



Sahel-Focused Active Shooter and Kidnapping Response Guidelines



Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)

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In light of growing constituent concern and the increasing frequency of active shooter attacks on soft target locations in major cities and kidnappings in the Sahel (including the Lake Chad Basin), OSAC has compiled the following guidelines for response in these situations. Note that these practices are not exhaustive and are meant solely as a starting point for the development of appropriate organizational security response and training. U.S. private-sector organizations are highly encouraged to develop their own mitigation measures and response capabilities insofar as possible, particularly in the Sahel. U.S. Missions in Sahel countries should not be solely relied upon for security or emergency response, as their ability to respond is limited due to official travel restrictions and security concerns. Constituents should remain cognizant of these limitations when adopting organizational security policies and response capabilities.

Active Shooter Response¹

A number of constituents have started offering active shooter training in the wake of the recent attacks on Western-associated soft targets in Sahelian capitals. During these attacks, active shooters tend to fire indiscriminately at civilians with little or no warning, and then barricade clientele inside targeted hotels/establishments. As a result, personnel and travelers that frequent potential target locations should be prepared to react quickly.

Following the guidance below combines advice from multiple sources, such as the Department of Homeland Security and the New York City Police Department (NYPD), and has saved lives during active shooter incidents, including during previous Sahel capital attacks; victims of the [2015 Radisson Blu attack](#) in Mali survived by running and hiding. Note that the tips listed below are not terrorism-specific and can be applied to all types of active shooters, regardless of motive. U.S. private-sector organizations with staff that frequent hotels and establishments associated with foreigners in West African capital cities may want to consider implementing active shooter training programs.

Run/Avoid



- Immediately attempt to exit affected area(s); those who flee improve their chance of survival
- Leave your personal belongings behind; your personal safety is of paramount concern
- Evacuate even if others do not follow; try to help others, if possible
- Keep your hands visible when fleeing to avoid being mistaken for an assailant by security forces
- * If the shooter(s) seems to be targeting exits or those fleeing, practice "avoidance"— move away from the shooter(s) even if that requires moving farther away from an exit
- Running may not always be feasible, especially in buildings or confined areas; be prepared to adapt accordingly by hiding/barricading or fighting/confronting

Hide/Barricade



- Hiding can improve victims' chance of survival, when they are unable to run
- If in an office or room, stay there and secure the door
- Silence your cellphone and/or other electronic devices to avoid detection, use mobile devices to contact authorities only if it is safe to do so
- * Hiding does not involve only passive action, such as moving out of sight; it also includes active response, such as locking doors and erecting barricades
- * Barricades do not need to be impenetrable; instead, any barricade could potentially be of use, as it puts distance between the victim and the shooter, provides some protection against bullets, and delays the shooter's progress

Fight/Confront



- * Ensure that the barricaded location does not become a "trap;" maintain a way to exit
- If unable to run or hide, victims should be prepared to fight
- If unarmed, grab everyday items that could be used as weapons, such as knives, scissors, fire extinguishers, chairs, and lamps
- Act with physical aggression and/or throw items at the shooter to startle or disrupt their course of action
- Identify shooter's points of weakness, such as pauses in firing to reload or exposed areas of the body that protective equipment are unlikely to cover; use these to your advantage
- When attacking, avoid actions that put other innocent bystanders at risk
- When in a group, use numbers to your advantage to overwhelm a small number of attackers

Most Importantly, Try to Remain Calm Throughout

¹ The following tips are predominantly drawn from the Department of Homeland Security's Active Shooter Preparedness [webpage](#), which contains additional resources on active shooter response. Supplemental information was gathered from the [FBI](#), the [NYPD](#) through the [Global Security Group](#), the [Washington Post](#), and [USA Today](#).

Additional Tips for Active Shooter Situations²

General Mitigation Techniques



- Practice scenario-based training/contingency planning for active shooter situations
- Locate nearest exits and potential hiding/barricading spots in hotels and establishments
- Ensure offices and hotel rooms have working locks
- Avoid crowded areas, if possible (e.g., markets, venues during events, busy restaurants, etc.)
- Avoid routine and/or large gatherings at locations frequented by foreigners
- Avoid certain activities during holidays and/or major events as terrorists may exploit the importance of certain dates for impact (e.g. sports bars and stadiums are at heightened risk during major sporting events, festivals may be more at risk during holidays, etc.)
- When in a crowded area, stay along the periphery of the crowd and close to exits or potential evacuation points
- When in restaurants or other establishments, sit facing major entry points and away from corners and obstacles that could hinder rapid exit/response

How to Seek Help



- Only if it is safe to do so, attempt to contact local authorities to alert them of the attack
- Memorize phone numbers for local police, the U.S. Embassy/Consulate, family members, and your organization's local and headquarters offices in case you are separated from your phone
- When contacting authorities, provide them with the following information to aid their response:
 - The number of shooters,
 - the location of active shooter (s),
 - physical description of shooter(s),
 - number and type of weapons held by shooter(s), and
 - the number of potential victims (fatalities, casualties, and/or hostages)

What To Do During Rescue Operations



- Remain calm and follow instructions from security personnel
- Raise hands and spread fingers; put down any items in your hands and keep your hands visible at all times
- Avoid sudden movements toward security forces and do not point or yell
- Do not stop to ask officers for help or directions when evacuating
- Prepare for potential delays or confusion in response as local forces may not be as well trained or equipped as U.S. security forces; some attacks in Sahel capitals have taken dozens of hours to be resolved

² Ibid.

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Kidnapping Response

OSAC has seen an increase in kidnapping for ransom (KFR) throughout the Sahel. As a result, U.S. private-sector organizations should develop kidnapping-specific policies and consider offering kidnapping mitigation and response training to all of their personnel operating in the region. Terrorists are not the only potential perpetrators of these attacks; political militants and criminal elements may also employ kidnapping for ransom, and both Westerners and locals are at risk for these attacks. In most kidnapping cases, regardless of perpetrator, victims are targeted based on perceived affluence and/or vulnerability. Note that even individuals of modest means could be targeted for kidnapping for ransom, due to the perceived wealth of the organization with which victims are affiliated.

The kidnapping tips listed below are primarily drawn from [OSAC's Kidnapping: The Basics](#), constituent best practices, and the Department of Commerce's Western Regional Security Office's [Kidnapping and Hostage Survival Guidelines](#), which are based on the Department of Defense's Antiterrorism Training Module.

General Mitigation Techniques



- Avoid locations where kidnappers have been active in the past, if possible
- Do not travel alone, especially at night and in remote areas
- Avoid displaying signs of wealth and keep a low-profile
- Maintain active awareness, even in familiar areas; avoid distractions and dangerous patterns of behaviors (e.g. avoid cellphone use in public)
- Establish check-in times with a third-party (family member, friend, driver, coworker, etc.), even in familiar areas or when performing everyday tasks
- Design contingency plans for kidnapping response that include evacuation, how to seek help and contact relevant parties, and coping mechanisms if kidnapped

What To Do During an Attack



- Immediately attempt to flee attackers
- If fleeing is not possible, try to fight assailants or otherwise cause a disturbance; *only do so if feasible without incurring serious bodily harm, as resisting armed perpetrators may cause the confrontation to escalate to violence*
- Remain calm, especially if you have a health problem that is exacerbated by stress; multiple hostages have died from underlying conditions during attacks

What To Do In Captivity



- Comply with kidnapper demands; remain courteous, speak normally, and do not complain
- Do not resist or show aggression, as such actions could lead to violence
- Avoid revealing personal or organizational information that could later be used for leverage
- Do not attempt desperate escapes, as these could fail and result in punishment, including physical harm; only attempt informed escapes
- Gather information about your surroundings to help orient you and that could be useful in escape or identification of assailants:
 - Memorize details about where you are being held (remarkable sounds? smells?) and your captors' routines, habits, and identifying characteristics (do they have an accent? identifying marks?)
 - When being transported, try to discern the route; note road bends, bumps, stops, checkpoints, sounds, smells, and traffic congestion
 - Keep track of time to estimate length of captivity and/or distance traveled
- If forced to present terrorist demands, state clearly that demands are from your captor(s); avoid making a plea on your own behalf
- If interrogated, do not be uncooperative or hostile, as such behaviors may result in punishment; give short answers and remain guarded about important matters, but talk freely about non-essential topics
- Establish a rapport with kidnappers to humanize yourself; discuss non-substantive topics, such as sports, clothing, and family (without divulging damaging details about your own), or ask to learn your captors language
- Develop a routine and devise strategies to cope with boredom and lack of interaction; include physical and mental exercise
- Ask for items to make you more comfortable and apprise captors of your needs -- but keep requests reasonable; examples include: pillows, blankets, snacks, basic hygiene items, books, medicines, paper, and pencils
- If you are held captive with other hostages, try to communicate with them

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What To Do During Rescue Operations



- Do NOT run
- Drop to the floor and remain still; if standing, stay still, cross arms, and bow head
- Do not make any sudden movements as these could be interpreted by rescuers as threatening
- Wait for instructions and obey orders; remain calm until confusion clears
- Do not expect the rescuer to know whether you are a kidnapper or hostage; be prepared to be handcuffed or searched

Most Importantly, Try to Remain Calm Throughout. Do Whatever Is Needed to Survive.

Additional Kidnapping Mitigation and Response Tips

When Traveling by Road



- Remain cognizant that kidnappers may target victims along transit routes; know which ones have been targeted in the past
- Changes in traffic patterns, congestion, bottlenecks, poor infrastructure, environmental factors (e.g. flooding), and certain times of day or year (e.g. at night, around holidays, at the end of the year) may elevate risk; criminals and terrorists may exploit obstacles that increase vulnerability
- Consider robust security measures, especially when traveling to remote or high-threat areas; example measures may include:
 - armed escorts/professional protection, although this could raise your profile;
 - hiring vetted local drivers;
 - requiring/providing defensive driving courses, even for local drivers;
 - travel with other vehicles in case of accident or disablement; and
 - use of varied travel routes

For Western and Local Aid Workers



- Never enter a vehicle without confirming the driver's identity and avoid sharing rides with strangers, even if it costs extra
- Consider additional security measures when traveling in large groups or via multi-passenger vehicles (e.g. buses, vans) as these may represent more enticing targets for kidnappers
- Remember experience and long-term embedment in local communities does not guarantee protection for Western, third-party, or local staff
- Do not become complacent, even if you are at ease in your surroundings; avoid falling into routines and perpetuating bad habits
- Remain vigilant when entering or leaving your residence or office; kidnappers have struck victims during these times
- Keep a low profile at all times, even in your local community, and especially when traveling and/or going to new locations or areas outside your community
- Take extra precautions when traveling by road; terrorists have attacked humanitarian convoys using a variety of roadside tactics, including ambushes, kidnappings, and complex attacks involving IEDs and armed assaults
- Be aware that aid workers may be especially targeted based on perceived wealth due to organizational affiliation or perceived vulnerability as they may have fewer visible security measures

For Faith-Based Workers



- Consider additional security measures in the Sahel; faith-based workers are at greater risk in the region as locals and Sahel-based terrorist groups have made general and specific threats against faith-based organizations and personnel due to real or perceived proselytization
- Keep a low-profile; avoid overt proselytization, especially in new areas, if possible
- Be aware that faith-based workers may be especially targeted based on perceived wealth due to organizational affiliation or perceived vulnerability as they may have fewer visible security measures

Additional Recommended Capabilities



- Leverage local and community connections for information-gathering
- Strengthen security measures around residences and offices
- Consider using contracted protective services when traveling or operating in areas where local security response is limited; note that private protection may not be sufficient alone and that bodyguards of kidnapping victims have been killed in the past
- Formulate kidnapping-specific policies outlining organizational stance on ransom payment, kidnapping insurance options, travel restrictions, protected/armed travel, etc.
- Offer kidnapping-specific training, including personalized scenario-based options
- Provide personalized emergency evacuation kits with essential items, such as medication, medical supplies, communications devices, water, food, etc.
- Use personal and/or vehicle location devices to facilitate tracking in emergencies; note that local response may be delayed and should not be relied on to thwart incidents in progress

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