

Paying a Ransom to Save Your Family

In 2014, ISIS posted a video of its adherents beheading James Foley, a captured American journalist. Although the United States attempted to rescue Foley and others, it maintains a strict policy of not paying ransoms for hostages.¹ One of the main arguments supporting this policy is that paying ransom not only incentivizes the taking of hostages, but also funds future heinous acts undertaken by the hostage-takers. An argument against this policy is that it fails to respect the incomparable value of innocent lives taken by groups like ISIS.

Recently, it was revealed that the American government not only refuses to pay ransoms for hostages but also legally threatens those who might try to do so, including the Foley family.² The rationale for this policy is that, if private citizens paid ransoms, then they would bring about many of the same harms as public officials, albeit to a lesser degree. However, not everybody is in favor of applying this policy to public officials and private citizens alike. For example, Diane Foley said, "I was surprised there was so little compassion." According to Michael Foley, this policy hampered the Foley family's efforts to save James. "It slowed my parents down quite a bit. They didn't want to do anything that could get them in trouble. It slowed them down for months in raising money. Who knows what might have happened?" In other words, some argue, even if the U.S. government has a policy against paying ransom for hostages, this restriction should not apply to private individuals.

More recently, the government announced that it will not threaten to prosecute families who try to pay ransoms for family members who are taken hostage.³ As President Obama said, "These families have suffered enough, and they should never feel ignored or victimized by their own government."⁴

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Assuming it has a policy against paying ransoms for hostages, is it morally justifiable for the government to enforce this policy on its own citizens, when they try to pay ransoms?
2. Does the fact that ransom payments will likely contribute to further violence by hostage-takers make it morally impermissible for families to try to financially secure the release of family members taken hostage? Why or why not?
3. If a public official or private citizen was confident that they could pay a ransom secretly, so that it would secretly but not openly support violence by hostage-takers, would that make a difference in your view? Why or why not?

¹ <https://news.yahoo.com/officials-us-rescue-mission-syria-failed-223157934-politics.html>

² <http://abcnews.go.com/International/government-threatened-foley-family-ransom-payments-mother-slain/story?id=25453963&singlePage=true>

³ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2015/06/23/u-s-government-will-stop-telling-families-of-hostages-that-they-could-face-criminal-prosecution-for-paying-ransom/>

⁴ <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/24/417160008/u-s-clarifies-hostage-policy-saying-it-won-t-prosecute-families-over-ransom>

