

Pro-Israel groups fearful that Iron Dome funding may end up blocked long-term

Boris Zilberman, director of public policy and strategy at the CUFI Action Fund, said that the way things are in Congress at the moment, it may be risky to pin all hopes on an omnibus spending bill passing because such agreement may not be reachable.

(January 17, 2022 / JNS) With a deadline to fund the U.S. government past the temporary Continuing Resolution (CR) passed last month set to expire mid-February, pro-Israel organizations have been pushing to bring supplemental funding of Iron Dome interceptor missiles back to the forefront.

Since September, senators have tried four times to bring a standalone supplemental \$1 billion Iron Dome funding bill, which was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives by an overwhelming 420-9 vote, for unanimous approval, but each time have been thwarted by the objection of Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.).

Paul stated that he didn't oppose the funding, though he is usually opposed to foreign aid; rather, he would like to see the funding offset by taking it from the \$6 billion allocated to aid the recovery of Afghanistan and deposit the remainder in the U.S. Treasury.

Passing a bill through unanimous consent is a common occurrence for legislation that is not controversial and supported by both parties. It avoids the time-consuming process that requires the bill to be debated on the Senate floor for 30 hours of valuable time before it can be voted on through the regular lawmaking process in the Senate.

After months of delay on the matter, pro-Israel organizations, organizations representing Jewish denomination and Jewish communal groups, are expressing that they are losing patience over delays that threaten the security of Israel.

One of the letters sent to Senate Majority Leader Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.)

and Minority Leader Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) last week was spearheaded by the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Council of Public Affairs. It called on the leaders to find a way to quickly move the legislation through.

Joel Rubin, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, said he was proud with how the Jan. 11 letter turned out, garnering 15 signatories from groups on both sides of the political spectrum that are rarely seen advocating together.

Rubin, who has worked in both chambers of Congress, as a foreign-policy adviser in the Senate, as well as serving as deputy assistant Secretary of State during the Obama administration, said that pro-Israel groups are worried that if a solution isn't found soon, the critical funding may not come under consideration again for a long time.

If Paul doesn't lift his hold over the House-passed bill, the most likely option for the bill to pass would be to include it in an omnibus spending bill that is passed by both chambers.

The omnibus spending bill is currently being negotiated ahead of the expiration of the current continuing resolution. Including Iron Dome funding in a defense appropriations bill that is included in an omnibus spending bill is seen as the most likely solution to get the funding through—funding U.S. President Joe Biden has said multiple times that he supports.

Still, there is no guarantee that an agreement could be reached on an omnibus spending bill, which would then require Congress to once again kick that can down the road and pass either a CR, which carries over previous spending levels, for a period of months to up to a year in order to avoid a government shutdown.

'A non-controversial bill should go right through'

Prior to passing a standalone funding bill for Iron Dome, Democrats in the House attempted to include the funding in a CR passed in September, but its inclusion was blocked by a group of progressive Democrats known as "The Squad." Needing their support to pass the CR over the opposition of Republican members, the Iron Dome funding was taken out, and it's unlikely if a new CR is agreed to in February that it will again be included.

Rubin said that this didn't have to be the case.

"This is a non-controversial bill. A non-controversial bill should go right through. It should be passed by unanimous consent and they should be done," he said. "And that's not happened now because one senator alone has decided to make a stand for perplexing reasons that are impossible to decipher and shift and, by doing that, requiring either floor time to be used for a non-controversial bill that will pass 99-1, or having it pushed into an omnibus bill which will then require house support and opening up again another ongoing debate about Israel in the House."

Schumer, whose office did not respond to a request for comment by JNS, has told Jewish organizational leaders that the funding will be passed, though he was not specific on how. And while that promise and the Biden administration's support provides confidence, Rubin said that in his career of working in public service and on policy, one can never take anything for granted.

That's why he was glad to see the Jewish community unite on the issue because "absent that voice, issues go lower on the checklist of the leadership."

Rubin and others following the issue who spoke to JNS believed that the quickest option to get the funding passed was its inclusion in the omnibus, assuming that Paul won't drop his opposition and that Schumer would not want to take time away from other priorities and acquiesce to Paul's obstruction.

'We're not talking about sending offensive weaponry'

"Sen. Paul is seeking to create precedent here that would be very dangerous on both sides of the aisle [that] one senator can take any non-controversial piece of legislation and insert a whole different issue into it to seek to force a vote on any different priority," said Aaron Weinberg, director of government relations at the Israel Policy Forum. "If leadership were to give into that, that would basically shut down the entire functioning of the Senate by just having any one senator be able to force the entire Senate to consider any piece of legislation at any moment. Nothing would ever get done, and there would be no point in having leadership and no point in having a calendar whatsoever."

Weinberg said that usually when there is an objection to a unanimous consent bill, the senator who opposes it does so due to their opposition to the bill itself, and is

often not the only senator opposing it. In this case, Paul claims not even to oppose funding to replenish Iron Dome stockpiles but is instead trying to tie his support to Afghanistan.

“I in no way shape or form blame leader Schumer for not wanting to capitulate to Sen. Paul’s antics here because they are really out of order in many ways,” said Weinberg.

If no omnibus is agreed to and Congress instead passes a “clean” CR with no Iron Dome funding that lasts a year, it could be 2023 before the supplemental funding is considered again.

“[That] would be not only suboptimal but really deleterious to Israel’s security posture and a shame that 99 out of 100 senators—that level of support can’t get something done—and that’s an indictment on really the United States Congress. ... It’s a shame that this is what we’ve come to, but this is the current situation,” said Weinberg.

Weinberg and Rubin agreed that it’s possible, though highly unlikely, that Schumer could let the bill pass through the regular process.

Boris Zilberman, director of public policy and strategy at the CUFI Action Fund, said that the way things are in Congress at the moment, it may be risky to pin all hopes on an omnibus spending bill passing because such agreement may not be reachable.

“I think that’s why the letter is pushing for Republican and Democrat leadership to come together and figure out where do they find the time while they negotiate these other domestic priorities that they have to find the 30 hours to do this, to either come together and either get Paul to move off his hold, which seems unlikely, or find the floor time to figure this out and move this forward,” he said.

Meanwhile, Zilberman said that a long-term CR is very likely to happen because the closer you get to campaign season for the midterms, there becomes less time available before members start needing to return to their districts to campaign.

After using up significant portions of its interceptor missiles during its conflict with Hamas in Gaza in May, there is widespread concern that if a major conflict flares up between Israel and Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon at any point, it’s

possible that there would not be enough interceptor missiles to handle the hundreds of thousands of rockets stockpiled by the Iranian-backed terrorist organization.

“Things can blow up next week, you never know what Hezbollah is going to do and that’s why the letter also talks about Hezbollah,” said Zilberman. “What this is really about is they don’t want to get caught with their pants down basically if there’s a conflict and all the while we’re debating whether we have 30 hours in the Senate or not.”

“I mean, this is Iron Dome. Let’s remember, this is defensive weaponry. We’re not talking about sending offensive weaponry to anyone. We’re talking about sending defensive weaponry to a major U.S. ally against literal terrorists,” said Weinberg. “This is a no-brainer. This is not rocket science, I guess pun intended.”

“Rand Paul, you know, he’s iconoclastic—he picks his issues, he is taking a stand for some reason on this. For some reason, he thinks it’s the right stance to prevent us from supporting an ally in protecting itself from 250,000 terrorist rockets. For some reason, he thinks that’s a good policy and the American Jewish community does not,” said Rubin.

“From a national security perspective, Israel has put its stock in the United States as its strategic support for its security infrastructure. We have to be a reliable ally in that,” he continued. “And part of that is ensuring that we are consistent in our support for and delivery of key items that we believe Israel should have—Iron Dome being one of them.”

Source:

<https://www.jns.org/pro-israel-groups-fearful-that-iron-dome-funding-may-end-up-blocked-long-term/#:~:text=Pro-Israel%20groups%20fearful%20that%20Iron%20Dome%20funding%20may,agreement%20may%20not%20be%20reachable.%20By%20Dmitriy%20Shapiro>

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