

Democrats raise concern over firing

Trump defends arms deal with Saudi Arabia

WASHINGTON, May 19, (AP) — Congressional Democrats say the State Department watchdog fired by President Donald Trump last week was investigating possible impropriety in a massive arms sale to Saudi Arabia last year, adding new questions to the watchdog's abrupt dismissal.

Democrats said Monday that ousted Inspector General Steve Linick was probing how the State Department pushed through a \$7 billion Saudi arms sale over congressional objections. Democrats previously suggested the dismissal might have been tied to Linick's investigation of allegations that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo may have improperly ordered staff to run personal errands for him.

Linick's dismissal late Friday comes amid broader concerns over Trump's removal of inspectors general at various departments. Trump has said he had lost confidence in those fired but has not given specific reasons, which lawmakers

from both parties have criticized.

Pompeo told The Washington Post on Monday that he had recommended to Trump that Linick be removed because he was "undermining" the State Department's mission. He would not address specifics except to say it was not in retaliation for any investigation.

"It is not possible that this decision, or my recommendation rather, to the president rather, was based on any effort to retaliate for any investigation that was going on, or is currently going on," Pompeo told the Post, adding that he did not know if Linick's office had been looking into possible impropriety on his part.

Under Secretary of State for Management Brian Bulatao told the Post that confidence in Linick had begun to wane after leaks to the media last year about an IG investigation into political retaliation against career employees by political ap-

pointees. When released, that report was critical of several political appointees for having acted against career officials deemed insufficiently loyal to Trump.

Trump confirmed Monday that he fired Linick at Pompeo's request.

"I have the absolute right as president to terminate. I said, 'Who appointed him?' And they say, 'President Obama.' I said, look, I'll terminate him," Trump said at the White House.

Rep. Eliot Engel, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said he was troubled that Linick was fired before the completion of the Saudi investigation. Engel had called for that probe after Pompeo in May 2019 invoked a rarely used provision in federal law to bypass a congressional review of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"His office was investigating — at my request — Trump's

phony declaration of an emergency so he could send weapons to Saudi Arabia," said Engel, D-N.Y. "We don't have the full picture yet, but it's troubling that Secretary Pompeo wanted Linick pushed out before this work could be completed."

He called for the State Department to turn over records related to Linick's firing that he and the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, had demanded on Saturday.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said it was "alarming" to see reports that the firing may have been in response to Linick's investigation into the Saudi arms deal. In a letter to Trump, she demanded an explanation.

Trump notified Congress of the dismissal, as required. But Pelosi said it was essential that he provide "detailed and substantial justification for the removal" before the end of a 30-day review period.

Shooter ... tactics

Qaeda contact in 'Pensacola'

WASHINGTON, May 19, (AP) — The gunman who killed three US sailors at a military base in Florida last year communicated with al-Qaeda operatives about planning and tactics in the months leading up to the attack, US officials said Monday, as they lashed out at Apple for failing to help them open the shooter's phones so they could access key evidence.

Law enforcement officials discovered contacts between **Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani** and operatives of al-Qaeda after FBI technicians succeeded in breaking

into two cell-phones that had previously been locked and that the shooter, a Saudi Air Force officer, had tried to destroy before he was killed by a sheriff's deputy.

"We now have a clearer understanding of Alshamrani's associations and activities in the years, months and days leading up to his attack," Attorney General William Barr said at a news conference in which he chastised Apple for not helping open the phones.

The new details, including that Alshamrani had been radicalized abroad before he arrived in the US, raise fresh questions about the vetting of foreign military members and trainees who spend time at American bases. The announcement also comes amid tension with the US over instability in the oil market during the coronavirus pandemic and as the Trump administration faces criticism that it has not done enough to hold the kingdom, which has been trying to improve its international image, accountable for human rights violations.

The criticism directed at Apple could also escalate divisions between the US government and the technology company, which rejected the characterization that it has been unhelpful. The company said Monday that it does not store customers' passcodes, does not have the capacity to unlock passcode-protected devices and that weakening encryption could create vulnerabilities that undermine national security and data privacy.

Alshamrani was killed by a sheriff's deputy during the Dec. 6 rampage at a classroom building at Naval Air Station Pensacola. He had been undergoing flight training at Pensacola as part of instruction offered at American military bases to foreign nationals. Besides the three sailors who died, eight other people were injured.

Once unlocked, US officials said, the phones revealed contact between Alshamrani and "dangerous" operatives from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, that continued until shortly before the shooting. They also revealed that he had been radicalized since at least 2015, before he arrived in the US, and had meticulously planned the attack.

Alshamrani created minicam videos as he cased a military school building and saved a will on his phone that purported to explain himself - the same document AQAP released after the shooting when it claimed responsibility for it, said FBI Director Chris Wray, who called the attack "the brutal culmination of years of planning and preparation."

"He wasn't just coordinating with them about planning and tactics," Wray said. "He was helping the organization make the most it could out of his murders."

Asked whether al-Qaeda had directed or inspired the attacks, Wray said it was "certainly more than just inspired."

The phones have already yielded valuable intelligence, officials said, citing a recent counterterrorism operation in Yemen that targeted an AQAP associate Alshamrani had been in touch with.

The Justice Department had asked Apple to help extract data from two iPhones that belonged to the gunman, including one that authorities say Alshamrani damaged with a bullet after being confronted by law enforcement.

But Wray said Apple provided "effectively no help," delaying by months the FBI's ability to access the devices and hampering the investigation since agents did not have a full picture of what to look for or ask about. He did not say what method was used to open the phones, but said it was a targeted fix and not a broad solution to the problem.

Barr used Monday's news conference to forcefully call on Apple to do more to cooperate with law enforcement.

"In cases like this, where the user is a terrorist, or in other cases, where the user is a violent criminal, a human trafficker, a child predator, Apple's decision has dangerous consequences for public safety and the national security and is, in my judgment, unacceptable," Barr said.

In a statement Monday, Apple said it had provided the FBI with "every piece of information available to us, including iCloud backups, account information and transactional data for multiple accounts." It rejected the idea of making its products more accessible for law enforcement's benefit.

New evidence against DAESH

UN team cites progress

UNITED NATIONS, May 19, (AP) — A UN investigative team says it has made "significant progress" in collecting new sources of evidence in Iraq against Islamic State extremists, including over 2 million call records that should strengthen cases against perpetrators of crimes against the Yazidi minority in 2014.

The team also reported progress in its investigations of the mass killings of unarmed cadets and military personnel from the Tikrit Air Academy in June 2014 and crimes committed by Islamic State extremists in Mosul from 2014 to 2016.

In a report to the UN Security Council obtained by The Associated Press, the investigative team said it is continuing to engage with the Iraqi government on pending legislation that would allow the country to prosecute war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide allegedly committed by the Islamic State, also known as ISIL.

"In the coming six months, the team will continue its work with the government of Iraq in order to capitalize on this opportunity, with a view to securing the commencement of domestic proceedings based on evidence collected by the team," the report said.

The Islamic State group's self-declared "caliphate" that once spanned a third of both Iraq and Syria, has been defeated on the ground but its fighters are still staging insurgent attacks.

Scars

The atrocities its fighters and supporters committed have left deep scars. Thousands of members of Iraq's Yazidi minority, mainly women and girls, were raped and enslaved, while men were killed. Suspected homosexuals were pushed off roofs to their deaths. Captured Americans and other Westerners were beheaded, and an unknown number of suspected opponents were killed.

A Security Council resolution backed by more than 60 countries to refer the Syrian conflict to the International Criminal Court was vetoed by both Russia and China in May 2014.

The General Assembly established an independent panel in December 2016 to assist in the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for war crimes or crimes against humanity in Syria.

In September 2017, the Security Council voted unanimously to ask the UN to establish an investigative team to help Iraq preserve evidence and promote accountability for what "may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide" committed by Islamic State extremists, both in Iraq and the Levant which includes Syria.

The latest report by the investigative team said that as a result of its expanded cooperation with the Iraqi judiciary, security services and Directorate of Military Intelligence, it stands "at a pivotal moment in its work."

Cooperation with the Iraqi judiciary in obtaining call data records and with Iraqi security services in extracting and analyzing data from cellphones, SIM cards and mass storage devices previously used by ISIL "have the potential to represent a paradigm shift in the prosecution of ISIL members," the investigators said.

The data has provided "access to a wide range of internal ISIL documents, cell data, videos and images," they said.

The team said it is already identifying evidence that can fill gaps in ongoing proceedings as a result of the cell phone data as well as from putting documents held by Iraqi authorities in digital form, and using enhanced discovery and evidence-management systems.

In its investigation of attacks committed by IS against the Yazidis in Sinjar district in August 2014, the team said the recent receipt of more than 2 million call data records from Iraqi cell phone service providers "relevant to time periods and geographic locations connected to this investigation provides a significant opportunity to strengthen case files in relation to alleged perpetrators."

Also:

BAGHDAD: A rocket struck Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, the seat of Iraq's government, early on Tuesday morning, according to an Iraqi military statement, the first attack on the area since a new prime minister was sworn in earlier this month.

The Katyusha rocket hit an empty house, causing minor damages. The Green Zone is where government buildings and foreign embassies are located. A preliminary investigation indicated the rocket was launched from the nearby by **Al-Idrisi** neighborhood on Palestine Street, the statement said.

Previous attacks have frequently targeted the US presence in Iraq, including the US Embassy and Iraqi bases hosting American troops. The US has blamed Kataib Hezbollah, an Iraqi militia group backed by Iran, of perpetrating the attacks.

The new administration of Prime Minister **Mustafa al-Kadhimi**, who came to power earlier this month, is preparing for a strategic dialogue with Washington, expected to take place next month. The talks will touch on security and economic cooperation between both countries.

The issue of militias acting outside of state control is also expected to be on the agenda.

An angry mob stormed the offices of a Saudi-owned channel in Iraq on Monday following the airing of a television show that suggested Iraqi militia leader **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis**, killed in a US strike earlier this year, was involved in orchestrating an attack in Lebanon nearly 40 years ago.

Saudi channel MBC 1 aired a show on Syrian poet **Nizar Qabbani**, which mentioned that his Iraqi wife was killed in the 1981 bombing of the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut during the Lebanese civil war.

The show suggested a link in that attack to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was killed in the January US drone strike in Baghdad. The attack also killed Iranian Gen **Qasem Soleimani**.

The airing of the show prompted outcry from dozens of angry Iraqis who stormed the office of the television channel located in the **Al-Waziriya** district, north of the Iraqi capital.

Al-Muhandis was the deputy leader of the Popular Mobilization Forces, an array of militia groups created to help defeat the Islamic State group. Some militia groups within the PMF have links to Iran.



An anti-government protester shouts slogans, while wearing a mask to help curb the spread of the coronavirus, during ongoing protests in front of the Ministry of Economy, in downtown Beirut, Lebanon, Monday, May 18, 2020. (AP)

UN calls for Syria talks

Former Syrian secret police officer declares his innocence

BERLIN, May 19, (AP) — A former Syrian secret police colonel testified in a German court Monday that he was not involved in the torture of opponents of the regime of President Bashar Assad, in the first war crimes trial outside Syria linked to the country's years-long conflict.

Anwar R., 57, is accused of crimes against humanity, rape and murder as head of the Al Khatib detention center, also known as Branch 251, near Damascus.

As a senior member of Syria's General Intelligence Directorate, R. is accused of overseeing the "systematic and brutal torture" of more than 4,000 prisoners between April 2011 and September 2012, resulting in the deaths of at least 58 people, according to the indictment.

His co-defendant, 43-year-old Eyad A., is accused of being part of a police squad that detained protesters and brought them back to Branch 251, where they were then mistreated. Neither of their last names has been released, in line with German privacy laws.

In his first statement since his trial opened in April, Anwar R. told the Koblenz state court that he was not guilty of the accusations against him.

"I have not committed the crimes I'm accused of," he said in a statement read by his attorneys, the dpa news agency reported. "I have never taken part in human rights violations."

Instead, he said, he was a secret supporter of the Syrian opposition, and testified that he sympathized with the victims of torture.

Patrick Kroker, a lawyer for the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights that is supporting several of the victims, called the defendant's statement "grotesque."

At least nine torture victims are represented as co-plaintiffs in the case, as allowed under German law. They and several others are expected to be called as witnesses.

Kroker told The Associated Press that R. had accused all witnesses of either lying or not having been under his responsibility.

R.'s attorney couldn't immediately be reached for comment.

The two defendants left Syria for Germany before their arrest in February 2019. If convicted, Anwar R. could face life imprisonment. Eyad A. could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison if convicted of complicity in crimes against humanity.

The Koblenz regional court, where the trial is being held, has reduced the number of seats available to reporters and the general public by a third due to social distancing rules to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

The trial is expected to run several months. Meanwhile, the UN special envoy for Syria called Monday for talks between Russia and the United States to help end the more than nine-year-old war, saying the two major powers could play "a key role."

Geir Pedersen's encouragement to Moscow and Washington to take a leading role was his first public appeal to the rival powers on opposing sides of the conflict - Russia which has been the key backer of Syrian President Bashar Assad and the United States which supports the opposition.

Pedersen told the UN Security Council on Monday that the three countries that have taken the lead in arranging cease-fires in Syria - Assad allies Russia and Iran and opposition backer Turkey "are key players too."

He said members of a committee from the Syrian government, opposition and civil society who are supposed to draft a new constitution for the country and the 15 council nations are key players as well.

Pedersen said there have been too many fleeting opportunities in the past decades to move from conflict to a political path that were lost, and "those missed moments were followed by renewed violence and a hardening of positions among regional and international actors."

"We must not repeat this pattern," he said.

Pedersen said there is anxiety that while violence has somewhat abated at the moment it could escalate at any time, and deep disappointment that the political process hasn't delivered tangible improvements for the Syrian people.

"And there is a widespread sense that international competition is more prominent than cooperation, with Syrians paying the price," he told the UN's top council.

With some calm at the moment and the world facing common threats from the COVID-19 pandemic and Islamic State extremists, Pedersen stressed that building trust between key international parties and with Syrians "is essential - and could unlock progress" toward peace.

He then encouraged the US and Russia along with the others to engage in dialogue.

Ultimately, Pedersen said, "there is a need to come together to support a renewed effort in a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated political process" toward a political settlement based on the 2015 Security Council resolution that endorsed a road map to peace including drafting a new constitution and UN-supervised elections.

The longstanding divisions between the US and Russia over Syria were evident in their speeches to the council that followed, which gave no indication of a desire for talks.

US Ambassador Kelly Craft said fully implementing the 2015 road map, starting with an immediate nationwide cease-fire, is "what will move Syria toward a future of peace" - and that's what the Security Council must pursue.

She urged the council to ensure that the Syrian government reverse "its destructive pattern of behavior against its own people" and agree to a cease-fire instead of pursuing a military solution to the conflict.



In this Sunday, April 19, 2020 photo Syrian Wassim Mukdad poses for a photograph at the Berlin offices of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, Germany. Together with more than a dozen other witnesses, Mukdad will testify before a German court in the trial of Anwar R., a former member of Syria's secret police suspected of overseeing the abuse of detainees at a notorious jail near Damascus known as Al Khatib, or Branch 251. (AP)

News in Brief

TEHRAN: A special anti-corruption court in Iran has sentenced a couple to death on money laundering and other charges, the judiciary said Tuesday.

The couple - Najva Lasheidaei and her husband Vahid Behzadi - are said to have smuggled hard currency and laundered \$200 million, said judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaili.

Authorities also confiscated nearly 300 kilograms of gold from the couple and said they had bought 6,700 cars from Saipa, one of top two automakers of the country.

In connection to the Saipa part of the charges, the court separately sentenced lawmakers Fereidoun Ahmadi and Mohammad Azizi to five years in prison each, as well as Mehdi Jamali, a former CEO of Saipa, to seven years in prison.

Both lawmakers represent the city of Zanjan, about 300 kilometers (187 miles) northwest of the capital, Tehran.

Under Iranian law, the couple can appeal the verdicts within 20 days. Their lawyers were not reachable for comment.

Iran is struggling to battle corruption, including among its lawmakers. Last week, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani dismissed the trade and industry minister amid ongoing economic problems that have seen car prices skyrocket by more than 60%.

Iran's constitutional watchdog barred some 90 lawmakers from running for reelection in February's parliamentary elections, accusing an unspecified number of them of corruption. (AP)

MINNEAPOLIS: A Lebanese man has pleaded guilty in federal court in Minnesota to conspiring to export drone parts and technology from the US to Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia in Lebanon.

US Attorney Erica H. MacDonald said Monday that Usama Hamade, 55, pleaded guilty to conspiring to illegally export goods and technology.

His brother, Issam Hamade, pleaded guilty in March in federal court in Minnesota.

Prosecutors said the brothers acquired sophisticated technology for drones from 2009 to 2013 and illegally exported them to Hezbollah, which the US considers a terrorist organization.

The Hamades were arrested in February 2018 in South Africa and were extradited to the US last fall.

According to an indictment, the parts included inertial measurement units, which can be used to track an aircraft's position, and digital compasses, which can be paired with the inertial measurement units for drone guidance systems. The parts also included a jet engine and 20 piston engines. (AP)

DOHA: Amir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Al Thani on Monday received a verbal message from Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tareq on firm fraternal ties between both countries and ways of promoting them.

The message had also something to do with a set of key regional and international issues and subjects of mutual concern, Qatar's official news agency reported.

The message was delivered by Omani Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yousef bin Alawai as he was welcomed by the Amir of Qatar earlier today, the agency said. (KUNA)