

Aurora Man Pleads Guilty To Attempting To Join Jihadist Militant Group In Syria

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Northern District of Illinois

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<http://www.justice.gov/usao-ndil/pr/aurora-man-pleads-guilty-attempting-join-jihadist-militant-group-syria>

CHICAGO — An Aurora man pleaded guilty in federal court Tuesday to charges he attempted to travel overseas to join a jihadist militant group in Syria.

ABDELLA AHMAD TOUNISI, 21, was arrested at O'Hare International Airport in April 2013 as he attempted to board a flight bound for Istanbul, Turkey. Tounisi had spent four months conducting online research related to overseas travel and violent jihad, focusing specifically on Syria and the Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist group.

Tounisi had made online contact with an individual he believed to be a recruiter for Jabhat al-Nusra. Tounisi and the purported recruiter exchanged a series of emails in which Tounisi shared his plan to get to Syria by way of Turkey, as well as his willingness to fight for the jihadist cause, according to a written plea agreement.

Tounisi pleaded guilty to one count of attempting to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization. He faces a maximum of 15 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. U.S. District Judge Samuel Der-Yeghiayan scheduled a sentencing hearing for Dec. 9, 2015, at 10:30 a.m.

The guilty plea was announced by Zachary T. Fardon, United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois; and Robert J. Holley, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Chicago Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The investigation was conducted by the Chicago FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force, which is comprised of Special Agents of the FBI, officers of the Chicago Police Department, and representatives from an additional 20 federal, state and local law enforcement agencies. The Justice Department's National Security Division assisted in the investigation.

"Foreign terrorist groups threaten the safety of the United States," Mr. Fardon said. "The Joint Terrorism Task Force should be commended for uncovering this plan and preventing a terrorist organization from enlisting a new member."

Jabhat al-Nusra is listed by the U.S. Department of State as an alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), a designated foreign terrorist organization. During online exchanges with the purported recruiter, Tounisi said he planned to travel from Istanbul to the Turkish city of Gaziantep, which lies near the border of Turkey and Syria, and then in to Syria, according to the plea agreement.

Tounisi, who is a U.S. citizen, requested an expedited passport and purchased an airline ticket for the flight from Chicago to Istanbul. He arrived at O'Hare on the evening of April 19, 2013, and was arrested after passing through security in the international terminal.

The government is represented by Assistant United States Attorneys William Ridgway and Barry Jonas.

Plea Agreement <http://www.justice.gov/usao-ndil/file/705931/download>

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