

Confronting ISIS and Rethinking the U.S. Government's "No Negotiations with Terrorists" Stance

When Diane and John Foley, the parents of American journalist James Foley--who was publicly executed by ISIS in Syria on August 19--accepted (posthumously) the 2014 Oxi Day Award for their son's extraordinary courage in the defense of freedom and democracy, James Foley's father had some tough words to say. Recalling his concern for his son and disappointment over how the United States refused to negotiate with ISIS to recover his son, Mr. Foley compared his meeting with European parents who had been reunited with their grown children--after their governments successfully negotiated their release. Stating quite simply he said--"I miss my son." Then he asked if perhaps it was time to rethink the U.S. government's stance of no-negotiations with terrorists.

While the politics and policies of non-negotiation with terrorists is firmly rooted in our policies, when one is faced with the grief of a stricken parent it perhaps begs a renewed discussion regarding what the actual costs and benefits of negotiating with terrorists are. Clearly on the benefit side is what Mr. Foley witnessed: hostages that--unlike his son--had survived their ordeal and been released to safety. Indeed, [European nations and organizations negotiated the liberation of more than a dozen of their citizens who had been held in the same cell as Mr. Foley, for ransoms averaging more than \\$2.5 million.](#) But the United States does not negotiate, nor pay ransoms for hostages--so Mr. Foley's son was beheaded.

On the cost side is the fact that paying ransoms does put money into the coffers of those who hate us. Alongside this is the belief that paying ransoms will also incentivize terrorists to carry out more hostage-takings. Kidnapping and hostage taking has long been a money-making venture for terrorist groups, and ISIS is hardly the first among them. There is evidence that terrorist hostage takings increase when they are seen as lucrative, but less evidence that refusing to pay for hostages dis-incentivizes groups from taking hostages if those hostages are providing other tangible benefits to the organization.

For instance, in the sixties and seventies the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) had a hey day of hostage taking via plane hijackings and raked in huge amounts of money as a result--but it was not the refusal to pay for the release of hostages that stopped them from continuing. It was an increase in airport security that put an end to that. Likewise, when the first Somali pirates began earning huge payments for the ransom of kidnapped shipping crews, a huge increase in pirating in the Gulf of Aden occurred. Refusing to pay for the release of such hostages is also not what stopped them. It was military intervention--that is naval counter-piracy operations to be precise.

In the case of ISIS it's not clear if they need the money they make from hostage takings. [They are the richest terrorist group ever, due to bank heists and the oil that they control.](#) We know that squeezing terrorist finances has proven to be a desirable strategy to

shutting terrorists down--or least squelching their abilities to mount major operations--but it is not clear if refusing to pay for hostages, especially in the case of the deep pocketed ISIS group achieves that end. Perhaps it just ends in the hostage's death?

In the case of ISIS, each time they threaten a beheading they dominate world news. And Western news agencies play right into their hands as they post, play and replay the pictures provided by ISIS that show submissive and humiliated hostages dressed in Gitmo orange, fearfully kneeling in front of their captors (see picture above). This propaganda gain of having media all around the world spread ISIS's message of domination is probably far more valuable to them than any ransom payment they may fail to collect.

Likewise, while the U.S. and other Western countries publically state that they do not negotiate for terrorists, the truth is many countries, including the United States do buy back their loved ones via prisoner exchanges and outright monetary payments--albeit coming via third parties. In recent years the United States has allowed, and even asked at times, for third party "broker" countries to work out the release of hostages. Theo Curtis, an American freelance writer who was held hostage for nearly two years by an affiliate of Al Qaeda in Syria, was for example, freed following extensive mediation by Qatar. Qatar, it turns out has successfully negotiated the release of numerous Western hostages in exchange for multimillion-dollar ransoms--paid by Qatar, not the United States.

The United States also brokered the release of Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl from the Taliban by releasing five Guantanamo detainees. The Taliban originally demanded \$1 million for Bergdahl along with the release of 21 Afghan prisoners and Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani scientist convicted in a U.S. court on charges of attempted murder of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. After Bergdahl's release, U.S. Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) announced that sources told him that the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) unsuccessfully tried to pay a ransom for Bergdahl, despite repeated denials that such a payment was made. Rep. Hunter said the "payment was made to an Afghan intermediary who 'disappeared' with the money and failed to facilitate Bergdahl's release in return."

So the question remains: is there a government policy that can both discourage terrorism and help secure the release of loved ones?

Many major news outlets insure their journalists with kidnap insurance. Perhaps a good answer is to have the American government attempt to stick to its no-negotiations stance while also supporting some type of non-governmental entity to insure and secure the monetary payments and negotiating acumen necessary to release American citizens held hostage by groups such as ISIS--given that withholding payment is unlikely to disincentivize their hostage taking operations. Negotiations and payments could then be made and fairly applied to all U.S. hostages held, and lives saved, until military or other interventions can shut the group down.

I know James Foley's father would have appreciated that. Perhaps we can do better for the other American hostages now held, and those that will continue to be taken, until our

governments finds a way to permanently shut ISIS down?

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