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High-Tech Tale of Stalking in the 21st Century

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By Naush Boghossian, Staff Writer

GLENDALE – A Glendale businessman faces stalking charges that allege that he attached a cell phone with Global Positioning System technology to his ex-girlfriend's car so he could track her every move and show up unexpectedly wherever she was.

In what authorities said was the first stalking case of its kind in Los Angeles County, Ara Gabrielyan, 32, was charged Tuesday with stalking and threatening over a six-month period to kill his former girlfriend and himself.

Gabrielyan – who ran an Armenian CD and video specialty shop – is suspected of using GPS technology to pinpoint her location so he could arrange apparent chance encounters at the bookstore, at the airport, even at her brother's grave site.

“This is what I would consider stalking of the 21st century – the utilization of technology to track a victim,” said Lt. Jon Perkins of the Glendale Police Department.

After the unidentified 35-year-old woman broke off their nearly two-year relationship, Gabrielyan would follow her by car, show up at her doorstep and call her 30 to 100 times a day, she told police.

But it wasn't until he started to bump into her at odd places that she became suspicious. Gabrielyan would pop up when she was having coffee at Barnes & Noble, picking up a friend at Los Angeles International Airport and even visiting the cemetery. In all, police said, he bumped into her at dozens of locations.

“It was an obsession, an obsession to the point where 24 hours a day he had to know where she was, what she did, who she met and how she carried out her daily routine,” Glendale police Sgt. Tom Lorenz said.

“She, like other stalking victims, feels violated and extremely vulnerable – like they no longer have that sense of security in their own home.”

Gabrielyan's luck ran out, according to authorities, when his ex-girlfriend spotted him under her car – apparently trying to change the cellular-phone battery, which lasts about five days. He said he was trying to fix some wires, but she called police, who found the phone.

Gabrielyan was arrested Sunday and is being held on \$500,000 bail.

The technology, which in recent years has been used to keep track of children, the elderly and even pets, would give Gabrielyan real-time updates on her location every minute.

“The technology was designed with every good intention in the world, but it was utilized for bad in this case,” Detective Mike Stilton said.

The situation is such a rarity that the District Attorney's Office has assigned a prosecutor who specializes in complex stalking and threatening cases – including actress Catherine Zeta-Jones' recent stalking case.

The Police Department has 57 pages of documents outlining the woman's movements since Aug. 16 – which is when police believe Gabrielyan placed the device on her car – including where she was and how long she spent at a particular place.

Gabrielyan had purchased a Nextel phone device that has a motion switch on it that turns itself on when it moves. As long as the device is on, it transmits a signal every minute to the GPS satellite, which in turn sends the location information to a computer.

Gabrielyan, who paid for a service to send him the information, would then log on to a Web site to monitor her locations, police said. Police are investigating where Gabrielyan purchased the device and the tracking service.

He's scheduled to be arraigned Wednesday on one count of stalking and three counts of making criminal threats. If convicted, he could be sentenced to a maximum of six years in state prison.

Given the fact that the prosecutor is from a special team, Gabrielyan, who has been arrested once in a credit card fraud case but has not yet been tried, will be assigned a special public defender.

Capt. Al Michelena of the Los Angeles Police Department said stalking somebody using GPS technology is not something his department has encountered.

“I think that would be a rare instance where a stalking suspect would use that kind of technology, and now that this incident has happened it's certainly something to be aware of,” Michelena said.

GPS technology can be used for tracking purposes in California only by law enforcement agencies, and in cars if the owner chooses to sign up for a service such as OnStar.

Owners of cars equipped with the OnStar service, for example, are one button away from being located.

Erin McGee of the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association said GPS is wonderful technology to maintain safety and security.

“I guess it’s use of the technology gone wrong,” she said. The organization lobbies on behalf of the wireless industry.

Technologically sophisticated methods of stalking are on the rise, said Tracy Bahm, director of the Stalking Resource Center at the National Center for Victims of Crime, and they expect these types of stalking cases to become commonplace in coming years.

“The concerns from our perspective is GPS is becoming more common, smaller and smaller, cheaper and cheaper, and all these things make it easier for a stalker to use it,” Bahm said. “We know of a handful of cases throughout the nation and that tells me there’s a lot more of it going on, but people who encounter it may not be reporting it.”

The group is also working to make sure each state’s laws cover stalking by GPS.

If Gabrielyan had not been charged with felony stalking and threatening, simply placing the GPS device under the car would have been considered a misdemeanor, Lorenz said.

“This is sort of old technology coupled with new applications and the law is trying to catch up to it,” said prosecutor Debra Archuleta, the head of the stalking and threat assessment team.

The public needs to be aware of the reach of this technology and how it can intrude on lives, law enforcement officials said.

“This particular case alerts the community and it alerts the public to the extremes some people could go to prey upon an innocent and unsuspecting victim,” Perkins said. “What started out as a device to help keep track of children has transitioned into a covert type of device that’s used for wrongful purposes.”

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http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/apus_story.asp?category=1110&slug=GPS%20Stalking

Calif. man accused of stalking via GPS

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GLENDALE, Calif. – Police arrested a man they said tracked his ex-girlfriend’s whereabouts by attaching a global positioning system to her car.

Ara Gabrielyan, 32, was arrested Aug. 29 on one count of stalking and three counts of making criminal threats. He was being held on \$500,000 bail and was to be arraigned Wednesday.

“This is what I would consider stalking of the 21st century,” police Lt. Jon Perkins said. Police said Gabrielyan tracked the 35-year-old woman, who was not identified, after she ended their relationship, showing up unexpectedly at a book store, an airport and dozens of other places where she was.

Police said Gabrielyan attached a cellular phone to the woman’s car on Aug. 16 with a motion switch that turned on when the car moved, transmitting a signal each minute to a satellite. Information was then sent to a Web site that allowed Gabrielyan to monitor the woman’s location.

The woman learned how Gabrielyan was following her when she discovered him under her car attempting to change the cell phone’s battery, police said.

Police allege Gabrielyan threatened over a six-month period to kill himself and the woman. An attorney for Gabrielyan could not immediately be reached for comment Saturday.

He faces up to six years in prison if convicted.