

## Cell Phone Trafficking Groups Taken Into Custody for Possible Plots and Questioning

**SUMMARY:** Police in Marietta, Ohio took Osama Sabhi Abulhassan and Ali Houssaiky (both men are 20 years old and from Dearborn, MI) into custody on August 10<sup>th</sup> 2006. Police found \$11,000 in cash and 12 pre-paid cell phones in their car<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, the pair had airplane flight passenger lists, as well as other security information. After being stopped for a traffic violation, Abulhassan and Houssaiky were held in a local county jail and charged with laundering in support of terrorism. Officials also found maps with the locations of Wal-Marts in Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North and South Carolina,<sup>2</sup> indicating that the pair was conducting a phone-buying trip.

The men, both college students, admitted later to buying 600 phones in the southeast Ohio area to sell to an individual in Dearborn. Terrorists use prepaid phones, like the ones Abulhassan and Houssaiky had in their possession, because they are difficult to track, and can be discarded shortly after the minutes are used up. These phones can also be resold in foreign markets for higher prices, since activation fees can be avoided by altering the software in the phone. Additionally, cell phones are commonly used as remote detonators for bombs.



A similar arrest occurred a few days later 75 miles north of Detroit. In this case, the Michigan State Police caught three men from Dallas, TX between the ages of 18 and 23 with over 1000 phones in their car. Adham Othman, Louai Othman, and Maruan Muhareb also had a laptop computer and a camera. Many of the phones were disconnected from their batteries, and the chargers were discarded. Police arrested the Palestinian-Americans after they purchased 80 of the phones at a Wal-Mart in Caro, MI.

Authorities initially feared that the trio planned to bomb the 5-mile-long Mackinac Bridge, which connects the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan<sup>3</sup>. However, further investigation would lead authorities to conclude that the men were not connected to a

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/travel/news/2006-08-10-ohio-terror-suspects\\_x.htm?csp=34](http://www.usatoday.com/travel/news/2006-08-10-ohio-terror-suspects_x.htm?csp=34)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.wzzm13.com/news/news\\_article.aspx?storyid=59411](http://www.wzzm13.com/news/news_article.aspx?storyid=59411)

terrorist organization, and there was no substantial threat to the bridge<sup>4</sup>. The three men claimed they were planning to re-sell the phones for profit.

**ANALYSIS:** These two cases provide additional evidence that a properly trained police force, attuned to and looking for precursor crimes and other signs of terrorist activities, is indispensable to preventing attacks. The disruption of recent terrorist plots here and abroad provides additional support for this proposition. These widely reported cases have led authorities to take a closer look at odd behavior that traditionally has not warranted heightened suspicion. In both of the cases presented in this report, for example, police noted evidence of bulk cell phone purchases during routine traffic stops and asked the next question.



Northern Michigan's Mackinac Bridge

All police officers should recognize that disposable cell phones are desirable to criminals and terrorists because they offer a degree of anonymity. Furthermore, cell phones are commonly used as initiating devices in improvised explosives. In these cases, the individuals could be selling the phones in order to traffic money into Islamist terrorist organizations. Hezbollah agents, for example, have been caught throughout the United States, running such illegal schemes in order to make profits to support international terrorism. Stratfor reports that disposable phones, which cost about \$20 in the United States, can be sold for up to three times that price in China or Pakistan<sup>5</sup>. Drug traffickers have also been known to use these phones, due to their anonymity: the phones can be registered to a false name and then thrown away after their minutes have been used up.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.breitbart.com/news/2006/08/14/D8JGC2I00.html>

<sup>5</sup> See Stratfor's report on this issue on the CPT website, [www.cpt-mi.org](http://www.cpt-mi.org), in the Precursor Crimes tab