



Worldwide Hostage and Detention Threats

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Worldwide Hostage-Taking and Wrongful Detention Threats Today

There is a persistent threat to U.S. nationals being taken hostage by terrorist groups and wrongfully detained by primarily state actors all over the world.^a There are also U.S. nationals who are missing, detained or abducted abroad but no non-state actor or government has acknowledged their detention. Foreign terrorist groups remain committed to taking U.S. and other Western nationals hostage, posing a sustained risk to individuals traveling to areas where terrorist groups operate. Additionally, the U.S. faces a growing threat from state actors using wrongful detentions of U.S. nationals to secure policy concessions, or negotiate the release of their citizens legitimately held in U.S. detention.

- » Factors that have influenced international terrorist networks to take Western hostages include a lack of local security in high-risk areas combined with the presence and movement of Westerners, and terrorists' expectation of a ransom payment, especially from some Western



countries who are willing to pay for their citizens' return.

- » Some state actors share similar motivation for wrongfully detaining U.S. nationals, such as defiance against the U.S., retaliating against perceived U.S. efforts to undermine their regimes, and attempting to gain leverage for specific concessions, such as prisoner swaps.

Executive Orders 13698 and 14078, Presidential Policy Directive 30 (PPD-30), and the Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act (Levinson Act) drive and inform the U.S. government's overall hostage and detainee policy. Both documents codified the central structures across the U.S. Government to respond to hostage and wrongful detention cases, and established the interagency Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell (HRFC) and the State Department Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA).

- » PPD-30, issued in 2015, reaffirmed the U.S. Government's commitment to the safe and rapid recovery of U.S. nationals held hostage overseas and directs executive branch agencies to coordinate their efforts to leverage "all instruments of national power" to safely recover U.S. nationals held hostage.

PPD-30 expands on the long-standing "no concessions" policy, but clarifies this policy does not prevent the government from communicating, directly or indirectly, with hostage-takers.

- » The Levinson Act, enacted in 2020, codifies into law the structures of HRFC and SPEHA. The Levinson Act directs the Secretary of State to review the cases of U.S. nationals detained abroad to determine whether they are being wrongfully detained, based on discretionary criteria.

HOSTAGE *The unlawful abduction or holding of a person or persons against their will in order to compel a third person or governmental organization to do or to abstain from doing any act as a condition for the release of the person detained.*

WRONGFUL DETAINEE *A U.S. national determined by the Secretary of State as someone detained abroad under circumstances that the Secretary has determined wrongful in accordance with the Levinson Act.*

KIDNAP-FOR-RANSOM (KFR) *A criminal scheme primarily motivated by money wherein kidnappers detain victim(s), often by force, and demand a ransom payment from the victim's friends or family. The FBI maintains criminal jurisdiction during (1) the kidnapping of a U.S. national overseas with a ransom demand; or (2) the kidnapping of any citizen overseas when the ransom demand goes to anyone residing in the U.S., using a facility of interstate commerce. This product does not cover criminal KFRs, but in the event of a kidnapping, please contact your local FBI field office or U.S. Embassy.*

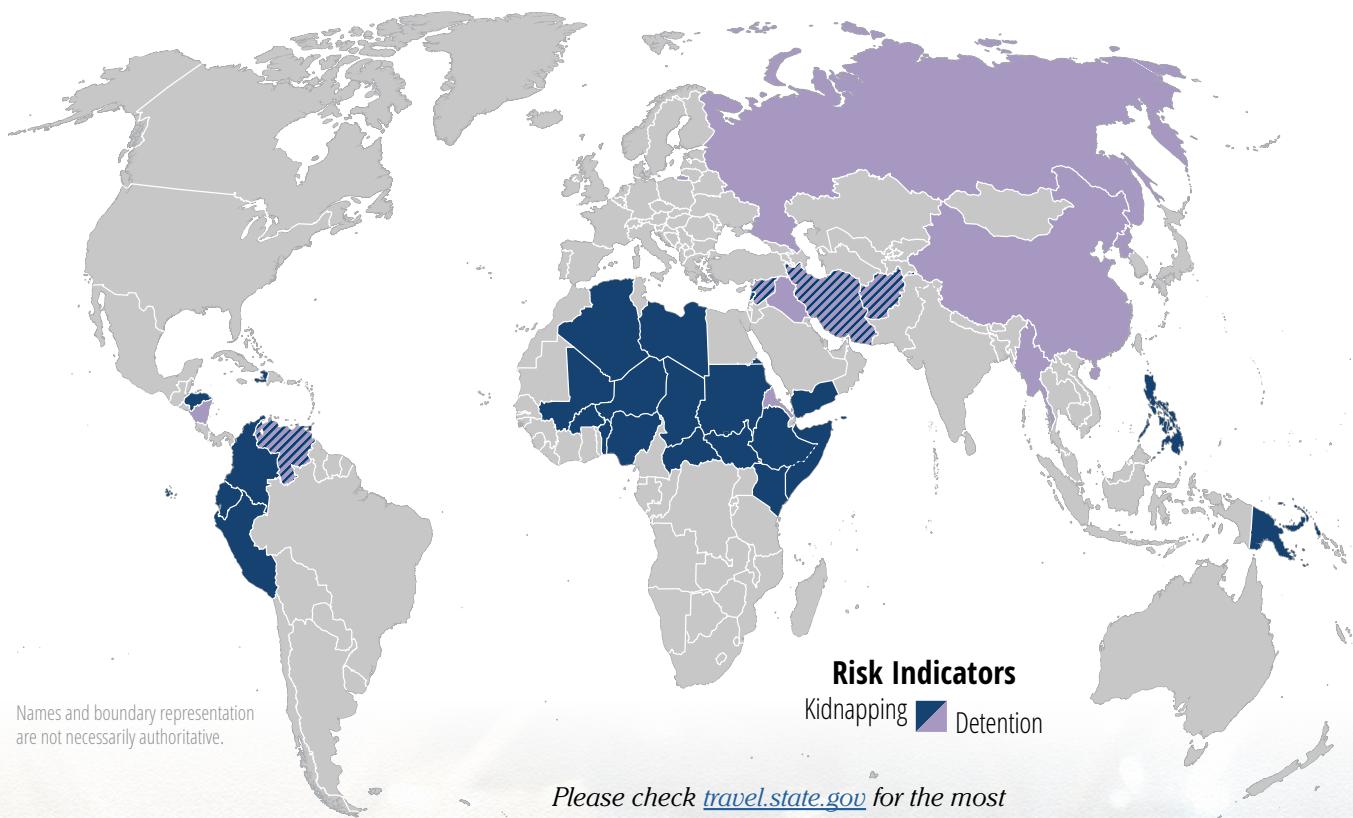
^aAlthough this document refers to wrongful detention being committed by state actors, it can also be committed by groups the United States has not yet decided whether to recognize as a government, such as the Taliban.

Kidnapping and Detention Risks Worldwide Current as of July 2024

The State Department has introduced the “K” and “D” risk indicators to provide clear and comprehensive safety and security information about the risk of kidnapping/hostage-taking and

wrongful detentions, respectively. The “K” indicator informs U.S. nationals that there is a continuing risk of kidnapping or hostage takings within a country, including criminal kidnappings-for-ransom and

hostage-taking. The “D” indicator highlights the elevated risk of wrongful detentions of U.S. nationals in particular countries that have engaged in that practice.



Please check travel.state.gov for the most up-to-date information on K and D indicators

Terrorist Hostage-Taking Tactics and Threats

Western Hostages Are Often Targets of Opportunity

Westerners,^b especially those in and around conflict zones, remain at risk of being taken hostage by terrorists as they travel to these areas, especially for tourism, work, and humanitarian aid efforts. Public awareness of the dangers of traveling to high-risk areas remains key to limiting the frequency of hostage-taking.

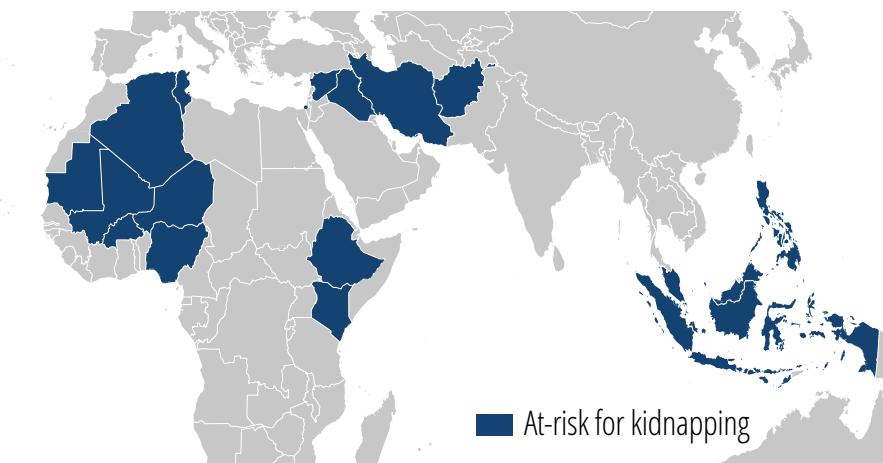
Although terrorist groups are opportunistic in their abduction of Westerners, once they have a Western hostage, they view them as an effective tactic to gain monetary and political concessions and score propaganda victories. Although monetary payments are often the

primary motivation for terrorist groups to abduct Western citizens, some groups have used hostages to negotiate for the release of prisoners and as political leverage, especially in retaliation for military operations. The hostage-taking threat has historically been highest in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, Africa, and the Middle East.

» As of 2023, ransom payments in exchange for Western hostages and incidents had declined over a nine-year period, although the average payment and duration of capture in each case had increased. The U.S. will use every appropriate resource to gain the

safe return of U.S. nationals who are held hostage, but the United States Government will make no concessions to individuals or groups holding U.S. nationals hostage.

- » Prior to 7 October 2023, when HAMAS kidnapped over 200 Israelis, non-Israelis, and Israeli dual citizens, most hostages since 2007 have been aid workers, journalists, or tourists, probably because they often travel or reside in high-risk areas and usually have less security than employees of private businesses, military members, and government officials.



Terrorists Remain Intent on Taking Westerners Hostage Amid Decrease in Incidents

- » In **South Asia**, since the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban, a U.S.-designated Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), has focused on efforts to portray themselves as the government of Afghanistan and gain international

recognition. While abducting foreigners would undermine these efforts, between August 2021 and early-2024, the Taliban have detained several Westerners for perceived violations of Taliban-imposed “laws” or edicts. The Taliban and the Haqqani Network—a designated Foreign

Terrorist Organization (FTO) and SDGT that is part of the Taliban—have historically been responsible for 90 percent of abductions in the region since 2007, and have tried to use abducted Westerners to secure the release of high-value detainees in Afghan Government and U.S. custody.

^bWe define “Westerners” as citizens from countries in Europe (excluding Russia and Turkey) and the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Our data include only those who are being held by nonstate armed groups, terrorist groups, or their affiliates.

Terrorist Hostage-Taking Tactics and Threats (continued)

» In **Africa**, groups have historically taken mostly private sector or NGO workers hostage in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia. Central Sahel-based terrorist groups continue to pose the greatest hostage-taking threat to Westerners. Between mid-2021 and early-2024, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Mulimin (JNIM), was responsible for at least six hostage-takings of Westerners in the Sahel, with one attributed to ISIS-Sahel. Separately, al-Shabaab also poses a hostage-taking threat to Westerners in Somalia and Kenya.

» In **the Middle East**, numerous Sunni Salafist terror groups

(including al-Qa'ida- or ISIS-affiliated) and Iran-sponsored terror or militant groups seek to abduct Westerners. The 7 October 2023 hostage-taking of approximately 200 Israeli citizens—including approximately 60 Western dual-nationals by HAMAS, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other Gaza Strip-based groups—was the largest single hostage-taking of Westerners since January 2013.

» In **Southeast Asia**, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has historically sought to abduct Westerners for ransom or propaganda purposes, particularly in the southern Philippines and parts of

Malaysia. As of early-2024, the ASG has taken 17 Westerners hostage since 2007 and has executed three of them, all since early 2016. Philippines-based terror groups remain intent on abducting Westerners for ransom, although no abductions of Westerners have been reported since mid-2021.

» In **the Americas**, Colombia-based foreign terrorist organizations, including the National Liberation Army (ELN) and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia dissident factions (FARC-EP), use hostage-taking, including of Westerners, to achieve insurgency goals and to fund their operations.



Wrongful Detention Threats and Trends

During the past decade, adversarial states have increasingly used the wrongful detention of U.S. nationals overseas as a tactic to gain policy leverage against or political concessions from the United States. Journalists, documentarians and producers, religious aid workers and faith community leaders, businesspeople, environmental activists, athletes, and individuals with prior military experience or connections to the U.S. government are currently wrongfully detained or were previously wrongfully detained by state actors. U.S. nationals can be caught up in the politics between the U.S. and adversarial countries for months to years.

- » The exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of expression (including to be critical of other governments), can be used as a basis to arrest, especially in countries adversarial to the U.S.
- » Although uncommon, arrested U.S. nationals are sometimes denied fair trial guarantees, with inadequate legal representation or no legal representation, or trials are conducted in secret with U.S. nationals being informed of their sentencing after the trial has ended.
- » The State Department informs travelers about countries where a risk of wrongful detention of U.S. nationals exists on its [travel.state.gov](#) website. These countries are marked with a “D” or “Wrongful Detention” risk indicator.

Some states look for targets of opportunity in detaining U.S. nationals, and fabricate charges or take a small violation and exaggerate charges. For example, U.S. nationals have been charged in both Venezuela

and Russia on false charges of being operatives of the U.S. government to force U.S. policy concessions. Some governments, such as Russia and Iran, appear predisposed to using detainees as a negotiating advantage against the U.S. in light of perceived hostility in the bilateral relationship and to show their resistance to U.S. policy.

- » Some countries wrongfully detain U.S. nationals as means to engage with the United States or even private actors from the United States in the absence of other engagement. For example, former U.S. officials engaged with Burma to discuss the release of U.S. detainees, which provided

“U.S. nationals can be caught up in the politics between the U.S. and adversarial countries for months to years.”

a rare photo opportunity for the junta leadership to enhance its perceived legitimacy.

- » Some states detain U.S. citizens to retaliate against U.S. policy, such as visa changes, extraditions, or sanctions. For example, the timing of the wrongful detention of U.S. nationals in Venezuela has been closely tied to U.S. actions against the Maduro regime. The detention of company executives in 2017, known as the CITGO 6, came months after the U.S. government sanctioned disputed President Maduro, freezing any assets he had in the U.S. and prohibiting U.S. nationals from doing business with him.

LEVINSON ACT

“Wrongful Detention” is a term codified by Congress in the 2020 Robert Levinson Act. It provides the Secretary of State with discretionary criteria to assess whether a detention of a U.S. national overseas is “wrongful” and transfers lead responsibility from the Bureau of Consular Affairs to the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA) for diplomatic engagement and providing resources for families of Americans deemed wrongfully detained.

Consistent with the Levinson Act, the Department reviews cases, monitoring for indications of a number of criteria to determine if the detention of a U.S. national is wrongful. This may include, but is not limited to, whether the individual is being detained to influence U.S. policy, whether there is credible information that the individual is innocent, and whether the person is being detained due to their U.S. connections.

If the Department of State has information indicating a U.S. national may be wrongfully detained, the Bureau of Consular Affairs, the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs, other relevant Department Bureaus, and interagency partners will collect and review information from a wide range of sources to help assess whether the detention is wrongful.

- » The Secretary of State has ultimate authority to determine whether a case is a wrongful detention. This determination is discretionary, based on the totality of the circumstances, and grounded in the facts of the case.
- » For privacy, safety, and/or operational reasons, we do not always make wrongful detention determinations public, and we do not disclose the details of internal deliberative processes.

Actions of the U.S. Government When a U.S. National is Taken Hostage or Wrongfully Detained

HOSTAGE-TAKING

When a U.S. national is taken hostage overseas, U.S. government agencies receive a notification from the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell (HRFC), based in Washington, D.C. The HRFC comprises representatives from across the U.S. government responsible for coordinating activities between the U.S. government and family members of the victim, and developing strategies for safely recovering the hostage. The HRFC works across the U.S. government to confirm hostage-takings, gather as much information as possible, support the family during the course of the isolating event (and the victim upon their return), and develop strategies and options for recovery.

- » Once a hostage-taking is confirmed, the Hostage Response Group, chaired by the NSC staff, discusses the circumstances under which the person was taken, the most current developments, the involvement of a terrorist group, information gaps, and potential recovery strategies.
- » After a hostage-taking is confirmed, the HRFC will notify FBI offices near the next of



kin and—if the family is not already aware of the event—an FBI agent, crisis negotiator, and victim services representative will notify the family in person and begin the investigative process. In cases where the family resides overseas, consular officials from the closest U.S. Embassy may make this notification instead.

The U.S. government learns about kidnappings and hostage-takings of U.S. nationals in a variety of ways, including from calls directly from family members to hotlines or members of the U.S. government, U.S. embassies & consulates, Intelligence Community partners, foreign partners, and the media as well as when businesses call local police or FBI offices.

At an early stage, the HRFC team—comprised of FBI's investigative and victim services team, representatives from the Department of Defense, State Department, and Office of the Director of National Intelligence; and the Family Engagement Coordinator—will meet with family members in a location of the family's choosing, such as Washington, D.C., a family's home, or another convenient location. The interagency representatives will provide a comprehensive briefing on behalf of the U.S. government that includes a declassified intelligence and a regional overview briefing, an explanation of the U.S. government's policies on hostage recovery, and a discussion on the manner in which the HRFC and U.S. government will partner with and support the family in recovery efforts. Finally, an individual communication plan is developed based on the family's preferences.

- » The HRFC has a Family Engagement Team (FET) made up of an experienced team of

individuals from the FBI and State Department. The FET includes FBI special agents, a Victim Services coordinator, an operational psychologist, and a crisis negotiator. The FET also includes a consular officer from the Bureau of Consular Affairs at the State Department. The FET maintains ongoing contact with the family through the hostage event, according to the established communication plan, and schedules calls and meetings when there is information to share, including proofs of life.

- » If the U.S. national hostage works for a U.S. company, a representative from the employer may be present for select HRFC engagements with the family; however, employers are excluded when the U.S. government provides intelligence or case information to the family. Outside of these circumstances, the family decides if, who, and when the employer representatives may be present during the HRFC engagements.
- » When the U.S. government assesses or determines that a U.S. hostage is deceased, it will work to bring the remains to the family. During this time, the family continues to receive support from the HRFC.

WRONGFUL DETENTIONS

The State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs handles thousands of U.S. national arrest cases each year. When a U.S. national is incarcerated abroad, the State Department stands ready to assist and seeks to ensure the fair and humane treatment of U.S. nationals in accordance with international, U.S.,

Actions of the U.S. Government When a U.S. National Is Taken Hostage or Wrongfully Detained (continued)

and foreign law. The U.S. Embassy will seek to access the incarcerated U.S. national within 24-72 hours of notification of their arrest, if possible. The U.S. Embassy will provide a list of English-speaking attorneys, and will contact the individual's family, friends, and employers in accordance with the Privacy Act of 1974. The U.S. Embassy also seeks to provide reading materials, conduct periodic visits, ensure prison officials facilitate appropriate medical care, help the family transfer funds to the prisoner as needed, and attend court hearings, if possible.

- » Consistent with the Levinson Act, the State Department continually monitors and reviews the detentions of U.S. nationals overseas for indications of wrongfulness. In rare instances, the circumstances of the charges or the detention may be such that the United States would regard the ongoing incarceration of the U.S. national as "wrongful." In assessing whether a U.S. national is wrongfully detained by a foreign government, the State Department looks at the totality of the circumstances.
- » State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs may learn about a possible wrongful detention in many ways, including through the U.S. Embassy or consulate in the country where the detention occurred, or directly from a detainee's family or advocates. Family members and advocates can be key sources of information for wrongful detention determinations, as they may have details about the purpose of travel, itinerary, background, or other issues that will help the Secretary of State make a determination.

State Department officials assess and if appropriate, make a recommendation to the Secretary of State that the case is a wrongful detention. If the Secretary of State determines that a case is a wrongful detention, the case is transferred to the office of the SPEHA to begin a diplomatic strategy to seek the release of the individual.

- » When a case is determined to be a wrongful detention, SPEHA's team will meet with the family members and designated case team of the detainee, either in Washington D.C., a family's home, or another convenient location.
- » SPEHA will work closely with the regional offices in the State Department, the NSC staff, the Intelligence Community, the Department of Defense, Department of the Treasury, the Department of Justice, and other Departments and Agencies as appropriate, to devise strategies to affect a detainee's release.

PRIVACY ACT CONCERNs

The Privacy Act of 1974 governs how federal agencies, including the Department of State, collect, use, disclose, and maintain certain records about U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents. Such records may not be disclosed without the individual's prior written consent, unless otherwise authorized by law.

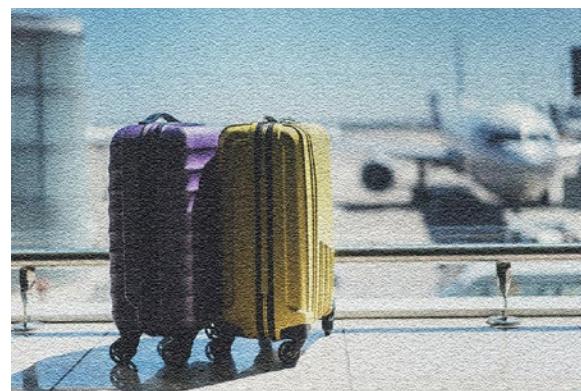
The Department of State takes seriously its commitment to protect the privacy of U.S. citizens. Obligations under the Privacy Act of 1974 as well as Department policies may limit what can be shared about any U.S. citizen with others, including family, friends, employers, congressional staff, and the media. When a U.S. citizen is arrested and/or convicted abroad, the Department of State will not release information about the citizen unless in accordance with all applicable privacy laws and policies.

- » The SPEHA team will also work with the Bureau of Consular Affairs, family members, non-governmental organizations, businesspeople, faith-based organizations, academia, think tanks, likeminded partners, and the multilateral community to bring a detainee home.

TRAVEL WARNINGS

The U.S. government regularly warns against traveling to certain areas of the world and high-risk countries because of various factors that limit its ability to assist U.S. nationals there. Those factors include ongoing armed conflict, a lack of functioning government or police, and ineffective local or regional governments. The State Department has introduced the "K" and "D" risk indicators to provide clear and comprehensive safety and security information about the risk of kidnapping/hostage-taking and wrongful detentions, respectively. The "K" indicator informs U.S. nationals that there is a continuing

SUPPORTING A DETAINEE'S "TEAM"
 A detainee's "team" can be broad and dynamic depending on who a detainee or family designates to engage the U.S. Government on their behalf. This can include employers, law firms, or third-party advocates.



Actions of the U.S. Government When a U.S. National Is Taken Hostage or Wrongfully Detained (continued)

risk of kidnapping or hostage-takings within a country. The “D” indicator highlights the elevated risk of wrongful detentions of U.S. nationals in particular countries.

- » The U.S. does not have embassies or consulates in all countries. The U.S. government may be able to offer only limited assistance to U.S. nationals in countries where the United States does not maintain an embassy or consulate.
- » The U.S. government may have very limited ability to assist in countries with a Level 4 Travel Advisory—where the State Department recommends U.S. nationals “Do Not Travel.” This ability to assist is especially impaired in cases where the traveler is a dual citizen of that country.

For additional State Department resources, see <https://www.state.gov/> and <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/before-you-go/travelers-with-special-considerations/high-risk-travelers.html>.

The U.S. has suspended or has extremely limited operations in the following locations: Afghanistan, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, Venezuela, and Yemen.

“The U.S. government regularly warns against traveling to certain areas of the world and high-risk countries.”

High-Risk Travel Precautions

For U.S. nationals traveling to a high-risk area, the State Department recommends taking the following precautions:

- Enroll in the State Department’s Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP).
- Draft a will and designate appropriate insurance beneficiaries and power of attorney.
- Discuss a plan with loved ones regarding care and custody of children, pets, property, belongings, non-liquid assets (collections, artwork, etc.), funeral wishes, etc.
- Share important documents, login information, and points of contact with loved ones so that they can manage your affairs if you are unable to return as planned to the United States.
- Learn how to use your phone or other smart devices to share your location with your friends and family while you are abroad.
- Establish a personal security plan in coordination with your employer or host organization or consider consulting with a professional security organization.
- Develop a communication plan with your family, employer, and host organization so that they can monitor your safety and location. This plan should specify who you would contact first, and how they should share the information.
- Identify key sources of assistance for you and your family in case of an emergency, such as the local U.S. embassy or consulate, FBI, the State Department’s Office of American Citizen Services, your employer, and local friends and family in the high-risk area.
- Appoint a family member to serve as the point of contact with hostage-takers, media, U.S. and host country government agencies, and Members of Congress if you are taken hostage or detained.
- Establish a proof of life protocol with your loved ones, so that if you are taken hostage, they will know specific questions (and answers) to ask the hostage-takers to be sure that you are alive (and to rule out a hoax).
- Leave DNA samples with your medical provider in case it is necessary for your family to access them.
- Erase sensitive photos, comments, or other materials from your social media pages, cameras, laptops, and other electronic devices that could be considered controversial or provocative by local groups.

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