

TALKING TO TERRORISTS

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TALKING TO TERRORISTS

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March 1982

The kidnapping of General Raymond Dozier in Italy points up again the difficulties and frustrations of dealing with a political kidnapping. In the last two decades, terrorists have abducted more than 30 American officials serving abroad. And this figure does not include the foiled attempts. It does not count the times terrorists seized hostages in American embassies or consulates. It does not count the numerous kidnappings of American businessmen and other private citizens abroad, or the many hijackings of airliners with American citizens aboard.

Terrorists seize foreign officials as a means of gaining international attention and exerting leverage over the local government, upon whom they usually levy their demands. A political kidnapping is an act of propaganda; inherent within it is a desire to communicate. Holding a hostage guarantees that the kidnappers will be heard. On the other side, the government not only is concerned with obtaining the safe release of the hostage or hostages; it also wants to communicate its position in the contest with the terrorists. When the hostage belongs to another government, that government also must communicate its concerns about the safety of one or more of its citizens, its policy with regard to political kidnappings, and its attitude toward the local government.

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For the news media, a political kidnapping is a good story, a genuine drama; human life hangs in the balance. There are disagreements, confrontations, ultimatums, brinkmanship, rumors. The noise level is high.

Political kidnappings create many communications problems. Resolution of these kidnappings requires communication between at least two parties: the terrorist kidnapers and the government. Governments themselves are, of course, complex organizations comprised of separate entities that sometimes act independently of one another, each having its own means of communicating. This magnifies the problem. When opinions are divided on how to handle the kidnapping, the government may be saying several things at once.

When terrorists seize American officials abroad, two governments are automatically involved, the local government and the U.S. government. The U.S. government, in this situation, comprises two principal entities: the task force assembled in Washington to manage the crisis and the American embassy on the scene. If the kidnapping occurs outside the country's capital, a regional government and the local American consul are added to the network. Kidnappers in some cases have contacted the hostage's family as a means of increasing pressure; or the family, dissatisfied with the handling of the incident by officials, may try to initiate direct contact with the kidnapers. In a few cases, hostages have been made to participate in meetings with the press or have been permitted to write letters or make appeals, and thus they, too, become part of the communications. In some cases intermediaries are used. Often they have something to say themselves,

and they become yet another component in the complex communications net.

The problem is not simply that a lot of people must somehow communicate with a lot of other people. There are many prohibitions. The local government often does not want to talk to the kidnapers, or at least does not want to be seen doing so. Communications themselves are viewed by many as a concession that gives terrorists equal status with the government. The local government may not want the embassy or the hostage's family to communicate directly with the kidnapers either, or at least not without government supervision. And the local government often will try to prevent the terrorists from communicating with the public. It may go so far as to prohibit publication by the news media of terrorist communiques. In other words, the local government usually wants to cut off the terrorists, bury the crisis, remain in charge, and conduct its business in private.

The prohibition against direct communications with the kidnapers also applies to the U.S. embassy itself. Since the early 1970s, the United States has followed a no-negotiations, no-concessions policy in dealing with political kidnappings. The no-negotiations component of that policy precludes direct communications between U.S. officials and the kidnapers. Moreover, the U.S. government regards the host or local government as being responsible for the safety of American diplomats assigned to it. Direct communications incur the risk that the terrorists will shift their demands to the United States and lift the responsibility from the shoulders of the local government. In 1975, the American ambassador to Tanzania was fired because he became directly involved in discussions with the kidnapers of three American students.

The kidnapers may try to get around the local government's and the embassy's unwillingness to communicate by dealing directly with the hostage's family. The kidnapers, the hostage, and the hostage's family often have a community of interests. All would like to see the kidnapers' demands met so the hostage can be released. Kidnapers may try to manipulate the family in order to exert private and public pressure on the government to make concessions. For that same reason, U.S. officials generally try to keep the family from becoming directly involved. The family's single-minded dedication to the safe release of the hostage makes it unconcerned with abstract policies about terrorism. The family may be willing to offer concessions, exert pressure on the government for concessions, or publicly criticize officials for "abandoning" the hostage.

Generally, terrorists kidnap American officials for political reasons. When they want cash, they abduct businessmen, who are more lucrative targets. However, in a few of the episodes involving American officials, the kidnapers have made demands directly on the hostage's family, usually for a cash ransom. This happened in the case of Terrence Leonhardy, the American consul general in Guadalajara, Mexico (more on that episode below). In that incident, the kidnapers instructed the family not to inform local authorities.

The different parties involved in a political kidnapping aim their communications at different audiences. The terrorists probably have the most ambitious program in this regard. Their specific audiences include their perceived constituents, the local population in general, the American public, a world audience, other potential targets whom they

might attack in the future, and other terrorists. A different message is aimed at each audience. They must inspire their perceived constituents. They must show the local population that the local government is ineffective, incompetent, impotent. To the American public they must explain their cause and thereby undermine support for the local government. The message to the world is the desire for publicity and recognition. They want to instill terror among local and foreign officials. They must demonstrate their superiority over rival terrorist groups.

The local government must communicate with the terrorists, the local population and, to a lesser degree, the world. Again, there are different messages for each, and sometimes the messages are contradictory. The local government publicly tries to persuade the terrorists that it will make no concessions, that they can gain nothing from the kidnapping and must release their hostage. Privately, the government may at the same time indicate its willingness to reach some sort of compromise to save the life of the hostage. The local government tries to convince the local population--its principal audience--that the government remains in charge, that it will not capitulate to terrorists, that it is competent.

The U.S. government talks to the terrorists, to the local government, and to the American public. It tries to persuade the terrorists that kidnapping will not pay and that they must release the hostage. At the same time, it may or may not try to persuade the local government to open a dialog with the terrorists and come to some kind of agreement that will bring about the safe release of the hostage. This part of the message has varied over the years. In the early 1970s,

American policy emphasized safe release of the hostage, and the U.S. government urged local governments to make concessions, if necessary. Later, the U.S. government adopted a no-concessions policy but emphasized the local government's responsibility for the safety of American diplomats; concessions were acceptable as long as the U.S. government did not make them. Current policy appears to argue more strenuously for a no-concession policy which, it is hoped by the government, will be universally adopted. But to this author's knowledge, the U.S. government has never actively tried to dissuade another government from making concessions in actual cases.

The U.S. government must also address the American public. This is probably the primary audience before whom the U.S. government must appear strong, unyielding to terrorism, and managerially competent. The current administration's public evaluation of terrorism as a problem of paramount importance, through some very strong rhetoric, makes this a special concern.

One serious problem is that most of the messages are public. In a sense, everyone reads everyone else's mail. Since each actor's objectives differ with regard to different audiences, the total traffic may be confusing and conflicting. The terrorists must figure out if the local government is throwing down the gauntlet or signaling its readiness to bargain. The local government may sometimes be confused as to whether the U.S. government places greater emphasis on preserving a policy of no-concessions or on securing the safe release of the hostage. In one case, U.S. policy was communicated publicly and privately in double-edged language which stated that there was no change in the U.S. government's policy not to accede to demands of terrorists holding

hostages, but the responsibility for the protection of American diplomats abroad lay with the host government. In this case, the host government demanded to know what exactly that sentence meant. Did the United States want the man back or not? In fact, the officials in Washington who drafted the phrase saw it as a means of preserving a previously established no-concessions policy while opening a window for the local government to cut a deal.

There is no easy solution to this problem. It simply must be kept in mind that in addressing one audience, a government may be causing difficulties in its communications with another audience. This argues for coordination of communications, and it suggests that the fine language of diplomacy may not always be applicable to the more practical problem of dealing with terrorist kidnapers in a crisis situation.

In most political kidnappings, the kidnapers and the government communicate with each other through the news media. But terrorists have also communicated through above-ground spokesmen, they have left messages for government officials to find, and sometimes they have established direct telephone contact. (Telephone contact is generally characteristic of negotiations for cash ransom.) In all private means of communication, the terrorists have the initiative. Governments devote a great deal of effort to figuring out how to contact the terrorists directly without addressing them publicly through the news media. Who can get in touch with them? Known sympathizers? A certain journalist? The leaders of other governments? Imprisoned comrades? And even if a means is found, the government can seldom be confident that its messages are accurately conveyed to the kidnapers at all.

In a few of the political kidnappings, an intermediary was used. While such intermediaries are sometimes necessary, they can be dangerous from the government point of view, and must be chosen and handled with care. The intermediary is rarely a neutral communicator. To be acceptable to the kidnapers, he may have to be someone who sympathizes with their cause to some degree. He may exploit his role to publicly blast the government. Even the politically neutral intermediary may begin to see himself not as a passive conveyer but as an active arbitrator in a dispute. He may become increasingly dedicated to arranging a compromise and may become impatient and begin to publicly criticize the government for not making concessions. Entrusting communications to an intermediary almost invariably translates into eventual concessions, and if the government is not prepared to negotiate, there is no need for an intermediary.

Communicating through the news media has both advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is the usual unwillingness of the local or American government to be seen in public communicating with terrorist kidnapers. Another is the desire to send a variety of messages--tough on terrorists, humane with regard to the hostage and his family, unyielding on the matter of concessions but willing to talk about a settlement--that are intended for different audiences but that will be read by everyone. A third disadvantage is the high volume of background noise. A political kidnapping commands the attention of the national and international press. Newsmen seldom wait for official briefings. They dig for news, ask for interviews, call their informants, reach for rumors. And they have two governments to work on. Each government's

message must compete with a barrage of public statements by high-level officials, off-the-record comments, tips, and rumors as interpreted by the press. The message to the terrorists, if there is one, may get lost. There is one unseen advantage to using the media rather than direct negotiations for communication. There is no capability for instant reply. In critical moments, one does not want to assume a position without thinking out the consequences and communicating with the other party involved. Each side has time to consider its moves and coordinate its position.

Terrorists naturally want all the attention they can get. They may even make media coverage or publication of their communiqués a part of their demands. Sometimes the local government may try to suppress messages sent by the terrorists by prohibiting their publication. In one case, however--the 1976 hijacking of a TWA airliner by Croatian extremists--an FBI official communicated the hijackers' demand that several newspapers print their manifesto on the front page and asked that the newspapers go along with the demand. The U.S. Secretary of State was incensed when he heard about the request, as he considered it a violation of U.S. no-concessions policy. Although the press went along with the request in this case, the news media are generally reluctant to relinquish command of their space to terrorists or governments.

On several occasions, public statements by high-ranking officials have complicated negotiations and narrowed options. In 1973, Palestinian terrorists, members of Black September, took over the Saudi Arabian embassy in Khartoum. In return for the release of their hostages--who included one Belgian and two American diplomats, the

ambassador and the deputy chief of mission--the terrorists demanded, among other things, the release of the imprisoned assassin of Senator Robert Kennedy. For the first two days, the terrorists took no action. Sudanese officials informed them that a high-ranking American official, the Under Secretary of State, was on his way to Khartoum. Meanwhile, in the course of a routine press conference at the White House, reporters asked President Nixon if the United States was going to release Kennedy's killer. The President replied that the United States would never give in to terrorist blackmail. This comment was broadcast to the Middle East and rebroadcast to Khartoum. The terrorists reportedly heard it on their radio. Shortly after that, they murdered the one Belgian and two American hostages.

It would be irresponsible to blame their deaths on the President's statement. Less than three months before the Khartoum incident, a team of Black September terrorists holding the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok had agreed to a compromise and were strongly criticized within the group. Black September was anxious to demonstrate its resolve at Khartoum. The United States could never have agreed to the release of a convicted assassin, so there was little room to negotiate. On the other hand, the terrorists had appeared willing to wait for the arrival of the American Under Secretary. The President's statement may have inadvertently undercut a stalling tactic.

Beyond its effect on the episode in Khartoum, the President's off-the-cuff remark, subsequently sealed in blood, set future policy. Until then, there had been some flexibility in dealing with each case. From that moment on, there could be no compromise, lest it appear to be a reversal of the President's remark.

In another case, the former Attorney General inadvertently revealed in a Washington press conference that an American diplomat had been kidnapped in Mexico. The kidnapping of the American vice consul in Hermosillo occurred five days before the Attorney General's conference, but authorities had kept it secret while attempting in vain to deliver the ransom demanded by the kidnapers. Once the secret was out, the news media in both Mexico and the United States made inquiries. The authorities, who were still hopeful of delivering the ransom and saving the hostage, had to make careful replies; they did not want to frighten off the kidnapers. As it turned out, the Attorney General's revelation was irrelevant. The kidnapper, a lone criminal who was later apprehended, had already murdered his hostage and fled. Had this not been the case, however, the Attorney General's remarks might have caused serious complications.

In neither case were the high-ranking officials to blame for the diplomats' deaths. In the one case terrorists and in the other case an ordinary criminal pulled the trigger. They alone are culpable. But the examples are instructive of the difficulties that can be caused by off-the-cuff remarks during a political kidnapping.

Hoax calls and claims will often equal or exceed genuine communications from the kidnapers. We have seen this in the Dozier case. In some cases, groups unconnected with the kidnapping may make demands; publicity seekers, nuts, or pranksters may get into the act; or the kidnapers themselves may send false messages--"The hostage has been condemned and executed, his body may be found...." These are designed to keep public attention focused on the kidnapping and government

tensions high. To assure itself that the claimants actually have the hostage and that he is still alive, the government may demand proof. Governments also have exploited the existence of rival claimants to confuse the kidnapers and entice them to provide additional information. Where further dialog--particularly over the telephone--is likely, the kidnapers or the government may establish a code to insure that the right calls will get through without delay.

Not all problems derive from the difficulty of communications between governments and terrorists. The kidnapping of a foreign official creates a major crisis for any government. In such a crisis, the local government closes in on itself. Decisions are made by the chief of state and a few close advisors. The minister of foreign affairs, the ambassador's normal point of contact, may not be part of the inner decisionmaking group and may be sidelined. This is particularly true in Third World countries where the key figures are likely to include the president, the ministers of defense and interior, and chiefs of the armed forces. The foreign minister is often a respected figure but not part of the inner circle. On tough issues like terrorism, political survival takes precedence over foreign relations.

How does the ambassador get to the people who count? Other contacts, the defense attache, the military mission, an intelligence counterpart, or a personal acquaintance may become crucial sources of information and communications. In some cases, these are not enough and it is necessary for the ambassador to talk directly to the chief of state. In the past, this has been accomplished by sending a letter from the President of the United States to be hand-delivered to the local chief of state.

In one episode, U.S. embassy officials feared that the local president's inattention to the problem after his government agreed to the terrorists' demands but before the deal was consummated might provide an opportunity for elements within the government who opposed the concessions to sabotage the settlement. In this case, they persuaded the chief of state to come back from his weekend retreat to guarantee that the deal would go through.

Communications between Washington and the American embassy have sometimes been a problem. The kidnapping of an American official inevitably generates a certain amount of debate in Washington regarding policy. No-concessions ceases to be an abstract issue. A life is at stake, and that changes things. Diplomats are skilled at resolving differences with vague or double-edged language. But compromise language used to bridge differences in Washington may not be understood by embassy officials who were not privy to the original debate and therefore may not see the intent of the words. This happened during the kidnapping of the U.S. consul general in Guadalajara, Mexico, which we referred to above. Officials in Washington sought to simultaneously preserve the U.S. no-concessions policy while giving Mexico an opportunity to make concessions. Officials at the embassy and the Mexican foreign minister all missed the subtlety intended in the double-talk.

There are no general rules for solving these communications problems, just as there are no formulas for dealing with political kidnappings. Each case is unique. At the same time, there do seem to be some general principles that government officials might try to adhere to:

1. The less said in public the better. The volume of communications is enormous. Anything said is likely to be lost in the noise or, worse, misinterpreted with possibly tragic consequences.
2. Off-the-cuff remarks by high-ranking officials should be avoided altogether. They are likely to get attention they don't deserve. They may inadvertently complicate affairs, foreclose options, and further elevate an event that is likely to have a tragic outcome.
3. The government must speak with a single voice; all communications should be coordinated. The off-the-record interview may have greater effect than the official briefing.
4. The various audiences should be identified. Those communicating should think about the message to be sent and the effect it is likely to have on the other parties. It must be remembered that everything will be heard by everyone.
5. The government's public responses should be kept as low-key as possible. The U.S. government is at the margin, its ability to determine the outcome of a political kidnapping in a positive way is limited. The kidnappers may decide to murder an American official, and we cannot stop them. In such circumstances, there is no reason to elevate the confrontation.

6. Messages should be blunt and simple. This admonition is likely to curdle the hearts of diplomats. But a kidnapping is a time of crisis. The volume of noise is high. Subtle messages are seldom received.

7. Policy ought not to equate communications with negotiations and concessions. They are different things.

8. Beware of intermediaries. They are seldom neutral or passive. They will drive the government toward concessions and denounce it for not making them.

9. Committee language does not work. It will not be understood by those not present at the debate.

