

US jury convicts Isis Beatle of killing western hostages in Syria

David Charter Alexandria, Virginia

A self-confessed Islamic State member from London was found guilty in a US court yesterday of all eight charges over the deaths of four American hostages in Syria.

El Shafee Elsheikh, 33, who was born in Sudan, was emotionless as he faced the jury while a court officer read out its unanimous verdict that he was part of a hostage-taking gang who beheaded three Americans, two British aid workers and two Japanese men in 2014-15. Elsheikh's defence was that he was "a simple Isis fighter", not in the gang.

Sitting yards away, the parents of some of his victims wiped away tears as

the verdicts were delivered after a 12-day trial. Bethany Haines, daughter of David Haines, one of the British men killed, appeared overcome with emotion.

The prosecution argued that Elsheikh was one of a trio of Isis jailers who became known as the Beatles, a nickname given to them by their hostages because of their British accents.

Most of the deaths were filmed for Isis propaganda videos and showed the gang leader, who became known as Jihadi John and was later identified as Mohammed Emwazi, a Briton from Kuwait. He was killed aged 27 in a US airstrike in Syria in 2015.

Elsheikh was captured by the Syrian

El Shafee Elsheikh tortured the westerners in 2014-15

Democratic Forces in 2018 with another gang member, Alexandra Kotey, 38, also from London. At first they pretended to be from Yemen and to speak no English but when US investigators matched Elsheikh's fingerprints he confessed his identity and some of his Isis activities. Both were stripped of their British citizenship in 2018.

Elsheikh will be sentenced on August 12. Kotey admitted the same



charges and will be sentenced on April 29. Neither will be executed in line with a UK agreement to transfer evidence to the US.

The trial at the district court in Alexandria, Virginia, was told that the Beatles tortured captives and forced them to fight each other. They kept their faces covered but prosecutors built up a case that Elsheikh was one of them.

The American journalists James Foley, 40, and Steven Sotloff, 31, and the aid worker Peter Kassig, 26, and the British aid workers Haines, 44, and Alan

Henning, 47, were decapitated, as were the Japanese citizens Kenji Goto, 47, a journalist, and Haruna Yukawa, 42. Kayla Mueller, an American human rights worker kept as a sex slave for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Isis leader, was killed in 2015, aged 26. Baghdadi, 48, was killed by the US in 2019.

Bethany Haines told ITV News: "At first I wanted him [Elsheikh] hung from a tree ... but that would be revenge and just sheer anger. I think the most suffering for him — he's so obsessed with his image — is having everyone know that he's guilty and he has to sit for 23 and a half hours a day in a horrible cell and think about what he's done for the rest of his life. So that is real justice."

Musk: Civilisation is safe if I own Twitter

SUZANNE CORDEIRO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Jack Malvern, Callum Jones

Billionaires used to buy a newspaper or television station to boost their influence on the world stage. Now they have moved on to something more ambitious: a social media takeover.

Elon Musk, the richest person in the world, appears to have set his sights on transforming the medium with an attempt to buy Twitter for \$43 billion — a substantial part of his estimated \$265 billion fortune.

Last night Musk said he wanted to make sure that the Silicon Valley tech giant allowed for freedom of expression as he believed it was "important to the future of civilisation".

Musk told the TED2022 Conference in Vancouver: "This is not about the economics. The civilisational risk is decreased the more we can increase the trust of Twitter as a public platform."

Musk became the world's richest person after setting out a vision to prevent human extinction by colonising Mars through his company SpaceX. He also hopes to reduce emissions on Earth by revolutionising transport through his electric car company Tesla.

In recent years Musk has grown frustrated by a perceived lack of free speech on Twitter, which he views as the modern-day town square.

The tech titan's recent tweets set out his motives in trying to take over the company. Musk has been polling his 81.7 million followers, asking whether they believe Twitter "rigorously" allows for freedom of expression. More than 70 per cent of the two million respondents disagreed.

The platform has previously angered followers of Donald Trump, and others who have had their accounts suspended for violating rules about violence, hate or harmful misinformation.

Musk has a history of his tweets causing legal problems. In 2019 he was unsuccessfully sued for defamation after insulting a British caver who helped to rescue Thai schoolboys trapped in a cave by calling him "pedo guy" in a tweet. In a recent post Musk challenged President Putin to a duel.

Last weekend Musk asked whether Twitter was "dying" because many of its most-followed accounts, including those belonging to Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift, were not tweeting frequently.

He has also proposed a reform of Twitter's premium subscription service. Musk suggested there should be no ads on Twitter Blue because the "power of corporations to dictate policy is greatly enhanced if Twitter depends on advertising money to survive".

The SpaceX founder revealed that he had become Twitter's biggest shareholder on April 4 with a holding of more than 9 per cent before launching an



Elon Musk speaking last week to fans of his Tesla electric cars. He is unpredictable in his use of Twitter

Manifesto by message

Elon Musk has run polls on Twitter for his 81.7 million followers in recent weeks since announcing his stake in the company. Here are three of his burning questions:

1. Free speech is essential to a functioning democracy. Do you believe Twitter rigorously adheres to this principle?

Two million votes: 29.6 per cent agreed, 70.4 per cent disagreed.

2. Convert Twitter [San Francisco] HQ to homeless shelter since no one shows up anyway.

More than 920,000 votes: 91.1 per cent agreed, 8.9 per cent disagreed.

3. Delete the w in twitter?

More than 445,000 votes: 55.8 per cent for, 44.2 per cent against.

unsolicited takeover by offering fellow shareholders \$54.20 per share.

The digits "420" in the price are thought to be a reference to the 420 movement, a subculture of cannabis enthusiasts. Musk smoked a spliff on a podcast with Joe Rogan, a friend and fellow free-speech advocate who creates one of the world's biggest podcasts.

The musician Neil Young unsuccessfully sought to have Rogan's podcasts removed from the streaming platform Spotify after the show was accused of spreading misinformation about the coronavirus.

Details of Musk's takeover attempt emerged in a regulatory filing a matter of days after he rejected a seat on the company's board — an appointment that would have prohibited him from taking it into private ownership.

Musk said in a letter to Bret Taylor, the Twitter chairman: "I invested in Twitter

as I believe in its potential to be the platform for free speech around the globe, and I believe free speech is a societal imperative for a functioning democracy.

"However, since making my investment I now realise [that] the company will neither thrive nor serve this societal imperative in its current form. Twitter needs to be transformed as a private company." He added: "My offer is my best and final offer and if it is not accepted, I would need to reconsider my position as a shareholder."

In 2018 Musk said he believed in social media regulation to curb fake news. "Whenever there's something that affects the public good, then there does need to be some form of public oversight," he told CBS. "I think there should be regulations on social media ... We can't have like willy-nilly proliferation of fake news — that's crazy."

Last night Twitter shares closed

down 1.7 per cent, or \$0.77, at \$45.08, valuing the company at nearly \$34.4 billion.

Twitter, based in San Francisco, was set up in 2006 and makes most of its money through advertising. The group went public in November 2013.

Parag Agrawal, Twitter's chief executive, had warned staff of "distractions ahead" after Musk rejected his invitation to join the company's board.

Twitter confirmed that it had received an "unsolicited, non-binding proposal" from Musk to acquire the company. "The Twitter board of directors will carefully review the proposal to determine the course of action that it believes is in the best interest of the company and all Twitter stockholders," it said in a statement.

Musk an imperfect vehicle for freedom in the public square, Gerard Baker, page 31
Musk says bid may fail, Business, page 37