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JUSTICE NEWS

Department of Justice

Office of Public Affairs

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, March 24, 2022

Texas Man Charged with Civil Rights Violations for Setting Fire to Synagogue

A federal grand jury in Austin, Texas, yesterday returned a three-count indictment charging Franklin Barrett Sechriest with crimes relating to the intentional fire set at the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue in Austin on Oct. 31, 2021.

According to a federal criminal complaint previously filed in this case and evidence presented at a detention hearing, on Oct. 31, 2021, at around 9:00 p.m., Sechriest set fire to the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue. He 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 distinct glow of a fire ignition appearing to come from the direction of the sanctuary. A security camera captured Sechriest jogging away from the direction of the fire and towards 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. No one was injured, but the fire caused over \$200,000 in damage.

The vehicle seen in the surveillance video was later traced to Sechriest's residence, in part based on surveillance video from Oct. 28, 2021, showing a similar vehicle parked near the synagogue's sanctuary with the license plate visible. On Nov. 10, 2021, the FBI searched Sechriest's residence under authority of a court-ordered search warrant. During the search, agents found items similar to those seen on the Oct. 31 surveillance videos, including similar clothing worn by Sechriest and a receipt for a five-gallon container similar to the one seen on video. Also found were various handwritten journals appearing to be written by Sechriest. The journals contained statements related to the synagogue fire and statements demonstrating hatred of and contempt for persons of the Jewish faith.

The indictment charges Sechriest with one count each of damage to religious property, use of fire to commit a federal crime, and arson. If convicted of all charges, Sechriest faces a minimum of 10 years and maximum of 60 years of imprisonment, a fine of \$250,000 or twice the loss suffered by the victim, and restitution for the amount of damage caused. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Sechriest remains in federal custody since his arrest on Nov. 12, 2021.

Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke for the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and U.S. Attorney Ashley C. Hoff of the Western District of Texas made the announcement. Assistant U.S. Attorney Matthew Devlin of the Western District of Texas and Trial Attorney Andrew Manns of the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division are prosecuting the case.

The FBI and Austin Fire Department are investigating the case.

An indictment is merely an allegation and all defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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Civil Rights

Hate Crimes

Component(s):

Civil Rights Division

Civil Rights - Criminal Section

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