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Texas Man Sentenced to Almost 25 Years for Hate Crime in Burning Down Mosque in Victoria, Texas

The Justice Department today announced that Marq Perez, 26, was sentenced to more than 24 years in prison for burning down the Victoria Islamic Center on Jan. 28, 2017. Acting Assistant Attorney General John Gore of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, U.S. Attorney Ryan Patrick for the Southern District of Texas, Special Agent in Charge Fred Milanowski of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), and Special Agent in Charge Perry K. Turner of the FBI made the announcement.

A jury found Perez guilty on July 16, for a hate crime in the burning of the Victoria Islamic Center (the mosque) on Jan. 28, 2017, and for the use of fire to commit a federal felony. In addition, the jury found that Perez possessed an unregistered destructive device for a separate but related incident that occurred on Jan. 15, 2017.

"Everyone in this country has the right to worship freely without fear of violence," said Acting Assistant Attorney General John Gore. "This defendant terrorized the Muslim community in Victoria, and the Department partnered with federal, state, and local agencies to ensure that the person responsible for this heinous hate crime would be found and prosecuted."

"The Attorney General has said that the Freedom of religion is indeed our 'first freedom'—being the first listed right of our First Amendment," said Patrick. "The Department of Justice prosecutes violent and dangerous crime, but also, and particularly when that crime interferes with someone's ability to practice their religious faith. Not only was this a dangerous and potentially deadly act, but also one spurred from hate. I am glad justice was served in this case."

"ATF is the primary federal law enforcement agency tasked with investigating House of Worship Fires and views an arson against a house of worship as not just an attack on a building, but as an attack against an entire community," said Milanowski. "ATF is pleased the defendant has been held accountable for this crime and will continue to respond to these violent crimes using all available resources."

"Mr. Perez sought to provoke terror within the tranquil space of the Victoria Islamic Center," said FBI Assistant Special Agent-in-Charge Edward Michel. "By deliberately burning down this mosque, Mr. Perez attacked a specific religious congregation in the hope of spreading fear, conflict and depriving Victoria's Islamic community of their peaceful and safe place to worship. Today's sentencing illustrates that hate crimes will not be tolerated. No one in this country should feel afraid to openly practice their religion or express their beliefs. The FBI will continue to aggressively investigate civil rights violations wherever and whenever they occur."

Testimony at trial detailed how Perez conducted what he described as "recon" by breaking into the mosque a week before he set it on fire. Evidence presented at trial showed that Perez communicated with someone through Facebook about breaking into the mosque a second time, the same night of the fire. A witness who was with Perez on the night of the fire described how Perez used a lighter to set papers on fire inside the mosque and how excited Perez was upon seeing the mosque in flames just minutes later. The witness testified that Perez said that he burned down the mosque, because he wanted to "send a message." During the execution of a search warrant, federal agents recovered stolen

property taken from the mosque the night of the fire in Perez's home. Several witnesses at trial also testified about Perez's animus towards Muslims and that he often used anti-Muslim slurs.

When Perez learned that the Victoria Muslim community had raised money to rebuild the mosque, he told a witness that he would burn the mosque down again if it was rebuilt.

Members of the mosque testified at the trial that they watched from afar as federal, state, and local law enforcement officers tried to extinguish the fire, but observed that the fire could not be put out until it had engulfed the entire mosque. Those witnesses also testified that, after the destruction of the mosque, the Victoria Islamic Center raised money online from over 20,000 individuals from all over the United States and over 90 countries to rebuild the mosque.

ATF and FBI conducted the investigation along with the City of Victoria Fire Marshal's Office, Victoria Fire Department, Victoria Police Department, Texas Department of Public Safety - Criminal Investigations Division and Texas Rangers with assistance of Texas State Fire Marshal's Office and Sheriff's Offices in Victoria and Nueces Counties and the Victoria County District Attorney's Office.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Sharad S. Khandelwal and Kate Suh prosecuted the case along with Trial Attorney Saeed Mody of the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division.

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Hate Crimes

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