

# HOSTAGES, THE STATE, THE SECRET SERVICES, MONEY AND THE MEDIA

*by Claude MONIQUET, Chairman of ESISC*

Reading the papers is never a let-down. They are quick to denounce scandal and injustice, to hand out bouquets and brickbats, and even at times to track down the truth (more slowly, admittedly, when it concerns their own errors and abuses, but that, as Kipling said, is another story). The media, though, have an irritating tendency to re-invent the wheel by uncovering truths that everyone knows. Thus, on Monday, The Times revealed that Paris and Berlin had paid tens of millions of dollars in ransom for the release of hostages held in Iraq. **Governments paid money for the release of hostages? The answer is short and simple: Yes, they did – so what?**

What journalist – what citizen, in fact – could imagine for a second that the release of hostages is achieved by "*state-to-state negotiations*," without a payment of ransom, as was claimed 18 years ago by those around Jacques Chirac, at the time of the Lebanon hostage crisis? In a book published several years ago<sup>1</sup>, I described the negotiations leading up to the release of the hostages. Yes, governments pay, in one way or another: in cash, with secret political agreements, in arms shipments, by providing visas or medical treatment for the leaders of the groups concerned, and so on.

There are, in fact, three ways to resolve a hostage crisis, and only three: free the hostages by force, pay a ransom, or weigh up the cost-benefit equation and accept their loss. With a bit of luck, seeing that their blackmail is not working, the hostage-takers will see the light and rid themselves of their troublesome burden. Most often the hostages will be killed, if only to show governments that the terrorists are serious, in preparation for another attempt in the future. **Experts from our Centre have been called upon in the last eight months to advise two governments whose citizens have been taken hostage. In both cases, the solution consisted in paying a ransom.**

And what in the end does society want? Where does the government's responsibility lie? Society, rightly, wants the hostages to be freed. The state has a primary responsibility, the protection of the safety of its citizens. From that point on, if the means – or the courage – are not available to mount a military operation to take the hostages by force, a call will be made to the "*secret services*" to use "*special*" methods (they are also known as "*special forces*") to bring about a happy ending.

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<sup>1</sup> *La guerre sans visage*, Claude Moniquet, Editions Michel Lafon, Paris 2002

In view of that, the press is irresponsible in bringing up this sort of polemic, to the point of quoting exact figures, because that can only encourage the terrorists to carry on with the *business* of taking hostages. The state, by denying the charges outright in the teeth of all reason, is laughing at the voters – and incidentally taxpayers – who have after all bankrolled the hostages' freedom.

The best solution would be the fourth on the list, though in these politically-correct times it is all but unthinkable: pay for the release of our citizens in the first instance, and thereafter send the "*secret services*" out to find the hostage-takers and terminate them *with extreme prejudice*, as the expression goes, in order to make it clear to any would-be imitators that the price to be paid is a heavy one. For that to happen, though, the state needs to stand up and be courageous. But the state is in retreat, as we see from the sad ***Clearstream*** affair among others, and courage has been missing for a long time now. As far as special forces are concerned, is it too much to ask that they take time out from carrying out dirty tricks operations on behalf of one political gang against another, to do what we pay them for instead?<sup>2</sup> It rather seems as if it might be.

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<sup>2</sup> The careful reader will have understood that we are referring specifically to the French situation.