

News Sir David Amess

Killer faces whole-life sentence

Fiona Hamilton, Henry Zeffman
Neil Johnston, Duncan Gardham

The Islamist who stabbed the MP Sir David Amess to death and considered attacking others including Michael Gove faces a whole-life sentence after being convicted of murder and preparing terrorist acts.

Ali Harbi Ali, 26, who said he had no regrets or shame over the “cold and calculating” killing, refused to stand at the Old Bailey on “religious grounds” when he was found guilty yesterday.

It took jurors 18 minutes to reach

their verdicts after the judge told them Ali had no legal defence against the murder charge.

The British-born terrorist, once a model student who was radicalised online, stabbed Amess more than 20 times at his Southend West constituency surgery in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, on October 15. He later casually described aiming for major blood vessels as he attacked the veteran Tory backbencher, 69, with a carving knife.

Ali tried to justify his actions in a WhatsApp message to family and

friends, saying he was taking “revenge for the blood of the Muslims” after Amess voted for airstrikes in Syria.

The killer had smiled and leant casually on one arm as he told jurors how he regretted not joining Isis in Syria and considered Mohammed Emwazi, the terror group’s British killer known as Jihadi John, “a brother”.

He said he considered Amess, a father of five, his “enemy” and “one of the list” of MPs who supported military action in Syria. The fanatic also claimed there was a “humanitarian element” to his plot to murder Gove,

saying it would prevent other deaths in the country.

During the trial, Ali revealed he had been referred to the government’s Prevent counterterrorism programme in 2014, but had persuaded authorities that he was not a threat.

After the verdicts, Boris Johnson and Sir Keir Starmer paid tribute to Amess’s dedication to public service. The prime minister said: “My thoughts remain with [his widow] Julia, the Amess family and all those who knew and loved him.” The Labour leader said: “Threats to our democracy will never prevail.”

Brendan Cox, widower of the murdered Labour MP Jo Cox, said: “The terrorist will rot in jail and die in ignominy. David’s name will be remembered, especially by the people of Southend who he served.”

Nazir Afzal, a former senior prosecutor, said Ali deserved a whole-life tariff. “His criminal narcissism took away a good man from his loved ones,” he said.

Holly Lynch, the shadow security minister, told *The Times* that more action on MPs’ security was “critical”. Referring to a review of security measures ordered by Priti Patel, the home secretary, after Amess’s murder, the Halifax MP said: “Given what we now know about the killer having researched and visited other MPs... we are very keen to work with her on implementing any recommendations.”

Before murdering Amess, Ali reconnoitred the Houses of Parliament seven times but decided not to attack there because Metropolitan Police officers were “armed to the teeth”.

He carried a knife in his backpack whenever he went out from the summer of last year and did little else but



Would-be lifesaver was fixated by extremism

When a fellow radiotherapy student at City, University of London asked Ali Harbi Ali about his hobbies and favourite musicians, he replied that he was “prohibited” by his faith from listening to music (Fiona Hamilton and Neil Johnston write). With others he went further, attempting to convert them to Islam after a game of pool, and skipped classes to ensure he did not miss prayer.

It was five years before Ali would murder an MP in cold blood, having considered a dozen other politicians as targets, including cabinet ministers and Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour leader.

However, the throwaway remark in 2016 and casual attempts to influence the religions of others signalled his lengthy descent into extremism, which gathered pace during the pandemic.

Security officials believe that Ali, a British citizen from an upstanding Somali family, is an archetypal “lone wolf” radicalised by online extremist propaganda. Over several years he became fixated on the idea of an atrocity as he scrolled through hate-filled content.

A football-mad schoolboy and observant Muslim, he had initially wanted to save lives, enrolling for a degree in radiotherapy at City, and had quickly secured a placement at University College Hospital, the top pick among students.

A former course mate said: “Ali was a pleasant member of the intake. At university nothing would have hinted towards Ali’s actions. On placement in the radiography department at UCH, I worked briefly alongside Ali. One time in passing I asked what Ali enjoyed doing outside of work and what music he listened to. He told me that he wouldn’t listen to music as he was prohibited to do so by his faith.”

Another former friend who regularly invited Ali to his halls for



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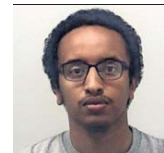
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Ali Harbi Ali, 26, refused to stand as jurors convicted him of murder

fantasise and plan an atrocity. He studied Gove’s home in west London in October, probably armed with a knife, and had laid out plans on his phone to “bump into [Gove] jogging” or “cause a scene outside to lure him”.

Gove, the Cabinet minister for levelling up, was apparently already of interest for some online Islamists because of his 2006 book *Celsius 7/7*, in which, according to Amazon, he “explores the roots of Islamist rage”.

Ali visited the constituency office of Mike Freer, the Finchley & Golders Green MP, four weeks before killing Amess. He spent an hour and ten minutes near a surgery held by the MP and was seen “staring” inside by a member of staff. He also researched political figures including Ben Wallace, the defence secretary, Dominic Raab, the deputy prime minister, and Starmer.

The killer told detectives he had “gone out in my head with the plan to do something” but had “bottled it” on multiple occasions. He switched his focus to Amess after reading about his constituency meeting on Twitter.

He had wanted to die a martyr and expected to be shot dead by police. PC Ryan Curtis and PC Scott James, the two plainclothes officers who confronted Ali with police batons and spray and pinned him to the floor, have been awarded the Merit Star, Essex police’s highest accolade.

Last night Curtis said: “We only wish we could have done more. We are not heroes, we did what any other officer would have that day.”

Ali, from Kentish Town, north London, will be sentenced tomorrow.

for murdering veteran Tory MP

METROPOLITAN POLICE/PA; ALAMY



Harbi Ali, pictured on his way from Leigh-on-Sea railway station to murder the MP Sir David Amess

terrorist attack. Unemployed and isolated during the pandemic, he spent long periods immersed in dark layers of the internet, and as lockdown eased he finally put his plan into action.

Ali said he stabbed Amess with a £20 knife he had bought at Argos five years earlier, as revenge for the MP's vote in favour of airstrikes on Syria. His interviews with detectives were littered with Islamist tropes about "kafirs" (non-believers) and an admiration for Islamic State. An examination of his phone history showed that from late 2016 he had regularly downloaded extremist material, largely related to Islamic State.

He had no criminal record or caution, but there was a brush with Prevent, the government's counterextremism programme. Giving evidence at the Old Bailey, Ali said he had wanted to travel to Syria in 2014, when he was 18. He said he was referred to Prevent by someone at his school that year because of fears he might do so.

Ali said police officers had asked him about his use of social media and his feelings towards the British government. They arranged for him to meet a Home Office official.

"We were walking around the Whitgift centre [in Croydon, south London]. He was wearing sunglasses indoors, saying, 'This is halal' [permitted in Islam]. I just knew to nod my head and say 'yes', and they would leave me alone afterwards and they did," Ali said.

"There were supposed to be two meetings but they were happy enough with the first one and I didn't hear anything."

Ali added: "Ever since I had a visit from the police in 2014, winter time, I kept shut and never spoke about that again or even politics stuff."

In the years after the meeting, Ali said he had tried to find a way to travel to Syria and other Isis-held territory "to fight, to help in any capacity I could".

He said he "deeply" regretted not joining Isis in Syria but had been persuaded against going to Turkey by his family.

One counterterrorism source said: "This is exactly the kind of terrorist we've been warning about, and have been worried about. There's no social media, no network. They don't tell anyone. They just download material, become more fixated, and plan."

In Ali's case, it was a slow burn. In interviews with counterterrorism detectives he calmly described how he had considered an attack for years and was waiting for the right moment, while blaming his own "procrastination".

Since last summer he had carried a knife in his backpack whenever he went out. He did little else but fantasise and plan an atrocity. The attack on Amess was arbitrary — Ali just wanted to kill. He told detectives that MPs were an "easy, accessible and numerous" target.

Ali's father, Harbi Ali Kullane, is a former communications adviser to the prime minister of Somalia, whose Twitter profile shows his support for Captain Sir Tom Moore and the England football team.

Ali grew up in Elephant and Castle, south London, where he lived with his mother and sister in a

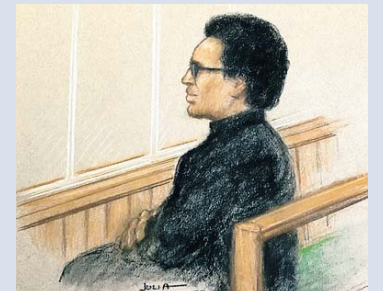
council flat while his father was working in Tanzania.

They moved to Croydon after his younger sister was born and in his evidence Ali said his family was "full of love and care" and he had no bad memories.

For his nursery, infant and junior education, between the ages of three and 11, he went to a Christian school, attached to the local parish church. He was a keen chess player, took part in the school's traditional Christian traditions and for years "excelled academically".

At Riddlesdown Collegiate, a school rated outstanding in Purley, Surrey, whose alumni include the supermodel Kate Moss, Ali was described as a football-mad schoolboy and observant Muslim. He did two weeks of work experience on a geriatric ward at Croydon University Hospital, which he said was "something I could imagine doing for the rest of my life".

He later had an offer to study medicine at St George's Hospital in south London but he flunked his A-levels and had to repeat a year to retake biology, leaving school in 2015 at the age of 19. During the time when his academic performance went downhill, Ali had become distracted by the conflict in Syria and had decided he wanted to



An artist's impression of the killer in court to hear the verdict yesterday

travel to the country to help with aid "or fighting if it was necessary".

He dropped out of City in 2016 because he was failing in what he saw as his obligation, to "go and do something as a Muslim". Within a few months, he went from training to save lives to planning for murder.

In September 2016 he told a lecturer how he planned to pursue a different direction in life. "This is something I am very sure about," he said. Ali had spent the summer on encrypted forums on the Telegram app, and in June that year had installed an app from MuslimCentral.com on his iPhone to hear a radical cleric called Ahmad Musa Jibril, a US-based extremist preacher who spoke extensively about Syria, and a channel that called for jihad.

Three weeks before he dropped out of his course, he watched a video of a man wearing glasses, a black turban and holding an assault rifle, giving a sermon to a circle of masked men in a field, which ended with them chanting: "Islamic State!". He also downloaded an image of the executioner Mohammed Emwazi, nicknamed "Jihadi John", masked and pointing a knife, with the words: "I am back, kafir!"

As Ali became radicalised, his family believed he was attending university, but instead he spent the next five years in his bedroom consuming Isis propaganda and, as he put it, "steeling" himself to launch an attack.

Analysis

The murder of Sir David Amess is the kind of crime police and security services particularly fear — a "cleanskin" terrorist with no criminal record who becomes obsessed and fixates on a target (Fiona Hamilton writes).

Counterterrorism officials raised the threat of such an attack throughout the

pandemic, warning that vulnerable young people who had spent months alone were finding acceptance on hate-filled online forums.

Ali Harbi Ali appears to fit the bill. His descent into extremism accelerated as he downloaded Islamic State material online. Within a short period he appears to have become fixated on conducting a terrorist

attack, although he mulled over its execution for up to five years.

While terrorism arrests are decreasing, Whitehall sources said that did not mean the threat had abated. There were increased numbers of plots in which only one person was arrested, rather than so-called "spectaculars" involving several suspects. Particularly chilling

about this case was the length of time it took to carry out and the number of potential targets that Ali had considered.

Unlike many would-be jihadists, he did not boast online, so there was nothing to detect.

The case highlights the complex problems MI5 and police face to capture the lone wolves of the terrorism world.

a game of pool said he was friendly and sociable but had suddenly dropped out saying he had got a job at a bank.

"He used to come to my halls for lunch to play pool. He seemed normal but was very religious; he would pray on the dot every time it was due even if we were in class at the time."

The friend said Ali was an Arsenal fan but they rarely heard from him outside university. He did not speak about life at home but had urged friends to convert to Islam. "He mentioned a few times about considering converting but as soon as I said 'no' he dropped it. [It was] only a handful of times, but he always dropped it when I said 'no' ...

[He] said I'd find inner peace, or something like that."

Ali started to be absent for lengthy periods citing "illness, Eid and family problems". Later that year he dropped out of university telling supervisors he wanted to "pursue a different direction in life".

He later told detectives that he had already started thinking about a