

THE WIDER WORLD

Hostage-Taking as Foreign Policy

By Diane Chido

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As pro-Palestinian protests continue on college campuses across the United States with more than 2,000 arrests so far, some pundits have talked about Americans' First Amendment right to freedom of expression. These debates will likely rage long after the fire of passion has receded from these protesters' hearts. The issue has implications for the presidential election, and thus the evolution of our relationships with global allies, and serves as the backdrop of today's topic.

Much of the pro-Palestinian rhetoric involves enacting a cease-fire in Gaza to stop the humanitarian crisis that has already claimed the lives of over 35,000 Palestinians (according to Hamas) since Israel began retaliating to a widespread attack by Hamas in October 2023. Hamas' attack, discussed [here](#) and [here](#), resulted in the killing of about 1,200, including 700 Israeli civilians, and taking hostage of hundreds of Israeli citizens. At the heart of the cease-fire discussion is concern over the fate of the remaining hostages held by Hamas.

The latest phased plan for a cease-fire negotiated by mediators from Egypt, Qatar, and the United States was agreed to by Hamas but rejected by Israel as having been watered-down from earlier rounds of negotiation. At the heart of this plan was the initial phase involving the exchange of hostages. Hamas was to release 33 hostages, both alive and dead. In exchange, 30 Palestinian women and children held in Israeli prisons would be released for each hostage, based on lists to be provided by Hamas.

In the first phase of the plan, a cease-fire would take place for 42 days while Israel continued rooting out militants in Gaza, with pauses in air fire for the hostage-prisoner swaps. At the same time, “sufficient” aid trucks would be permitted to enter Gaza to relieve the humanitarian crisis by providing water, fuel for power plants and generators, and medical supplies. By the sixth week, all remaining Israeli hostages would be returned, and the prisoners released. The two additional phases would focus on restoring stability to Gaza and a longer, three- to five-year reconstruction effort.^[i]

Regardless of this proposal or another still to be finalized, the primary concern for Israel is the return of all hostages and ensured security from future attacks. For the U.S.-based protesters, the central theme is the protection of Palestinian civilians and their future role in Palestine.

It is common for the issue of hostages to be an essential component of foreign policy. As far back as ancient Rome, dignitaries or their children were routinely held hostage by adversaries for ransom or political gain. This has been manifested in our own time with the holding of Americans by Russia, for instance, claiming they have broken domestic laws or were caught spying. The notoriety around WNBA star basketball player Brittney Griner’s nine-year sentence to prison in Russia for possession of a small amount of cannabis oil and her subsequent release in a prisoner exchange has brought the issue of hostage-taking to the fore for many Americans. The deal negotiated by the Biden administration prompted loud opposition from Biden critics because Griner was exchanged for a convicted Russian arms dealer.

During the recent White House Correspondents Dinner, the issue of Americans still held by Russia was a major theme.

President Joe Biden proclaimed May 9, 2024 “U.S. Hostage and Wrongful Detainee Day,” noting that since 2021, his administration has managed the release of “more than 60 Americans being held hostage or wrongfully detained around the world, including in Afghanistan, Burma, Gaza, Haiti, Iran, Russia, Rwanda, Venezuela, West Africa, and more.” The graphic shows the special flag to be flown over the White House to mark that day.^[ii]



Hostage and Wrongful Detainee flag^[iii]

Although journalists are not the only people taken hostage around the world, they are an easy target for states seeking to use them as leverage, as their investigative process can easily be perceived as spying by a closed society. In authoritarian states, they can also be detained at home for getting too close to the powerful. A future essay will look further into issues of press freedom and the global rise of disinformation, especially concerning the electoral process.

Another category of people in danger of being taken hostage are those who travel abroad for business or pleasure. The U.S. State Department has long published risk information for travel to every country but, as noted in President Biden's proclamation for May 9, that agency recently "launched a risk indicator that warns travelers if there is a high threat of wrongful detention at their destination." These provide country information and levels of travel risk. Countries listed as "Level 4: Do not travel" include Afghanistan, Belarus, Burma (Myanmar), Haiti, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Russia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen.^[vi] Keep these in mind when planning your next vacation!

In addition to governments, there are criminal groups that kidnap people for ransom to use as domestic or sex slaves, or for ransom. Americans and Europeans are most logical targets for kidnap-for-ransom schemes, as most in the rest of the world assume they are all rich. Often humanitarian aid workers are prey to this phenomenon. The U.S. has long had an official policy of not paying ransoms for hostages, of which the most current revision reads:

The U.S. Government will make no concessions to individuals or groups holding official or private U.S. citizens hostage. The United States will use every appropriate resource to gain the safe return of U.S. citizens who are held hostage. At the same time, it is U.S. Government policy to deny hostage takers the benefits of ransom, prisoner releases, policy changes, or other acts of concession.^[v]

This policy is intended to increase the safety of Americans traveling abroad by reducing their attractiveness as lucrative kidnapping targets. HostagesUS.org, an organization providing support to families of those taken hostage, says it is difficult to know how many Americans are kidnapped abroad but estimates 200 to 300 annually.^[vi] Often desperate families arrange payment of ransoms, despite government mandates and warnings. Companies and organizations seeking to avoid lawsuits and public scrutiny of their security protocols also often pay ransoms. These arrangements are generally discreet, and details are not available for public data reviews.

When a terrorist or other violent political group targets Americans for kidnapping, ransom is often not the goal, but a concession from the U.S., such as a prisoner exchange or a policy change. This is why the State Department mandate is so clear that this is not a likely outcome.

According to a 2018 Rand report looking at four decades of the no-concessions, the policy dates back to a 1973 hostage taking in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. In that case, members of the Black September terrorist group eventually killed the U.S. ambassador and his deputy because their demand for the release of Robert Kennedy's assassin Sirhan Sirhan was not granted.^[vii]

In the 1980s, the Iran arms-for-hostages scandal showed terrorist groups around the world that the U.S. does not necessarily stick to its own rules. Rand also pointed out that even if the demands made by violent political groups are not met, they get so much global attention, it enhances their reputation with potential recruits and investors, so it can be considered worth the trouble. The report makes the statement that, "The deterrent effect of the no-concessions policy, however, may be eroded by the fact that kidnappers are not aware of U.S. policy, do not believe it, or may not care because other objectives will still be served by holding Americans hostage."

Sometimes the definition of "terrorist" or "militant" group is unclear and even an obfuscating distinction. The Abu Sayyaf group operating in the Philippines from the 1990s called itself an al-Qaida affiliated Muslim independence movement, often targeting government and police buildings and officials, but it also kidnapped for ransom to obtain women as noted above, or to fund its operations. Because the Philippine government, with U.S. support, stopped

treating it as a terrorist group and began employing the police strategies and tactics that would be used to defeat a criminal group, Abu Syyaf was brought to its knees by 2008 and was exposed as a gang of brigands and thugs.^[viii]

The United Kingdom has had a no-concessions policy similar to that of the U.S. since 2000,^[ix] and in 2013 proposed all the G8 countries sign on to a no-concessions protocol that stated, “We are committed to protecting our nationals and reducing terrorist groups’ access to funding which allows them to thrive. We unequivocally reject the payment of ransoms to terrorists, and we call on countries and companies around the world to follow our lead and stamp out this as well as other lucrative sources of income for terrorists.”^[x] However, France and Germany have continued to pay ransoms, most notably to the Islamic State.

As the Rand report indicated, the deterrent effect is considered sacrosanct in U.S. policy circles, but in reality it is unclear whether the U.S. itself is making much of a difference when other groups are willing to pay.

The question of whether Hamas has gained or lost in its taking of hostages in October 2023 is an open one. Today, it seems as if the wholesale destruction of Gaza and loss of civilian life indicate it lost the gamble, but as the stabilization and reconstruction process gets underway in the region, it will be critical to determine whether that action has helped its recruiting efforts and how much prestige and power it will retain in Gaza and with its fellow violent extremist groups in the future.

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