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US, Israel begin talks on new 10-year aid plan



Published: Thursday March 1, 2007

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US and Israeli officials opened talks Thursday on a new multi-year plan for US aid to the Jewish state, which could seek additional funds to meet evolving threats from Iran, Syria and Islamic militants.

The negotiations, announced jointly by the US State Department and Israel's embassy, aim to replace a 10-year US aid program that runs out in 2008 and saw Israel maintain its position as the biggest recipient of US assistance.

Under that plan, military aid to Israel rose from 1.8 billion dollars to 2.4 billion dollars per year, while civilian aid, which totaled 1.2 billion dollars in 1998, was phased out.

The US also provided a billion dollars in special military aid and nine billion dollars in loan guarantees in 2003.

The current talks will define "our next 10-year assistance relationship and Israel's long-term economic and military security requirements," the joint statement said.

The negotiations are led by Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns for the United States and an Israeli team headed Bank of Israel Governor Stanley Fischer and finance ministry official Yarom Ariav.

"The meeting today is another manifestation of the unshakable commitment by the United States to Israel's security and a step towards fortifying and enhancing the strategic relationship between our two countries," the statement said.

Israel was expected to seek a renewal of the multi-year assistance plan tailored to meet the new security threats and economic realities facing their country.

"There is a continuing discussion about the emerging threats and also the economic expectations over the next 10 years -- what Israel's economic capabilities are in dealing with emerging threats," one official said on condition of anonymity.

Danny Ayalon, who served as Israel's ambassador to the United States until November, said Israel was hoping to seal a new 10-year deal before the end of President George W. Bush's mandate in January, 2009.

"The political clock is right," Ayalon told the Jerusalem Post newspaper, suggesting Israel should seek more than the current 2.4 billion dollars in annual aid to meet new threats posed by Iran's long-range ballistic missiles or its uranium enrichment program, which both the US and Israel fear is a cover for developing nuclear weapons.

Israel is also concerned over Syria's ballistic missile arsenal and shorter-range rocket threats from Lebanon's Hezbollah militia and from Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

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