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U.S.

Michael Cohen Guilty Plea Reveals Link to Qatari Royal Family

Trump's former lawyer received a \$100,000 brokerage fee for a Florida real-estate deal in which he represented a company owned by Sheikh Abdul Aziz



Michael Cohen admitted Tuesday to failing to pay taxes on more than \$4 million in income. That included what prosecutors described as \$100,000 in 2014 from 'brokering the sale of a piece of property in a private aviation community in Ocala, Florida.'

PHOTO: MARK KAUZLARICH/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By *Mark Maremont and Rob Barry*

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A \$100,000 real-estate brokerage fee that was part of former Trump attorney Michael Cohen's guilty plea Tuesday came from representing a company owned by a member of the Qatar royal family, according to interviews and real-estate documents.

Mr. Cohen admitted to failing to pay taxes on more than \$4 million in income, among other felonies. That income included what prosecutors described as \$100,000 in 2014 from "brokering the sale of a piece of property in a private aviation community in Ocala, Florida."

The community is a fly-in development named Jumbolair, said Frank Merschman, who owns the development. Mr. Merschman said he bought some property in 2014 from a Qatari company, and Mr. Cohen represented the seller, Abdul Aziz Althani Holdings Inc.

That company is owned by a member of the Qatar royal family, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Jassim bin Hamad Al-Thani, 62 years old, according to the Panama Papers, documents from a Panamanian law firm obtained by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung, and shared with The Wall Street Journal.

Sheikh Abdul Aziz and his attorneys didn't respond to requests for comment. He was described in the Panama Papers as a major shareholder in two Qatari banks.

Lanny Davis, an attorney for Mr. Cohen, didn't respond to a request for comment.

The Journal reported in May that Mr. Cohen helped a major donor to President Trump's inauguration pitch a nuclear-power investment to the Qatari sovereign-wealth fund. The pitch

came in early April, shortly before federal authorities raided Mr. Cohen's office, apartment and hotel room.

Mr. Merschman said the Qatari company owned several properties adjacent to Jumbolair, and he initially bought one through a tax-foreclosure auction. He said he then received a call from Mr. Cohen, who said the owner, being in Qatar, hadn't realized taxes were overdue and wanted to repurchase the property.

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When Mr. Merschman declined that offer, he said, Mr. Cohen later offered to sell him two other properties owned by the Qatari

company. "I don't know how they knew each other, but [Mr. Cohen] knew all the people," Mr. Merschman said. "He had done work for Mr. Aziz."

In 2005, Abdul Aziz Althani Holdings paid Mr. Trump's company \$6.2 million for a fourth-floor condominium in Trump Park Avenue, New York property records show. Mr. Cohen owns a condo on the 10th floor of that building.

Mr. Merschman's company in May 2014 paid \$650,000 for the two additional properties, county real-estate records show. Mr. Merschman said he didn't pay Mr. Cohen's brokerage fee directly, but understands the fee was paid through a former owner of the property who was working for him at the time.

Mr. Merschman said the Federal Bureau of Investigation interviewed him a few months ago about the transaction, and "I cooperated with them 100%."

—Rory Jones contributed to this article.

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