

Senate bows to Trump vetoes, allows Saudi arms sales



President Donald Trump welcomes first responders before signing H.R. 1327, an act ensuring that a victims' compensation fund related to the Sept. 11 attacks never runs out of money, in the Rose Garden of the White House. Monday, July 29, 2019, in Washington. - AP

WASHINGTON — The Senate failed Monday in a bid to override a trio of vetoes issued by President Trump, allowing the administration to move forward with plans to sell billions of dollars of weapons to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Trump's decision to sell the weapons in a way that would have bypassed congressional review infuriated lawmakers from both parties. In a bipartisan pushback, Democrats and Republicans banded together to pass resolutions blocking the \$8.1 billion weapons sales to the U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf.

Votes to override Trump's vetoes failed, 45-40, 45-39 and 46-41. A two-thirds vote was needed in each case.

The White House argued that stopping the sales would send a signal that the United States doesn't stand by its partners and allies, particularly at a time when threats from hostile countries such as Iran are increasing. Saudi Arabia has long been a regional rival to Iran. Its strategic importance has grown as tensions with Iran have mounted after Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from a 2015 accord that restricts the Iranian nuclear program.

The Senate votes came as the House Oversight Committee released a report criticizing the Trump administration over its apparent willingness to allow the president's friends and allies undue influence over policy toward Saudi Arabia.

New documents obtained by the committee "raise serious questions about whether the White House is willing to place the potential profits of the president's

friends above the national security of the American people and the universal objective of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons,” the report said.

The report “exposes how corporate and foreign interests are using their unique access to advocate for the transfer of U.S. nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia,” said Rep. Elijah Cummings of Maryland, the panel’s Democratic chairman.

Cummings, who has repeatedly targeted the Trump administration in a series of investigations, came under sharp attack from Trump this weekend when the president called the congressman’s district a “disgusting, rat and rodent-infested mess” where “no human being would want to live.”

The 50-page Oversight report, released Monday, says Trump’s longtime personal friend, campaign donor and inaugural chairman, Tom Barrack, negotiated directly with Trump and other White House officials to seek positions within the administration, including special envoy to the Middle East and ambassador to the United Arab Emirates.

At the same time, Barrack was promoting the interests of U.S. corporations seeking to profit from the transfer of nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia; advocating on behalf of foreign interests seeking to obtain U.S. nuclear technology; and taking steps for his own company, Colony NorthStar, to profit from the proposals, the report said.

One of the companies leading an effort to build nuclear plants in Saudi Arabia, IP3 International, repeatedly pressed the Trump administration not to require Saudi Arabia to commit to a rigorous “gold standard” in any agreement with the U.S., complaining it would lock them out of lucrative nuclear contracts, the report said.

IP3 officials had “unprecedented access” to the highest levels of the Trump administration, including meetings with Trump, his son-in-law Jared Kushner and Cabinet Secretaries Rick Perry, Steven Mnuchin, Mike Pompeo, Rex Tillerson, James Mattis, and Wilbur Ross, the report said.

The report also criticized the White House for refusing to produce any documents in the investigation and said communications obtained from outside sources indicate Kushner and other officials used personal email or text accounts to communicate about Saudi-related deals.

The private communications appear to violate White House policy and the Presidential Records Act, the report said.

The White House did not respond to requests for comment Monday.

A spokesman for Barrack said he has been cooperating with the Oversight panel and provided documents the committee requested.

The spokesman, Owen Blicksilver, said Barrack's investments and business activities are well known and are intended to "better align" the Middle East and U.S. objectives. Barrack has never served in the Trump administration.

The Trump administration has approved seven applications for U.S. companies to sell nuclear power technology and assistance to Saudi Arabia. Lawmakers from both parties have expressed concerns that Saudi Arabia could develop nuclear weapons if the U.S. technology is transferred without proper safeguards.

Congress is increasingly uneasy with the close relationship between the Trump administration and Saudi Arabia. Trump has made the kingdom a centerpiece of his foreign policy in the Middle East as he tries to further isolate Iran. In the process, Trump has brushed off criticism over the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the Saudis' role in the war in Yemen.

"From the start, this administration has failed to demonstrate what kind of national security threat or quote-unquote 'emergency' from Iran warranted fast-tracking the sale of these weapons to Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E.," said Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The pending sale "not only is a Saudi jobs program, but it is also a giveaway of sensitive U.S. military technology," Menendez said.

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