

On February 24, AIPAC CEO Howard Kohr submitted the following written testimony for the record to the U.S. House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs to make the case for U.S. security assistance to Israel and robust funding for foreign aid.

With growing instability, chaos and tension in the Middle East, one fact remains reliably true—Israel remains America’s closest ally, an anchor of stability in a dangerous and unpredictable region. The United States and Israel have formed an enduring partnership, based on an unshakable dedication to common values and interests. The two allies have developed deep strategic ties to confront common threats and ensure both the security of the Jewish state and the advancement of US interests. This strategic relationship is a key pillar of America’s Middle East security framework, which is constantly growing and expanding into exciting new arenas.

Today, both Israel and the U.S. face an unprecedented array of evolving threats stemming from the growing regional turmoil fueled by Iran’s unceasing aggression. Tehran has grown more belligerent over the past year: in addition to attacking Israel from Syria and funding anti-Israel proxies throughout the region, it has directly challenged the U.S. by detaining a U.S. tanker in the Persian Gulf, downing a U.S. drone, firing missiles at U.S. bases and at our Embassy in Iraq, and striking crucial oil installations of our ally Saudi Arabia. Jerusalem’s contribution to containing Iranian mischief is more important than ever. Were Israel not resisting Iranian activity in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, Washington would likely have to direct more resources to those theatres, in addition to our deployments in eastern Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Qatar and our recent troop plus-up in Saudi Arabia.

Confronting these complex and broad ranging threats requires Israel to spend significantly more on its defense. Accordingly, AIPAC strongly urges the Subcommittee to approve \$3.3 billion to Israel in security assistance for fiscal year 2021, as called for in the 2016 U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Understanding. By providing security assistance to Israel, the United States safeguards the Jewish state’s qualitative military edge (QME) over its adversaries and enhances the safety and security of both nations. In addition, AIPAC urges support for a robust and bipartisan foreign aid program that ensures America’s strong leadership position in the world. At just one percent of the federal budget, foreign aid is a cost-effective and relatively small investment that saves U.S. taxpayer money by helping prevent more costly wars, crises and disasters. Foreign aid enables the United States to support key allies like Israel, spur our job-creating exports, and help prevent unstable areas from becoming breeding grounds for terrorism. AIPAC also strongly supports the expansion of U.S.-Israel non-defense cooperative programs. These programs have made America stronger through the development and introduction of technologies relating to energy efficiency, cybersecurity, and water scarcity. Israel has in recent years also brought some of these technologies to the developing world – furthering sustainability, helping lift millions out of poverty and creating enormous possibilities of cooperation between Israel and our development agencies.

Iran Taking Advantage of a Region in Turmoil

Israel continues to face unprecedented turmoil on its doorstep. Lebanon, Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen have all been transformed by the chaos in the region. Sub-state actors often dominate the landscape, and one dangerous state actor, Iran, is taking full advantage of the changing realities.

In this new environment, Israel must confront countless new and difficult challenges. On the Jewish state's northeast border, Iran is working to establish a permanent military presence in Syria from which to attack Israel. Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei and its Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) make no secret of the fact they seek Israel's destruction. Six times over the last two years – in February and May 2018 and in January, August, September and November 2019 – Iran or its proxies tried to directly attack Israel with drones and missiles. All these attacks were directed at civilian population centers. Iran is also developing a “land bridge” from Teheran to Beirut to more easily provide sophisticated military equipment to its close ally Hezbollah and to its forces in Syria.,

On Israel's northern border in Lebanon, Iran's close ally Hezbollah is well on its way to taking over the country. With an estimated 150,000 rockets and missiles – more sophisticated and accurate than ever and located inside Lebanese homes, schools and hospitals – Hezbollah poses a significant challenge to Israel. Designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States since 1995, Hezbollah has killed more Americans than any terrorist group other than al-Qaeda. The group has gained significant experience fighting for Iran in Syria and will bring that experience to a future conflict with Israel. The makeup of the new Lebanese government raises serious questions about Hezbollah and their allies' control and influence over the country. All the while, they are actively working to produce precision guided munitions to significantly enhance the accuracy of their huge missile arsenal.

In the Gaza Strip, Hamas—a designated terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union—poses both an immediate and a longer-term threat to Israeli citizens. Rather than help its own citizens, the group has used its resources and help from Iran to construct an elaborate military infrastructure— including a broad network of terror tunnels — to attack Israeli communities. Six million Israelis live within range of Hamas' increasingly accurate rocket arsenal. Over the past year, Hamas has used Palestinian civilians as human shields to storm the security fence separating Israel from Gaza. Hamas has launched explosive-laden kites to destroy thousands of acres of Israeli forests and farmland.

Israel also needs to prepare for the possibility of a nuclear armed Iran. Iran has demonstrated its continued nuclear ambitions by conducting approximately 20 ballistic missile tests in defiance of U.N. prohibitions, including long-range missiles capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. An extensive archive of Iranian nuclear documents smuggled out of Iran in an Israeli covert operation in 2018 illuminated the advanced nature of the regime's nuclear ambitions. The fact that Iran secretly retained information on how to build nuclear weapons—which it refused to disclose to inspectors as required by the 2015 Iran nuclear deal—suggests Iran maintains a desire to field nuclear weapons at some point in the future.

These threats illustrate one simple truth: Israel faces unprecedented strategic challenges. Whereas Israeli military planners used to face state enemies with a defined number of conventional weapons and armies, today, the threats to Israel's existence come from a broad array of forces armed with diverse weaponry – conventional and unconventional, symmetrical and asymmetrical - that are largely aimed at Israel's civilian population. It is in America's vital interest for Israel — our sole reliable democratic ally in the region — to have the military capabilities it needs to decisively thwart those challenges.

U.S. Assistance Helps Maintain Israel's Qualitative Military Edge Against Mutual Threats

U.S. support for Israel through annual security aid has helped the Jewish state maintain its QME, which Congress has defined in legislation as Israel's "ability to counter and defeat any credible conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors." This military superiority has historically prevented war by deterring regional adversaries from attacking Israel. Due to U.S. support for Israel's QME, prospective aggressors know they would face a U.S.-backed ally armed with the world's most advanced weapon systems—both American and Israeli. At the same time, however, when deterrence has failed the American-made defense hardware provided to the IDF has enabled the Jewish state to take direct action against the mounting threats moving towards its borders. U.S. support for Israel's security assistance has also encouraged Israel's neighbors to come to the negotiating table, thus playing a key role in securing Israel's peace treaties with Jordan and Egypt, and in Israel's warming relationship with some Gulf Arab countries. We believe that continued U.S. aid to Egypt and Jordan is also important to helping ensure stability in the region, as is the strong U.S. commitment to the Multinational Force and Observers mission in the Sinai.

Increased Israeli Defense Spending

Confronting this plethora of threats is expensive. The Israeli defense establishment has launched a new multi-year modernization plan in 2020 to build up the IDF with the most advanced technologies it can afford in order to face the rapidly changing threats it will face on the battlefields of the next decade. Spiraling defense costs force Israel to spend more on security as a percentage of GDP than any other nation in the industrialized world. Despite a commitment to curb deficit spending the Israeli government is forced to allocate about 5% of its GDP for defense. This partially reflects the fact that the IDF is not a peacetime military but is constantly engaged in the ongoing low-level "conflict between wars" against Hamas and other Iranian proxies. The actual costs to the Israeli economy, however, are even higher than the official 5% estimate when considering lost productivity and the need for reserve duty, internal security and anti-terrorism spending.

The weapons systems Israel needs to meet the growing threats it faces are becoming far more expensive than in the past. For example, a single F-35 Joint Strike Fighter costs Israel some \$90 million, plus the costs of supporting infrastructure and maintenance, over twice the cost of an F-16 fighter jet purchased under the first U.S.-Israel agreement in 1998. Other major U.S. hardware on Israel's short list of critical requirements to replace or upgrade aging, obsolete systems from the 1990s include aerial refueling tankers, troop transport and attack helicopters, Gen. 4.5 combat aircraft, special naval vessels, armored vehicles, heavy trucks, precision munitions and advanced technology to support the emerging frontiers of cyber warfare, artificial intelligence and intelligence data communications. Even as Israelis face substantial budgetary pressures, Israel will have to dramatically increase its own defense spending over the next decade—at the same time looking to its longtime ally the United States as a strategic partner in upholding its qualitative edge in major defense systems.

Israel: A Vital Strategic Partner

As a long-standing pillar of America's Middle East security framework, the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership plays a vital role in combating common threats and furthering U.S. regional and

global policy objectives. These threats include terrorism, regional aggression and destabilization by armed Iranian proxies, conventional and non-conventional weapons proliferation, counterfeiting, cyber warfare, and the spread of radical ideologies. In this context, Israel's military strength and geo-strategic location provide a strong deterrent to regional actors opposed to the United States. Coordination between the Israelis and their U.S. military counterparts in the Mideast-focused Central Command (CENTCOM), for example has expanded considerably as Iran's disruptive behavior from Syria, to Yemen, to Iraq and the Arabian Gulf has metastasized since 2015.

Indeed, Israel's stable, democratic, and reliably pro-American orientation remains unquestioned and ensures that America can consistently rely on its alliance with the Jewish state. This has been an enduring constant through Republican and Democratic U.S. administrations and across a range of varying Israeli governments.

Over the last 30 years, the U.S.-Israel defense relationship has benefitted both countries through, among other programs, joint military training exercises and joint research and development. Facing common threats—from high-end weapons and cyber-tech to improvised explosive device (IEDs) and terrorist tunnels—the two allies optimize responses to these threats by working closely together. Twice each year, U.S. Marines conduct desert warfare training with their Israel Defense Forces (IDF) counterparts, and American soldiers and security officials have regularly visited Israel to study Israel's approach to urban combat. U.S. pilots hold simulated combat training with the Israeli Air Force, including aerial combat tactics and inflight refueling. In addition, Israel and the United States have cooperated on a wide range of intelligence-sharing programs, including monitoring Iran, Syria, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups and sponsors. In the biennial Juniper Cobra exercise, U.S. and Israeli forces practice cooperative tactics to counter the growing threat from ballistic missiles and long-range rockets. Given a U.S. desire to reduce commitments where possible in the region, Israel's defensive and offensive capabilities are appreciated all the more acutely, as we have seen demonstrated time and again.

Cooperation Produces Critical New Military and Defense Technologies

With America's support, Israel has developed and deployed an advanced, multi-layered missile defense shield. These systems—which directly benefit both U.S. and Israel security—require ongoing investment to remain effective against evolving threats. The \$500 million in annual U.S. missile defense funding support outlined in the current MoU is matched by Israel own budgetary investments and in-kind contributions, and is crucial to completing a robust active defense infrastructure to protect not only Israeli population centers and strategic assets from aerial assault, but also provide a degree of protection to neighboring U.S. partners and deployed American forces.

Iron Dome: Since 2005, terrorists in Gaza have fired more than 10,000 rockets indiscriminately into Israel, prompting the Jewish state to develop the Iron Dome rocket defense system. This defensive platform has a proven track record of intercepting incoming rockets and mortars midair, saving lives and avoiding broader conflict. In February 2019, the U.S. Army announced its intention to purchase two Iron Dome systems to protect American soldiers overseas.

David's Sling: David's Sling was designed to close the current operational gap between Israel's short-range Iron Dome and higher-altitude Arrow ballistic missile interceptor. Declared operational in 2017, the system intercepted two large Syrian surface-to-surface ballistic missiles a year later. Jointly developed by Israel's Rafael and Arizona-based Raytheon, the United States and Israel are increasing their serial co-production of David's Sling as Israel steps up its procurement of the system.

Arrow 2 and 3: The Arrow program is the centerpiece of the U.S.-Israel cooperative defense relationship. Jointly developed by the two allies, Arrow-2 is among the world's most sophisticated missile shields. Operational since 2000, Arrow-2 has consistently proven that one missile can shoot down another at high altitudes and supersonic speeds. Arrow-3, an upper-tier, exo-atmospheric defense system, is designed to counter long-range conventional and unconventional strategic threats to Israel. In 2019 the Arrow-3 system conducted a successful test in Kodiak, Alaska.

Beyond the threat of missiles, terrorist organizations on Israel's borders are continuing to construct subterranean passages to attack and kidnap Israeli soldiers and civilians. The United States and Israel work together to fund and develop counter-tunneling technologies. Israel shares its counter-tunnel technologies and advancements with the United States, enhancing our own ability to deal with this growing threat around the world. Our joint work with Israel has yielded positive results over the past two years, with Israel discovering and destroying several Hamas tunnels from Gaza and well as Hezbollah tunnels emanating from Lebanon.

New areas of joint defense activity include counter-drone technologies, directed energy—including lasers—artificial intelligence and robotic systems such as unmanned ground vehicles.

A Robust Foreign Aid Budget Is Critical to U.S. National Security

AIPAC strongly believes that the broader U.S. foreign aid budget, which includes security assistance to Israel, is an essential component of America's national security strategy. Over 75 percent of our assistance to Israel comes back to the United States through the purchase of U.S.-made aircraft and other equipment. Beyond aid to Israel, overall U.S. foreign aid also helps American companies develop foreign markets, build stable business environments in developing countries, and thereby create jobs at home. Foreign aid programs also help bring education, health care and transportation to hundreds of millions of potential new customers. Today, one in five American jobs is linked to U.S. exports.

Conclusion

Few can predict what the coming few years will bring in the Middle East, but one thing remains certain: ensuring Israel's security is deeply in the American interest. This Subcommittee—headed so ably by Chairwoman Lowey and Ranking Member Rogers—deserves great credit for its stalwart advocacy for the U.S.-Israel relationship and the overall foreign aid budget over the years. That includes not only reliably providing the full funding that is so vital to keeping Israel secure and strong, but also in codifying the equally important policy provisions dealing with so many aspects of U.S. policy in the Middle East. This bipartisan support will remain even more critical as America and Israel continue to work together to meet the challenges that lie ahead and to advance the goals of a more peaceful and stable Middle East.