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Influence Industry: Sudan hires its first U.S. lawyer in years, prompting protests



Alex Wong/Getty Images - Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) is a longtime critic of the regime in Khartoum.

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By Dan Eggen, Published: December 14

The Obama administration has allowed the Republic of Sudan to hire its first U.S. lawyer in years, prompting strong objections from human rights groups and some members of Congress.

Bart S. Fisher, a veteran international trade lawyer, is being paid \$20,000 a month by Sudan to help the strife-torn African nation in its attempts to have U.S. economic sanctions lifted and be removed from the State Department's list of terrorism-sponsoring governments, according to [federal registration documents](#).

The hiring has angered U.S. human rights

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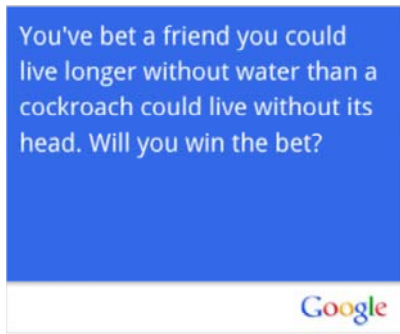
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activists and some lawmakers because of the Sudanese regime's history of alleged genocide and other atrocities against its citizens during a decades-long civil war. Fighting has flared again this year along the border with newly independent South Sudan, displacing an estimated 400,000 people and prompting new accusations of indiscriminate bombing and illegal killings by the Khartoum government.

Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.), a longtime critic of the Sudanese regime, attacked Fisher in the [House](#) and during a [news conference](#) this week for agreeing to work for "a genocidal government" that "has blood on its hands." He also said he suspected the administration may have issued a license to Fisher because of the lawyer's past campaign contributions to President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and other Democrats.

"I don't know how Mr. Fisher sleeps at night," Wolf said on the House floor Tuesday, adding later: "If he has received one penny from the government of Sudan, he should return it immediately."

An alliance of activists, Act for Sudan, plans to picket Fisher's Washington offices on Friday. "Our government should not be seeing this as the time to reward the government of Sudan," said Act for Sudan spokesman Eric Cohen.

Fisher said in an interview Wednesday that the objections are misplaced and based on the erroneous idea that he is working as a lobbyist. Under the terms of the license issued by the Treasury Department, which enforces sanctions against Sudan, Fisher may only represent the Khartoum government in legal matters and is forbidden from lobbying or engaging in public relations, records show.


"I am not a lobbyist," Fisher said. "I am a lawyer, and the Embassy of the Republic of Sudan is my client."

The State Department has designated Sudan a state sponsor of terrorism since 1993, when the United States imposed sanctions on the country for harboring terrorists such as Osama bin Laden. The restrictions remained amid persistent allegations of genocide and other crimes during a 20-year civil war. A fragile peace agreement in 2005 led to the formation this year of the new nation of South Sudan.

The Khartoum regime has long sought ways to persuade the U.S. government to lift its restrictions, including the hiring of a Washington lobbyist in 2005, who was [later prosecuted](#) for working on behalf of the country in violation of sanctions.

The Washington Post [reported in 2009](#) that the regime had worked through the nation of Qatar to enlist the help of former Reagan administration official Robert "Bud" McFarlane, who is now an adviser to Newt Gingrich's presidential campaign.








Documents filed with the Justice Department under the Foreign Agents Registration Act show that Fisher was hired Nov. 1 to "counsel and assist the Republic of the Sudan in satisfying appropriate U.S. conditions to reduce and eliminate the Sudanese Sanctions Regulations and related U.S. laws." A license allowing the deal was issued by Treasury on Nov. 16, records show.

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The fee is \$20,000 per month, paid quarterly. Fisher's wife also received a gift of a purse and two candlestick holders from the republic on Nov. 2, disclosure records show.

A Treasury official, speaking on background, said that the agreement adheres to sanction guidelines because legal representation, but not lobbying or public relations, is allowed.

"Recognizing the importance of due process and opportunity for redress, our regulations ensure that even the worst actors have the opportunity to challenge the blocking of their property before U.S. government agencies and courts," the official said in a statement.

Fisher said Sudan's government needs legal representation to continue implementing the 2005 peace accord, which includes complex negotiations over transportation and other infrastructure issues with South Sudan.

"Is it controversial? Yes. But is it improper to have counsel under the Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution? I don't think so," Fisher said. "Why would they not have a right to counsel like anyone else?"

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