AQIM's hostage taking and the ransom dilemma

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In mid September, a few hours after five French citizens were taken hostage by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Niger, a senior Algerian diplomat told the international media that ransoms paid by European states in order to free their kidnapped citizens are being used to finance terrorist attacks. In fact, Algeria has repeatedly criticized European states for paying ransoms. Algeria's Delegate Minister for African and Maghreb Affairs Abdelkader Messahel said "we know that most of the terrorist activity in the Sahel is possible because of the ransom money". Indeed, Algeria is currently lobbying in the United Nations to add two articles to Security Council Resolution 1904 in order to make such payments a criminal offense.[1] AQIM – as well as individuals acting under its banner though not formal members – has been responsible for the kidnapping of several Western citizens, mostly Europeans, in the Maghreb and Sahel regions. This criminal activity has grown exponentially since 2007. In order to free the hostages, AQIM demands large sums of money as well as the release of Islamist terrorists held in European and African prisons. Although no European state has officially acknowledged any concessions, at the end of the day the ransom is what unblocks the situation. For example, after Spain's Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos publicly denied ransom payment, Madrid is said to have paid more than US$5 million for the release of three of its citizens kidnapped in November 2009 in Mauritania. Other ransoms were not far from these amounts.

From a merely pragmatic and short-term point of view, the ransom policy is successful: once payment is made, hostages are freed unharmed. Reversely, failing to meet the AQIM's financial demands and adopting a different approach seems to bring disastrous results: when French commandos stormed an AQIM camp in Mali in July 2010 to free Michel Germaneau - a French hostage taken in April in Niger - and failed to find him, the terrorist group killed Germaneau as retaliation. In a previous case, Edwin Dyer, a British national, was killed on May 31st 2009, after the United Kingdom failed to fulfill the terrorists' demands: releasing Abu Qatada[2] and paying ransom. This was the first time AQIM killed a hostage – although a woman had already died in captivity due to illness.

As a result, the history of hostage taking by AQIM seems to encourage European governments to pay ransoms and refrain from adopting other measures. This lesson is emphasized by the significant coverage that executions have in European media and the consequent public pressure that European societies exert over their governments.

Kidnappings are one of the main tactics used by AQIM. Their purpose is to first and foremost serve as an important source of revenue. Secondly, they aim to affect a much needed counterterrorist cooperation in the region by instigating disputes between countries – not only due to payments (tolerated by some and rejected by others), but also because of the political rifts generated by the release of imprisoned terrorists.

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1 This resolution already states that the ban on funds, financial assets and economic resources fully applies to the payment of ransoms. Still, there is no measure that effectively prohibits ransoms.

2 Abu Qatada is a radical cleric arrested in the United Kingdom that has been described as "al-Qaeda's spiritual ambassador to Europe". Videos of his sermons were found in the Hamburg flat used by some of the 9/11 terrorists.

One naturally understands the anguish felt by hostages and their families, as well as the difficult situation European statesmen find themselves in when a citizen from their country is being held at gunpoint. European governments feel political and moral responsibility to act in order to assure the safety of citizens abroad, and payment seems to be the only alternative, as using police forces or deploying the military is impossible. Still, European decision-makers must look at the big picture and go beyond short-term – though understandable – calculations. The exponential growth rate of hostage taking by AQIM in the Maghreb and Sahel substantiates the obvious conclusion that the payment of ransom perpetuates the cycle of kidnappings, putting other citizens in harm's way. Furthermore, given the sums of money involved in these numerous cases, it is fair to say that ransoms are the main source of AQIM's financing – Algeria puts it at over 90% of the group's budget, although given Algiers' vested interest in ending ransoms, along with the difficulty of gathering solid intelligence, the figure is likely exaggerated. Aside from their financial relevance, ransoms embolden terrorists and provide them with the necessary thrust to keep fighting for the ultimate goals.

But there are deeper consequences. As long as AQIM maintains its strength and activities, it will be extremely difficult to foster economic development and political reform in the region. AQIM takes advantage of and accentuates inner-state and regional differences, fuels black markets, capitalizes on social grievances, promotes illicit activities such as drug trafficking, and is one of the motives invoked by local regimes to justify the tight grip they hold over their societies. Hence, it will perpetuate all the pressing issues that the international community wants to overcome. All together, these factors lead to a rather contradictory situation: the West, and Europe in particular, spend time and money on development projects to help the Maghreb, and then pay to destabilize the region. It is a counterproductive path that demonstrates the absence of real, shared understanding and a lack of a joint response to the problem. It also shows that Europe – probably without being aware of it – does not perceive AQIM as its own problem, despite these kidnappings and AQIM's actions on European soil: bear in mind that several member-states had kidnappings orchestrated by domestic terrorists and, when that happened, they were averse to making concessions.

Citizens from the Maghreb are AQIM's first and main victims, so naturally they tend to oppose any practice that empowers their aggressor. However, in this case, accepting Algeria's point of view does not require altruism from European leaders. As mentioned above, payments to terrorists directly and seriously affect European interests. Moreover, due to the nature and scope of the threat, no effective solution can be achieved without solid cooperation between Europe and the Maghreb. Algeria has taken the lead in trying to shape the region's response to terrorism and, at least for that, it is an indispensable partner. Diplomatic quarrels should therefore be avoided.

The solution to hostage taking situations is neither simple nor direct, and it does not offer short-term results. It is a long-term and intricate process that cannot be summarized in a paragraph. However, there are a couple of basic steps that must be taken. The first step is to have effective and systematic police operations based on solid intelligence. Both European and local governments will have to adapt their strategies in order to attain the above-mentioned goal. Second, it is crucial to shatter AQIM's support base. Despite the many differences between jihadism and 'traditional' forms of terrorism, AQIM needs a constituency in order to prosper, just as Baader-Meinhof and IRA needed one. Debunking social support – whether tacit or explicit – is a complex issue. Despite this, there are two broad paths to take: local governments must create a safe environment where people may denounce the AQIM's activities; and those same governments should also invest more in political reforms, which are important because social grievances are behind the terrorist recruitment process. Also, political reforms would solve the states' debilities that largely justify AQIM's operational and tactic success.

Hostage taking can only be solved by addressing the structural dimension of the problem. It is an enormous challenge with many potential roadblocks, but it is also the only way to offer a sustainable solution to the threat posed by AQIM.