



## Harvard Model Congress Boston 2023

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# RECOVERING AMERICAN HOSTAGES ABROAD

*By Alexander Hughes*

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## INTRODUCTION

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***Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*** – also known as *ISIL* or *Daesh*; a terrorist group that once controlled a large territory in its namesake states and took many American hostages



*James Foley prior to his capture*  
*James Foley Legacy Foundation*

On August 12, 2014, members of the **Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)** sent a statement directed at the United States government and the family of journalist James Foley, taken hostage by ISIS in 2012. It described American involvement in the Middle East as cowardly and unjust and reaffirmed ISIS’s commitment to war. Foley, whose execution was broadcasted a week later, would be the next casualty:

“You were given many chances to negotiate the release of your people via cash transactions as other governments have accepted... however you proved very quickly to us that this is NOT what you are interested in...” (Wright, 2015).

Both terrorist groups and foreign powers take United States citizens hostage with some frequency. These hostage situations pose a unique challenge for United States policymakers—on one hand, granting these demands seems likely to empower the hostage-taker and incentivizes others to take hostages as well. On the other hand, if demands are not met, hostages are likely to die in captivity.

The precise number of Americans detained abroad is difficult to determine, but there are at least 59 publicly known cases (James Foley Legacy Foundation). With many American citizens remaining in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, that number could explode upwards soon. However, this is not an issue that has historically received much legislative attention. As such, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has an opportunity to guide United States hostage policy moving forward, exploring a variety of options designed to facilitate the return of United States residents detained abroad and prevent them from being taken hostage to begin with.

The following sections will provide additional information about the history of United States hostage policy, describe the problems currently faced by the diplomats tasked with the recovery of American hostages, and discuss a few proposed policy choices. As a Senator, you will be faced with two related challenges—deciding whether to prioritize recovering hostages or denying hostage-takers the fruits of their labor, and then determining which policies will most effectively accomplish your goals.

**Barbary Coast** – the 18<sup>th</sup> century name for Africa’s northern coast, whose governments were known for state-sanctioned piracy against Western powers

**Federal Air Marshal Service** – a subdivision of the Department of Homeland Security trained to defend planes against hijacking attempts

**No-concessions policy** – the rule that Americans may not give terrorist groups anything in exchange for the release of detainees

**Iran hostage crisis** – an event from 1979 to 1981 where the United States embassy in Tehran was overrun and its occupants held hostage by militant Iranian student groups

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## EXPLANATION OF THE ISSUE

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### *Historical Development*

Citizens of the United States have been taken hostage for essentially the nation’s entire history. One of the nation’s earliest international conflicts was a response to hostage situations. The states of the **Barbary Coast** of North Africa demanded tribute to protect Western shipping interests, imprisoning American sailors when the United States was unable to pay. Eventually, American armed forces under Presidents Jefferson and Madison defeated these states, freeing the imprisoned sailors (Office of the Historian, 2017). President Madison also justified the War of 1812 in part on the grounds that the British Royal Navy had been kidnapping American sailors and forcing them into service (Office of the Historian).

Hostage policy became a serious concern in the modern era during the presidency of Richard Nixon. In contrast to the early American period, where sovereign states were primarily responsible for taking hostages, “we began to see at the very tail end of the 1960s, (and) clearly evident in the 1970s, the emergence of contemporary international terrorism” (Jenkins qtd. in Collinson, 2015). Nixon ordered preventive measures, such as the expansion of the **Federal Air Marshal Service** and screenings of airline passengers and their luggage, designed to prevent the airplane hijackings that had become some of the biggest hostage crises (Collinson, 2015). Nixon’s biggest contribution was the creation of the **no-concessions policy** in 1973 in insisting that “we will not pay blackmail” (qtd. in Collinson, 2015).

However, this policy does not apply to sovereign states, with whom the United States often negotiates. The **Iran hostage crisis**, for instance, was resolved when the United States lifted economic sanctions on Iran (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021). During the crisis, the United Nations (UN) Hostages Convention was adopted, requiring its signatories to punish hostage-taking within their borders and implemented in the United States via **18 USC 1203** (Department of State, 2001). International law had previously prohibited hostage-taking under the Geneva Convention, but this

**18 USC 1203** – also known as the Act for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Hostage-Taking, its passage in 1984 made taking an American hostage anywhere in the world subject to American jurisdiction

**Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA)** – the main diplomat responsible for pursuing the release of American hostages



Ambassador Roger Carstens, currently serving as SPEHA  
*Wikimedia*

**Protecting powers**– countries that manage diplomatic relations in a state on behalf of countries who do not have a formal relationship with that state

only applied to armed conflict (Saul, 2022). The newest major update to American policy came in 2015 under President Obama, who issued an executive order establishing the **Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA)**, among other offices, to coordinate hostage recovery (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

## *Scope of the Problem*

The effort to bring all American hostages home continues to present American diplomats and policymakers with difficult choices. It is important to remember when considering these problems that hostage policy does not exist in a vacuum—it can have ripple effects that affect other components of American foreign policy. Senators must be careful to weigh the benefits of aggressive strategies against their potential harms to other American interests. Additional details about some of the biggest problems faced by the United States are provided below, regarding the difference between state and non-state actors, the strong incentives for some actors to take American hostages, and the role of non-governmental actors in freeing them.

### State and non-state actors

The problem of hostage diplomacy is, in some ways, two separate problems because state and non-state actors pose distinct challenges. Some of these are self-imposed—the no-concessions policy does not apply to states. But many of them are consequences of the natural differences between the groups. The United States maintains some form of diplomatic relations with almost every state in the world, and it has established lines of contact with most others through its **protecting powers**. Sovereign states also tend to publicly charge United States citizens with crimes when they are detained. This means that it can be difficult for these states to release a United States citizen without losing face, but it also means that the United States generally knows when one of its citizens is unlawfully detained by a state and can begin negotiating immediately. In contrast, it is often difficult to determine what has happened to Americans who go missing in conflict areas or those controlled by terrorist groups. These groups sometimes sell or swap hostages to each other (Wright 2015). This can make it challenging to determine who one needs to negotiate with, especially since the United States does not maintain formal relations with terrorist organizations, and often has no reliable way to contact them at all until those groups reach out with a ransom demand.

### Incentives for hostage-taking

There are three main reasons foreign agents might take a United States citizen hostage—financial gain, policy change, or publicity—although many hostage situations are motivated by some

***Al-Qaeda***— a major fundamentalist Islamic terrorist group, best known for perpetrating the 9/11 attacks under Osama bin Laden

***Show of good faith***— an action taken by one party of a negotiation to prove its sincere desire to reach a mutually agreeable outcome

***Richardson Center***— led by former UN Ambassador Bill Richardson, the Center has successfully negotiated the release of US citizens from states like North Korea and Venezuela

combination of these incentives. Financial considerations motivate state and non-state actors alike—in addition to the Iranian demand mentioned above that the United States lift sanctions and unfreeze its assets in exchange for hostages, some terrorist groups fund themselves through ransom payments from Western governments and their citizens. For instance, ransom payments provided much of the capital needed for **al-Qaeda** to expand into North Africa, and ISIS made around \$40 million from such payments in 2014 (Mellon et al, 2017). Both types of hostage-takers also use American hostages to provoke policy change. In 2018, China took two Canadian citizens hostage after Canada detained Meng Wanzhou, a major Chinese businesswoman. The United States had requested the detainment of Wanzhou and intended to try her for fraud but was forced to release her in exchange for the Canadians’ release (Feiner, 2021).

Additionally, the effects of hostage-taking on public opinion can also be significant. This can work in the United States’ favor when dealing with other states—even dictatorial regimes understand that if the American public is too angry with them, their representatives in Congress can limit any agreements American diplomats may make. American negotiators can use this to their advantage in requesting the release of hostages as a **show of good faith** before engaging in more substantive negotiations. However, these incentives often work in the other direction for terrorist groups. Publicly executing Western hostages, especially American citizens, can earn them a great deal of international attention. This often leads to a major influx of recruits (Mellon et al, 2017).

### The role of non-governmental actors

Engaging with non-governmental actors presents trade-offs for American diplomats. These include both the family, friends, and employer of a hostage, as well as organizations like the **Richardson Center** established specifically to get American citizens released. One part of President Obama’s updates to hostage policy intended to improve communication between families and the United States government, but families have continued to express dissatisfaction with the government’s willingness to share details about the effort to free their relatives with them (Tucker, 2019). Distance between the government and non-governmental actors can also cause them to interfere with each other’s efforts, prolonging hostage crises. However, non-governmental actors can be effective in part because they can engage directly with the terrorist organizations and rogue states that the United States government cannot. Additionally, their separation from the government prevents the hostage-taker from linking the release to other foreign policy issues, minimizing the importance of the relevant concessions (Bergman, 2021).

## *Congressional Action*

Most current American hostage policy has been driven by the executive branch, particularly by presidential action and the State Department. The main legislative act governing United States hostage policy remains the Act for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Hostage-Taking, enacted in 1984 as part of Rep. Jamie Whitten's (D-MS) H J Res 648, which makes it illegal to take a United States citizen hostage or attempt to influence the United States government through hostage-taking (Congress.gov, 1984). More recently, the Robert Levinson Act became law as part of Rep. Henry Cuellar's (D-TX) HR 133. This act grants congressional approval to **Executive Order 13698** and affirm the President's authority to impose sanctions against hostage-takers (Congress.gov, 2020). Additionally, Sen. Rick Scott's S 1605 has required the Secretary of Defense to devise plans for the potential hostage recovery of United States citizens left in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of American troops (Congress.gov, 2021).

A proposed law is also worth considering. Sen. Tom Cotton's (R-AR) S 1164 would require the president to impose such sanctions. It would also affirm the no-concessions policy and, as written, expand it to apply to sovereign states (Congress.gov, 2021). Overall, United States hostage policy could benefit from additional, in-depth consideration by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in order to provide diplomats and other negotiators the tools they need.

## *Other Policy Action*

As mentioned above, the Executive Branch has taken the leading role in determining American hostage policy, such as with President Nixon's promulgation of the no-concessions policy. The most recent revision of American hostage policy was instituted under President Obama through Executive Order 13698 and the related Presidential Policy Directive 30. In addition to establishing SPEHA, it created the **Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell (HRFC)** to coordinate cross-agency efforts to free hostages and clarified that the no-concessions policy does not prohibit communication with hostage-takers (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). While SPEHA has become an effective advocate for American hostages, the HRFC has very little public presence and it is unclear how useful it has been. Congress can codify, change, and expand upon these efforts to further improve hostage policy.

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## IDEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

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United States hostage policy has not usually been treated in a particularly partisan matter. Presidents and legislators of both major

**Executive Order 13698**— issued by President Obama, it created the current bureaucratic structure for handling hostage situations

**Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell**— a joint task force incorporating members of the relevant diplomatic, military, and intelligence branches of the federal government

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parties have felt the competing needs to bring American citizens home safely without endangering other major foreign policy considerations. In fact, SPEHA Carstens was one of the few Trump-appointed federal officials that President Biden asked to continue serving in his own administration—a sign that hostage recovery remains a bipartisan concern. However, conservative and liberal senators may be inclined to believe that different sets of policies will be most effective.

**Populist**— typically used for political movements which purport to support the ‘common man’ against elites

**Isolationist**— a type of foreign policy which promotes minimizing one’s involvement in world affairs; generally opposed to foreign military deployments

## *Conservative View*

Conservatives are increasingly divided between a **populist** wing that wants to see the United States pursue a more **isolationist** foreign policy and a more traditional wing that would like to see the United States remain globally active. Republican or conservative senators should consider what their relationships with each wing are. Traditional conservatives tend to focus both on fiscal restraint and projecting American power, both of which might incline them to oppose any softening of the no-concessions policy. In contrast, populists may be willing to reduce America’s military presence in turbulent regions like the Middle East, a common demand of terrorist groups, because they would already like to reduce United States involvement. Both sides are somewhat more likely than liberals to consider military rescue attempts or intervention against hostage-takers, although populists may be more concerned than traditional conservatives about the likelihood of such conflicts escalating. Because of their desire to reduce the size and the scope of the federal government, conservatives are also likely to support efforts to allow private negotiators increased latitude.

## *Liberal View*

Liberals tend to prefer diplomatic solutions to foreign policy problems, as well as the centralization of political authority. As such, they might be less likely to push for military intervention to rescue hostages, even if they don’t directly oppose it. They are likely to prefer solutions that involve working with international partners like American allies or the UN. Democratic presidents have thus far maintained the no-concessions policy. However, in domains like health care, liberals often argue that large government expenditures are worth it to save lives, and this sentiment may inspire opposition to the policy for some liberal senators—especially if policy concessions involve a reduction in defense spending, which liberal senators often argue is too large.

## AREAS OF DEBATE

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### *Abandon the No-concessions Policy*

One of the most frequently analyzed components of hostage policy is the no-concessions policy. It is intended to disincentivize hostage-taking and thereby reduce its frequency. However, it limits the ability of American diplomats to negotiate with hostage-takers. Currently, their only legitimate tool is to threaten hostage-takers.

#### **Ransom insurance**

*– some individuals traveling to high-risk areas purchase ransom insurance, which pays out a ransom to their captors if they are taken hostage*

Supporters of the no-concessions policy argue that when terrorists succeed in hostage negotiations, they will continue to take more hostages (Brandt et al, 2016). The logic of the no-concessions policy is that by guaranteeing to hostage-takers that they will not profit, they will stop. Nonetheless, **ransom insurance** and other payments from nongovernmental sources currently undermine this logic (Clendenin, 2007). Rather than abandon the policy, supporters say, we ought to strengthen it by better ensuring compliance with it.

However, its opponents argue that revoking the policy would provide diplomats the flexibility they need to recover American hostages. Threats are often ineffective because most hostage-takers, state or non-state, have minimal economic connections with the United States. Unless the United States is willing to engage in armed conflict with them, it has very little leverage (Bergman, 2021). Opponents also dispute its effectiveness in preventing hostage-taking, arguing that European states which offer concessions have fewer of their citizens taken hostage, and that the United States experiences “far worse outcomes for their kidnapped citizens than countries that” offer concessions (Mellon et al, 2017).

*European states which offer concessions have fewer of their citizens taken hostage*

#### Political Perspectives on this Solution

The policy has received bipartisan presidential support since its promulgation. Both parties have equated granting concessions with granting support to terrorism. Former Speaker of the House John Boehner even argued that the increased latitude granted to families under President Obama’s reforms went too far, even though the government’s negotiating position remained unchanged (Jalabi, 2015). However, President Trump’s efforts to free hostages frequently seemed to violate the policy without major backlash, suggesting that support for the policy may not be as resilient as it once was (Simon, 2020).

### *Increase Targeted Retaliatory Efforts*

Despite United States and international law to the contrary, hostage-takers often go unpunished after a hostage is released, unless the release involves a military rescue. Punishments are also often targeted at whole groups rather than specific individuals who

took a hostage (Bergman, 2021). Congress could make it a policy priority to retaliate against those individuals, employing economic sanctions, legal indictments, or military attempts to kill or capture them. Supporters argue that swift and reliable punishments are necessary to truly disincentivize hostage-taking and that focusing on specific perpetrators sends a clear message (Bergman, 2021). Opponents raise concerns that if the officials of foreign states are targeted in this way, it could seriously damage other foreign policy goals involving that state.

## Political Perspectives on this Solution

Both sides seek to punish those who take hostages, but conservatives may be more willing to use aggressive or potentially diplomatically damaging methods to do so.

**Host state** – the country where a hostage is held

## *Restrict Publicity of Hostage Executions*

Unfortunately, to a terrorist group, the best alternative to returning an American hostage is often to use their execution for propagandistic purposes, serving the ideological goal of publicly embarrassing the United States and inspiring donations and recruits from radicals all over the world (Mellon et al, 2017). Working with news organizations, search engines, and social media companies to strengthen their efforts to limit the exposure of such executions could minimize their broader impact. While such efforts would likely have to be voluntary due to First Amendment protections, some companies have already adopted relevant content moderation policies. A resolution encouraging censorship of terrorist propaganda or a reaffirmation of **Section 230** protections may push others to cooperate.

**Section 230** – this law protects the right of Internet companies to censor indecent content from their platforms without being held liable for content they allow to remain

Keeping hostages indefinitely is expensive, and if they die of natural causes, they cease to function as leverage over the target state (Tzung et al, 2021). If terrorist groups were unable to derive value from hostage-taking, it would either strengthen the no-concessions policy or make diplomats more effective if that policy were revoked. The present value of publicity from executing American hostages should not be underestimated: “The 100 million Euro ransom demanded for American journalist James Foley may not have been a good faith offer, but it may have indicated the degree to which ISIS valued the enormous amount of publicity Foley’s murder would generate globally” (Mellon et al, 2017). Opponents argue that such a policy would be “watering down the truth” and that allowing the public to see the brutal effects of terrorist groups might maintain the strength of public opposition to them (Frye, 2014).

**Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** – these are usually engaged in humanitarian efforts, filling in gaps where governments are unable or unwilling to act

## Political Perspectives on this Solution

These content moderation decisions have historically been made by tech companies themselves, rather than by political actors;





*Fmr. Amb. Bill Richardson, head of the Richardson Center*

*Wikimedia*

YouTube already bans “content depicting hostages or posted with the intent to solicit, threaten, or intimidate on behalf of a violent criminal or terrorist organization” (YouTube Help, 2022). However, many Republican politicians have recently attacked social media companies for what they see as unfair moderation standards, seeking to impose free speech guidelines that would likely prevent this kind of censorship (Breuninger, 2021). Liberals have generally defended the ability of large tech companies to set content standards.

## *Improve Multilateral Cooperation*

American hostage recovery usually requires the cooperation of other states—most pressingly, the **host state** and, where a group has been taken, the governments of the other victims. However, the United States has no system of multilateral coordination in place specifically for dealing with hostage crises. Senators could consider establishing such a framework, relying on the United States’ vast intelligence-gathering agencies and unparalleled military strength to allow it to lead such a joint endeavor. This could take the form of a new task force designed to work with the State Department to coordinate with relevant states, or guidelines for SPEHA to adhere to in doing the same.

Supporters argue that such a task force would allow American and allied efforts to work synergistically and could extend beyond the resolution of a crisis to retaliation, maximizing the punishments imposed on hostage-takers (Tzung et al, 2021). Critics might be concerned that other states—especially the host state—cannot necessarily be trusted with United States intelligence. They may also question the logic of allowing foreign states to limit the United States’ potential responses to a hostage crisis.

### Political Perspectives on this Solution

Liberals may be more willing than conservatives, especially of the populist wing, to trust foreign states to effectively augment American policy.

## *Clarify the Role of Non-governmental Organizations*

The United States government is not the only party interested in the release of American citizens held abroad—groups like the James Foley Foundation and the Richardson Center work toward the same end. Currently, these groups have no formal position within American negotiating efforts, and there is frequently tension between them and the State Department (Bergman, 2021). Senators should consider what role **non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** ought to be allowed to play in hostage negotiations. Supporters of integrating NGO efforts with official negotiations argue that NGOs can develop greater interpersonal connections with

officials in rogue states, without granting them legitimacy, than American diplomats can (Bergman, 2021). Opponents of granting NGOs increased freedom argue that they can disrupt ongoing official negotiations (Stahl, 2022). Without access to the United States' full intelligence capacity, they also may not realize the full impact of concessions they offer.

## Political Perspectives on this Solution

Perspectives on this issue are generally more informed by one's position than their party; while liberals may seem less likely to be willing to cede federal authority, Richardson is a Democrat.

## BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

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Current expenditures on hostage recovery are relatively small due to the no-concessions policy; other than funding the Office of the SPEHA and his team, they usually only include one-off expenses which depend on the cost of military rescue attempts or agreements made with other states. However, senators should be mindful of the potential costs of new policies, especially concessions and improved retaliatory plans. Terrorist groups regularly demand millions of dollars in ransom per hostage (Mellon et al, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

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Every day that a United States citizen remains a hostage of a hostile regime or terrorist organization is a tragedy. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee can help alleviate this problem—but this will require carefully considering the needs and interests not only of American negotiators but of the enemy. Clarifying America's response options and guaranteeing effective collaboration with our partners will give our hostages the best chance to return home.

Senators should consider how their ideological commitments inform their response to these issues, but they should be prepared to engage in bipartisan dialogue and compromise. Both sides understand the grave necessity of freeing Americans held wrongfully. The best solutions will include elements of many proposals, including those not explored in this briefing. Be sure to consider how different policy options will interact—how is a terrorist group or unfriendly state likely to react to a given set of policies? The committee will run best if all senators take the time to thoughtfully consider these issues before the conference begins.

*How is a terrorist group or unfriendly state likely to react to a given set of policies?*

## GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

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Senators should treat this briefing as a starting point for their own research, which might include both broad analyses of American hostage policy and specific case studies of individual hostage crises. Reliable sources include United States government sources, well-known and relatively unpartisan news agencies, and NGOs.

In addition to the reports cited in this briefing, the work of Brian Michael Jenkins at RAND provides a useful statistical background to the problem, and President Obama's [policy review](#) is especially worthwhile, as is [this report](#) of the Congressional Research Service. Senators might also consider investigating the hostage policies of other Western nations to determine where and why they differ from American policy.

Senators seeking a good visual resource are encouraged to watch [this 60 Minutes segment](#) on the successful effort to free Danny Fenster from Myanmar.

## GLOSSARY

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