

Remarks by Assistant Attorney General for National Security John C. Demers on ISIS Militants Charged with Deaths of Americans in Syria

Washington, DC

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Wednesday, October 7, 2020

Good morning. I'm joined today by FBI Director Chris Wray, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia Zach Terwilliger, and the Acting Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI Washington Field Office, James Dawson. We are here to announce the indictment of Alexandra Amon Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh. Kotey and Elsheikh were members of the notoriously brutal ISIS hostage-taking cell that became known as "the Beatles" — a name their captives gave to them because of their British accents. The defendants are charged with terrorism offenses relating to the hostage-taking and killing of four Americans, as well as nationals of the United Kingdom and Japan. For approximately a year, Kotey and Elsheikh were held in Iraq by the U.S. military under the law of armed conflict. I am pleased to confirm that they are now in FBI custody and will soon land in the United States and appear in federal court in the Eastern District of Virginia.

Today is a good day, but it is also a solemn one. Today, we remember four innocent Americans whose lives were taken by ISIS:

James Wright Foley,

Steven Joel Sotloff,

Peter Edward Kassig, and

Kayla Jean Mueller.

Many around the world are familiar with the barbaric circumstances of their tragic deaths. But we will not remember these Americans for their deaths. We will remember them for the good and decent lives they lived.

James Foley was a print and video journalist who was covering the civil war in Syria. He had previously served as a conflict zone correspondent in Iraq and then in Libya. James was a former elementary school teacher.

Steven Sotloff was a journalist who covered the Middle East and was in Syria reporting on the refugee crisis. According to a longtime friend, he was drawn to the region to "give a voice to the people who didn't have one." Steven was the grandson of Holocaust

survivors, who inspired him to be that voice.

Peter Kassig was in Syria working for a humanitarian organization that he founded to deliver food and medical aid to refugees. He had previously served as an elite airborne Ranger in the U.S. Army, which included service in Iraq.

Kayla Mueller was a humanitarian aid worker and human rights activist who, inspired by her faith, devoted much of her young life to serving those in need both at home and around the world. As President Trump shared during his 2020 State of the Union Address, the American warriors who conducted the military operation that resulted in the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi were so inspired by Kayla that they named the mission “Task Force 8-14,” a reference to August 14th — Kayla’s birthday.

Today’s announcement is the result of many years of hard work in pursuit of justice for these Americans. We have been inspired by their memories and moved by the determination and grit of their families, families which will never rest until justice is done. To them, I say this: neither will we. Although we cannot bring back your children, we will do all that we can do: obtain justice for them, for you, and for all Americans.

As for Kotey and Elsheikh — like many other terrorists before them — they have underestimated American resolve to obtain justice for our fellow citizens who are harmed or killed by terrorists anywhere in the world. These men will now be brought before a United States court to face justice for the depraved acts alleged against them in the indictment. As for their ringleader, Mohamed Emwazi (infamously known as Jihadi John), he faced a different type of American resolve — the mighty reach of our military, which successfully targeted him in an airstrike several years ago.

My message to other terrorists is this — if you harm an American, you will face the same fate as these men. You will face American arms on the battlefield, and if you survive, you will face American justice in an American courtroom with the prospect of many years in an American prison. Either way, you will never live in peace — you will be pursued to the ends of the earth. No matter how long it may take, we will never forget, and we will never quit.

To the American people, today’s announcement is a reminder of the threat that we continue to face from radical Islamic terrorists. These terrorists despise the freedoms and way of life we cherish as Americans and are hell-bent on imposing their ideologies on a world that continues to reject them. Although our nation faces a variety of national security threats from many quarters, we will not relent in our efforts to protect America and her citizens from the threat posed by terrorists.

Today’s announcement would not have been possible without the relentless effort of countless dedicated prosecutors, agents, and analysts who are the bedrock of the Department of Justice. I want to thank the prosecutors from the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of Virginia and my own National Security Division and all of the many

FBI agents and analysts who have worked tirelessly on this case. I also want to thank the Office of International Affairs and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, both of which assisted with important aspects of this investigation.

The Attorney General wanted me to convey that the support of the United Kingdom's Home Secretaries Sajid Javid and Priti Patel was critical to moving this investigation and prosecution forward, and he extends his sincerest gratitude for their unwavering commitment to the pursuit of justice in this case. We also thank all of our other international partners who have come forward thus far with evidence, and I would encourage any others who may have evidence to do the same. We understand that the justice we seek in this case will extend to many people in numerous other countries around the world. We humbly and enthusiastically accept that responsibility.

We all have to do our part in confronting and defeating ISIS. Just last week, the department announced our significant successes in repatriating and prosecuting a number of U.S. citizens who went to Syria to join and support ISIS and were detained by the Syrian Democratic Forces. The United States has been a leader in taking responsibility for its citizens who left to join ISIS. And, as the case we are announcing today highlights, when we have the evidence to do so, we will also take responsibility for prosecuting those non-U.S. citizens who have injured or killed Americans anywhere in the world. In short, if you have American blood in your veins or American blood on your hands, you will face American justice. This department has successfully prosecuted hundreds of defendants for terrorism-related offenses in our federal courts — and we will continue to do so.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the Departments of Defense and State. We will continue to work together with them and our other partners in the U.S. government to combat the scourge of terrorism.

The step we take today is just that — a step. But it is a big one. I can assure you that the men and women of the Department of Justice will not stop until justice is finally won.

Thank you.