

Q&A with Veryan Khan

THE BIG ISSUE

What do ransoms tell us about any particular group? From ransom amounts to length of time captives are held: each give us clues for future prediction and control

Over the past week KR Magazine has published stories involving Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Qaeda affiliated terrorists in Algeria, jihadists in Syria, and Zuwwar Imam Ali al-Rida in the Lebanon.

From a basic analysis of the current situation, it would seem that kidnapping operations conducted by terrorist groups are on the rise. Indeed the financial gains that ransom payments represent appear tantamount to being the very life blood of certain organisations.

According to the UK Prime Minister's office: "...in the last three years, we estimate that Al Qaeda-affiliated and other Islamist extremist groups worldwide have collected tens of millions of dollars in ransoms."

Mr Cameron's advisors have also stated that ransom payments support recruitment efforts and increase the planning and operational capacities necessary to conducting attacks.

To understand more about these organisations and the threat posed by kidnapping for ransom by terrorists, KR Magazine asked Veryan Khan, Editorial Director of the Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium, to answer a few very direct questions.

KR Magazine: Who are they?

Veryan Khan: Kidnapping is a very broad tactic ranging from individual profiteering, such as in Mexico, to big business for terrorist groups in countries as diverse as Yemen, Mali and Nigeria. Some of the most active groups practicing kidnapping are AQAP, AQIM, Belmokhtar's factions, Boko Haram and its spin off Ansaru, and Abu Sayyaf is forever present. Almost every group dabbles in kidnapping on some level. But their reasons vary tremendously. Though not political, we might also include the concept of hijacking as a form of kidnapping since individuals are usually part of the hijacking. The Somali pirates are a good example of demanding ransom not only for the vessels but also the sailors and the cargo. It is worth noting that the waters of Somalia are no longer the world's most dangerous - the waters around Indonesia's islands and those of the Gulf of Guinea are currently contending that title.

KRM: What do they want?

VK: That's a great question and it depends on who they are, who they have kidnapped and where they are located. The number one reason to kidnap is to finance operations. AQAP and AQIM are the prototypes here. Neither group would have lasted this long without the cash cow that ransoms bring to the table. Ransom keep these groups open, they supply the money for training, planning, feeding, arms and housing. Ransom amounts have gone up tremendously in the past 5 or 6 years in Africa.



A video released by Boko Haram listed the conditions for the release of a French family it was holding hostage. The family were released unharmed after two months



Italian citizen Sergio Cicala was held in Mali for four months by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Welcome to the first of KR Magazine's Direct Interviews, a series of brief conversations with experts aimed at getting directly to the heart of the matter.

Over the coming weeks we'll be asking a number of specialists short, sharp and very direct questions on issues ranging from the ultimate destination of ransom payments to private capture initiatives.

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Multi-million dollar amounts are the norm. Reports just this week say that AQAP have taken in 20 million in the past 2 years alone. The second most popular reason is to make a political statement. Something like, "We are in charge here, you can't even ensure that your citizens are safe" or "In solidarity with our brethren in other nations". Boko Haram crossed the border and kidnapped a French family in Cameroon last year, which made both political and solidarity statements. Officially the kidnapping was in retaliation for "the French invasion in Mali" but it was also a message to Cameroon and other neighbours that they can do anything they wish at any time.

KRM: Does the money generate disagreement?

VK: There have been some pretty public arguments over kidnapping and division of ransom amounts. Belmokhtar famously split with AQIM in a power struggle over carving up the ransoms and negotiations with other nations. AQIM still had an axe to bare with Belmokhtar for going behind their back and renegotiating ransom amounts with the Canadian Government for a third of the usual price that AQIM fetches for its hostages. Belmokhtar's is an accomplished criminal and kidnapping is a specialty of his, so we can believe it is tops on his list of "to dos" for his new group al Murabitounes. Another example of splits over kidnapping policy is Boko Haram and Ansaru. One of

"The payment of ransoms to terrorist groups is one of the sources of income which supports their recruitment efforts, strengthens their operational capability to organise and carry out terrorist attacks, and incentivises future incidents of kidnapping for ransom."

UK Prime Minister's Office

the main reason's Ansaru severed from Boko Haram was over who they targeted in kidnappings. Boko Haram frequently targeted Nigerians in all kinds of attacks, while the Ansaru group felt attacking only foreign nationals was justified. Ansaru made the ultimate statement about this by kidnapping and assassinating seven construction workers in February 2013. The seven were from the UK, Lebanon, Greece and Italy. It is rumored that after Boko Haram's kidnapping of the French family in Cameroon, that Ansaru folded back into its parent group based on Boko Haram's refocusing on the kidnapping of foreigners.

KRM: How do they conduct their operations?

VK: Depending on where you look, operations vary considerably. For example in the Philippines Abu Sayyaf regularly targets individuals or groups of less than three people. Many are businessmen, plantation employees or aid workers. Held in harsh jungle locations, with little food or attention, often for very long periods of time, many hostages die in captivity or escape. But the undisclosed ransom amounts encourages the group to continue kidnapping operations. They kidnap at the alarming average of twice a month. Yemen, however, is a very different situation indeed. Though the landscape is changing there as more and more hostages are given or sold to AQAP, in general western hostages in Yemen are treated well and held for shorter periods of time. One reason for the time being shorter is that Yemen has an efficient tribal system which can facilitate the negotiation process. Eating better than the family holding him, one reporter described his time as a hostage in Yemen more as being a "house guest at gun point".

KRM: Does length of time held determine a successful release?

VK: No, not really. As I said, location can show some trends. But history has shown us that in many areas hostages can be held for years and still be released alive. AQIM is currently holding five French hostages and three other Europeans, they issued a statement marking the 1,000 day and reassuring that their hostages were still alive and well. One item to note is the longer a hostage is held, the greater the chances are that someone will see them and turn the kidnappers in. It's to the kidnappers' benefit not to hold hostages for long periods of time because of the effort involved, the constant surveillance required to hold them, and the risk of being discovered. Also, for less experienced groups, kidnapping is only effective for so long before they actually have to kill the hostages to prove their intentions, thus also lending to "the earlier the better" release philosophy.



Malaysian cousins Chong Wei Fei and Chong Wei Jie were kidnapped and held by Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines



Australian Warren Rodwell was held by Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines for over after fifteen months

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