

Obama Vetoes Bill Allowing 9/11 Victims to Sue Saudi Government

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On Friday, US President Barack Obama vetoed a bill passed unanimously in Congress that is intended to allow Americans to sue foreign governments alleged to be responsible for terrorist attacks in the US. With overwhelming bipartisan support for the bill, titled "Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act" (JASTA), Congress is expected to override Obama's veto later this week.

The legislation was passed by the House of Representatives earlier this month, in the aftermath of the release of 28 pages of secret government documents detailing the role of the government of Saudi Arabia in the September 11, 2001 terror attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people. It has been sponsored by organizations representing September 11 victims and their families who aim to sue the Saudi government.

Spurred on by the Pentagon and CIA, as well as a desire to maintain close ties to the Saudi regime, the Obama administration opposes the bill for a number of reasons. Above all, increased litigation on the 9/11 attacks threatens to further expose the fraudulent character of both the official investigation into the attacks, as well as the so-called "war on terror" launched in their aftermath.

The attacks provided the pretext to initiate longstanding plans to wage aggressive wars in pursuit of the oil resources of the Middle East, as part a broader effort to maintain American imperialism's hegemony throughout the region and the Eurasian continent as a whole. Through the "war on terror" begun under Bush and deepened under Obama, the US has destroyed entire societies from Afghanistan, to Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria, in the process killing over a million people.

The central lies deployed by the Bush administration in 2003 to justify its attack on Iraq were that Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi government bore responsibility for the 9/11 attacks and that the country possessed weapons of mass destruction.

In reality, the country most deeply implicated in the attacks was Saudi Arabia, home to 15 out of 19 of the hijackers, as well as Osama bin Laden. Saudi ties to the 9/11 attacks were confirmed by the 28-page segment from the report issued by the "Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities before and after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001," released to the public last July. The 28 pages had been stowed away in a Capitol Hill basement vault since 2002, with only members of Congress allowed to read them, barred from taking notes or discussing their content with the outside world.

The redacted document begins by stating, “While in the United States, some of the September 11 hijackers were in contact with, and received support or assistance from, individuals who may be connected to the Saudi government.” It goes on to detail that at least two of the hijackers were “provided substantial assistance” by Omar al-Bayoumi, whom the FBI identified as a Saudi intelligence agent, while some hijackers received paychecks for no-show jobs from a company financed by the Saudi Ministry of Defense.

In order to maintain official ties to Saudi Arabia—alongside Israel, Washington’s principal Middle East ally for over 50 years and the largest buyer of American weapons—these facts had to be suppressed. While claiming without any evidence that Iraq bore responsibility for the 9/11 attacks, the US was forced to bury real and substantial links to the Saudi regime.

During the buildup and launching of the war in Iraq in 2003, many of the same congressmen now professing their desire to find justice for the 9/11 victims supported the campaign of the CIA and Saudi monarchy to keep the Saudi role a secret by suppressing the 28-page document. The present bipartisan congressional support for JASTA is thus a cynical and hypocritical political maneuver.

The release of the document and the passing of JASTA coincides with the 2016 presidential election campaign, in which the two candidates have been jockeying for the support of the military and are both campaigning on aggressively “antiterror” platforms, portraying the US as virtually under siege. Both Clinton and Trump released statements criticizing Obama’s decision, saying they would have signed the bill into law.

The support of the candidates and Congress for the bill is also a manifestation of the deepening rift between the US and Saudi Arabia. Last year, against the wishes of the Saudi regime, the Obama administration began a rapprochement with Iran through the signing of a nuclear agreement. Most recently, there have been rising tensions between Washington and Riyadh over US foreign policy in Syria and the broader Middle East.

At the same time, the country’s continuing importance is highlighted by the fact that influential sections of the national security apparatus were able to pressure Obama to veto the bill, as part of an effort to maintain good relations with Riyadh. A bipartisan group of former national security officials, including President George W. Bush’s national security adviser Stephen Hadley and attorney general Michael Mukasey, President Bill Clinton’s secretary of defense William Cohen, and Richard Clarke, a national security aide to both Clinton and Bush, penned an open letter to Obama urging him to veto the bill.

They wrote, “The harm this legislation will cause the United States will be both dramatic and long-lasting,” and if enacted, the bill “will most certainly undermine our relationship with one of our most important allies, Saudi Arabia, and damage our relationship with the entire Middle East.”

While not explicitly naming Saudi Arabia, Obama made clear in his veto letter that the bill threatened US foreign relations. He writes, “A number of our allies and partners have already contacted us with serious concerns about the bill. By exposing these allies and partners to this sort of litigation in U.S. courts, JASTA threatens to limit their cooperation on key national security issues, including counterterrorism initiatives, at a crucial time when we are trying to build coalitions, not create divisions.”

In his veto message to Congress, Obama also expressed concern that setting this precedent

in the US “could encourage foreign governments to act reciprocally and allow their domestic courts to exercise jurisdiction over the United States or U.S. officials—including our men and women in uniform—for allegedly causing injuries overseas via U.S. support to third parties.”

In other words, if similar legislation were enacted in virtually any country in the world, lawsuits could be brought against the US government to demand reparations for decades of imperialist slaughter. In the past quarter century alone, American imperialism has laid waste to entire societies, killing and displacing millions of innocent people and creating the largest refugee crisis since the end of World War II.

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