KIDNAP FOR RANSOM RISK
Top 10 Countries
December 2017
Overview

This report provides an overview of Constellis’ top 10 countries according to overall Kidnap for Ransom risk globally. Rankings are drawn from multi-source analysis of both proprietary and official data, including Constellis’ global monitoring of over 200 countries and database of 2000+ foreign kidnapping incidents recorded since 2015. Overall scores are informed by past incidents, current K&R activity and developing threats across diverse security environments. Consideration of the risks to both local and foreign nationals has also been made for activity on an international level, particularly for foreign workers. All countries listed should be considered high kidnapping threat environments for commercial operations.
1. LIBYA

Overview

A VERY HIGH threat of kidnapping exists for organizations operating in Libya, driven by the large number of armed groups active across the country who regularly conduct abductions for both political, financial and ideological reasons. Militant actors, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, have repeatedly targeted foreign nationals, including diplomatic personnel in recent years, with overall risks particularly high in border and desert areas of southern Libya.

The widespread presence of local militias has also contributed to the threat in the country, with numerous militia factions reported to be linked to the mass-abduction of foreign workers, in particular migrant laborers entering the country from the southern and western territories.

Across Libya’s main urban centres, including Tripoli, armed criminal enterprises are known for their attacks against both local nationals and expatriate staff, in many cases targeting foreign personnel in order to sell their captives to terrorist organizations in return for financial reward. Reflecting such challenges, Libya has recorded the highest number of foreign kidnap victims in the world since 2014, according to Constellis’ global Kidnap for Ransom index.

Ransom Demands

According to open source reporting, ransom demands for local residents in Libya average around USD 150,000, although they may surpass the million dollar mark for high-profile hostages. By contrast, ransom demands for western expatriates have averaged USD 5 million, reaching up to the USD 8 million mark, and in some instances delivered alongside political demands such as the release of fellow militants. At the lower end of the spectrum, is claimed by former hostages and witnesses that kidnappers of low income migrants in Libya typically demand between USD 8,000 to USD 10,000 per hostage.

2. NIGERIA

Overview

There is a pervasive threat of kidnapping in Nigeria, with incidents in 2017 increasing in both frequency and scope, affecting all strata of society. Foreign nationals remain a target of both criminal and militant groups, encouraged by the payment of past ransom demands. International businessmen and expatriates working in the construction and oil & gas industry are among the most regularly targeted groups, although temporary visitors can also be victims of opportunistic kidnapping attempts, as they are often perceived as wealthier targets than local residents.

Criminal kidnapping is committed both by individuals and organised gangs. This activity has historically been concentrated in the Niger Delta region; however, it is now rampant throughout the country. Although most hostages are released after a ransom is paid, many are injured or killed during the abduction process or rescue attempts. Kidnappers in Nigeria are increasingly bold and violent, even attacking groups employing armed
security escorts. Although kidnapping in southern Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta area, can be carried out by either criminals or militants, such activity remains largely for financial gain. A recent expansion of kidnapping in the central belt of the country is also understood to be connected to an increase in armed activity by nomadic tribal groups.

Additionally, kidnapping is a common tactic employed by Islamic militants in northern Nigeria. While most victims of these factions are local nationals, (no western expatriates have been kidnapped by any of these organisations in northern Nigeria since 2013), a significant underlying threat to international organizations remains.

Crime at sea also represents a significant issue in Nigeria, where organised groups including militants, have increasingly turned to kidnaping for ransom of crew. Nigerian pirates typically employ aggressive measures to board vessels and have proven notorious for violence against victims in order to solicit ransoms and other financial payments. This threat extends beyond the Nigerian coastline in the wider Gulf of Guinea, as well as deep inside the creeks of the Niger Delta.

**Ransom Demands**

Ransom demands in Nigeria vary greatly according to the victims’ profile, location, and identity of the perpetrators. It has been observed that ransom demands for low-medium profile local nationals generally reach up to N 10 million (USD 27,600), while for higher profile individuals these may reach N 100 million (USD 276,000). Ransoms for very high profile Nigerians have been recorded up to N 350 million (almost USD 1 million) in recent years. Meanwhile, known ransom demands for western expatriates in the last two years have ranged between USD 200,000 and USD 950,000, while ransoms demanded for non-westerners have not surpassed the USD 50,000 mark.

**3. Venezuela**

**Overview**

There is a **VERY HIGH** threat of kidnapping in Venezuela, a country considered as one of the most dangerous in the world, with violent crimes, including kidnapping, increasing dramatically in recent years. Kidnapping is the fastest growing crime in Venezuela, believed to have increased by 300% since 2009, in spite of claims by state authorities of a decrease in the practice. A high percentage of kidnappings involve police officers and soldiers (active and former), and other personnel linked to the Maduro administration, leading to great levels of impunity and under-reporting.

Amid a wider economic collapse, hyperinflation and continuous depreciation of the national currency, the bolivar, kidnappers are now demanding US dollars and euros in payment, along with other valuables such as jewellery, cars or property. Most victims are local nationals, but expatriates and employees of large local companies are known to have been targeted over the past five years. While most kidnapping victims are
released after the payment of a ransom, kidnappings in Venezuela have been reported to be increasingly violent, with a growing number of cases ending in the death of the victim.

Kidnapping for ransom is of a particular concern near Venezuela’s border with Colombia where a number of Colombian rebel groups and organised crime entities are active. While most of the victims abducted in these regions are wealthy cattle ranchers, international workers have also been abducted in the past.

Express kidnappings are another serious concern, accounting for the majority of kidnapping instances in Venezuela. This is particularly common in Caracas and its environs, where gangs can kidnap and release several people in one night. In such instances, criminals often demand up to USD 50,000 in ransom payments. Recent developments nationwide, including monetary restrictions in the country have made the classic express kidnapping practice (based on ATM withdrawals) less lucrative, and consequently a limited reversal back towards traditional kidnapping, albeit of shorter duration (less than a week) is also now being reported. An additional concern in Venezuela are “inside kidnappings”, where domestic employees are paid money or promised a share of the ransom if they provide access or information to facilitate an abduction.

Ransom Demands

According to open source reporting, the average value of recorded ransoms in traditional kidnappings in Venezuela in the last two years has been around USD 450,000. However, in recent months, given the rapid deterioration in the economy, kidnappers have been known to demand initially as much as USD 10 million for high-profile victims.

4. MEXICO

Overview

Although Mexico has one of the highest kidnapping rates in the world, total incidents and risk exposure varies depending on the region. While a particularly high incidence of abductions are recorded in border and port areas, kidnapping incidents are far less common in tourist centers and resort regions. Kidnapping for ransom was once primarily directed against high-profile Mexican businessmen and their families; however, organized crime groups now focus on a broader selection of targets, with the middle-classes currently the most targeted social group. Although there is limited precedent of foreign nationals being singled out in kidnap plots, travelers may fall victim to opportunistic attacks, particularly express kidnappings. In this context, Mexican-Americans, who frequent the country, are increasingly becoming victims of this crime.

Numerous gangs specialized in kidnapping are active through most of the country, some of them closely interlinked with drug cartels. Most kidnapping victims are released, either after the payment of a ransom or following a rescue operation by security forces. However, the number of cases in which kidnapping victims are
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killed or injured continues to increase, attributed to the emergence of many inexperienced gangs. Moreover, there has been a noticeable increase in the use of violence during captivity to pressure relatives to pay ransoms demanded.

Although traditional kidnapping for ransom is of significant concern, express kidnappings are more commonplace, assessed to account for over 66% of cases, in comparison to incidents lasting over four days, accounting for just over 12% of all incidents. Meanwhile, virtual kidnapping, a practice whereby groups attempt to extort family members by creating hoax kidnapping scenarios, is on the rise, with an increasing trend of travelers, including foreign nationals, targeted at hotels.

Ransom Demands

Ransom demands in Mexico vary greatly, however, according to information released by NGOs specialising in the study of kidnapping in the country, ransom demands in traditional kidnappings in Mexico generally fall between MXN 500,000 and MXN 4 million (USD 26,300 & USD 211,000). Ransom demands are typically higher when the victim is a foreign national, generally ranging between USD 500,000 and USD 1 million.

5. YEMEN

Overview

A VERY HIGH kidnapping threat exists throughout Yemen, including in the country’s capital Sana’a, with kidnappings of locals and foreign nationals by tribal, extremist and criminal groups regularly reported. Kidnapping has been a security concern in Yemen for over a decade, but has worsened since the outbreak of the country’s civil war in March 2015. The abduction threat is heightened for foreign nationals, who have been specifically targeted for their higher monetary and political value. Although all foreign nationals operating in Yemen are a potential target, oil company employees, aid workers, diplomats and business personnel, have in the past been the primary targets.

Victims held by extremist groups may face very long captivity periods and potential death at the hands of their abductors. In addition to the direct threat posed by terrorist organizations, tribal and criminal groups may also kidnap foreigners in order to sell them on to terrorist groups (or threaten to do so). Kidnappers in Yemen often demand large ransom payments, which may include political concessions. There is an additional threat of wrongful/extra-judicial detention by Houthi rebels (controlling the majority of western territories of the country), who have in the past carried out mass detentions of regional expatriate workers, and have held a number of American nationals, usually on suspicion of being spies. During these detentions, which may last several months, victims are often held in isolation. There is an additional threat of piracy acts in Yemeni waters. As diplomatic presence is severely limited in Yemen, the ability of foreign governments to assist citizens in kidnapping/detention incidents is restricted.
Ransom Demands

Average ransom demands in Yemen can go up to USD 100,000 for local nationals, while demands for foreign nationals generally start at around USD 1 million. Previous cases involving expatriate workers have recorded ransom demands of up to USD 20 million in the past, in some cases also including political concessions.

6. SYRIA

Overview

There is a **VERY HIGH** threat of kidnapping across Syria, in both Syrian government and rebel-controlled territories. Kidnappings for ransom have surged in the country since the start of the country’s civil conflict in 2011, as both combatants and criminal groups have turned to alternative ways to finance their operations. Kidnappings in Syria typically fall into three broad categories: kidnapping for ransom, retaliatory attacks (“tit-for-tat”), and political/ideological incidents; although some cases may contain elements of all three.

Actual perpetrators are usually hard to identify, as kidnappers are known to claim false affiliations in order to increase the likelihood of a successful outcome. Although kidnappings for ransom mostly target wealthy Syrians and their relatives, the war economy has seen an expansion of targets.

The kidnapping threat is heightened for foreign nationals, who are actively targeted and are often killed, particularly by extremists groups. Journalists and humanitarian workers have been common victims, with many foreign victims kidnapped and murdered by terrorist groups in Syria in the past. While the number of kidnapped foreign nationals has decreased notably in the last year, this is a result of their reduced presence, rather than a decrease in the threat. Because of the security situation in Syria, and the limited diplomatic presence, the ability of governments to help foreign hostages is very limited.

Ransom Demands

It is reported that ransom demands usually surpass the USD 100,000 mark for foreign nationals, in some cases reaching millions of dollars, although actual payments are said to usually be just 10 to 50% of such amounts. By contrast ransom payments for local nationals in Syria range between USD 2,000 and USD 20,000. In some cases, victims are not released following a ransom payment, and have remained unaccounted for. There is an additional threat of unlawful detention by Syrian authorities.
7. THE PHILIPPINES

Overview

The kidnapping threat in the Philippines is pervasive and over recent years has grown to affect both urban centres and rural resort areas. Such activity has thrived in the context of high crime rates, institutional corruption, and the presence of militant groups (including Islamic extremists). The Philippines has the highest kidnapping rates in Southeast Asia, with the threat most acute in the southern Mindanao region, followed by Metro Manila.

Although the majority of incidents are carried out by organised criminal groups, many of these organisations have former or current militants as associates, as well as members of the security forces. Foreign Asian organised crime groups are also active in the country, though mostly targeting fellow nationals.

The vast majority of victims remain local nationals, primarily wealthy businesspeople and their dependents. However, foreign nationals, both visitors and expatriates, are at particular risk, specifically targeted by the Abu Sayyaf and some criminal groups. Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos of foreign origin, particularly Chinese-Filipinos, are commonly targeted, due to their perceived affluence.

Although violence is used in some cases, the majority of kidnap for ransom cases in the Philippines are resolved peacefully once a ransom is paid. This is also the case for kidnappings perpetrated by militant groups, however, hostages of extremist organizations continue to face a very high risk of death if the demanded ransom is not paid within the established time, or as a consequence of failed rescue operations. Captivity periods are normally short when perpetrated by criminal organisations, with the timing of cases increasing significantly for abductions perpetrated by militant groups.

Ransom Demands

Ransom demands recorded for Filipino nationals have typically ranged between 300,000 and 3 million Philippine pesos (US$ 6,500 – 65,000), while for foreign nationals, demands have ranged between 5 million and 1 billion pesos (US$ 108,000 – 21.5 million), depending mainly on the nationality of the hostage. Western expatriates have traditionally commanded the largest ransom demands in the country.
8. IRAQ

Overview

Iraq possesses a diverse kidnapping threat, a product of the ongoing activities of insurgent groups such as the Islamic State (IS), paramilitary and militia organizations, as well as criminal gangs. Kidnapping has historically been a widespread phenomenon, targeting both local residents and foreign nationals, particularly those of western countries. Kidnappings targeting Iraqis account for the vast majority of incidents however, and while political motivations have been recorded, such attacks are increasingly based less on sectarian lines than economic motives. Furthermore, it is believed that former militants -- who once participated in these activities as part of ideological campaigns -- are becoming increasingly involved in kidnappings for ransom. This is also the case of the pro-Iranian militias attached to the country’s Popular Mobilisation Forces, who have been accused over the past two years of multiple abductions throughout Iraq, including the kidnapping of foreign nationals. Anti-Western sentiments, expressed publicly by many pro-Iranian paramilitary groups, have also indicated the enduring risk of targeting for US and other nationalities linked to historic military operations in Iraq. While overall numbers of cases involving citizens of developed countries have fallen considerably over the past decade, this is thought to be in part due to the reduced number of international personnel operating in the country, particularly following the Islamic State campaign across Iraq’s northern territories in June 2014.

Some local reports have alluded to the involvement of members of the Iraqi security forces in illicit activities, including kidnappings, although the extent of such involvement remains unknown. At the same time, while successful security operations have resulted in a large clearance of IS presence from the country, there will remain a latent threat posed by the group who will be highly motivated to carry out kidnappings for ransom, propaganda and ideological reasons. Concerns also exist regarding the participation of members of the security forces in criminal activities, including kidnapping for ransom.

Ransom Demands

According to open-source reporting, typical ransom demands in Iraq for local nationals range between USD 65,000 and USD 300,000. Figures are considerably higher for foreign nationals, ranging between USD 2 million and USD 10 million. An exorbitant demand of hundreds of millions of US dollars (the amount differs depending on which source is quoted) was recorded in 2016 for the release of a number of Qatari royals which is believed to have also included demands for political concessions from various foreign governments and armed groups.
9. AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan remains a VERY HIGH threat environment for kidnap for ransom, with insurgent forces using the practice as both a tactic of war and a significant source of income. Kidnappings in urban centres, especially Kabul, are typically carried out for financial gain, while others are politically motivated. Attackers have regularly targeted foreign nationals, including humanitarian workers, journalists, security contractors, missionaries and tourists. Afghan nationals associated with foreign organisations also constitute potential (and more vulnerable) targets. The majority of high profile incidents in the past two years have taken place in Kabul, eastern and southern Afghanistan, with a recent increase in activity in the central areas.

Kidnapping of local nationals in Afghanistan is rampant, with targets ranging from wealthy businessmen to ordinary citizens such as farmers and construction workers. Criminal gangs are known to often sell hostages, including foreigners and high profile locals, to insurgent groups, who often then transfer victims to territories across the Pakistan border. Kidnapping by militant groups poses a considerable risk of death in captivity as well as physical and psychological harm posed by extremely long captivity periods. In addition to large sums demanded for the release of victims, militants may also seek to obtain the release of prisoners and other political concessions as ransom for foreign captives.

Ransom Demands

In Afghanistan, recorded ransom demands for local nationals have been as high as USD 2 million, although it is believed payments are commonly below USD 100,000. Ransom demands for foreign nationals are seldom reported, however, these have been as high as USD 20 million in the past.

10. SOMALIA

Overview

There is a VERY HIGH kidnapping threat in Somalia, where pervasive and violent crime is an extension of the general state of insecurity in the country. Kidnappers may be motivated by financial gain or terrorist objectives, with kidnapping a particular challenge in Mogadishu, Southern and Central Somalia (notably across the districts of Harardhere, Galkayo and Garaad in Mudug province.)

Aid workers and journalists have been common targets in the past, as well as local nationals associated with foreign organisations. Terrorists, including Al Shabab and Islamic State militants, commonly employ kidnapping as a tactic of their armed campaigns as well as a source of funding and exchange with other local residents. While this has mostly affected Somali nationals, the risk to foreigners remains extant.
An additional security concern in Somalia is maritime piracy, which in most incidents entails kidnapping for ransom of crew. While increased international anti-piracy patrols and security measures on board of vessels have drastically reduced the number of attempted and successful pirate hijackings off the coast of Somalia in the past five years, piracy groups have proven both their capability and intent to hijack vessels along the Somali coast, the broader Gulf of Aden, and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. This has been demonstrated with a number of incidents (suspicious approaches, attempted and successful attacks) recorded in the last year. As diplomatic presence in Somalia is limited, the ability of foreign governments to assist citizens in kidnapping incidents is greatly restricted.

**Ransom Demands**

Ransom demands in recent incidents in Somalia have not been published. However, past initial demands during the peak of Somali piracy reached as high as USD 20 million, with final payments averaging the USD 3.9 million by 2012. Meanwhile, in incidents not related to piracy, demands for local nationals have been as high as USD 30,000.
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