

PRESS RELEASE

Texas Man Sentenced for Antisemitic Hate Crime After Seeking to Burn Down Synagogue

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A Texas man was sentenced today to 10 years in prison and three years of supervised release, and ordered to pay \$470,000 in restitution for a hate crime and arson in which he set fire to the Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue in Austin, Texas, on Oct. 31, 2021.

Franklin Sechriest, 19, of San Marcos, pleaded guilty to a hate crime and arson charges on April 7. Sechriest admitted that he targeted the synagogue because of his hatred of Jews, and journals recovered from the defendant were replete with virulent antisemitic statements and views. Sechriest also possessed several decals and stickers expressing antisemitic messages.

"This defendant is being held accountable for this depraved, antisemitic attack on Congregation Beth Israel, a community with a rich history and heritage that dates back to 1876," said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. "This hate-filled act of violence against a house of worship was an attempt to sow fear in the Jewish community and was intended to intimidate its congregants. Attacks targeting Jewish people and arsons aimed at desecrating synagogues have no place in our society today, and the Justice Department will continue to aggressively prosecute antisemitic violence."

"No one should have to fear that their daily lives will be inflicted by hate-fueled violence, or that their place of worship and community could become a target of hate," said U.S. Attorney Jaime Esparza for the Western District of Texas. "We stand firmly committed to those impacted by this arson, and my office will continue to combat criminal acts of hate while seeking justice for the victims."

"Hate crimes have the power to devastate and terrorize entire communities. To target a place of worship, a space meant to be a sanctuary in every sense of the word, is one of the most heinous acts that can be committed," said Acting Special Agent in Charge Doug Olson of the FBI San Antonio Field Office. "We remain dedicated to investigating hate crimes and will continue to work relentlessly to hold responsible those who would commit violent acts based on hate."

According to court documents and admissions made during his plea and sentencing hearings, on Oct. 28, 2021, three days before the arson, Sechriest drove to the synagogue's parking lot outside its sanctuary. According to Sechriest's journals, he went there to "scout out a target."

The night of the arson, Sechriest drove to the synagogue and was seen on surveillance video carrying a five-gallon container and toilet paper toward the synagogue's sanctuary. Moments later, multiple surveillance videos captured the glow of a fire from the direction of the sanctuary. A security camera captured Sechriest jogging away from the direction of the fire and toward the open driver's side door of a vehicle. A concerned citizen reported the fire, and the Austin Fire Department responded quickly to extinguish it. In Sechriest's journal, in an entry dated Oct. 31, 2021, he wrote "I set a synagogue on fire." In the days following the arson, Sechriest's journal noted that he was actively monitoring media reports to track the progress of the investigation into the arson.

The FBI San Antonio Field Office and Austin Fire Department investigated the case.

Trial Attorney Andrew Manns of the Civil Rights Division's Criminal Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Matthew Devlin for the Western District of Texas prosecuted the case.

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