

Ohio man accused of plotting July 4th attack in Cleveland indicted for attempting to provide support to al Qaeda

U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of Ohio

Thursday, January 17, 2019

<https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndoh/pr/ohio-man-accused-plotting-july-4th-attack-cleveland-indicted-attempting-provide-support>

A Maple Heights man was indicted on one count of attempting to provide material support to al Qaeda.

Demetrius Nathaniel Pitts, aka Abdur Raheem Rafeeq, aka Salah ad-Deen Osama Waleed, 49, has been in custody since July, when he was arrested after allegedly planning a terrorist attack in Cleveland.

"Protecting our citizens and our nation remains the Justice Department's top priority," U.S. Attorney Justin E. 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 FBI Acting Special Agent in Charge Robert Hughes. "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 and the UCE met 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)."

If convicted, the defendant's sentence will be determined by the Court after review of factors unique to this case, including the defendant's prior criminal record, if any, the defendant's role in the offense and the characteristics of the violations. In all cases, the sentence will not exceed the statutory maximum and, in most cases, it will be less than the maximum.

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 Baeppler and Matthew Shepherd of the Northern District of Ohio, and Trial Attorney Paul Casey of the National Security Division's Counterterrorism Section.

An indictment is only a charge and is not evidence of guilt. A defendant is entitled to a fair trial in which it will be the government's burden to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.