EXCLUSIVE: Threat of US Action at UN Security Council Impacting Israel Defense Aid Negotiations

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Politics, not line items, may be complicating negotiations over an historic US defense package to Israel, *The Jerusalem Post* has learned.

Quiet talks have been under way for months over a new, decade-long aid deal, set to replace an expiring Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) worth $3 billion a year in security assistance to the Jewish state.

 But according to a senior Israeli official, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may let the negotiations continue without conclusion so long as there remains a possibility the Obama administration will support a UN Security Council resolution codifying parameters for a two-state solution with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu, the official explained, fears the White House may be seeking to quickly wrap up and sell the MOU as a public display of the president's commitment to Israel's security– in order to free him to pursue action at the UN.

Israel has not received assurances from the White House that Obama opposes such a resolution– a decision that is the president's alone, the official noted.

Inside the MOU negotiations, US and Israeli officials are still debating whether the package should be "sealed" or remain open to additions over the course of the next decade. "You don't know what will be the threats," the official said. "Now we're speaking of Iron Dome and tunnels. But maybe in five years you'll see submarines coming from Gaza."

Israel hoped for "generosity" in light of the nuclear deal reached with Iran last summer– a deal that both governments agree is likely to fuel Tehran's hostile behavior toward the Jewish state. But that subject remains sensitive, and diplomats negotiating the MOU are wary of slipping into yet another proxy argument over the costs and benefits of the nuclear accord.

In February, Netanyahu told his cabinet members he is willing to wait for the next president to secure a more generous package. But he nevertheless expects to complete the agreement before Obama leaves office– after the United Nations General Assembly in September, and likely before the presidential election in November, the official said.

The deal is largely complete– and if it were up to defense officials in both governments, the memorandum would be signed in a matter of weeks.

"They are pushing," the official continued, referring to the military and defense industry in Israel. "They want this deal sealed so they can start planning for the future. Because when you buy a plane, you make the commitment for five, ten years."

Israel is requesting $5 billion per year in the new package, while the US is pitching between $3.4 and $4 billion. "In Israel's view, the lower end of that range would actually represent a decrease in aid, since the 2007 MOU would have amounted to $3.6 billion per year if one factors in inflation," notes David Makovsky, a former senior advisor on Secretary of State John Kerry's Middle East peace team.

A senior official in the Prime Minister's Office rejected the claims of the source in this report: "We hope to conclude an MOU with the Obama administration as soon as possible," the official said.

And Tzahi HaNegbi, chairman of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, said he is not privy to the negotiations. But he questioned the logic of the strategy, noting the significance of an MOU will far outweigh any Security Council resolution.

A senior Obama administration official also pushed back, highlighting Obama's "historic" commitment to Israel's security over the course of his presidency.

"Even as we grapple with a particularly challenging budget environment, this administration's commitment to Israel's security is such that we are prepared to sign an MOU with Israel that would constitute the largest single pledge of military assistance to any country in US history," the senior official said in response to this report.

Those budget considerations are recognized across partisan lines. Leading a six-member congressional delegation to Israel this week, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) [told *the Post*](http://www.jpost.com/US-Elections/Lindsey-Graham-in-Israel-Trumps-foreign-policy-worse-than-Obamas-449653) the US "would try to be as generous as we could given our budget restraints at home."

"If we are able to reach agreement on a new MOU," the administration official continued, "it would be just the most recent reflection of President Obama's unshakable commitment to Israel's security."

The negotiations are "intensively" under way, the US official added, and the president's goal remains to conclude the aid package swiftly.

"It’s clear that there are serious discussions going on trying to finalize the MOU and the best indication of that is that there are no real leaks taking place about the content," said Dennis Ross, a distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a veteran diplomat on Israel and the Palestinians from the Reagan, H. W. Bush, Clinton and Obama administrations.

"The Israeli government is working with the administration, not bringing Congress into it and not leaking details out, because they want these talks to succeed," he continued. "I don’t know whether there is any linkage to other issues including the peace issue and possible moves at the UN. The reality is both the administration and the Israeli government see the benefit of concluding an MOU this year and I think that’s what’s driving both sides at this point."

But several US officials chose not to comment on whether the president is still considering action of any kind on Middle East peace at the UN Security Council.

The administration's reluctance to rule out such a path is fueling Israel's concerns– and has created daylight between Obama and his former secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton, who has [long rejected](http://www.jpost.com/US-Elections/Clinton-against-imposed-UN-action-on-two-state-solution-aide-says-447297) actions at the UN that would serve to impose parameters on Israel and the Palestinians from without.

"Number one, I don't think it works," Clinton said last month of the strategy. "And number two, I don't think that's the place for it to be hashed out."

Any UN Security Council resolution would be non-binding, following on or possibly replacing Resolution 242, which set the standards for a peace agreement after Israel's seizure of land in the 1967 Six Day War.

The president's goal is to enshrine the principles of a two-state solution with the Palestinians– an outcome he firmly believes is in Israel's long-term interest– even as direct diplomacy falters, and as facts on the ground appear corrosive to the prospects of peace.

Addressing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) last month, US Vice President Joe Biden said the Obama administration will "continue to stand against the biased resolutions and attempts to delegitimize Israel at the United Nations."

He did not address reports that the White House is considering a Middle East peace resolution– presumably considered fair and unbiased by the president, should he chose to proceed.

"I'm hopeful that we can work out all the details," Biden told the crowd at AIPAC, of the MOU negotiations. "Israel may not get everything it asked for. But it'll get everything it needs."