

Jacksonville Man Pleads Guilty to Conspiring and Attempting to Support Terrorists

U.S. Attorney's Office

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• **Middle District of Florida**

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JACKSONVILLE, FL—United States Attorney A. Lee Bentley, III announces that Shelton Thomas Bell (20, Jacksonville) today pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists and attempting to provide material support to terrorists. Bell faces a maximum penalty of 30 years in federal prison. A sentencing date has not yet been set.

According to the plea agreement, between May 2012 and continuing through at least July 18, 2012, Bell agreed and conspired with a juvenile and one other individual to train and prepare themselves as combatants for overseas violent jihad and then travel from Jacksonville to the Middle East for the ultimate purpose of providing themselves to terrorists, including members of Ansar al Sharia in Yemen. Once overseas, their plan included receiving further training and deadly weapons from Ansar al Sharia and then engaging in violent jihad against and to kill others in the country of Yemen and elsewhere.

In May 2012, Bell introduced the juvenile to the concept of traveling overseas for the purpose of engaging in violent jihad and inspired the juvenile and another person with the teachings of an al Qaeda spokesperson, Anwar al-Awlaki (al-Awlaki). Bell suggested traveling to Yemen to fight because of al-Awlaki's teachings—that all young people should travel to Yemen to “take up the fight.” Bell and the juvenile subsequently agreed to a plan in which they would travel to Israel and then make Hajj. As part of the deception, the conspirators told others, including their parents, that they were traveling overseas to attend Hajj, to study, and to get an education. By July 2012, Bell, the juvenile, and another individual began taking actions to train for their unlawful activities by conducting mental training that included watching al-Awlaki videos and looking at images of dead Muslims.

Another part of the training took place on July 4, 2012, when Bell and another individual conducted a late-night “jihadi training mission” that involved the destruction of religious statues in a multi-denominational cemetery located in Jacksonville, Florida. In preparation for the mission, the two dressed in all black clothing; wore tactical gloves, and masks; and wrapped their shoes in black duct tape to avoid leaving footprints. Bell brought a loaded 9mm pistol with him on the mission, to use “in case any kuffar want to cause any trouble.” Other training sessions conducted by Bell included a homemade firing range and impromptu battlefield lessons intended for recording and uploading to the Internet, to be used in the recruitment of others as to “the actions of Jihad.” At the conclusion of one training session, Bell placed the American flag on a machete, burned it, and commented that the flag was “burning to the ground by the mujahidin's hands.” To recruit other youth to travel and join in armed conflict, Bell and the juvenile also planned to take footage of each other actually participating in armed conflict in the Middle East, once they made it there and began fighting.

On September 25, 2012, Bell and the juvenile left Jacksonville and flew to New York, Poland, and Tel Aviv, Israel, where they were detained by Israeli officials and deported to Poland. From

there, Bell and the juvenile traveled to Jordan to stay with the juvenile's relatives. While in Jordan, Bell and the juvenile contacted another person to assist in their plan of joining up with Ansar al Sharia. Bell and the juvenile also bought airline tickets to the country of Oman, believing they would fly to Oman and walk across the border to Yemen to join the armed conflict there. As part of the conspiracy, Bell and the juvenile intended to travel to Yemen, where they intended to carry out their plan. During their overseas travel, Bell and the juvenile took steps to avoid detection by law enforcement.

Ultimately, Bell and the juvenile were deported from Jordan to the United States on November 21, 2012. At that time, Bell spoke with agents and stated, among other things, that he and the juvenile had purchased plane tickets to Oman, with the intention of entering Yemen. Bell stated, "If you ask me if [I] was going for jihad in Yemen, I say yes." Bell confirmed that Ansar al Sharia was the group that they sought to join but explained that several groups were affiliated with Ansar al Sharia, including al Qaeda and the Taliban.

In commenting on this case, United States Attorney A. Lee Bentley, III stated, "Working with our law enforcement partners to prevent terrorism and promote national security is a top priority. We are thankful that this investigation was resolved without harm or injury to any citizens, at home or abroad."

"Stopping these threats from within is the grim reality we deal with today," said Special Agent in Charge Michelle S. Klimt, FBI Jacksonville. "This case serves as a reminder that terrorist-related activities can occur anywhere. It also shows that we will use all the resources at our disposal to root out the individuals posing these threats to keep America safe."

This case was investigated by the FBI's Jacksonville Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF). The JTTF is a multi-agency task force comprised of full-time personnel from the FBI, U.S. Coast Guard Investigative Service, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations, the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, Florida Highway Patrol, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. It is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Mac D. Heavener, III and Department of Justice Trial Attorney Mara M. Kohn from the Department's Counter Terrorism Section, National Security Division.