

News

A Vermont man is on trial for shooting 3 Palestinian students. He claimed the CIA told him to do it

VERMONT (AP) Ason Eaton insisted he was acting on orders from the CIA and Mossad when he shot three Palestinian college students who were walking past his home a few days after Thanksgiving. He said the U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies transmitted the messages to him via FM radio and that God was commanding him to protect his Jewish neighbors.

Eaton's claims were at the heart of his insanity defense as he went on trial Monday on attempted murder charges in a case that shook Burlington, Vermont, and reverberated in the West Bank, where the three wounded men grew up and became friends as schoolmates in Ramallah before moving to the U.S. for college.

The November 2023 shooting, weeks after the start of the Israel-Hamas war, spawned calls for a hate crime investigation. But no hate crime charges were filed as questions persisted about whether anti-Palestinian animus, an altered mental state or something else had compelled Eaton to open fire on Hisham Awartani, Tahseen Aliahmad and Kinnan Abdalhamid, who were all 20 at the time.

The men testified one after another as Eaton, now 51, watched stoically from the defense table in a Burlington courtroom. He has pleaded not guilty but doesn't dispute that he was the shooter. If convicted, he faces up to life in prison. If found not guilty by reason of insanity, he could be ordered to undergo mental health treatment.

Defense lawyer Joshua O'Hara, previewing testimony from a defense psychiatrist, told jurors in an opening statement that Eaton was suffering from a delusional, psychotic disorder after losing his job at a credit union two weeks before the shooting.

While listening to a local NPR affiliate, Eaton

believed he was hearing messages that he attributed to the CIA, O'Hara said. At first, the messages were encouraging and validating, the lawyer said, but subsequent messages turned dark, insisting that Eaton "has to go out and shoot somebody."

Prosecutor Sally Adams told jurors that a state psychiatrist who is slated to testify concluded that Eaton did not have a mental disease or defect. Evidence will show he intended to kill the men, was not legally justified in shooting them, and does not meet the test of legal insanity, Adams said.

Authorities found three shotguns in Eaton's apartment and a Ruger .380-caliber handgun that crime lab testing concluded was the gun used in the shooting, Adams said. Eaton had purchased the gun seven months earlier from a Vermont gun store.

"If the defense tries to focus on the story that Mr. Eaton tells about why he intended to kill these three young men, that story is only part of the whole picture," said Adams, the chief administrative deputy at the Chittenden County State's Attorney's Office.

Awartani, Aliahmad and Abdalhamid, all of whom are now 23, told jurors of their holiday weekend visit to Awartani's grandmother's house, a trip to a bowling alley to celebrate his twin cousins' birthday, and the walk they took near the University of Vermont campus after dusk that ended in bloodshed.

Awartani, who was studying at Brown University in Rhode Island at the time, said they were smoking cigarettes and speaking a mix of English and Arabic. Two of them said they were wearing traditional Palestinian scarves known as keffiyehs. Awartani said he first noticed Eaton standing



on a porch as they approached the apartment house where he lived.

Within seconds, Awartani said, Eaton was off the porch and walking toward them. His face was expressionless and he didn't say anything. As Eaton got to about five to 10 feet (1.5 to 3 meters) away, "he pulled out a handgun and started shooting at us," said Awartani, who was paralyzed from the waist down in the shooting and now uses a wheelchair.

Jacob Pyne, who lived in a different apartment in the same house as Eaton,

testified that he heard four to six gunshots, followed by footsteps going up the stairs of the apartment house. He said he ran outside and heard two men speaking, one of whom was more vocal and yelling, "I've been shot, help me." He then brought the men blankets and called 911.

Abdalhamid, a student at Haverford College near Philadelphia, said he fled and hid behind another home after seeing Aliahmad fall to the ground. He said he only realized later

when he sat down that he had also been wounded. Awartani was shot in the chest and the bullet ricocheted off his scapula, causing paraplegia in his spinal cord. Aliahmad, who was a student at Trinity College in Connecticut, was struck in the collarbone, and Abdalhamid was shot in the right buttock.

O'Hara, the supervising attorney at the Chittenden County Public Defender Office, told jurors that Eaton was confused by the messages he said he was receiving, and became

convinced that the CIA and Mossad were enlisting him into "overwatch duty" to protect a Jewish family living across the street.

"These were delusions," O'Hara said. "He believed in the moment that he was doing something that was right. He had been commanded to do this. And that he did not have the ability to appreciate the wrongfulness of his conduct in the moment because he believed he'd been instructed to do this by a government agency or God."

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