

Patel plans major cutback to ATF by moving many as 1,000 agents to FBI

 [cnn.com/2025/03/22/politics/atf-agents-fbi/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/22/politics/atf-agents-fbi/index.html)

By Evan Perez and Hannah Rabinowitz, CNN

March 22, 2025



Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Kash Patel speaks after he was sworn in on February 21, 2025, in Washington, DC.

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images
CNN —

FBI Director Kash Patel, who also serves as acting director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, has outlined plans to move as many as 1,000 ATF agents to the FBI, cutting ATF's agents by more than a third, three people briefed on the plan told CNN.

The move represents a major cutback of the ATF, an agency that long has been in the crosshairs of gun rights groups that believe its work infringes on Second Amendment rights. The ATF has about 2,600 agents and more than 5,000 employees, a number that has remained largely unchanged for years.

The move is expected to begin with the reassignment of a couple hundred ATF agents to border-related criminal enforcement duty as FBI agents, one person briefed on the matter said.

After publication of this story and resulting pushback including from Republican allies, FBI officials began to back off aspects of their plan, according to a US official familiar with the matter.

An ATF spokeswoman disputed that the agents were being reassigned to the FBI and said in a statement Saturday that as a part of the ATF and FBI's plans to address issues at the southern border, "the ATF will temporarily assign approximately 150 agents from existing field offices to other ATF field offices, where they will continue serving as ATF agents to support the surge initiative."

"It is important to clarify that this is a temporary reassignment of resources to bolster public safety and combat criminal organizations more effectively. Additionally, ATF routinely initiates surge operations in cities across the country facing significant increases in violent crime," ATF spokeswoman Ashlee J L Sherrill said in a statement to CNN. "These targeted operations are a proven strategy to disrupt criminal activity, apprehend offenders, and support local law enforcement efforts."

But eventually as many as 1,000 ATF agents would be given temporary reassignments as FBI agents, though with no end date for the reassignment, the person said.

A spokesperson for the FBI declined to comment, and a spokesperson for the Justice Department didn't respond to requests for comment.

President Donald Trump chose Patel to overhaul the FBI, which has just under 14,000 agents and 38,000 employees. Patel was later announced as the acting ATF director. Getting ATF directors confirmed in the Senate is often a difficult task, in both Democratic and Republican administrations. The prospect of Patel running both agencies stoked speculation over whether Trump plans to merge at least part of ATF with the FBI.

The idea of merging at least part of ATF into FBI or other agencies isn't a new one. Previous administrations have considered it. Joe Biden as vice president floated the idea in discussions about a task force that was set up to tackle mass shootings and gun crime in the Obama administration.

This story has been updated with additional information.