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The FBI Director Is MIA

Kash Patel has alarmed colleagues with episodes of excessive drinking and unexplained absences.

By Sarah Fitzpatrick

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ON FRIDAY, APRIL 10, as FBI Director Kash Patel was preparing to leave work for the weekend, he struggled to log on to an internal computer system. He quickly became convinced that he had been locked out, and he panicked, frantically calling aides and allies to announce that he had been fired by the White House, according to nine people familiar with his outreach. Two of these people described his behavior as a “freak-out.”

Patel oversees an agency that employs roughly 38,000 people, including many who are trained to investigate and verify information that can be presented under oath in a court of law. News of his emotional outburst ricocheted through the bureau, prompting chatter among officials and, in some corners of the building, expressions of relief. The White House fielded calls from the bureau and from members of Congress asking who was now in charge of the FBI.

It turned out that the answer was still Patel. He had not been fired. The access problem, two people familiar with the matter said, appears to have been a technical error, and it was quickly resolved. “It was all ultimately bullshit,” one FBI official told me.

But Patel, according to multiple current officials, as well as former officials who have stayed close to him, is deeply concerned that his job is in jeopardy. He has good reasons to think so—including some having to do with what witnesses described to me as bouts of excessive drinking. My colleague Ashley Parker and I reported earlier this month that Patel was among the officials expected to be fired after Attorney General Pam Bondi’s ouster, on April 2. “We’re all just waiting for the word” that Patel is officially out of the top job, an FBI official told me this week, and a former official told my colleague Jonathan Lemire that Patel was “rightly paranoid.” Senior members of the Trump administration are already discussing who might replace him, according to an administration official and two people close to the White House who were familiar with the conversations.

In response to a detailed list of 19 questions, the White House spokesperson Karoline Leavitt told me in a statement that under Donald Trump and Patel, “crime across the country has plummeted to the lowest level in more than 100 years and many high profile criminals have been put behind bars. Director Patel remains a critical player on the Administration’s law and order team.” Acting

Attorney General Todd Blanche told me in a statement, "Patel has accomplished more in 14 months than the previous administration did in four years. Anonymously sourced hit pieces do not constitute journalism."

The FBI responded with a statement, attributed to Patel: "Print it, all false, I'll see you in court—bring your checkbook."

The IT-lockout episode is emblematic of Patel's tumultuous tenure as director of the FBI: He is erratic, suspicious of others, and prone to jumping to conclusions before he has necessary evidence, according to the more than two dozen people I interviewed about Patel's conduct, including current and former FBI officials, staff at law-enforcement and intelligence agencies, hospitality-industry workers, members of Congress, political operatives, lobbyists, and former advisers. Speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information and private conversations, they described Patel's tenure as a management failure and his personal behavior as a national-security vulnerability.

They said that the problems with his conduct go well beyond what has been previously known, and include both conspicuous inebriation and unexplained absences. His behavior has often alarmed officials at the FBI and the Department of Justice, even as he won support from the White House for his eager participation in Trump's effort to turn federal law enforcement against the president's perceived political enemies.

Several officials told me that Patel's drinking has been a recurring source of concern across the government. They said that he is known to drink to the point of obvious intoxication, in many cases at the private club Ned's in Washington, D.C., while in the presence of White House and other administration staff. He is also known to drink to excess at the Poodle Room, in Las Vegas, where he frequently spends parts of his weekends. Early in his tenure, meetings and briefings had to be rescheduled for later in the day as a result of his alcohol-fueled nights, six current and former officials and others familiar with Patel's schedule told me.

On multiple occasions in the past year, members of his security detail had difficulty waking Patel because he was seemingly intoxicated, according to information supplied to Justice Department and White House officials. A request for "breaching equipment"—normally used by SWAT and hostage-rescue teams to quickly gain entry into buildings—was made last year because Patel had been unreachable behind locked doors, according to multiple people familiar with the request.

Some of Patel's colleagues at the FBI worry that his personal behavior has become a threat to public safety. An FBI director is expected to be available and focused on his job—especially when the nation is at war with a state sponsor of terrorism. Current and former officials told me that they have long worried about what would happen in the event of a domestic terrorist attack while Patel

is in office, and they said that their apprehension has increased significantly in the weeks since Trump launched his military campaign against Iran. "That's what keeps me up at night," one official said.

Patel arrived at the fbi in early 2025 as a deeply polarizing figure. He had risen from being a public defender in Miami to a congressional aide and, ultimately, a national-security official during the first Trump administration. During Patel's confirmation hearing to be FBI director, the Republican chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Chuck Grassley, expressed optimism that Trump's nominee would implement much-needed reforms. "He's the right change agent for the FBI," the senator said, adding that the bureau was in need of "a big shake-up."

Under questioning from skeptical Democrats, Patel vowed that "there will be no retributive actions" and that he was not aware of any plans to punish FBI staff who had been part of investigations into Trump. Democrats were not the only ones who were leery of Patel, who had a record of embracing far-fetched conspiracy theories—including the notion that the FBI and its informants had helped instigate the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol to sabotage the MAGA movement. Several Republicans wavered on whether to back him. But a pressure campaign by the White House and its allies ultimately prevailed, and Patel was confirmed by a vote of 51 to 49.

Inside the FBI, which had been wounded by a number of scandals, many hoped that Patel could give the bureau a fresh start. But even many of those who had been enthusiastic about his arrival have since been disappointed. Officials said that Patel has been an irregular presence at FBI headquarters and in field offices, and that he has compounded the agency's existing bureaucratic bottlenecks. Several current and former officials told me that Patel is often away or unreachable, delaying time-sensitive decisions needed to advance investigations. On several occasions, an official told me, Patel's delays resulted in normally unflappable agents "losing their shit."

Patel has also earned a reputation for acting impulsively during high-stakes investigations. He announced triumphantly on social media, for instance, that the FBI had "detained a person of interest" in the Brown University shooting in December. That person was soon released while agents continued to hunt for the killer.

Still, Patel has his fans. The president has been pleased by Patel's efforts to purge agents who worked on January 6 cases and other probes into Trump. The president has also indicated that he is relatively unbothered by grumblings about Patel from within the FBI, according to White House and other administration officials. That's not surprising: Patel views many of the bureau's veterans as anti-Trump "deep state" agents who have worked against him and his followers. But Patel has, on occasion, earned the president's ire. Trump has complained that the FBI director has seemed unprepared for TV appearances and that some high-profile investigations that he directed Patel to pursue have not moved quickly enough. These

include inquiries into former Biden-administration officials and other political opponents.

Patel's spotty attendance at the office and the eagerness with which he's embraced the perks and travel that come with the job have also been sources of concern at the White House. Some in the West Wing have followed the headlines about Patel's use of the FBI jet for personal matters—as well as the whispers about his love of partying—and said that they fear that Trump would react badly were he to focus on those storylines.

Doj's ethics handbook states that "an employee is prohibited from habitually using alcohol or other intoxicants to excess." The department's inspector general has warned that off-duty alcohol consumption can not only impair employees' judgment; it can also make them vulnerable to exploitation or coercion by foreign adversaries.

Patel's drinking is no secret. While on official travel to Italy in February, he was filmed chugging beer with the U.S. men's Olympic hockey team following their gold-medal victory. The incident prompted the president—who does not drink and whose brother died following a long struggle with alcoholism—to call the FBI director to convey his unhappiness, according to two officials familiar with the call. But officials told me that Patel's alcohol use goes far beyond the occasional beer. FBI officials and others in the administration have privately questioned whether alcohol played a role in the instances in which he shared inaccurate information about active law-enforcement investigations, including following the murder of Charlie Kirk.

Many of the people who spoke with me said that they have been afraid to reveal their concerns about Patel publicly or through traditional whistleblower channels, because he has been aggressive in cracking down on anyone he deems insufficiently loyal. At Patel's direction, FBI employees are polygraphed in an effort to identify leakers. One former official told me that bureau employees have been asked in these sessions for opinions about Patel's perceived "enemies," as well as whether they have ever said anything disparaging about the director or the president.

Patel has held on to his job in part because of his commitment to using the federal government to target political or personal adversaries of the president. In his 2023 book, *Government Gangsters*, Patel designated a list of government officials past and present that he alleged were corrupt or disloyal. In an interview that year on Steve Bannon's podcast, Patel said that he planned to "come after" members of the media for their 2020-election coverage with criminal or civil charges. Patel has led a purge of people who he believes are anti-Trump "conspirators" or "enemies" within the FBI. This has included firing people, opening internal investigations, and pressuring agents to quit when they pushed back—or were perceived to have pushed back—against Patel's demands or questioned their legality.

Some at the FBI are concerned that Patel's behavior has left the country more vulnerable. One former senior intelligence official told me that there is a lack of experience at FBI headquarters and that the turnover rate is high in field offices, because of both voluntary departures and Patel-ordered purges. The result is an FBI workforce being asked to accomplish more with fewer resources, and with less direction from the top. "The instinctive level of muscle memory or discernment that is necessary to identify and counter a terror attack is missing," the former official said. A current official described people inside the bureau feeling besieged and disillusioned—or even angry.

Days before the United States launched its war with Iran, Patel fired members of a counterintelligence squad that was devoted, in part, to Iran. The director said in testimony before Congress that the agents had been let go because their work investigating Trump's handling of classified documents had placed them in violation of the bureau's ethics rules. But multiple officials told me that they were concerned that the firings had been rushed and would leave the U.S. shorthanded at a crucial moment.

Patel has publicly proclaimed that the FBI needs to demonstrate that it is "fierce," and officials I spoke with said that he is fixated on that image in private as well. He recently expressed frustration with the look of FBI merchandise, complaining that it isn't intimidating enough. Officials have grown accustomed to such behavior, and they have learned to roll their eyes at it. But they said that the absurdity masks real concerns about what Patel's leadership has meant for an institution that the country relies on for national security and the safety of its citizens. "Part of me is glad he's wasting his time on bullshit, because it's less dangerous for rule of law, for the American public," one official told me, "but it also means we don't have a real functioning FBI director."

Jonathan Lemire, Isabel Ruehl, and Marie-Rose Sheinerman contributed reporting.