



Middle East Spotlight

Vital Boost

If Hamas rocket attacks from Gaza against Israeli civilians and a resurgent Hizballah armed with 40,000 rockets aimed at Israel were the only threats facing Israel, along with her ally the United States, it would be easy to be overwhelmed by these unprecedented dangers. Unfortunately, the scope of the peril is not so limited.

Iran -who is helping Hamas transfer itself into a terrorist army and helping Hizballah to rearm- remains the key threat. Iran's leadership calls for Israel's destruction and for a world without the United States, all while she continues to advance her uranium enrichment efforts which could yield a nuclear weapons capability within two years. Iran continues to serve as the major destabilizing force in the Middle East through its support of terrorist groups that are threatening Israel and working to undermine U.S. efforts in the region, from Israeli-Palestinian talks to Lebanon to Iraq.

In addition to increased threats, spiraling defense costs are forcing Israel to spend more on defense as a percentage of gross domestic product than any other nation in the industrialized world. Israel is spending eight percent of its GDP on defense, or nearly double the percentage the United States spends.

To help confront these threats, the United States and Israel signed a new 10-year security agreement that aims to provide the Jewish state with \$30 billion in security assistance over the next decade. Israel has committed to a 10-year plan of sustained increases in its own defense spending to accompany an expected growth in U.S. security assistance and is slated to spend \$150 billion on defense during the next decade, a 50 percent increase over the previous 10-year period.

This increased spending comes as overall regional military spending has accelerated throughout the Middle East, fueled by windfall oil profits. From 2002 to 2006, the growth rate of Saudi Arabia's military budget was almost six times that of Israel's, while Iran's rate of military spending grew 16 times more than that of the Jewish state.

In an effort to ensure that Israel maintains its qualitative military edge over those that threaten the Jewish state and actively work to undermine U.S. interests in the region, the administration has requested \$2.55 billion in military assistance for fiscal year 2009.

The request represents the first year of the new 10-year agreement and is subject to congressional approval. Under the agreement, Israel is slated to receive increases in aid over the next four years—before leveling off at \$3.1 billion for the remaining six years.

Amid the increased threats and rising defense costs, such a boost in U.S. assistance to Israel during the next decade will be vital as the two allies work together to seek peace and defeat the forces of extremism.