

# CRS Insights

U.S. Citizens Kidnapped by the Islamic State

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February 13, 2015 (IN10167)

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## Overview

On February 10, 2015, President Barack Obama [acknowledged](#) that U.S. citizen Kayla Mueller was killed while held in captivity by the terrorist group known as the [Islamic State](#) (IS). This was the fourth death of an American taken hostage by the Islamic State: [Abdul-Rahman Kassig](#) (previously Peter Kassig), [James Foley](#), and [Steven Sotloff](#) were also killed. The death of Mueller and the graphic videos depicting the deaths of the other three Americans have generated debate about the U.S. government's role and capabilities for freeing hostages.

In light of these deaths, some policymakers have called for a reevaluation of U.S. policy on international kidnapping responses. Questions include whether it is effective and properly coordinated and implemented, should be abandoned or modified to allow for exceptions and flexibility, or could benefit from enhancements to improve global adherence.

## Scope

The killing of U.S. citizens by the Islamic State may be driven by a variety of underlying motives. [Reports](#) describe the group as inclined toward graphic and public forms of violence for purposes of intimidation and recruitment. It is unclear whether the Islamic State would have released its Americans hostages in exchange for [ransom payments](#) or other concessions. Foley's family, for example, [disclosed](#) that the Islamic State demanded a ransom of 100 million euros (\$132 million). The Islamic State reportedly [demanded](#) \$6.6 million for Mueller's release. For its part, the Islamic State claims to have carried out the killings of Kassig, Foley, and Sotloff in retaliation against military intervention in the region. Further raising questions regarding its fundraising motivations, the Islamic State [beheaded](#) two Japanese hostages, Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto, after a \$200 million ransom [demand](#) went unfulfilled in early 2015. The [killing of a captured Jordanian pilot](#) who was supporting the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State also called into question the group's true desire to exchange a hostage for a prisoner being held for 10 years by the Jordanian government.

The Islamic State may be inspiring others to conduct kidnappings and beheadings. In September 2014, a French citizen, [Herve Gourdel](#), was kidnapped and [murdered](#) by a group in Algeria that has claimed IS allegiance. Two [Germans](#) are being held for ransom in the Philippines by another group that supports the Islamic State. Some policymakers are concerned that individuals in the United States may [also](#) be inspired by the Islamic State's tactics. Meanwhile, Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's Syria-based affiliate, released U.S. citizen [Peter Curtis](#) (reportedly without ransom).

It is possible that [other](#) U.S. citizens are held hostage by terrorist groups in the region, including [Austin Tice](#), who has been missing in Syria since 2012. The State Department has [identified](#) at least 72 U.S. citizens kidnapped by international terrorists between 2005 and 2013; actual numbers may be higher.

## U.S. Policy and Questions for Congress

A central issue to U.S. responses to IS kidnappings is the "no concessions" policy. According to this [policy](#), the U.S. government will seek the safe return of its citizens, but rules out any "acts of concession" to kidnappers, including the "benefits of ransom, prisoner releases, [or] policy changes." Moreover, ransom payments to terrorists could be a [violation](#) of U.S. criminal law and, in some cases, a violation of [U.S.](#) and [U.N.](#) counterterrorism sanctions.

In March 2014, Under Secretary of the Treasury David Cohen [reiterated](#) the U.S. government's justification for its "no concessions" policy:

Refusing to pay ransoms or to accede to other terrorist demands is the surest way to convince potential hostage-takers that they will not be rewarded for their crime.... Although this may appear to be cold-hearted and is often agonizingly difficult to sustain in practice, plain logic and long experience demonstrate that this policy has led to fewer Americans being taken hostage....

Earlier, in a 2012 [discussion](#) of international kidnapping for ransom, Cohen described several alternative responses to terrorist hostage situations, including conducting rescue operations and applying targeted financial sanctions against kidnappers. The Treasury Department has [designated](#) several IS members for financial sanction, one of whom reportedly oversaw an IS prison facility where foreign hostages may have been held. The Obama Administration has also [acknowledged](#) that the U.S. military attempted in July to rescue Foley and others held captive by the Islamic State. Another series of failed U.S. military rescue [attempts](#) in late 2014 to free American Luke Somers from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) further highlighted the risks associated with such operations.

At the international level, some observers [describe](#) a lack of coherence and [consistency](#) in handling hostage cases. Although the United Kingdom adheres to a "no concessions" policy, [reports](#) suggest that several other European governments have paid large ransoms to terrorist groups, including IS and Al Qaeda affiliates.

In Congress, questions about U.S. policy on kidnapping have arisen during hearings focused on the Islamic State. On November 1, 2014, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy [responded](#) to congressional questions about this issue by stating, "The President recently directed a comprehensive review of U.S. government policy on overseas terrorist-related hostages cases, with specific emphasis on examining family-engagement, intelligence collection, and diplomatic engagement policies."

There is a long history of legislative debate on kidnapping policy and existing statutes on kidnapping and terrorist financing (e.g., [18 U.S.C. Ch. 55](#), [18 U.S.C. 2339A-C](#), and [22 U.S.C. 2656f](#)). As policy makers continue to consider these issues, key questions include:

- To what extent is the U.S. government responsible for the safe return of U.S. citizens held hostage by the Islamic State? Are U.S. government agencies sufficiently coordinated to address international kidnapping events?
- Has the "no concessions" policy been successful in deterring the Islamic State from targeting and seizing U.S. citizens as hostages? Are there circumstances in which exceptions to the "no concessions" policy may be warranted?
- To what extent are ransom payments a primary source of IS financing? What are the challenges associated with U.S. government efforts to track, block, and ultimately confiscate or retrieve ransom payments?
- To what extent are other nations' practices consistent with the U.S. "no concessions" policy? What options do U.S. policy makers have to deter foreign governments from financing terrorist groups, including the Islamic State, through the payment of ransom demands?

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