



# Why concessions should not be made to terrorist kidnappers



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamic implications of making concessions to terrorist kidnappers. We apply a Bayesian Poisson changepoint model to kidnapping incidents associated with three cohorts of countries that differ in their frequency of granting concessions. Depending on the cohort of countries during 2001–2013, terrorist negotiation successes encouraged 64% to 87% more kidnappings. Our findings also hold for 1978–2013, during which these negotiation successes encouraged 26% to 57% more kidnappings. Deterrent aspects of terrorist casualties are also quantified; the dominance of religious fundamentalist terrorists meant that such casualties generally did not curb kidnappings.

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“...we know that hostage takers looking for ransoms distinguish between those governments that pay ransoms and those that do not, and make a point of not taking hostages from those countries that do not pay.” David S. Cohen, US Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, 2012 speech to ChathamHouse

[Callimachi (2014a)]

## 1. Introduction

A three-minute video, released by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on September 14, 2014 entitled “Lend me your ears, messages from the British detainee John Cantlie,” accurately characterized the differences in the negotiation policies that set the United States and the United Kingdom apart from their European counterparts in recent years. In the video, Cantlie stated that “every other European country negotiated with Islamic State and got their people home while the British and Americans were left behind” (Cantlie, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Cantlie's claim is supported by *New York Times* reporter Rukimimi Callimachi (2014a, 2014b), who indicated that ransoms had been paid to ISIS for the release of Javier Espinosa (Spain); Edouard Elias, Didier François, Nicolas Hénin, and Pierre Torres (France); Jejoen Bontinck (Belgium); Federico Motka (Italy); and others (also see Mickolus, forthcoming). Ransoms had been paid by the hostages' home country, his family or employer, or by a third country.<sup>2</sup> In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> As of May 2016, the fate of John Cantlie was not known. He has made a number of propaganda videos for ISIS that criticized US and UK actions against ISIS.

<sup>2</sup> Generally, media accounts, upon which our data is based, do not identify who really paid the ransom; but any payment by private citizens was facilitated by government officials.

Callimachi (2014b) reported that ISIS received ransoms for 15 of 23 hostages held during 2013–2014; the exceptions were four Americans, three British, and one Russian held hostage. Three of the American hostages – James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig – were beheaded; two of the British hostages – David Haines and Alan Hennings – met the same fate. Kayla Mueller, the only female American hostage, was allegedly killed by a US drone strike on an ISIS-occupied facility. Sergey Gorbunov, a Russian hostage, was shot to death by his ISIS captors (Callimachi, 2014b). A similar scenario of beheadings of American (e.g., Nicholas Berg and Eugene Armstrong) and British hostages (e.g., John Bigley) and release of European hostages (e.g., Italian Guiliiana Sgrena) after ransom payment took place in 2004–2005 in association with kidnappings by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the then leader of al-Qaida in Iraq (Mickolus, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

The *New York Times* also reported that nearly \$130 million was paid in ransoms to al-Qaida and affiliates between 2008 and 2013, prior to the rise of ISIS. This total included \$94.5 million to al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), \$5.1 million to al-Shabaab, and \$29.9 million to al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Countries involved with the payment of these ransoms to terrorist kidnappers included Austria, Canada, France, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland (Callimachi, 2014a). Other countries alleged to have paid or facilitated the payment of ransoms to hostage-taking terrorists include Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Mickolus, 1993, 2008, 2014, forthcoming; Mickolus and Simmons, 2002, 2006). Despite news reports and corroborating evidence, countries deny paying ransoms and sometimes disguise the payment as a foreign aid contribution to the venue country where the hostage is held (Callimachi, 2014b). This denial is not surprising since major Western countries signed a G-8 agreement in 2013 not to pay ransoms or grant concessions to terrorists who kidnap. The *New York Times* quoted a high-ranking al-Qaida official as indicating that currently ransoms fund half of the organization's operating budget (Callimachi, 2014a). These ransoms allow terrorist organizations to circumvent enhanced post-9/11 efforts to freeze terrorist groups' assets (Enders and Sandler, 2012).

US–UK no-concession policy presents the families of hostages with a terrible reality. Unless their loved ones escape or are freed in a high-risk rescue mission by special forces, both of which are highly unlikely, the hostages will meet a terrible fate after a horrible incarceration, combined with mental and physical torture (Callimachi, 2014b, 2014c). Prior to 9/11, US families had been aided, at times, by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to pay ransoms to terrorists to bring their loved ones home (Callimachi, 2014c). An example is the ransom paid to Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) for the release of US journalist Thomas Hargrove on August 20, 1995; Hargrove had been kidnapped in Colombia on September 23, 1994 (Mickolus and Simmons, 1997). On June 24, 2015, the Obama administration announced that it would no longer prosecute families that paid ransoms to terrorists<sup>4</sup>; however, the administration reiterated that the US government would not pay ransoms or grant other concessions to terrorist kidnappers. Since most families do not have the large sums that ISIS and other current terrorist groups demand, this policy change should have little or no effect on our findings in the future. Moreover, our analysis includes data prior to this recently announced policy change.

Our primary purpose is to apply economic analysis to quantify the verity of the statement by David S. Cohen, given at the start of the paper. In particular, we want to ascertain how, if at all, the recent no-concession policy of the United States and the United Kingdom has changed the abductions of Americans and British people by concession-seeking terrorists. Is it true that these terrorists have increasingly abducted hostages from known concession-granting countries – i.e., Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland – which we call the “Concessionaires.” With the help of game theory and time-series analysis, we offer answers to these questions and indicate why countries are better off not conceding to ransom or other requests (e.g., a prisoner exchange) despite the terrible costs visited on captured citizens. If adherence to the no-concession policy really discourages kidnappings, then past sacrifices of a few US–UK hostages serve a country's interests by protecting a greater number of potential hostages. Thus, countries confront a dilemma where the lives of some unfortunate victims must be weighed against the future well-being of many if the policy is effective. This effectiveness is quantified in our ensuing analysis. Since the start of 2001, countries that granted concessions encouraged up to 87% additional abductions (above the median number of kidnappings) of their citizens. In contrast, the median rate of abduction of American and British citizens has remained essentially unchanged after 2001, given these countries' general adherence to their no-concession policy – i.e., there is no changepoint after 2001. The past actions of concession-granting countries not only placed more of their citizens in greater peril, but also put all targeted countries in harm's way by either funding or supporting (from prisoners release) the operations of terrorist groups. Generally, we find that terrorist casualties in kidnappings do not deter future EU and concession-granting countries' kidnappings during 2001–2013 or the reign of religious fundamentalist terrorists. There is, however, some evidence that terrorist casualties in kidnappings reduce median abductions for the US–UK.

After some necessary preliminaries in Section 2, we sketch a conceptual game-theoretic model of kidnapping in Section 3 that informs our empirical analysis on past kidnappings. This conceptual analysis indicates that terrorists abduct more hostages from countries that grant concessions to get their citizens home. Moreover, the conceptual model indicates that enhanced deterrent measures (i.e., greater protection for potential hostages or rescue missions) that result in terrorist casualties generally discourage kidnappings unless the terrorists are out for *martyrdom* or *publicity*. In Section 4, we describe our unique data set of transnational terrorist kidnappings for 1978–2013. Section 5 presents the time-series methodology along with the study's key covariates. A Bayesian Poisson changepoint model is applied to kidnapping time series from three cohorts of countries – the United States and the United Kingdom, the Concessionaires, and the EU (without the UK) – during 2001–2013. In Section 6, the results show

<sup>3</sup> Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in a US bombing of one of his safe houses on June 7, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/22/hostage-review-will-make-it-easier-for-families-to-pay-ransoms/>.

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