
GETTING THE HOSTAGES OUT:
WHO TURNS THE KEY?

Brian Michael Jenkins

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The RAND Corporation, 1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90406-2138

PREFACE

This paper sums up what we know and what we don't know about the hostage issue, and examines U.S. policy options. An abbreviated version of this article appeared in the Los Angeles Times, April 27, 1990.

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Seven American hostages remain captive in Lebanon. They are held by at least two separate factions; three "organizations" claimed their abductions: Islamic Jihad, the Revolutionary Justice Organization, and Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine, but we know from former hostages that captives kidnapped by the Revolutionary Justice Organization have been held with captives kidnapped by Islamic Jihad.

Are they indeed separate organizations then? Some observers say they are one -- only the names change. According to one source, even the same mullah writes all of their communiques. Other analysts believe that separate interests are represented even if some hostages are held together. We do not know.

Who has the keys? The captors certainly. Iran, which finances the Shi'ite factions in Lebanon and exercises spiritual influence; almost no hostage has come out without Iran's approval. Syria, whose troops occupy much of Lebanon and through whose lines any hostage must pass. Do all three keys have to be turned at once? Does Iran have a master key?

U.S. policy is based upon the assumption that it does, but there is uncertainty and debate here. Some see a complex relationship in which Iran's influence is not absolute. Iran can request, Iran can bribe, and Iran can threaten, but Iran cannot order the captors to release their hostages. The on-off-on again pattern of Polhill's release is offered as evidence of the pushing and shoving that goes

on between the captors and their patrons in Tehran. But others see the captors as mere jailers, dependent on Iranian support and therefore unable to refuse an Iranian order. From that perspective, the Polhill drama was a charade stage-managed in Tehran to get credit for its role in the release, but at the same time, protracting the episode as a means of exerting continuing leverage over the Americans. More uncertainty!

We have no direct communications with the captors themselves. For reasons of policy, the government prefers not to deal with them directly (although it probably would not turn down an opportunity to communicate), and the captors have rejected private efforts to initiate a dialogue. Every "offer" by the captors to talk has, upon investigation, turned out to be a hoax or a scam.

The kidnappers' demands include the release of the 17 prisoners in Kuwait convicted of the bombing of the American and French embassies in that country. One of these prisoners is a brother-in-law of the leader of one of the factions holding American hostages. They have demanded the release of several hundred Shi'ites detained by Israel including Sheik Obeid, a Shi'ite leader abducted from Lebanon by Israeli commandos in 1989. Prisoners in Germany, Sweden, and Belgium have also been mentioned.

These demands have not been met, yet hostages have come out indicating that other solutions are possible. Some, in fact, believe that the captors now realize that their original demands, at least their demand for the release of the prisoners in Kuwait, will not be met, and that the kidnappers tired to holding hostages, only want a face-saving way out.

There may be some frustration and fatigue, but there is no evidence that the captors are eager to let the hostages go. Hardliners in Hizbollah have urged the captors to hold

their hostages forever. Indeed, they have powerful incentives to keep them. Holding hostages gives the captors prestige. It makes them important political actors in the Middle East. Nothing can be done without at least taking into account what the consequences will be for the hostages. Hostages provide the captors with protection against Israeli retaliation, Syrian military pressure, and any future American action. Hostages guarantee continued support from Iran, which likes to use its influence with the captors to get hostages out when it suits Iran's national interests. And finally, the hostages have paid off as an investment. We may not pay the price -- but someone does.

Most analysts believe that the Iranians have made up their mind to get the hostages out. The Iranian economy is in shambles. The government confronts open protest at home. Its strategic position is perilous. Iraq, still an enemy, brandishes chemical weapons and is believed to be developing a nuclear bomb. Events in the Soviet Union have eliminated any notion of playing a Moscow card.

To survive politically, Iran must rebuild its economy, which will require foreign investment and loans from the world's major financial institutions. That requires repairing relations with the West. And that requires getting the hostages out.

However, some in Tehran may see any lessening of hostility toward the Satans of the West as a betrayal of the Islamic revolution. There has been debate. Supposedly now there is consensus, evidenced by the positive statements coming out of Iran in recent weeks, which are not, at least openly, being challenged by others in Tehran. But how far can the so-called "moderates" go without risking their necks politically -- or physically? Must they get something in return from us to fend off their political criticism at home?

Administration officials will claim that U.S. policy on the hostage issue has not changed. In fact, it has changed in subtle but important ways. Our loud proclamations of no-ransom were rendered hypocritical by the revelation in 1986 that the United States had secretly sold arms to Iran in return for the release of American hostages in Lebanon. For the remainder of the Reagan administration, U.S. officials pledged no-deals with the zeal of reformed alcoholics. Throughout 1988, any rumor of talks was seized upon by a news media still suspicious that the administration might try to cut some kind of deal that could bring home hostages and boost Bush's chances for election. The administration, and candidate Bush in particular, had to avoid any hint of talks about hostages.

At his inauguration, President Bush signalled his desire to end the era of hostility that existed between Iran and the United States. He used elliptical language -- "goodwill begets goodwill" -- but his message was clear, and he has repeated it several times since.

Bush also took pains to explain that the United States had a no-concessions policy, but not a no-negotiations policy. He was willing to talk if there was someone to talk to, a willingness he underlined by allowing it to be leaked that he had even taken a call from a fake Rafsanjani.

Still enmeshed in their own political quarrels, the Iranians were not ready to respond to Bush's offer, at least not openly and directly. Persian diplomacy seems to prefer an indirect approach through diplomatic backchannels and unofficial routes. This allows the Iranians to reconnoiter the positions of their foes and choreograph steps at the official level before they are made, thus eliminating the risk of open rejection and failure that might humiliate and imperil those in charge. Iran's leaders deeply mistrust us, and due to internal divisions, they apparently cannot trust

all of their own officials either. Things take a long time to set up.

The administration will also claim that the release of Robert Polhill vindicates our policy. We have done no deals. We have made the hostage issue Iran's problem. Iran has begun the process. But the Polhill release also presages a long tortuous path filled with uncertainty and danger.

Americans have been held captive in Lebanon for seven years. Except for brief spasms of news coverage, like that surrounding Polhill's release, there is little public interest in the saga and virtually no public pressure on the President to negotiate their release. There are, however, political risks for the President to be seen making a deal with the captors or with the Iranians, who our intelligence services hold responsible for instigating the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 and other acts of terrorism. In blunt language that administration officials cannot use, getting the hostages out is Iran's problem; we can wait.

At the same time, the administration does not want to be seen as ignoring the possibility of another release or rejecting the opportunity to talk. And, according to his close advisors, the President personally wants the hostages out.

He therefore will be under pressure to define exactly what he meant by "goodwill." He will also have to decide whether, in order to keep things moving, he must offer some expression of it before the last hostage comes out. Purely symbolic gestures, although an important currency in the Middle East, may not suffice.

Expressing goodwill without making substantive concessions will require deft diplomacy. We will not link the release of hostages with the settlement of the financial claims currently being negotiated between American and Iranian officials in the Hague. That would smack of ransom.

But some have suggested that we could assign more officials to the task thus speeding the settlement process.

Humanitarian aid for Lebanon may be easily justified on its own merits, but it is not likely to move the hard men who want their comrades out of prison. Israel has helped the United States before. In the 1985 TWA hijacking, Israel agreed to release 700 Shi'ites it held and 39 American hostages were promptly released. Everyone denied a deal. In a similar "non-deal," Israel could decide on its own to release some of the Shi'ite prisoners it now holds. This would be especially attractive if in the process Israel were to obtain the release of Israeli soldiers now held captive in Lebanon. All this lies perilously close to the limits of what policy permits.

Those who expect or even discern the traces of labyrinthine diplomacy and veiled deals may be chasing mirages in the desert. The hard reality is we are unwilling and perhaps unable to bring them off. It is not in our interest to be too forthcoming. Our policy does not encourage creative thinking. Our priorities lie elsewhere. Our capabilities are limited.

There is a lot going on in the world right now. The government's top management, intelligence resources, and creative talent are preoccupied with events in Eastern Europe, our relations with a disintegrating Soviet Union, the intractable drug problem. Hostages simply are not the big issue.

Moreover, there are too many gaps in our knowledge to be clever. Has Iran made up its mind about the hostages? What do the captors really expect to obtain? We grope in the dark.

And it is politically dangerous. The last two presidents were wounded politically by their handling of hostage episodes: President Carter by his inability to rescue or negotiate the release of the Americans held in

Tehran, President Reagan by the revelations of Irangate. President Bush does not want to be the third victim.

When in doubt about what to do, the administration retreats behind its hard-line -- reactive, cautious, immovable --an uninspiring approach perhaps, but safe, and given the realities, just possibly correct.
