

Republican, Democratic senators seek to block Trump Saudi arms sales

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Backers said the introduction of the resolutions was intended to “protect and reaffirm Congress’ role of approving arms sales to foreign governments.”

The announcement followed furious rejection in Congress late last month of the Trump administration’s declaration that a growing threat from Iran was an emergency that forced it to sidestep lawmakers’ review of major arms deals and approve precision-guided munitions, aircraft engines, mortars and other equipment and services for Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan.

“We are taking this step today to show that we will not stand idly by and allow the President or the Secretary of State to further erode Congressional review and oversight of arm sales,” Senator Bob Menendez, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said.

The effort was led by Menendez, and Republican Lindsey Graham, a close Trump ally who is also a critic of Saudi Arabia’s human rights record.

Members of Congress had been blocking sales of offensive military equipment to Saudi Arabia and the UAE for months, angry about the huge civilian toll from their air campaign in Yemen, as well as rights abuses such as the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at a Saudi consulate in Turkey.

“While I understand that Saudi Arabia is a strategic ally, the behavior of (Saudi Crown Prince) Mohammed bin Salman cannot be ignored. Now is not the time to do business as usual with Saudi Arabia,” Graham said in a statement.

Graham said he expected “strong bipartisan support” for the resolutions.

Many lawmakers say that the powerful crown prince is ultimately responsible for Khashoggi’s murder and other rights abuses. The government in Riyadh denies that.

Two other Republican senators - Rand Paul and Todd Young - and three Democrats - Chris Murphy, Patrick Leahy and Jack Reed - also joined the announcement.

‘EMERGENCY’

Declaring the emergency, the Trump administration informed congressional committees on May 24 that it was going ahead with 22 military deals worth \$8.1 billion, circumventing a long-standing precedent for lawmakers to review major weapons sales.

The decision angered members of both parties, who worried that Trump’s decision to blow through the “holds” process would eliminate Congress’ ability to prevent not just Trump but future presidents from selling weapons where they liked.

Announcing their plan to introduce the 22 resolutions, the senators said Trump’s “unprecedented” action is at odds with longstanding practice and cooperation between Congress and the executive branch.

Reuters reported on Tuesday that lawmakers were working on responses to the administration’s action and could file legislation within days. A separate set of legislative responses is being considered in the House of Representatives. [L2N23B1W6]

The Arms Export Control Act gives Congress the right to stop major weapons sales by passing a resolution of disapproval in both the Senate and House.

Opponents of the weapons sales said strong bipartisan support for such resolutions would send a forceful message to the administration - as well as defense contractors and the three countries - that Congress was unhappy about the process and could retaliate.

They also said it was possible, given the level of congressional anger over Trump’s use of the emergency declaration, that some of the resolutions would garner the two-thirds majorities in the Senate and House needed to override a Trump veto if necessary.

(The story corrects third country to Jordan from Lebanon in third paragraph.)