

North Carolina Man Charged with Seeking to Join US-Backed Syrian Opposition

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A man from the US state of North Carolina faces up to 15 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for allegedly seeking to join the Al Nusra Front (Janhat al-Nusra), an Al Qaeda-linked organization that has been promoted by the US and its allies throughout the Syrian civil war.

According to an indictment filed by a grand jury in North Carolina, Basit Javed Sheikh, who lived in the city of Cary and is originally from Pakistan, contacted an individual who turned out to be an agent of the FBI to seek assistance in traveling to Syria.

The involvement of FBI informants is a feature of nearly every terrorism-related prosecution filed by US officials. In this case, Sheikh allegedly made contact with the informant through an Islamist Facebook page in August, expressing an interest in traveling to Syria to support the forces fighting against the government of Bashar al-Assad.

According to a report in CBS News, “Sheikh told the covert informant in early September that he’d bought a one-way ticket to travel to Turkey in hopes of making contact with people who would get him to Syria.” He allegedly said he had travelled to Turkey last year for a similar purpose, but had become frustrated by his experience with individuals who claimed to be part of the Free Syrian Army, which has had the official backing of the US.

The plans for travel to Turkey were apparently cancelled. Sheikh was arrested earlier this month at the Raleigh-Durham International Airport before boarding a plane to Lebanon, a trip that the US government claims had the same aim as the Turkish trips.

If the accusations of US officials are true, Sheikh’s actions in seeking to join Al Nusra in fact entirely conform to the activities of the US government itself. At the time that he first allegedly made contact with the FBI informant, the war drive of the Obama administration against Syria was at its peak. Over the summer, the US government had been preparing to launch a direct military intervention against the Assad government, after having fueled and stoked a sectarian conflict, dominated by the Al Nusra Front, for two years.

Thanks in part to the military and financial assistance from US allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Al Qaeda-linked groups in Syria became the dominant forces in the civil war aimed at toppling Assad, a principal ally of Iran and Russia. These forces carried out repeated terrorist attacks, including the bombing of civilian institutions, the murder of prisoners of war, and the massacre of members of the Alawite minority.

A Reuters report on September 5—when Sheikh was allegedly in discussions with the FBI

informant—noted that claims by Obama administration officials that the opposition in Syria was “moderate” were “at odds with estimates by US and European intelligence sources and nongovernmental experts, who say Islamic extremists remain by far the fiercest and best-organized rebel elements.”

Sheikh is at least the third individual arrested by US authorities for allegedly seeking to join the Al Nusra Front, which is formally designated as a terrorist organization. Earlier this year, Abdella Ahmad Tounisi, an 18-year-old from Chicago, was seized while leaving the US, allegedly to join up with Syrian forces. Similarly to the latest case, the arrest came after undercover FBI agents ensnared Tounisi in an Internet sting.

Last March, a US Army veteran, Eric Harroun, was arrested on charges related to his going to Syria and allegedly fighting alongside the Al Nusra Front.

In Harroun’s case, defense lawyers argued that there was confusion over what group he was to join, and that he had, in fact, intended to fight with the Free Syrian Army. Throughout the Syrian conflict, the FSA has worked closely with the Islamist organizations.

Initially, Harroun was charged with using a weapon of mass destruction outside of the United States—which carries a possible death sentence—and providing material support to a terrorist organization, which is punishable by 15 years in prison.

In the end, however, Harroun was allowed to plead to a lesser charge of conspiring to violate arms control laws and was released after being sentenced to time served.

During an initial hearing, Harroun’s lawyer, Jeremy Kamens, had argued in his defense: “It is extremely unusual for the US to charge a person who is fighting in a manner that is aligned with US interests.”

While dozens of innocent people entrapped by undercover *agents provocateurs* have been sent to prison for decades on trumped up charges of conspiring to provide material support for terrorism, these cases involving Syria pose a dilemma. How can federal courts send people to prison for supporting Al Qaeda, when the US government is doing the very same thing?

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