



Kash Patel, facing questions about his independence, says FBI reform is his focus

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Kash Patel, President Trump's nominee to serve as the next director of the FBI, testifies during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday.

Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images

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Kash Patel, President Trump's pick to serve as the next director of the FBI, sought to erase concerns that he would use the position to investigate political enemies of the president, during his Senate confirmation hearing on Thursday, as he faced questions

about whether he could be trusted to serve independently and without influence from the White House.

In his opening remarks, Patel laid out his pitch for the country's premier law enforcement agency, which is responsible for everything from catching terrorists and spies to investigating cyberattacks and public corruption. Patel said he is focused on reforming the agency he's previously characterized as mismanaged and politicized against Trump.

"Our national security is at threat both internally and externally," he told the committee. "If confirmed as the next FBI director, I will remain focused on the FBI's core mission. That is to investigate fully wherever there is a constitutional factual basis to do so."

Patel said in order to restore public trust, the FBI's mission should focus on fighting crime.

While Republicans, who hold the majority in the Senate, were largely supportive of Patel throughout the hearing, Democrats on the committee focused on Patel's background and urged him to clarify how he would keep the FBI independent despite his record as a staunch Trump defender.

Those questions were fueled by Patel's fierce loyalty to Trump, as well as Patel's own past statements about rooting out the "deep state" and going after Trump's perceived enemies, including at the FBI, the Justice Department and in the media.

Some of those statements date back to his 2023 book *Government Gangsters*, which includes a list of alleged "deep state" actors that Patel's critics have described as an enemies list. Asked about it on Thursday, Patel said the book was being mischaracterized.

"It's not an enemies list," he said.



INVESTIGATIONS

Trump has made more than 100 threats to prosecute or punish perceived enemies

Dick Durbin of Illinois, the top Democrat on the committee, said Patel was a Trump

"loyalist" who would not uphold the agency's independence.

"Mr. Patel has neither the experience, the temperament, nor the judgment to lead an agency of 38,000 [people] and 400 field offices around the globe," Durbin said in his opening remarks.

It was a message echoed by other Democrats throughout the hearing, including California Sen. Adam Schiff.

"[Trump has] chosen someone whose primary qualification, in my view, is his willingness to say yes when everyone else would say no to whatever the president wanted to say, whatever he wanted to do whatever he wanted," he said. "That's why he is sitting here."

Republicans, for their part, cited past FBI probes into Trump that they also disagreed with and commended Patel for committing to take politics out of the bureau.

The president and his supporters accuse the FBI and the Justice Department of being weaponized in recent years against conservatives, and they view Patel as someone who will put the FBI on the correct course.

"Mr. Patel, in my time, I've never seen our law enforcement, intelligence community institutions so badly infected with political decision-making," said Iowa's Chuck Grassley, the committee chairman. "You must be fair. You must be consistent. But you must be aggressive. Your actions must be based on accountability. And transparency brings accountability."

"Should you do so, you'll have my support," Grassley said.

The Biden Justice Department rejected allegations of politicization, noting that prosecutors brought cases against President Biden's own son as well as powerful Democratic members of Congress.

Focus on past statements

Many Senate Democrats spent their time zeroing in on Patel's background, arguing he was unqualified to lead the FBI, and highlighting past statements he has made disparaging former national security officials and calling for drastic changes to the structure of the agency.

"Our nation needs an FBI director who understands the gravity of this mission and is ready on day one, not someone who is consumed by his own personal political grievances," Durbin said.

Since leaving the first Trump administration, Patel became a frequent guest on right-wing podcasts, where he railed against what he calls the deep state, which he views as people in senior national security roles who he claims have weaponized the justice system and intelligence agencies and pose a threat to democracy.



POLITICS

Trump picks longtime ally Kash Patel to replace current FBI director

In one appearance on [Shawn Ryan's podcast](#), Patel committed to shutting down the FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., "on Day 1 and reopening the next day as a museum of the deep state."

"And I'd take the 7,000 employees that work in that building and send them across America to chase down criminals," he added. "Go be cops. You're cops — go be cops. Go chase down murderers and rapists and drug dealers and violent offenders."

Patel sought to deflect questions about his past comments and defended his pledge to move more FBI agents to other parts of the country to better fight crime.

"If the best attacks on me are going to be false accusations and grotesque mischaracterizations, the only thing this body is doing is defeating the credibility of the men and women at the FBI," Patel said. "Any accusations leveled against me that I would somehow put political bias before the Constitution are grotesquely unfair."

He was also peppered with questions about past statements where he [appeared to sympathize](#) with those previously incarcerated for rioting at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

His testimony comes less than two weeks after Trump issued [sweeping pardons to some 1,500 individuals](#), and commuted the sentences of 14 others, connected to the insurrection on Jan. 6.

When asked about the pardons and commutations, Patel indirectly acknowledged that

he disagreed with Trump's executive order, telling the committee he did "not agree with the commutation of any sentence of any individual who committed violence against law enforcement."

How Patel got here

In less than a decade, Patel has risen from a largely unknown congressional aide to become a MAGA-world fixture. He has held senior national security jobs, sold self-branded merchandise online and written a children's book called *The Plot Against the King*, featuring a wizard named Kash and a king named Donald.

The FBI director's job comes with a 10-year term, although neither of Patel's immediate predecessors served that full term. Trump fired James Comey in 2017 and replaced him with Christopher Wray.



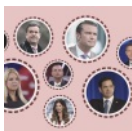
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After Trump's 2024 election win, he made clear that Wray would not be allowed to stay and nominated Patel to replace him. Wray left before Trump's inauguration.

Patel's résumé is not typical for an FBI director. Wray, for example, had run the Criminal Division at the Justice Department, while Comey had previously served as U.S. attorney in Manhattan and as deputy attorney general, the No. 2 job in the department.

Patel, in contrast, worked as a public defender in Florida before working as a prosecutor in the Justice Department's National Security Division for a few years.



POLITICS

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In 2017, he moved to the House Intelligence Committee, where he was a top aide to the top Republican on the panel, Rep. Devin Nunes of California. It was there that Patel gained attention for helping investigate the investigators who were probing possible ties between the Trump campaign and Russia during the 2016 election.

His efforts raised questions about failings in the FBI's work on the probe, and it made Patel a hero among Trump supporters. It also helped him land a job on Trump's National Security Council and later as a top aide to the director of national intelligence and to the secretary of defense.

Toward the end of the first Trump administration, the president tried to install Patel in top positions at the CIA and the FBI, but backed down in the face of opposition from senior leaders at the Justice Department, Congress and elsewhere.

Patel's path forward

Despite hours of fierce questioning from Democrats on Thursday, Patel appears on track to win confirmation, given Republicans hold a majority in the Senate. Patel can afford to lose as many as three Republican votes and still win confirmation — but he has yet to receive much public opposition from any GOP members.

Towards the end of the hearing, Sen. Peter Welch, a Democrat from Vermont, seemed to acknowledge Patel's likely confirmation. He used his final allotted time to urge Patel to do away with unofficial Trump appointees influencing any restructuring of the FBI — an agency where the director is the sole role selected by the White House.

"We have no political appointees over there, so it's going to be up to you to, I think, strengthen that tradition," he said.

Welch specifically called out tech billionaire Elon Musk, who has become a major player in Trump's orbit and advocated for reducing the size of the federal government. When asked if he would let Musk have input on personnel, Patel repeated the FBI would be independent.

Grassley concluded the hours-long hearing with words of encouragement for Patel.

"I think you did very well," he said. "Your reputation leading up to and during this hearing, I think, proves that you're a person that can stand a lot of heat, including a president telling you how to do your job."

—*NPR's Carrie Johnson contributed to this story.*

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