

Beat: News

Moroccan man in Conn. accused of plotting `flying bomb` attacks

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USPA News - A Moroccan man, who received permission to stay in the United States after fabricating a story that he'd face prison time and torture in his native country, was arrested in Connecticut on Monday after allegedly plotting to use remote-controlled planes to bomb a U.S. university and a federal building, officials said on Tuesday. El Mehdi Semlali Fathi, 26, a resident of Bridgeport, was arrested on Monday after being charged with three counts of immigration-related crimes over his illegal stay in the United States and - when caught - fabricating a story to prevent being deported back to Morocco.

Fathi was not immediately charged with terrorism-related crimes as a federal criminal investigation is still underway. An affidavit unsealed by U.S. prosecutors on late Monday said Fathi completed a Microsoft Access course at the Business English Center in the Moroccan port city of Kenitra in June 2007, after which he submitted an online application to attend Virginia International University in Fairfax, Virginia. He then applied for a non-immigrant student visa to the United States. After both applications were approved, Fathi arrived at Washington Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C. on January 8, 2008, to begin his classes at Virginia International University. Fathi's student visa was canceled just over a year later after he failed all of his classes during the Fall 2008 semester and subsequently failed to register for class for the Spring 2009 semester. Despite the student visa being canceled, Fathi illegally stayed in the United States until he was arrested in Fairfax in December 2010 after alleged trespassing, although those charges were subsequently dismissed. That is when officers determined Fathi's illegal status in the country and began the process to remove him. But when an immigration judge found Fathi removable from the United States during a court appearance in April 2011, Fathi stated that he wished to apply for refugee status, even though he had previously given no indication of this. Fathi was then provided with a form to complete his refugee application and was eventually released on \$7,000 bond in June 2011, after which he moved to Connecticut. "In his written application for refugee status (I-589), Fathi sought asylum and withholding of removal based on his political opinion and membership in a particular social group," said FBI Special Agent Anabela Sharp in the affidavit, adding that Fathi falsely claimed he had been arrested several times and that Moroccan authorities believed he was a member of the banned Ansar al-Mehdi group. "I was accused of being involved with the so-called Ansar El Mehdi group, the group that was trying to overthrow the government of Morocco, that was because I participated in many demonstrations in support of Western Sahara independence, and more importantly because of the involvement of a family member with Ansar El Mehdi group, so there is an APB against me in Morocco, so if I returned to Morocco I will be arrested, detained, and tortured," Fathi wrote, adding that he was likely to be sentenced to 25 years in prison. With immigration hearings still pending in Connecticut, Fathi traveled to Los Angeles in September 2012 to stay with a friend and to go sightseeing, leading to an arrest in California for theft. While serving his sentence he was again determined to be unlawfully in the United States and eventually appeared at an immigration hearing in California in August 2013, after which Fathi was granted `withholding of removal`, a status that is similar to asylum, and was released. Months later, Sharp said, a federal criminal investigation was launched in January after the FBI received information about Fathi's alleged aspirations to bomb an educational institution outside Connecticut. During the course of the investigation, Fathi allegedly also expressed his desire to bomb a federal building in Connecticut. The FBI eventually produced five recordings, three of them in February and two in March, in which Fathi speaks Arabic and admits the stories told to immigration officials were fabricated in order to be able to stay in the United States. He said he first learned about the asylum process from a Nigerian national he was incarcerated with and then used the U.S. State Department's country reports for Morocco to fabricate a story. "Fathi admitted that he searched for issues during the 2006-2007 time-frame because he left Morocco in 2008. Fathi stated that he learned about or found out about Ansar El-Mehdi, and the Western Sahara movement and created his case around those issues," Sharp said of the recorded conversations. "Fathi explained that he worked on the time-frame so that everything he wrote in his refugee application coincided with the actual events." Sharp added: "Fathi claimed there is no proof that he is lying. In one of the recordings, Fathi is clearly heard stating that the more he thinks about the case, he laughs because he cannot believe the judge believed him. Fathi stated that he worked on creating his case for three months and studied all cases of asylum - not just in Morocco." During some of the recordings, Fathi also repeatedly stated his desire to bomb an educational university outside Connecticut and later also a federal building in Connecticut that houses a courthouse and offices for Homeland Security Investigations. He claimed that funding for these attacks would come from "secret accounts" with money coming from money laundering activities and drug dealing. When asked about pliers, a cutter and wires in his bedroom in February, Fathi allegedly said in the recordings that the materials were for a bomb. "Fathi stated in the recording that he would use airplanes, possibly toy planes to execute the bombing," Sharp said. "Specifically, Fathi stated he was going to use a plane, a remote-controlled hobby-type airplane, to deliver the bomb." The affidavit adds that Fathi allegedly claimed to have studied his planned bomb attack for months, and said he previously made a chemical bomb while in high school in Morocco. "He can be heard explaining that there are three things

that scare people in the United States: causing harm to schools, the economy, and their sense of security," Sharp said.

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