

The Moral Math of Trading with Enemies

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The Bowe Bergdahl controversy has brought renewed attention to the costs of trading for hostages, and how the United States, Israel, and other countries weigh those costs.

Washington is doing it. So are Cairo and Amman. Since January, the United States, Egypt and Jordan have all released high-value terrorists from captivity in exchange for kidnapped nationals abroad.

For many countries, the principle of leaving no man or woman behind is sacred. But these transactions are problematic. As with the law of supply and demand, when a country pays for captives, it's likely to encourage more kidnappings. Just ask Israel.

The Jewish state is currently involved in a manhunt for three teenagers kidnapped while hitchhiking in the West Bank. Israel has blamed Hamas for the crime and has deployed 2,000 troops to the territories on a search-and-rescue mission.

Hamas has a long track record of kidnapping Israeli soldiers and civilians, the most "successful" of which was the 2006 abduction of Corporal Gilad Shalit. Shalit, 19 years old when abducted, was released in 2011 in exchange for 1,027 imprisoned Hamas terrorists.

Israel has always paid a high price to bring its citizens -- dead or alive -- back home. The numbers are striking. In 1982, for example, Israel released 4,767 prisoners in exchange for six of its soldiers held by the Palestine Liberation Organization; in 1985, 1,150 Palestinians were freed in return for three Israeli soldiers. More recently, in 2008 Israel swapped four members of Hezbollah and Samir Quntar, the state's most notorious and reviled terrorist captive, for the corpses of two soldiers killed in Lebanon in 2006.

The value of Israeli captives has not been lost on the state's adversaries. Even today, posters circulating in Palestinian areas in support of the kidnappings reference the 2006 abduction. One sign reads: "Shalit = 1,027

prisoners, three Shalalit [coining a new Arabic plural] = 3,081 prisoners."

While the commitment to its soldiers no doubt provides important reassurance to those in harm's way, it also offers a perverse incentive to abduct more Israelis, fueling a vicious cycle.

Consider Egypt and Jordan's recent experience. This past January, five Egyptian diplomats were snatched by Libyan terrorists in Tripoli. In return for its envoys, Cairo released Abu Obeida, the leader of one of Libya's largest Salafist-Islamist militias.

Not surprisingly, three months later, Jordan's ambassador in Tripoli was seized. In exchange for the consul, Jordan freed Mohamed Darsi, a would-be Al Qaeda suicide bomber who had been sentenced to life in prison for attempting to blow up Amman Airport.

To be sure, American soldiers and civilians abroad are perennial kidnapping targets regardless of American policy. Washington's swap of five senior Taliban officials in exchange for Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl -- apprehended in 2009 in Afghanistan after apparently wandering away from his post -- is unlikely to change this unfortunate dynamic.

The Bergdahl trade raises some especially thorny issues regarding the threat of terrorist recidivism and a state's obligations to redeem nationals captured committing illicit acts.

On both accounts, it seems, Israel has few misgivings. Dozens of terrorists released from Israeli jails have killed again; and in 2004, the Jewish state traded 435 Hezbollah captives for Elhanan Tannenbaum, an Israeli citizen abducted in Europe during a drug deal.

No doubt Israel sees these transactions as the cost of doing business in the Middle East. While the exchanges are probably less harmful than the hundreds of millions of dollars France, Britain and Germany have paid to Al Qaeda in ransom over the last decade to repatriate their abducted nationals, either way, the inescapable result is an increased demand for hostages. Perhaps that's why Israel is devoting so much effort to hunting down -- rather than purchasing -- the three abducted teenagers.

Meanwhile, today in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians are handing out candy in celebration of the kidnapping and anticipating the next prisoner release.

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