

CRS Insights

Foreign Heads of State Addressing Congress
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On March 3, 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to address [a joint meeting of Congress](#). The invitation to address a joint meeting of Congress was extended by Speaker John Boehner on January 21, 2015 ([read the invitation](#)). Mr. Netanyahu's speech would be his third address to a joint meeting of Congress. He previously addressed Congress on [July 10, 1996](#), and [May 24, 2011](#). Mr. Netanyahu is the fourth Israeli Prime Minister to address Congress. **Table 1** lists speeches to a joint meeting of Congress by Israeli Prime Ministers.

Table 1. Addresses by Israeli Prime Ministers to Joint Meetings of Congress

Date	Prime Minister
May 24, 2011	Benjamin Netanyahu
May 24, 2006	Ehud Olmert
July 10, 1996	Benjamin Netanyahu
December 12, 1995	Shimon Peres
July 26, 1994	Yitzhak Rabin (jointly with King Hussein I of Jordan)
January 28, 1976	Yitzhak Rabin

Source: Historian of the House of Representatives, "Joint Meeting & Joint Session Addresses Before Congress by Foreign Leaders & Dignitaries," at <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Foreign-Leaders/Joint-Sessions/>.

Notes: On November 10, 1987, Israeli President Chaim Herzog also addressed a joint meeting of Congress. On September 18, 1978, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat attended the address to a joint session of Congress by [President Jimmy Carter](#) on the Middle East Peace agreement reached at Camp David.

The invitation has raised questions about the process and protocols used to invite foreign leaders to the United States generally and to address a joint meeting of Congress, specifically.

Historically, it appears that some form of consultation protocol may exist between the executive and legislative branch when foreign leaders visit the United States on official duties *and* the leader will be invited to speak to Congress. However, no such procedure is codified in law or in House or Senate Rules. The congressional leadership, through the Speaker of the House, has historically invited non-Members of Congress to address a joint meeting of the House and Senate. The President retains a similar right to invite foreign heads of state to meetings at the White House or other locations coordinated by his Administration. Not all foreign heads of state who visit the United States are invited to address Congress.

Visits by Foreign Heads of State

[According to the United States Department of State](#), a meeting between a foreign leader and the President of the United States is arranged by the White House, in coordination with the foreign chief of state. Once a meeting date has been set, the White House then coordinates the visit through the State

Department's Office of the Chief of Protocol. The Office of the Chief of Protocol coordinates approximately [350 visits per year](#) by foreign leaders, foreign ministers, and other foreign dignitaries.

Addressing a Joint Meeting of Congress

An address to a joint meeting of Congress is available by invitation only. As such, an agreement on whom to invite, and when they will speak, is generally reached between the House and the Senate. Such an agreement is then memorialized in a formal letter of invitation sent to the guest by the Speaker of the House ([read the letter sent to Prime Minister Netanyahu](#)). Since 1809, [most joint meetings of Congress](#) have been held in the Hall of the House.

The first time a foreign leader addressed a joint meeting of Congress occurred in 1874, when King Kalakaua of Hawaii (then a Kingdom) visited Washington. Since then, there have been [113 instances](#) where foreign leaders have addressed a joint meeting of Congress.

House and Senate Receptions

There have also been numerous instances of addresses by foreign leaders to either the House or Senate individually (read a [complete list](#) of all addresses to Congress by non-Members in the *Congressional Directory*). In some instances, foreign leaders have not been invited to address a joint meeting of Congress and have instead addressed only the House or Senate. These meetings are formally called House or Senate receptions. The [first House reception](#) was held on December 10, 1824, when the Marquis de Lafayette addressed the chamber. The last House reception for a foreign leader was held on February 17, 1977, for the President of Mexico, José Lopez Portillo.

The [first Senate reception](#) was held on January 5, 1852, when Louis Kossuth, the exiled Governor of Hungary, addressed the Senate. The [most recent Senate reception](#) for a foreign leader was held on August 16, 1967, with Kurt George Kiesinger, Chancellor of West Germany.

Past Discussion of Foreign Leader Visits

The upcoming visit by Mr. Netanyahu is not the first visit of a foreign leader to have generated discussion regarding that leader's potential appearance before Congress. In 1987, for example, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was invited to Washington, DC, for a three-day summit with President Ronald Reagan. In the planning for Mr. Gorbachev's visit, it was [reported in the press](#) that he would be invited to address a joint meeting of Congress. The congressional invitation, however, [was never issued](#) after some Senators reportedly objected to the idea of inviting the Soviet leader. Instead, it was reported by the media that Mr. Gorbachev [met individually](#) with some Members of Congress.