

ISIS Militant Pleads Guilty to Role in Deaths of Four Americans in Syria

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Beatles' Member Admits to Participating in Hostage-Taking Scheme that Resulted in the Deaths of American, British, and Japanese Citizens

ALEXANDRIA, Va. – A militant fighter for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a foreign terrorist organization, pleaded guilty today to all 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 court records, from in or around November 2012 through on or about February 7, 2015, former British citizen Alexandra Amon Kotey, 37, served as an ISIS fighter and participated in the captivity of American and European hostages in Syria. Kotey specifically participated in the seizure, detention, 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, Kotey participated in hostage operations involving British, Italian, Danish, and German nationals, among others.

“This case has always been focused on the victims and their families,” said Raj Parekh, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia. “Their resilience, courage, and perseverance have ensured that terror will never have the last word. The justice, fairness, and humanity that this defendant received in the United States stand in stark contrast to the cruelty, inhumanity, and indiscriminate violence touted by the terrorist organization he espoused. Today, through the voices and lives of the victims, Justice spoke, and it is those words that will resonate through history.”

“This guilty plea ensures that Kotey will spend the rest of his life in prison for the horrific crimes he has committed,” said Acting Assistant Attorney General Mark J. Lesko for the Justice Department’s National Security Division. “Although there remains much work to be done in this case, we hope today’s events provide some measure of justice for Kotey’s victims and their families as they continue to grieve the loss of their loved ones. I want to thank all of the agents, analysts and prosecutors who worked tirelessly on this investigation and prosecution – their efforts are proof that the National Security Division and our partners will not rest in our commitment to hold accountable terrorists who target and attack U.S. citizens anywhere in the world.”

“Years ago, Alexandra Kotey’s actions played out on the world stage, and those brutal crimes against Americans James Foley, Steven Sotloff, Peter Kassig, and Kayla Mueller, as well as two British and two Japanese hostages are forever burned into the eyes of the American people,” said Steven M. D’Antuono, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI’s Washington Field Office. “This guilty plea will not lessen the suffering of those affected by his cruelty, but I hope it reminds the world of the FBI’s unwavering dedication to finding and prosecuting all individuals who inflict harm on U.S. citizens, no matter their location.”

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

In addition to physically and psychologically abusing the hostages, Kotey 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 on or about April 25, 2014. After a group of European hostages were forced to witness the execution of the Syrian prisoner, Kotey 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 fighters confirming Mueller’s death in Syria.

Kotey was part of a group of four ISIS members who spoke with British accents and were referred to by the hostages as the “Beatles.” Kotey and alleged co-conspirator El Shafee Elsheikh, 33, whose case remains pending in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern

District of Virginia, were captured together in January 2018 by the Syrian Democratic Forces as they attempted to escape Syria for Turkey. Mohamed Emwazi, who conducted the videotaped beheadings referenced above, was killed in November 2015 in a U.S. military airstrike in Syria.

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 Wright Foley, Kayla Jean Mueller, Steven Joel Sotloff, and Peter Edward 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 March 22, 2022 by Senior U.S. District Judge T. S. Ellis, III.

The plea agreement entered in the case ensures that the defendant will serve the rest of his life in prison. Per the agreement, after 15 years of the defendant's imprisonment in the United States, if the defendant has complied with all terms of the plea agreement and requests a transfer to the United Kingdom, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia has agreed to take all reasonable measures under the law to seek the transfer of Kotey to the United Kingdom. As part of the plea agreement, Kotey has agreed that, prior to any such transfer, he would plead guilty in a U.K. prosecution, accept responsibility for relevant violations of U.K. law, and face a sentence in the U.K. of life in prison without parole – a sentence which he has agreed would be a fair and proper punishment. If the actual sentence he serves in the U.K. is less than life for any reason, Kotey has agreed to serve the remainder of his U.S.-imposed life sentence in the U.K., if that is legally available, or to be transferred back to the United States to serve the remainder of his sentence. Pursuant to the plea agreement, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia and Kotey understand and agree that – even if all of the necessary preconditions are met – the acceptance of any such requested transfer would be subject to the sole discretion of the United Kingdom. As indicated in the plea agreement, should the U.K. government deny any such requested transfer, Kotey will serve his mandatory life sentence in the United States.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia expresses its profound appreciation to our many foreign partners for their dedicated commitment to assist the United States in seeking justice for all the victims of these crimes.

This case is being investigated by the FBI's Washington Field Office. Assistant U.S. Attorney Dennis M. Fitzpatrick; Acting United States Attorney Raj Parekh; and Assistant U.S. Attorneys 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 are prosecuting the case. The Justice Department's Office of International Affairs provided valuable assistance.

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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