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Department of Justice

Office of Public Affairs

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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California Man Pleads Guilty to 113-Count Federal Hate Crime Indictment for 2019 Poway Synagogue Shooting and Mosque Arson

John T. Earnest, 22, pleaded guilty in federal court to a 113-count indictment for the religiously- and racially-motivated murder of one person and the attempted murders of 53 other persons.

According to court documents, after several weeks of planning, on the morning of April 27, 2019, Earnest drove to the Chabad of Poway synagogue, where members of the congregation were gathered for religious worship. Earnest entered the building armed with a Smith and Wesson M&P 15 assault rifle that was fully loaded with a 10-round magazine. He wore a chest rig which contained five additional magazines, each loaded with 10 rounds of ammunition. Earnest opened fire, killing one person and injuring three other members of the congregation, including a then eight-year-old child. After Earnest emptied his initial magazine, several congregants rushed at Earnest. Earnest fled in his car and, shortly after, called 911 and confessed that he had “just shot up a synagogue.” Earnest was apprehended by local law enforcement who found the rifle and additional ammunition in his car.

“The defendant entered a synagogue with the intent to kill all those inside because of his hatred for Jewish people, and days earlier used fire in an attempt to destroy another sacred house of worship because of his hatred for Muslims,” said Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco. “There is no place in American society for this type of hate-fueled violence. The Department of Justice will enforce hate crimes and anti-discrimination laws to the fullest extent of the law and will hold perpetrators accountable for these crimes, which inflict harm not only on individual victims, but on entire communities.”

“This nation stands with Lori Gilbert Kaye’s family and the survivors of these unspeakable acts of terror,” said Acting U.S. Attorney Randy S. Grossman for the Southern District of California. “We emphatically reject the defendant’s hate, racism and prejudice, and we hope the conclusion of this case brings some measure of comfort to all those affected by his heinous crimes.”

“We continue to keep Lori Gilbert Kaye, the loved ones she left behind, and all those affected by the senseless acts of terror committed in 2019 in our thoughts,” said FBI Director Christopher A. Wray. “Violence motivated by racism and hate is reprehensible and must be vigorously pursued. The FBI is committed to ensuring that those responsible for hate crimes and all forms of violent extremism are brought to justice.”

“The tragic shooting at Poway Synagogue was shocking for our community,” said Special Agent in Charge Monique Villegas of the ATF Los Angeles Field Division. “Our condolences go out to the victims and their families who were affected by this horrific act. ATF remains committed to bringing individuals responsible for such acts to justice to ensure everyone can worship safely.”

Earnest also admitted that on March 24, 2019, he attempted to set fire to the Dar-ul-Arqam mosque in Escondido, California, because of his hatred of Muslims and the religious character of the building. Seven missionaries were asleep in the mosque, but no one was injured.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Shane Harrigan and Peter Ko, along with Deputy Chief Rose Gibson of the Civil Rights Division. The FBI, ATF and San Diego Sheriff’s Office conducted the investigation.

According to the terms of the plea agreement, the United States and Earnest will jointly recommend a sentence of life in prison followed by 30 years of imprisonment. Sentencing has been scheduled for Dec. 28.

Attachment(s):

[Download Plea Agreement.pdf](#)

[Download Indictment.pdf](#)

Component(s):

[Civil Rights Division](#)

[Civil Rights - Criminal Section](#)

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