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Jury Convicts ISIS 'Beagle' for Role in Hostage-Taking Scheme that Resulted in the Deaths of American, British and Japanese Citizens

A federal jury convicted a militant fighter for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a foreign terrorist organization, on all eight charges that were brought against him in the United States relating to his participation in a brutal hostage-taking scheme that resulted in the deaths of four American citizens, as well as the deaths of British and Japanese nationals, in Syria.

According to evidence presented during trial through the testimony of 35 witnesses, from November 2012 through Feb. 7, 2015, former British citizen El Shafee Elsheikh, 33, served as a high-ranking ISIS fighter and was an integral member of a wide-ranging conspiracy involving the captivity of 26 hostages in Syria. Elsheikh personally participated in the detention of and hostage negotiations for four American citizens – James Wright Foley, Kayla Jean Mueller, Steven Joel Sotloff and Peter Edward Kassig – each of whom died as hostages in ISIS custody. In addition, Elsheikh personally participated in the detention of and hostage negotiations for British, French, Italian, Danish, German, Spanish, Swedish, Belgian, Swiss and New Zealand nationals.

According to evidence presented during trial, Elsheikh and two other ISIS members supervised the terrorist organization's jails and detention facilities at which the hostages were held. Elsheikh and his co-conspirators engaged in a prolonged pattern of physical and psychological violence against hostages that was meant as an effort to subdue the hostages. These actions were also intended to compel the victims' family members and their governments to pay large monetary ransoms for their release, in addition to compelling the U.S. government and other governments to agree to other terms and conditions for the victims' return.

According to evidence presented during trial, in addition to physically and psychologically abusing the hostages, Elsheikh and his co-conspirators participated in forcibly exposing the hostages to the murder of other hostages held by ISIS, including a Russian hostage who was killed in or about February 2014 and a Syrian prisoner who was executed in or about April 2014. After a group of European hostages were forced to witness the execution of the Syrian prisoner, Elsheikh and his co-conspirators returned the hostages to the prison where they were being held with American and British hostages.

From August 2014 through October 2014, ISIS released videos depicting the beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotloff and British citizens David Haines and Alan Henning. In November 2014, ISIS released a video depicting the decapitated head of Peter Kassig. In January 2015, ISIS released videos depicting the decapitated body of Japanese citizen Haruna Yukawa and the beheading of Japanese citizen Kenji Goto. On or about Feb. 7, 2015, Kayla Mueller's family received an email from ISIS confirming Mueller's death in Syria.

According to evidence presented during trial, Elsheikh was part of a group of ISIS members who spoke with British accents and were referred to by the hostages as the "Beatles." He and his convicted co-conspirator, Alexandra Amon Kotey, 38, were captured together in January 2018 by the Syrian Democratic Forces as they attempted to escape Syria for Turkey. Mohammed Emwazi, who conducted the above-referenced videotaped beheadings, was killed in November 2015 in a U.S. military airstrike in Syria.

On Sept. 2, 2021, Kotey pleaded guilty to all of the offenses charged by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia in the eight-count indictment, consisting of one count of conspiracy to commit hostage taking resulting in death; four counts of hostage taking resulting in the deaths of the four Americans (James Foley, Kayla Mueller, Steven Sotloff and Peter Kassig); one count of conspiracy to murder U.S. citizens outside of the United States; one count of conspiracy to provide material support or resources to terrorists resulting in the deaths of U.S., British and Japanese nationals; and one count of conspiracy to provide material support or resources to a designated foreign terrorist organization resulting in the deaths of U.S., British, and Japanese nationals. Kotey faces a mandatory sentence of life in prison and is scheduled to be sentenced on April 29.

Elsheikh faces a mandatory sentence of life in prison and is scheduled to be sentenced on Aug. 12.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia expresses its profound appreciation to the FBI, the Counter Terrorism Command of the United Kingdom's Metropolitan Police Service, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and our many foreign partners for their dedicated commitment to assist the United States in seeking justice for all the victims of these crimes.

First Assistant U.S. Attorney Raj Parekh, Assistant U.S. Attorneys Dennis M. Fitzpatrick, John T. Gibbs and Aidan Taft Grano-Mickelson, all of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia; and Trial Attorney Alicia H. Cook of the National Security Division's Counterterrorism Section are prosecuting the case.

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