HOUTHIS OR IRANIANS? - SAUDI ARABIA’S OIL SECTOR DISRUPTED IN AERIAL ATTACKS
organisations have found themselves to be particularly vulnerable. This is primarily due to the digital boom occurring on the continent, whereby businesses and individuals are becoming increasingly Internet-connected, with a backdrop of a lack of appropriate funds and education to secure their devices against cyber threats. Moreover, a significant portion of African states are ill-equipped to deal with this growing phenomenon, lacking the legislation and infrastructure to respond to and prevent attacks. With the number of Internet users growing exponentially, Africa is set to remain a fertile breeding ground for cybercriminals for the foreseeable future.

The Focus Article examines the 14 September 2019 attacks on Saudi Arabia’s Abqaiq plant and the Khurais oilfield, two of the most important oil facilities in the country. These coordinated attacks utilising armed drones and cruise missiles are considered to be the biggest blow to the Kingdom’s oil infrastructure in recent history, causing one of the largest disruptions to the global oil market. While the operation was claimed by the Houthis in Yemen, the US and its allies claimed it was orchestrated and funded by Iran, in the context of increasing tensions in the Persian Gulf. While the origins of the attacks cannot be fully ascertained at present, it is clear that Saudi critical infrastructure will remain a target, particularly oil and gas facilities, given their economic and political importance.

The Global Piracy Update provides an overview of the piracy threat by region, providing trend analysis for July and August 2019. It also offers sample cases that took place during those months to illustrate identified trends.

The Cybersecurity section examines current issues affecting companies and individuals in the realm of IT security. This edition will provide an overview of cybercrime trends on the African continent. Africa is one of the fastest growing regions in the world regarding cybercrime, with attacks costing African economies billions of dollars per year. As cybercriminals seek to increase their activities worldwide, African
Los Mexicles gang identification tattoo. (Photo: El Paso Times)

was visiting the city. Quezada's body was subsequently identified on 29 August, after relatives of one of the victims reported his kidnapping for ransom. Investigations started on 5 June, after several suspects and rescuing him, along with another male. Police officers subsequently deployed to the location where they believed the man was being held, arresting several suspects and rescuing him, along with another victim. There, the police learnt of another safe house in the city where other migrants were being held. At the second location, the authorities found 16 female hostages. Investigations determined that the women had been held captive and sexually assaulted for 25 days.

Los Mexicles gang identification tattoo. (Photo: El Paso Times)
EUROPE

With at least 27 kidnapped foreigners registered, Europe accounted for approximately 11% of Constellis’ records for July-August 2019; a significant reduction from the previous reporting period when the region accounted for 91 victims. This was linked to a reduction in the number of reported mass kidnappings of migrants, with only one such incident recorded. On the other hand, this reporting period was characterised by a number of incidents in which victims were linked to drug-trafficking activities and other criminal offences. This has been particularly notorious in Spain in recent months. According to figures from the Spanish National Police, Spain jumped from being the fifth most important point of entry of narcotics in Europe in 2017 to second place in 2018. While some Spanish criminals participate in narco-trafficking, the trade is primarily controlled by foreign mafias. The presence of Latin-American groups is well known in the country, with Eastern European and Maghrebi organisations also having a prominent presence, especially in the distribution of the products throughout the region.

CASES:

▶ On 20 July, Greek police rescued 19 South Asian undocumented migrants who were being held for ransom at a warehouse in the northern town of Volvi. According to the police report, the Pakistani and Bangladeshi victims were abducted by the gang who smuggled them from Turkey soon after their arrival in Thessaloniki. Instead of letting them proceed with their journey, the smugglers confined them in Volvi and forced them to ask their families for more money. A Pakistani national was arrested in the raid.

▶ On 23 August, the Spanish Police rescued a Danish citizen who had been held and tortured for ten days in a property in Marbella. The incident was reported by the parents of the victim after they received a number of phone calls from strangers demanding €165,000 euros (approximately USD 182,000) for the release of their son. To expedite the payment, the criminals additionally sent them photographs of the victim with bruises. The family was given only six hours to make the payment, after which the victim would be killed. The Spanish authorities however managed to locate the victim within the allocated time. A Spanish man guarding the Danish national was arrested during the rescue operation. The victim was also arrested, having an arrest warrant issued by the Danish authorities for drug-trafficking offences.

▶ On 30 July, officers of the Civil Guard in Almussafes, Valencia, released a Moroccan man who had been kidnapped in a dispute over a sale of drugs. The dispute originated when the victim and his brother cheated an Italian group who bought hashish from them. The buyers had paid €74,000 (almost USD 81,000) in advance for the drugs, but the Moroccans did not hand over the goods. The Italians located the pair but only managed to seize one of them, whom they held against the debt, threatening to cause him “irreversible damage” if it was not settled. The Moroccan who escaped alerted the authorities, who located the victim within 24 hours. Six people were arrested, including five Italians and a Moroccan who had served as intermediary between the groups.

▶ On 14 August, Italian police rescued an Australian woman who was abducted from Turin’s city centre in broad daylight on the same day. Video footage showed a group of hooded men bundling the woman inside a van as she screamed and tried to break free. The kidnappers also tried to abduct her male companion but he managed to escape and alert the police, who rescued the woman a short time later, after the van pulled into a parking lot. Four men, three German nationals and an Austrian, were arrested. Police said the perpetrators had been trying to recover money lost in a currency exchange scam, however it was not clear if the victim was involved in the scam or she was taken by error.

▶ In Russia, the manager of a St. Petersburg bank reported on 30 August the kidnapping of her partner who had been missing for three days. The report was made after the woman received a ransom note from the kidnappers, demanding USD 200,000 for the release of the victim. The police announced that they suspected that the victim had already been killed. Further investigations revealed that the man, who owned a paper company, had recently sold his company and had large debts.

Sporadic, isolated cases of kidnapping were also reported elsewhere in the region. In most instances, however, these remained linked to personal, business or criminal feuds, with traditional kidnap for ransom being rare, albeit possible. Instances of express kidnapping are far more common, given that no sophistication is needed to carry out these operations, though even these events occur at a much lower rate than other regions in the world. Nonetheless, basic security precautions should be maintained at all times in order to avoid becoming a victim of crime. These range from avoiding the display of wealth and valuables, particularly at night-time, moving through isolated spaces, and repetitious travel patterns.

CASES:

▶ A 15-year-old Vietnamese tourist who disappeared while on a trip in the UK was found safe by police in Staffordshire on 12 August. The teen, who speaks no English, had been with a tour group in York when she went missing on 6 August near Station Rise. A Vietnamese man was charged with the abduction as well as facilitating a breach of immigration laws. Ten other people have been arrested in connection with the case. It is not clear what the motive behind the abduction was.

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In Turkey, criminal activity is not particularly high, with opportunistic and petty crime as the most likely security threat to be encountered by visitors. Likewise, despite its size, Istanbul’s crime levels are relatively low compared to other major cities in the world. However, crime rates have recently been on the rise throughout the country, linked to criminal migration from neighbouring countries. Violent crime such as kidnapping, rape, and homicide have also seen an increase, boosted by an increase in the availability of weapons as a consequence of the conflict in neighbouring Syria.

Over recent months, a number of violent crimes have been committed targeting foreign nationals, especially those of Arab origin. As a result, the government of Saudi Arabia has issued a number of travel warnings on Turkey, subsequently designating the country as an unsafe location for its nationals. A number of critics of the Saudi government however argue that these measures have had a political drive, linked to the strained relationship between the two countries.

**CASES:**

- On 12 August, a Jordanian national went missing on his way to visit a friend in the Syrian province of As-Suwayda. After a few days, his family was contacted by the kidnappers, who demanded a ransom of JOD 30,000 (over USD 42,000). The victim was freed on 23 August in the city of Shabha, where he had been held, and handed over to the local militant group in power. Although some of the kidnappers have been identified, no arrests have taken place. It is unknown if a ransom was paid for the release of the victim.

- On 21 August, a Saudi woman was kidnapped in Istanbul while on a trip to Turkey with her family. The woman was abducted while going to a shop near her hotel. The incident was recorded by surveillance cameras in the area, which showed an individual spraying a substance on the tourist’s face, causing her to lose consciousness, and then taking her away. According to Saudi media, a Syrian gang was behind the kidnapping of the Saudi woman, for whom they demanded a ransom of USD 150,000 via WhatsApp. Reportedly, the gang’s communicator called the family and pretended to be a broker, offering his services and knowledge on Istanbul kidnapping gangs to locate the woman. The brother of the victim, suspecting he was actually a member of the gang holding his sister, agreed to hire him. The man was arrested by Turkish police while collecting the ransom money from the brother, on 26 August. After confessing to the crime, the suspect escorted the authorities to a house in the city where a Syrian family was residing and where the victim was being held. The kidnapping of the Saudi tourist took place just three days after the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul had warned its citizens to be vigilant while in Istanbul, particularly in the area of Sisli, where two Saudi brothers had recently been victims of armed robbery in the area. One of the brothers sustained gunshot wounds during the attack.

- On 30 July, a 13 year-old Syrian national was rescued in the Turkish city of Sanliurfa by police shortly after having been kidnapped in Incirlik, Adana. His four Syrian captors, who were arrested in the operation, had demanded USD 20,000 for his release. One suspect was a friend of the victim’s father.

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**CASES:**

- In September, reports emerged on the arrest of a British-Australian woman and her Australian boyfriend in Iran in late June. According to the media, the two bloggers, who were on a trip around the world since 2017, were arrested after camping and flying a drone near a military area in Jazrood, Tehran province, and are awaiting trial. Reports also emerged on the Iranian regime holding a second British-Australian dual national who had been teaching at an Australian university. She was reportedly arrested in late 2018, tried on unknown charges and sentenced to 10 years in prison. The academic is reportedly being held for alleged espionage charges. These incidents have led a number of countries to issue travel warnings on Iran, advising their citizens on the threat of illegal detention, particularly for Iranian dual nationals who are therefore advised against all travel to the country. Moreover, in the light of Iran’s threat to block all exports through the Strait of Hormuz and the subsequent vessel attacks and seizures, the US launched the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). This military initiative, so far joined by the UK, Bahrain and Australia, is aimed at securing this key shipping route, which has already sustained significant economic losses as a consequence of the conflict.

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AFRICA

Over July-August 2019, Africa maintained the levels of reported kidnappings of foreign nationals observed during the March-April period, with 56 victims recorded. Nigeria was once again top in the region, accounting for over 32% of victims, followed by Cameroon with 30%. Most victims (28) in these two countries were sailors, taken by Nigerian pirates in four different incidents, two of them in Cameroonian waters on the same day. Indeed, kidnapping in Nigeria is a multifaceted criminal enterprise, perpetrated by diverse armed groups and well-organised criminal syndicates operating across the country, both in land and at sea, driven by different motives, from political and ideological to merely financial goals. The epicentre of this activity has traditionally been the southern states, where criminals not only profit from terrain that allows concealment, but also enjoy the protection brought by a web of corruption at different levels of government and the security apparatus. In spite of the Nigerian Senate having passed a bill imposing the death penalty for kidnappers in 2017, and several nationwide security operations targeting these groups, the problem continues unabated, having expanded to other regions in the country and further abroad.

CASES:

▶ On the night of 20 July, four Turkish expatriates were kidnapped during a raid on a local bar in Gbale village, Edu Local Government Area of Kwara state, by at least six armed bandits. The victims were working at a construction project in the village for a Turkish company. A community leader said that the kidnappers had demanded a N16 million (approximately USD 44,000) ransom to free the hostages, while other sources affirmed that the amount demanded was USD 1 million. The state police meanwhile warned the relatives of the victims to refrain from paying a ransom to anyone. The victims were allegedly rescued in an operation carried out by a team comprised of state police, local vigilantes and Abuja officials, on 28 July, with no ransom having been paid. The Nigerian authorities said that the arrest of three of the kidnappers prior to the operation led to the successful outcome.

▶ In South Africa, while criminal kidnapping has not yet reached levels seen in Nigeria, it’s certainly an increasing concern as incidents targeting foreign nationals continue to be reported across the country. Expatriates of South Asian and Arab origin have commonly been victims in the past. On 17 August, Jordan’s Foreign Ministry announced it had formed a crisis cell following reports of the kidnapping of two Jordanian nationals in South Africa. According to preliminary information, a father and his son, both of them expatriate businessmen, were abducted by criminals who demanded an undisclosed financial ransom. The pair were released on 29 August. Not many details on the incident were made public, including the conditions for the release of the victims.

In Tanzania, a couple from New Zealand suffered an express kidnapping in a taxi during their visit to Dar es Salaam. The tourists were held at gunpoint by three armed men who boarded their taxi a few minutes after they hailed it at the airport. During the two-hour ordeal including death threats, the couple were forced to withdraw a total of USD 4,200 from several ATMs. They were also robbed of USD 500 they had on them, as well as of their valuables. Two of the criminals were identified as former police officers who had been fired after being caught extorting tourists outside ATMs.

Security threat levels in Chad are assessed as very high, owing to a number of threats, ranging from petty crime to terrorism. The threat is particularly high near the country’s porous borders, shared with a number of very high-threat countries, including Libya, Niger and Nigeria, where a plethora of terrorist and criminal groups are known to operate. These groups include Al-Qaeda and IS-linked outfits, Boko Haram, and numerous organised criminal groups profiting from the vast ungoverned spaces in the region. The country’s Extreme North region has particularly been exposed to conflict, being a desert area rich in precious metals, including gold, thus being of very important commercial interest and attracting criminal and rebel groups, both local and foreign. In spite of the Chadian government deploying significant military contingents in recent months in order to eradicate illegal mining, trafficking of arms and humans, and other criminal activities, the threat remains high at present.

CASES:

▶ Three Chinese and a Libyan, who had been kidnapped in Chad’s Extreme North region, were abandoned by their captors as they tried to escape a security operation carried out by Chad’s gendarmerie. According to reports by the Chadian authorities, the four foreign nationals were kidnapped in Tibesti, the Chadian gold zone, by 14 heavily armed men who raided their living quarters at a mining site in the early morning of 16 August. After taking 6kg of gold from the premises as well as cash and other valuables, the assailants took the workers away, driving them to a mountain area near the Chad-Sudan-Libya tri-border, where they were held for several days. The kidnappers demanded a ransom of 50 million Libyan dinars (approximately USD 34.7 million) from the victims’ employer. After negotiations, the ransom was finally reduced to 2 million dinars (USD 1.4 million), of which 500,000 dinars (USD 348,000) had to be paid to a man in Benghazi, who immediately forwarded the funds to N’Djamena. The Chadian authorities managed to detect the transaction and seize the sum. After hearing of the seizure and fearing imminent arrest, the kidnappers escaped, abandoning the victims at a location in the desert 40km from Amjarass. The men were found by a peasant who led them to the authorities in Amjarass, who subsequently handed them over to their diplomatic representations on 2 September. The identity of the kidnappers has not been established, although the victims said they were men between 30 and 60 years old who spoke Sudanese and Libyan Arabic.

▶ Two foreign mine workers, a South African and a Zimbabwean national, were kidnapped by gunmen along with two local colleagues from a gold mine in the Maniema province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), on 26 July. No group claimed responsibility for the attack, although it was attributed to Mai-Mai militias, which have a strong presence in the province and have previously targeted the company’s facilities and staff in DRC. The Zimbabwean employee was released on 14 August, after 18 days in captivity. This followed the release of the two Congolese workers the previous day. The South African national was released in September, after 41 days in captivity. According to Stephane Kamundala, president of Maniema’s civil society, no ransom was paid for the workers, who were instead released in exchange for unspecified concessions from the company.
Asia observed an increase of almost 25% in the number of foreign victims recorded in the region over the July-August period. The increase was related to a number of detentions in China and North Korea, which coincided with periods of political tensions between these countries and detainees’ nation of origin. While the kidnapping threat in both nations is low, arbitrary detention is a significant concern for foreigners. The Chinese government employs human sources and technical equipment to conduct surveillance of foreign citizens and businesses by monitoring their private communications and even picking locks of residences and property to have access to other material. In the case of detentions with a suspected political motive, the Chinese government may use even the slightest indication of wrongdoing to build a case against detainees. An increasing number of visitors and expatriates in China have reported ‘government harassment’ in recent months, including allegations of drug possession and breach of migratory laws. A number of foreign nationals have also been accused of espionage.

CASES:

In early July, Chinese authorities in Xuzhou announced they had arrested 16 foreign nationals, seven teachers and nine students, on suspicion of drug use. Later on 14 July, a Swiss-based company in the education sector confirmed that the seven arrested teachers were their employees. Although the company declined to specify the employees’ nationalities, the UK government later said that four of them were British nationals and were receiving consular assistance. On the same day, the Canadian government announced that a Canadian had been arrested in the city of Yantai. The government spokesman declined to provide additional information, including the alleged charges. These incidents took place in the context of strained relations between the UK and China over the protests in Hong Kong and previously-soured relations with Canada over the arrest of a senior executive of Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei in December 2018. In that same month, at least 13 Canadian nationals were arrested in separate incidents in what was assessed to be a retaliation for the arrest of the Huawei executive. The detainees included a former diplomat and a businessman who were later charged with espionage, which can carry a death sentence.

On 17 July, the Russian-owned fishing vessel Xiang Hai Lin 8 was detained with all its crew, including 15 Russian and two South Koreans, in North Korea’s Wonsan port. The detention took place after the vessel drifted into North Korean waters following engine trouble on its way to South Korea’s town of Sokcho. According to a statement by the Russian embassy in Pyongyang, the North Korean government accused the fishing vessel of “violating rules of entry and stay”. The vessel and its crew were released on 27 July, reportedly through diplomatic efforts and without any fines. Although the sailors were released, their employer deplored the length of their captivity and the conditions in which they were held, including a lack of ventilation and subjection to continuous interrogations. It is believed the incident was in retaliation to past arrests of North Korean sailors, accused by the Russian authorities of illegal fishing in Russia’s territorial waters.

Crime and violence related to gambling continues to be an issue for a number of countries in Southeast Asia. Related illegal activity ranges from the betting itself to loan sharking and kidnapping to extortion payments, as well as human trafficking. The increase of these types of activities has been linked to China’s strict ban on gambling which has resulted in a large migration of gambling businesses (both legal and illegal) and a large increase in Chinese gaming tourism abroad. The Philippines and Cambodia have figured as the two most popular hosts of these businesses, registering a major influx of Chinese nationals, both as clients and staff. In view of the recent increasing number of crimes registered in these countries, particularly kidnapping, their national governments have pledged to ban gambling. This is however unlikely to take place in the short to medium term, both as a result of corruption and given the economic importance of this sector that generates billions of dollars in taxable income, jobs for the local population, and investment. The sector has been particularly profitable for loan shark syndicates, who lure players into debt traps, sometimes even from abroad, and when they cannot pay, debtors are held hostage until their families pay their debts. Detention cases have also been registered among members of competing syndicates and individuals involved in disputes with these groups. According to figures by the Philippines anti-kidnapping police, at least 56 casino kidnapping cases involving foreigners of Chinese origin have been recorded in the country since 2017.

CASES:

The Philippine anti-kidnapping police arrested two Chinese nationals for the illegal detention of two compatriots who were rescued during the same security operation on 10 September. The two victims had been lured by the suspects to the high-end Okada Manila casino for a three-day all-expenses-paid holiday. The only catch was that the two gamblers had to gamble at a VIP room operated by a Chinese junket operator, for which the men claimed to work. The victims reportedly acquired casino chips worth RMB 1 million (approximately USD 141,000), but lost them all by 9 September. Although the suspects tried to convince them to keep gambling with funds lent by their company, the victims refused and retired to their room. Later on the same day, the victims found themselves locked in the room by the suspects, who stopped them leaving until they signed a loan. The victims reported the incident to their friends in Beijing, China, who contacted the management of the casino and the Philippine authorities.

Traditional kidnap for ransom among members of the Chinese diaspora is also a common occurrence throughout the world. In a recent incident, a 20-year-old Chinese national who is a student at a Sydney University was kidnapped on 23 August. On the same day, the kidnappers sent the victim’s parents footage of the student blindfolded and with signs of violence, along with a message threatening to permanently harm him if the parents did not meet their demands. The next day, the family was sent a video in which the captors demanded a ransom of 80 bitcoins (approximately USD 641,000 at the time of writing) to be paid within 24 hours, and showing the victim pleading with his parents to comply. The student was released after 10 days in captivity, with his parents reportedly having paid in full the ransom demanded by the kidnappers. The Chinese authorities confirmed that it had indeed been a case of kidnap for ransom. This refute initial reports of an auto-kidnap (where the victim stages their own kidnapping) or a virtual kidnapping, both common occurrences in Australia and which have cost the country’s Chinese community over USD 1 million so far this year, according to the Australian authorities.

On 28 September 2019, the Philippine anti-kidnapping police arrested 132 foreign nationals, most of them Chinese, suspected in kidnappings linked to gambling debts. (Photo: Palawan News)
Statistics for July-August 2019 are drawn from Constellis’ record of 253 kidnapped foreign nationals. Over May-June 2019, Constellis recorded a total of 385 foreign nationals kidnapped across the world.

For the kidnapping of foreign citizens in Jul-Aug 2019:

Global distribution:
- **Middle East**: 26.5% (67 victims)
- **Africa**: 22% (56 victims)
- **Americas**: 20.6% (52 victims)
- **Asia & Pacific**: 20.2% (51 victims)
- **Europe**: 10.7% (27 victims)
- **Rest of the World**: 14.3% (36 victims)

**Regional Statistics**

- **Middle East**: Iran (63) 94%, Turkey (2) 3%, Kuwait (1) 1.5%
- **Africa**: Nigeria (18) 32.1%, Cameroon (17) 30.4%, Libya (7) 12.5%
- **Americas**: Mexico (41) 78.9%, Haiti (4) 7.7%, Ecuador (2) 3.9%
- **Asia & Pacific**: North Korea (17) 33.3%, China (16) 31.4%, Philippines (13) 25.4%
- **Europe**: Greece (21) 77.8%, Spain (3) 11.1%
- **Rest of the World**: Chad (4) 1.6%

(Number of Victims) *Including Migrants
**KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS**

### REGIONAL ORIGINS OF VICTIMS

- **SOUTH ASIAN** (72) 28.5%
- **LATIN AMERICAN** (44) 17.4%
- **SOUTHEAST ASIAN** (39) 15.4%
- **NORTH AFRICAN** (4) 1.6%
- **NORTH AMERICAN** (6) 2.4%
- **AFRICAN** (8) 3.2%
- **UNKNOWN** (21) 8.3%
- **MIDDLE EASTERN** (21) 8.3%
- **EUROPEAN** (38) 15%

### MOST VICTIMIZED SINGLE NATIONALITY

- Indian
- Honduran
- Russian
- Chinese
- Turkish
- Filipino
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- British
- Cuban

**MOST VICTIMIZED ORIGIN BY REGION**

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<tr>
<th>REGION</th>
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**DISCLAIMER:** These statistics herein presented are the result of a compilation of kidnapping incidents involving foreign nationals only, which have been reported in the media and other open sources. The information contained and its results are therefore partial as result of the incomplete nature of open-source material. Thus, this report should be taken only as a reference of general trends, taking its limitations into consideration.

### VICTIMS BY SECTOR

#### DEPENDENTS (3) 1.2%
#### DIPLOMATS (3) 1.2%
#### PROFESSIONALS (1) 0.4%
#### HEALTH (1) 0.4%

**MARITIME** (114) 45.1%

**CONSTRUCTION** (5) 2%
**BUSINESS** (6) 2.4%
**MINING** (11) 4.3%
**UNKNOWN** (13) 5.1%
**TOURISTS** (16) 6.3%
**OTHER** (20) 7.9%
**EDUCATION** (55) 21.7%

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### MOST VICTIMIZED SECTOR BY REGION

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**JUL-AUG 2019**
STATISTICS SEP 2018 AUG 2019

KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS

Global & Regional Geographical Distribution of Victims

AMERICAS 47.5% AFRICA 20.7% EUROPE 12.6% ASIA & PACIFIC 10.3% MIDDLE EAST 8.9%

(Number of Victims)

*Including Migrants

Statistics for September 2018 - August 2019 are drawn from Constellis' record of 1,635 foreign nationals kidnapped worldwide.

FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF FOREIGN CITIZENS IN SEP 2018-AUG 2019

REGION NUMBER OF VICTIMS

AMERICAS 777
AFRICA 339
EUROPE 206
ASIA 168
MIDDLE EAST 145

REST OF THE WORLD (423) 25.7%

01 MEXICO (673) 41.2%
02 GREECE (147) 9%
03 NIGERIA (77) 4.7%
04 IRAN (65) 4%
05 LIBYA (57) 3.5%
06 CAMEROON (42) 2.6%
07 VENEZUELA (30) 1.8%
08 SPAIN (29) 1.8%
09 LEBANON (29) 1.8%
10 UK (2) 1%
Two incidents were recorded in the Gulf of Aden and the wider East Africa region over July and August, an increase from zero in the previous two months. The incidents comprised a criminal boarding at Mozambique’s Nacala Port and a suspicious approach in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Also of note, a Houthi attempt to target a commercial ship with an explosive-laden boat in the Red Sea was thwarted in early July. The Houthis have targeted both coalition and commercial vessels in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea for nearly four years, during which at least 40 Houthi naval attacks have been documented. Incidents have dropped significantly since January 2018, certainly due to the group’s loss of territory. However, the past two months have seen an escalation of the conflict in Yemen, amid the rise of a separatist movement previously aligned with the government, Al Qaeda and Islamic State militants increasing their activities in the country, and Houthis stepping up their attacks in both Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Despite being a lesser focus of the Houthi leadership, naval attacks constitute a significant threat to shipping in the region. Military and humanitarian aid vessels as well as ships affiliated with the warring parties are most at risk of direct attacks. Past incidents have included the use of anti-ship missiles, explosive-laden boats and mines. Operators are advised that vessels transiting the region have reported GPS interference and spoofed bridge-to-bridge communications from entities claiming to be US or coalition warships. Additionally, Iran has demonstrated an intent to specifically capture American and British nationals. As a result, a number of maritime security firms have pulled out British guards from jobs in the region. While the likelihood of a major escalation of tensions remains low, ship seizures by the IRGC as well as low-intensity military engagements and direct attacks on commercial vessels (such as the May and June tanker attacks) can occur. Thus, commercial vessels transiting the region are advised to exercise vigilance and review security plans.
Hostile activity in the GoG tripled over July and August when compared to the previous two months. Such fluctuations in hostility are common during the rainy season (May – October), as the ability of pirate groups to operate their skiffs and speedboats remains highly dependent on weather and sea conditions. Criminal boardings remained the most common incidents in the region over July and August. All five kidnaps recorded globally during the period also took place in the GoG, two off Cameroon, two off Nigeria and one off Togo. Both of the Cameroon attacks occurred off Douala in the evening of 14 August, when suspected armed Nigerian pirates attacked the Antigua and Barbuda-flagged MarkAlata and the Liberian-flagged Victory C. A total of 17 crew members (13 Filipinos, three Russians and a Ukrainian) were abducted, with their fate currently unknown. In light of the incidents, Cameroonian port authorities announced that each vessel at anchorage at Base Buoy will be provided with an armed security team free of charge during its stay at berth.

CASES:

The Swedish-owned UK-flagged M/V Stena Impero was passing through international waters in the Strait of Hormuz on 19 July, when it was detained by the IRGC. Seven fast attack craft and a helicopter participated in the IRGC operation, with video footage showing troops descending from the helicopter on to the deck. A British Royal Navy frigate deployed in the Gulf reportedly tried to come to the tanker’s assistance, warning the Iranians by radio that their actions were illegal. However, UK forces failed to reach the scene in time to prevent the seizure. The tanker, which is operated by Northern Marine, was subsequently taken to Iran’s Bandar Abbas, where it remains at anchor. The vessel, which had 23 personnel onboard, was reportedly en route from Saudi Arabia’s Port of Jubail to the Port of Fujairah in the UAE at the time of the interception. Iran claimed that the Stena Impero was seized for non-compliance with ‘international’ maritime laws and regulations. In early September, Iranian authorities released seven of the Stena Impero’s crew members (five Indians, one Latvian and one Russian) on humanitarian grounds. The vessel and the remaining crew (13 Indians, two Russians and a Filipino) finally left Iran on 27 September.

Armed Nigerian pirates targeted the Turkish general cargo ship Paksoy 1 in the vicinity of Brass, Nigeria, on 13 July. The vessel, managed by Kadioglu Shipping, was en route from Cameroon’s Douala to Ivory Coast’s Abijan when it was attacked. The assailants kidnapped 10 out of the 18-man crew, including the ship’s captain. The remaining sailors took the ship to Tema Anchorage in Ghana, arriving there on 15 July. The hostages, all of whom were Turkish nationals, were released on 9 August. Reports indicated the victims were in good health. No further details surrounding their release were disclosed and it is currently unclear whether a ransom was paid.

At approximately 0325hrs on 22 July 2019, a group of seven men armed with guns and knives boarded the South Korea-flagged bulk carrier CK Bluebell while the ship was underway in the South China Sea. The incident occurred roughly 26 nautical miles west of Anambas Islands, Indonesia. The attackers threatened the ship’s captain, chief engineer and duty navigator. The perpetrators stole approximately USD 13,000 from the ship’s safe, as well as various personal items belonging to the crew. Two crewmembers sustained minor injuries during the ordeal. The assailants left the ship at about 0400hrs, with the CK Bluebell continuing her voyage towards the next port of call at Incheon, South Korea.

Ten Turkish sailors, crewmembers of MV Paksoy-1, arrive at the Turkish Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria on 9 August 2019, after being held for 27 days by Nigerian pirates. (Photo: Anadolu)
The main reasons behind these growing figures are threefold. Firstly, the rapid spread of internet-enabled devices throughout the continent has brought access to the web to millions more people (approximately 500 million are currently online in Africa), all of whom are by proxy in potential contact with malicious programs. In conjunction with this is the growing digitisation of economic activities, such as online banking and shopping, granting attackers further scope for surreptitious activities. However, the jump in connectivity has not been mirrored by an awareness of cyber defence practices. As in other developing countries, the majority of Internet users are not technically-minded and uneducated in IT security.

Another major contributor to why cybercriminals are beginning to focus more and more on developing African economies, is that public and private organisations have failed to invest adequately in their cyber security solutions - particularly SMEs. A recent report showed that 95% of both African governmental organisations and private enterprises spend less than USD 1,500 per year on cyber defences. By quickly attempting to embrace digitisation, many African companies are exposing themselves to cybercrime.

Finally, many African nations lack the appropriate legislation and law enforcement to prevent and respond to cyberattacks. Though the African Union adopted the ‘Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection’ in 2014, only 11 of the 55 member states have so far signed it. Meanwhile, a UN survey of cyber legislation found that of the 54 African countries examined, 15 had no legislation whatsoever, including Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Chad and Mali, while 11 countries only had draft legislation. Furthermore, at present, it is thought that over half of all African nations have no dedicated cyber emergency response teams. However, despite the growth in cybercrime in Africa over recent years, measures are being gradually implemented to improve cybersecurity and mitigate cyber threats. Several countries are developing legal and security infrastructure to deal with cyberattacks, while top companies - especially financial institutions - are beginning to invest strongly in cybersecurity solutions.

Nevertheless, these advances are unlikely to have any short-term impact on this growing phenomenon, with reports estimating that by next year, Africa will be lacking 100,000 cybersecurity professionals. It will thus be unable to keep up with the exponential growth in Internet users in the region, who will number approximately one billion by 2022. With cyber education and funding still hugely lacking, the continent will remain a fertile breeding ground for cybercriminals for the foreseeable future.

**CASES:**

- **On 25 July 2019,** one of Johannesburg’s major electricity suppliers, City Power, announced that it was the victim of an unspecified ransomware attack which encrypted all of its databases. This temporarily deprived millions of people of power until services were eventually restored. However, the City of Johannesburg informed its customers that no data had been exposed in the attack. While unconfirmed, it is not thought the municipality paid the attackers any ransom.

- **On 28 October 2018,** the hacker group Anonymous claimed to have brought down 70 government and other official websites in Gabon, saying the move was part of its campaign against dictatorships. The denial of service attack brought down several sites for hours, including those of the ministries of communications and the civil service.

- **On 14 June 2018,** Johannesburg-based insurance company Liberty Holdings suffered a ransom attack that encrypted 40TB of customer data. The attackers threatened to make the data public unless the firm paid an undisclosed ransom fee. While Liberty Holdings announced that no ransom was paid and that the encrypted customer data was limited to email addresses, the company suffered significant reputational damage, with its share price falling by 5%.

**AFRICA’S CYBER SECURITY LANDSCAPE**

With regard to cybercrime, Africa is one of the fastest growing regions globally, both in terms of attacks taking place in the region and attacks against the rest of the world emanating from the continent. Reports published last year estimated that cybercrime cost African economies at least USD 3.5 billion, an increase on the USD 2 billion of the previous year. Nigeria was worst impacted, with annual losses of USD 649 million, followed by Kenya with USD 270 million and South Africa with USD 157 million, where an estimated 570 suspected cyberattacks occur every hour. As cybercriminals seek to increase attacks against governments and enterprises across the world, African users and organisations have found themselves to be particularly vulnerable. Attacks have ranged from data theft and ransomware attacks, to the spread of fake news, disrupting government and business operations across the continent.

African countries accounted for some of the highest rates of individuals impacted by cybercrime globally. If we look at attempted mobile malware infections for instance, almost 25% of Algerian Internet users were impacted, the third highest rate in the world behind Iran and Bangladesh. Also in the top ten list were Tanzania, Nigeria and Kenya. Turning to ransomware-Trojans, several African countries were also placed amongst the global top ten for the number of impacted users, including Mozambique, Ethiopia and Ghana. Of these three, Mozambique was highest with at least 4% of users having been attacked by some form of ransomware, followed by Ethiopia with 2.5% and Ghana with 1.2%. Of further concern, an estimated 96% of cyberattacks in Africa go unreported or unresolved.

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On 14 September, Saudi Arabia suffered what is considered to be the biggest blow to its oil infrastructure in recent history. At approximately 0400 local time, Aramco’s Abqaiq plant - the country’s largest crude-processing facility - and the Khurais oilfield were attacked by what was initially reported as a multitude of armed drones. These coordinated events caused one of the largest disruptions to the world oil market, reducing Saudi oil production by approximately 42%, accounting for a loss of almost 5% of global daily supply, and resulting in a subsequent surge in oil and gas prices.

The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attacks on the two oil facilities, located in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, over 1,100 kilometers away from Houthi territory in Yemen. Codenaming the assaults as ‘Operation Deterrent Balance 2’, the Yemeni rebel group said the campaign caused a fire and disrupted operations. The Houthis further specified that the devices used in the attacks were ten Qasif-3 drones and a number of Samad-3 missiles, which were fired from three different positions in Yemen. The militants claimed to have also launched a number of drones as decoys to confuse Saudi air defence systems, though the exact number and type of drones were not specified.

The Saudi authorities confirmed the attacks and damage to the Abqaiq and Khurais facilities. Satellite images later confirmed that the strikes caused large fires, with fire trucks and ambulances pictured at the sites. The US government reported that they had identified 19 fire trucks and ambulances pictured at the sites. The Saudi authorities confirmed the attacks and damage to the Abqaiq and Khurais facilities, minutes before the attack. The Qasif-3 drone and its specifications are yet to be showcased by the Houthis. This novel aerial weapon is likely a variation of the much used Qasif-2k drone, upgraded to have a higher range.

Following the attacks, the Houthis vowed on 16 September to continue drone strikes against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), reiterating that their aerial weapons could reach any location within the country. The rebel group claimed that oil installations in particular would remain targets, with the Kingdom’s upcoming Aramco initial public offering (IPO) presenting a further incentive to disrupt KSA’s activities in the sector. Houthi spokesman Yaheya Sarea warned foreign nationals and companies to stay away from the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities, as the group could attack the sites again at any moment. Sarea also claimed that the attack followed an intelligence and monitoring operation with the cooperation of individuals within the Kingdom. This could indicate the infiltration of Houthi rebels or the existence of sympathisers within the country. Though the Houthis have claimed to have conducted a large number of ground attacks along the Saudi southern borders in the past, KSA authorities have continually denied that the events took place or refused to comment. Despite the difficulty of determining the validity of the Houthis’ claims, the possibility of Houthi infiltration or the presence of Houthi allies within the Kingdom pose an additional threat to Saudi critical facilities. The threat is further compounded by Houthi claims of their stockpiling of missiles and drones in Yemen, and the introduction of several new aerial weapons in recent months.

A previous, similar incident was recorded on 17 August 2019, when the Houthis claimed an attack using 10 Qasif-2k drones on Eastern Province’s Shaybah oilfield and refinery, reportedly containing the largest oil stockpile in the Kingdom. At the time, the Houthis claimed a fire had broken out as a result of the assault, disrupting operations at the plant, while the Saudi authorities reported that activities continued as normal, despite there being a small fire. The 14 September attack is in line with Houthi threats and previous strikes on Saudi strategic facilities, which have increased since March 2019, with at least 180 such missile or drone attacks having been recorded in KSA, according to Constellis’ records. However, it is rare for the Saudi government to acknowledge such a large-scale assault, particularly on oil facilities. The increase in missile attacks in recent months, coupled with claims of KSA’s defective missile defence capabilities, could be an indication that there have been more successful Houthi attacks than the Kingdom has previously acknowledged.

This more recent attack also comes amid developing tensions between Iran and the US and its allies. In this context, US officials claimed that the attack was ordered by Iran, suggesting that they possess substantial evidence of Iran’s direct responsibility. Additionally, on 15 September, UK-based news channel Middle East Eye cited an Iraqi official claiming that the strikes were launched by the Iran-linked Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (also known as Hashd al-Shaabi), from southern Iraq. According to this account, the militias had conducted the strikes in retaliation for Israeli drone strikes on their military bases and convoys in August, which had allegedly been supported and financed by KSA. The official further claimed that this motive was coupled with an Iranian bid to destabilize KSA, a US ally and long-time rival in the region. Neither claims have been substantiated, with Iran officially denying any involvement in the attacks. That being said, Iranian involvement would certainly be line with the country’s strategy in the region, exerting power and influence through a series of local proxies.

Iran’s potential involvement raises the possibility of US retaliation, as the Trump administration has already deployed troops to KSA and the Strait of Hormuz to deter future Iranian attacks. Despite this show of force from both sides, an escalation to full-out war between Iran and the US is unlikely, with a conflict of this magnitude potentially having dire consequences for global oil markets and the world economy as a whole. Talks took place between President Trump and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, at the United Nations General Assembly in September, though they did not result in anything conclusive. Tensions have escalated between the two countries since the US withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal and the imposition of sanctions on Iran in May 2019, in addition to Iran’s attack and seizure of a series of oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz in recent months.

In this context, a high risk of Houthi missile attacks on operations in Saudi southern provinces remains, particularly on airports and oil and gas facilities. Though Houthi air assaults on oil and gas operations are less common, the rebel group has demonstrated both capability and intent to target such installations, even beyond KSA’s southern provinces, as seen in these latest attacks. While the Saudi Air Defence Forces have claimed to have intercepted the majority of Houthi drones and missiles, conflicting reports make it difficult to determine the exact number and impact of previous assaults. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Kingdom’s upcoming IPO, escalating tensions with Iran, and the ongoing conflict in Yemen, are all motivational factors for the Houthis to continue their attacks on Saudi strategic facilities, particularly the oil and gas sector and airports with military facilities.
ABOUT CONSTELLIS

Constellis is a leading provider of risk management, humanitarian, social intelligence, training and operational support services to government and commercial clients throughout the world. Operating in over 45 countries, Constellis’ 20,000 employees bring unparalleled dedication and passion for creating a safer world by upholding the highest standards of compliance, quality, and integrity.

Constellis’ forward thinking services span a broad range of synergistic solutions, from the boardroom to the project site, encompassing risk governance, organizational resilience, business continuity management, crisis management, travel security, global tracking, training, protective security, life support, logistics and specialist support such as K9 services and UAV systems.

At Constellis, our number one mission is to secure success for our customers. Constellis combines the legacy capabilities and experience of ACADEMI, Triple Canopy, Centerra, Olive Group, OmniPlex, AMK9, Edinburgh International, Strategic Social and all of their affiliates. The consolidation of companies under the Constellis name allows our clients to rely on one single partner and project experience that spans the globe.

For more information about Constellis, please visit our website at: www.constellis.com

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