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Focus

BANISH BANNON?
TRUMP HEDGES

For months, US President Donald Trump's national security adviser and his chief strategist have battled for influence behind the scenes, and their feud may force another shake-up at the White House. The dispute between Lieutenant General H R McMaster and political strategist Stephen Bannon has reached level of animosity that is destabilizing Trump's team of top advisers just as the administration tries to regain lost momentum, three senior officials said.

Under pressure from moderate Republicans to fire Bannon, Trump declined to publicly back him on Tuesday, although he left his options open. "We'll see what happens with Mr Bannon," he told reporters at Trump Tower in New York. Whatever Trump decides could chart the fate of a nuclear-weapons deal with Iran, US troop deployments to Afghanistan and White House staffing decisions - all issues over which Bannon and McMaster have sparred.

Bannon has been in a precarious position before but Trump has opted to keep him, in part because his chief strategist played a major role in his election victory and is backed by many of the president's most loyal rank-and-file supporters. "The president obviously is very nervous and afraid of firing him," a source close to the White House told Reuters. The source floated the possibility that Bannon could be demoted instead of fired, noting that he might turn into a harsh critic of the administration if he is forced out of the inner circle.

Two other senior officials, both supporters of McMaster who asked not to be identified, said he blames Bannon for a series of attacks against him by right-wing website Breitbart News, which Bannon used to lead, and other far-right conservative groups. In recent weeks, Breitbart has published a series of articles making a case for McMaster's ouster on the basis that he is not a strong ally of Israel and that he has staffed the National Security Council with holdovers from the Obama administration.

Jostling

One of the senior officials said McMaster's anger over the campaign "is known to the president" but declined to say whether the national security adviser had told Trump directly or through General John Kelly, an ally and the president's new chief of staff. "McMaster isn't saying Bannon is the mastermind behind the campaign, but he does think Bannon could stop it if he wanted to," said one of McMaster's defenders.

In a television interview on Sunday, McMaster repeatedly declined to answer when asked if he could work with Bannon. About their feud, Bannon declined to comment and McMaster was unavailable for comment. Instead of firing Bannon, Trump could move McMaster into a position outside the White House, possibly back to an active military command role, or keep both men where they are and insist on some form of truce.

Bannon has survived other White House power struggles this year and established a detente with Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner after a scolding from the president. The two senior officials who support McMaster said Kelly is angry that the anti-McMaster campaign has made the White House appear chaotic, reflecting badly on him as he was brought in as chief of staff two weeks ago to restore order and discipline.

Bannon sees himself as the defender of Trump's nationalist base and has advocated for both an end or renegotiation of trade deals and a more isolationist approach to foreign affairs than McMaster. He has pushed to scrap the 2015 nuclear-weapons agreement with Iran, which McMaster argues should remain in place, and has also proposed using contractors to fight the war in Afghanistan rather than expanding US forces there, as McMaster has advocated. McMaster is part of a more pragmatic group that Bannon likes to label "globalists". He drew the fury of Bannon's supporters by recently overhauling the White House's National Security Council, pushing out four staffers who were seen as close to Bannon.

Conservative commentator Mike Cernovich is a Bannon ally and has been a vocal critic of McMaster, even leveling personal attacks against him. Cernovich says he does not talk directly to Bannon but praises him as an important counterweight to McMaster. He also warns that the president would alienate his most loyal supporters if he fires Bannon. "I don't think that people who like Trump are suddenly going to say, 'We're going to fight Trump.' Instead they'll say, 'What's the point of supporting him?'" Cernovich told Reuters.

The conservative Jewish-American and pro-Israel group Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), which also has close ties to Bannon, has been one of McMaster's sharpest critics, urging Trump to reassign him away from policy areas dealing with Israel and Iran. Trump has himself backed McMaster, saying he was a "good man and very pro-Israel". — Reuters

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JORDAN WOMEN JAILED IN NAME OF HONOR

In a secret shelter in the Jordanian capital Amman, 52-year-old Fatima runs a hand over the scar that shaped her life. Almost 30 years ago, her father shot her and her sister to "cleanse the family's honor" after her younger sibling got pregnant out of wedlock and he deemed both daughters should pay the price. "When they shot my sister she died," said Fatima, who declined to give her real name for fear of reprisals. "When they started on me, our neighbors informed the police... I remained in hospital for six to seven months, then the police came and put me in prison."

Fatima remained in prison for 22 years under a law that allows the authorities to indefinitely incarcerate women considered to be at risk of being attacked or killed in the name of family honor. "Your life is gone, your youth is gone. Everything you wished for in the world is gone," said Fatima, who now lives alone in a shelter run by a charity. An estimated 65 percent of more than 1,700 female inmates in Jordan's prisons are held under the 60-year-old law, according to the Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI), a women's rights charity.

There are no official figures on honor killings in Jordan but activists estimate at least 42 women were murdered by their relatives in 2016, up 60 percent from the previous year, according to SIGI. Human Rights Watch, the international rights watchdog, says there are typically between 15 and 20 crimes of this nature a year.

No Alternatives

Jordan, which has one of the highest rates of honor killings in the world, has made strides to curb gender-related crime and boost women's rights. Parliament voted this month in favor of abolishing a law that allows rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victim. The penal code was amended in March to no longer allow judges to grant reduced sentences for perpetrators of honor crimes.

"Jordan's customs and traditions differ, but the population has become noticeably more aware, open and understanding about issues related to women," said Basel Tarawneh, government coordinator for human rights. "We are aware of the need for change and are taking the neces-

sary action and revisions will be done on a continuous basis to adapt to the times," said Tarawneh. But women's rights groups call for stronger penalties and to end the practice of imprisoning women at risk of being killed for their own protection.

Their imprisonment is often justified by lack of alternatives, such as safe shelters for abused women. "We haven't created enough protection services and we have not made any effort to change social attitude," said Salma Nims, secretary general of the Jordanian National Commission for Women, a semi-governmental body that promotes women's issues. "So we end up with a government that under the law of stopping crimes to protect women (makes) the victim actually the persecuted," said Nims. ABUSED AND IMPRISONED Many women are imprisoned after weeks or months in hospital following violent attacks by male relatives, activists say.

A 2014 report by Dignity, the Danish Institute Against Torture, described how they blamed themselves and felt "isolated, persecuted and rejected by their own families". Rehab, 32, was detained for seven months in Amman's Jwaideh prison after divorcing her abusive husband. "I went through hell and saw things in Jwaideh that I had never seen before... people throwing themselves down the stairs, breaking the sink to cut their arms, strangling and beating each other," said Rehab, who declined to give her real name for fear of reprisals.

One of the biggest problems for women in protective custody is that they are held with all types of detainees. "A woman who is held for her own protection is in the same cell with a convicted murder or someone who has actually committed an act of violence," said Adam Coogle, Middle East researcher at Human Rights Watch. "This can lead to a lot of psychological problems and real fear," said Coogle. In her 22 years of detention, Fatima experienced heavy abuse from other female detainees. "When I went inside and they put me in cells with murderers, narcotics, thieves and prostitutes, I no longer knew who I was and what I am," she said.

From Bad to Worse

For the women to be granted a release, governors typi-

cally insist a male family member act as guarantor and sign an order of protection. Often these are the same relatives that threatened the women's lives to begin with, resulting in frequent cases where - despite the signed guarantee - women have been seriously injured or killed after their release, according to Dignity.

Charities like Mizan Law act as a mediator between women in protective custody and their families to ensure women can return home safely. "Families don't prefer to kill, these people are fathers or mothers and they have feelings, and at the end of the day they are still their daughters," said Eva Abu Halaweh, director of Mizan Law. For many of the imprisoned women, marriage is the only path to freedom.

Since it is almost impossible to find husbands while in prison, many are forced to make desperate choices. "There are no guarantees in these marriages, it's an administrative procedure," Nims said. "It's like negotiating the best situation possible for herself and sometimes it ends up being a worse situation than being in the prison itself." Swasan, 26, spent two years in detention after fleeing her abusive father. "A man came to visit me in prison to determine if I was suitable for marriage...the very next day I was transferred to the governor's office and the governor signed my marriage certificate," said Swasan, who declined to give her real name for fear of reprisals.

Four years and two children later, Swasan is anxious to escape her situation. Her husband is an abusive alcoholic and provides her young family with little to live off. "I feel like I don't have options; if I were to get divorced, for example, I have nowhere to turn to. I would end up back in Jwaideh or on the streets."

The government announced a plan last December to open a protection shelter for women at risk, but no building has been opened yet. Although women's rights activists have welcomed the plan, many feel more needs to be done. "It's not just about building a shelter, it's about creating a whole system that believes in the dignity and the right of these women to live a dignified life and the right to be protected," said Nims of the Jordanian National Commission for Women. — Reuters

SADR'S TRIPS SHOW GULF REALPOLITIK

An influential Iraqi Shiite cleric, notorious for his followers' deadly attacks on US troops in Iraq over a decade ago and thought at times to have ties to Iran, has two new stamps in his passport - from the two fiercest Sunni critics of Tehran in the Gulf. Muqtada Al-Sadr's trips to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates come as the two nations want to limit Iran's influence in the wider Middle East, especially with Iranian-backed Shiite militias leading the fight against the Islamic State group on Iraqi battlefields.

Meanwhile, the chameleonic cleric hopes to cement his own standing ahead of Iraq's parliamentary elections next year, part of his makeover from a militia warlord whose fighters battled American forces to an Iraqi nationalist who can fill Baghdad's streets with his protesting followers. How far any possible alliance between Sadr and the Gulf Arab countries could go remains to be seen, though photos of the black-turbaned Shiite cleric meeting with Sunni rulers already has stirred speculation in Iran.

The hardline Iranian newspaper Keyhan warned that if Sadr continued on this path, "his popularity will fall and he will become an isolated person". Such harsh criticism from Iran would have been unthinkable in the years immediately following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. While Sunni Muslims represent the world's principal branch of Islam, Shiites are the majority in Iraq. Neighboring Iran has had a government overseen by Shiite clerics since its 1979 Islamic Revolution. Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated government massacred Shiites after the 1991 Gulf War and continued imprisoning, torturing and executing others up to his overthrow.

Sadr, the son of a prominent Shiite cleric assassinated in a 1999 attack believed to be organized by Saddam, quickly organized Shiite dispossessed under Saddam against the American occupation. "The little serpent has left and the great serpent has come," Sadr told CBS News' "60 Minutes" program in 2003. Saddam loyalists and Shiite extremists alike would soon fight an insurgency against the American forces. Sadr's Mahdi Army militia fought American forces throughout much of 2004 in Baghdad and other cities.

Sadr's forces are believed to have later taken part in the sectarian killings between Shiites and Sunnis that plagued Iraq for several years after the bombing of one of the holiest sites in Shiite Islam. Sadr left for Qom, a holy Shiite city in Iran, for religious studies around the time that his forces

accepted a cease-fire in the 2008 battle of Basra, in southern Iraq. Since that time much has changed.

Sadr's followers have taken part in Iraqi military offensives against the Islamic State group in Tikrit and other cities. He has organized rallies against government corruption, including breaching the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, the highly secure area housing government offices and many foreign embassies. On July 30, Sadr traveled to Saudi Arabia to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the next in line to the throne. The state-run Saudi Press Agency published a photograph of King Salman's son smiling next to the cleric, only saying the two "reviewed the Saudi-Iraqi relations and a number of issues of mutual interest".

In the UAE, Sadr met on Sunday with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nayhan, Abu Dhabi's powerful crown prince, and other officials. "Experience has taught us to always call for what brings Arabs and Muslims together, and to reject the advocates of division," Sheikh Mohammed said in a statement carried on the state-run WAM news agency.

Anwar Gargash, the Emirati minister of state for foreign affairs, tweeted after the meeting that it was part of an effort to "build bridges" between the Gulf Arab nations and Iraq. "Our ambition is to see a prosperous, stable Arab Iraq," Gargash wrote. "The challenge is great and the prize is bigger." Using "Arab" to describe Iraq is no accident for the UAE, which opposed the 2003 American invasion. Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia want to limit Shiite-ruled Iran's power in Iraq.

"There are serious questions about how to help encourage Iraqi stability and minimize Iranian influence in the country," said Lori Plotkin Boghardt, a former US intelligence official who now is a fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "Building ties with someone like Al-Sadr is part of the Saudis' and Emiratis' answer to this."

One of the biggest question marks ahead for Iraq is what happens after the war against the Islamic State group. Shiite militias advised by members of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard have proved to be among the most effective ground forces in the fight against IS. Disarming or incorporating the groups into existing security forces likely would be a major challenge for the national government.

Sadr, already a respected Shiite cleric with a massive base of followers, demanded in March that Shiite militias disband, saying only Iraqi national forces should hold territory in the country. Though many among the militias disagree, saying they have proven their credentials in battle against IS, Sadr's stand could provide Baghdad with the cover it needs to do so. "This would be, of course, music to the Gulf countries' ears," said Fanar Haddad, a senior research fellow at the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore.

For Sadr, whose loyalists represent one of the biggest blocs in Iraq's parliament, his foreign trips burnish his credentials as an Iraqi leader. However, it remains unclear what he wants - and whether any tilt toward the Sunni Gulf countries truly would represent a total break with Iran for the Iraqi nationalist. "It shows he has options," Haddad said. — AP

