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Syrian refugee arrested for alleged ISIS plot to bomb Pittsburgh church

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On the eve of World Refugee Day, the Trump administration announced the arrest of a Syrian refugee accused of plotting to bomb a church in Pittsburgh in the name of the Islamic State.

Mustafa Mousab Alowemer, 21, was arrested Wednesday after being charged with one count of attempting to provide material support to IS (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) and two counts of distributing information about explosive weapons related to his plot to attack the place of worship.

“Targeting places of worship is beyond the pale, no matter what the motivation,” Assistant Attorney General John Demers, said in a Justice Department [news release](#). “The defendant is alleged to have plotted just such an attack of a church in Pittsburgh in the name of ISIS.”

An affidavit filed in a federal court in Pittsburgh accuses Alowemer of plotting to bomb a church in Pittsburgh’s North Side. The FBI identified the church as Legacy International Worship Center on Wilson Avenue.

The affidavit accuses Alowemer of saying that his motivation for blowing up the church was to support IS and inspire other potential jihadis to commit similar acts for IS, which has long called on its lone-wolf supporters in the West to carry out attacks on soft targets such as churches.

“Alowemer also targeted the Church in order to ‘take revenge for our [ISIS] brothers in Nigeria,’” the press release explains. “Alowemer was aware that numerous people in or around the Church could be killed by the explosion.”

Information provided by the Department of Homeland Security states that Alowemer was born in Daraa, Syria and admitted to the United States as a refugee on Aug. 1, 2016.

Authorities are accusing Alowemer of using multiple social networking and messenger applications to communicate with a person he thought was a fellow IS supporter.

Alowemer stands accused of distributing multiple instructional documents relating to the use and construction of improvised explosive devices to the person he believed to be an IS supporter. That person turned out to be an undercover FBI employee.

“During his communications, Alowemer stated his support for ISIS, and his desire to answer the call for jihad or travel to conduct jihad,” the news release explains. “Alowemer also distributed

propaganda materials, offered to provide potential targets in the Pittsburgh area, requested a weapon with a silencer, and recorded a video of himself pledging an oath of allegiance to the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.”

Authorities state that in or around June 2019, Alowemer purchased several items to be used to assemble an explosive device to be used in the attack.

Alowemer was also said to have met four times with an undercover FBI employee and/or an FBI confidential source. At a June 11 meeting, Alowemer allegedly shared details about his bomb plot and provided materials he bought to make the explosive device.

Among the materials were two printed copies of Google satellite maps that had markings identifying the church and routes of escape. Additionally, Alowemer was said to have provided a 10-point handwritten plan outlining details of the plot.

Alowemer requested to meet one more time before carrying out that attack. That meeting occurred on June 19, where he was arrested.

Michael McGarrity, the assistant director of the FBI’s counterterrorism division, explained that Alowemer’s alleged plans were “foiled by the full force of the FBI Pittsburgh Joint Terrorism Task Force.”

“The FBI takes threats to churches and other religious institutions extremely seriously and will use all our resources to stop potential terrorist attacks against them,” McGarrity said.

Micahel Anthony Day, the lead pastor and founder of Legacy International Worship Center, released a statement through Facebook.

“Gratefully, God thwarted such a tragedy, protecting our congregation and northside community,” Day wrote. “The terrorist was apprehended earlier today and all [IS] operations for planned attacked has been destroyed.”

Day asked supporters to pray that the “peace of God to rest with us.”

“Please know that God is getting the glory out of this,” Day assured. “The Devil is defeated and God is exalted.”

Alowemer’s arrest came the day before Thursday’s annual observance of World Refugee Day, which is dedicated to raising awareness about the situation facing refugees worldwide.

Christian humanitarian groups and activists are using the observance to speak out against Trump administration policies that have led to a drastic reduction over the last two years in the number of refugees and asylum seekers being permitted to resettle in the United States.

At the beginning of his administration in 2017, Trump received much criticism for enacting an executive order that suspended Syrian refugee resettlement to the U.S. indefinitely on grounds

that strengthened vetting measures were needed to ensure that terrorists weren't being given entry into the U.S.

Trump also suspended the entire U.S. refugee resettlement program for 120 days.

Since restarting the resettlement program, the Trump administration has imposed stricter vetting for refugees. The number of refugees being resettled to the U.S. under the Trump administration has hit historic lows.

Refugee advocates have long argued that the extensive, months-long, multiple-agency vetting process has done an adequate job of screening refugees chosen to resettle.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, reports that just 25 out of 3,391,203 refugees admitted between 1975 and 2017 were terrorists.

“In other words, one terrorist entered as a refugee for every 135,648 refugees who were not terrorists,” the Cato Institute report from May reads. “Refugees were not very successful at killing people in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. Of the 25, only 3 were successful in their attacks, killing a total of 3 people and imposing a total human cost of \$45 million, or \$13.27 per refugee visa issued.”

Alowemer's plotted Pittsburgh church attack comes after 11 were killed last October in a shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue carried out by an anti-Jewish, anti-refugee neo-Nazi supporter.