

PRESS RELEASE

Two Defendants Charged in Connection with Vandalism Targeting Jewish Property in Pittsburgh

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For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Pennsylvania

<https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdpa/pr/two-defendants-charged-connection-vandalism-targeting-jewish-property-pittsburgh>

PITTSBURGH, Pa. – Residents of Coraopolis and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, have been charged by criminal complaint in Pittsburgh with damaging religious property and conspiracy to commit an offense against the United States, United States Attorney Eric G. Olshan announced today.

The two-count complaint named Mohamad Hamad, 23, of Coraopolis, and Talya A. Lubit, 24, of Pittsburgh.

The complaint charges that, from in and around July 2024 through on or about July 29, 2024, Hamad and Lubit conspired with each other to commit an offense against the United States—specifically, a civil rights violation involving damage to religious real property. Hamad and Lubit are further charged with defacing the religious real property of Chabad of Squirrel Hill (Chabad), which occupies a synagogue building, because of the racial and ethnic characteristics of the Jewish individuals associated with Chabad, in violation of federal law.

According to the affidavit filed in support of the complaint, which was unsealed today following Hamad’s and Lubit’s arrests, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Pittsburgh Bureau of Police initiated a criminal investigation on July 29, 2024, after receiving reports from Chabad and the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh (the Jewish Federation) of overnight vandalism at their respective properties. Chabad, a center for Jewish educational programming, which occupies a building for Jewish religious services in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, reported that an exterior wall at the front of the property had been defaced with graffiti. Specifically, the

words "Jews 4 Palestine" with an inverted triangle were spray-painted onto the exterior of the building with red paint. The inverted triangle, according to the affidavit, first appeared in videos posted online by Hamas, a designated foreign terrorist organization, of the current fighting in Gaza where it was used to mark an Israeli target about to be attacked by Hamas fighters. The investigation also revealed, according to the affidavit, that shortly after the vandalism occurred at the Chabad building, another message was spray-painted on an exterior sign for the Jewish Federation, a non-profit organization that serves as the central fundraising and community relations arm of the Jewish community in Pittsburgh.

"Defacing religious property is not protected speech—it is a crime," U.S. Attorney Olshan said. "Members of our communities should be able to practice their faith without fear of being targeted for their religious affiliation, including, as alleged here, with a symbol associated with a terrorist organization. Protecting the civil rights of the people of Western Pennsylvania is of paramount importance to this office and our partners in law enforcement, and we are dedicated to pursuing justice on behalf of the victims of these crimes."

In connection with the investigation, search warrants were executed in August and September 2024 at both defendants' residences. Hamad's and Lubit's cell phones were seized, and a review of the contents revealed, among other things, messages during the month of July 2024 between Hamad and Lubit during which they planned their vandalism activities and specifically discussed selecting Jewish targets. Review of Hamad's phone also revealed that in the weeks leading up to the vandalism on July 29, Hamad referred to himself as a "Hamas operative," sent a picture of himself wearing a headband with the Hamas logo to another associate, and exchanged messages with another individual regarding building an explosive device, including a video of a test detonation in early July 2024.

The law provides for a maximum total sentence of two years in prison, a fine of \$200,000, or both. Under the federal Sentencing Guidelines, the actual sentence imposed would be based upon the seriousness of the offenses and the prior criminal history, if any, of the defendant.

Assistant United States Attorney Carolyn J. Bloch is prosecuting this case on behalf of the government.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and Pittsburgh Bureau of Police are conducting the investigation that led to the charges against Hamad and Lubit.

A criminal complaint is an accusation. A defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

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