

Omnibus Spending Bill Grants Half-Billion to Israel

With much fanfare and six different pens, President Barack Obama signed the \$1.1 trillion omnibus spending bill for fiscal year 2014 last Friday, capping years of congressional budget fights and officially alleviating the sequester cuts that last year began indiscriminately slashing government spending.

The bill, negotiated by House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers, R-Ky., and Senate Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., closely followed a budget compromise devised by U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., in early December 2013. Lasting until Sept. 30, 2014, the appropriations spare Israel-related aid, specifically defense cooperation, from the budget ax. The bill fully funds the \$3.1 billion commitment in the Memorandum of Understanding, returning funding to pre-sequester levels.

Before being signed by the president, the bill received strong bipartisan approval, passing the House on Jan. 15 by a vote of 359 to 67. The Senate took up the measure the next day, voting 72 to 26 for passage.

In the overall deal, which represents a return to the long-dormant budget negotiation process between the House and the Senate, no party got everything it wanted. But when it came to disbursements affecting the Middle East, a premium seems to have been placed on stability.

The Department of Defense section of the appropriations bill specifies a number of line items assisting in Israeli defense infrastructure and collaborative projects with the U.S., allocating funds for "Israeli Cooperative Programs." The bill

specifies that \$235.3 million should be provided to the Israeli government for the Iron Dome short-range missile defense system; \$149.7 million for research and development of the Short Range Ballistic Missile Defense program; \$74.7 million for “an upper-tier component to the Israeli Missile Defense Architecture”; and \$44.3 million for the Arrow System Improvement Program.

The Arrow System is a cooperative program intended to counter threats that are not defendable using Iron Dome. The system has been in development since the late 1980s and is now in its third iteration, according to the website .

“The system is designed to deal with threats that fly on too small a trajectory to be engaged efficiently by Iron Dome, the Israeli interceptor credited with an 80 percent success rate against rockets fired by Palestinian militants,” Reuters reports.

Speaking to *The Jerusalem Post*, U.S. Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., the ranking member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, called the passage of \$3.1 billion in Israel security assistance as a demonstration of “the bipartisan commitment to ensuring Israel’s security needs are fully met.”

In an interview, Jonathan Schanzer, vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said that such funding is vital to protect Israel’s position *vis a vis* its neighbors.

“Right now, it’s more crucial than it has been—if you look around Israel right now, it’s a very unstable region—with Iran obviously on the precipice of a nuclear weapon,” Schanzer told . “And this notion of the Qualitative Military Edge is getting much harder for anyone to be able to calculate how to maintain that edge, and so the continued funding of Iron Dome and new weapons systems are incredibly important for Israel at this moment.”

The bill also provides aid to Egypt and Jordan, and allocates approximately \$400 million for the Palestinian Authority, but the disbursement of these funds hinges on a number of scenarios.

For Egypt, up to \$350 million in aid would be halted if the fledgling military government violates the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979 in any way.

The Palestinian earmark will cease if the P.A. continues attempts to gain recognition as a state in the United Nations or other U.N. agencies without Israeli agreement. The P.A. is also prohibited from pursuing legal action against Israel in the International Criminal Court.

A congressional source close to the legislation told that this language is not new and has not resulted in punitive actions against the Palestinians because of a presidential waiver built into the legislation. That's why Congress's seemingly proactive stance against Palestinian incitement has had no tangible results, explained the aide.

Still, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) released a statement last week praising the bill, saying the legislation "takes important steps to support peace efforts between Israel and the Palestinians."

"It presses the Palestinians to halt anti-Israel incitement by explicitly linking Palestinian economic aid to their efforts in countering incitement of violence against Israelis and ensuring that they are supporting activities aimed at promoting peace, coexistence, and security cooperation with Israel," AIPAC said.

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