

Kidnapping – Current Issues and Options

Insight paper by Harmattan Risk

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Caveat

Harmattan Associates is broadly familiar with the issue of kidnap and some mainstream responses to it. We are not, however, a dedicated kidnap response consultancy. While this form of risk often arises in general assessments and mitigation advice, we defer to experts in this uniquely dangerous field. Readers are advised not to plan on the basis of this article, but simply to draw awareness from it which can be applied in detailed discussion with relevant law enforcement and private sector experts for tangible planning inputs. This being said, we hope that the following provides at least awareness and some initial reference points in guiding clients towards their own interpretation of the issue in their context.

Introduction

Kidnapping is one of the worst things that can happen to a foreign organisation. An immediate killing or injury represents a stressful point in time for both the victim and the organisation (and family and friends), but it at least provides a tangible and certain outcome, on the basis of which recovery can ensue. A kidnapping, by contrast, makes victims of all of us. The victim of course has the worst experience, suffering dislocation, threat, potentially physical trauma, boredom and loneliness, and lingering uncertainty. The organisation suffers too. Co-workers and managers imagine the worst, and vicariously experience the victim's situation. People are distracted from their value-adding "day jobs", both (and especially) the managers in the crisis team responding to the case, and other co-workers who live under a cloud of negativity as they empathise with the victim. Kidnappings can result in self-doubt, guilt and paranoia throughout an organisation, and unlike killings or injuries, cases can endure.

Statistics on kidnapping of personnel in foreign organisations are quite robust and will not be rehashed here, but we can suggest that the frequency is often under-reported. Many cases occur in places and situations where the local authorities would prefer to sweep these cases under the rug, and / or are handled so discretely that the case never makes into the media.

Suffice to day, kidnapping is one of the most tragic and distracting risks that can befall an international player, and it is well worth some consideration. This brief article attempts to shed some light on the issue. First, we look at different types of cases, then we will focus on kidnap for ransom (still the most common type) and the strategies used to address such cases. The article might be counter-intuitive for some. Some experts assert that paying ransoms is only feeding the problem. But ransoms are only part of the equation. How the "game" is played matters more.

Types of Kidnapping

Kidnapping happens for a variety of motives and involves different kinds of actors. It is difficult to capture the whole phenomenon in a simple typology, but we can still suggest three types, and this might help readers to get a better grip on the issue as it arises / could arise in their context.

Express Kidnapping

This is a relatively recent label for a phenomenon that has been on the increase in Latin America, but also other developing regions (and the industrialised "West" is not immune to it either, though it suffers far less frequency). This refers to the ad hoc, unprofessional and opportunistic snatching of someone in hopes of gaining profit via ransom (it can also happen for purposes of retribution on an opposing family or clan, but in the context of a foreign organisation, it is usually for ransom). Imagine a small street gang, taking what they can get from racketeering, prostitution, and by dabbling in the black market. They become aware that a foreign organisation is operating in their proximity, maybe from a friend who has a job with that organisation, maybe from regular observation, probably both. Foreigners equals wealth, and also ignorance. A quick snatch of an employee (foreign or local, the latter for whom the organisation extends at least reasonable duty of care) seems like a great chance to earn a quick buck.

Imagine as well a disgruntled and desperate individual, maybe with a connection to gangs, maybe just to like-minded and desperate friends. He / she assembles an ad hoc team and network, using the promise of payoff as a lure, and in exchange the invited network members provide assistance, maybe in terms of getting a weapon, maybe for safe locations to stash the victim until resolution occurs. It can be as simple as that - someone who knows someone who is working for a wealthy organisation, and who has the motive and who can develop the means and network to initiate a kidnapping.

In either case, they kidnap the individual, usually off the street, and take them to a safe house. They press them for contact details and soon get their message across to the victim's employer and family - pay or else. The case ensues.

Because these groups are non-professional and opportunistic, they do not have a long-term safe location on hand, so they move the victim as new opportunities arise. They also hurt the victim - professionals tend to try to leave the "goods" more or less unharmed to increase the value of any future exchange and out of fear of retribution, but ad hoc "express" kidnappers are not so disciplined. Their abuse usually takes the sexual form, and in places where forensic resources are limited, they know they can get away with it without risk of identifying themselves if the victim is eventually freed.

Problems

- Hard to locate: They use a loose and ad hoc network of local bases / safe houses, or have one which is very mundane in outward appearance, perhaps in the middle of a congested slum (they often lack the resources to remove a victim from the city or vicinity, hence rely on borrowed or vacant properties).

- Unpredictable: These are not professionals and do not go by a script. They probably do not know how to best play the game. International K&R (kidnap and ransom advisors) professionals and dedicated law enforcement can become accustomed to a "play book", but express kidnappers have not read it. They also have little emotional control and are prone to snap decisions.

- Violent: Express actors are usually desperate and anxious. In kidnapping a potentially lucrative member of an international firm or organisation, they know that they are out of their depth, and they are very willing to get rid of the liability if its presence seems to be leading to arrest or retribution. It was a low cost operation in the first place, and if it incurs unexpected hassle, then "get rid of the problem and plan better next time". Furthermore, lack of regard for "keeping the goods intact" can lead to express kidnappers taking their frustration of a slow or dangerous resolution process out on the victim, whether by sexual or other forms of violence.

- Short time frame: Being opportunistic, the whole idea is a quick payoff. If the victim seems to be a serious or long-term liability, then they are quickly dispensed with and efforts are made to cover tracks and resume normal, probably criminalist (but not always) life, at least until another opportunity presents itself.

Advantages for Resolution

- Mistakes: Being unprofessional, express players tend to leave evidence traces, whether e-communications or physical, and they do not know how police forensics work and therefore how to confuse authorities and cover their own tracks.

- Personal attachments / networks: Ad hoc "expressers" are not part of a wider movement or resistance / mafia organisation, and have often not divorced themselves from the social networks in which they live and with which they are familiar, and are not subject to organisational discipline. As such, their personal acquaintances might well know about aberrations in their behaviour, maybe even their crime, and are quite easy to locate.

- Lack of operational security: Non-professionals hope for a quick payoff, and often expect the shock effect and a reasonably low ransom to create a quick and disaggregated response from the opponent - covering their tracks and not providing information to people external to the case (e.g. bragging to friends, fellow gang members and family) are not always front of mind.

In summary, express kidnappings have a very short time horizon for resolution, but they tend to leave strong traces which can make resolution possible within this constrained time window, and ideally before the perpetrators cause serious harm to the victim.

Ideological Kidnapping

Kidnapping to make a political point has been with us for decades, if not most of political history. An early example of the modern era was the kidnapping of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in Italy in 1978. While the Reds might have preferred resolution to execution, they painted themselves into a corner through gaps in their operational security and eventually had to dispose of the "liability". This phenomenon has been highly publicised (and perhaps more frequent, though there is no strong evidence to that effect) since the advent of the conflict between the ideological "West" and the more radical elements of fundamentalist Islam. The Hezbollah kidnappings of the 1980s and early '90s were an early manifestation of this phenomenon.

The aim in ideological kidnapping is to demonstrate strength, draw attention, and demoralise the opponent. Only then is monetary gain a consideration. Most experienced insurgent and terrorist groups have a broad range of funding sources and kidnapping might be an important source in the early days, but it becomes less of a financing tool and more of a weapon as the group grows and expands its base. Increasingly, in the current conflict which might be dubbed the "War on Terror" versus the "War on Hypocrites", insurgent kidnappings lead to protracted and confusing negotiations which appear to give promise at various points, only to eventually fall through and lead to the victim's execution. This happens for two reasons: One, the enemy is closing in and it is safer to dispose of the goods and end / dissipate the operation; Two, and probably preeminent, is that the killing was pre-planned and all the haze leading up to it was just a way to hurt, distract and

demoralise the enemy, with the killing being the final, well timed blow to the enemy's self esteem and confidence.

The classic scenario is that a political insurgent group discovers a soft and accessible target who is broadly representative of the "West", and kidnaps them. There is usually a scramble of attempted negotiation or other resolution, and a protracted period of severe angst while family, colleagues, and government agencies wait to see how efforts unfold, with the odd prod and a few scrapped plans to rescue the victim. Sometimes, if the kidnappers are not as extreme or dedicated to their cause as they originally proclaim, the issue can be resolved. But in an increasing number of cases, this period of protraction and procrastination is deliberate and serves a purpose: weaken the morale of the ideological enemy, give false hope, then bring morale crashing down by committing the inevitable execution of the victim.

This form of kidnapping has turned old advice on its head. Kidnap and Ransom (K&R) experts used to advise victims to remain calm and patient, and that the most dangerous periods in a kidnap were during the initial snatch and the eventual hand over. If it seems that a victim is going to be killed no matter how negotiations go, then this advice no longer works. Advocating escape attempts, especially when dealing with a victim who is both psychologically traumatised and probably physically weakened, and probably untrained in close quarter combat, is dangerous, but it is now apparent that in some cases playing by the old rules is even more risky. Trying to make a break can be the lesser of two very nasty evils.

The best that K&R advisors can do is to help people who might be at risk of kidnap to recognise the different forms, and especially to identify warnings and indicators that their kidnappers are staunch ideologues who will probably use the event to gain notoriety, not money. If the victim correctly perceives that they are in this situation, then there is nothing to lose by trying to get away. But that is a big gamble.

Problems

The obvious problem is that there is a very high chance that the victim will be killed. The other problem is that no one can really be sure of this until it happens - the kidnappers will dangle hope and protract the negotiation simply to degrade the morale and to distract their opponents, and until the final deed is done, it is necessary to try all of the usual methods to achieve resolution. When authorities believe that the case is ideological and likely to be murderous, they then also face the difficult decision of attempting an armed rescue attempt, an operation that might release the victim,

but might well also get him or her killed in the process (and members of the rescue team, and insurgents, not that perpetrating insurgents' lives are a concern to the intervening authority).

Advantages to Resolution

Unfortunately there are not many advantages in this scenario, but there are a few.

One is that the group is probably connected with known insurgent organisations (it could be a spin off set up specifically to undertake the kidnapping, under a slightly different brand label to buy the main group some "plausible deniability), and there is likely to be considerable intelligence on the principal insurgents in any given theatre. This can be used to start tracking down the perpetrators and victim.

Another is that ideological kidnapers tend to be quite disciplined and apply the "play book" of tradecraft and operational security. While we might not agree with their broader perspective, we might well identify with their tactical rationality once we know what we are dealing with, and this makes it possible to put ourselves in their shoes to try to predict or deconstruct behaviour.

Finally, this same discipline often applies to the well being of the victim. For maximal psychological impact, when the victim is killed it is best that they are fully intact, and identifiable as the same person that they were known as in their old domain. Traditional ethics might also play a role in preventing harm to the victim until they are executed (which is usually swift), and indeed perpetrators might be seeking to instil the image of civility, with killing being a regrettable but necessary message. Abuses do occur, but seldom on the scale experienced in express kidnappings.

There have indeed been cases in which defence or intelligence officials or operatives have been kidnapped and severely tortured to spill any useful information, but in such cases kidnapping is more of a "prisoner snatch" in a situation perceived as a war, and the perpetrators behave not so much as kidnapers, but as war fighters and by extension interrogators. The case of William Buckley, CIA station head in Beirut in 1983-84, is a classic example, and so too are Western renditions of terrorist suspects to interrogation centres in the current ideological struggle.

Professional Kidnapping

While ideological kidnapping makes the headlines, and express kidnappings provide horror stories, the most common variant of this risk remains professional kidnapping. It is perpetrated by insurgent groups who still rely on K&R as a funding source, and by organised criminal groups and small insurgent groups who subsist between extortion, drug and arms trading, and friendly government hand outs.

There are many more cases of professional kidnapping than figures would suggest, because often cases are handled discretely by both sides, and go unreported.

As far as a foreign / expatriate worker is concerned, the group might snatch one individual and quietly seek the best possible deal, or they might hi-jack or corral a whole team, perhaps working on a remote location (and indeed crews of ships as we see of the African coast). Oil workers in Africa have especially been subject to group kidnapping, but the individual type is still the most common.

The group, criminal or insurgent or both, is actively seeking a victim as part of its self-financing strategy, or in some cases partly to satisfy the twisted requirements of state backers. In either case, foreign workers are a good target set - they are ignorant, probably insured, and their employers have untold wealth. They are not "players" and untrained in operational security - soft, lucrative targets. Perpetrators often co-opt or coerce insiders to help with the planning, for example for intelligence on whom is most vulnerable, security procedures, time windows, etc. This is aided by surveillance. The operation is planned, the victim is snatched, and sequestered in safe houses, the more and more frequently rotated the better, but sometimes one location has to suffice.

The "perps" get in touch with the company and explain the situation. Money and maybe public recognition of the validity of a cause (more usually just money) or the victim dies.

There is little room for game-playing in the other two forms of kidnapping. In express situations, we need to react quickly, either by caving in but retaining an armed rescue option. In ideological cases we need to play the game as a front, but plan for the worst in the background. In this case, we might need to play the game.

Problems

The perps will not necessarily be guided by an ethical standard, and hurting the victim to increase pressure on the potential payers of ransom is not uncommon. This can take the form of sending an ear or finger, or simply under-feeding the victim or depriving them of required medication (e.g. asthma meds). This increases a sense of urgency, and the potential for panic reactions, among the victim's organisation and ideally also authorities.

Second, as with express kidnapping, if the "heat is on", it can be more efficient to simply dispense with the victim and dissolve the operation, by killing the victim.

Perps can also set up fronts, as do ideological kidnapers, to create confusion in tracing the perpetrating organisation, and to shield the commanders and organisers from the event itself.

Advantages to Resolution

Despite the problems, which are not inconsiderable, professional kidnappings are the most open to resolution.

We are dealing with a rational actor. They play by the "play book", which we understand well.

They want something from us, not just our shock and demoralisation, but something tangible. They might even be desperate for whatever we can give.

Once we initially untangle the knots, we might have a focused set of hypotheses about who they are, and we can start the investigative process with confidence that we are not covering an insurmountable amount of terrain - be they insurgents or a crime group, if they seem to be playing by the same book, as professionals, then there are only so many possibilities.

What to do

Harmattan is not a K&R consultancy, but by dint of being in the political risk space we have picked up a few pointers. We leave express and ideological kidnapping aside for now and focus on professional cases.

The ideal outcome will have these traits:

- We get the victim back in one piece, and she / he recovers and is able to deal with ongoing emotional scars
- We remove the sense of vulnerability from family and colleagues, and they end up with a sense of empowerment
- We make the perpetrators so anxious (about exposure mainly) that they do not try it again with people under our protection
- Insurance companies would like us to minimise the ransom in the resolution process, but this is not really a success criteria, just a nice to have

How

- The perpetrators think that time is on their side, that we are extremely anxious to get the victim back in one piece. We need to express our limitations, and make it clear that we are patient, just as patient as they are.

- We insist on proof of life, a question that only the victim can answer, maybe ideally a video conf or real time exchange, and we insist that any evidence of harm is going to result in a severe hardening of attitudes, and that it would likely put negotiations fully into the hands of authorities who probably crave the opportunity to apply a much harder approach.

- They insist on some outrageous sum, but we draw back from this and explain why it is unrealistic and unfeasible (as it often is) - we suggest other sums, or staged payment once the victim is released. They will not believe this, of course, but they will consider the upfront one-off payment. It needs to at least cover their cost of the kidnapping, but ideally not much more.

- Time is on our side. Every day and every contact with the perpetrators exposes them more to discovery and retribution. Eventually they will be anxious to end the case, and they will probably agree to terms that are far less than their initial asking price. We need to be firm, and make it clear that any harm to the victim will effectively nullify prior agreements and could unleash retribution beyond our control.

There is a delicate balancing act. We are trying to increase the perceived opportunity cost of continuing the kidnap case. We seek to increase the tension and stress, but short of pressing the perpetrators to kill and dispose of the victim in order to wash their hands of the problem. They need to get something, but so do we, and one thing we seek is that they will not try this again, and that their difficulty in dealing with us will resonate in the criminal community and deter others from trying the same thing.

The ethics of paying ransoms is much discussed. Case One: we refuse to pay anything - they become very frustrated and to demonstrate the risk of non-negotiation among potential foreign organisations they kill the victim, then try again later after having delivered this stark message. Case Two: we comply with all demands - they see us as a soft target and we are in for "repeat business". Case Three: We make them anxious, stress them, but hold out promise of at least enough payoff to cover their operational costs. If they are rational (and in this type they often are) then they

will not ignore our offer, but as negotiations proceed, they know that the authorities have been tracking them and that they are well on the radar. They accept payment (less than the initial asking price), and probably do not try it again, at least with us. Case Three is optimal. It is the most rational response, while Cases One and Two are gut reactions that will likely lead to immediate or longer-term grief.

Do we pay? Yes, we might well need to, at least something. Do we let them control the situation? No. And in paying we are only closing a deal - you release our person and lay off of us and we will try

to control the backlash (or at least we will not give carte blanche to a heavy-handed "special squad" police task force until our person is safe), and you get a small profit in exchange, to use however you see fit, as long as it is not against us. And in the meantime, the perpetrators have exposed themselves to some degree, and local / international authorities have more intelligence with which to shape long-term responses. Ransom payment is just one tactical tool in our toolkit, as are psychological instruments, negotiation, deception, threats and deterrence, empathy and rationality. If we exclude it from our toolkit, we remove a major asset and bargaining chip. Ironically, although Western governments make considerable noise about not paying ransoms ("we don't fund terrorists"), in most cases where they have intervened in kidnap cases, there is evidence of a payoff. Without full information, we can only suppose that they applied some of the thinking in this article, and perhaps showed a bigger stick than the average corporation is capable of credibly waving.

Summary

The main point of this piece was to illustrate some of the rationality and options around dealing with kidnap. But it became evident, given recent trends, that two additional, less rational forms had to be discussed. The "game" does not necessarily apply in those types of cases, but it is still useful to understand the game, and its limitations.

Many firms deal with kidnap risk with insurance for their most exposed people or operations. Be aware that if a company does have kidnap insurance (which usually includes activation of K&R consultants), there are often some unique stipulations and protocols which must be adhered to. In turn insurers often have access to retained expert K&R resolution consultants, the best of whom have excellent track records and do not see minimising the ransom as their main objective.

While the focus has been on victims from international private sector firms, some of this applies to local / national victims, and we sought to avoid moral judgement - "We" might see the problem as "the rational West" versus "fanatics and mobsters" overseas, but in our recent history elements of our own society have engaged in this kind of activity, in the case of "renditions" often sanctioned by commanders, and indeed even by elected leaders and their legal apparati. It is a potential problem for anyone, and is ideologically and geographically agnostic. There is a difference between the kidnapping of a young man in Afghanistan, by "Western" forces based on dubious charges rendered by an antithetical neighbour, for example, and a foreign business executive in a hot spot. But both types of victim and their personal networks share the same trauma.

Caveat Revisited

Harmattan Associates is not a kidnap advisory, and while we have some exposure to the issue, we are not experts and we do not advise on immediate kidnap response. For the full and updated picture of the risks and best practice, readers should consult relevant law enforcement / security authorities, as well as dedicated kidnap response consultants. This is a highly sensitive area, and while it is useful to have some general insights to increase awareness of the issue, planning should be based on expert insight, not generalisations or peripheral insight.

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