



أكاديمية  
أنور قرقاش  
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ANWAR GARGASH  
DIPLOMATIC  
ACADEMY

AGDA  
INSIGHT

RESEARCH & ANALYSIS

JANUARY 2022

# Indian Diplomacy in Practice: Negotiating Hostage Release in Iraq

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## Executive summary

- ◇ This Insight is a practitioner's perspective on negotiating a hostage crisis in Iraq, narrating the first-hand experience of the events that occurred in 2004 and the rationale behind decisions that ultimately led to the successful release of the hostages.
- ◇ The case study revolves around the rescue of seven hostages – three Indians, three Kenyans and one Egyptian – who were kidnapped in Iraq in 2004. It gives a detailed account of the challenges faced by the negotiators, led by the author, specific problems that arose through the month-long negotiations with the hostage-takers, and the diplomatic skills that were needed to achieve the successful release of the hostages.
- ◇ The main aim of the personal account, analyses and observations in this Insight is to add value to the existing pedagogy of diplomacy.

## The Issue

At the end of July 2004, seven drivers working for a Kuwaiti company, KGL, while transporting military equipment from Kuwait to the American forces in Iraq, were taken hostage by insurgent groups near Falluja. These drivers included three Indians, three Kenyans and one Egyptian. In India, there was an immediate media furore to get them home. Grieving family members regularly made fervent appeals for their release, with politicians joining them to pressurise the government.

In New Delhi, the Congress Party, which had just returned to power after eight years, found itself facing this crisis. In response, the government sent a team of diplomats to Baghdad to facilitate the release of the hostages. As the ambassador in Oman, I led the team, which included the ambassador to Iraq and another diplomat who spoke fluent Arabic.

Iraq had been invaded by a US led coalition a little over a year earlier. The country was devastated – its institutions of governance were nearly non-existent, while a plethora of insurgent groups had emerged in different parts of the country. Some of them claimed to be opponents of foreign occupation, some were connected to the previous regime, others had a sectarian agenda, and there were criminal groups, who simply took advantage of the chaos to kidnap, assault and murder.

At that time, it was difficult to tell one group from another in terms of its background, organisation or motives. Further, in terms of their actions, the three categories were not necessarily mutually exclusive – a group opposing foreign occupation could also carry out sectarian attacks and kidnap vulnerable groups or individuals for ransom.

The Indian team was informed that a tribal chief from Falluja was negotiating with the kidnappers and it was likely that the hostages would be released if a ransom was paid by their employer. For fear of aggravating the hostage-takers, the negotiating team was instructed not to interact either with the US-led coalition forces or the interim administration in Baghdad.

The team reached Baghdad (via Amman) on 1 August and stayed in the ambassador's residence for safety and convenience. While Kenya had no embassy in Baghdad, we maintained contact with the Egyptian embassy, then headed by a Counsellor-rank officer who was the Charge d'Affaires. He was informed that our mission was to obtain the release of all hostages, not just the Indians.

Apart from dealing with the political and security sensitivities on the ground, the negotiating team was

also mindful of significant media interest in the event and occasional sensationalism, as both Indian and Arab television channels were covering the kidnapping prominently.

## Handling the Crisis

At the first internal meeting at the Indian embassy, the team agreed on the following norms that would define our actions in handling the crisis:

1. We would function as an integrated team; reports sent by the team head to the Ministry would be seen by all members and suggested changes would be incorporated in the reports.
2. Recognising that the chances of failure were high, it was agreed that we would make detailed personal notes to guide us in case we had to face an enquiry commission later.
3. Noting that we had no previous experience in handling such challenges, we agreed to pool together our personal knowledge and resources and make every effort jointly to secure the release of the hostages.
4. We also agreed that, since we were on the ground, we would not constantly seek directions from the headquarters. Instead, we decided to act on the basis of our best judgement, while keeping New Delhi in the loop. Flowing from this, the team agreed to collectively accept full responsibility for the consequences of its actions.

Within a week of getting to work in Baghdad, the team met its first hurdle. The tribal chief negotiating with the hostage-takers announced on Al Arabiya TV that his negotiations had failed and he was withdrawing from further involvement in the matter.

Next morning, while we were pondering our next steps, a surprise visitor showed up at the embassy: an Iraqi academic, who taught political science at a local university. He told us that he had been authorised by the hostage-takers to negotiate on their behalf. We were in discussion with him almost every day for the next three weeks.

The negotiations were divided into three parts:

- (i) political agenda;
- (ii) discussing the ransom amount;
- (iii) handover of the ransom and release of the hostages

## Political Agenda

The first demand of the hostage-takers was that representatives of the Indian and Egyptian embassies should make separate formal statements on Al Arabiya television affirming the following:

1. condemnation of the US invasion;
2. demand that the US occupation be ended immediately;
3. confirmation that our nationals will not work in Iraq.

We were given a deadline of four or five days to announce our statement on television, after which the next round of discussions would occur.

The Indian team took two decisions:

1. a statement would be finalised in Baghdad, without sending a draft to New Delhi; we feared that vetting of the draft would delay matters and, perhaps, jeopardise our mission;
2. in order to be as close to our government's thinking as possible, the draft statement prepared by us would use the remarks of the ministers in the Indian parliament during the debate on the US invasion and the unanimous resolutions that had been passed.

The parliamentary resolutions had severely criticised the US invasion and demanded an immediate end to the occupation. The government had also banned the movement of all workers to Iraq for employment. Thus, we had no difficulty in meeting the demands of the kidnappers.

Unexpectedly, our Egyptian colleague had a problem. He said that, given Egypt's ties with the United States, there was no way he could officially condemn the invasion or demand an immediate withdrawal of US coalition forces. He added that more than 150,000 Egyptians were working in Iraq, mostly as farmers, with many married to Iraqis. Hence, there was a regular movement of employed Egyptians between Egypt and Iraq, which could not be banned.

Understanding this predicament, we had a long conversation with the interlocutor to persuade him not to end the discussion because of Egypt's concerns. We suggested that the Indian statement be viewed as representing all three governments of the hostages. The hostage-takers agreed to this a day or so later. The statement prepared on this basis was then read out on Al Arabiya television by our Arabic-speaking team member.

## Fixing the Ransom

The next step was fixing the ransom. These discussions were no longer bilateral between the Indian team and the interlocutor. The Kuwait government became an active party to the discussions because the drivers worked for a Kuwaiti company, KGL. We agreed that the details of our discussions would be conveyed telephonically every day to the Indian ambassador in Kuwait who was in regular contact with the Kuwaiti foreign ministry and KGL. The views of the company were then conveyed by us to the interlocutor in Baghdad.

Not surprisingly, the discussions were prolonged and difficult. The hostage-takers showed great animosity towards Kuwait for its support to the US-led coalition and wanted to inflict the maximum penalty on KGL. The hostage-takers made an initial demand of \$20 million. Following discussions with the Indian team, this was reduced steadily over the next few days to \$10 million, \$5 million and finally to \$1 million. Throughout these conversations, KGL did not move from its offer of \$350,000 (\$50,000 for each driver).

An impasse was reached with the hostage-takers and KGL not budging from these amounts. At times, the discussions in Baghdad were tense, with the interlocutor conveying that the hostages would be killed if the demand was not met. The interlocutor also proposed that the gap of \$650,000 be made up by the Indian government. This was unacceptable to India. Even the fact that Indian officials were negotiating with the hostage-takers was not in the public domain.

After reflection, the Indian team argued against the kidnappers executing the hostages by making the following points:

1. The Iraqi hostage-takers believed that they enjoyed support in Asia, Africa and the Arab world due to their opposition to US forces in Iraq. An argument could be made that if they executed the hostages due to differences over a small sum of money, they would quickly lose that support and risked being viewed as mere criminals.
2. The reason why the Indian government could not pay any part of the ransom was quite simple: there were more than 20 million Indians living in different parts of the world; once news spread that the government had paid a ransom of nearly a million dollars to release its nationals, no Indian anywhere would be safe. No government would like to place itself or its nationals in such a situation.

After considerable discussion, the hostage-takers accepted the ransom of \$350,000 that KGL had agreed to pay.

## Payment of Ransom and Release of Hostages

Since the acceptance of the ransom was conveyed late in the evening, KGL was able to arrange a special aircraft with the money only after a day's gap. After consultations, it was agreed that the ransom would be paid at the Egyptian embassy, which was closer to the airport than the Indian embassy.

The interlocutor informed us that, after the handover of the ransom, all the hostages would be released within a perimeter of half a kilometre from the Egyptian embassy.

That day, in an unrelated development, about 20 Nepalis, who had been kidnapped two weeks earlier, were executed elsewhere in Iraq. This tragic development, widely covered on local media, made us most apprehensive about the fate of our own hostages.

Next morning, a special aircraft arranged by KGL landed at Baghdad airport, with a company official escorting the money. It appeared that the Kuwaiti government had organised the security of the escort and the ransom through the company managing the airport security.

It is also possible that the Kuwaiti government may have arranged with the US authorities that their forces would not confront or attack the hostage-takers or their representatives, but would allow the payment and release operations to go through smoothly.

Thus, accompanied by several officials from the airport security, the KGL official and the money reached the Egyptian embassy. The money was handed over to the interlocutor who quickly disappeared into the large crowd that had gathered outside the embassy.

Members of the Indian team then searched for the seven hostages within the agreed half kilometre perimeter. They were discovered standing together in a group not too far from the Egyptian embassy. They were all then taken to the Indian ambassador's residence.

After lunch, two Indian officials accompanied them to Kuwait in a special aircraft and handed them over to KGL. The Indian drivers left for India three days later.

## Unique Features of the Crisis

This hostage crisis had some unique features that shaped the approach of the Indian negotiators and, perhaps, determined the outcome.

1. The crisis occurred in a country that was under foreign military occupation and had no functioning government of its own. Thus, the Indian team's entire negotiating effort was focused on a single interlocutor who represented unknown hostage-takers. While there is every likelihood that the US authorities were aware of the discussions, they did not intervene in the matter. The Kuwaiti government also clearly prioritised the safety of the hostages throughout the crisis.
2. The Indian team's efforts were facilitated by the absence of Indian media representatives in Baghdad on the ground. If media persons had been present in Baghdad, it is likely that speculation, intrusiveness and regular pressure on officials might have jeopardised the negotiations over the three-week period.
3. It was also helpful that, while Indian diplomats led the discussions with the hostage-takers, India was not a party to the financial settlement. The negotiations by Indian officials in Iraq were effectively on behalf of the Kuwaiti company. The Indian team only had to ensure that the final outcome did not depend on any financial contribution by the Indian government.
4. Again, it was most helpful that the Indian government was not directly involved with the political issues at play in the crisis – the principal contention was between the hostage-takers and the US and, by extension, Kuwait. Our mission was also facilitated by the fact that the Indian parliament had already taken a principled position on the invasion, which enabled the Indian team to quickly respond to the political demands of the hostage-takers.
5. The close relations between India and Kuwait meant that the latter attached the highest importance to the safety of the hostages and probably ensured that coalition forces took no peremptory action in Baghdad against the hostage-takers at any stage of the crisis, even though paying the ransom meant enriching the coffers of the US's enemies.

## Concluding Observations

1. The most important factor that contributed to the success of this effort was the team-work of the Indian officials in Baghdad, their close coordination with the Indian ambassador in Kuwait, and the considered decision of all officials to function as an integrated team, take decisions on the spot, and accept personal responsibility for the implications of these decisions.
2. The decision of the Indian team to represent the interests of all the kidnapped drivers, not just the Indians, emerged from the sense of Afro-Asian solidarity engendered by the spirit of the nonaligned movement, which is ingrained in the psyche of Indian diplomats.
3. Indian team members were well-informed about Iraq's history, politics and culture and were deeply sympathetic to the sufferings of the Iraqi people due to the decades-long conflicts and the US led invasion in 2003. India's close political and economic ties with Iraq over the previous decades and the goodwill that most Iraqis have for India were also factors that facilitated the ransom negotiations.
4. During meetings with the interlocutor, the Indian team discussed the political and military situation in the country and conveyed sympathy for the suffering of the Iraqi people, which perhaps made the atmosphere more conducive for a positive outcome.
5. The crisis severely tested the negotiating skills of the Indian team, whose members were involved in an unprecedented challenge. Early interactions with the Iraqi interlocutor gave the impression that the group behind him comprised experienced political figures and intellectuals. The interlocutor brought detailed written notes for all the meetings and did not say anything beyond what was in his notes. All demands were conveyed orally and he refused to hand over any written statements.
6. The Indian team had to be careful in the language used to convey its views to the interlocutor so that nothing could be deemed as insulting or provocative. In order to retain credibility through the long period of discussions, the team ensured that, while its views were put across clearly, no false statement or misleading remark was made.
7. At one crucial moment in the negotiations, the kidnappers attempted to pressure us psychologically. This was when the talks had reached an impasse

on the ransom amount – the hostage-takers were fixated on \$1 million as opposed to \$350,000 offered by KGL. After reluctantly agreeing to consult the hostage-takers and revert in a few hours, the interlocutor did not call back for nearly two days. During this nerve-wracking period, we believed that our movements and conduct were being monitored by the local sources of the hostage-takers. We made it a point to display no overt anxiety during the period of the interlocutor's disappearance. This perhaps convinced the kidnappers that we were firm on the ransom amount and, hence, decided to return to the discussions and finally accept KGL offer.

Overall, the 2004 hostage crisis was a test for Indian diplomacy in a unique set of circumstances. The safe return of hostages belonging to three different countries was the result of teamwork and the commitment of officials from diverse backgrounds who did their best to protect the lives of very vulnerable people and serve the interests of their country in trying conditions.