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Secret Talks, New Flexibility Led to Release

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WASHINGTON—The release of David P. Jacobsen and the sudden hope of freedom for other American hostages in Beirut came as the result of a long series of secret negotiations between the Islamic Jihad kidnapers and the Reagan Administration, which once vowed never to negotiate with terrorists, U.S. officials said Sunday.

And, despite the Administration's insistence that it would never "make a deal" with kidnapers, the breakthrough reflected a new willingness on the part of both President Reagan and the terrorists to seek a compromise solution to the two-year-old hostage problem.

Since July, both sides have sent messages and signals to each other—some openly, but many through secret channels including Syria, Iran, and Anglican Church negotiator Terry Waite—suggesting more flexibility than their public positions implied, officials and terrorism experts said.

At the same time, some sources said, revolutionary Iran appeared to take an increasing role in pushing for a compromise solution, apparently hoping that it could persuade the United States to ease a ban on U.S. weapons sales for its lengthy war with neighboring Iraq.

Although Reagan and his aides once declared flatly that they would never negotiate with terrorists, that policy has clearly shifted during the last year—an evolution prompted by the lesson, learned reluctantly in other hostage crises, that deals are sometimes unavoidable. Today, the Administration says it is willing to negotiate for the release of U.S. hostages if it can do so without giving in directly to terrorists' demands.

"There has been no change in U.S. policy," White House spokesman Larry Speakes insisted Sunday. "We continue our policy of talking with anyone who can be helpful, but we do not make concessions, nor do we ask third countries to do so."

White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan was franker. "Negotiations . . . have been going on over the past several months," he said on ABC television's "This Week With David Brinkley."

"Because we are still negotiating for the other hostages, we aren't going to say anything more about what process we went through to get Mr. Jacobsen out," Regan said. Asked whether the Administration was giving in to the kidnapers' demands, he replied: "Absolutely not."

But asked whether "negotiating" implied some other kind of U.S. concession, Regan said: "I won't talk about that . . . but there's an awful lot that goes on in the Middle East."

On the other side of the bargain, officials and terrorism experts noted that the statement issued Sunday by Islamic Jihad (Islamic Holy War), the group that kidnaped Jacobsen and still holds two American hostages, was unusually conciliatory.

U.S. Approaches Cited

It said that the United States has made "approaches which, if continued, could lead to a solution of the hostage issue." And, significantly, it made no mention at all of the kidnapers' original demand, the release of 17 prisoners, mostly Lebanese, convicted of car bomb attacks on the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait in December, 1983.

"We're more hopeful than things they've said in the past because it indicates that they are indeed prepared to consider the release of the additional hostages," said Robert B. Oakley, a former director of counterterrorism at the State Department. "Past communiqués by the Islamic Jihad have been very explicit in threatening to kill the hostages unless all the people in Kuwait were released."

"The one thing that I am confident of is there hasn't been any deal with respect to the prisoners in Kuwait. There may be other things," Oakley said in an interview on Cable News Network. "Perhaps the captors are beginning to understand that the Kuwaiti prisoner thing is just out of the question."

Another terrorism expert, Robin Wright of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said that the change in Islamic Jihad's approach first appeared in July, when the kidnapers released Father Lawrence Martin Jenco, a

Roman Catholic priest taken hostage in 1985. Jenco carried a secret message from the terrorists to Pope John Paul II and to Robert A. K. Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury, along with a videotape from Jacobsen appealing to the Reagan Administration to negotiate.

"Islamic Jihad was getting tired of holding these hostages," Wright said. "They wanted to see if they could make a deal."

She noted that, despite the kidnapers' frequent threats to kill their hostages, only one, U.S. diplomat William Buckley, has apparently died in the hands of Islamic Jihad—and U.S. intelligence officials believe that he was not killed deliberately.

Conciliatory Face

As a result of Jenco's messages, Runcie sent Waite back to Beirut to make contact with the kidnapers, and the Reagan Administration slowly began to show a more conciliatory face.

In August and September, Islamic Jihad issued more and more messages from the hostages, seeking to build public pressure on the Administration to make concessions. A long videotape released Oct. 3 showed hostage Terry A. Anderson, the Beirut bureau chief for Associated Press, asking why the Administration had made a deal with the Soviet Union for the release of imprisoned journalist Nicholas Daniloff but still ruled out concessions for him.

Speaking at a press conference later, Reagan responded plaintively: "We don't even know who is holding them (the hostages)."

That wasn't true, officials later conceded; the Administration had already been in indirect contact with Islamic Jihad. But the State Department declared that "our door [is] open" for talks, and the contacts apparently stepped up.

U.S. officials refused to describe their negotiations, pointing out that five more Americans are still held hostage in Lebanon.

"We have been working through a number of sensitive channels for a long time," Reagan said in a statement announcing Jacobsen's release. "However, we cannot di-

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vulge any of the details of the release because the lives of other Americans and other Western hostages are still at risk."

But other officials, speaking on condition that they not be identified, have said in past weeks that the United States has been talking with Iranian, Syrian, Algerian and Lebanese officials who are in contact with the kidnapers.

Iran is important because it is the chief sponsor, both ideologically and financially, of Islamic Jihad and similar Shia Muslim radical groups. The groups are largely based in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, but their money and weapons come almost entirely from Iran.

The United States has named Iran as one of the major instigators

of anti-American terrorism ever since the followers of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and held 52 Americans hostage for 14 months.

But the Iranian regime has also intervened to end several hostage crises, and its interest in normalizing relations with the United States has risen as its need has increased for U.S.-made arms in its war with Iraq.

Several sources said that Iran may now be urging Islamic Jihad to compromise with the United States

in the hope that the Tehran regime will benefit.

Even if Islamic Jihad makes a deal, however, the Administration may still be faced with a continued hostage crisis. Only two of the remaining hostages, Anderson and Thomas Sutherland, are known to be held by the group. Three others, Joseph J. Cicippio, Frank H. Reed and Edward A. Tracy, were kidnaped in September and October by terrorists claiming to belong to three previously unknown organizations—and these men have not been heard from since.