



THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
SOUTHERN DISTRICT *of* CALIFORNIA

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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Southern District of California

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, September 17, 2021

John Earnest Pleads Guilty to 113-Count Federal Hate Crime Indictment in Connection with Poway Synagogue Shooting and Mosque Arson

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John T. Earnest of Rancho Penasquitos pleaded guilty in federal court today to a 113-count hate crimes indictment, admitting that he set fire to an Escondido mosque and opened fire in a Poway synagogue because he wanted to kill Muslims and Jews. The religiously- and racially-motivated attacks resulted in the murder of one person and the attempted murders of 53 others.

Earnest was indicted by a federal grand jury in May of 2019 on civil rights, hate crime, and firearm charges in connection with the murder of Lori Gilbert Kaye and the attempted murder of 53 others at the Chabad of Poway on April 27, and the March 24 arson of the Dar-ul-Arqam Mosque in Escondido.

"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. "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."

"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 guilty plea will hopefully bring closure and start the healing process to all those impacted by the defendant's cowardly acts nearly two-and-a-half years ago," said FBI Special Agent in Charge Suzanne Turner. "The FBI stands steadfast with all of our law enforcement partners throughout the county to root out and defeat hate; it has no place in a civilized society."

“The tragic shooting at the Chabad of Poway was shocking for our community,” said ATF Los Angeles Field Division Special Agent in Charge Monique Villegas. “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.”

According to the plea agreement and other 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 ten rounds of ammunition. Earnest opened fire, killing one person and injuring three other members of the congregation, including a then 8-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.

Investigators found a manifesto written by Earnest and posted on the Internet shortly before the attack. In the manifesto, Earnest made many anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim statements, including “I can only kill so many Jews” and “I only wish I killed more.” Earnest wrote that he was inspired by the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the shootings at two mosques in New Zealand.

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.

According to the terms of the plea agreement, the United States and Earnest will jointly recommend a sentence of life in prison plus 30 years.

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. Grossman thanked the prosecutors and law enforcement agencies for working hard to achieve justice in this case.

DEFENDANT

Case Number 19cr1850

John T. Earnest

Age: 22

San Diego

SUMMARY OF CHARGES

Counts 1 - 54

Obstruction of Free Exercise of Religious Beliefs Resulting in Death and Bodily Injury; and Involving Attempt to Kill, Use of a Dangerous Weapon - 18 U.S.C. §§ 247(a)(2), 247(d)(1) and 247(d)(3)

Maximum penalty: Life in prison or death and \$250,000 fine

Counts 55-108

Hate Crime Acts – 18 U.S.C. § 249(a)(1)(B)(i)(ii)

Maximum penalty: Life in prison and \$250,000 fine

Count 109

Damage to Religious Real Property Involving Use of a Dangerous Weapon or Fire – 18 U.S.C. §§ 247(a)(1), 247 (d)(3)

Maximum penalty: Twenty years in prison and \$250,000 fine

Count 110

Using and Carrying a Firearm During and In Relation to a Crime of Violence, Resulting in Death – Title 18, U.S.C., Sec. and 924(c) and 924(j)

Maximum penalty: Life in prison or death and \$250,000 fine

Counts 111-113

Using, Carrying, and Discharging a Firearm During and In Relation to a Crime of Violence – Title 18, U.S.C., Sec. and 924(c)

Maximum penalty: Life in prison and \$250,000 fine, mandatory minimum 10 years in prison

AGENCIES

Federal Bureau of Investigation

San Diego County Sheriff's Department

San Diego Police Department

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives

San Diego County District Attorney's Office

Escondido Police Department

Topic(s):

Hate Crimes

Firearms Offenses

Component(s):

USAO - California, Southern

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