

Netanyahu: I will not 'shut up' when Israel's interests are at stake

PM, predecessor go head-to-head over Iran approach; Olmert: Netanyahu has "declared war" on US by slamming ally's role in brokering deal.

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FRONT PAGE LEAD STORY

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his predecessor Ehud Olmert battled over Israel's Iran policy Sunday, with Olmert slamming Netanyahu for "waging war" against the US administration and Netanyahu responding that he would speak out loudly when Israel's security is at stake.

"As opposed to others, when I see that interests vital to the security of Israel's citizens are in danger, I will not be quiet," Netanyahu said in Rome in a clear reference to comments Olmert made earlier in the day.

Speaking at a Hanukka candle-lighting ceremony at the Great Synagogue in Rome, where he is on a two-day visit, Netanyahu said it was "very easy to be silent, very easy to get pats on the shoulder from the international community, and to bow one's head."

But, he said, "I am committed to the security of my people and to the future of my state, and in contrast to periods in the past, we have a loud and clear voice among the nations and we will sound it to warn during times of danger."

Earlier in the day, at a conference at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, Olmert slammed Netanyahu for his outspoken opposition to the US's support of the recent international agreement reached in Geneva with Iran over its nuclear program.

"You have to handle this decision with wisdom, quietly – without bombastic declarations – and quiet dialogue as we used to do in the past," Olmert said.

Speaking alongside MK Tzachi Hanegbi (a member of Netanyahu's Likud Beytenu party), Olmert said efforts to lobby members of Congress and the public questioning of the US's commitment to Israel are errors by Netanyahu's government.

“We waged war on the American administration. You cannot blur it. We waged war,” he said. “They were always on our side,” he added, emphatically banging the podium. “What do you want from them?”

Olmert’s comments came exactly a week after world powers announced a nuclear agreement in Geneva, and represented a direct challenge to Netanyahu’s approach: to publicly pressure Americans and their elected representatives not to accept a “bad deal” with Iran.

The comments also referenced the public disagreements between Washington and Jerusalem that marked the lead-up to the nuclear deal.

Olmert said Netanyahu had changed the cautious policy set by him and his predecessor Ariel Sharon on Iran, which was to work quietly and cooperatively with the US administration behind the scenes.

Instead, Olmert said, repeating criticism he first voiced in January during the heat of the election campaign, when Netanyahu took power in 2009 the policy became one of “declarations, threats, and also of financial expenditures of more than NIS 10 billion that were earmarked to prepare something that there was no need to prepare, never really existed, and was money that was wasted.”

In January, in a Channel 2 interview, Olmert said that some NIS 11 billion were wasted on “illusionary security escapades that have not been implemented and will not be implemented.”

Netanyahu, during his speech in Rome to leaders of the local Jewish community, again threatened military action to stop Iran from gaining nuclear weapons, saying, “We will act against it in time if need be.”

“I would like to dispel any illusions,” he said.

“Iran aspires to attain an atomic bomb. It would thus threaten not only Israel but also Italy, Europe and the entire world. There should be no illusions about this charm offensive.

Today there is a regime in Iran that supports terrorism, facilitates the massacre of civilians in Syria and unceasingly arms its proxies – Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad – with deadly missiles.”

Netanyahu said that the sanctions regime that was put into place over recent years against Iran has already “started to weaken, and very quickly.”

“If tangible steps are not taken soon, it is liable to collapse and the efforts of years will vanish without anything in exchange,” he said. “But at the same time, I tell you and promise in the spirit of the Maccabees, we will not allow Iran to receive a military nuclear capability.”

Although Olmert was harsh in his criticism of Netanyahu – whom he did not mention by name – he was sparse in his opinion of the Geneva agreement.

He downplayed its significance, calling the accord “a partial memorandum of understanding” and insisted upon the possibility that a separate, secret deal was also reached during the negotiations.

“A large part of this agreement is confidential, and we don’t know what’s written there,” Olmert said.

“I’m just saying, let’s be cautious, because we don’t know everything.”

The interactions between Olmert and Hanegbi turned personal at times. After Hanegbi said that Israel reserved the right to take military action, Olmert said that Hanegbi was the “authorized and reliable speaker of what the prime minister thinks,” and that “you’re not humble and you don’t have to be humble, we know you are influential and that is fine.”

Hanegbi said Olmert’s comments about Netanyahu’s approach do “not fit an institution like this,” and was incredulous about Olmert’s claim of a secret portion to the Geneva agreement.

“Most of your [comments] were political attacks, attacking the prime minister or government with no context related to the issues at hand,” Hanegbi said.

As a member of the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, he said, “I can note that there is nothing confidential.”

Hanegbi accused Olmert of vilifying Netanyahu and turning him into “the enemy.”

Olmert, for his part, accused Netanyahu of turning Obama into the “enemy.”

Throughout his talk, Hanegbi echoed Netanyahu’s arguments – that the Geneva agreement would have little impact on Iran’s capability to produce nuclear weapons while dismantling brutal economic sanctions.

“What would happen if the Americans will not follow our interest and would adopt their own? No Israeli prime minister can demand the American president to work against their interest and send their troops to fight the Iranians, and we don’t expect anyone to tell to us how to defend ourselves,” Hanegbi said.

“Israel is a sovereign country and it will decide how to defend itself when it finds any harm or danger,” he said, adding that Washington agrees with Israel’s prerogative to defend itself.

Economy Minister Naftali Bennett (Bayit Yehudi) took Olmert to task for his remarks, writing on his Facebook page that it would have been better if they had never been uttered.

“On issues touching on Israel’s security it is fitting to present a common front and not to turn it into an unnecessary political battle,” he said.

Iran, meanwhile, is expected to be a major focus of Netanyahu’s talks in Rome on Monday with his Italian counterpart, Enrico Letta. The two will meet following a morning meeting Netanyahu has scheduled with Pope Francis.

Netanyahu is in Rome along with five other ministers, holding the annual Italian-Israeli government-to-government meeting.

Link: <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Olmert-faults-Netanyahu-on-Iran-nuclear-diplomacy-says-PM-has-declared-war-on-US-333630>