

Congress Delivers Promised Israel Aid Bump Despite Budget Deadlock

Move Bypasses Normal Appropriation Process

By **Nathan Guttman**

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Washington - While almost all federally financed programs were denied any funding increase for the coming year, aid to Israel from the United States will increase thanks to a legislative loophole and some deft maneuvering by pro-Israel lobbyists.

Congress bypassed the normal appropriation process on June 26 when it approved a \$170 million raise in military aid to Israel, as part of a larger supplemental spending bill. The increase contrasts with the standstill in budgeting for almost all other government programs. Due to fighting between Democrats and Republicans over the federal budget, most government spending will be held in what is known as a "continuous resolution," which maintains all spending at the same level as in the previous fiscal year and allows no raise in government spending.

Aid to Israel would normally be covered by this resolution, but legislators made the aid into an amendment to special legislation covering funding for the military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to an official in the Washington pro-Israel community, the only other instance in which aid to Israel went through this channel was after the first Gulf War, 16 years ago.

The move was quickly applauded by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

"The effort to secure this vital increase in American aid to our ally Israel could not have happened without the active support of the bipartisan leadership of the House and Senate and Aipac applauds their effort," Aipac spokesman Josh Block said in a statement published following the aid increase approval.

Israel had been promised a bump in military aid before the current wrangling over the budget.

Last August, Jerusalem and Washington signed an agreement that should direct \$30 billion to Israel over 10 years.

For the agreement to actually turn into cash for Israel, Congress is required to appropriate the money. This legislative process has become increasingly difficult to complete in recent years, since Republican and Democratic lawmakers could not find common ground on spending bills. A continuous resolution this year would have put the promised increase in aid in jeopardy and would have left the implementation of the new aid package in the hands of a new administration and new Congress.

The first indication of the special maneuvers came at the annual conference of Aipac, when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi took the podium.

"I don't know if Harry or John Boehner told you this earlier," Pelosi said in her June 4 address, referring to Senate majority leader Harry Reid and House Minority leader John Boehner, "but the first installment of this increase, \$170 million, will be in the supplemental appropriation bill the House will consider soon, in fact, that we are considering now, so we can expedite this."

The pro-Israel community's desire to see the aid increase, even in the face of a Continuous Resolution had been raised earlier by members of Norpac, a New Jersey-based pro-Israel political action group, in a lobbying day they held May 21.

But a source following the issue closely said Aipac leaders were surprised by Pelosi's pledge, saying it was an initiative that came from the highest congressional ranks.

On June 19, Aipac's director of legislative policy and strategy briefed congressional staffers and explained the need for increasing foreign aid to Israel, stressing that the Jewish state's expenses on security are higher than any other country in the industrialized world because of the threats it faces.

Bipartisan support for bypassing legislative hurdles was apparent in the June 27 Senate vote, which tallied 92 supporters and only six senators opposing the bill. Aid to Jordan and Mexico are the two other foreign military assistance items included in the bill.

The \$170 million raise to Israel will bring the overall military funding to \$2.38 billion — the highest of any such package.

The new aid to Israel is part of a larger deal which includes multi-billion-dollar arms deals with Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries, all aimed at strengthening nations seen as crucial in curbing Iran's influence in the region. That package is an arms deal and does not require the appropriation of any funds.

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