

# KIDNAP+ RANSOM INSIGHT

GLOBAL SUMMARY

FOCUS  
ARTICLE

## THE MILITANT THREAT IN THE SAHEL

JAN

2019 REPORT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## SUMMARY

This issue of Constellis’ Kidnap for Ransom Insight Report covers global kidnapping incidents and trends for the months of November and December 2018, as well as January 2019. The information is derived from multi-source analysis of kidnap for ransom activity and where known, the outcome or resolution of the event. The report covers current kidnap for ransom hotspots at regional, national and provincial levels, with a particular focus on areas where kidnap for ransom activity is increasing.

Statistical analysis of data for November and December 2018 is included on page 13, which displays kidnap for ransom trends by region, victims by nationality and employment sector, as well as identifying the Top 10 countries for kidnapping of foreign nationals over the reporting period. Annual figures for 2018 can be found on page 17.

The Global Piracy Update provides an overview of the piracy threat by region, providing trend analysis for November and December 2018. It also offers sample cases occurring through those months to illustrate identified trends.

The Cyber Security section examines current issues affecting companies and individuals in the realm of IT security. This edition will look at the Ryuk ransomware.

First detected in August 2018, Ryuk is thought to have netted its creators at least USD 3.7 million so far. What sets this virus apart from other forms of ransomware is its apparent targeted nature. This assessment is based on differing ransoms demanded by this ransomware, which seem to correspond to the hackers’ perception of the amount targeted organisations are able to pay. While small to medium-scale businesses were initially targeted, recent attacks suggest the Ryuk hackers are beginning to expand their operations to include much larger organisations.

The Focus Article offers an insight into the militant threat in the Sahel. This area, stretching from Senegal in the west, to Sudan in the East, has long been a jihadist stronghold on the continent, due to its vast size and lawlessness. The overarching ambition of jihadist groups in the region is the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and the expulsion of alleged foreign influencers, having Western military and civilian organisations as declared targets. Islamist networks have notably grown in the Sahel in recent years, expanding their areas of operations, as well as their attack capabilities. With insurgent groups continuing to exploit regional insecurity and conflict, the threat of terrorism in the Sahel is expected to remain extensive.

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# GLOBAL OVERVIEW

## AMERICAS

In November-December 2018, the Americas accounted for just over 60% of the total number of foreign kidnapping victims recorded by Constellis globally. This represents a significant increase compared to the previous two-month period, in which the region recorded 9% of total global foreign kidnapping cases. This was largely linked to a series of mass kidnappings of foreign migrants recorded in Mexico over the reporting period. Constellis recorded 199 victims of this type of incident in 2018 alone, placing the Americas, and Mexico specifically, at the top of the kidnapping ranking. While this has been an enduring trend in the country for several years, the number of such cases has spiked since November as a result of the arrival in Mexico of almost 10,000 Central American migrants as part of the so-called 'Migrant Caravan'. Most migrants are the victims of high levels of violence and crime in their home countries, or the critical state of the economy. However, anti-immigration groups, both in the US and Mexico, have claimed that a number of criminals have sought shelter in the movement. Additionally, it has been argued that because of stringent US border security, thousands of migrants may opt to stay in Mexico. This will not only place considerable economic strain on Mexico's border territories, but may also lead to increased levels of criminality, as the migrants provide local criminal groups with a vast number of vulnerable targets, both as victims and as potential recruits.

### CASES:

- ▶ In November, the Ombudsman of Oaxaca State reported the kidnapping of nearly 100 undocumented migrants belonging to the 'Migrant Caravan' on their way to Mexico City from Veracruz State. It was reported that the Central Americans were kidnapped in Puebla State by bus drivers contracted to transport them, who then handed them over to presumed members of Los Zetas cartel. In the same month, a video showing a Guatemalan migrant being tortured by kidnappers in Mexico went viral on social media. Isidoro Saban was kidnapped along with his 10-year-old son by suspected cartel members in Chiapas State on 1 November as they travelled to the US. The kidnappers reportedly demanded a ransom of USD 50,000 from their family in Guatemala, and sent them the video to press for payment. In the video, other victims held in the same location can be heard crying in the background. According to some Guatemalan media sources, Saban and his son were released on 9 November after the family paid USD 5,000 to the kidnappers.
- ▶ A similar situation has been observed along the Colombia-Venezuela border, where dozens of Venezuelan migrants have fallen prey to both Colombian and Venezuelan groups. Most recently, on 11 December, Colombian NGOs denounced the kidnapping of 10 Venezuelan nationals by an armed group in the municipality of Tibú, Norte de Santander department. At the time of the report, information had been received that two of the hostages had already been killed by the kidnappers. A local organization said the kidnappers disseminated a series of videos on WhatsApp, displaying the remaining hostages. It is believed the victims may have been the target of a 'social cleansing' campaign in the border area with Venezuela.



Still from video sent to relatives of a kidnapped Guatemalan migrant in November 2018. (El Puerto Informa)

Terrorism and criminal activity by armed groups continue to be an ever-present concern in Colombia, a country ranked among the 30 most affected nations by terrorism worldwide, and the second in the Americas region, according to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI). Following the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army of Colombia (ELN) has emerged as the deadliest group on the continent. Moreover, the ELN has sought to benefit from the criminal vacuum caused by the demobilisation of the FARC, vying for control over former FARC territories with FARC dissident groups and organised criminal groups (neo-cartels) in the area. The group's attacks, which have included kidnappings, have notably increased since the suspension of the dialogue with the government in September 2018. President Ivan Duque has made the ELN's release of its hostages a condition for the resumption of the talks. At present, it is believed the group is holding at least 16 people, of whom 15 are civilians. While the ELN's kidnappings have a strong political motive, in most cases the group has demanded a ransom for the release of the hostages. A statement released by the group's leader 'Pablito' in April 2018 said that the ELN "is an insurgent revolutionary organization, and as such we have the right to economic and political retentions". From this statement, it is clear that kidnapping remains an important strategy in the group's ideology as well as an important source of funding. As of January 2019, this crisis appears far from being resolved, given that the ELN refuses to concede to the government's demands and in view of the group's recent increase in violent activity. This was shown on 21 January, when the group claimed responsibility for a car bomb in Bogotá. This attack resulted in the death of at least 21 people and is reminiscent of the militant violence experienced in the country in the early 2000s.

### CASES:

- ▶ On 8 January, a helicopter belonging to a Colombian cash-in-transit service company was attacked and brought down in the region of Catatumbo, Norte de Santander department. After the attack, the assailants took the helicopter's three-man crew hostage and stole COP 1.7 billion (over USD 500,000) being transported, later incinerating the aircraft. The Colombian police and army are carrying out search operations to locate the whereabouts of the victims. The ELN claimed the attack on 16 January, declaring that it was in response to Colombian army operations in the areas of Catatumbo and César. No ransom demand has been made public, although the group has stated it is willing to release the crew.



Wreckage at the site where the ELN carried out a car bomb attack on 17 January 2019. (El Nuevo Diario)

**To the west, Venezuela is on the brink of collapse at all levels: economic, political and social. As President Maduro was sworn in for his second six-year term, and with a coup attempt already reported, tensions are at their highest, presenting bleak prospects for the country in 2019. As such, it is expected that crime will continue to increase, including kidnapping, in spite of the government's assertion to the contrary.**

### CASES:

- ▶ On 9 December, Venezuelan police rescued an Italian businessman who had been held for 27 days by a network of kidnappers with links to security agencies. Emilio D'Andre was kidnapped on 13 November from his business in Caracas by four armed men dressed in black who wore insignia of the Special Forces of the Venezuelan Police (FAES). The victim's father, who also resides in Caracas, was called the next day and demanded USD 200,000. After negotiations, the

kidnappers agreed on a payment of USD 50,000, to be delivered to the headquarters of the intelligence service (Sebin) in Caracas. The exchange was foiled as the kidnappers realised that the Scientific Police (CICPC) was monitoring the payment. Although the kidnappers threatened to kill D'Andre over the incident, they were arrested whilst attempting to escape. During interrogation, the arrested criminals revealed the location of the safe house where the victim was being held. It is believed the gang was behind a series of other kidnappings in Caracas.



# EUROPE

During November and December 2018, Europe once again experienced a significant increase in the number of kidnapped foreigners. This, however, was linked to reports of two mass-kidnappings of migrants, one in Spain and another in Greece. European countries have for a long time been countries of destination for migration, primarily from Africa and the Middle East. While the whole region is affected by this issue, countries of entry are particularly affected, especially in terms of security. This is the case of countries bordering the Mediterranean and the Balkans. According to organisations monitoring migrant movements into Europe, the inflow of migrants has observed a downward trend since 2017, as a result of stringent measures both in Europe and in transiting countries in Africa. Nonetheless, this will continue to be an important political factor in the region. In addition to kidnappings linked to people-smuggling gangs, Europe continues to record a series of kidnappings linked to criminal activities and personal disputes. On the other hand, traditional kidnap for ransom incidents continue to be infrequent, particularly in Western Europe, mainly as a result of effective law enforcement. Foreign nationals are rarely targeted in these cases.

## CASES:

- ▶ On 14 November, the Spanish Civil Guard rescued 22 Moldovan migrants who had been held against their will and subjected to forced labour by a gang of Romanian human traffickers in Albacete, Castilla-La Mancha region. Three Romanian nationals were arrested in the operation. According to investigators, the victims had been lured in Moldova with promises of well-remunerated agricultural work in Spain. The rescue operation was launched after the Civil Guard received an anonymous tip-off alerting them to the workers' situation.
- ▶ On 18 December, Greek police detained a man for holding 22 illegal migrants to ransom in an abandoned building in a village west of Thessaloniki. The migrants had arrived illegally via Turkey and were held in the building by the perpetrator, who subsequently demanded ransoms from their families. The amounts demanded are unknown. Police are currently attempting to identify any accomplices.



Images of the flat where Moldovan migrants were held against their will in Spain. (Spanish National Guard)

- ▶ On 9 January, Norwegian police made known the kidnapping of the wife of multi-millionaire Norwegian businessman Tom Hagen, calling for information from the general public. Anne-Elisabeth Falkevik was kidnapped on 31 October 2018 from her home in Lorenskog, located approximately 20km from Oslo, Norway. A ransom of USD 10.3 million in the cryptocurrency Monero has been reportedly demanded for her release. During the limited contact established, the kidnappers have been said to have threatened to use violence against Falkevik if her family does not meet their demands. No Proof of Life has reportedly been provided. In a statement, police said they made the case public despite threats from

the kidnappers in order to appeal for more information. Tips so far received by the police affirm that three men of Eastern European ethnicity, posing as fishermen, were seen in the area with surveillance equipment in the days prior to Falkevik's disappearance.



(Image: cryptocoinspy.com)

Higher kidnapping rates in the region can be found in former Soviet nations, particularly Russia and Ukraine. There, kidnappings take place for a variety of reasons, ranging from issues related to the conflict between the two countries - typically in border areas - to disputes among criminals. A feature of this region in the last couple of years has been the targeting of people engaged in activities that involve cryptocurrency trading.

## CASES:

- ▶ On 23 November, the Ukrainian National Police arrested two brothers for the kidnapping of a man who mined cryptocurrencies. According to the police report, the kidnapping occurred in March 2018 in the Podilsky district of the Ukrainian capital, Kiev. The criminals waited for the victim in the vicinity of his apartment and attacked him when he arrived. After taking him to a safe house, the kidnappers demanded the keys to his apartment and his crypto-wallet details, threatening him with death. The victim was released in the city of Brovary after the criminals stole over USD 50,000 from him.



# MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East showed a two-fold increase in the number of foreign kidnap victims recorded over November-December in comparison with the previous reporting period. This was also linked to one mass kidnapping of migrants, which was recorded in Lebanon in November. Over 2018 however, the region experienced a downward trend in the reporting of kidnapping cases affecting foreign nationals, with 43% less victims recorded than in 2017. Kidnapping in the region continues to be most pervasive in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, due to ongoing conflict and associated high levels of criminality; and Lebanon, more particularly in its border areas with Syria, which are prone to the spill-over of violence and where local criminals have traditionally found a safe haven for their activities. In these countries, while foreign nationals are at very high risk of kidnapping from a variety of actors, the great majority of victims are locals. Additionally, although Westerners are regarded as high-value targets, it is in fact regional nationals who are most affected among foreigners kidnapped in the region. According to Constellis statistics for 2018, only 23% of all foreign victims in the region originated from non-Arab countries, out of which only 37% were Westerners. Aid workers are at particular risk in high-threat countries in the region, especially in Syria and Yemen, where they seem to be targeted by opposition groups and criminals alike.

## CASES:

- On 11 January, footage emerged showing the apparent rescue of a British aid worker who had been missing in northern Syria since late November 2018. Mohammed Shakiel Shabir, who had been based in Idlib for the past four years, was said to have been kidnapped and held hostage by a local armed gang. The video, which was originally posted by the media arm of the main militant group in the region, Hay'at Tahrir al-

Sham (HTS, formerly Al Nusra Front), shows Shakiel being rescued by HTS militants, who break down the door of a cell where he is shackled to the wall by chains around his arms, legs and neck. The rescue reportedly took place on 9 January in the Idlib countryside. The events were confirmed by a number of local sources, who said the rescue took place after members of the gang holding Shabir were stopped at a checkpoint, and found in possession of photos of the victim. According to the same sources, the kidnappers had demanded USD 4 million in Bitcoin for his release. After his rescue, Shabir alleged the gang was made up of Chechens and Syrians. These criminals were purportedly well-known in the province for their criminal activities, particularly for kidnapping members of wealthy Syrian families, making them millions of dollars in Bitcoin ransoms payments.

Still from video showing the rescue of British aid worker Mohammed Shakiel Shabir in January 2019. (Birmingham Mail)



- On 29 November, units of the Lebanese army rescued 27 Syrian nationals who had been held for ransom in the Beqaa Valley. The raid was carried out after the military received intelligence about the location of the hostages, who were kept at a farm in the outskirts of the Baalul settlement. Three Lebanese nationals were arrested during the operation.

- On 23 December, an Iraqi man was released during an army operation in Qurna, in the southern Iraqi province of Basra. The victim had been kidnapped the previous day by unknown assailants who demanded a ransom of USD 150,000 from his family. It is believed the kidnapping was conducted by a local criminal group, who targeted the man due to his perceived wealth, being an employee of the Basra Oil Company.

**Kidnapping in countries that are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) continues to be infrequent, due to their low levels of criminality and the efficacy of their law enforcement. Reported incidents commonly involve foreign victims, given the large presence of expatriates in these countries. These incidents are in their majority linked to personal or business disputes with compatriots.**

## CASES:

- On 20 January, the Dubai Criminal Court heard the case of an Asian businessman accused of kidnapping and assaulting a compatriot. The victim said he had paid Dhs10,000 (approximately USD 2,700) to the businessman's uncle in their country to come to the UAE to work as a driver. When he arrived in Dubai, he found the job was as a labourer. The worker demanded a change in the contract or to be allowed to return home. The businessman refused and the victim filed a complaint at his country's consulate in Dubai. When the businessman found out about the complaint, he lured the worker to his house, where he was beaten by two other men and taken to another property where he was held hostage. The victim was threatened with police reports against him and was forced to sign several documents. He was also forced to contact his family and request them to send him Dhs12,000 (almost USD 3,300) to pay the businessman the cost of bringing him to the UAE.

- On December 2018, a CCTV video posted on social networking platforms exposed the assault and kidnapping of an Asian worker at a petrol station in the Naqra area of Hail city, Saudi Arabia. The video shows two criminals getting out of their car and pulling the victim inside, taking advantage of the worker being distracted filling fuel. The car is then seen leaving the station at full speed. It was later reported that the man was subsequently abandoned without injury in the city's suburbs after being robbed of 5,000 riyals (USD 1,300) and his phone.



Still from CCTV video showing kidnapping of Asian worker in Hail, KSA. (alrams.net)

# AFRICA

During the period of November-December, Africa observed a 15% decrease in the number of foreign kidnap victims recorded in the region, compared to September-October. This was mainly because only one successful mass maritime kidnapping was reported during the reporting period (the attack targeted five fishing trawlers in Cameroonian waters, with 18 victims), as opposed to four off Congo, Cameroon and Nigeria, which accounted for 44 victims in the previous period. Overall, in 2018, Africa remained the region with the highest threat of kidnapping, having the greatest number of countries with 'High' and 'Very High' threat ratings. The Sahel region has emerged as one of the most dangerous areas in the world in recent years, as a result of a strong Islamic militancy, which has demonstrated great resilience to counter-terrorism operations carried out by the international alliance led by France. Benefitting from vast ungoverned spaces and partnerships with long-established criminal networks, and exploiting inter-communal conflict, these groups have expanded their territorial reach and operational capabilities. This expansion has particularly been observed in Burkina Faso in recent months, where a state of emergency exists as of 31 December 2018. Kidnapping will remain a significant tactic and funding source for groups operating in the region, with foreign nationals as preferred targets, given their perceived high worth. Most western nations have issued travel advisories against travel in the region, particularly to Mali and the areas bordering its neighbours.

## CASES:

- ▶ Canadian national Edith Blais and her Italian companion Luca Tacchetto were kidnapped in Burkina Faso on 15 December 2018. The couple, who had been travelling by car across Africa for several months, went missing after they departed the locality of Bobo-Dioulasso. They were on their way to Ouagadougou to obtain visas for Togo, where they intended to volunteer for a humanitarian project with INGO Zion'Gaïa. It is reported that the two foreigners did not make it to the capital and never crossed the border. Their car has not been located either. Reportedly, no ransom has been demanded so far and no group has publicly claimed their kidnapping. Canadian authorities announced they have received information that both hostages are alive.
- ▶ Canadian national Kirk Woodman was kidnapped by suspected extremists near the border with Niger on 15 January 2019. The victim, a geologist working for a Canada-based mining company, was abducted during a raid on a mining site in the locality of Tiabongou. Woodman was found dead, with several bullet wounds, on the morning of 17 January, 100 km from the abduction site. The reason for Woodman's killing is currently unknown, but it is believed it may have been the result of the victim trying to escape his captors. No group claimed responsibility for the incident.
- ▶ Loubos Kosik, a gym manager and former officer of the Slovak Secret Service (SIS), was kidnapped on 15 January 2019 in Bamako, Mali. The Slovak national was reportedly taken from his home by a group of about 15 armed people travelling in four vehicles and on a number of motorcycles who surrounded his residence. No more details have emerged since his disappearance. While it has been speculated that this may have been an extraction operation on the part of the Slovak government, which has sought Kosik's extradition to Slovakia, the method by which he was abducted is similar to that of previous kidnappings carried out by jihadists in the region.



Italian Luca Tacchetto and Canadian Edith Blais, kidnapped while travelling through Burkina Faso in December 2018. (Radio Canada)

In Southern Africa, the kidnapping threat emanates primarily from criminality. A particular trend in this region has been the targeting of affluent members of the Indo-Pakistani community. These attacks are typically carried out by brazen, sophisticated kidnapping syndicates, usually in urban settings and involving prior investigation and surveillance of victims. This trend was first observed in Mozambique. There, law enforcement efforts focused on this crime have achieved a downward trend since 2017. Conversely, kidnapping rates have increased in recent years in neighbouring countries such as Madagascar and South Africa, where kidnapping of foreign nationals in these two countries have followed similar patterns. The October 2018 kidnapping of a multimillionaire of Indian origin in Tanzania was a possible indication of this trend also affecting this Eastern African country. This fact could indicate a criminal migration or expansion of Mozambican syndicates. Indeed, in a number of recent kidnappings in the region, the participation of Mozambican elements has been cited, reinforcing the above-mentioned assessment. While mostly targeting South Asians, other nationalities have also been targeted, including South-East Asians, Europeans and regional expatriates.

## CASES:

- ▶ Harman Kamis, a French citizen of Indian origin and owner of a large transport company in the country, was kidnapped by four armed men on 20 November in Madagascar's second largest city, Toamasina. Kamis was leaving his company offices when four heavily-armed men boarded his car and forced him to drive away. The car was found abandoned in the capital, Antananarivo, a few hours after the incident. The kidnappers allegedly demanded a ransom of 4 billion ariary (approximately USD 1.1 million). The victim was released on 26 November, according to Malagasy authorities, as a result of a security operation in the Toamasina district of Antsarakofafa, without any ransom having been paid. One kidnapper was reportedly arrested during the raid. This was the fourth kidnapping of a French national of Indian origin recorded in November in Madagascar.
- ▶ A prominent Portuguese businessman based in Pombal, Mozambique, was found beheaded in a quarry in Moamba, Maputo province. José Paulo Caetano was kidnapped on 9 November, having been lured by the criminals to a fake business meeting. According to the Mozambican police, the kidnappers demanded a ransom of 900,000 meticalais (over USD 14,000) and a BMW vehicle, which the family of the entrepreneur delivered. Nonetheless, the businessman was killed by the criminals. A number of suspects were arrested by the Mozambican authorities in the following days, believed to be part of a group that was also responsible for a number of other violent kidnappings between 2016 and 2017.



Kidnappers of businessman Harman Kamis being presented at Toamasina police station after their arrest on 28 November 2018. (News Mada)



# ASIA

Over November and December, Asia saw an increase of 58% in the recorded number of foreign kidnapping victims. Nonetheless, Asia was ranked last in Constellis' statistics for the period and for 2018 overall. In a year-to-year assessment, in 2018 Asia saw a decrease of 17%, mainly as a result of a decrease in maritime kidnapping cases, and kidnappings in the Philippines. While the activity of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) remains limited in comparison to levels seen in 2016 and the first months of 2017, the threat posed by the group persists. Following a hiatus of over a year, resulting from sustained counter-militancy activity by the Philippines' government, the group is believed to be reorganising. This has been evidenced in the recent spike of maritime attacks recorded in waters between Malaysia and the Philippines, as well as the threat warnings issued by several western countries against the threat of kidnapping by the group in the region. Another persistent threat in South-East Asia originates from loan shark syndicates, particularly those from in China, which have an extensive presence in gambling hubs across the region. While this has been a long-standing issue in many countries, it is believed that the recent increase in reporting of such incidents in the region is linked to the tightening of regulatory controls on the gambling industry of Macau in recent years, which has driven out organized crime from the island and into new hubs such as Manila (Philippines), Sihanoukville (Cambodia) and Hanoi (Vietnam).

## CASES:

- ▶ On 30 December, ASG militants released the son of Eddie Quimbo, mayor of Labason, Zamboanga del Norte, after more than a year in captivity. Jed Quimbo was abducted by six armed men on 6 September 2017. After his release, Jed said he had been held captive with Dutch national Ewold Horn (kidnapped in 2012), a Vietnamese national and three other Filipinos, all of whom were in good condition. According to the Philippine authorities, as of the day of Quimbo's release, five more hostages - three foreigners and two Filipinos - remained in the hands of Abu Sayyaf.
- ▶ On 5 December, six Chinese, believed to be members of a loan shark syndicate, were arrested by operatives of the Philippine National Police Anti-Kidnapping Group (AKG) in Parañaque City, Metro Manila. A kidnapped Chinese national was rescued in the operation at the Okada casino. Zhu Yan Qing had been held by the suspects since 28 November, when he failed to pay a debt of 3 million pesos (USD 57,000). The suspects allegedly demanded 500,000 renminbi (USD 74,000) from the victim's family in exchange for his release. One of the victim's friends reported the incident to the police.
- ▶ On 5 December, Cambodian authorities arrested nine Chinese nationals who allegedly kidnapped and tortured two of their compatriots who could not pay their gambling debts. The arrest took place in Sihanoukville, at one of the city's Chinese-owned casinos. According to police, the accused were members of a Chinese gang who provided loans to gamblers at the raided casino. The victims had been reportedly held for five days at a rented home in the area and released once payment was received.



Philippine Army deployment following the double bomb explosion at a Church in Jolo, claimed by the Islamic State's 'East Asia Province', formed by former Abu Sayyaf militants. (Rappler)

While Afghanistan and Pakistan are well-known for the significant presence of insurgent groups, most kidnap for ransom incidents there are carried out by criminal elements. The two Asian nations possess a very high crime rate, favoured by ineffective law enforcement. While foreigners are perceived to be wealthier, these groups mainly target wealthy locals. Having said that, reports suggest that given the opportunity, criminal networks may opt to take foreign hostages to sell them on to militant groups. Many organised criminal groups in the area have the ability to operate on both sides of the border. Additionally, they are known to be involved in an array of criminal activities, including extortion of local business owners, which may be accompanied by violent acts if their demands are not met.

## CASES:

- ▶ In Pakistan, on 23 November, Lahore police, with the cooperation of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD), recovered two local businessmen and arrested five suspected kidnappers, including two women. The businessmen were abducted from Peshawar on 8 November, while on their way back to Lahore. Soon after their kidnapping, the victims' relatives started receiving phone calls from Afghanistan, during which the kidnappers demanded a ransom payment of Rs. 500 million (approximately USD 3.6 million). The families reported the incident to the authorities, who after investigations traced the kidnappers' hideout to the Faqirabad area of Peshawar, from where the victims were rescued.
- ▶ On 1 January 2019, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) arrested a group of four kidnappers in the Afghan capital, Kabul, and rescued a person. According to the NDS, the kidnappers had abducted the victim, a doctor, in the Khair Khana area, and demanded USD 500,000 in ransom from his family. The gang was reportedly arrested before obtaining payment from the doctor's family.

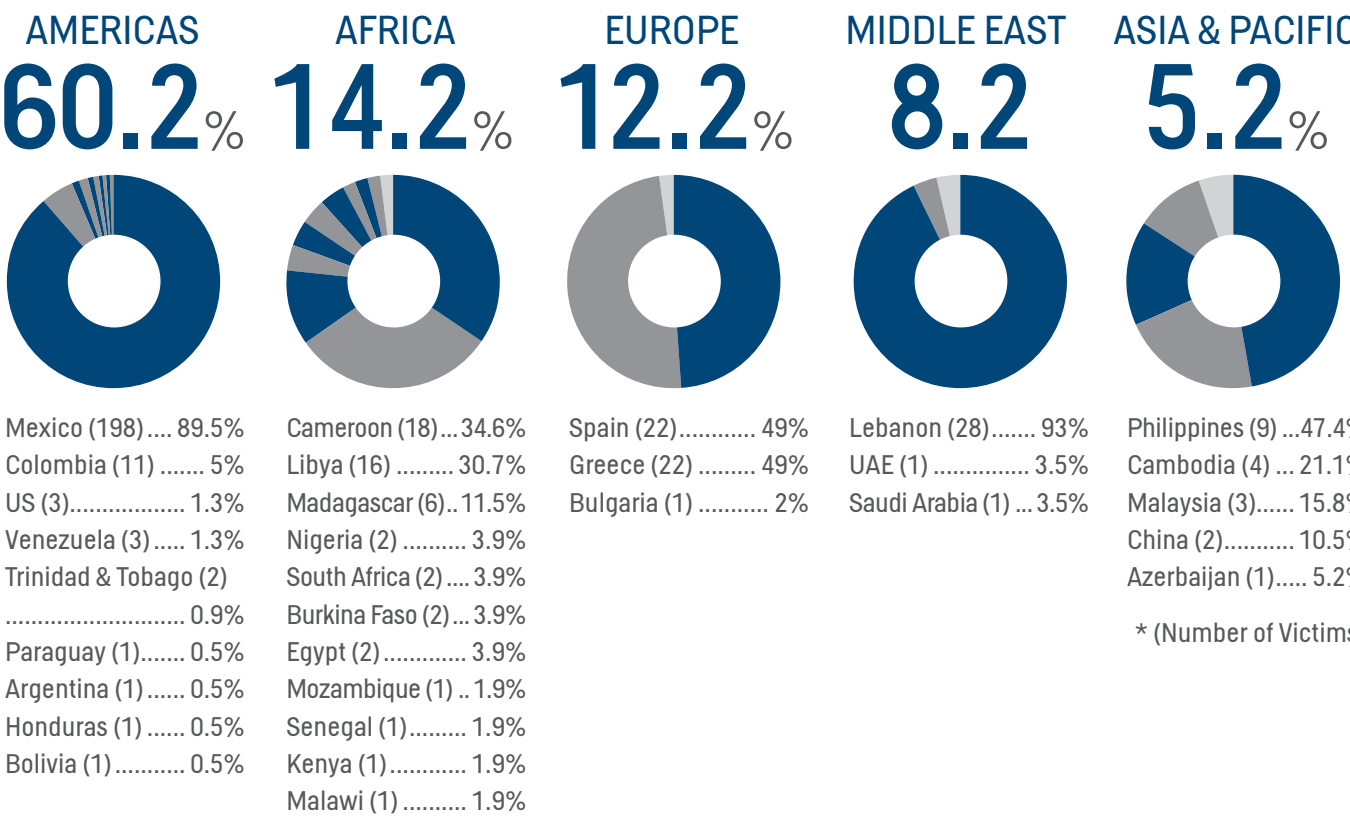
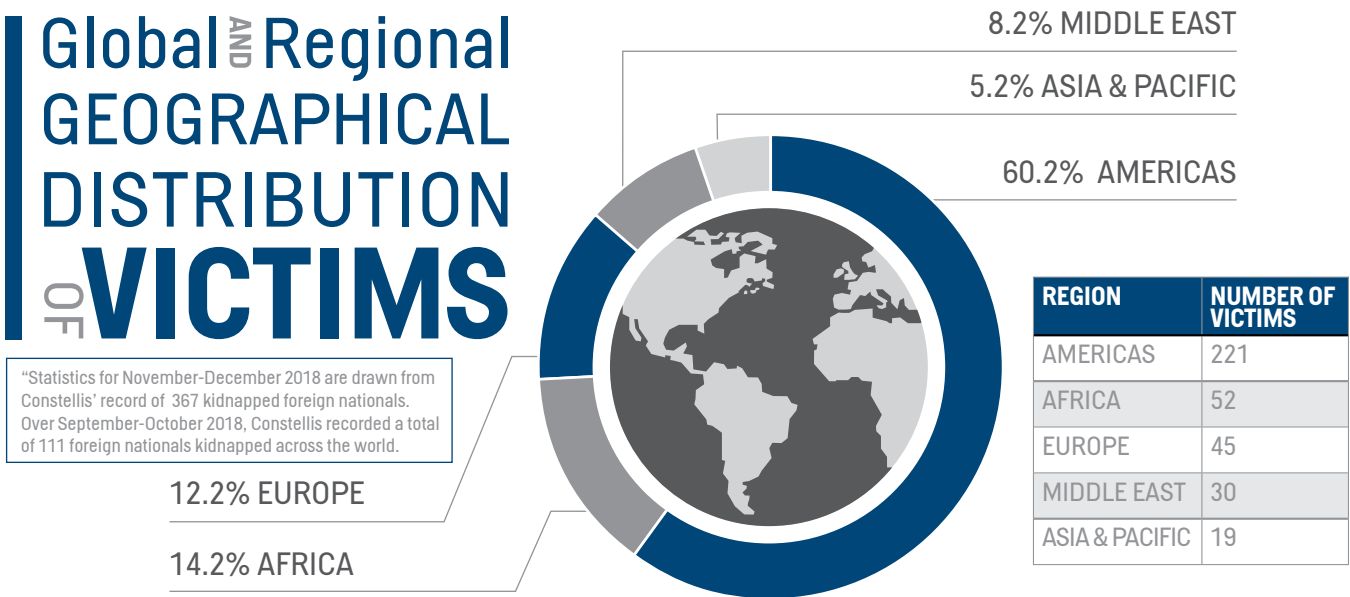


Arsenal recovered by Pakistani police during the arrest of remaining members of the kidnapping gang responsible for the kidnapping of two Lahore businessmen in November 2018. (The Express Tribune)

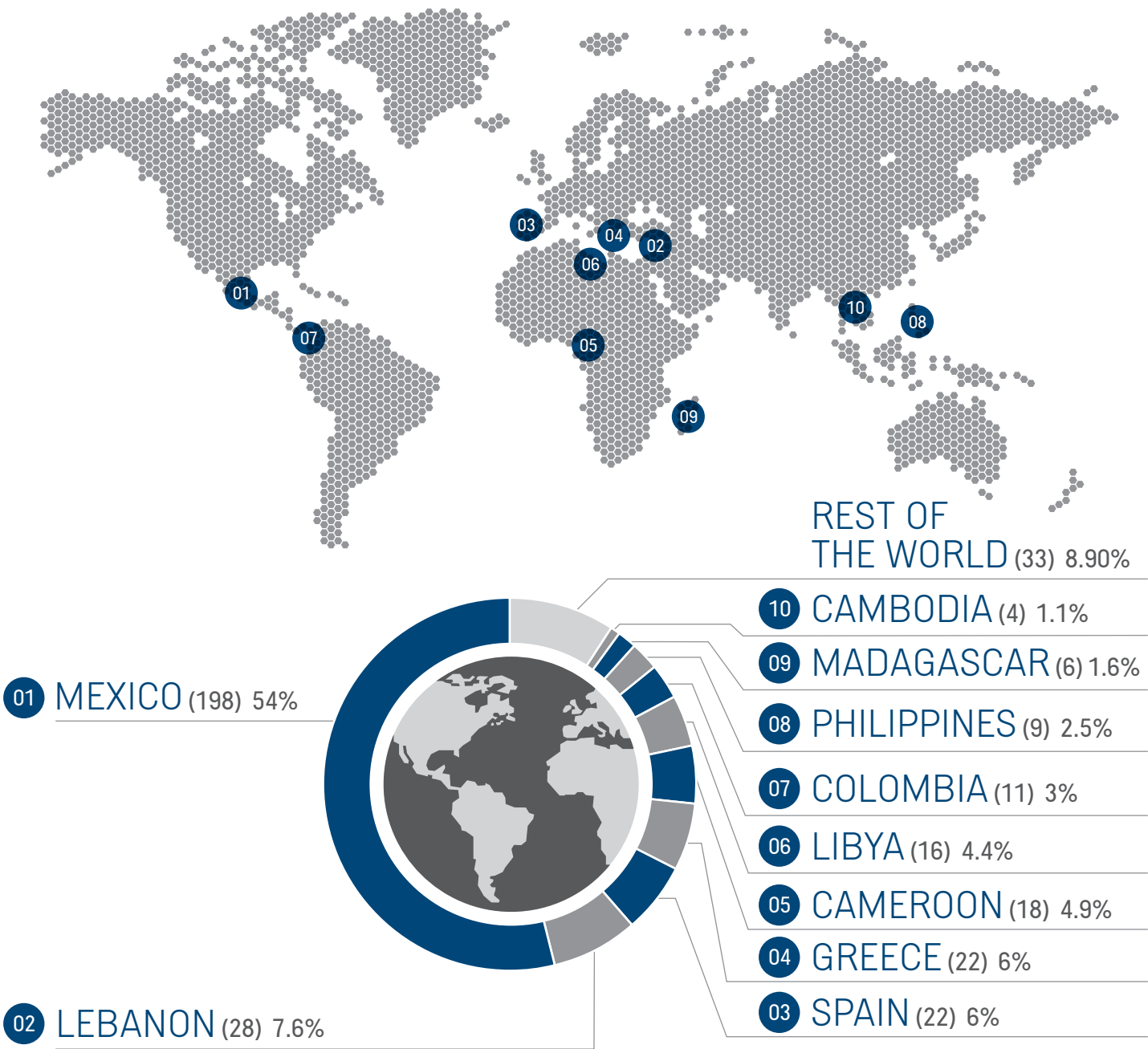
KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS\*

Global AND Regional  
GEOGRAPHICAL  
DISTRIBUTION  
OF VICTIMS

“Statistics for November-December 2018 are drawn from Constellis’ record of 367 kidnapped foreign nationals. Over September-October 2018, Constellis recorded a total of 111 foreign nationals kidnapped across the world.



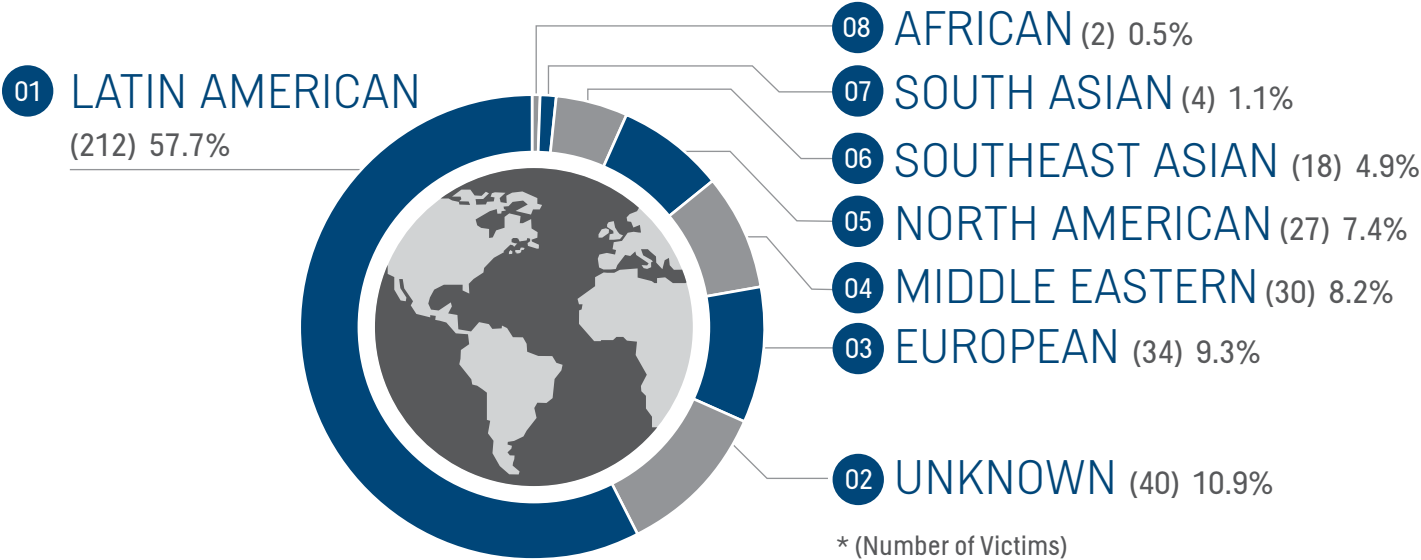
TOP 10 COUNTRIES  
FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF  
FOREIGN CITIZENS IN NOV-DEC 2018





# KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS

## REGIONAL ORIGINS OF VICTIMS



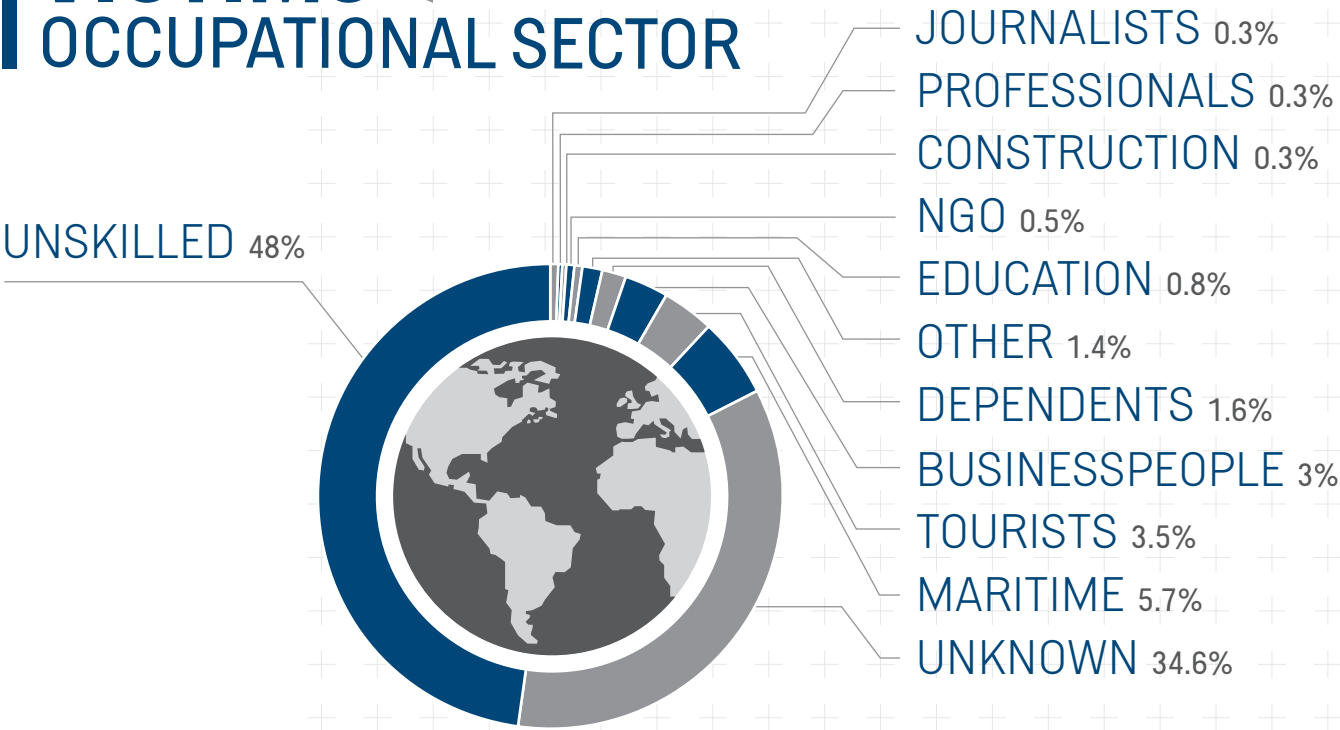
## MOST VICTIMIZED SINGLE NATIONALITY

- 01 Honduran
- 02 Syrian
- 03 Moldovan
- 04 Egyptian
- 05 Venezuelan
- 06 Chinese
- 07 American
- 08 Canadian
- 09 French
- 10 Guatemalan

## MOST VICTIMIZED ORIGIN BY REGION

REGION	ORIGIN
Africa	North Americans
Americas	Latin Americans
Asia & Pacific	Southeast Asians
Europe	Europeans
Middle East	Middle Eastern

# VICTIMS BY OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR



INDUSTRY	NUMBER OF VICTIMS
Unskilled	176
Unknown	127
Maritime	21
Tourists	13
Businesspeople	11
Dependents	6
Other	5
Education	3
NGO	2
Construction	1
Professionals	1
Journalists	1

## MOST VICTIMIZED OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR BY REGION

REGION	OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR
Africa	Maritime
Americas	Unskilled
Asia	Tourists
Europe	Unskilled
Middle East	Unknown sector

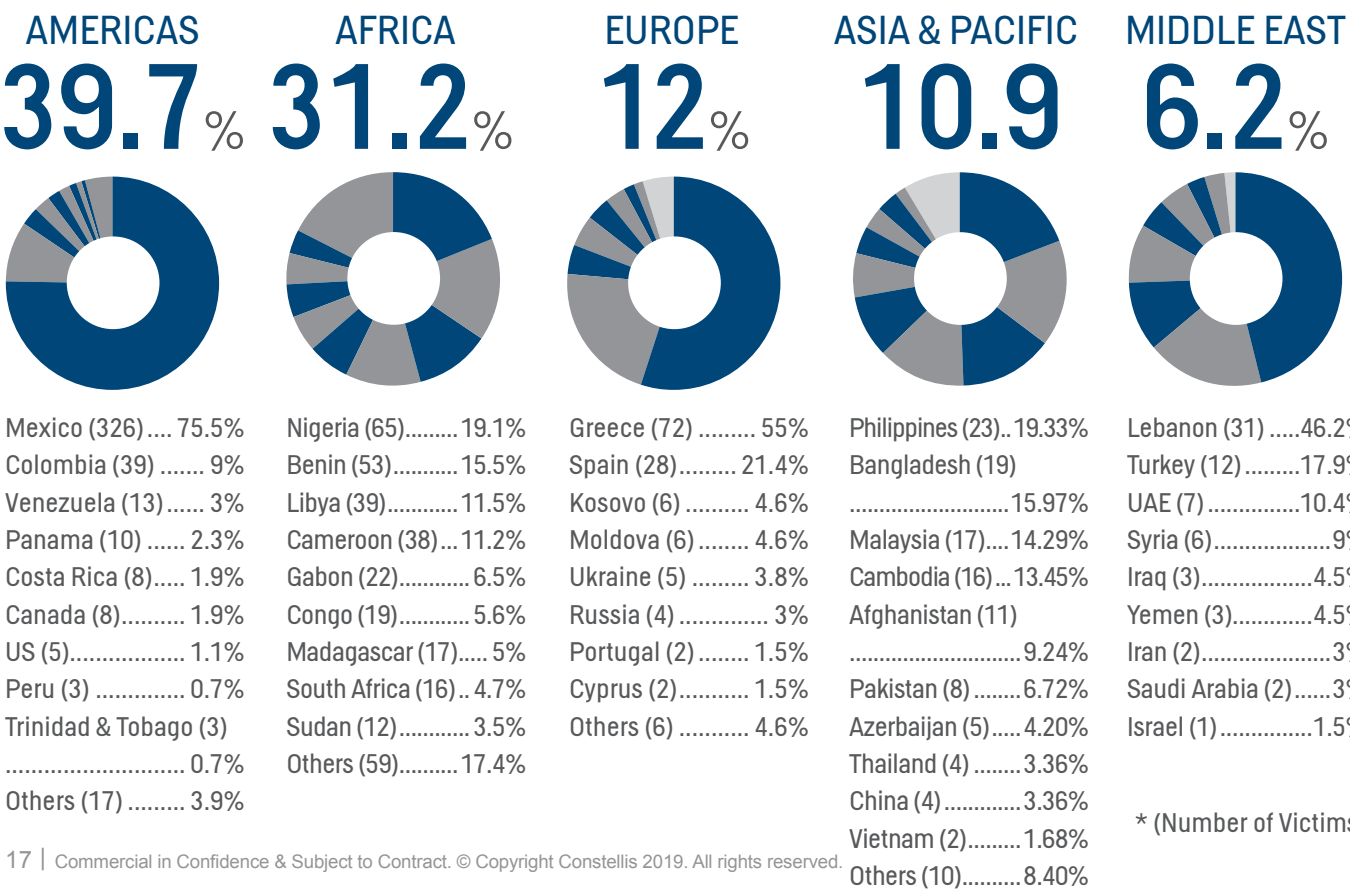
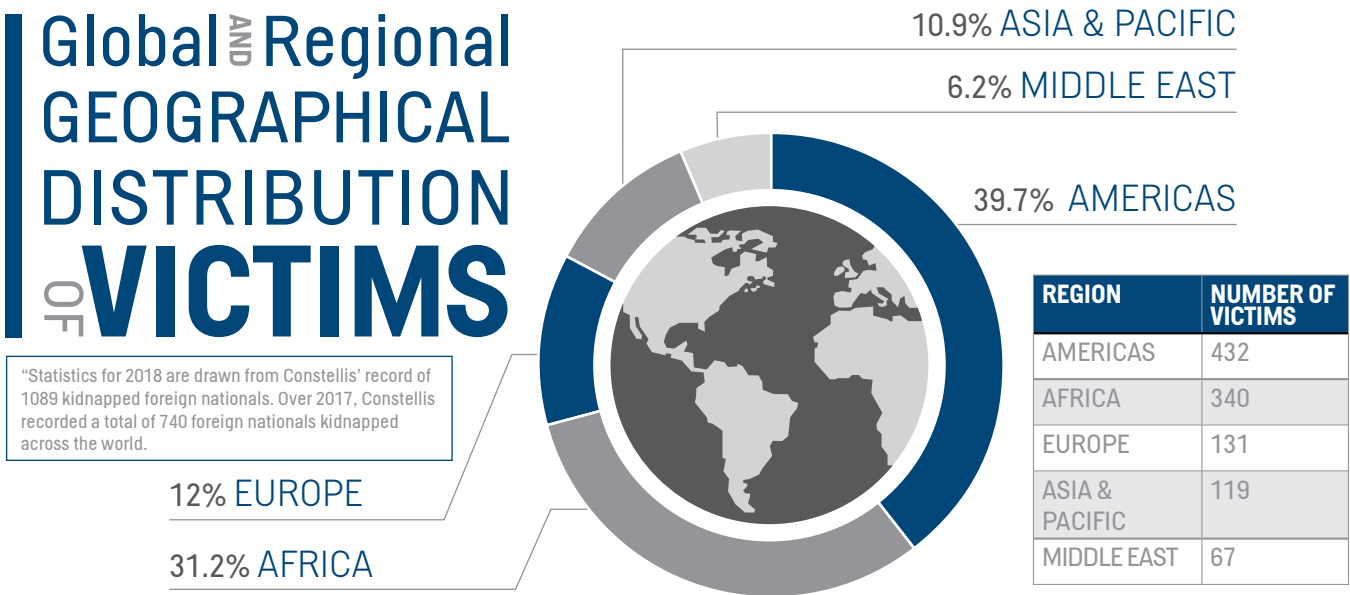
DISCLAIMER: These statistics herein presented are the result of a compilation of kidnapping incidents involving foreign nationals only, which have been reported in the media and other open sources. The information contained and its results are therefore partial as result of the incomplete nature of open-source material. Thus, this report should be taken only as a reference of general trends, taking its limitations into consideration.

# STATISTICS 2018

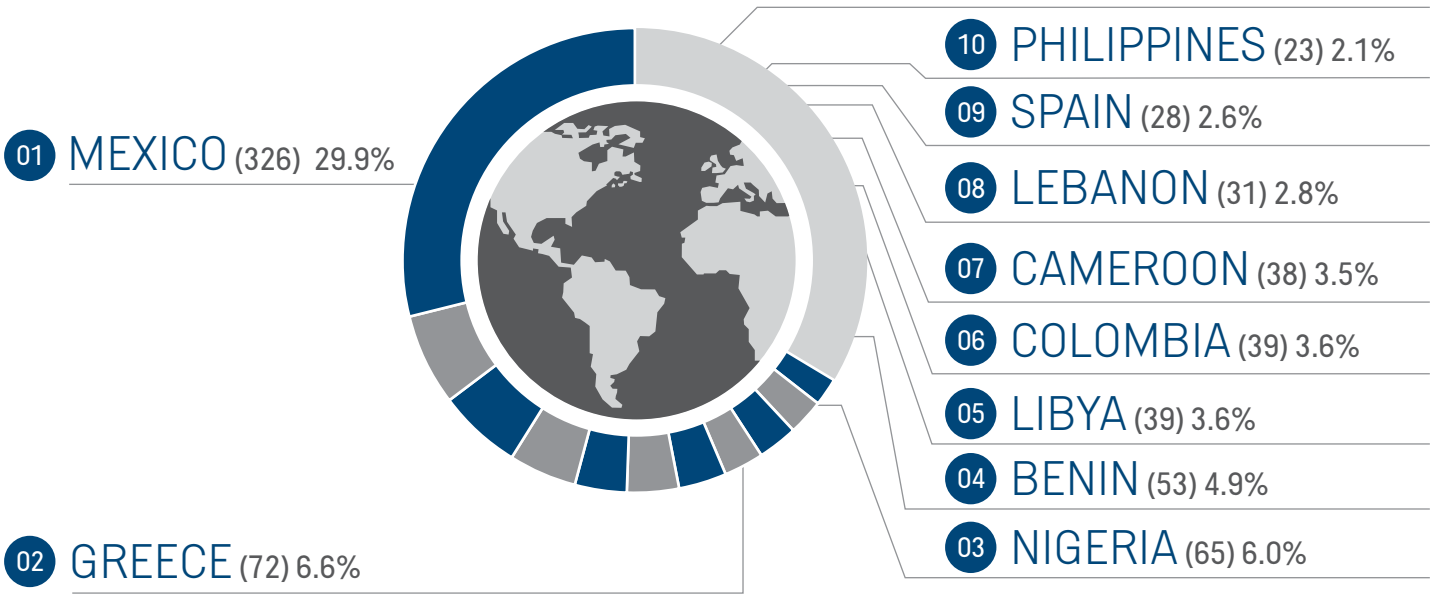
## KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS\*

### Global AND Regional GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF VICTIMS

"Statistics for 2018 are drawn from Constellis' record of 1089 kidnapped foreign nationals. Over 2017, Constellis recorded a total of 740 foreign nationals kidnapped across the world.



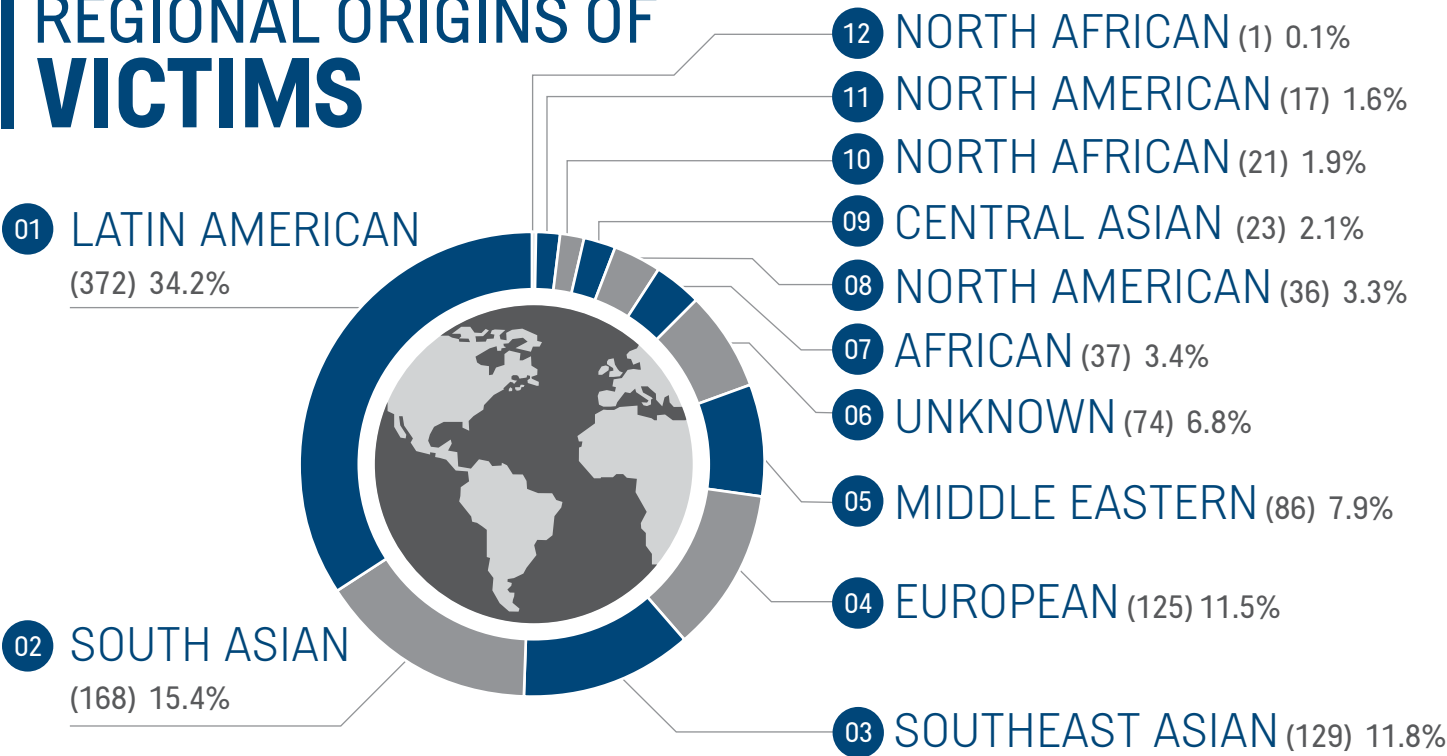
## TOP 10 COUNTRIES FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF FOREIGN CITIZENS IN 2018





# KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS

## REGIONAL ORIGINS OF VICTIMS



\*(Number of Victims)

## MOST VICTIMIZED SINGLE NATIONALITY

- 01

Honduran
- 02

Indian
- 03

Chinese
- 04

Pakistani
- 05

Cuban
- 06

Syrian
- 07

Venezuelan
- 08

Filipino
- 09

American
- 10

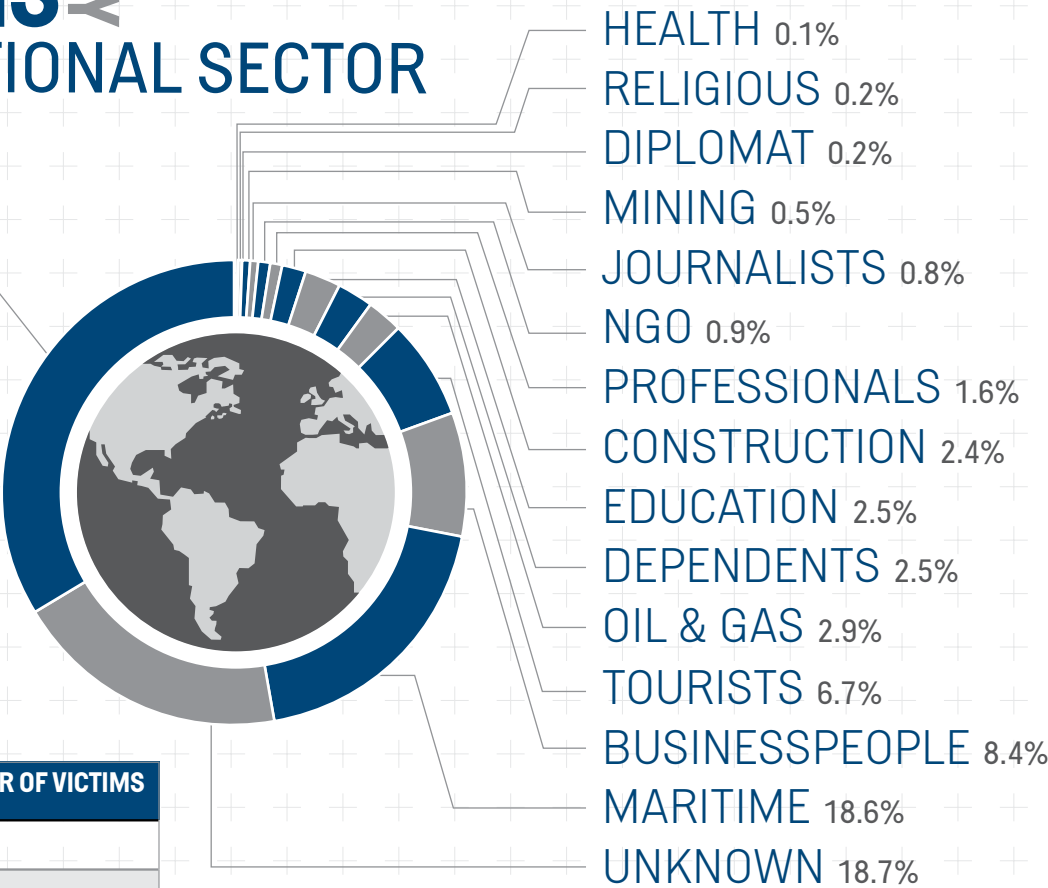
Turkish

## MOST VICTIMIZED ORIGIN BY REGION

REGION	ORIGIN
Africa	Europeans & Southeast Asians
Americas	Latin Americans
Asia	Southeast Asians
Europe	South Asians
Middle East	Middle Easterns

# VICTIMS BY OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR

UNSKILLED 33%



INDUSTRY	NUMBER OF VICTIMS
Unskilled	360
Unknown	204
Maritime	203
Businesspeople	92
Tourists	73
Oil & Gas	31
Dependents	27
Education	27
Construction	26
Professionals	17
NGO	10
Journalists	9
Mining	5
Diplomat	2
Religious	2
Health	1

## MOST VICTIMIZED OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR BY REGION

REGION	OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR
Africa	Maritime
Americas	Unskilled
Asia	Maritime
Europe	Unskilled
Middle East	Unknow sector

DISCLAIMER: These statistics herein presented are the result of a compilation of kidnapping incidents involving foreign nationals only, which have been reported in the media and other open sources. The information contained and its results are therefore partial as result of the incomplete nature of open-source material. Thus, this report should be taken only as a reference of general trends, taking its limitations into consideration. Figures for the annual roundup include incidents reported outside their respective reporting periods.

# GLOBAL PIRACY UPDATE

Piracy and armed robbery incidents registered a 15% decrease in the November – December 2018 period, compared to the previous two months. Criminal boardings remained the most common types of incidents, with 19 reported boardings. Suspicious approaches and sightings increased, with 10 reported incidents, compared to six in the September – October period. Notably, the rise was attributed to a spike in this type of activity in the Gulf of Aden. Six hijackings were recorded during the November - December period, down from eight over September and October. In line with established trends, the Gulf of Guinea remained the area worst affected by piracy worldwide, followed by Southeast Asia.

The November – December 2018 period saw a slight reduction in hostile maritime activity in the Gulf of Aden, recording four incidents compared to five during the previous two months. Of note, all incidents recorded over November and December were suspicious approaches. Two incidents occurred off Yemen and another off Somalia. Political instability and conflict in both Somalia and Yemen remain a key factor undermining maritime security in the region. In Yemen, a UN-brokered ceasefire came into force on 18 December, as warring sides agreed to end fighting in the strategic port of Hodeidah. Nevertheless, violent clashes in the area have continued, amid enduring instability in the country. Incidents linked to the Yemeni conflict as well as piracy over the past year have highlighted the continued threat to commercial shipping in the region. In particular, the Houthis have been very successful at targeting warships and auxiliary vessels with missiles, anti-tank rockets and explosive-laden boats. The possible deployment of sea mines by the rebels in entrances to harbours also presents an underlying risk to vessels, particularly if the explosives were to drift prior to being identified and removed. While vessels not affiliated to the warring parties are unlikely to be directly targeted by Houthi rebels, there is a credible collateral risk.

Overall levels of piracy throughout the Gulf of Guinea over the November – December 2018 period remained largely consistent with the previous two months. Criminal boardings were once again the most common incidents. There were five reported hijackings, down from eight in the September – October period. More than 60% of all incidents occurred within the Nigerian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and internal waterways. Although there were no reported hijackings in the EEZ, kidnappings recorded in Cameroonian waters in November, in addition to the abduction of six crew members of container ship MSC MANDY off Cotonou, Benin on 2 January 2019, demonstrate there is an enduring threat posed by sophisticated pirate groups in the region. Notably, in early December, the Nigerian Federal Executive Council approved USD 22.995 million towards enhancing security in the country's maritime sector. On 30 December, the Nigerian Navy announced it had increased its surveillance capabilities with the refurbishment of old vessels and the acquisition of new ones. Yet, despite efforts to improve maritime security, incident levels are expected to remain consistent throughout the Nigerian dry season (November – April), amid the prevalence of piracy groups at ports and anchorages in the Gulf of Guinea.

A downward trend was observed in Southeast Asia throughout November and December 2018, with six recorded incidents. In line with established trends, criminal boardings remained the most frequent type of piracy in the region. Significant incidents, such as hijackings and armed attacks, remained relatively infrequent, with one kidnapping reported in December off Malaysia. This was the second actual abduction reported in Southeast Asia in 2018, with the first having occurred on board a fishing trawler in Semporna waters on 11 September. Two crew members were abducted, one of whom allegedly escaped

on 5 December. The other was freed on 15 January, amid speculation regarding the payment of a PHP 20 million (USD 383,000) ransom for his release. The militant organization Abu Sayaa Group (ASG) is believed to be behind both kidnappings recorded in 2018. Recent incidents as well as threat reporting has raised concerns militants are able to perpetrate attacks in spite of strict security measures. Given that the threat of abduction of crew in the Sulu-Celebes Seas and waters off eastern Sabah remains credible, vessels are advised to reroute from the area if possible.

## CASES:

- ▶ On 13 December, a merchant vessel transiting through the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) was approached by an unspecified number of fast moving skiffs with four to five suspects on board. The incident occurred approximately 48 nautical miles south of Aden, Yemen. Onboard armed security personnel fired warning shots, prompting the assailants to abort the attack. While hostile activity in the Maritime Security Transit Corridor (MSTC) are common, incidents within the IRTC section are comparatively less frequent. Notably, this was the second piracy event in the IRTC over the past year, with another recorded previously in March. Undoubtedly, the continued presence of maritime security forces, including the Combined Maritime Forces, the European Union Naval Force and the Saudi-led coalition, in the region have greatly reduced the ability of piracy and criminal groups to target transiting vessels.
- ▶ A group of about 20 armed suspected ASG militants attacked a fishing trawler owned by a Malaysian company on the night of 5 December. The attack took place in the vicinity of Sabah's Tambisan, Malaysia. The gunmen boarded the vessel from speed boats powered with double engine. It was reported the group abducted the boat's three crew members (a Malaysian and two Indonesians) and the skipper (unknown nationality). It is unclear if a ransom demand has been made. The empty vessel was found with its engine still running near Pegasus Reef on 7 December. The discovery took place shortly after four armed men attacked a tugboat, wounding an Indonesian crew in an apparent kidnapping attempt in the same area.
- ▶ An unusual series of pirate attacks targeting five fishing trawlers was recorded off Cameroon on 23 November. The incidents took place at night, approximately 13 nautical miles west and northwest of Idenao. 18 crew members of unknown nationality were kidnapped in groups of two, three, five, five and three respectively. The remaining crew escaped the attacks and managed to sail their boats to safe port. According to unconfirmed sources, the kidnapped sailors had already been released as of 27 November, possibly following ransom payments.



Indonesian sailor Usman Yusuf being treated at a Sulu hospital after his alleged escape from the ASG on 5 December 2018. (The Inquirer)



# CYBER SECURITY

## RYUK VIRUS – A TARGETED THREAT

The Ryuk virus was first detected on 13 August 2018. It is a type of ransomware that encrypts information on users' computer systems, disabling access to their files unless a ransom is paid with digital currency. What sets Ryuk apart from other forms of ransomware is its apparent targeted nature. Other ransomware attacks have sought to attack as many individual users and organisations as possible to maximise their effect and potential revenue streams. Ryuk, conversely, is believed to be more precise, targeting specific victims, as evidenced by differing ransoms demanded and tailored ransom notes.

The August 2018 outbreak of the virus, which reportedly netted its creators approximately USD 640,000, was thought to be a 'trial run' by the hackers. This assessment seems to have been confirmed recently when the virus reemerged with a couple of variants, making it harder to detect, and thus posing a higher threat to organisations and individuals, with the number of detections spiking in late December. It is believed that since its inception, Ryuk has generated over USD 3.7 million for its creators, though this figure could be substantially higher as many ransom payments go unreported. Indeed, as Ryuk has not been widely distributed, instead focusing on targeting specific companies, its authors' activities and revenues are much harder to track.

The hackers behind Ryuk have launched targeted attacks against organisations or businesses using phishing attacks, taking advantage of insecure remote desktop connections, or through some other form of manual compromise. How targets are chosen is still unknown, although it is likely that the criminals cycle through potential targets one-by-one, electing victims based on perceived or detected vulnerabilities through which they can implant Ryuk. Given the differing size, infrastructure and wealth of potential targets, the malware is designed to take a 'best fit' approach, enabling hackers to customise it to best suit

intended targets. This bespoke nature also applies to ransom demands. Unique Bitcoin addresses are created for each victim, and differing ransoms are known to have been issued to targeted organisations. One known ransom demand was for 50 Bitcoin (approximately USD 200,000), while others have demanded between 15 to 35 Bitcoin (approximately USD 50,000 - USD 140,000). The varying amounts demanded seem to correspond to the hackers' perception of the amount the targeted organisations are able to pay.

Thus far, a variety of organisations has been targeted. Victims have included companies in the media, medical, and technology sectors, as well as local government agencies and companies (utilities). All known targets have been primarily situated in the US, while at least four organisations have been struck in Canada. Cybersecurity company Malwarebytes has reported Ryuk detections to date to be in the low thousands, much lower than other viruses identified in 2018. This is likely another indicator of Ryuk's targeted approach, in contrast to mass malware campaigns.

It was originally assessed that Ryuk's encryption scheme was tailored for small-scale operations, given that within targeted networks, only critical resources are infected, meaning that in-depth network mapping and extensive credential collection is required prior to an attack. However, more recently the criminals behind Ryuk have also targeted larger enterprises, such as Tribune Publishing (owner of several US newspapers), demonstrating that their approach does not necessarily ignore larger-scale organisations with supposedly enhanced systems security. In any case, it is assessed that the hackers conduct thorough research of their victims and their financial standing, targeting them on the premise that the ransom demanded matches the worth of the data being held.

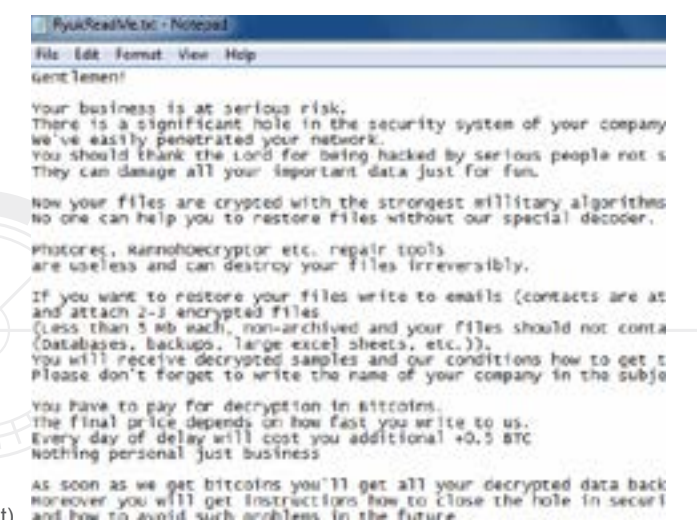
At present, it appears as if the hackers behind Ryuk are only aiming at blocking access to data for financial gain, without ulterior motives, such as leaking data as part of a disruption campaign. This would suggest that they are cyber criminals unaffiliated with any nation states. Nevertheless, following recent recorded incidents, cyber analysts are predicting that the threat to enterprises may be increasing.

Cyber security specialists have recently listed a number of preventative measures that organisations can use to better protect themselves from Ryuk, as well as immediate reactive measures should an infection be detected:

- ▶ **Train users to recognise social engineering attempts.**
- ▶ **Use an email protection platform to recognise malicious spam.**
- ▶ **Use protection technologies, such as anti-ransomware software.**
- ▶ **Keep security software up to date and regularly run malware scans.**
- ▶ **Disable remote desktops from computers on the network - or replace them with a secure third-party version that utilises two-factor authentication.**
- ▶ **Ensure two-factor authentication is implemented for any changes to network devices.**
- ▶ **Segment access to certain servers and files on the network.**
- ▶ **Implement a password management policy for the network.**
- ▶ **Ensure backups do not allow access through the operating system.**
- ▶ **Store backups offsite, in the Cloud for example.**
- ▶ **Due to the malware's targeted nature, do a full network scan to find any backdoors or other tools which the attackers may use to regain access to the network once compromised.**

### CASES:

- ▶ 29 December 2018. The publishing of the Saturday edition of multiple US newspapers was delayed due to a suspected Ryuk attack. Although initially thought to be a server outage, the issue was later confirmed to be a malware attack that infected computers belonging to Tribune Publishing, which owns the Chicago Tribune, the Baltimore Sun and the New York Daily News. Other newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times and the San Diego Union Tribune, which share networks with Tribune Publishing, were also held up. A company source disclosed that corrupted files contained the extension '.ryk', thereby pointing to Ryuk. It is unknown if any ransom payments were made, though reports stated that IT teams managed to isolate the virus and bring Tribune Publishing's servers back online, thus only experiencing a temporary disruption in its operations.
- ▶ 24 December 2018. Data Resolution, a California-based Cloud provider with over 30,000 customers worldwide, was allegedly infected with Ryuk on Christmas Eve, severely hampering its operations. While it is unknown if any ransom payment was made, Data Resolution stated that there was no evidence suggesting customer data had been stolen, with the attack instead intended to provoke a monetary response.
- ▶ 15 October 2018. North Carolina's Onslow Water and Sewer Authority (OWASA) was infected with Ryuk, leading to critical damage to the organisation's network. A ransom was not paid, which led to the destruction of files. Although water and sewage services, along with customer data, were unaffected by the attack, this required the company to rebuild its IT infrastructure from scratch.



One of Ryuk's ransomware notes (Check Point)



# FOCUS ARTICLE

## THE MILITANT THREAT IN THE SAHEL



Africa map indicating the Sahel region in yellow.

The Sahel is a semi-arid region in western and north-central Africa between the Saharan desert and sub-Saharan Africa. It stretches eastwards from Senegal to Sudan, incorporating parts of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Chad. The Sahel has long been a jihadist stronghold on the continent due to its vast size and sparseness, which has given insurgent groups greater operational freedom.

Islamist networks have notably grown in the Sahel in recent years, expanding their areas of operation as well as their attack capabilities. They have achieved this by recruiting from geographically diverse ethnic groups and taking advantage of weak or non-existent border controls. Further bolstering their growth, many groups have tapped into local criminal networks to provide themselves with a regular revenue stream, engaging in human and narcotics trafficking, as well as kidnapping for ransom. Moreover, many returning fighters from Libya and the Middle East have brought with them new ideologies and methodologies, and in many cases, funding to launch their own cells.

The main jihadist groups operating in the region are the Al-Qaida-affiliate Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Ansaroul Islam, Boko Haram and its Islamic State offshoot, Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP). Their chief operating bases in the Sahel are north and central Mali, as well as northeast Nigeria. Al-Qaida and its affiliates are most firmly established in Mali's provinces of Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, Mopti and Ségou, while ISGS have a greater presence in the eastern province of Ménaka. Groups operating out of northeast Nigeria are prevalent in the states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa. In recent years however, fighting has spilled over into a number of neighbouring countries, significantly increasing insecurity in these countries' border regions.

Burkina Faso, notably, has recently experienced several high-profile terrorist attacks, including a complex attack in Ouagadougou in March 2018. At present, the northern border area with Mali is experiencing increased levels of militancy, predominantly in the regions of Nord, Sahel and Boucle du Mouhoun. Other attacks have been registered in western Niger, while Ivory Coast was also struck in 2016. Moreover, the arrests of suspected militants in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal is further evidence of the insurgency's geographic reach. Meanwhile, from north-eastern Nigeria, the Lake Chad region has become a hotbed of militancy, with ISWAP and Boko Haram extending their activity into south-western Chad and south-eastern Niger, as well as the north-western border of Cameroon.

While specific objectives may differ from group to group, their overarching ambition remains the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. This typically involves the undermining of regional governments and the expulsion of alleged foreign influencers, particularly former colonial powers and countries contributing soldiers to the UN peacekeeper corps. As such, insurgent activity in the region is largely concentrated on government and military targets, using a combination of armed and explosives attacks. However, the indiscriminate killing of civilians in rural communities has also been commonplace over the last three years. This is taking place in a context of rife ethnic conflicts, and as a bid to overthrow local power structures, as well as intimidate and coerce local populations. Additionally, a number of mass casualty attacks have been conducted against international targets, including the French Embassy in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) in March 2018, French construction company Sogea-Satom in Niafounke (Mali) in October 2017, and a luxury resort frequented by tourists west of Bamako (Mali) in June 2017.

Overall, Islamist insurgents are believed to have made upwards of USD 40 million in recent years by ransoming their hostages. While local nationals are favoured due to their accessibility, foreign nationals, including expatriate workers, NGO staff and tourists - particularly westerners - are valued targets for insurgents because of the higher ransom fees they can command as well as the greater media attention they attract. Several high-profile cases have recently been registered in Burkina Faso and Niger, near the border with Mali. Most recently, on 15 January 2019, a Canadian geologist was abducted (and subsequently killed) in the Sahel region, approximately 90km from where an Italian priest was kidnapped in September 2018 across the border in Niger. This followed the suspected kidnapping of a Canadian and an Italian in south-western Burkina Faso on 15 December 2018. At the time of writing, at least 13 foreign nationals remain missing in the region, who are thought to be held by extremist groups. These kidnappings show that the majority of the victims were vulnerable to attack, i.e. humanitarian workers operating in high-threat environments and tourists abducted from insecure areas.

With insurgent groups seeking to exploit regional insecurity and strengthen their own position, the threat of terrorism in the Sahel is expected to remain extensive. It will manifest itself in escalating IED and armed attacks, predominantly against government and military targets, though high-casualty attacks against civilian infrastructure are almost certain. The threat to foreign operations and personnel will also endure. Indeed, AQIM issued a statement in May 2018 threatening attacks against western organisations operating in the Sahel, and warning Muslims to avoid them or risk becoming casualties themselves. As such, locations hosting embassies

and international organisations will remain attractive to insurgents, including those within large urban centres, such as Bamako and Ouagadougou. Other busy areas frequented by foreigners, including international hotels, restaurants, government facilities and tourist destinations are also assessed to be at a high threat of attacks.

Mali is likely to remain the insurgents' organisational base, mainly due to the continued absence of state control. Activity is expected to remain heightened over 2019, progressively encroaching on Bamako's surrounding districts. Outside Mali, militants will remain most active in northern and north-western Burkina Faso, with attacks also likely in western Niger. Attacks on high-value targets outside these countries, including Mauritania, cannot be ruled out. Violence in north-eastern Nigeria will meanwhile contribute to a highly volatile security environment in the Lake Chad region, with the Nigerian Army struggling to gain a foothold in Borno.



Former Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) hostages. Two of them were released after six years in captivity, following alleged combined payments of USD 9 million. (PHOTO: Al Jazeera)



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**Constellis' intelligence analysts and security consultants produce bespoke political and security reports, threat assessments and security risk assessments to inform decisions and to protect people and assets across the world.**



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