

## Secrecy behind Saudi nuclear talks infuriates Congress

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Congressional anger is growing over [President Trump](#)'s efforts to secure a nuclear energy deal with Saudi Arabia.

Lawmakers first became wary of the plans when the Saudis refused to accept limits preventing them from developing a nuclear weapon.

But that skepticism quickly turned to fury when it was revealed that the Trump administration gave approval for companies to share certain nuclear energy technology with the kingdom without a broader nuclear deal in place.

Lawmakers are now demanding answers. They particularly want to know whether any of the approvals came after the October murder of U.S.-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.

"First we want the information from [the Department of Energy], and we're demanding it. We should get it," said Sen. [Bob Menendez](#) (D-N.J.), the ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "And I think it's critical to know exactly how this happened, when it happened and particularly were you doing this after Khashoggi?"

Congress has been re-evaluating the U.S.-Saudi relationship since Khashoggi's death, with lawmakers blaming Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for the killing.

Propelled in part by anger over Khashoggi's death, Congress last week sent Trump a resolution that would end U.S. military support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen's civil war.

Trump is expected to veto the resolution, making it the second veto of his presidency, and lawmakers are plotting their next steps to confront him for supporting the Saudis.

One potential avenue for expressing that anger is the administration's nuclear talks with Riyadh.

House Democrats began investigating the administration's nuclear talks with Saudi Arabia after the Oversight and Reform Committee announced in February it was launching a probe to "determine whether the actions being pursued by the Trump administration are in the national security interests of the United States or, rather, serve those who stand to gain financially as a result of this potential change in U.S. foreign policy."

The investigation was launched in conjunction with the release of an interim report that included detailed allegations by unnamed whistleblowers that senior White House officials ignored warnings from legal and ethics advisers to stop pursuing the plan to sell nuclear reactors to Saudi Arabia.

The administration has been negotiating what's known as a 123 agreement with Saudi Arabia that would allow U.S. companies to sell nuclear reactors to the kingdom.

Riyadh has resisted an agreement that includes prohibitions on enriching uranium and reprocessing spent fuel to produce plutonium — essential steps in producing nuclear weapons.

Crown Prince Mohammed has also vowed his country would obtain a nuclear weapon if rival Iran does.

Satellite images first reported by Bloomberg News this past week show Saudi Arabia is nearing completion of its first nuclear facility.

The administration argues a nuclear energy deal with Saudi Arabia is necessary because the kingdom will otherwise take its business to other countries, leaving U.S. companies in the lurch while doing nothing to prevent nuclear proliferation.

Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) on Friday was asked about the state of negotiations with Saudi Arabia but responded by criticizing the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran in 2015.

"I can't tell you where the negotiations sit because they're still ongoing. But make no mistake about it: We only wish that the previous administration had taken that threat seriously with respect to the Islamic Republic of Iran," he said in an interview with Norah O'Donnell on "CBS This Morning."

Pressed on whether that makes it acceptable for Saudi Arabia to be a nuclear power, Pompeo said, "We will not permit that to happen."

Congress has statutory review powers over 123 agreements and can block them once they are submitted to Capitol Hill.

But even as the agreement remains in the negotiation stage, Energy Secretary [Rick Perry](#) approved seven authorizations that let U.S. companies share certain nuclear energy technology with Saudi Arabia. Such authorizations typically allow for sharing unclassified nuclear technology and services such as nuclear fuel fabrication, reactor designs and training for operating a nuclear facility, according to the Congressional Research Service.

The Daily Beast first reported the approvals, which Perry later confirmed to the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Perry told senators the Saudi-related approvals were among 37 authorizations granted since 2017, including two for Jordan, and that it's "something that goes on every day."

He said details of the approvals were not shared publicly because the companies involved determined that doing so would divulge proprietary business information.

In a statement following Perry's testimony, the Department of Energy stressed that 810 authorizations and 123 agreements are "are two distinct and different processes based on two separate sections of the Atomic Energy Act."

But lawmakers were outraged when they found out they were not told about the approvals, saying the secrecy violates the Atomic Energy Act, which requires that Congress be kept "fully and currently informed" of 123 agreement negotiations.

In a recent hearing with Pompeo, Rep. [Brad Sherman](#) (D-Calif.) said, "It appears that this is an end run around the law in an effort to achieve a policy."

"If you cannot trust a regime with a bone saw, you should not trust them with nuclear weapons," Sherman said, referring to a weapon used in Khashoggi's killing.

Sherman and Rep. [Ted Yoho](#) (R-Fla.) introduced a bill in late February that would require congressional approval of a 123 agreement with Saudi Arabia before it can take effect, as opposed to current law that says agreements go into effect unless Congress blocks them.

A companion bill was introduced in the Senate by Sens. [Ed Markey](#) (D-Mass.) and [Marco Rubio](#) (R-Fla.).

Menendez and Rubio sent Perry a letter this past week demanding information by April 10 on his approval for the six authorizations by his agency.

The two senators previously asked the Government Accountability Office to investigate the administration's negotiations on a 123 agreement.

"The kingdom has engaged in many deeply troubling actions and statements that have provoked alarm in Congress and led lawmakers to begin the process of reevaluating the U.S.-Saudi relationship and our long-term stability and interests in the region," the senators wrote to Perry. "We therefore believe the United States should not be providing nuclear technology or information to them at this time."

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