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**Department of Justice**

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of New Jersey

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **Sussex County Woman Charged with Concealing Terrorist Financing to Syrian Al-Nusra Front, a Foreign Terrorist Organization**

NEWARK, N.J. – A Sussex County, New Jersey, woman, was arrested at her home today in connection with concealing sending money to a Syrian foreign terrorist organization, U.S. Attorney Craig Carpenito announced.

Maria Bell, a/k/a "Maria Sue Bell," 53, of Hopatcong, New Jersey, is charged by complaint with one count of knowingly concealing the provision of material support or resources to a designated foreign terrorist organization. She is scheduled to appear by videoconference this afternoon before U.S. Magistrate Judge Cathy L. Waldor.

According to documents filed in this case and statements made in court:

From February of 2017, Bell used encrypted applications to communicate with and provide advice to fighters based in Syria who were members of the al-Nusra Front (ANF), also known by other aliases, including Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), fighting the Assad regime. Bell communicated with and provided money to one self-identified member of HTS based in Syria, identified in the complaint as "User 1." Bell sent currency to User 1 via Western Union, using an intermediary to conceal the source of the funds, and also provided him advice on weapons and ammunition.

In communications with HTS fighters, Bell cited her professional experience – including her specialized weapons training while on active duty in the U.S. Army and Army National Guard – to provide guidance concerning operational security issues, firearms purchases, and military knowledge. She had thousands of encrypted communications with User 1 about operational planning and provided details with regard to concealing payments sent to User 1.

User 1 made his status as an HTS fighter clear. In one communication, Bell and User 1 discussed User 1's pledge to HTS and the ongoing Syrian conflict. Bell stated: "If Assad wins, mujahideen will be persecuted again," and "If Assad wins, I cannot get a visa into Syria. I cannot come to you." In the same communication, the defendant later asked User 1 if he was ready to fight:

*Bell: Are you ready to fight in front line with other fighters? You are no longer young child like you used to be.*

*Bell: It will be frightening. But I am with you*

In another communication, User 1, after discussing U.S. support for the Syrian regime, which HTS and other groups were fighting at the time, stated: "If you want to hit the Syrian airports, we will return to revenge within New York." Later in the encrypted communication, Bell states "If there were ever an attack in New York, all Muslims and helpers like me will be arrested...."

Bell provided advice to User 1 regarding the purchase of a firearm and ammunition for User 1. They discussed the cost and type of weapons that would be good for User 1, in addition to various types of ammunition.

Bell also wired money, often at the direction of User 1, to individuals in Turkey and Syria who are supporters of HTS, knowing that the funds would support acts of terrorism by HTS. The defendant concealed the nature, location, and ownership of payments, sending at least 18 payments totaling \$3,150 to several accounts used by User-1's associates. In one communication, she expressed concern that her transfers could be tracked by U.S. law enforcement:

*Bell: But I will not have my account watched more closely than it is already.*

*Bell: Each time I withdraw money, it is noted because Western Union is trying to track fraud and terrorists for the government.*

The charge of concealment of terrorist financing to a designated foreign terrorist organization carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

U.S. Attorney Carpenito credited special agents of FBI, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge George M. Crouch Jr. in Newark, and special agents of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Homeland Security Investigations, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Jason J. Molina in Newark, with the investigation leading to today's charges.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Dean C. Sovolos of the U.S. Attorney's Office National Security Unit and Trial Attorney Brenda Sue Thornton of the Department of Justice, National Security Division.

The charge and allegations contained in the complaint are merely accusations, and the defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

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**Attachment(s):**

[Download Bell.Complaint.pdf](#)

**Topic(s):**

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