

U.S. Congress allows Saudi Arabia weapons sale to go ahead

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A Patriot missile battery is seen in Saudi Arabia [File: Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP]

Washington, December 8 (RHC)-- The U.S. Senate has blocked a resolution that would have banned a \$650 million sale of missiles and missile launchers to Saudi Arabia. The sale was approved by the administration of President Joe Biden in November. It is the first major arms deal between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia since Biden took office in January this year.

The chamber on Tuesday voted 67 to 30 against the resolution, which represented the latest attempt by legislators to attempt to block US weapons transfers to Saudi Arabia over its involvement in the continuing

war in Yemen. It had been introduced by Republicans Mike Lee and Rand Paul, as well as Bernie Sanders, an independent who caucuses with Democrats.

In a speech on Tuesday, Sanders said: “Exporting more missiles to Saudi Arabia does nothing but further this conflict and pour more gasoline on already raging fire.”

“We could stop this war if we really had the will to do it,” Paul said on the Senate floor. “All of America should be appalled at the humanitarian disaster caused by the Saudi blockade of Yemen.”

The Biden administration had promised a reset of relations with Riyadh over human rights concerns and the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which U.S. intelligence linked directly to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Saudi officials have denied MBS was involved in Khashoggi’s murder.

But Washington has also taken a more pragmatic approach towards Riyadh, whose influence over oil markets and strategic significance in the region continue to make it a key U.S. ally.

In February, Biden announced an end to support for all “offensive operations” by Saudi-led forces in Yemen, but pledged to continue to support the kingdom’s ability to defend itself. On Tuesday, the Biden administration had said it strongly opposed the resolution to prohibit the weapons sale.

Passage “would undermine the president’s commitment to aid in our partner’s defenses at a time of increased missile and drone attacks against civilians in Saudi Arabia,” the White House Office of Management and Budget said in a statement.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Monday that Riyadh is currently appealing to the U.S. and other allies to supply “hundreds more” Raytheon Missiles and Defense-made Patriot missile interceptors to repel drone and ballistic missile attacks from the Houthis, citing a dwindling supply. The State Department is considering a direct sale, according to the newspaper.

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