

Trump Dismisses Another Inspector General, Fueling Oversight Concerns

With the firing of the Export-Import Bank's inspector general, the president has sidelined around two dozen of the watchdogs who seek out fraud and mismanagement in federal agencies.



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Parisa Salehi was the kind of internal watchdog who had earned a strong reputation for digging up fraud, waste and abuse during her 15 years in government service. She had risen through the ranks at inspectors general offices at the State Department and U.S.A.I.D., eventually taking over internal investigations at the Export-Import Bank of the United States, where her office reported saving tens of millions of dollars.

But last week, she got a notice that President Trump had fired her, effective immediately. The reason she was given? A vague line about the administration's changing priorities, according to two people familiar with the matter.

Ms. Salehi was the latest casualty of Mr. Trump's mass purge of government watchdogs, the investigators assigned to agencies across the administration who act as the eyes and ears of Congress and ensure taxpayer dollars are not misused.

Mr. Trump has fired or reassigned about two dozen such top investigators, and he has moved to defund an umbrella group, the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, further weakening the system that supports robust



oversight of government operations. The defunding meant, among other things, the shutdown of websites for dozens of inspectors general that publish reports for public review and hotline numbers where whistle-blowers can submit complaints.

Even among Republicans on Capitol Hill, Ms. Salehi's firing is prompting some backlash.

Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, raised concerns that the termination was illegal, and that Mr. Trump had skirted a law demanding he inform Congress of such moves.

"Pres Trump takes an oath to uphold the constitution & the laws but he hasn't told Congress he was firing the Ex-Im Inspector General," Mr. Grassley wrote on social media. "The law says POTUS has to specifically inform Congress abt IG firings and unless the courts say otherwise that's still the law."

Mr. Grassley and Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, also have called on Russell T. Vought, Mr. Trump's budget director, to restore funding Congress approved for the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity.

The Export-Import Bank of the United States facilitates exports of U.S. goods and services by providing financial assistance such as loans, loan guarantees and credit insurance when private lenders are unavailable.

Ms. Salehi's firing comes as the bank is operating under new leadership. The Senate recently confirmed John Jovanovic as president and chairman of the bank's board of directors. He has pledged to carry out Mr. Trump's agenda to "put American jobs first."

Mr. Jovanovic is the son-in-law of Mehmet Oz, known as Dr. Oz, the administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and a longtime ally of Mr. Trump.

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Before Mr. Jovanovic took the reins, Ms. Salehi's office had submitted to lawmakers on Capitol Hill the results of two reports that did not look good for the agency, according to people familiar with the matter. One examined environmental and social behavior of the agency, and another questioned costs associated with a direct loan the agency had awarded.

Her office briefed Republican legislators about the reports, but Democrats did not attend a briefing about the findings, the people said.

"Parisa Salehi is very well respected in the inspector general and oversight community. She is exactly what the American people should want, conducting fair, objective, independent oversight," said Mark Greenblatt, the former inspector general for the Interior Department who was fired by Mr. Trump in January.

"The fact that her firing is coming right on the heels of the confirmation of a new head of the bank is disconcerting because it suggests that they want to bring in a lap dog into this position," Mr. Greenblatt said. "The timing certainly sends up a red flag, in my view."

Spokespeople for the White House and the Export-Import Bank did not respond to requests for comment.

Taken together, Mr. Trump's firing of inspectors general, defunding of the council and taking down of websites that produce investigative leads amounts to a "complete decapitation of the I.G. community," Mr. Greenblatt said. "The inspector general community is unrecognizable from what it was just a few months ago, and the American people are the victim here."

Some Democrats on Capitol Hill have begun to step up their efforts to combat the Trump administration's moves against inspectors general.

Senator Richard Blumenthal, Democrat of Connecticut, and Representative Robert Garcia, Democrat of California, plan to introduce the FALCON Act this week. The proposed legislation is designed to bolster the authority of inspectors general across the federal government by requiring agencies, employees, grantees and

contractors to respond to inspector general requests within 60 days and requiring reports to the relevant agency head and Congress of any noncompliance with requests from inspectors general.

“If we want to root out waste, fraud, and abuse in our government, we need to make sure watchdogs do their job, without interference, delay or fear of retaliation,” Mr. Garcia said.

With Republicans in charge of both chambers of Congress, the proposal faces an uncertain future.

Luke Broadwater covers the White House for The Times.

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