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## PRESS RELEASE

# Tampa Man Pleads Guilty To Attempting To Provide Material Support To ISIS

Friday, February 24, 2023

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### For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Florida

Tampa, Florida – United States Attorney Roger B. Handberg announces that Muhammed Momtaz Al-Azhari (26, Tampa) has pleaded guilty to attempting to provide material support or resources to a designated foreign terrorist organization, namely, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (“ISIS”). Pursuant to the terms of his plea agreement, Al-Azhari and the United States have agreed to the imposition of a stipulated sentence of 18 years in federal prison. Al-Azhari has also agreed to forfeit certain assets that are traceable to proceeds of the offense, as well as various items of property, including gear involved in, or intended to be used to commit the offense.

According to the plea agreement, Al-Azhari is a United States citizen who spent most of his life abroad and came to embrace dogmatic, Islamist/Salafist beliefs. In or around 2015, Al-Azhari was convicted of advocating for Jaysh al-Islam, an armed Islamist group then participating in the conflict in Syria. TOP

the Syrian conflict, in Saudi Arabia. Al-Azhari spent approximately three years in Saudi Arabian custody, after which he was removed to the United States. Upon Al-Azhari's arrival to the United States, in or around December 2018, the FBI began investigating him for potentially providing material support to ISIS, which, at all relevant times, was designated as a foreign terrorist organization under federal law.

In or around April 2020, Al-Azhari began planning to carry out an attack in support of ISIS. Around the same time, Al-Azhari began to acquire multiple firearms. He also researched and scouted potential locations in the Tampa Bay area. Since at least May 2019, Al-Azhari consumed ISIS propaganda and spoke favorably about ISIS, to whom he eventually pledged his allegiance through a bay'ah (an Islamic oath of allegiance). Furthermore, Al-Azhari spoke about avenging the United States' imprisonment of Muslims, including ISIS fighters, and the United States' military actions in the Middle East. In addition, Al-Azhari rehearsed parts of the plan described above, including practicing statements that he would make during, or in connection with, an attack in support of ISIS.

Between late April and May 2020, Al-Azhari also had multiple interactions with an FBI undercover employee ("UC-1") and a confidential human source ("CHS-1"), during which Al-Azhari tried to buy guns from the UC-1, including a fully automatic rifle, but he was arrested on unrelated state charges while negotiating the purchase. Al-Azhari thereafter met CHS-1, attempted to "convert" CHS-1 to Islam, and confided in CHS-1 about his affiliation with ISIS and his plans to provide material support to ISIS, as well as to send money to ISIS. Al-Azhari recruited CHS-1 to help him carry out the plans described above in support of ISIS, as well as robberies, and he asked CHS-1 to obtain a Glock pistol and an unregistered silencer for him. Agents arrested Al-Azhari when he took possession of the gun and silencer on May 24, 2020.

This case was investigated by FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force, including Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the Tampa Police Department, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, the St. Petersburg Police Department, the Clearwater Police Department, and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. It is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Patrick Scruggs and Risha Asokan.

*Updated February 24, 2023*

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