



White House says more than 30 Americans held hostage abroad

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Updated 4:44 PM ET, Wed June 24, 2015

Story highlights

- Government officials will be allowed to negotiate with terror groups but will still not make 'substantive concessions'
- The White House makes clear that families won't be threatened with prosecution if they pay ransoms
- Obama establishes an interagency task force to spearhead hostage-freeing efforts

Washington (CNN) The U.S. government will now communicate with terrorist groups holding the more than 30 Americans currently hostage abroad, one of a slew of changes to the nation's hostage policy that President Barack Obama announced Wednesday.

The U.S. government will stick to its "no concessions" policy -- often incorrectly interpreted as "no negotiations" -- while also allowing government officials going forward to talk with terrorist groups like ISIS that have kidnapped Americans, according to a presidential policy directive Obama outlined on Wednesday.

More than 30 Americans are currently held hostage abroad, Obama's chief counterterrorism adviser Lisa Monaco, who oversaw the policy review, told reporters on Wednesday.

The tally includes those who are held hostage by terrorist groups as well as criminal gangs and cartels, according to a senior official, who said the government couldn't provide a further breakdown for safety reasons.

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The changes to the hostage policy, which also include the creation of an interagency "fusion cell" to streamline efforts to free American hostages and improve communication between the government and families, follow a months-long review of U.S. policy that included interviews with nearly two-dozen families of current and former U.S. hostages.

Obama also made it clear that the U.S. government will not prosecute families looking to pay ransoms to terrorist groups holding their loved ones hostage -- a threat some families faced during their ordeals.

"No family of an American hostage has ever been prosecuted for paying ransom for their loved one. The last thing we should ever do is to add to a family's pain with threats like that," Obama said at the White House.

"The bottom line is this: When it comes to how our government works to recover hostages, we are changing how we do business," he said.

The presidential directive issued by Obama reiterates U.S. policy "to deny hostage-takers the benefits of ransom, prisoner releases, policy changes, or other acts of concession.

"However, this policy does not preclude engaging in communications with hostage-takers," the directive says.

Obama noted that many changes he ordered on Wednesday "are a direct result" of the families' feedback and said that he considered the policy changes not just through the lens of president, but as a husband and father.

"If my family were at risk obviously I would move heaven and Earth to get those loved ones back," he said. "I'm making it clear that our top priority is the safe and rapid recovery of American hostages," he added.

But Obama also noted that he would not authorize the government to make ransom payments, noting that it would put "in danger more Americans" by incentivizing kidnappings.

The parents of James Foley, the first American hostage beheaded by ISIS, applauded the "in-depth" work of the hostage policy review team and thanked the leaders of that group in a statement on Wednesday.

And they pledged to continue to work to improve U.S. policy on the matter to help American hostages still held abroad.

"Jim wanted to make a difference in the world. Perhaps his horrific death was necessary to awaken the American public and our government," John and Diane Foley said.

The payment of ransoms to terror groups has long been tolerated in many instances, though it is technically illegal. The administration has looked the other way when families of Americans held overseas have paid ransoms.

But several families -- including the family of James Foley -- have said they were threatened with prosecution as they considered making ransom payments. A member of the National Security Council staff had threatened Foley's family with prosecution during their ordeal.

[Lawmakers 'disappointed' with hostage policy reforms push legislation](#)

House Speaker John Boehner on Wednesday said he feared the erosion of the U.S.'s policy of not paying ransoms and the principle of not negotiating with terrorists.

"I've not seen the report nor have I seen an analysis of it, but we have had a policy in the United States for over 200 years of not paying ransom and not negotiating with terrorists and the concern that I have is that by lifting that long held principle you could be endangering more Americans here and overseas," Boehner said.

U.S. policy actually does not prohibit negotiations, but prohibits making "substantive concessions" to captors in the process.

Family members of former hostages met Tuesday with officials at the National Counterterrorism Center to learn of the administration's decisions after a months-long review of U.S. policies in dealing with American citizens held captive.

In interviews with the hostage policy review group, families expressed concerns that officials displayed a lack of compassion and the new presidential directive explicitly directs officials to "treat all families and hostages equitably and fairly while respecting their dignity and privacy."



Hostages killed in U.S. drone strike 01:51
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"All interactions with the family should be undertaken with the utmost professionalism, empathy, and sensitivity to the psychological and emotional disruption the family is experiencing and should be informed by the family's needs, wishes, and rights," according to the policy directive.

Obama's Wednesday executive order establishes the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, which officials described as a full-time, inter-agency body with the goal of coordinating the U.S. government's response to hostage-takings.

A senior FBI official will serve as the taskforce's first director, responsible for overseeing hostage recovery efforts and the fusion cell's office will be housed in the FBI.

The cell will include officials from the State, Treasury, Defense and Justice Departments as well as the CIA and Director of National Intelligence.

The order also created two new positions: a family engagement coordinator to act as a single point of contact for families of hostages, and the designation of a senior representative from the State Department for diplomatic outreach abroad.

The review process has relied heavily on the input of former hostages and their families. Administration officials conducted over 40 interviews with 24 families and former hostages through three rounds of feedback.

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The administration also consulted with five intermediaries, three international organizations, two hostage experts and four foreign countries as well as members of Congress, including Reps. Duncan Hunter, R-California, and John Delaney, D-Maryland. Delaney's constituents include the family of Warren Weinstein, who was inadvertently killed in a drone strike while held captive by al-Qaeda.

The interviews with former hostages or families took place in their hometowns or in Washington. The review was led by Lisa Monaco, Obama's top counterterrorism adviser.

Monaco sent letters to 82 families and former hostages dating back to 2001, inviting them to be part of the review process and to provide their views based on their personal experiences.

"We understand this is incredibly difficult and painful for the families and we appreciate their feedback," a senior official said. "(Their feedback) has been invaluable and helped us examine ways to improve our processes and communicate with the families most effectively to achieve our shared objective of ensuring the safe return of a loved one."

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Some families, like that of James Foley, an American journalist beheaded by ISIS last August, [have been critical](#) of the administration's handling of hostage situations. His mother, Diane Foley, told CNN's Anderson Cooper in September that she was "embarrassed and appalled" by how the U.S. government dealt with her son's case.

"I think our efforts to get Jim freed were an annoyance" to the U.S. government, Foley said. "It didn't seem to be in (the U.S.) strategic interest."

The wife of [Warren Weinstein](#), an American aid worker accidentally killed by a U.S. drone strike in April, said on Tuesday that during her husband's captivity, "elements of the U.S. government fell short."

"We hope to be the last family that fails to receive the level of coordinated government support that those who serve abroad deserve when trouble finds them," Elaine Weinstein said.

"We believe the creation of a fusion cell is a good idea, but we believe establishing a sole individual with overall policy responsibilities for safe hostage recovery would have been best positioned at the National Security Council, since that would not only give the position more inter-agency coordinating authority but also ensure that those debating counter-terrorism activities and hostage recovery efforts were sitting in the same room," she said.



Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-CA) speaks during a news conference held by House Republicans on 'Protecting America's Veterans' at the U.S. Capitol May 29, 2014 in Washington, DC.

Hunter, who pushed the administration to conduct the review, was similarly skeptical of early details about the hostage review.

"The changes offered up by the White House prove that neither the right questions were asked nor were any lessons learned," Hunter said. "Wholesale changes are needed, but what's being put forward is nothing more than window dressing, I fear."

He continued, "It's a pathetic response to a serious problem that has plagued the ability of the U.S. to successfully recover Americans held captive in the post-9/11 era."

Hunter said giving the FBI authority over the fusion cell is a mistake, claiming the agency is ill-equipped to handle foreign hostage crises.

The team that carried out the administration's hostage review was comprised of officials from the Departments of Defense, State, Justice, Treasury and the intelligence community.

An administration official said the U.S. government has observed a "significant shift" in hostage-takings abroad by terrorists and criminal groups, requiring the policy to also evolve with new and more pronounced challenges.

"Terrorist groups have become increasingly willing to engage in publicized and repugnant murders of hostages if they are unable to extract concessions," the administration official said. "They deliberately target private citizens as well as government officials to garner media attention and attempt to extract political and financial concessions."

CNN's Kevin Liptak and Deirdre Walsh contributed to this report.

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/23/politics/hostage-policy-review-changes-white-house/index.html>

