The Atlantic | November 16, 2014

ISIS Has Killed Another American Aid Worker

The death of Peter Kassig raises fresh questions about the U.S. policy of not paying ransoms.
Matt SchiavenzaNov 16 2014, 2:56 PM ET

The Islamic State claimed that it killed Peter Kassig, shown in the background, in a video released Sunday. (Bilal Hussein/AP)

The Islamic State released a video Sunday showing the death of Peter Kassig*, an American aid worker who has been a hostage since his kidnapping in Syria last year.

Kassig, a 26-year-old Army Ranger veteran and a convert to Islam, ran an NGO that provided medical assistance to civilians in Syria, where a civil war has torn apart the country. Kassig is the fifth of the 23 hostages held by ISIS to be executed. All five have been citizens of the United States or the United Kingdom.

The death of Kassig provides further illustration of the brutality of the terrorist group that calls itself The Islamic State, which controls large swathes of Syria and Iraq. But his situation also casts the spotlight on the controversial American policy to refuse, under all circumstances, to make ransom payments. The U.S. government even threatens to prosecute family members who make separate attempts to secure the hostage's release.

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Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State earn significant revenue from countries, such as France and Italy, that quietly make ransom payments through intermediaries. The New York Times revealed in July that al-Qaeda has earned $125 million from ransom payments since 2008, and that money obtained from European governments comprises a significant chunk of the group's revenue. Ransom payments are so valuable, in fact, that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have learned which countries pay and which don't. As a result, they capture more Europeans. Should these governments enforce a ban on paying ransoms, the theory goes, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State would no longer have an incentive to kidnap Westerners.

But this theory rests on an uneasy assumption: that terrorist organizations keep hostages solely for financial reasons. David Rohde, a journalist and Atlantic contributing editor who in 2009 escaped Taliban captivity in Afghanistan, told the Intercept that, contrary to the New York Times report, the lack of ransom payments do not always deter terrorist groups from capturing U.S. citizens.

"I've seen no clear evidence that groups are grabbing more Europeans and fewer Americans," Rohde wrote in an email. "They take any foreigners they can get and use the Europeans for ransom and the Americans for publicity."

Money is just one factor that terrorist groups consider when capturing a hostage. In a 2009 study, the Journal for the Royal Society of Medicine found that hostage takers are often motivated by a desire to "voice and/or publicize a grievance or express a frustrated emotion." For example, each ISIS execution video claims that the death of the hostage is in retaliation for American foreign policy in the Middle East. France, a country that declined to participate in the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, has successfully arranged for the release of four hostages from Islamic State captivity. But this policy wasn't enough to save the life of Herve Gourdel, a French mountaineer kidnapped and executed in Algeria by separate militants who wished to kill the "spiteful and filthy French." There is also evidence that the vivid, grisly recordings of the executions serve as a powerful recruitment tool for the Islamic State, which has attracted thousands of adherents from countries far beyond its base in Iraq and Syria.

Should the U.S. abandon its policy and pay ransoms to hostages? Or should the European governments honor their G-8 commitment and not do it? The issue presents a true moral dilemma: No country wants to see one of its citizens murdered, but all want to defeat the scourge of terrorism. Rohde has argued that the inconsistency between Western countries has contributed greatly to the problem.

"My captors were absolutely convinced that the U.S. government secretly paid ransoms–and then publicly denied it–because that's what European governments regularly do," he told the Intercept.