



The United States Department of Justice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
WWW.JUSTICE.GOV/NEWS

July 13, 2023

Judge Sentences Florida Man to 18 Years in Prison for Attempting to Provide Material Support to ISIS

WASHINGTON – Muhammed Momtaz Al-Azhari, 26, of Tampa, Florida, was sentenced to 18 years in federal prison, followed by a lifetime of supervised release, for attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization.

According to court documents, Al-Azhari pleaded guilty to the charge in February 2023. Al-Azhari is a United States citizen who spent most of his life abroad and came to embrace dogmatic, Islamist/Salafist beliefs. In 2018, Al-Azhari was released from prison in Saudi Arabia following a conviction and sentence for supporting terrorism in Syria, 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 to plan to carry out an attack in support of ISIS. Around the same time, Al-Azhari began to acquire multiple firearms. Al-Azhari also researched and scouted potential locations for an attack in the Tampa Bay area. Since at least May 2019, Al-Azhari also consumed ISIS propaganda and spoke favorably about ISIS, to which 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 his plans, including practicing statements that he would make during or in connection with, his intention to support ISIS.

Al-Azhari had multiple, recorded interactions with an FBI undercover employee and a confidential human source (CHS) in April and May 2020. Al-Azhari was in the process of trying to buy guns from the undercover employee, including a fully automatic rifle,

when he was arrested on state charges for carrying a concealed weapon without a permit. After his release from state custody, Al-Azhari continued to try to buy firearms from the UCE. Al-Azhari also met with the CHS, attempted to “convert” the CHS to Islam, and Al-Azhari confided in the CHS about Al-Azhari’s affiliation with ISIS and his plans to provide material support to ISIS, as well as to send money to ISIS. Al-Azhari also recruited the CHS to help him in connection with his plans in support of ISIS, as well as robberies, and he asked the CHS to obtain a Glock pistol and an unregistered silencer. Agents arrested Al-Azhari when he took possession of the gun and silencer on May 24, 2020.

Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department’s National Security Division, U.S. Attorney Roger B. Handberg for the Middle District of Florida, and Assistant Director Robert R. Wells of the FBI Counterterrorism Division made the announcement.

The 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 investigated the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Risha Asokan and Cherie Krigsman for the Middle District of Florida prosecuted the case, with assistance from Joshua Champagne and Paul Casey of the National Security Division’s Counterterrorism Section.

###

NSD

23-757

Do not reply to this message. If you have questions, please use the contacts in the message or call the Office of Public Affairs at 202-514-2007.