

After Foley killing, U.S. defends refusal to pay ransom to terrorist groups that kidnap

By Karen DeYoung and Adam Goldman August 21, 2014

The Obama administration sharply defended its refusal to negotiate with or pay ransom to terrorist groups that kidnap, following the videotaped [execution this week](#) of American photojournalist [James Foley](#) by the Islamic State.

"We believe that paying ransoms or making concessions would put all Americans overseas at greater risk" and would provide funding for groups whose capabilities "we are trying to degrade," Marie Harf, a State Department spokeswoman, said in a briefing Thursday.

Harf said it is illegal for any American citizen to pay ransom to a group, such as the Islamic State, that the U.S. government has designated as a terrorist organization.

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In late 2013, more than a year after Foley was captured while reporting on Syria's civil war, his family received several e-mails from the Islamic State, including one demanding 100 million Euros, about \$133 million, for his freedom, according to [GlobalPost](#), Foley's employer.

The amount, many times the ransom demanded for other Western hostages, indicated that the Islamic State was not serious about releasing Foley, U.S. officials said. His family and GlobalPost agreed, said Richard Byrne, the company's vice president and director of communications. "I don't think there was a negotiation," he said.

GlobalPost has said that it shared with federal officials all communications it received from the kidnapers, including a final e-mail last week saying they were about to execute Foley.

Earlier this summer, [U.S. Special Operations forces had tried to rescue](#) Foley and three other Americans known to be held by the Islamic State. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel on Thursday described the raid — in which one U.S. service member was injured — as "flawless" and said that the intelligence indicating the hostage location was correct.

The hostages apparently had been moved. According to an activist in the north-central city of Raqqah, which is controlled by the Islamic State, the rescue attempt took place over the July 4 weekend. The hostages were being held at a training camp and makeshift prison about 25 miles east of Raqqah, said the activist, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he feared for his safety. He said that a large convoy of trucks had left the facility the day before the raid.

Three other Americans are known to be held by the Islamic State, including [Steven Sotloff](#), a freelance journalist who was threatened in the video that showed Foley's beheading. The other two are not journalists, and were in Syria for humanitarian purposes.

Harf and other administration officials acknowledged that other countries have negotiated with, and paid ransom to, terrorist kidnapers. Four French and two Spanish journalists were released by the Islamic State earlier this year, reportedly following ransom payments. It is unclear whether the money was paid by their companies, their governments or their families.

One of the four, Nicolas Henin of the French magazine *Le Point*, who said he was imprisoned for seven months alongside Foley before he was released in April, said Thursday that "some countries, many countries, actually do negotiate." Asked why he was released, Henin said in an interview with the BBC that "I don't know if it is money, or it is prisoner exchange."

Harf said that ransom payments are "one of the main ways ISIL has been funded. . . . We believe just in 2014 that that's in the millions of dollars." ISIL is one of several acronyms that refer to the [Islamic State](#).

Britain also has refused to pay ransom to terrorists for hostages. Harf said the administration is in "conversations" with countries that have a different policy.

British officials said Thursday that they are investigating the identity of the masked, knife-wielding man who read a statement threatening attacks against the West before slitting Foley's throat.

Prime Minister David Cameron has acknowledged that the man, who spoke with what experts say is a London accent, is "likely British," but officials have not divulged any other details about his identity.

Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, based on the account of a former Islamic State hostage, has reported that the executioner was one of three British nationals who guarded foreign captives in the Raqqah area. Because of their nationalities, the three apparently were known as "the Beatles."

Didier François, another French journalist who was held captive with Foley before being released with Henin, was asked in an interview on Europe 1 radio whether he recognized the executioner. "Recognized is a very big word. I see roughly who it is," he said.

François said the freed French journalists had been threatened by their captors and told not to speak publicly about those who were left behind. "If you make public the fact they are being held or that you were together, reprisals will follow against them," he said. "Their exact words were: 'They'll be punished.'"

Security analysts said British authorities may have a good idea of the killer's name and background, having used voice-recognition technology, as well as other details apparent from the video, including his height.

About 500 Britons have gone to Syria to join the civil war there — most of them with the Islamic State — and their movements and communications are closely tracked by British intelligence. Many have made no secret of their whereabouts, boasting on Twitter and Facebook of their latest attacks, and calling their relatives back home.

"There's a very strong chance this person has spoken to friends and family in the U.K.," said Sajjan Gohel, director for international security at the Asia-Pacific Foundation.

Griff Witte in London and Liz Sly in Irbil, Iraq, contributed to this report.

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