

Families of journalists murdered by ISIS threatened with prosecution by US government

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New details have emerged of threats of prosecution made against the families of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, who were brutally beheaded on video by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The gruesome murders of Foley and Sotloff have been seized upon as highly opportune events by the Obama administration, quite consciously and rapidly exploiting their deaths to justify expanding its war in the Middle East and operations targeting the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Under the pretense of fighting ISIS—which has benefited from funding and arms coming from the CIA and its allies in the region—the US Congress will vote on a bill this week that would approve \$500 million for training and arming Syrian opposition forces.

Diane Foley, speaking in an interview last week, said that a member of the Obama administration’s National Security Council staff threatened the family with criminal prosecution for “material support” of terrorism on multiple occasions if they paid the ransom that was being demanded by ISIS for Foley’s release.

According to Philip Balboni, the chief executive of Foley’s employer GlobalPost, ISIS had demanded a ransom of approximately \$132 million prior to his murder.

“We were told very clearly three times that it was illegal for us to try to ransom our son out and that we had the possibility of being prosecuted,” Foley’s mother told ABC News.

“I was surprised there was so little compassion. It just made me realize that these people talking to us had no idea what it was like to be the family of someone abducted... I’m sure [the U.S. official] didn’t mean it

the way he said it, but we were between a rock and a hard place. We were told we could do nothing; meanwhile our son was being beaten and tortured every day,” she said.

“It was very upsetting because we were essentially told to trust that the way they were handling things would bring our son home.”

The Foley family was kept largely in the dark about what the American government was doing to rescue their son as he was being held captive by ISIS in Syria. US Special Forces allegedly made an attempt in early July to free Foley and other hostages being held by ISIS, but the military has said that the hostages were moved from the location where it was suspected they were being held captive.

Foley’s brother, Michael, told ABC News that he had been threatened by a State Department official with prosecution as well. The threats “slowed my parents down quite a bit,” he said. “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?”

Barak Barfi, a spokesman for the family of Steven Sotloff, told Yahoo News that the Sotloffs were told by a White House counterterrorism official in a meeting last May that they could face prosecution if they paid their son’s ransom. “The family felt completely and utterly helpless when they heard this,” Barfi said. “The Sotloffs felt there was nothing they could do to get Steve out.”

The Foley and Sotloff families’ decisions to come forward about the threats from the US government drew denials from multiple individuals within the Obama administration.

In an appearance on Fox News Sunday, White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough responded to the family's claims by denying that anyone in the administration ever threatened Foley's family. "We didn't threaten anybody, but we made clear what the law is," he said. "That's our responsibility, to make sure we explain the law and uphold the law."

Caitlin Hayden, spokesperson for the National Security Council, denied that the families were threatened but reiterated that "the US does not grant concessions to hostage takers. Doing so would only put more Americans at risk of being taken captive. That is what we convey publicly and what we convey privately."

Other revelations by the family of Steven Sotloff about the circumstances that led to his death raise questions about the relationship of ISIS to elements that make up the so-called moderate rebels being funded and armed by the United States and its allies.

Last week the Sotloff family's spokesman revealed that Steven had been sold to ISIS by a supposedly moderate rebel group at the Syrian border. "We believe these so-called moderate rebels that people want our administration to support—one of them sold him probably for something between 25,000 and 50,000 dollars and that was the reason he was captured," Barfi said.

On Sunday the AFP news service reported that a ceasefire had been reached between moderate rebels and ISIS forces in Hajar al-Aswad, a suburb south of Damascus. An official from the US-backed Syrian National Coalition admitted that a temporary ceasefire had been reached between the supposedly moderate Free Syrian Army forces and ISIS in that area, but denied that a lasting deal had been reached.

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