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Business Intelligence
& Investigations



Global Kidnap Bulletin

Issue 2 / July 2015

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1. United States

According to police statistics released in June, there have been 27 reported cases of virtual kidnapping in Houston, Texas since the beginning of 2015. Three of the victims paid ransoms to the perpetrators. Local authorities have claimed that the reported cases are reflective of an overall increase in virtual kidnappings in cities countrywide; the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is investigating the trend.

2. Argentina

Reports suggest that kidnappings in the Buenos Aires Province have increased by over 50 percent in the last 12 months. Most incidents have taken place in the districts of Lomas de Zamora, Lanús, Avellaneda, and Almirante Brown. Between March and April 2015, there were eight high-profile kidnap-for-ransom cases, including the kidnapping of Daniel Rebagliatti, a businessman and son of an industrial magnate. Rebagliatti was kidnapped by a criminal gang and held for eight days. His family paid a 1.8 million peso (USD 200,000) ransom for his release.

3. Venezuela

In June 2015, authorities in Venezuela arrested eight federal police officers charged with kidnapping a businessman in La Guaira, Vargas. This follows the January 2015 arrest of 13 investigative police officers charged with kidnapping a businessman in the capital, Caracas. The arrests indicate that the 2011 reforms to public security in Venezuela have yet to have a significant effect on rooting out corruption. Previous estimates have suggested that police are involved in approximately 80 percent of all kidnappings in Caracas.

4. Gulf of Guinea

On 13 March, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) launched the Multinational Maritime Coordination Centre (MMCC), located in Cotonou, Benin. The MMCC forms part of the ECOWAS Integrated Maritime Strategy and is intended to monitor pirate activity and co-ordinate member state counter-piracy operations in 'Pilot Zone E', which comprises Benin, Niger, Nigeria and Togo. Pirates in the Gulf of Guinea principally engage in three types of

piracy: robbery, cargo theft and kidnap for ransom. Ransom demands usually range from USD 100,000 to several million US dollars. The MMCC will coordinate patrols, information sharing, and training between the four countries in an ongoing effort to combat piracy in the region.

5. Mozambique

Kidnappings in Mozambique have continued unabated in the second quarter of 2015 with at least seven incidents reported since March. The majority of kidnappings have been concentrated in Maputo and targeted local nationals. The Alto Maé area, Aeroporto 'A' area, and Mao Tse Tung Avenue in Maputo have emerged as kidnapping hotspots. Targets have generally been wealthy Mozambican nationals of South Asian descent, however the risk to wealthy individuals of any nationality is increasing. Although the police have arrested several individuals they claim are heads of kidnapping syndicates, the latest statistics for the second quarter of 2015 indicate that Mozambique remains a high-risk country.

6. Italy

In May, Sicilian police arrested five Italian nationals who were part of an organised criminal gang which had orchestrated the kidnapping of several migrants and were demanding ransom payments from the victims' families. Criminal groups are present throughout Italy but their activities are concentrated in the southern regions, namely: Calabria, Campania, Puglia and Sicily. Most kidnappings by organised crime groups target individuals who are in some way connected to illegal activity. As such, immigrants, who may have entered the country illegally, are more likely to be targeted due to their reluctance to engage with local authorities.

7. Germany

On 17 June, Markus Wuerth, the 50-year-old son of Reinhold Wuerth, the Chairman of the Wuerth Tool and Hardware Company, was abducted in Schlitz, northeast of Frankfurt. The victim was found chained to a tree the following day in a forest approximately 100km south east of where he was seized. According to reports, he was

unharmed, and a EUR 2.1 million (USD 2.4 million) ransom was demanded but not paid. Police are still searching for the perpetrators.

8. Ukraine

On 16 June, Pavel Kanygin, a correspondent for Novaya Gazeta, a Russian investigative newspaper, was detained by pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Kanygin was covering an anti-war rally by local residents in Donetsk. Kanygin was reportedly interrogated while handcuffed and was punched in the eye. He was also accused of illegal drug use, spying for Ukraine and the US, and working in rebel-held areas without accreditation. He was deported to Russia the following day.

9. Qatar

In May, a team of BBC journalists were arrested and their equipment confiscated whilst reporting on conditions of migrant labourers in the country. The team had been invited to take part in a government-run media tour to showcase improvements to the living conditions faced by migrant labourers in Qatar. Having arrived in advance of the tour, the BBC team visited a number of sites unaccompanied by government handlers before they were arrested. The journalists were held for two days and interrogated by the Qatari security services. After the journalists were released, the Qatari government noted that they had been arrested for trespassing on private property, and that their coverage of labour issues was not being censored.

10. Yemen

On 4 May, a video was released featuring a French national, Isabelle Prime, who had been kidnapped in February 2015. In the video, Prime appealed to French President Francois Hollande and Yemen's internationally-recognised President, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, to secure her release. While Prime's translator, Sherine Makkaoui, who was kidnapped at the same time, was released in March, Prime's current condition remains unknown. No group has publicly claimed responsibility for the kidnapping.

Prime was working as a consultant for Yemen's Social Fund for Development before she was kidnapped.

11. Azerbaijan

Ahead of the Baku 2015 European Games, on 9 June, Azerbaijani authorities detained Emma Hughes, a UK national and activist, at Baku airport. Hughes works for Platform, an environmental justice organisation, which had reported on human rights abuses in Azerbaijan. Although Hughes had reportedly obtained press accreditation to cover the games, she was barred from entering the country and sent back to London within 24 hours. Media reporting of the European Games has also focused on the imprisonment of Khadija Ismayilova, a journalist, and Leyla Yunus and Rasul Jafarov, both human rights activists who are widely believed to be political prisoners.

12. The Philippines

On 6 April, Nago Town Mayor, Gemma Adana, was kidnapped by affiliates of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a militant Islamist group based in the south western Philippines. Adana was abducted from her home in the village of Taytay Manubo on the island of Mindanao. The kidnapping was not staged directly by the ASG; instead, it was carried out by a group of armed men who are believed to be a part of a kidnap for ransom syndicate that is likely to have connections to ASG. The ASG frequently uses such syndicates to abduct victims and transport them to Basilan or Sulu, where they are then handed over to the group.

13. Malaysia

On 25 April, two Bangladeshi students were kidnapped from a bus station in Kelana Jaya, Selangor State. The perpetrators demanded a BDT 100 million (USD 1.26 million) ransom from the victims' families. However, police recovered the body of one hostage near a road in Shah Alam, Selangor State before any ransom was paid whilst the other hostage managed to escape. Police have arrested four suspects in connection with the crime. Though kidnappings involving expatriates is uncommon in Malaysia, this is the second incident in Selangor State in the past seven months.

Daesh and Taxes: Extortion and kidnapping in the Islamic State

While international efforts to cut Islamic State's funding over the past nine months have focused mainly on illicit oil revenues, the group's most valuable asset has proved to be the population living within its territories, writes Julian Karssen.

Since its fighters overran Iraqi security forces in mid-2014 and seized large swathes of territory in northern and western Iraq, Islamic State (IS) has evaded conventional labelling and comparisons with other militant organisations. IS is not a beleaguered and under-resourced rebel movement, but rather acts simultaneously as a nominally functional state, criminal enterprise, and religious enforcer. The territories under IS control generally feature an established system of governance, judicial institutions, and a military force that continues to surprise in both in its effectiveness and adaptability – causing no small amount of consternation to the group's opponents in Baghdad, Damascus and Washington. Moreover, through a combination of extortion, kidnap and ransom, and taxation, IS has exploited the population in areas under its control to attain an estimated income of approximately USD one million per day.

“With over eight million inhabitants in IS-controlled areas, by late 2014, an estimated 60 percent of IS's daily revenue was accounted for via extortion, taxation, and kidnap for ransom.”

IS's success has been fuelled in large part by this ability to generate massive revenues independently from external funding, in contrast to other militant organisations such as IS's precursor group, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Initially, it was thought that IS derived most of its revenue from illicit oil sales after the group captured numerous oil production facilities in 2014. As a result, from the start of the international military campaign in September 2014, US and allied war planes targeted oil infrastructure controlled by IS, while neighbouring countries sought to crack down on oil smuggling networks.

Following nine months of air strikes on IS and ongoing conflict around the major oil-producing areas of Baiji and Kirkuk, Pentagon spokesmen announced in February 2015 that IS's illegal oil sales had declined to the point where they no longer provided the main source of revenue for the group. Despite this, IS has managed to sustain its hold on territory and has even made fresh gains since May, suggesting that the focus on natural resources may have been misplaced. Instead, it has become apparent that IS's most significant resource is derived from the population.

With over eight million inhabitants in IS-controlled areas, by late 2014, an estimated 60 percent of IS's daily revenue was accounted for via extortion, taxation, and kidnap for ransom.

As early as 2005, AQI began laying the foundation for IS's current extortion networks throughout a number of Iraq's Sunni-majority provinces. In the wake of the US invasion, AQI exploited the weak security presence in cities such as Mosul and demanded protection fees from both small and large businesses, with threats of bombing, murder, and abduction as penalties for non-payment. By the time AQI had changed its name to the 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' and was preparing to overrun Mosul in mid-2014, the group's underground extortion ring in the city was already generating an estimated USD 12 million a month. After IS seized these areas from Iraqi forces in mid-2014 and established its own system of governance, these extortion networks were formalised, and protection fees were employed more overtly, framed by IS as a legitimate form of taxation.

According to US intelligence sources, IS demands a five to 20 percent cut of the salaries of all residents; any remaining registered employees of the Iraqi government face a tax as high as 50 percent. IS also imposes fees on all forms of economic activity occurring in the regions it governs. For example, IS has set up a taxation network on the main highway between Jordan and Baghdad in the western Anbar province of Iraq, replacing the government import tax on the transport of goods by long-haul truckers. The system of tax collection also extends to illegal enterprises; for instance, IS reportedly receives payments from smugglers operating along the Turkish border.

IS's imposition of taxes in urban centres is supposedly undertaken in exchange for the provision of basic services and utilities. To help legitimise its status as a governing entity, IS claims that a significant amount of its income is allocated towards paying official salaries, providing sanitation, building medical facilities, and distributing food supplies. However, there are mixed reports regarding the effectiveness of IS's service delivery, with some former residents of IS areas contradicting the group's propaganda, describing uncollected garbage and critical shortages of both doctors and medical supplies. Moreover, accounts from those who have fled IS territory suggest that fear of reprisal is the primary motivation to pay taxes, further blurring the lines between taxation and extortion.

In addition to regular taxes, IS has instituted the Islamic concept of 'Jizya' in areas under its control. During the early Islamic empire, the Jizya was a form of protection tax demanded from non-Muslims living under Islamic rule.

The concept has been incorporated into IS's ideology, and religious minorities living in a territory administered by IS who are unwilling to convert to Islam are required to pay a fee, or face eviction or even execution. When IS seized Mosul in June 2014, all Christians were subjected to the Jizya and their homes marked to designate them as non-Muslims. The fees demanded have reportedly ranged from USD 170 to USD 660, depending on household income, to be paid twice a year. However, with IS's record of atrocities against minority groups, most have chosen to flee rather than pay, and it is unlikely that IS currently derives significant income from Jizya.

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Religious minorities that remain in IS territory also risk being targeted in kidnap for ransom operations. While the most publicised accounts of IS hostage-taking have typically involved Western victims and end with footage of brutal executions posted online, the ransoming of local hostages serves as a valuable source of income for the group.

In territories controlled by IS, minority religious and ethnic groups are regularly targeted in mass kidnappings, the most recent instance being the abduction of approximately 220 Assyrian Christians in north-east Syria in February 2015. Indeed, only a small number of European hostages have reportedly been exchanged for large sums of cash, as it is much more common for local hostages to be ransomed off to family members for smaller amounts of money, typically a few thousand US dollars.

Although the US-led air campaign has been relatively successful in weakening IS's control over Iraq's oil infrastructure, breaking the group's hold over the population, its most valuable asset, will be a much more complex and costly endeavour. Physically removing IS from the areas it controls is a task for which both the Iraqi army and Syrian regime forces are ill-equipped. While the retaking of Tikrit earlier in the year was heralded as a victory for Iraqi forces, the prospects for success are much lower in larger cities such as Mosul, where IS is more firmly entrenched and far less willing to give up the income that the urban population provides. Until IS's opponents demonstrate their ability to significantly roll back the group's territorial gains, IS will continue to be able to rely on a steady revenue stream to fund its operations.



The Jorday-Iraq highway, an extortion hotspot for IS
Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org>

Caught off guard: Kidnapping in Burkina Faso

Recent instability in Burkina Faso has limited the government’s ability to respond to kidnappings, particularly given uncertainty surrounding the future of the country’s special forces unit, the Régiment de la Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP), writes [Gabrielle Reid](#).

On 4 April 2015, Iulian Gherghut, a Romanian national who was employed as a security guard at a foreign-owned manganese mining operation in northern Burkina Faso, was kidnapped by five gunmen. Two other employees were injured during the attack, which occurred in Oudalan province, before the assailants drove north towards the border with Mali. Al Mourabitoun, a Sahel-based Islamist militant group, has since claimed responsibility for the attack and has called on the Romanian government to enter into negotiations over an undisclosed ransom to secure the security guard’s release. In light of the political vacuum that has emerged in Burkina Faso following the ousting of long-serving leader Blaise Compaoré, in October 2014, the kidnapping has raised concerns over insecurity in the north of Burkina Faso. At the centre of these security concerns is the still undetermined future of the presidential guard, the Régiment de la Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP), the specialised force tasked with securing Gherghut’s release.

The RSP has been widely regarded as a tool for repression, particularly under former President Compaoré. However, with the country now headed up by an interim government, comprising both civilian and military representatives, the role of the military, and specifically that of the RSP, remains doubtful and has proven to be an incendiary factor in Burkina Faso’s transition. Under the new government, the RSP has been unable to shake off its reputation, resulting in widespread calls for it to be disbanded. As a result of public pressure, former Military General and current Prime Minister, Isaac Yacouba Zida, has already dismissed Gilbert Diendéré, head of the RSP and Zida’s former boss. Although Zida has reiterated that he does not seek to disband the unit, the future of the RSP, including its counter-terrorism unit, remains uncertain as civil society groups continue to call for the redistribution of RSP troops.

“This latest kidnapping may offer the RSP a unique opportunity to transform itself.”

This latest kidnapping may offer the RSP a unique opportunity to transform itself however, allowing it to move away from political duties in Ouagadougou to defending Burkina Faso’s vulnerable border with Mali and Niger. Yet, while security sector reforms are on the top of the transitional government’s agenda, with presidential elections slated for October 2015, there are a number of additional challenges.

Like all government reforms, the rebranding of Burkina Faso’s security forces will ultimately take time to implement. In the interim, the RSP will need to successfully locate Gherghut in order to reassure Burkina Faso’s population of its purpose; but the 1,400 strong unit has a tough task ahead.

While this is the first high-profile kidnapping in Burkina Faso, kidnapping in the wider Sahel is a well-established revenue generator for transnational militant groups. Various groups, including Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Mourabitoun and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), garnered approximately USD 75 million in revenue from ransoms in the Sahel between 2003 and 2015. These groups have been able to capitalise on political and security vulnerabilities across the region, including weak central authorities, porous borders and a geographical environment conducive to sustaining an insurgency. Furthermore, as evident in the rise of AQIM in Mali since the 2012 Tuareg rebellion, these transnational militant groups take advantage of an unstable domestic environment within Sahel states to further their own agendas.

For Burkina Faso, the reality is that cross-border criminality is not new within its northern regions. However, the recent ousting of President Compaoré, which resulted in a directionless RSP, has made outlying parts of the country more susceptible to such transnational activity. Burkina Faso will ultimately need to do more to secure these areas and the RSP may prove to be a requisite part of the solution. Yet the RSP is plagued by accusations of abuse of power and the alleged killing of protesters during the October 2014 uprising. Furthermore, in defiance of various calls on government to disband the force earlier this year, the RSP took to the street demanding Zida’s resignation in February, reinforcing the widely held perception that the unit is a somewhat volatile force. As civil society continues to reject the RSP and the unit seems hesitant to change, a quick and successful resolution to the latest kidnapping will help the RSP shake off its former reputation. The RSP needs to transform its role within Burkina Faso with a focus on counter-terrorism and counter-kidnapping abilities in order to for it to have a future in the country, particularly as a new administration takes office at the end of 2015.

The carrot or the stick? Solving El Salvador’s gang problem

The El Salvadoran government’s uncompromising approach to gang violence has failed repeatedly, and an anticipated increase in US funding is likely to exacerbate violence in the country, writes [Lloyd Belton](#).

May 2015 will be remembered as El Salvador’s deadliest month since the country’s civil war in 1992, with over 622 homicides. The recent surge in violence comes as President Salvador Sánchez Cerén reverts to a mano dura (iron fist) approach to combating gang violence in the country, a tactic frequently used by past administrations. Having opposed the 2012-2014 truce between the country’s two largest ‘Mara’ gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, Cerén opted to renew the government’s military offensive after coming to power in 2014. Although unprecedented levels of gang violence suggest that this strategy is failing, many hope that an anticipated increase in US funding will bolster the government’s war against the Maras. However, because Cerén’s approach fails to address the underlying causes of gang violence in the country, it is likely to be unsuccessful.

In March 2012, peace seemed to be on the cards, as rival MS-13 and Barrio 18 leaders ordered approximately 10,500 Mara gang members in El Salvador to stop countrywide attacks. This move followed a government-supported gang truce, brokered by religious and civil society representatives. The truce held for approximately 21 months, as the government suspended its mano dura approach to gang violence and instead pledged economic support for gang members who ceased their criminal activities; homicide rates fell by over 40 percent. However, by 2014, public opinion had turned sharply against the agreement. Critics argued that the Maras had taken advantage of the truce as well as the concessions offered by the previous government to bolster their extortion operations, estimated to affect 79 percent of small businesses at the time. The Maras in turn argued that they had been forced to increasingly rely on extortion due to the government’s failure to provide employment opportunities for gang members who had put down their weapons.

Cerén came to power in June 2014 on a staunchly mano dura platform, rebuffing any attempts to renew the faltering gang truce. Although he initially outlined a more open and inclusive security strategy, known as ‘Plan El Salvador Seguro’, which included provisions for social development programmes, it quickly became clear that the government would once again revert to a military solution to gang violence despite its failure in the past. Cerén has continued the hard-line tradition of previous governments, deploying more than 7,000 soldiers and three special force battalions across the country to aid police and monitor border areas. Social and economic development programmes—a carrot offered by the previous administration to entice gang members to cease violent activity—have been supplanted by anti-gang military battalions—a notoriously brutal stick.

In light of this shift, anticipated US funding increases for social and economic development in El Salvador are likely to be undermined by the current government’s mano dura approach. In January 2015, US Vice President Joe Biden outlined a USD 1 billion aid package for Central America, earmarking approximately 80 percent of the funding for social and economic development initiatives. However, this plan also includes significant funding for counter-narcotics programmes, which critics claim the El Salvadoran government will use to further militarise the country. Many compare this latest US package with previous strategies launched in Colombia, where between 2000 and 2006, the US spent USD 9 billion on the ‘Plan Colombia’ security and development initiative. While supporters of Plan Colombia highlight its contribution to stabilising a country on the brink of being a failed state, critics argue that it funded a violent and destructive counter-narcotics war whose principal goal was improving investment conditions in Colombia. Setbacks for drug traffickers and left-wing insurgencies in Colombia went hand-in-hand with large-scale displacements, an estimated 14,000 non-combatant deaths, extra-judicial killings, and a surge in paramilitary violence. It remains to be seen whether US funding for El Salvador will produce similar levels of violence.

“Social and economic development programmes—a carrot offered by the previous administration to entice gang members to cease violent activity—have been supplanted by anti-gang military battalions—the notoriously brutal stick”

Reverting to the iron fist approach to combating gang violence in El Salvador, Cerén has militarised the country and escalated the government’s war against the Mara gangs. Extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and human rights abuses— all characteristics of El Salvador’s brutal anti-gang police squads and army— are expected to continue, and only encourage socially and economically marginalised youths to seek protection within gang structures. Increased US funding risks exacerbating this problem. As long as the El Salvadoran government fails to show any earnest commitment to addressing the underlying social and economic drivers behind gang recruitment, the Maras will continue to fight fire with fire, perpetuating violence in the country.

About

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