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PRESS RELEASE

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Multiple Defendants in Synthetic Marijuana, Bath Salts Distribution Ring Sentenced

Jackson, TN – Fourteen members of a drug ring responsible for manufacturing and distributing hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic cathinones have been collectively sentenced to more than 290 months in federal prison. Edward L. Stanton III, U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Tennessee, announced the sentencings today.

The defendants and their respective sentences include:

- Saed Abdeljawwad: 24 months, 2 years supervised release
- Mohammed Sadek: 12 months, 2 years supervised release
- Ali Safa: 6 months, 6 months home detention, 2 years supervised release
- Mohammed Khalil: 60 months, 3 years supervised release
- Ehab "Mark" Rezk: 30 months, 3 years supervised release
- Hussein Salloukh: 48 months, 3 years supervised release
- Nazem Salloukh: 36 months, 3 years supervised release
- Ahmed "Eddie" Elsebae: 48 months, 3 years supervised release
- Akram Nagi: 6 months, 2 years supervised release
- Paula Neil Kirk: 2 years probation, 6 months home detention
- Irene Rosas-Montalvo: Time served, 12 months supervised release
- Deok Hee "Simon" Han: 27 months, 3 years supervised release
- Hani Tarhini: 2 years probation, 6 months home detention
- See Wan "Steven" Kang: 2 years probation, 6 months home detention
- Hassan "Sam" Safa: Fugitive
- Mahmoud "Steve" Safa: Fugitive

According to information presented in court, between 2011 and 2013, all of the defendants conspired to distribute large quantities of Schedule I and Analogue synthetic cannabinoids (marijuana simulates, aka “spice” or “K2”) and synthetic cathinones (cocaine/methamphetamine simulates, aka “bath salts”) throughout West Tennessee and other areas of the country.

Synthetic marijuana is made by mixing a raw Schedule 1 drug and analogue powder chemicals with surfactants, acetone, and glue, and spraying damiana, a dried vegetable matter, for a product which can be smoked. To manufacture bath salts, Schedule 1 drugs and Analogues are mixed and cut with adulterants, and packaged for snorting or ingesting.

Defendants involved with the drug ring either manufactured, distributed, or obtained units of drugs and/or wired currency and deposited proceeds into bank accounts to further the conspiracy. Some of the defendants worked as owners, managers, and retail clerks at Jackson area gas stations and convenience stores.

In February 2011, multiple packages containing synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones were intercepted by officers with the Jackson Metro Narcotics Unit. Testing revealed the substances were both Schedule I and Analogues of Schedule I substances. Subsequently, law enforcement discovered the same types of drugs were being sold at area gas stations and convenience stores. In November 2011, officers served a series of search warrants on local gas stations and convenience stores, many of which were owned by the defendants. Synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones were seized, as well as tens of thousands of dollars in currency. Amongst the substances being sold at the establishments were AM2201; JWH-018; JWH-081; Methylone; MDPV; UR-144; XLR11; 5-MeO-DALT; and 5-Fluoro-PB22.

In February 2012, law enforcement seized more synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic cathinones at gas stations and convenience stores in another round of search warrants. Law enforcement’s investigation discovered hundreds of thousands of these drugs were being ordered and sold by Hassan Safa and Ahmad Elsebae. The synthetic drugs were being shipped throughout the Western District of Tennessee and other states.

In summer 2012, packages were intercepted from the United States Postal Service and FedEx, all containing Schedule I drugs and Analogues. It was determined that Hassan Safa obtained the raw chemicals from China. The chemicals were reportedly being cooked or manufactured at office buildings Hassan Safa owned in Jackson. He supplied various stores with the drugs to sell.

The investigation revealed that each defendant was involved in the conspiracy with Safa. In 2013 and 2014, all of the above defendants were indicted for their roles in the conspiracy to distribute synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic cathinones, among other charges.

Over \$1.4 million in assets have been forfeited as a result of the investigation, including residences, local convenience stores, a grocery store, and more than \$150,000 in bank

deposits. The forfeitures come from both Operation Desert Spice and a separate civil forfeiture case against assets owned by fugitive defendants Hassan Safa and Mahmoud Safa.

The investigation was conducted by the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation; Drug Enforcement Administration; Internal Revenue Service; Jackson-Metro Narcotics Unit; Jackson Police Department; Madison County Sheriff's Office; and the Tennessee Highway Patrol.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Matt Wilson and Chris Cotten prosecuted these cases on the government's behalf.

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