

Is pro-terrorist speech a crime? Massachusetts says so

In 2012, Tarek Mehanna was sentenced to 17 and a half years in prison by a US court for conspiring to provide support to terrorists, writes Jeff Howard.



Tarek Mehanna is a 29-year-old American citizen and pharmacologist who was raised in Sudbury, a quiet suburb of Boston, Massachusetts in the US. Trouble began for Mehanna in 2004, when he travelled to Yemen. Mehanna insists his trip was a personal journey to deepen his Muslim faith – specifically, to search for a school where he could learn classical Islamic law. The US district court in Massachusetts disagreed, contending that Mehanna was in search of a terrorist training camp. The court ruled that while Mehanna never found a camp, he was guilty of conspiring to murder Americans overseas. On April 12 2012, it sentenced him to 17 and a half years in prison.

Conspiracy to murder Americans overseas was not the only crime of which Mehanna was convicted. Additionally, the court found him guilty of a further crime: conspiring to “provide material support” to terrorists. When Mehanna returned from his unsuccessful trip to Yemen, he launched a website on which he provided English translation of “pro-jihad” documents. One such document, 39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad, explains the various paths Muslims can take to defend their fellow Muslims, from participating in wars against foreign aggressors to taking care of widows

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and children.

As further evidence of Mehanna's participation in a conspiracy to support terrorists, the prosecution (to name some examples [flagged](#) by the Yale political scientist Andrew March) explained how he “watched jihadi videos”, “discussed efforts to create like-minded youth”, “discussed” the “religious justification” for certain violent acts like suicide bombings, “created and/or translated, accepted credit for authoring and distributed text, videos and other media to inspire others to engage in violent jihad”, “sought out online Internet links to tribute videos”, and spoke of “admiration and love for Osama bin Laden”.

In an impassioned speech delivered at his sentencing, Mehanna [explained](#) that his actions did nothing but register general support for, and facilitate discussion about, attempts to resist the killing of Muslims in their own lands by foreign powers. “This trial was not about my position on Muslims killing American civilians,” Mehanna declared, saying he had never translated, edited, or authored documents suggesting that the murder of innocent Americans in “shopping malls” would be justified. Rather, he continued, “It was about my position on Americans killing Muslim civilians, which is that Muslims should defend their lands from foreign invaders.”

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