

Nevada assemblywoman resigns from consulting job after ties to Saudi Arabia are revealed



Shannon Bilbray-Axelrod (Daniel Clark/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

By BEN BOTKIN LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

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CARSON CITY — Nevada Assemblywoman Shannon Bilbray-Axelrod resigned Thursday from her job at a consulting firm tied to her role as a registered foreign agent for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Bilbray-Axelrod announced her resignation on the same day the Las Vegas Review-Journal published a report that said the Las Vegas Democrat is one of four foreign agents

in Nevada registered to do work on behalf of Saudi Arabia to oppose a federal law that allows U.S. terror victims and families to sue other nations.

“Although I’ve already been on unpaid leave, this morning I made the decision to resign from Organized Karma effective immediately,” Bilbray-Axelrod said in a statement. “The questions that have come as a result of my employment are distracting and unfair to the constituents in my district. I regret any unintended consequences that I may have caused while at Organized Karma. Now, I would like to continue serving the constituents of Assembly District 34, which has always been my sole focus.”

WHEELER HAS ETHICAL CONCERNS

Separately, Assemblyman Jim Wheeler, R-Gardnerville, called on Bilbray-Axelrod to recuse herself from taking votes or attempting to influence Assembly Bill 159, which would ban fracking in Nevada.

“Anyone who follows the issue knows that the Saudis have a huge stake in the issue and we’ve been trying for years to relieve ourselves from dependency on foreign oil, and fracking is just one small way we’ve been able to,” Wheeler told the Review-Journal.

Wheeler said he is weighing whether to ask the Assembly’s ethics committee to investigate the matter for potential breaches of ethics. Wheeler said he is waiting to hear from the Legislature’s legal counsel before he decides on the request for an ethics investigation.

If Wheeler does ask for an investigation, the request would go to Assembly Speaker Jason Frierson, D-Las Vegas, the committee’s chairman.

Bilbray-Axelrod didn’t respond to a request for comment about Wheeler’s concerns.

OCTOBER START

Bilbray-Axelrod registered as a foreign agent in October, shortly before her election to represent Assembly District 34.

At the time, Bilbray-Axelrod and the other registered agents, Aida Blankenship, Ronni Council and Charity Stevens, worked for or were closely tied to Organized Karma, a Las Vegas consulting firm.

U.S. Department of Justice disclosure records show Organized Karma and the Nevada agents are subcontractors for Qorvis MLSSGroup, a public relations firm that does advocacy work for Saudi Arabia.

The agents linked to the kingdom work to oppose the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act, or JASTA. JASTA was long sought by some 9/11 families who declined legal settlements so they could pursue claims against Saudi Arabia instead. Others, including agents for Saudi Arabia, oppose the measure on legal grounds, citing fears that other nations could enact similar laws and sue U.S. veterans, intelligence officials and diplomats who work on foreign soil.

Former President Barack Obama vetoed the bill, but Congress overrode the veto in September.

On her federal disclosure, Bilbray-Axelrod reported her role as doing “outreach to media, influencers, state and federal elected officials” about JASTA and its “unintended consequences.”

But Wheeler said: “We need legislation like JASTA to ensure that justice is served and bring a small peace of mind to the victims of 9/11.”

The Saudi government has invested in a multimillion-dollar public relations and lobbying effort to advocate against the law in the U.S. with agents throughout the nation. The work includes flying veterans to Washington, D.C., to raise concerns about the issue and encouraging them to write letters to members of Congress.

Bilbray-Axelrod, a consultant, listed Organized Karma as her income source in a state disclosure required for elected officials that was filed in January.

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