

ISSUE BRIEF

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U.S.–Israeli Missile Defense Cooperation: Building on the Success of Iron Dome

Baker Spring

On July 27, President Obama signed into law the United States–Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act, which is designed to strengthen the qualitative edge of Israeli military forces over its current and future enemies. While the law serves to strengthen this edge in a variety of areas, it pays special attention to improving Israel’s capabilities for defending its civilian population against rocket and missile attacks.

Not coincidentally, this special focus has come on the heels of the demonstrated success of the Israeli Iron Dome system for countering rockets and short-range missiles against attacks with such weapons launched by Hamas terrorists in Gaza. Accordingly, Congress needs to take additional actions to expand cooperation with Israel in the area of missile defense.

Further Action Is Needed. The act is accompanied by still incomplete actions by Congress regarding U.S.–Israeli missile defense cooperation. The House version of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which passed the House on May 18, includes a provision to provide an additional \$168 million to general missile defense cooperation with Israel above the Administration’s roughly \$100 million request.

Further, this version of the NDAA provides \$680 million to fund the Iron Dome system over the period covering fiscal years (FY) 2012 through 2015. Thus, the bill proposes to peg all U.S.–Israeli missile defense cooperation at \$948 million, where the Obama Administration proposed a little less than \$100 million.

The House approved the FY 2013 Defense Appropriations Act on July 19. This bill funds the U.S.–Israeli missile defense cooperation program at the level recommended in the NDAA, thus providing the necessary budget authority now, even though the funds would be expended over a four-year period.

The Senate, however, is lagging behind the House regarding the drafting of its version of the NDAA and the defense appropriation

bill. The Senate Armed Services Committee reported out the NDAA on June 4, but the full Senate has yet to take it up. The Senate Appropriations Committee reported its version of the annual defense appropriations bill on August 2, and it is unlikely that the full Senate will take up and pass the measure prior to the start of the new fiscal year on October 1.

The NDAA provides an additional \$100 million to general U.S.–Israeli missile defense cooperation, again compared to slightly less than \$100 million originally proposed by the Obama Administration. The bill also proposes to authorize \$210 million for the Iron Dome program in FY 2013 alone. Thus, the Senate Armed Services Committee proposes authorizing \$410 million in funding for the overall missile defense program with Israel. The Senate Appropriations Committee’s defense appropriation bill for FY 2013 would fund general U.S.–Israeli missile defense cooperation at \$268.7 million and the Iron Dome program at \$211 million, for a total funding level of almost \$480 million.

Implications of the Success of Iron Dome for Missile Defense. The steps in the legislative process described above, which point to the

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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strong bipartisan congressional support in favor of providing significantly more money for U.S.–Israeli missile defense cooperation than the Obama Administration originally proposed, demonstrates that Congress is starting to understand the implications of the Israeli success with Iron Dome. These implications cut across the entire scope of the missile defense enterprise—for the defense of both the U.S. itself and U.S. allies around the world.

The most important of these implications is that strategic defenses generally, and missile defenses in particular, are essential contributors to a robust deterrence posture. This is a sharp departure from the prevailing Cold War view that strategic defenses were at best worthless and at worst destabilizing. This implication is still just dawning on portions of the policy community, given that recent reports indicate that the State Department’s International Security Advisory Board adopted a preliminary finding that the U.S. should accept its vulnerability to Chinese strategic attacks. In this case, it appears that Congress is well ahead of the executive branch in recognizing the value of defenses to deterrence.

Another implication is that from a broad perspective, missile defense systems can be cost effective. During the Cold War, the prevailing view was that the cost effectiveness of missile defenses relative to offensive missiles must be measured in the marginal cost of each defensive interceptor compared to the cost of each offensive missile. This narrow approach set aside from the calculations the value of what is being

defended and the value of intangible things such as overall strategic flexibility and better options for de-escalation in a conflict.

The final implication is that overall funding for the missile defense program should be robust, because the U.S. and its allies eschewed active missile defense options for several decades, and as a result missile defense programs are still catching up with the offensive missile threat. The Israelis discovered the shortcomings of an offense-only response to rocket and short-range missile attacks during the 2006 Lebanon War and the subsequent use of these weapons by Palestinian terrorists from the Gaza Strip.

While always focusing limiting costs to the greatest extent possible, the Israel government pursued the development and procurement of the Iron Dome system quite aggressively. Congress is now aware of the value of this aggressive approach.

U.S.–Israeli Missile Defense Cooperation. Congress, now with the Obama Administration, is recognizing that the U.S. should broaden and deepen its program of cooperation with Israel in the area of missile defense. This strengthens the overall deterrence posture of the U.S. and Israel, both individually and as allies. It also permits the more rapid advancement of missile defense technology and permits the sharing of the costs incurred from trying to make up the lost time when missile defenses were not pursued as a matter of policy.

Moving forward first requires adequate overall funding for an extended period of time. Accordingly, it would be wrong for Congress to

assume that the increase in funding, which is now likely to be provided to this program in FY 2013, will be a one-time occurrence. The U.S. and Israeli governments are sure to find that this increase should be replicated in FY 2014 and beyond.

Inherent in the need for sustained additional resources for the U.S.–Israeli cooperative program is the need for higher overall funding in the U.S. missile defense program. The U.S. will find that it is impractical to assume that the U.S.–Israeli program can absorb ever higher shares of its overall missile defense budget. The Israelis are likely to find that it will become less likely that the U.S. will sustain funding for the cooperative program if the U.S. missile defense budgets remain stagnant.

Gabriel M. Scheinman, a visiting fellow at the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, has recommended making Iron Dome a joint U.S.–Israeli production program.¹ This is a good idea. It builds on the success of the U.S.–Israel joint program for the production of the Arrow and David’s Sling systems for countering short-, medium-, and even longer-range ballistic missiles. Such an approach would serve the purposes of limiting costs and advancing the technology for both sides.

Pursue the Umbrella. The U.S. should pursue an umbrella system for defending itself and its allies against ballistic missiles. This system would be most effective if it is based in space, because it would provide global coverage on a constant basis and would be much more effective in countering attacking missiles containing decoys and other countermeasures. This is a project the U.S.

1. Gabriel M. Scheinman, “Buy, America: Make Iron Dome a Joint U.S.–Israel System,” Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, May 10, 2012, <http://www.jinsa.org/fellowship-program/gabriel-scheinmann/buy-america-make-iron-dome-joint-us-israel-system> (accessed August 1, 2012).

should lead while consulting with its allies, including Israel, in order to account for allied needs.

—**Baker Spring** is F. M. Kirby
Research Fellow in National Security
Policy in the Douglas and Sarah
Allison Center for Foreign Policy
Studies, a division of the Kathryn and
Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for
International Studies, at The Heritage
Foundation.