

KIDNAP+ RANSOM INSIGHT

GLOBAL SUMMARY

FOCUS
ARTICLE

**HOW WILL THE TALIBAN'S TAKEOVER
OF AFGHANISTAN AFFECT THE
GLOBAL TERRORISM LANDSCAPE?**

September

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SUMMARY

This issue of Constellis' Kidnap for Ransom Insight Report covers global kidnapping incidents and trends for the months of July and August, as well as September 2021. The information is derived from multi-source analysis of kidnap for ransom activity and where known, the outcome or resolution of the events. 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 July and August 2021 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 the kidnapping of foreign nationals over the reporting period. Additionally, statistical information for the period of September 2020 – August 2021 can be found on page 17.

The Global Piracy Update gives an overview of the piracy threat by region, providing trend analysis for July and August 2021, as well as sample cases that took place during these months to illustrate identified trends.

The Cybersecurity section examines current issues affecting companies and individuals in the realm of IT security. This edition provides an insight into Wizard

Spider, one of the most sophisticated and effective cybercrime organisations in the world, and its Conti ransomware, one of the most proficient forms of ransomware to date. Conti, through 'double' and 'triple' extortion campaigns, has managed to disable the IT infrastructure of high-profile targets, including national healthcare systems and large commercial organisations, also providing Wizard Spider with millions of dollars in ransoms.

The Focus Article examines the potential knock-on effects and risks that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan harbour for the region and the West. Following the deadly 26 August Islamic State bombing at Kabul International Airport that killed over 160 people, Afghanistan has once again been placed under the spotlight to determine how terrorist groups might flourish under the new Taliban regime. While the Taliban have vowed to extinguish IS's presence within the country, there is concern regarding some Taliban elements being closely linked with Al Qaeda. Moreover, with the fall of the country to the Taliban, thousands of militants are believed to have flocked to the country, raising fears it may once again become a breeding ground for terrorists.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GLOBAL OVERVIEW	03
Americas	03
Europe	05
Middle East.....	07
Africa	09
Asia.....	11
STATISTICS	13
GLOBAL PIRACY UPDATE	19
CYBERSECURITY	21
FOCUS ARTICLE.....	24
ABOUT CONSTELLIS	26

GLOBAL OVERVIEW

AMERICAS

Over July - August 2021, the Americas was the region with the highest number of kidnapped foreign nationals. The number of recorded victims more than doubled against those registered in April - June 2021, as mass kidnappings of migrants soared in Mexico. This has been a bioproduct of the high migration volumes from Central America. According to data from US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), illegal crossings along the US-Mexico border over July and August were the highest in more than 20 years, with over 200,000 individuals having been arrested each month. Though increases in interceptions had already been recorded since April 2020, these have spiked since January 2021, when the tough restrictions implemented by the Trump administration were relaxed. Though the Biden administration attributed the increase to normal cyclical activity, movement did not reduce as expected during the summer months. This has presented great opportunities for criminal groups in Mexico, who not only benefit from human trafficking, but also from crime targeting this vulnerable population. This has enabled criminal groups to flourish, while growing competition among them, thus accounts of migrants being kidnapped more than once, and victims being passed or snatched among different criminal groups, are not uncommon.

CASES:

- ▶ On 29 July, a Nicaraguan migrant was released along with his wife and two children after his sister paid a ransom to their captors. This was the second time the family had been kidnapped while trying to reach the US. The first time was on 3 July. Soon after they were released, a second group abducted them. Their relatives were contacted the next day and USD 2,400 per hostage was demanded. The criminals gave them two days to pay. The family decided to continue trying to cross the border despite their ordeal.
- ▶ Likewise, in Chile, police rescued 31 kidnapped foreign nationals from a property in the town of Pozo Almonte, Tarapacá region. Two Venezuelan nationals were also arrested in the raid. The security operation followed a report made in the Chilean capital by a Venezuelan who said her teenage son had been kidnapped while on his way to meet her. The minor had entered Chile illegally with the help of smugglers who later held him captive. While looking for the minor, the authorities found 30 more people in the same situation, 29 Venezuelans and an Ecuadorian.
- ▶ In Haiti, kidnapping has continued unabated despite an alleged truce being called by a number of gangs following the 14 August earthquake. On 24 August,

two Dominicans and their Haitian colleague were kidnapped near the city of Limbe when transporting construction materials and equipment to Cape-Haitian. The kidnappers demanded a 'significant' ransom in exchange for their release and a return of goods taken from the workers. Just hours after the abduction, police launched an operation to release the hostages and recover the stolen goods. The victims were rescued the next day. No arrests were made.



55 kidnapped central American migrants were rescued by Mexican authorities in the border city of Reynosa on 21 July 2021. (Photo: ABC Noticias)

In Paraguay, kidnap for ransom is more common in rural areas, particularly near the borders. This activity typically targets wealthy residents, particularly ranch owners, some of whom may be expatriates. In recent years, Paraguay has grown as a criminal hub in South America, linked to its position in the drug trafficking business. Given its location, Paraguay is an important transit country, linking producer Bolivia with the consumption markets of Brazil and Argentina. However, the country has also recently increased its profile as a producer, mainly as a result of widespread corruption, lax regulations and poor law enforcement, all of which have enabled this activity to prosper, along with other associated enterprises, such as arms trafficking. Paraguay has thus become an attractive location for international criminal groups, particularly for Brazilian gangs, including the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Vermelho (CV). In trying to establish dominance on the Paraguay-Brazil border, such groups have exported their rivalry. It is suspected that the domestic militant group Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP) has also sought to profit, creating alliances with these groups. The expansion of the criminal landscape has also opened numerous opportunities for small domestic criminal actors, who have also looked to benefit from the current synergies.

CASES:

- ▶ A Brazilian woman was abducted on 14 August during her daily walk near her home in the Paraguayan town of Mbaracayú, Alto Paraná department, near the border with Brazil. The woman was identified as Sandra Maceda Rubert, the wife of a Brazilian agricultural producer. Soon after the abduction, her husband received a call from her mobile phone in which a man with a Brazilian accent demanded the payment of USD 250,000 for her release. To prove he had the victim, the kidnapper put her on the phone. During the brief call, the victim reportedly said she was being held in a forest. She was rescued by the Paraguayan security forces on 17 August, following an armed encounter with the kidnappers. The police said they had decided to carry out the rescue operation as there were concerns the hostage would be soon taken elsewhere by her captors. Paraguayan officials said the crime had been carried out by a criminal gang involved in drug trafficking who were trying to set themselves up in kidnapping for ransom. Allegedly, no ransom had been paid prior to the rescue operation.
- ▶ In Venezuela, Juber Nasser, a businessman of Arab origin, was rescued on 21 August after having spent nearly two weeks in captivity in El Callao, Bolivar state. The authorities did not provide details, though some local sources claimed the businessman was liberated by a group of unidentified people. Nasser was kidnapped on 10 August while supervising a construction project

in the area. It is reported that the kidnappers had initially demanded 30kg of gold (approximately USD 1.7 million) in exchange for the businessman's release. It is unclear if any ransom was paid; however, it is claimed that, during negotiations prior to his release, the criminals had settled for 10kg of gold (approximately USD 580,000). According to local sources, this was one of the highest ransom demands recorded in Venezuela in the last 20 years. This is also the third abduction of a businessman in El Callao this year, with at least one of them also having had a ransom demand in gold.



Rescue of Brazilian national Sandra Maceda Rubert by members of the Paraguayan anti-kidnapping police. (Photo: Ultima Hora)

EUROPE

The number of kidnaps registered in Europe was limited during this reporting period, especially those involving foreign nationals. General kidnapping activity continued to conform to previously established trends, with incidents linked to organised crime being the most reported. As has been the case in recent years, Spain had the highest number of such events, typically carried out by multinational criminal groups involved in drug trafficking, many originating from North Africa. According to official figures, most incidents are recorded in the southern region of Andalucía, followed by Madrid and Cataluña. A similar trend was also observed during this reporting period in southern France, particular in Marseille, where a surge of violence has been recorded in recent months, linked to turf wars between drug trafficking gangs. According to the Marseille authorities, there have been at least 15 violent deaths associated with organised crime in the city over the first eight months of 2021, 12 of which took place in July and August. Moreover, it has been observed that these events have been escalating in violence. The situation is such that President Macron has called for an urgent plan aimed at tackling the problem, which has now been categorised as a matter of national security. It is expected that the issue will be at the forefront of campaigning for the next presidential elections.

CASES:

- ▶ On 8 August, three Moroccan men and one Spaniard were arrested by Spanish police in Málaga for their involvement in kidnap for ransom and drug trafficking. The suspects had kidnapped a young Spanish man on 26 May, near his residence in Vélez-Málaga. After taking the man to Málaga, the kidnappers contacted his family and demanded a EUR 20,000 ransom. A first instalment of EUR 10,000 was paid, and the victim was released. The family immediately informed the authorities of the incident. Investigations revealed that the kidnap was related to a failed drug deal between the victim and his captors.
- ▶ On 22 August, a man was kidnapped in the Chartreux district of Marseille, France. A video taken by a bystander circulated on social media showing the moment the victim was taken away. The victim's charred body was later found inside a burned-out vehicle in the city of Corot. The autopsy revealed that the man had been alive when the vehicle was set on fire, although it is not clear whether he was conscious, as he had suffered considerable violence in captivity. It is suspected that, given the level of violence, the incident was connected to a settling of scores by individuals involved in organised crime. Marseille authorities said that was the first time such methods had been seen in the city.

- ▶ On the night of 3 August, a man of Congolese origin was wounded in Aubervilliers, a commune of north-eastern Paris, during a suspected kidnap for ransom attempt. According to investigators, the victim was returning home from football training when he was attacked by hooded men when getting out of his car. The assailants, who were armed with a rifle, attempted to force the man into their own vehicle. He resisted and managed to flee, though he was shot twice in the legs during the struggle. The attackers fled and their vehicle was later found burnt in Drancy. The authorities said they were investigating whether the kidnap attempt was linked to a dispute between criminals.



This car was set on fire with a kidnap victim inside in what was believed to be a settling of scores between criminal elements in Marseille, France, on 22 August 2021. (Photo: actu.fr)

Elsewhere in Europe, kidnappings remain a rare occurrence, taking place for a variety of motives, ranging from political reasons to personal disputes and random acts of opportunity. In other developments this reporting period, security services in Western Europe have been placed on alert since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on 15 August. It is believed by a number of agencies, including the UK's MI5, that the Taliban's self-assessed victory could embolden locally based extremists and lone actors to carry out acts of terror on European soil. This threat not only comes from individuals sympathetic with the Taliban and Al Qaeda (AQ), those aligned with the Islamic State may also seek to orchestrate attacks to raise the profile of the organisation vis-à-vis AQ. A longer-term threat is also being assessed, derived from those who may look to travel to Afghanistan to join the ranks of the Taliban and regional extremist groups. Given tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by home-grown extremists in the past, it is unlikely that future attacks may involve kidnap for ransom. However, this cannot be fully disregarded as it has commonly been executed by international terrorist groups in other regions.

CASES:

- ▶ Australian teacher Shanae Brooke was found dead on 31 July, a day after she was reported missing in Tbilisi, Georgia. Her friends and family believe she was kidnapped and killed. One of her acquaintances was allegedly speaking to Brooke on the phone at the time she was attacked. They reported hearing a physical altercation before the call was ended. Security services are investigating the incident. A man has been arrested.
- ▶ In mid-July, a Nepalese domestic worker reported to Cypriot authorities that she had been kidnapped while taking a walk in Paphos. She claimed she had been forced inside a car with no plates by four men who intercepted her. The men took her to an unknown location and at knifepoint forced her to surrender all her valuables. She was hit by the criminals before they left her somewhere near a road. The woman said her four attackers spoke an Indian language but denied knowing them.
- ▶ On 15 September, Russian diplomatic authorities in Prague said they had not yet received a reply to a note sent to the Czech Foreign Ministry requesting clarification of the reasons for the detention of a Russian national at Prague's international airport on 12 September. According to media reports, Alexander Franchetti was detained following a request from Ukraine, linked to his active participation in Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The Russian government has called the arrest an 'unacceptable violation of international legal mechanisms for political reasons.' Franchetti is currently in Prague's Pankrac prison, following a 14 September court order to place him in custody as it was feared that he could abscond. He is awaiting the decision of the Czech authorities regarding his extradition to Ukraine. It is reported that the ruling could take about a year while the case is being investigated. Following the incident, the Russian authorities on 17 September warned their citizens of the risks of potential arrests abroad, derived from some states "extending their national jurisdiction".



Paris was placed on high alert as the trial of those accused of carrying out the terror attacks of 13 November 2015 begins on 8 September. (Photo: NBC News)

MIDDLE EAST

Over July and August 2021, the Middle East saw another spike in the number of kidnapped nationals. This was however the result of a number of mass abductions, one of them being the brief hijacking of a Singaporean-owned tanker off the coast of the UAE by suspected Iranian-linked elements. Other recorded mass kidnappings targeted refugees at Syrian and Iraqi camps. Meanwhile, the security situation in Lebanon continues to deteriorate significantly, with the economic collapse driving criminality levels up. The crisis has also exacerbated sectarian tensions, threatening the country's hard-earned social equilibrium. Both developments have contributed to a notable increase in armed violence in the country, ranging from armed personal disputes to full-on clashes between communities. As the security forces are stretched thin, unable to contain the violence and criminality, residents are resorting to taking matters into their own hands, further fuelling the cycle of violence. In this environment, already established criminal gangs are expanding their grip on the territory, while low-level criminals driven by economic hardship are springing up throughout the country. As a reflection of the lawlessness in Lebanon, kidnap for ransom activities have seen an increase in recent months.

CASES:

- ▶ On 3 August, Panama-flagged tanker ASPHALT PRINCESS was boarded and hijacked by five or six suspected Iranian gunmen off the coast of Fujairah, UAE. The hijackers left the vessel the following day under unclear circumstances, according to the British navy. The 21-man crew comprising Indian and Indonesian nationals were reported safe. Iran denied any involvement in the attack, which comes at a time of heightened regional tensions and maritime hostilities in the Gulf. The incident follows a recent drone attack against an oil tanker off the coast of Oman that killed two crew members, a British national and a Romanian.
- ▶ On 7 July, the Lebanese Army rescued a man during a raid in eastern Lebanon, just hours after his abduction by an armed group. Businessman Firas Abu Hamdan was kidnapped under heavy gunfire on the evening of 6 July, in front of his house in the village of Taalbaya, in Zahle, Bekaa region, by unknown assailants driving two 4x4 vehicles. The businessman was found inside a house belonging to a local family mafia in the town of Hurtala. During the raid on the property, the army found a remote-controlled improvised explosive device (RCIED), grenades and other weapons. The property also contained a makeshift prison, where the gang kept all their kidnap victims. No arrests were made.
- ▶ On 29 August, Lebanese authorities announced that a missing Lebanese national had been found dead in Jordan. The murder of Georges Nehmé, who had worked for several years as an engineer in Saudi Arabia, was linked to a dispute with a Jordanian work colleague. It is reported that the suspect had invited Nehmé to stay in his home in Jordan and abducted him upon his arrival in the country. He was allegedly tortured and subsequently stabbed to death. The remains of the foreign national were found on 28 August, several days after his disappearance.



People queuing at a petrol station in Beirut, Lebanon, amid a generalised shortage of fuel, electricity, and basic goods. (Photo: The Columbian)

Concerns are growing regarding the future of Iraq and Syria following US President Joe Biden's statements that his country will end its combat missions in Iraq by the end of this year. Some of the main questions address the influence of antagonistic foreign powers such as Iran and Russia, and a potential strengthening of the Islamic State (IS) in the region. In late July, the United Nations Sanctions Monitoring Team warned of setbacks in the two countries in the event of a US withdrawal while IS remains and looks for a resurgence. Though IS activity patterns have not so far changed as a result of the announcement or events in Afghanistan, the situation could change as the full withdrawal takes place. On the other hand, Iran and its proxies have stepped up activity in the Iraq-Iran border region, apparently emboldened by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the prospect of the same in Iraq. The scaling down in US presence has also reached other countries in the region. This includes Saudi Arabia, where the US pulled out its missile defence systems despite ongoing Houthi hostile activity. Remarkably, as September satellite images showing the redeployment of the defence systems from Prince Sultan Air Base outside of Riyadh were published in the media, the Houthis launched a new air offensive on the Kingdom. While it is unclear whether these two events are linked, it gives a glimpse of potential increased future activity.

CASES:

- ▶ Kidnapping for ransom by IS militants has continued to be reported in rural areas of north-central and north-eastern Iraq, with hefty ransoms (by local standards) being demanded by the group. On 10 July, suspected IS insurgents abducted a civilian in Sargaran district, northwest of Kirkuk. The kidnappers reportedly demanded a ransom of USD 100,000. Additionally, on 10 July, Nineveh Police announced the release of a shepherd who had been kidnapped by IS in Makhmour three days earlier. The man was allegedly released after a ransom was paid. Though the amount obtained by the militants was not disclosed, it was reported that the group had originally demanded USD 120,000.
- ▶ In Syria's Afrin district, kidnappings of civilians for ransom by Turkish-backed militias have become a common feature of the area's security landscape, with several cases reported daily in the media. On 27 July, local sources reported that members of the 'Elite Army', an armed group affiliated to the Turkish occupation forces, kidnapped a 50-year-old man in the Afrin village of Shikhota. The victim was reportedly beaten before being taken to the group's headquarters in Amara village. The militants reportedly demanded a payment of USD 2,000 for his release. This was the second time the man had been kidnapped; the first time was in April 2020. On that occasion, he was released after paying a USD 250,000 ransom.
- ▶ In a rare incident, Israeli police announced on 12 August that eight men had been arrested for their involvement in the kidnapping of a foreign national. The incident occurred on 20 July, when a group of men pretending to be police officers abducted a Chinese worker near the HaZahav Mall in Rishon LeZion. The expatriate was then robbed of USD 218,000. The police located the assailants within hours, in the city of Beersheba. After questioning, the suspects revealed they had already released the Chinese national, leaving him on the road between Rishon LeZion and Beersheba. The money taken from the victim was not recovered.



US soldiers on patrol in Baghdad, Iraq. (Photo: Foreign Policy)

AFRICA

As a result of a scarcity in reporting of mass kidnappings of foreign nationals, Africa saw a significant decrease in figures, bringing down the region to third place in Constellis' ranking. The downturn in activity was mainly observed in the Gulf of Guinea, where no kidnappings of crew were recorded over the reporting period. Likewise, only a few mass abductions of migrants were reported in Libya. However, this is attributed to underreporting. The prevalence of these incidents was made evident in September, when the International Organization for Migration expressed its concern over the disappearance of thousands of Europe-bound migrants who were intercepted and returned to Libya. Safa Msehli, spokeswoman for the organisation, said that the Libyan coast guard had intercepted over 24,000 Europe-bound migrants in the Mediterranean so far this year. However, only 6,000 have been accounted for in Libyan official detention centres, with the fate and whereabouts of the others remaining unknown. Msehli feared that those unaccounted for may have ended up in the hands of criminal groups and traffickers, many of them likely being held for ransom. Meanwhile in the Sahel, the security situation remains highly complex, even more so following the killing of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, head of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Al-Sahrawi's death will likely disrupt the group's operations in the short-term and may also provoke retaliatory attacks against French targets. Indeed, on 17 September the French government issued a security alert, warning French citizens of the persistence of serious terrorism threats in Mali, including kidnapping, particularly in Bamako and its surroundings. Additionally, the event may provide a temporary advantage to rival extremist group Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). France has pledged to increase efforts to neutralise JNIM's leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly, as well as other jihadi leaders in the region. However, there are several other instability factors that will play a significant role in the perpetuation of conflict in the region. Among them are the end of the Barkhane mission in the first quarter of 2022 and the potential intervention of Russian mercenaries in Mali. Malian political events will also play a decisive role, especially the upcoming referendum to provide greater powers to the president and elections in late 2021-early 2022.

CASES:

- ▶ A young Nigerian woman reportedly died on 19 July after being kidnapped, tortured and starved by an armed group in Libya. According to a fellow Nigerian hostage, who posted a video of the victim on Facebook the same day, they were part of a group of African migrants who were travelling north. Their vehicle broke down on the main road connecting Libya, Chad and Niger; near the village of Qatrun, Murzuq district, in southern Libya. The migrants were reportedly kidnapped by armed men who held them in a makeshift prison in Sabha, where they tortured and starved them. The kidnappers reportedly demanded a ransom of LYD 8,500 (USD 1,900) for each of the victims.
- ▶ On 18 July 2021, presumed ISGS militants abducted five people from a village in Ansongo, Gao province of Mali. The abductees were humanitarian workers and included foreign nationals. The victims were the president of an aid organisation and a councillor, both Malian nationals,

as well as two Cameroonians and one Togolese worker. The two Malians were subsequently released, while the three foreigners were held in captivity until 28 July. The circumstances of their release are unknown.



Still of 2015 video where Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi pledges allegiance to the Islamic State, giving birth to the group's Greater Sahara wilayat (province). (Photo: Wall Street Journal)

In Nigeria, the kidnapping crisis has reached exorbitant levels, with the so-called 'bandits' leading the phenomenon in the northwest of the country. These former herders of Fulani origin have been best known in recent months for their mass abductions of school children. However, they have a full spectrum of targets, including large groups of villagers taken during raids, wealthy and influential locals, as well as expatriates. According to a Lagos-based research organisation, bandits have been behind the kidnapping of at least 821 students between January and August 2021, a figure not far from the 1191 abducted in the previous seven years. These criminals are known to be well-armed and do not hesitate to use violence against their victims, with a few being killed when ransoms are not paid. Of most concern are allegations that some of these groups may have links to terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). In view of the crisis, the Nigerian government, both at a local and federal level, implemented in September a number of measures targeting these groups in Zamfara state, believed to be their hub, in an attempt to curb the problem. These have included a telecoms blackout, restrictions on movement, and a limitation on fuel and food supplies. Additionally, hundreds of troops backed by fighter jets began an offensive in the state. However, local sources have alleged that many of these groups have already evacuated the state and sought refuge in neighbouring localities. These measures have also been condemned for their adverse effects on local communities.

CASES:

- ▶ On 8 July, six students and two of their lecturers, who were kidnapped in June from a school in Kaduna state, were released after 28 days in captivity following a ransom payment. According to local media sources citing relatives of the victims, the total amount paid was NGN 10 million (over USD 24,000). Reportedly, the kidnappers had originally demanded the same amount per hostage. Gunmen attacked the main campus of the Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic in Kaduna on 10 June and abducted eight students and several staff members. One student was killed in the attack.
- ▶ Kidnappings in other parts of Nigeria are also rife. On 7 August, bandits kidnapped Swiss national Andre Beita along with his local driver, on a road in Ogun State. During the incident, the assailants exchanged fire with the victim's police escort, resulting in three people being killed and another wounded. The casualties included two of Beita's employees, who were part of the convoy. The fate of the victims has not been ascertained and it is unknown if a ransom has been demanded.
- ▶ Three students, part of a group of 156 people abducted in late May from a school in Tegna, Niger State, are believed to have died in captivity. The information was reportedly conveyed over the phone to some of the parents. The bandits reportedly told them that they would later send a video of the burial of the deceased and proof of life for the remaining hostages. This development follows the deadline given by the criminals for the payment of the ransom (21 July), which at the time stood at NGN 30 million (nearly USD 73,000). Later, on 25 July, it was reported that a village elder who was sent to pay the ransom had been abducted. Locals said the man was taken because the kidnappers claimed the ransom he had brought was not complete. At least 11 of the victims were released a day after the abduction, while another 17 escaped three weeks later. Many of the remaining hostages are said to be seriously ill due to their poor captivity conditions.



Group of 84 kidnapped students after their release in Katsina state. (Photo: CNN)

ASIA

A decrease in kidnappings of foreign nationals was observed in Asia over July and August, with less than half of the victims recorded over the previous reporting period. This was because of a lower number of abductions attributed to Chinese gangs in eastern Asia, particularly in the Philippines. However, this is highly likely a result of underreporting. In evidence of the ongoing problem, on 2 September officials of the Philippine National Police (PNP) discussed with their Chinese counterparts the setting up of a China Desk in various police stations in the country to specifically address the kidnapping of Chinese nationals and other security concerns such as the illegal activities of Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs). The PNP has identified two major modi operandi currently being employed in kidnapping activities involving Chinese nationals. One involves Chinese workers being lured by POGOs into the country with what seem to be great packages. Once they arrive, they are not paid or given the benefits promised, and sometimes also forced to pay expenses. If they want to be released, they must pay a large sum of money. In some cases, if they do not pay, the workers are sold on to other POGOs. In the other, Chinese criminal groups convince casino players in China to travel and play in the country, as these activities are banned in China. They offer free accommodation, among other incentives, and provide gamblers with loans to continue playing. If the victims fail to pay, they are kidnapped and detained until their relatives cover the amount borrowed, in addition to exorbitant interest.

CASES:

- ▶ Philippine security forces rescued two kidnapped Chinese nationals and arrested three suspects in Pasay City, Metro Manila, on 25 August. The perpetrators - two Chinese nationals and their Filipino bodyguard - were employees of a Philippine Offshore Gaming Operator (POGO). According to the police, the victims had been sold to the suspects after being held captive by a POGO employer. The victims had been abducted when they came for a job interview. The pair were held for three days in a house in Las Piñas, where their abductors demanded a ransom for their release. After receiving a payment of CNY 1.5 million (over USD 230,000) from the victims' relatives, the kidnappers did not release the victims and instead sold them to the arrestees. The suspects subsequently demanded PHP 400,000 (nearly USD 8,000) in exchange for their release. The situation was reported to the authorities by the person who had been tasked to deliver the money to the criminals. The authorities are still searching for two other suspects who fled during the security operation.
- ▶ A similar situation can be seen in other countries of the region such as Cambodia. On 22 July, police in Preah Sihanouk province arrested four Chinese men

following their attempt to kidnap a compatriot for ransom. The suspects were arrested as they were transporting their victim to a safe house, from where they intended to demand a ransom from his family. The victim, identified as Zhang Tao, owner of a water purification business, had been abducted earlier that day in front of a Chinese-owned-casino in Pei commune. The reason behind his targeting is still unknown but is likely to be linked to a gambling debt.



Over 200 Chinese nationals were arrested by Cambodian police in July during a raid on a compound near the Thai border, being suspected of operating an online blackmail and extortion ring. (Photo: Asia Times)

In Afghanistan, during and following the withdrawal of US forces, concerns increased regarding the safety of foreign nationals who were not able to depart in the initial evacuation flights. Indeed, throughout the process, a number of foreign nationals were detained. However, in most cases, detentions were brief, allegedly to allow for documentation screening. In some instances, involving foreign citizens of Afghan origin, violence was reported. Although the Taliban have so far shown restraint with regards to foreign nationals following their takeover, the group's posture could shift quickly. Moreover, the group is not a homogenous entity, and as disagreements start to emerge, there is a possibility of certain units acting on their own accord, despite the central command's guidelines. Moreover, criminal groups will certainly seek to exploit the security vacuum and volatility in the country. In this context, an increase in criminally motivated kidnappings is likely, and may target any remaining foreign citizens, deemed to be of higher value in terms of ransom.

CASES:

- ▶ The British director of a chain of NGOs in Afghanistan was arrested by the Taliban on 2 September while attempting to evacuate his local staff and their families through a land border after failing to secure spots for them on the British airlift from Kabul. His mission failed after the coach carrying the staff was turned away at the border. The expatriate was released later the same day and was allowed to cross the border with only one assistant. The rest of his staff had to remain in Afghanistan.
- ▶ On 26 August, an Australian citizen of Afghan origin was beaten and kidnapped by Taliban men as he tried to reach Kabul International Airport to leave the country. The victim managed to take a video, showing Taliban men armed with AK-47s assaulting him despite him telling them he was an Australian citizen. In the video, shots can also be heard in the background. The man's relatives confirmed the events and said that the Taliban had also taken some other members of his family, all of whom were targeted because they are members of the Hazara community. The group was released seven hours later, reportedly after their community pleaded with their captors.
- ▶ On 14 September, an Indian national of Afghan origin was abducted at gunpoint in Kabul, near his business. According to some reports, some of the man's staff were beaten up by the kidnappers but managed to escape. The victim was identified as Bansri Lal Arendeh, a businessman in the pharmaceutical field who belongs to the Hindu community of Khost. The identity of the kidnappers and the motive behind the abduction have not yet been established. Some eyewitnesses said Arendeh was taken away in a vehicle that looked like those used by Taliban officials, while others claimed the incident appeared to be the work of local criminals. The Taliban have denied their participation in the incident and have issued an order to locate the Indian citizen.

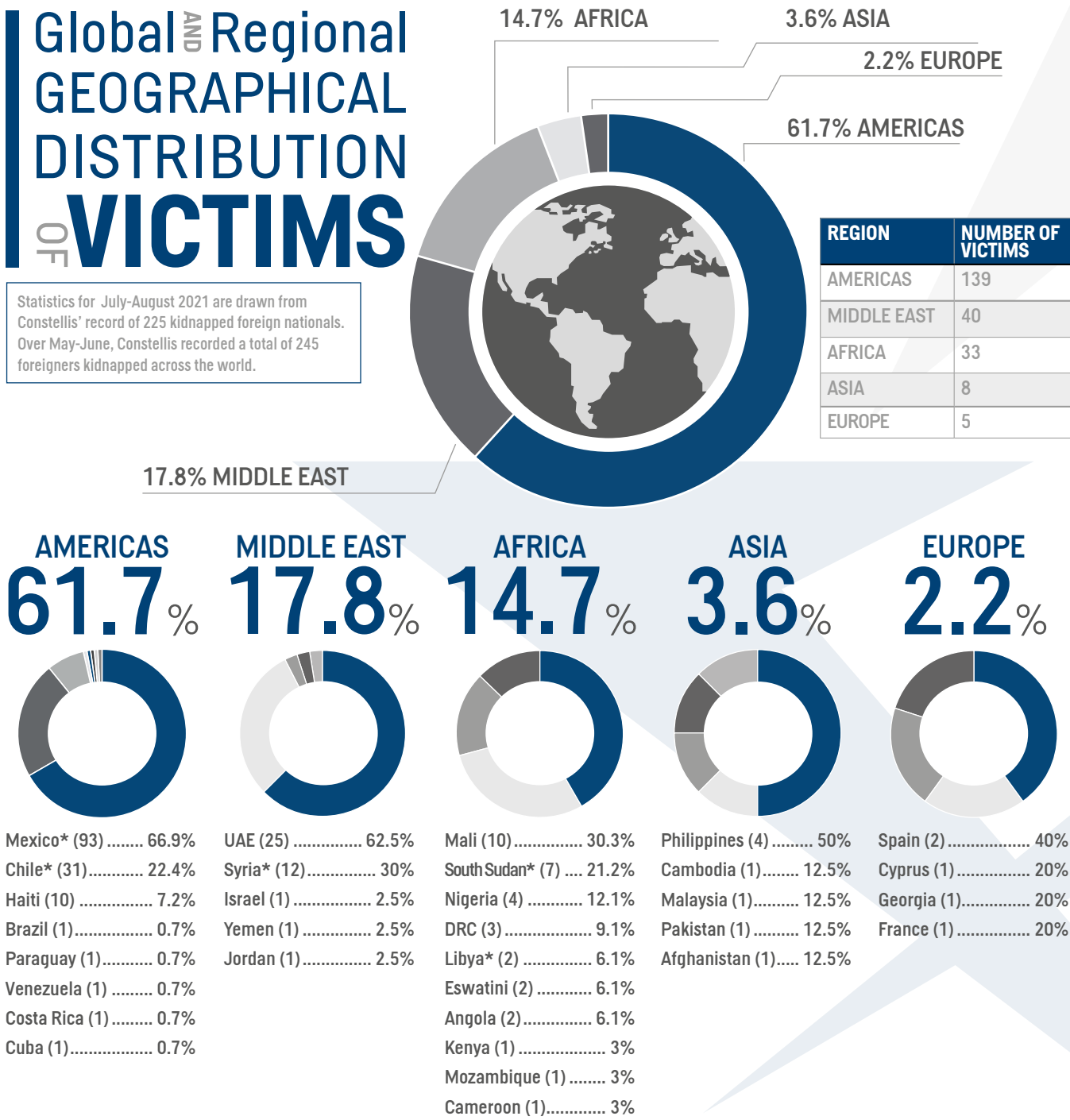


Still of video published by the Taliban parading alleged US military equipment seized in late August 2021. (Photo: CNN)

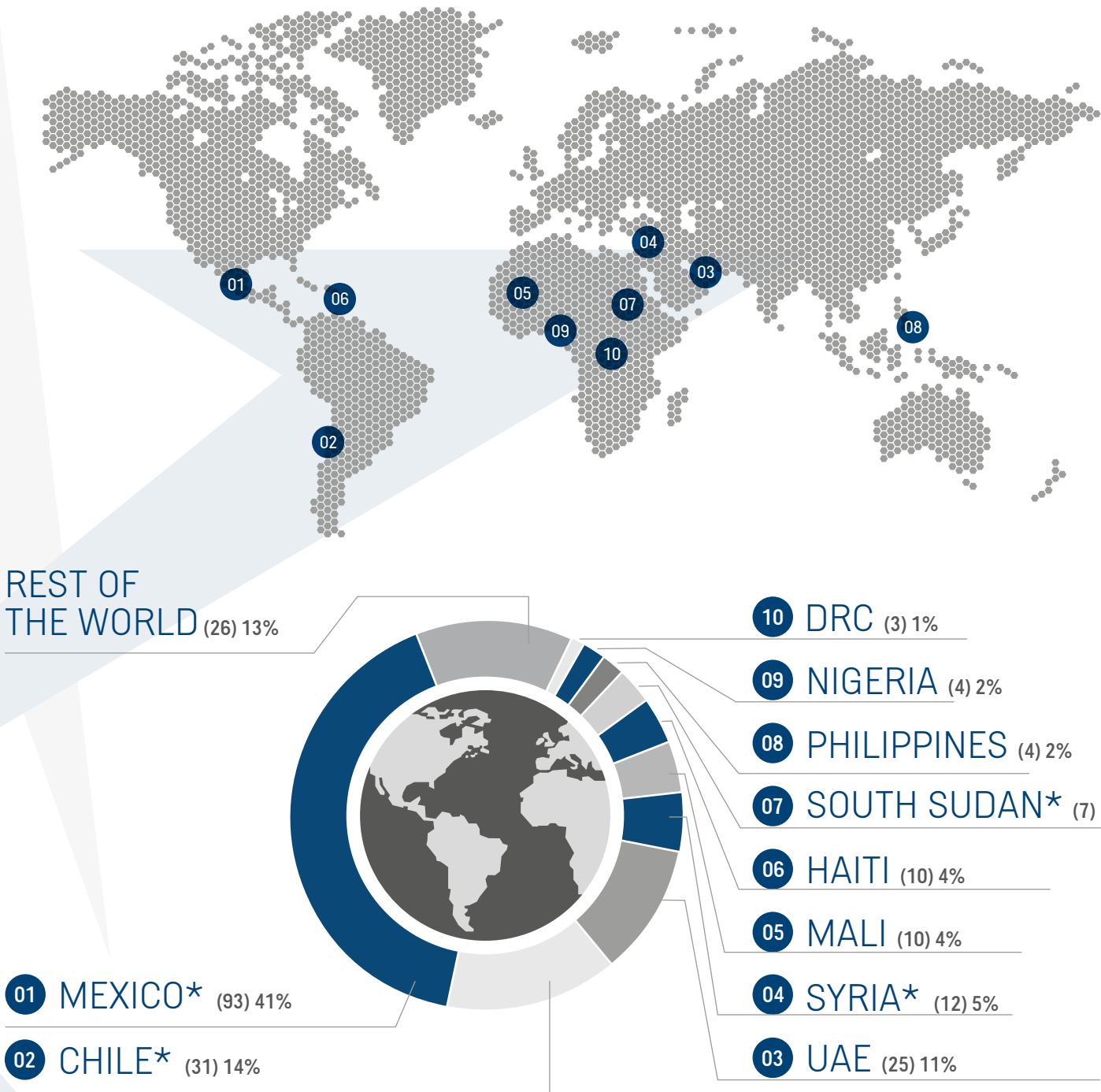
KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS

Global AND Regional
GEOGRAPHICAL
DISTRIBUTION
OF VICTIMS

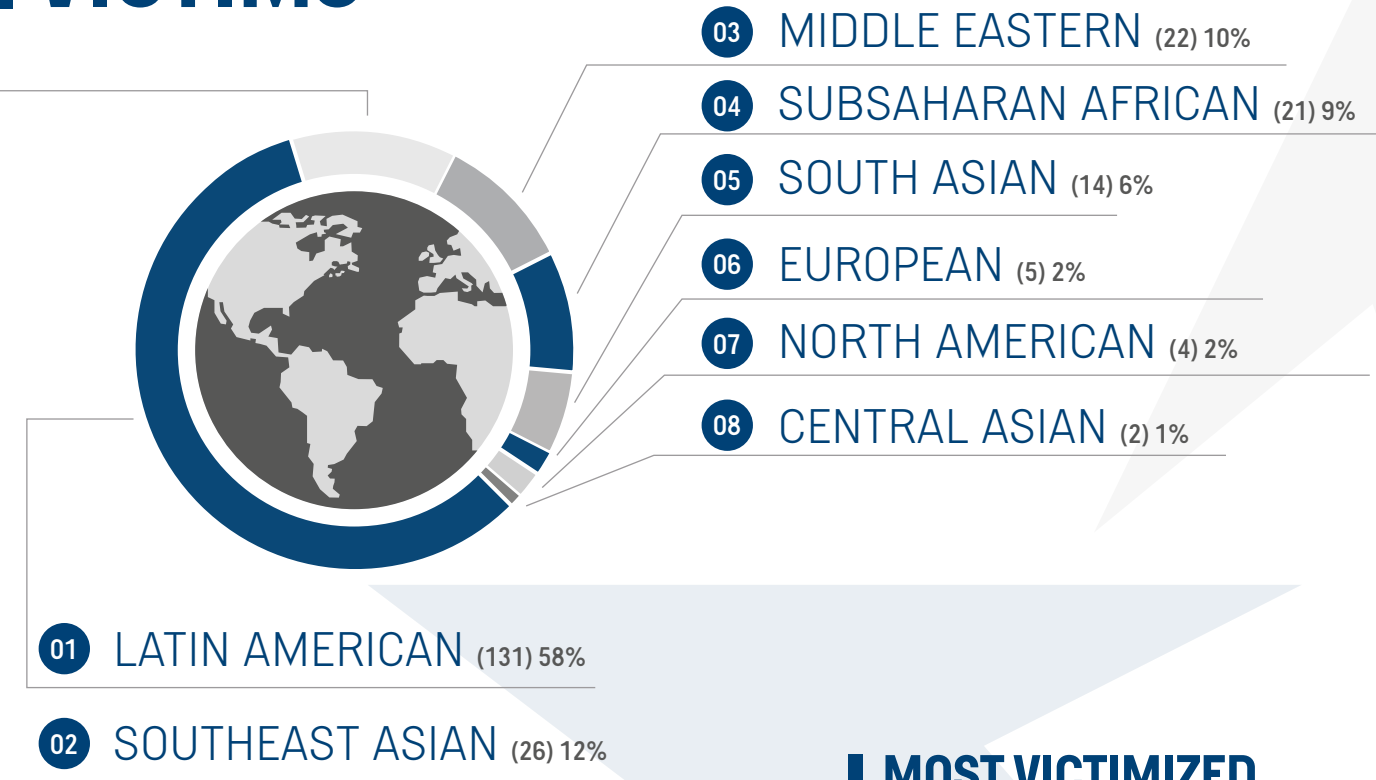
Statistics for July-August 2021 are drawn from Constellis' record of 225 kidnapped foreign nationals. Over May-June, Constellis recorded a total of 245 foreigners kidnapped across the world.



TOP 10 COUNTRIES
FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF
FOREIGN CITIZENS JUL-AUG 2021



ORIGINS OF VICTIMS



MOST VICTIMIZED SINGLE NATIONALITY

- 01 Honduran

02 Venezuelan

03 Chinese

04 Nicaraguan

05 Indian
- 06 Iraqi

07 Indonesian

08 Salvadorean

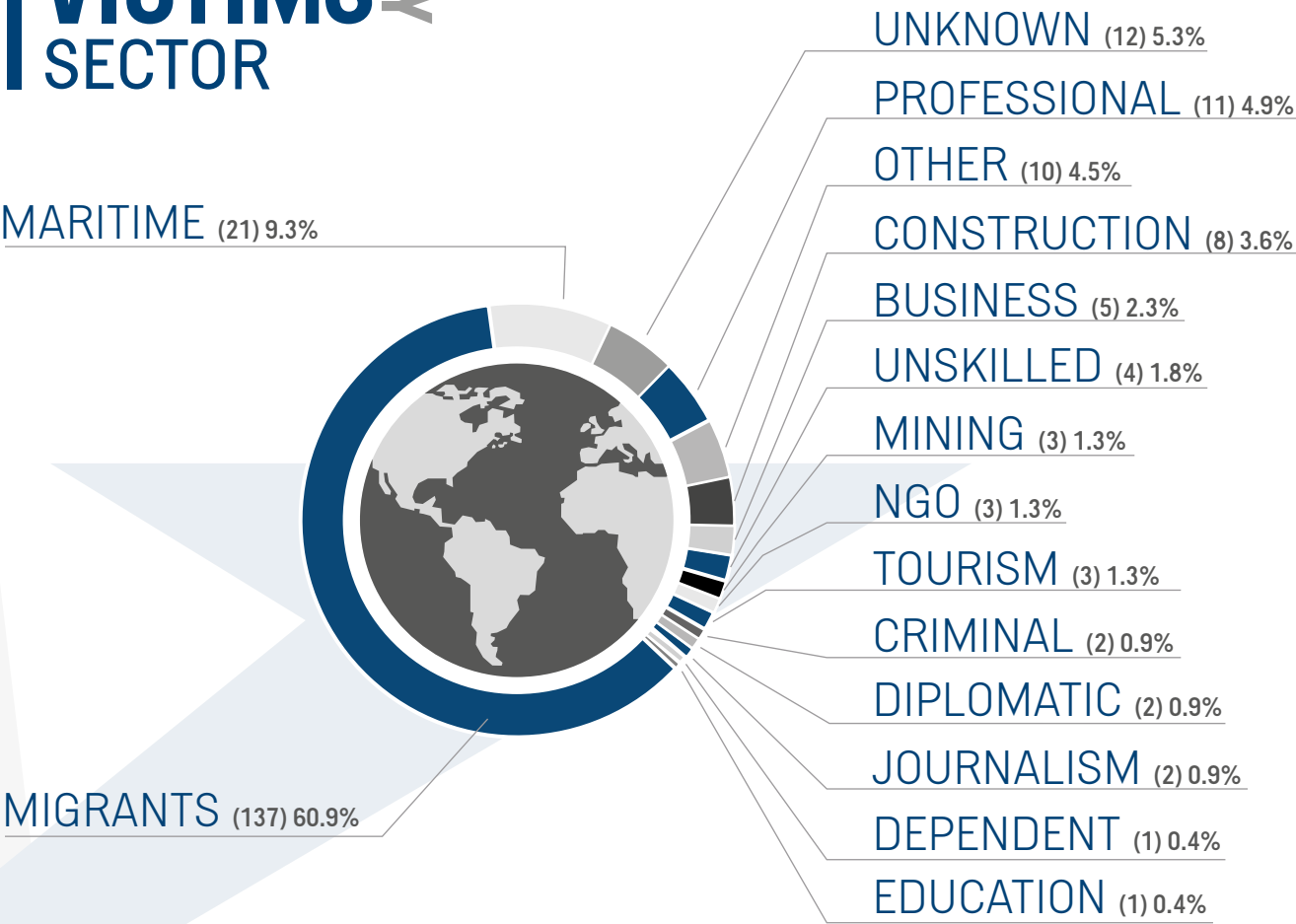
09 Dominican

10 Guatemalan

MOST VICTIMIZED ORIGIN BY REGION

REGION	ORIGIN
Africa	Subsaharan African
Americas	Latin American
Asia	Southeast Asian
Europe	European
Middle East	Middle Eastern

VICTIMS BY SECTOR



MOST VICTIMIZED SECTOR BY REGION

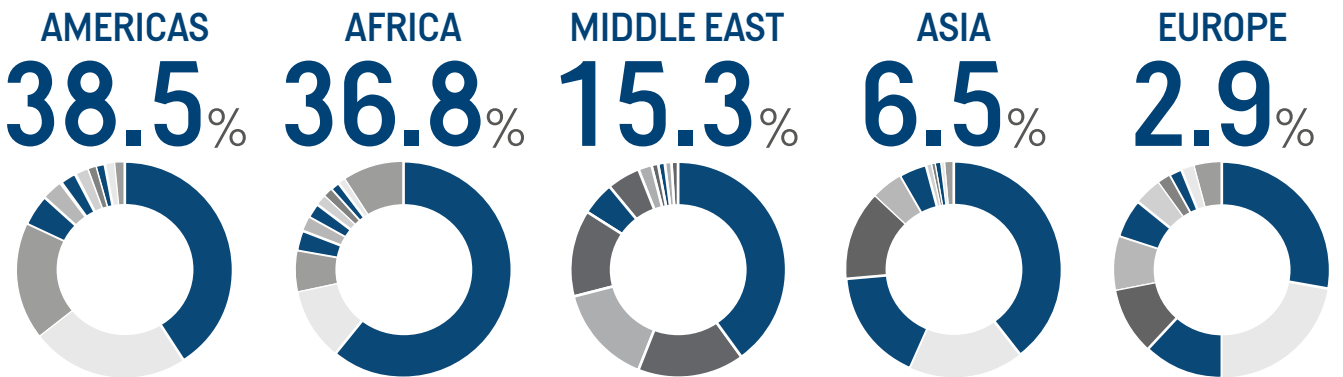
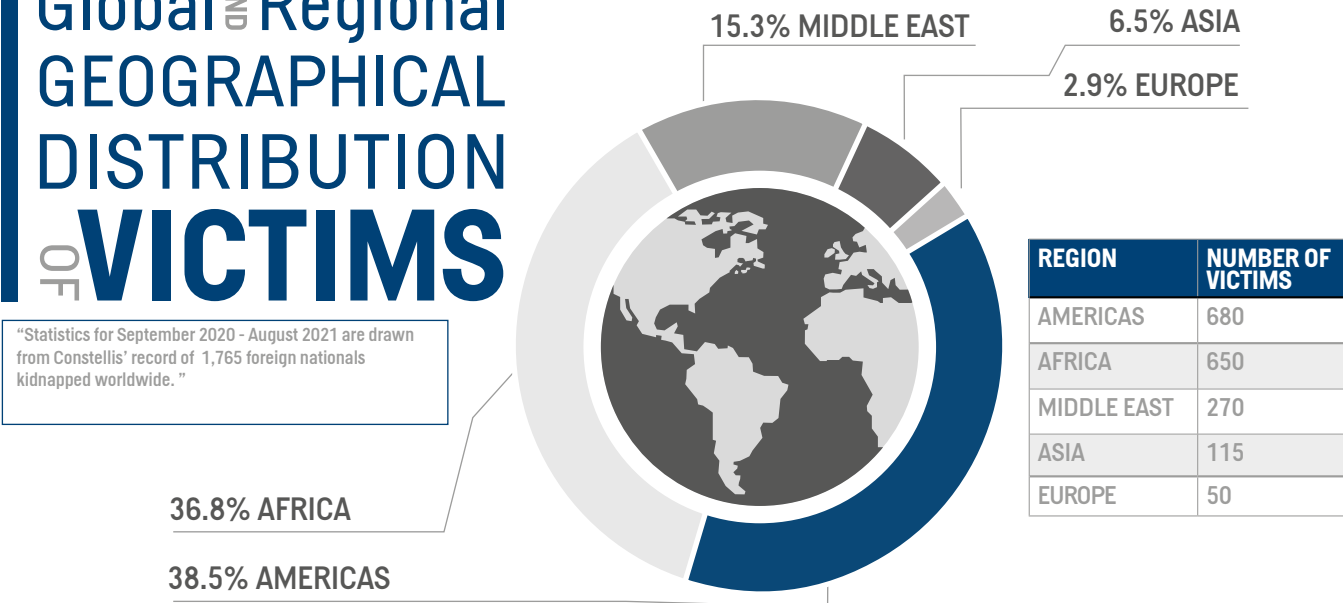
REGION	OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR
Africa	Migrants
Americas	Migrants
Asia	Unskilled
Europe	Criminal
Middle East	Maritime

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.

KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS

Global AND Regional
GEOGRAPHICAL
DISTRIBUTION
OF VICTIMS

"Statistics for September 2020 - August 2021 are drawn from Constellis' record of 1,765 foreign nationals kidnapped worldwide."

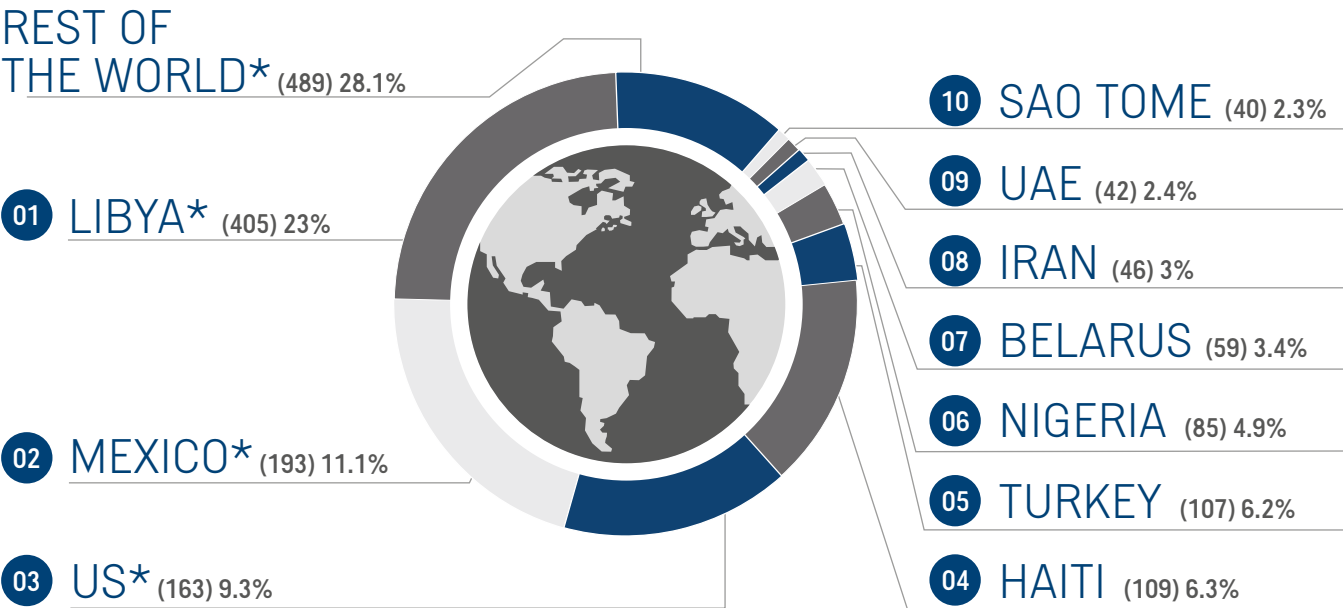


Mexico* (278) 40.9%	Libya* (396) 60.9%	Turkey (107) 39.6%	Philippines (38) 33%	Spain (14) 28%
US* (162) 23.8%	Nigeria (71) 10.9%	Iran (46) 17.1%	Cambodia* (15) 13%	Greece* (11) 22%
Haiti (118) 17.4%	Sao Tome (40) 6.2%	Syria* (46) 17.1%	India* (11) 9.6%	Ukraine* (6) 12%
Chile* (31) 4.6%	Benin (20) 3.1%	UAE (36) 13.3%	China (10) 8.7%	Belarus (5) 10%
Colombia* (21) 3.1%	South Sudan* (14) ... 2.2%	Lebanon (13) 4.8%	Myanmar (8) 7%	Russia (4) 8%
Venezuela (18) 2.6%	Mozambique (13) 2%	Iraq (11) 4.1%	Azerbaijan (7) 6.1%	Malta (3) 6%
Brazil* (9) 1.3%	Mali (12) 1.8%	Bahrain (2) 0.7%	Pakistan (5) 4.3%	Cyprus (2) 4%
Bolivia (8) 1.2%	South Africa (10) ... 1.5%	Israel (2) 0.7%	Malaysia (4) 3.5%	Belgium (1) 2%
Paraguay* (6) 0.9%	Tanzania* (8) 1.2%	Kuwait (2) 0.7%	Thailand (4) 3.5%	France (1) 2%
Uruguay* (6) 0.9%	DRC* (7) 1.1%	Qatar (2) 0.7%	Armenia (2) 1.7%	Georgia (1) 2%
Others* (23) 3.3%	Others* (59) 9.1%	Others (3) 1.2%	Others (11) 9.6%	Others (2) 4%

17 |

(Number of Victims)
* Including Migrants

TOP 10 COUNTRIES
FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF
FOREIGN CITIZENS IN SEP 2020 - AUG 2021



GLOBAL PIRACY UPDATE

During July and August, Constellis recorded 53 maritime incidents, signifying a 20% increase on the last reporting period (May-June). For a second consecutive time, Asia accounted for the majority of events (28%), followed by South America (28%), where a large number of low-profile attacks were recorded. In third place was the Gulf of Guinea (GoG – 25%), while the Gulf of Aden (GoA) recorded only two incidents. Also, during this reporting period, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reported that the number of incidents of piracy and armed robbery recorded during the first half of 2021 was the lowest since 1994. Despite this decrease, a risk to seafarers persists, especially in the GoG.

Tensions in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz continue to escalate, mostly in the context of the conflict between Iran and Israel, both of whom have engaged in a series of tit-for-tat, non-attributable attacks. While so far maritime insecurity in waters of the wider Middle East region remains largely limited to vessels linked to countries involved in the different conflicts in the region, there is an inherent collateral risk for commercial shipping due to possible misidentification and miscalculation. Moreover, the recent loss of civilian life during an attack on an Israeli-owned tanker has brought this issue back to centre stage. Meanwhile, piracy off the coast of South America is increasing. Though most attacks consist of low-level thefts there is evidence of growing violence. Given the widespread economic hardships, weak governments and the easy access to weapons, it is likely that piracy will continue to grow, as criminal elements in the region progressively see this as an alternative, lucrative business.

Only two maritime incidents were observed in the GoA in July and August, one less than the previous two months. Only one of those events was linked to piracy, the first piracy attack off the coast of Somalia since April 2019. While Somali piracy remains suppressed, this attack is evidence that it has not been completely eradicated. In spite of the pirates' continuing capability and intent to carry out attacks, on 17 August several organisations of the global shipping and oil industry said they would reduce the High-Risk Area (HRA) boundaries to the Yemeni and

Somali Territorial Seas and Exclusive Economic Zones in its eastern and southern reaches, as of 1 September. The HRA was implemented in 2010, at the height of the Somali piracy threat. Meanwhile, the Houthi-Saudi Arabia conflict continues to drive instability in the region, with a risk of possible indirect attacks on shipping vessels. The Arab coalition said that it had thwarted a 'hostile Houthi attempt' to attack Saudi commercial ship MT ALBERTA with a drone on 30 July. Some sources claimed that the drone managed to hit the vessel, though it did not cause any significant damage. This information has not been confirmed by independent sources.

Consistent with the last reporting period, Constellis recorded 13 maritime incidents in the GoG, only one less than July and August. In accordance with established trends, most attacks occurred off Nigerian waters, as well as in close proximity to São Tomé and Príncipe. At least 50% of all attacks resulted in successful boardings, while the rest comprised attempted (29%) and suspicious approaches (21%). 13 people were reported kidnapped in two separate attacks, all of which took place off the coast of Nigeria. In early September, the Director-General of the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) noted a sustained reduction in reported cases of piracy and other maritime crimes in Nigerian waters. NIMASA attributed the decrease in piracy attacks to efforts by the Nigerian Navy and the implementation of the Deep Blue Project in February 2021. Indeed, according to the IMB, sea piracy in the

GoG in the first half of 2021 fell to the lowest numbers since Q2 2019. Despite the overall reduction in reported incidents, the IMB continues to warn shipping companies that pirates operating in the region have the capability to stage attacks, with fishing vessels hijacked in the past to be used as mother ships and to target merchant vessels.

There were only 15 maritime incidents recorded in Asia, a 25% decline against May and June. All the events comprised successful criminal boardings, with 80% being robberies, followed by attempted robberies (20%). Most thefts were low-level and occurred in the vicinity of Indonesia and the Philippines. The Port of Manila in the Philippines, where vessels typically anchor to change crews, has become a particular concern. Meanwhile, although there were no kidnappings in the Sulu and Celebes Seas, regional authorities announced on 23 July that a new task force focused on combating piracy, abductions and marine wildlife trafficking would be launched in the sub-region between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. In other developments, tensions in the South China Sea continue to run high, with the Chinese military reportedly conducting live-fire exercises near Taiwan on 17 August. According to China, the drills were launched in response to alleged 'provocations' by the US and Taiwan 'separatist forces'. This followed the detection of a US Navy destroyer in waters off eastern Taiwan in mid-July, and a Chinese military plane entering Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ). The deployment of US vessels in the region, along with China's recent law demanding that foreign vessels give notice before entering 'Chinese territorial waters,' could escalate the ongoing conflict, which could pose a threat to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

CASES:

- On 30 July, Israeli-owned tanker MT MERCER STREET was attacked approximately 152nm northeast of Al Duqm, Oman. Whilst details remain unclear, it is reported that the attack involved an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), which is understood to have 'deployed flares' before being seen falling into the water. The explosion on the MERCER STREET killed two, a British national and a Romanian. While the origin of the drone has not been identified, given the area and the Israeli links of the targeted vessel, it is believed that the attack could have been carried out by Iran.
- On 13 August, passenger and cargo ship MV ANATOLIAN, which was transiting 100nm northeast off Mogadishu, Somalia, came under attack by a single skiff with four persons on board, who opened fire at the crew. Upon seeing the vessel's security personnel, the skiff turned away towards the coast.
- On 18 August, seven robbers armed with knives boarded the anchored bulk carrier MV SANTOS EAGLE in Callao Anchorage, Peru. The criminals reportedly took one crewmember hostage, tied his hands, and stole the ship's stores before escaping. Two more attempted thefts targeting other vessels were reported in the area during this reporting period.
- On 16 July, eight robbers armed with a gun and iron bars boarded the containership MAERSK NUSSFJORD in Manila Anchorage, the Philippines. The pirates took the on-duty crew hostage while they were on their rounds and tied them up while they stole ship's property. They escaped in a small boat.



Images of the suicide drone attack against Israeli-operated tanker MV MERCER STREET on 31 July 2021 and its aftermath.
(Photo: All Israel News/Trade Winds)

CYBER SECURITY

THREAT GROUP PROFILE: WIZARD SPIDER

Wizard Spider is assessed to be one of the most sophisticated and effective cyber-crime organisations in the world. The group is believed to be primarily based in Saint Petersburg, Russia, though some members are said to be located in Ukraine. Western intelligence agencies estimate that the organisation comprises some 80 members, made up of skilled hackers and programmers, some of whom may not even realise that they are employed by a criminal enterprise. A few of Wizard Spider's known affiliates are UNC1878, TEMP, MixMaster and Grim Spider. The group is also said to be aligned with other Russian-speaking hacking organisations (Twister Spider, Viking Spider, Lockbit gang, SunCrypt gang) – thus forming the world's first cyber-cartel. This cartel, called the 'Maze Cartel' and in which Wizard Spider is the most advanced group, was formed last year and has since dominated the global ransomware landscape. It is suspected that Wizard Spider, along with these other Russia-based groups, is tolerated by the Russian authorities so long as they do not target domestic organisations. It is also possible that some elements within the cartel receive state backing.

Wizard Spider has for a long time been under investigation by the FBI, NCA and Interpol, as well as other international law enforcement agencies. The group first came under scrutiny in 2014-15, having been involved in numerous cyber-attacks using a malware known as 'Dyre', designed to steal money online. In recent years, Wizard Spider has significantly amplified the scale and sophistication of its attacks, primarily utilising and authoring ransomware such as Ryuk and Conti. These have been used to target a wide range of organisations, from small and medium-sized businesses to large-scale enterprises and government entities across the world, making high ransom demands sometimes reaching millions of dollars. Over 2019 alone, Wizard Spider is estimated to have extorted approximately USD 100 million from its ransomware campaigns.

Conti, in particular, has recently emerged as one of the most high-profile forms of ransomware, having been used to disable the Irish healthcare system's IT infrastructure, among other very high-profile cases. It has been around since May 2020, and uses a unique encryption routine that identifies key files and encrypts them incredibly quickly. As such, its implementation is much faster than most ransomware. Conti is also used in combination with other tools to extract data in 'Double Extortion' attacks. Wizard Spider hackers have also reportedly contacted the employees of targeted organisations, and other affected parties such as customers, to make threats by email and phone ('Triple Extortion'). Something that sets Wizard Spider apart from other groups is that it has been found to operate divergent attack types simultaneously. For instance, concurrent Ryuk and Conti ransomware attacks have demanded ransoms be paid to Bitcoin wallets operated by Wizard Spider. This suggests that multiple 'cells' within the group are able to operate autonomously using different methods, thus giving an indication of the outfit's size.

Conti key details:

- **Targets:** Mid- to large-sized enterprises in North America and Europe. The FBI said in May 2021 that the Conti ransomware group targeted at least 16 US healthcare and first-responder networks. These victims are among over 400 organisations worldwide victimised by Conti, with 290 being in the US.
- **Ransom demands:** Amounts are scaled based on the size of the organisation and its perceived capacity to pay. Demands may increase if data exfiltration has taken place. Recorded ransom demands have on average been around USD 900,000 but can be as high as USD 25 million.

- **Average ransom payment:** USD 889,000 (as of July 2021). According to some cyber analysts, at least 26 victim companies have declined to pay, each of which had their documents leaked by the hackers. Other sources place the number of victims suffering the publishing of their data at 180.

- **Decryption timeframe** (until full data recovery): 15 days (vs 19 days for other ransomware). It is reported that although its decryptor is fairly straightforward to use, the decryption rate really depends on the complexity of the targeted network.

- **Data recovery rate:** High.

- **Aftermath:** Even if the victim decides to pay, it can take a considerable time to recover from the attack without adequate, recent, and organised backups, or a roll-back technology. Not paying the Conti ransom can lead to exposure of exfiltrated data on the dark web. Wizard Spider is also known to open back-channels into compromised networks through which it can conduct future attacks.

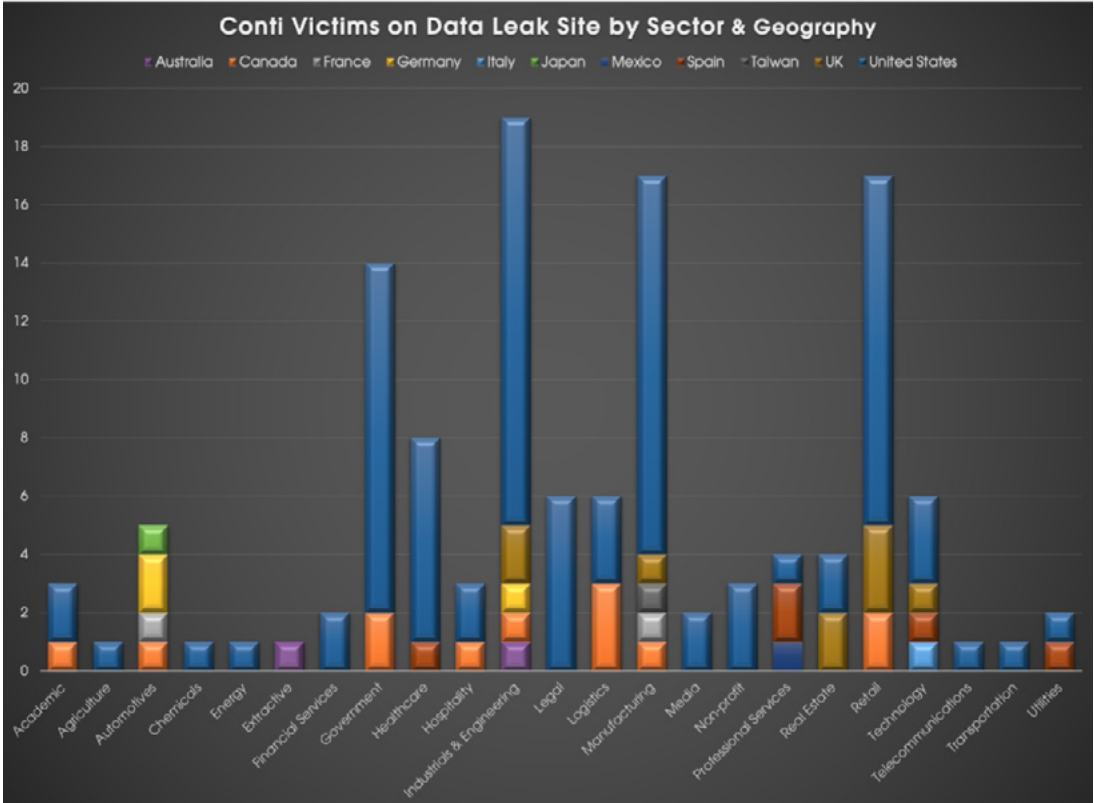
Wizard Spider operates a site from which it can leak documents copied by the ransomware. The site is available at different URLs on both the public internet and the dark web.

The group also offers Conti and other malware as 'Ransomware-as-a-Service'. However, rather than openly advertising its services on the dark web, it only colludes with cartel members and trusted associates. Moreover, Wizard Spider is known to distribute victim data amongst leak sites belonging to other members of the Maze Cartel, demonstrating that attacks carried out by one gang may be passed on to others to negotiate ransoms with the victim.

Several troubling developments are emerging regarding Wizard Spider and its affiliates. Apart from sharing tactics and victim data, Maze Cartel gangs are reinvesting their ill-gotten gains to advance their malware arsenal and are progressing towards automating their attacks. They are also persistently increasing their ransom demands and becoming bolder, issuing press releases, and directly contacting their victims to pressure ransom payments. Wizard Spider is also known to have developed and operate espionage malware, something thus far unique amongst hacking groups. According to reports, this special malware, known as 'Sidoh', seeks only to capture data, with no aim of financial gain. This tool is typically associated with nation-state cyber espionage. It is not yet understood how and why Wizard Spider is using this espionage malware, and its existence is of great concern to cyber-security experts.



(Photo: Adobe Stock)



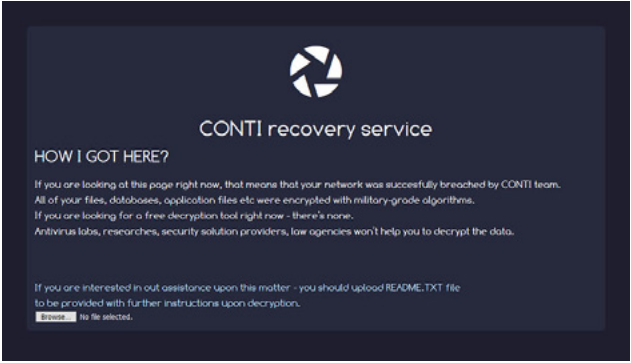
Conti Ransomware victims by sector and location (Photo: crowdstrike.com)

CASES:

- ▶ The Antwerp-based managed service provider ITxx paid a ransom of USD 300,000 to cyber criminals after the company fell victim to a Conti ransomware attack on 2 July. ITxx said that after the payment it received the encryption keys from the hackers. In its statement, the service provider said that “after thorough investigation” it was found that paying a ransom was the only way to get affected customers back in possession of their data. The attack encrypted the data of some 60 customers, according to ITxx. The hackers initially demanded USD 1.5 million, according to cybersecurity company Secutec, which was involved in the negotiations.
- ▶ Conti was responsible for ransomware attacks on the Irish healthcare system that disrupted operations on 15 May 2021. They demanded USD 20 million in ransom, threatening to publish 700GB of data if the ransom was not paid. Irish authorities said the country’s healthcare system did not pay the ransom. Allegedly, the hackers provided a decryption key for “free”, but threatened to publish the stolen data. Four days after the attack, there were already reports of patient files being published on the internet. The Health Service Executive’s leadership

said that it would “likely take months” before its IT systems were fully back online and that the expected costs of full recovery would top USD 600 million.

- ▶ On 19 April 2021, cybercriminals who had attacked a school in South Florida with Conti ransomware published almost 26,000 files that had been exfiltrated during the attack. This was the result of the school refusing to pay the ransom demanded, even when this had been reduced to USD 10 million, from the USD 40 million originally requested.



Conti ransomware portal via Tor browser (Photo: provendatarecovery.com)

FOCUS ARTICLE

HOW WILL THE TALIBAN’S TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN AFFECT THE GLOBAL TERRORISM LANDSCAPE?

By William Dennis



(Photo: WBAA)

Coinciding with the original deadline of the US troop withdrawal on 1 May 2021, the Taliban began their final offensive in the country, seizing control of dozens of districts and provincial capitals on their march towards Kabul. The capital eventually fell on 16 August, bringing the Taliban back to power after a 20-year hiatus. The Taliban were now in effective control of 32 of the country’s 34 provinces, with some resistance being offered in Panjshir and neighbouring districts in Parwan and Baghlan. By 6 September, the resistance movement had largely been quashed, and the Taliban effectively completed their conquest of the country. Afghanistan’s new power structure has raised alarm amongst members of the international community, given their past support for Al Qaeda, fomenting fears that the country may once again become a breeding ground for terrorists.

One of the primary areas of concern is the composition of Afghanistan’s new leadership, announced by the Taliban on 7 September. Despite having promised an ‘inclusive’ government with representation comprising all Afghanistan’s complex ethnic make-up, most positions are in the hands of Pashtuns. Furthermore, after pledging to expel terrorists from the country, most of the 33-member cabinet are veteran Taliban leaders, many with historic or current links to Al Qaeda. Some members are also designated terrorists themselves,

while a few were previously held in the detention facility at Guantánamo. One of the most controversial appointments is that of Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani. Haqqani, who is wanted by the FBI, is head of the Haqqani Network, a designated terrorist organisation long viewed as one of the most dangerous militant groups in Afghanistan. The network has been accused of conducting several high-profile attacks in past years, including the kidnapping of Westerners. Additionally, it maintains close links with Al Qaeda, to the point that Sirajuddin has been suspected of being a member of Al Qaeda’s wider leadership. The top leader of the Taliban, or ‘Emir of the Faithful’, is Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada. He has served as emir of the group since 2016, issuing fatwas and orchestrating suicide bombings (his own son blew himself up in Helmand in 2017). Al Qaeda’s leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, swore allegiance to Akhundzada in 2016.

The Taliban have never admitted to working with Al Qaeda prior to or after 9/11, although the two entities are believed to be closely affiliated. The Taliban founder and first emir, Mullah Omar, refused to turn Osama bin Laden or any other Al Qaeda leaders over to the US following the 9/11 hijackings. Under the February 2020 Doha agreement with former US President Donald Trump, the Taliban agreed to prevent all terrorist groups from operating in the country, including Al Qaeda.

However, this promise has done little to convince international experts. Following the fall of Kabul, Al Qaeda celebrated the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, releasing a statement on 31 August congratulating the Taliban on their ‘victory’, and for putting an end to US military intervention in the Muslim world. While the group is operationally weaker than it was when the Taliban were last in power, the threat from Al Qaeda is likely to grow. After the withdrawal of foreign forces and with the continuing patronage of the Taliban, Afghanistan is once again expected to become a safe haven for the militant organisation, emboldening it to regenerate its networks and thus pose security threats across the Western world and South Asia. A recently published report by the UN indicates that Al Qaeda is believed to be currently active in at least 15 Afghan provinces.

In addition to Al Qaeda, other insurgent groups are also expected to profit from the Taliban takeover. Chief of these is the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), IS’s affiliate in South and Central Asia, which has been active in Afghanistan since 2015 and was formed by disaffected Taliban members. While both are hard-line Sunni organisations sharing many jihadi values, the two are rivals in Afghanistan, differing on religious and strategic matters, with ISKP claiming they represent the ‘true’ jihadist cause. There is a high probability that ISKP will attempt to take advantage of the current uncertainty in Afghanistan to regenerate, increase its activity, and enhance its relevancy. Evidence of this was seen soon after the Taliban seizure of Kabul with the 26 August suicide bombing at Hamid Karzai International Airport. The attack, which killed over 180 people, including 13 US service members, was claimed by ISKP. The group alleged that the bomber was able to penetrate Taliban and US ‘security fortifications’ and detonate his explosive belt near a “large gathering of translators and collaborators” working with the US. Amid international condemnation, the Taliban also denounced the attack, asserting that they would do all in their power to eliminate ISKP leader Shahab al-Muhajir. While ISKP only maintains a small presence in Afghanistan, the group has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to carry out high-profile attacks in the country, primarily in the capital. Given that ISKP has successfully managed to elude most counter-insurgency operations in recent years, the group will highly likely remain a threat factor under the Taliban regime, possibly seeking to also increase its reach and influence internationally.

The Taliban’s subjugation of Afghanistan has been viewed by the jihadist world as a symbolic victory over the West. This has resulted in the country becoming a magnet for insurgents and extremists. Indeed, thousands of fighters are estimated to have entered Afghanistan in recent months, with links to the Taliban, Al Qaeda and ISKP. Many more are reportedly attempting the journey, including Western recruits, as well as battle-hardened militants from neighbouring countries. Current estimates of foreign fighters in Afghanistan are between 8,000 and 10,000. These individuals, seeing Afghanistan as a sort of Islamist paradise, may also be attracted by the prospect of training camps and bases being facilitated in the country. There is serious concern that should such facilities materialise, they will be used to plot and train for sophisticated attacks on foreign soil. Though the Taliban have little to gain by enabling terrorist groups to flourish while seeking to present themselves as a legitimate governing body to the international community, it remains to be seen to what extent the Taliban will be able or willing to meet their pledge to bar terrorists from its territories. In ruling over a diverse and potentially rebellious population, the Taliban will struggle to preserve their own internal stability, let alone prevent the emergence and proliferation of militant networks. As such, ungoverned areas will likely become breeding grounds for both domestic and international groups.

A related by-product of the Taliban victory is the potential for increased recruitment to jihadist groups, both in Afghanistan and abroad. As such, jihadist sympathisers wishing to ride the wave of the reestablishment of the Islamic Emirate may be inspired to conduct attacks in their home territories. Lone wolves may similarly be enthused to carry the jihadi cause forward. This is of particular concern in the West, where numerous individuals amid the thousands of Afghan refugees have been identified by domestic intelligence services as having terrorist affiliations or backgrounds. A direct threat has already emerged in Pakistan. Following the Taliban takeover, the emir of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, or the Pakistani Taliban) renewed his oath of allegiance to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. TTP, which has significant influence in Afghanistan, has close ties with Al Qaeda and is responsible for conducting terrorist attacks in Pakistan. While overrunning Afghanistan, the Taliban freed thousands of prisoners, some of whom were TTP members. The Taliban takeover will also inevitably have a knock-on effect for other regional powers and their own domestic insurgencies.

ABOUT CONSTELLIS

Constellis is a leading provider of risk management, humanitarian, social intelligence, training and operational support services to government and commercial clients throughout the world. Operating in over 45 countries, Constellis’ 20,000 employees bring unparalleled dedication and passion for creating a safer world by upholding the highest standards of compliance, quality, and integrity.

Constellis’ forward thinking services span a broad range of synergistic solutions, from the boardroom to the project site, encompassing risk governance, organisational resilience, business continuity management, crisis management, travel security, global tracking, training, protective security, life support, logistics and specialist support such as K9 services and UAV systems.

At Constellis, our number one mission is to secure success for our customers. Constellis combines the legacy capabilities and experience of ACADEMI, Triple Canopy, Centerra, Olive Group, OmniPlex, AMK9, Edinburgh International, Strategic Social and all of their affiliates. The consolidation of companies under the Constellis name allows our clients to rely on one single partner and project experience that spans the globe.

For more information about Constellis, please visit our website at: www.constellis.com

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.



CONTACT

For more information on this report please contact:

BEATRIZ SANCHEZ-GARRIDO
Information Analysis Manager
beatriz.sanchez-garrido@constellis.com

For all inquiries on Constellis’ advisory & consulting services please contact:

MARK ALLISON
Vice President, Crisis & Risk Services
Mobile: +44 7791 495 057
mark.allison@constellis.com

 www.constellis.com

DISCLAIMER: IN NO EVENT SHALL OLIVE GROUP BE LIABLE FOR ANY DAMAGES WHATSOEVER, INCLUDING ANY DIRECT, INDIRECT, SPECIAL, CONSEQUENTIAL OR ANY OTHER DAMAGES, ARISING OUT OF OR IN CONNECTION WITH THE USE OF OR RELIANCE ON INFORMATION AVAILABLE WITHIN THIS REPORT. IN USING THIS INFORMATION, YOU AGREE TO THE LIMITATIONS AND DISCLAIMERS PROVIDED HERE.

Crisis Response Emergency Numbers:

- NORTH/SOUTH AMERICA**
+1 713 918 6401
- EUROPE, AFRICA, ASIA, AUSTRALIA**
+44 (0) 20 7 240 3237
- GENERAL INQUIRIES**
+971 800 100 100

THE INFORMATION IN THIS REPORT IS PROVIDED “AS IS” WITHOUT ANY WARRANTIES, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO THE IMPLIED WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY, FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE, OR NON-INFRINGEMENT. CONSTELLIS, MAKES NO REPRESENTATION OR WARRANTY THAT THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THIS REPORT WILL BE TIMELY OR ERROR-FREE. IN NO EVENT SHALL CONSTELLIS BE LIABLE FOR ANY DAMAGES WHATSOEVER, INCLUDING ANY DIRECT, INDIRECT, SPECIAL, CONSEQUENTIAL OR ANY OTHER DAMAGES, ARISING OUT OF OR IN CONNECTION WITH THE USE OF OR RELIANCE ON INFORMATION AVAILABLE WITHIN THIS REPORT. IN USING THIS INFORMATION, YOU ARE USING IT AT YOUR OWN RISK AND AGREE TO THE LIMITATIONS AND DISCLAIMERS PROVIDED HERE.