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Introduction

The methods behind kidnapping are as varied as their motivations. While kidnapping, especially for ransom, can be a crime of opportunity, foreigners are often targeted due to their high-profile appearance, vulnerability, and assumed wealth. The length of any kidnapping incident can also vary widely; while many high-profile kidnapping cases are drawn out for weeks, months, or even years, 79% of reported kidnapping cases around the world last less than seven days according to one study of incidents between 2010 and 2015. Likewise, while kidnapping incidents affiliated with terrorist groups or insurgencies tend to get the most press, the same study reports that the vast majority (80%) of kidnappings are carried out by unaffiliated criminals, with armed groups (14%) and Islamist militant groups (6%) far behind. This report examines the various styles of kidnapping that may affect private-sector operations abroad, as well as providing some mitigation strategies and resources for further research. Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website contains a list of more than a dozen examples of westerner kidnappings since September 2015, which while nowhere near exhaustive, proves the continued risk facing the private sector worldwide.

Types of Kidnapping

This section will detail several types of kidnapping commonly seen around the globe, the motivations behind each type, and some recommendations to deter or mitigate the threats of each.

Kidnap for Ransom- This "traditional" version of kidnapping well-known variant involves the criminal leveraging the hostage in order to receive a payment from their family, employer, or country in exchange for the hostage's release. Kidnapping for ransom is a major source of income for criminal gangs that rely on ransom to finance their operations. Ransom kidnappings are on the rise worldwide, and are so common in certain regions that local companies and criminal groups have a mutually agreed-upon "market price" for kidnapping ransoms. Foreigners especially are targeted due to their high relative wealth and the incentive of a large government ransom payment. A study by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center on the kidnapping of Westerners from 2000-20015 found that the Middle East (469), Africa (456), and Asia (154) regions had the highest number of westerners kidnapped. Countries with both high levels of unrest and Western investments tend to have more kidnappings. For example, according to the study, the majority of Nigeria's 192 Westerner kidnappings occurred in the Niger Delta region due to the heavy presence of oil companies, as opposed to the eight kidnappings by northern Nigeria-based Islamist extremist groups in the same time period, due to the relative lack of Western investment in those areas of the country. Often, organizations do not disclose when ransom is paid because such payment can be interpreted as supporting terrorist organizations. However, a 2015 policy change noted the U.S. government will no longer threaten to prosecute families who try to pay

ransom to win the release of American hostages held overseas, which may slowly change how much information the public knows about these dealings. Detractors to this policy note the inability of Americans to negotiate with terrorists had sometimes meant non-Americans were targeted for kidnap rather than Americans; others also note such publicity generally means higher ransoms are sought by would-be captors.

- **Nigeria, 2015:** An [American missionary was kidnapped](#) in a targeted raid south of Abuja and held for a ransom of $300,000. She was released several weeks later, although the missionary organization with which she was affiliated would not disclose what was done to secure her freedom.

Tiger Kidnapping/Proxy Bombings- Tiger Kidnappings differ from kidnappings for ransom in that the hostage or the recipient is coerced into performing a desired action for the kidnapper(s), such as opening the vault of the bank they work at, unlocking the office after hours so the kidnappers can gain access to the building, or even planting or detonating a bomb (which is the distinction for a *Proxy Bombing*). This style was popularized by the IRA during "The Troubles," a period that saw Northern Ireland militant groups wage a guerilla conflict against British rule. While less common today, several criminal gangs still use this tactic, as do opportunistic criminals worldwide. While abroad, travelers should be aware that their access to their place of employment may make them a target for a tiger kidnapping. For this reason, security managers should ensure their personnel avoid displaying their place of business to casual observers; for example, do not carry business cards with the organization's logo or leave company parking permits visible on your vehicle when off premises, and remove identification badges from your clothing upon leaving work.

- **Ireland, 2015:** An employee of an armored truck company had [his family taken hostage](#) before the criminals forced him to steal cash from his armored truck during his route. After the employee handed the money over, this family was released.

Express Kidnapping- Common in Latin America and parts of Africa, an express kidnapping is a relatively short-term ordeal and only involves a victim and the criminal(s). The criminal will threaten the victim and take them to an ATM to withdraw the maximum amount of cash. The kidnapping generally ends when the victim can no longer withdraw money. Express kidnappings are designed to be quick and profitable for the criminal, and are almost always crimes of opportunity. Occasionally, kidnappers will keep the hostage past midnight in order to extract a second day's worth of cash before ending the ordeal. Unless the hostage fights back, this type of incident usually does not involve violence. The [2016 Crime and Safety Report for South Africa](#) reports express kidnappings by criminals posing as police as a threat facing travelers to that country. After being spotted in the airport, the victim will be stopped by a "policeman" and either robbed or detained for an express kidnapping. The increased threat of express kidnappings from taxis in Mexico in the past year has led to a [surge in ridesharing applications](#), which make it more difficult for a criminal to pose as a driver.

Travelers can mitigate the threat posed from express kidnapping by only using ATMs in well-lighted and public areas, and being aware of suspicious individuals loitering near ATMs. A proactive way to limit the financial consequences is to set maximum daily withdrawal limits on the cards you travel with, if such limits haven't already been set by your bank, as most express kidnappers will let you go once they see you cannot withdraw additional cash. An example of express kidnappings targeting travelers abroad is:

- **Brazil 2016:** A New Zealand Olympic athlete in Rio de Janiero for the 2016 Olympic Games, was the victim of an express kidnapping after men wearing police uniforms forced him to withdraw cash from several ATMs in the city.

- **South Africa 2017:** A couple was assaulted by a criminal falsely portraying himself as their rideshare driver, forced to withdraw money from an ATM, then held overnight before managing to alert a neighbor to their whereabouts.

Political and Ideological Kidnapping- These are potentially the most dangerous form of kidnapping due to the wide range of motives and groups involved. The kidnappers in these cases target victims for their political or ideological impact. This could include motivations such as using the hostage to swap for prisoners, negotiating a withdrawal of security forces from an area, or for propaganda purposes. The ultimate fate of the hostage in this style of kidnapping relies on the negotiation between the kidnapping organization, mediators, and/or the hostage's government. While groups who seek to use a hostage execution as propaganda are less common, they often receive the most public attention. Since 2001, there has been an increase in these incidents among Islamist extremist militant groups. Political and Ideological kidnappings are popular in regions where criminals and insurgents hostile to the government of the victim operate or have influence such as Latin America, East and Central Asia, and the Middle East.

- **Syria, 2012:** An American journalist heading to Syria, was kidnapped by an al-Qa'ida-linked militant group after they accused him of being an American spy near the Syria border in Turkey. He was released in 2014 after 22 months of captivity after Qatar served as a negotiations mediator and secured terms for his release.

- **Afghanistan-Pakistan Border, 2016:** Al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al Zawahiri released a statement encouraging affiliates to kidnap westerners in order to exchange them for prisoners or concessions from governments.

Virtual Kidnapping- This method of kidnapping is unique in that it does not actually involve physical kidnapping and more closely resembles a scam. The criminal calls the target's family or employer claiming to have their family member and promising to release them upon receipt of a payment, which is usually a smaller, more manageable amount to increase the chances of a quick payment. Often the kidnapper has an accomplice who pretends to be the hostage crying for help in the background. Some criminals have also used information gathered from social media or observation to make the threat

appear more genuine, such as where the target works/studies, or what kind of car they drive. The overall goal is to pressure and scare the victim to send the money quickly, before they risk contacting the "hostage". Having successfully received the ransom, the criminal ends the call. The target is usually not aware of the virtual kidnapping until the recipient of the contacts them after payment to ask if they are safe.

Virtual kidnappings tend to target victims who are away from family members for long periods of time, such as victims who are traveling, studying, or working abroad, and occasionally target elderly victims.

If you get a call claiming to be from someone who has kidnapped someone you know, ask for proof such as having the kidnapper call you back from the victim's phone or asking the criminal for specific information not available on social media. If it is a real kidnapping, it would be in the criminal's interest to prove that the threat is legitimate as quickly as possible, while a virtual kidnapper will be unable and therefore unwilling to provide concrete proof in order to keep you on the line. Creating emergency contact information for all members of your family and domestic help when they are abroad can provide you with an alternate way to confirm that the kidnapping threat is a scam.

- **Mexico, 2015:** An American couple received a call at their Tijuana hotel informing them that a cartel was going to attack them. The caller told them to shut off their phones, purchase disposable phones, and ask family members to send money to an account in order to convince the "cartel" to spare the couple's lives. The Legal Attaché (an FBI officer assigned to the U.S. Consulate) helped the family determine that the threat was a scam. Once payment was refused, caller declared that the couple would be killed before hanging up. The couple was unharmed and never in physical danger.

General Kidnapping Mitigation Tips

- If kidnapped, do not act overly defiant towards your captors, but be mindful to avoid giving them information that could be used against you.

- Try to keep a low profile, especially in locations known to have a kidnapping threat.

- Always inform someone, such as a concierge, coworker, or friend of where you are going and what time you expect to return.

- If using locally hired security, drivers, or guides, ensure that they are from a well vetted and accredited organization, as criminal or extremist groups have paid local guides to cooperate with them in order to kidnap clients.

- If possible, do not drive alone or on rural and unpopulated roads after sunset in areas known to have a high risk of kidnapping.

- Always use licensed taxis when in a city. Check to make sure that 1) the meter is present and functional and 2) that the driver matches the ID on the taxi registration sticker. Some areas have seen increased use from rideshare applications with features such as driver reviews and background check as well as the ability to "share" your ride's progress with friends and family; these features can provide travelers with a more secure method of public transportation. If unsure about the security of your ride, trust your instincts and simply wait for another taxi.

- Avoid being predictable while abroad, and stay in locations with adequate security measures.
  - Those most at risk for kidnapping are travelers who are staying in remote areas such as aid workers or those who routinely travel the same route (such as to and from a compound).

- Contact OSAC to learn about region-specific kidnapping threats or methodologies.

Resources

Before traveling abroad, check if your destination country has an active consular message. The warnings will contain an overview of the specific types of risks facing U.S. citizens, and areas in the country that should be avoided. OSAC's "Guidelines for a Personnel Recovery Management Plan" provides best practices in order to ensure that your organization can be prepared in the event that a member of your organization is kidnapped. Additionally, OSAC.gov contains annual Crime and Safety Reports that cover a wide range of security issues that U.S. organizations should know; there's a report for every country published every year. Enrolling in the Department of State's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) allows you to receive security messages from your local U.S. embassy or consulate in addition to providing them with emergency contact information in the event that it is needed. The Defense Human Resource Activity (DHRA) has general guidelines to survive a hostage situation that would be beneficial to read or give to travelers when heading to a high-threat area for kidnapping.

If you have specific questions about the kidnapping threat towards your organization, please contact the OSAC Research & Analysis Unit for more information.