



THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE  
EASTERN DISTRICT *of* VIRGINIA

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**Department of Justice**

U.S. Attorney's Office

Eastern District of Virginia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, August 19, 2022

## **ISIS 'Beagle' Sentenced to Life Imprisonment for Hostage-Taking Scheme that Resulted in the Deaths of American, British, and Japanese Citizens**

ALEXANDRIA, Va. – The highest-ranking fighter for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a foreign terrorist organization, to have ever faced a jury trial in the United States was sentenced today to life imprisonment for 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.

"I want to express my gratitude for the tireless work of the trial team, including all our partners, in bringing about today's sentence," said U.S. Attorney Jessica Aber. "Their efforts over many years of investigating and prosecuting the ISIS Beagles are emblematic of the best of the Department of Justice, and truly our country, has to offer in pursuing justice in the face of terrorism. I am also deeply appreciative of the efforts of the victims' families in this case. Without their commitment, this case never would have made it to our courthouse and we would not have the result we have today."

"Today, the men and women of the Department of Justice and our criminal justice system delivered justice," said Deputy Attorney General Lisa O. Monaco. "Today, we remember the four Americans for whom it was delivered: James Foley, Kayla Mueller, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig. My thoughts are with their families, whose strength and resolve inspired the men and women of the Justice Department as they investigated and prosecuted this case with skill and determination."

"ISIS committed horrific acts against hostages held in Syria and nothing can make up for their suffering and loss," said FBI Deputy Director Paul Abbate. "We will always remember the victims who perished and our thoughts today are especially with the Foley, Mueller, Sotloff, and Kassig families. Today's sentencing demonstrates that those who kill or injure our citizens cannot hide forever. The FBI and our partners throughout the U.S. government will work relentlessly to bring them to justice. I am grateful for the dedication of the men and women of the FBI, and that of our partners both in the United States and internationally, who stand with us."

"Today, El Shafee Elsheikh was sentenced to life in prison for his role in the heinous hostage-taking and appalling deaths of American, British, and Japanese citizens," said Steven M. D'Antuono, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI Washington Field Office. "This case has always been about the victims, and while this

sentence does not take away any pain felt by their families, we hope that it brings some justice. The families of James Foley, Kayla Mueller, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig have shown remarkable resilience and strength through the ordeal of their loved ones' abduction and murder and the ensuing years it took for this investigation and trial to conclude. The scope of this investigation was immense, and involved a myriad of individuals at the FBI, other U.S. agencies, and international partners working together to obtain this significant sentence. Today's sentence demonstrates the commitment of the FBI and our partners to continue to investigate crimes against Americans and pursue justice on behalf of the families of these victims, no matter how long it takes or where in the world it takes us."

According to court documents, from November 2012 through February 7, 2015, former British citizen El Shafee Elsheikh, 34, served as a leader in 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 court documents and 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 February 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 September 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 was sentenced to eight concurrent terms of life imprisonment on April 29, 2022.

On April 14, 2022, Elsheikh was convicted by a jury in the Eastern District of Virginia of all eight of the above-listed offenses. Earlier today, the Court sentenced Elsheikh to eight concurrent terms of life imprisonment.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia expresses its profound appreciation to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 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 United States 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 Justice Department's National Security Division prosecuted the case.

A copy of this press release is located on the website of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia. Related court documents and information are located on the website of the District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia or on PACER by searching for Case No. 1:20-cr-239.

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**Topic(s):**

Counterterrorism

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**Component(s):**

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