

Department of Justice
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Maple Heights man arrested and charged in federal court after plotting terror attack in downtown Cleveland on Independence Day

Demetrius Nathaniel Pitts, aka Abdur Raheem Rafeeq, aka Salah ad-Deen Osama Waleed, 48, of Maple Heights, Ohio, was charged with one count of attempting to provide material support to al Qaeda, a designated foreign terrorist organization. Pitts was arrested Sunday by members of the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force.

The arrest and charges were announced by Attorney General Jeff Sessions, FBI Director Christopher Wray, Assistant Attorney General for National Security John C. Demers, U.S. Attorney Justin E. Herdman for the Northern District of Ohio, and Special Agent in Charge Stephen D. Anthony of the FBI's Cleveland Division.

"Terrorists reject the ideals this nation was founded upon—the ideals we celebrate on July Fourth and which our law enforcement officers lay down their lives for every day," said Attorney General Sessions. "Each one of us owes a debt of gratitude to the agents, analysts, and prosecutors who work day and night to identify those who would do this nation harm, including those committed to supporting violence in the name of foreign terrorist organizations. At the Department of Justice, we will continue to take every lawful step we can to disrupt terrorist plots and to protect our nation from foreign and domestic threats, including the dangerous threat posed by radical Islamic terrorism."

"Together with our law enforcement partners on FBI Cleveland's Joint Terrorism Task Force, the FBI disrupted plans to attack innocent citizens – including on July 4th, a day our citizens should be able to celebrate our freedom without fear of violence," said Director Wray. "This arrest shows the determination of the men and women of the FBI and our partner agencies to protect our communities from harm. I extend my thanks not just to those who worked on this case, but to all those who safeguard our nation every day."

"Protecting our citizens and our nation remains the Justice Department's top priority," U.S. Attorney Herdman said. "This defendant plotted and scouted locations in downtown Cleveland for an attack on July 4th, when he knew it would be packed with people celebrating our nation's birthday. We will continue to do all we can to identify, arrest and prosecute those threats while working to keep our communities safe and secure."

"Pitts, a U.S. citizen living in Ohio, pledged his allegiance to al-Qaeda, a foreign terrorist organization, and was planning to conduct an attack in Cleveland on Independence Day, the very day we celebrate the freedoms we have in this country," said Special Agent in Charge Anthony. "The FBI commends the public for reporting individuals that espouse their radical beliefs and/or engage in behavior that threaten the lives of our military personnel and community."

According to an affidavit filed in the case, between 2015 and 2017, Pitts expressed anti-American sentiments and expressed a desire to recruit people to kill Americans. The defendant expressed a desire to meet with an al Qaeda "brother" and in June he was introduced to an FBI employee acting in an undercover capacity (UCE), who Pitts believed was such a "brother."

Pitts, a U.S. citizen, and the UCE met on June 22, in Walton Hills, Ohio, where they discussed launching an attack for al Qaeda during the July 4th holiday.

Pitts said: "I'm trying to figure out something that would shake them up on the 4th of July." He later stated: "What would hit them at their core? Blow up in the, have a bomb blow up in the 4th of July parade."

Pitts and the UCE searched Google for a map of downtown Cleveland. After learning the fireworks would be launched from Voinovich Park, Pitts said: "Oh there you go. Oh yeah." He was also pleased the park was near the U.S. Coast Guard station, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Celebrezze Federal Building.

The meeting concluded with Pitts indicating to the UCE that he would travel to downtown Cleveland soon to take photographs and videotape footage as part of surveillance efforts of Voinovich Park and the U.S. Coast Guard station. He also expressed a desire to take a tour of the U.S. Coast Guard station to gain as much information as he could about the layout of the facility.

The UCE texted Pitts later on June 22 and where he indicated al Qaeda "brothers" would provide Pitts with a bus pass and cellular phone.

On June 25, Pitts met with an FBI confidential human source (CHS) in Maple Heights, Ohio, who provided Pitts with a bus pass and a phone Pitts could use to communicate with the UCE. The bus pass was provided to Pitts, as he requested, so he could travel to downtown Cleveland to conduct surveillance for the July 4th attack.

On June 26, Pitts contacted the UCE via text message and relayed that he had completed the reconnaissance of the designated spots in downtown Cleveland and that he desired to "destroy the government."

Pitts also indicated he intended to travel to Philadelphia, since Philadelphia is his hometown and he knows it best. Pitts indicated it was his "job" to "go look at the base of the ground" and that it was up to other "brothers" to complete other parts of the job.

On June 27, Pitts met with the CHS and turned over the phone that contained the reconnaissance photos and videos, so they could be provided to the al Qaeda brothers.

Later on June 27, Pitts and the UCE met in Maple Heights then drove to downtown Cleveland, where they discussed the impending July 4th bombing.

"And I'm gonna be downtown when the – when the thing go off. I'm gonna be somewhere cuz I wanna see it go off," Pitts said.

A search of the phone that Pitts provided to the CHS revealed that he made two videos in which he pledged allegiance. He stated, in part: "We serve Allah . . . We fight our enemies. We destroy them and destroy those who try to oppose..."

The phone also had four videos taken by Pitts that show him walking down East 9th Street in Cleveland, pointing out potential targets such as the federal building, the Coast Guard station and St. John's Cathedral, which he said could be taken "off the map."

On July 1, Pitts met with the UCE in Garfield Heights, Ohio, for Pitts to explain his plan for Philadelphia. Pitts said he planned to travel there to conduct reconnaissance for a future attack in Philadelphia. Pitts stated a truck bomb packed with explosives, such as the one used in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, would be the best way to cause maximum damage.

Pitts was reminded by the UCE that people would die and body parts would be flying around. Pitts responded “I don’t care” and that he had “no regrets,” would be able to “go to sleep” and “I don’t give a (expletive).”

The defendant faces a statutory maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. A criminal complaint is merely an allegation, and the defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law. The maximum statutory sentence is prescribed by Congress and is provided here for informational purposes. If convicted of any offense, the sentencing of the defendant will be determined by the court based on the advisory Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

This investigation is being conducted by the FBI-Cleveland Division’s Joint Terrorism Task. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Michelle Baepler and Matthew Shepherd of the Northern District of Ohio, and Trial Attorney Paul Casey of the National Security Division’s Counterterrorism Section.