

# Crisis Monitor / 1st Quarter Report 2019





# Global View – Top 20 Kidnap Hotspots



### Quarterly rankings indicator

- ↔ No change
- ↑ Improved situation
- ↓ Worsening situation

① Nigeria	67	<span style="color: yellow;">↔</span>	⑧ Afghanistan	11	<span style="color: green;">↑</span> 1	⑮ Ghana	8	<span style="color: red;">↓</span> 7
② India	39	<span style="color: yellow;">↔</span>	⑨ Argentina	11	<span style="color: red;">↓</span> 8	⑯ Kenya	7	<span style="color: yellow;">↔</span>
③ Mexico	27	<span style="color: yellow;">↔</span>	⑩ Iraq	10	<span style="color: green;">↑</span> 2	⑰ Somalia	7	<span style="color: red;">↓</span> 10
④ Pakistan	24	<span style="color: yellow;">↔</span>	⑪ Cameroon	10	<span style="color: green;">↑</span> 2	⑱ Colombia	5	<span style="color: green;">↑</span> 6
⑤ Venezuela	15	<span style="color: yellow;">↔</span>	⑫ Trinidad & Tobago	9	<span style="color: red;">↓</span> 3	⑲ Mali	5	<span style="color: red;">↓</span> 6
⑥ South Africa	14	<span style="color: yellow;">↔</span>	⑬ Bangladesh	9	<span style="color: red;">↓</span> 11	⑳ Yemen	5	<span style="color: red;">↓</span> 6
⑦ Philippines	13	<span style="color: red;">↓</span> 3	⑭ Uganda	8	<span style="color: yellow;">↔</span>			



## Key Trends – Targeted Groups and Perpetrators

- > Unity recorded 386 kidnap cases in Q1, roughly the same as the last quarter. The top ten global rankings collectively experienced a 35 percent drop in attacks, which was most noticeable in India, Mexico, and Pakistan. Despite the improvement, there is little evidence that government action is effectively tackling organized crime in these countries, although police arrested kidnapers and rescued victims in Argentina, South Africa, India, and Pakistan.
- > Unity noted a wider adoption of kidnap for ransom by criminals. Kidnapping cases were recorded in 56 countries, 12 more than Q4 2018. There was renewed targeting of businesspeople and their dependents and the middle-class in Chile, Burkina Faso, Togo, Malawi, Tanzania, and Malaysia.
- > The regional rankings experienced no change this quarter. Africa was the worst affected region with 141 kidnappings across 15 countries, eight of which were in the top 20 hotspots. Asia took second place with 121 abductions in 15 countries. Americas was in third position with 84 incidents across 13 countries, and the Middle East was in fourth with 29 kidnappings in eight countries. Europe remains the safest region with 11 events across five countries.
- > The number of foreign victims continues to fall in 2019 although this quarter, journalists, aid workers, maritime crew and businesspeople were abducted in Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Kenya, and the Philippines.
- > School teachers and students, local government officials, dependents of the middle-class and wealthy families, and commuters in the wrong place at the wrong time accounted for the vast majority of the targeted groups incident data. These attacks were relatively unsophisticated and represented a high availability of targets in poorly governed parts of the developing world where criminals can make a quick buck rather than well-planned and coordinated attacks involving six-figure ransom payments.

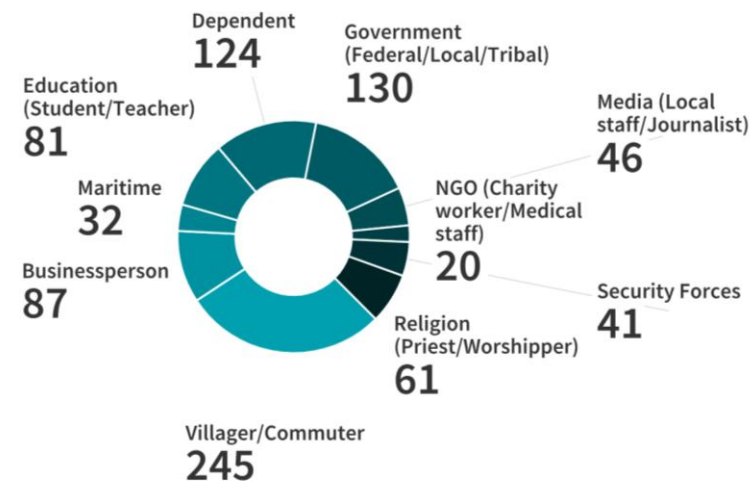


Fig.2 Most targeted groups from 948 victims.

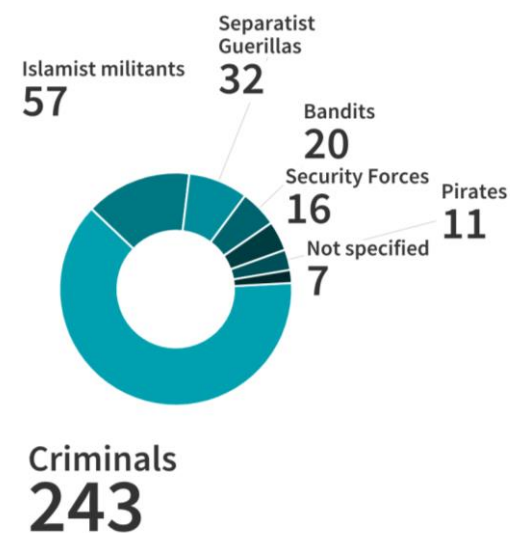


Fig.3 Perpetrator type from 386 kidnapping events.



## Key Trends – Motivation and Ransom Demands

- > The gap between kidnap for ransom and politically motivated attacks narrowed this quarter as separatists and government thugs increasingly targeted local officials, voters, activists and journalists in Venezuela, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Bangladesh. Islamist militant groups also escalated kidnapping activities as an intimidation tactic against villagers and the security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- > Norway recorded the highest ransom demand of 9 million euros (roughly 10 million U.S. dollars) for Anne-Elisabeth Hagen, the wife of prominent Norwegian businessman Tom Hagen. Mrs. Hagen is still missing. Another noteworthy case involved a British aid worker, Mohammed Shakiel Shabir who was held to a Bitcoin ransom of four million U.S. dollars by an armed group in Syria. Islamist fighters rescued him after seven weeks in captivity.
- > There were 12 countries where a ransom demand of 100,000 U.S. dollars or more was recorded including Mexico, Trinidad & Tobago, Norway, Russia, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Syria, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This number has increased since the last quarter, and according to Unity’s research organized crime groups, not opportunistic amateurs were responsible for nearly all of these attacks. The police response has in most cases been improvised and inadequate, which has resulted in further captivity, death or an unknown outcome as illustrated on pg. 4.
- > The most substantial ransom payment was 360,000 U.S. dollars for a Pakistani neurosurgeon who was released in Quetta after six weeks in captivity. Over the last year, there have been four ransom payments above 100,000 U.S. dollars in Pakistan. Unity data shows that organized criminals with links to Afghanistan-based militant groups were responsible for three of the incidents.
- > Brazil and South Africa witnessed the highest number of car-jackings. In many cases, the perpetrators used illegal vehicle checkpoints on remote highways or poorly policed suburbs of major cities to attack unsuspecting victims. Gang warfare and intimidation attacks related to drug trafficking took place in Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia.
- > Sexual assault cases and forced marriage abductions continued unabated in India, so too did kidnappings linked to business and financial disputes.

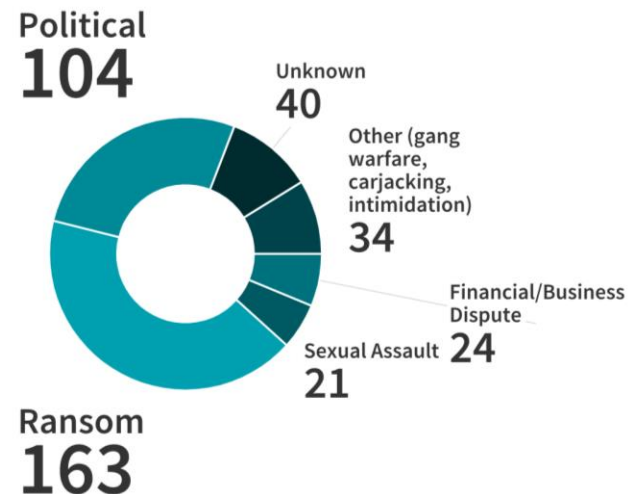


Fig.4 Breakdown of all kidnapping motivations.

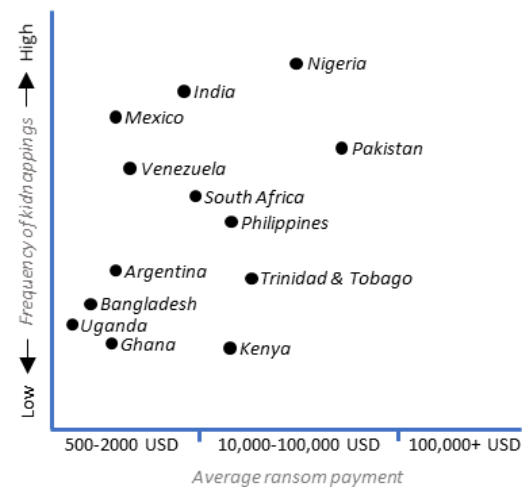


Fig.5 Identifiable ransom behaviour in 13 of the 20 kidnap hotspots



## Key Trends – Outcomes and Captivity

- > The Asia region had the most significant improvement in kidnapping outcomes this quarter with more victims released and rescued than the rest of the world. Pakistan and India recorded the most favorable results. However, the majority of these incidents were business disputes and domestic affairs that did not require special investigative techniques to resolve the case.
- > Kidnappers killed their captives in 18 of the 56 countries where an incident was registered. The worst deterioration was in Mexico, Venezuela, Nigeria, South Africa, Iraq, and Bangladesh where more than one kidnapping ended in the victim's death.
- > The 'Unknown' value represents events with no outcome from our research and findings. In these cases the kidnappings relate to: gang rivalry and intimidation in Mexico, commuters and villagers disappearing in Nigeria, and dependents taken in India.
- > The 22 victims still held captive were taken for ransom or political purposes in Norway, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and negotiations may be ongoing.
- > Mali, Yemen, and Afghanistan had the longest captivity periods. In these countries, Islamist fighters and local militias were responsible for holding their victims for more than a year before releasing them, and it appears foreign governments were responsible for negotiating the release of foreigners in three long-duration cases this quarter.
- > Short duration kidnappings lasting less than a week and in most cases no longer than two days remain the most common length of captivity. Criminal groups seeking a quick settlement will demand small ransoms from the victims family then move onto the next target. This quarter, victims were routinely targeted outside of local and international airports, near transit hubs, and on the outskirts of major urban areas. This type of recurring crime often goes unnoticed by the police in insecure parts of the world because of competency and resourcing issues. As such, high-volume, low yield kidnappings will continue to drive the higher percentage of kidnap data in 2019.

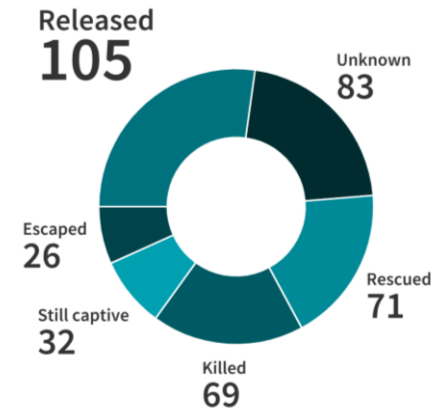


Fig.6 Kidnapping outcomes.

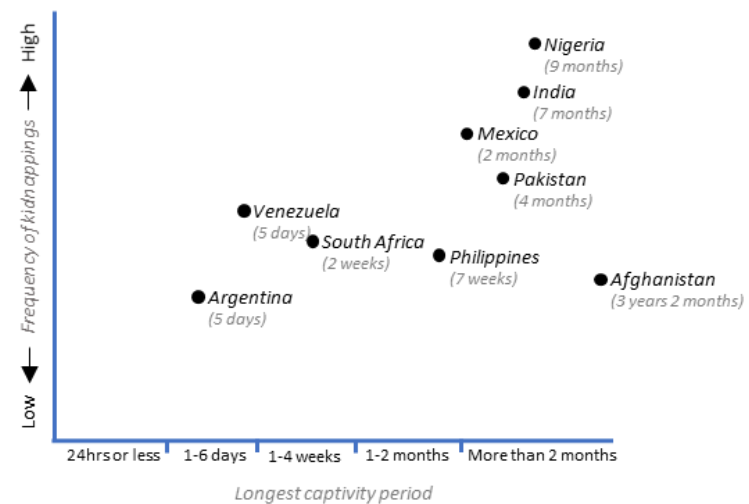


Fig.7 Longest captivity period in the top ten kidnap hotspots





## Region Review – Americas

- > Mexico suffered another record period of violence. Drug trafficking groups fought for territorial control of smuggling routes and extortion rackets in the central state of Guadalajara and Jalisco in the west. A Mexican NGO released a report identifying Tijuana in Baja California as the most violent city in Mexico. Acapulco in Guerrero state was not far behind. High rates of kidnapping were recorded in Mexico City, Veracruz, Michoacán, and Jalisco. Businesspeople and dependents were mostly targeted, and in many cases were rescued after the police tracked the captor’s cell phone through GPS technology.
- > In Haiti, political tensions manifested in widespread and violent anti-government protests. The capital, Port-au-Prince experienced spikes of violence which left some 26 dead. To appease Haitians, PM Jean Henry Céant was removed by parliament in a no-confidence vote in March and replaced by Jean-Michel Lapin as interim PM. With no response to the economic crisis, the outlook for Q2 looks bleak.
- > Peace talks between the Colombian government and National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group were suspended in January following a car bomb attack against a police academy in the capital, Bogotá. Meanwhile, open conflict between ELN and the security forces continued along the Pacific Coast as well as near the border with Venezuela. ELN claimed responsibility for three separate kidnappings in the northeast departments of Norte de Santander and Arauca. Otherwise, the rate of abductions remained at a historical low this quarter.
- > The political crisis deepened in Venezuela as opposition leader Juan Guaidó claimed the role of acting president, backed by massive anti-government protests. Ninety percent of the country has suffered power and water shortages this quarter. The U.S. embassy closed its doors with the last American diplomats leaving on 14 March. The U.S. State Department also issued a travel alert advising its citizens not to visit the country. Kidnapping groups were most active in the capital, Caracas, and of the 15 cases recorded, most of the victims were released unharmed after a small ransom was paid.
- > Elsewhere, nine express kidnappings were registered in the Argentinian capital, Buenos Aires – the victims were of all social classes, and most took place on expressways. Child abductions were recorded in the Bahamas. Piracy continued to affect the kidnap risk climate off the coast of Trinidad and Tobago, while several businesspeople linked to organized crime were kidnapped in Chile. Tourists were also targeted and released in three kidnap cases in Peru.

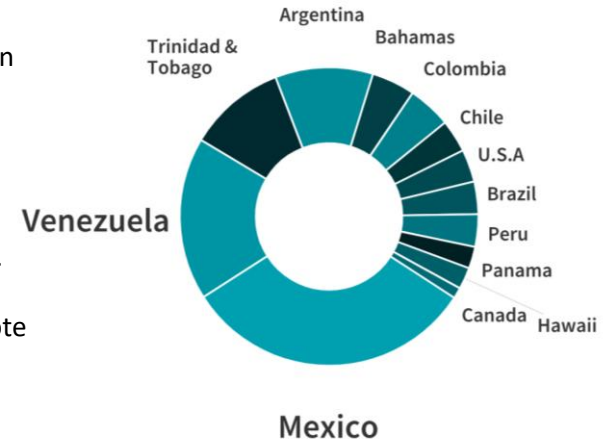


Fig.8 Regional kidnap countries in Q1.

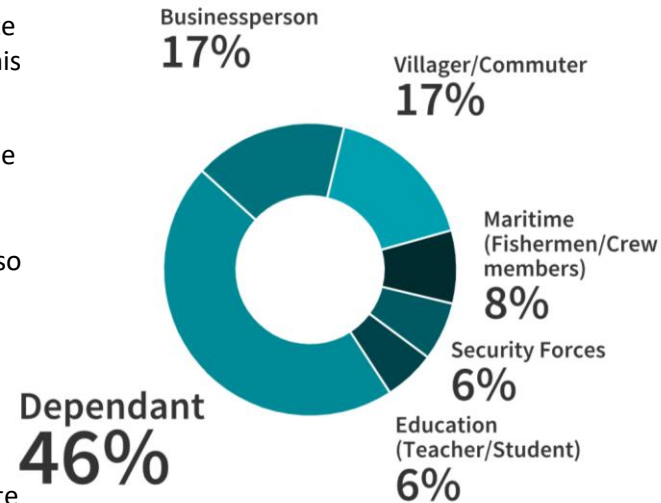


Fig.9 Most targeted groups in the Americas.



## Region Review – Europe

- > There were eleven kidnappings recorded in Europe this quarter, which is about the same as Q4 2018. Most of the incidents were short duration, and the victims were rescued or released in nearly all of the cases where an outcome was reported in the media.
- > Criminal gangs in southern Spain continue to target migrants crossing over from Morocco. Victims are thought to pay up to 1,500 U.S. dollars based on their perceived wealth.
- > Businesspeople and their dependents were taken in Greece and Russia. The abductions resulted in ransom demands from 20,000 - 100,000 U.S. dollars. In one case, a Russian property developer based in Novosibirsk was held against the equivalent of 38,000 U.S. dollars and released after reportedly paying the demand. More recently, the U.S. State Department has warned American citizens about a heightened kidnap risk in Russia, although comparatively, the risk level is similar to central and southern Europe, which is relatively low.
- > Fewer Europeans were kidnapped abroad this quarter, though cases involving journalists, aid workers, and missionaries were registered in Venezuela, Mali and Burkina Faso. Overall, there was a marked decrease in foreign victims, especially Westerners, which is indicative of improved security measures and situational awareness. However, Asians and Africans travelling abroad for work and recreation were increasingly targeted in neighbouring and foreign countries this quarter.

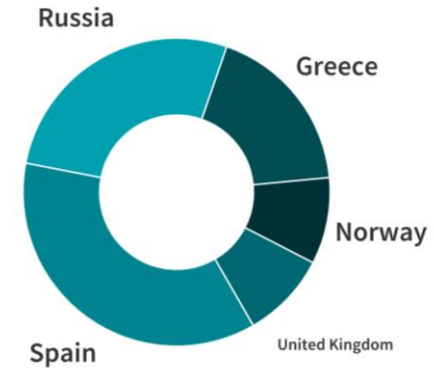
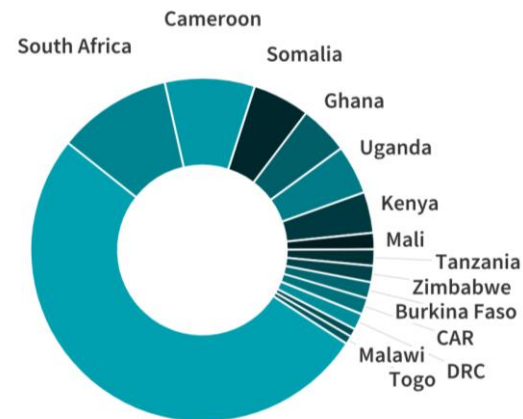


Fig.10 Regional kidnap countries in Q1.



## Region Review – Africa

- > Jihadist violence intensified across parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Insurgent attacks and terrorism rose in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya, Somalia, and Mozambique. There was also increased political tension and unrest in Algeria, Guinea, Sudan, and Zimbabwe.
- > Al-Shabab militants carried out a terror attack against a commercial complex in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi in January. The security response appeared to have been timelier and more effective. However, the consequent arrest of innocent Muslims and indiscriminate crackdown against ethnic Somalis escalated social tensions through the quarter. Al Shabab also intensified its bombing campaign in the Somali capital, Mogadishu resulting in dozens of casualties. The group will continue to pose a risk to Kenya for its military role in Somalia, and with little indication its fighters are being eroded across the border, the terror threat will remain high in the region moving into Q2.
- > Nigeria retained its ranking as the worst affected country for kidnappings. Election-related violence and politically motivated attacks in the Middle Belt combined with an increase in kidnap for ransom by criminals across parts of the south contributed to the high incident numbers.
- > Suspected Islamists continue to hold foreign victims in Libya, Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, and Kenya. A Canadian geologist was killed by his militant captors near the border with Niger, while two Western travelers are still missing in Burkina Faso, and so is an Italian charity worker in Kenya.
- > Unity’s regional kidnapping data shows that the average captivity period in Africa was between 1-6 days, with abductors holding their victims for extended periods in Mali and the Central Africa Republic.
- > The average demand for locals was under 1,000 U.S. dollars. This amount rose significantly to a range between 50,000 – 100,000 U.S. dollars for victims of perceived wealth and employees working for international organizations.



Nigeria

Fig.11 Regional kidnap countries in Q1.

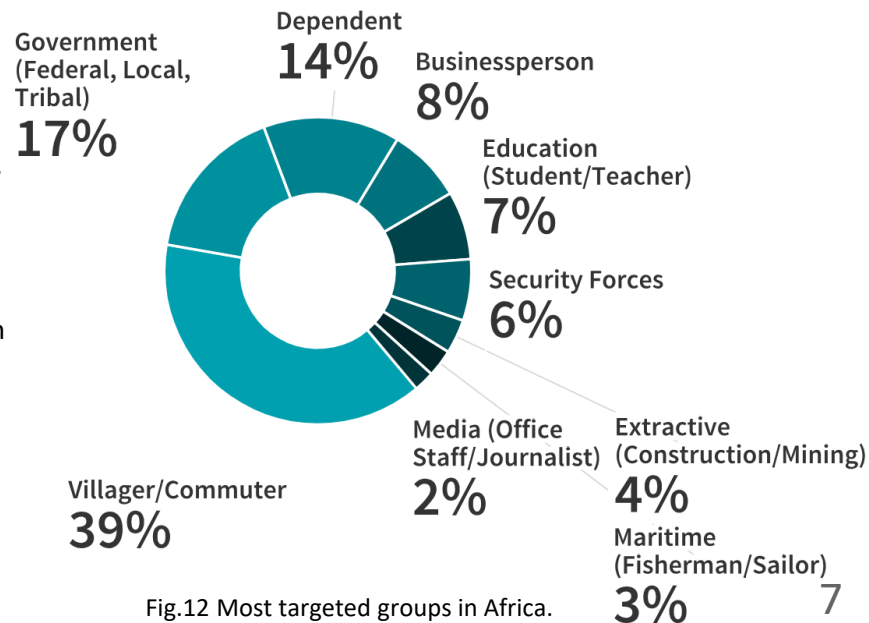


Fig.12 Most targeted groups in Africa.





## Region Review – Middle East

- > There was 29 kidnappings in the Middle East, a 25 percent reduction from the previous period that was attributed to fewer for-ransom abductions by organized crime groups in northern Syria.
- > The Islamic State (ISIS) insurgency maintained momentum in Iraq resulting in multiple kidnappings and bombings in the north of the country. Nearly all of the attacks were politically motivated, and the victims were killed or are still missing.
- > A business dispute in Baghdad resulted in the abduction of a wealthy businessman in March. The victim’s family paid 120,000 U.S. dollars to the kidnappers before his release. According to the local press, the Iraqi police made several arrests but did not retrieve the money. It was the highest ransom payment in the region this quarter.
- > The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces eliminated ISIS from its last standing bastion in eastern Syria bringing an end to the so-called caliphate. The group has vowed to fight back in Syria and is expected to revert to its insurgent roots to undermine security efforts. The U.S. has said it will reduce half of its 2,000 troops in the coming months as it begins drawing down forces in the area but has pledged to keep 400 American soldiers to establish a safe zone.
- > The risk of ISIS exploiting weak security in Syria is highly likely. A UN monitoring committee stated in July 2018 that membership stands between 20,000 – 30,000 in Iraq and Syria, while a Pentagon report published in February revealed ISIS is already regenerating capabilities in the absence of effective counterterrorism measures. The challenge of engaging sympathetic communities while militarily dislodging underground insurgent networks will be a complex one. Also, there are significant numbers of ISIS-affiliated fighters still warring across parts of the Sahel, Afghanistan and the Philippines, suggesting the groups’ global network remains a significant transnational threat and potential risk to international operations and global travelers.
- > The Middle East continues to register long captivity periods. In Yemen, an armed group released an American oil worker after 18 months. Criminal captors in northwest Syria freed two medical workers after three months in captivity, and Mohammed Shakiel Shabir, the rescued British aid worker, taken from the same area, was released two months later.

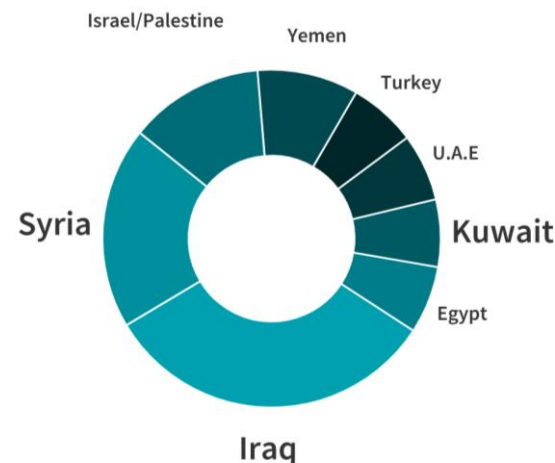


Fig.13 Regional kidnap countries in Q1.

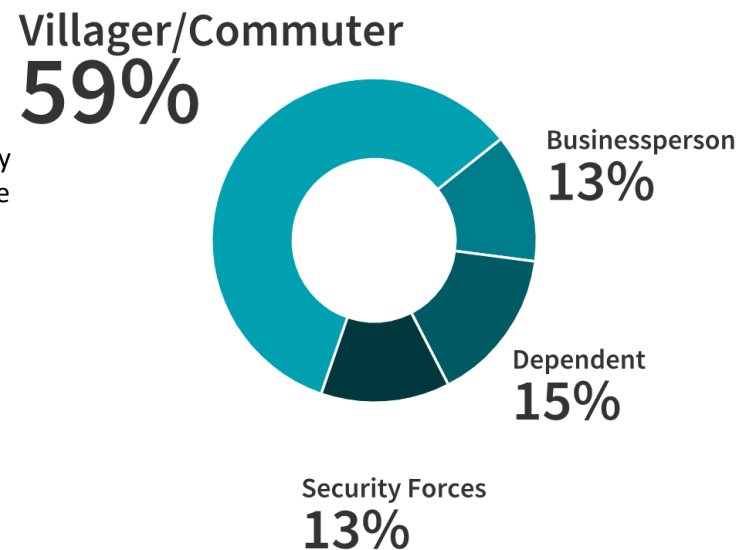


Fig.14 Most targeted groups in the Middle East.



## Region Review – Asia

- > This quarter saw the rate of kidnappings decline in Asia because of fewer incidents in India and Pakistan. Afghanistan registered a slightly higher number of abductions as the Taliban maintained an offensive across parts of the country. Bangladesh also experienced an increase in kidnappings and illegal detentions amid rising election-related violence.
- > A rare terrorist attack in New Zealand left more than 50 Muslim worshippers dead. The mass shooting which targeted two mosques in Christchurch was indicative of rising anti-immigrant violence specifically aimed at Muslim communities in the West.
- > There was heightened political tension in Thailand as demonstrators took to the streets in anger over the 24 March election result. Protesters gathered in central Bangkok late March to demand the removal of the Election Commission after complaints of ballot counting irregularities. There is a heightened risk of political unrest in the coming months. Meanwhile, several clashes between insurgents and the security forces in the deep south led to the kidnap and subsequent death of three police rangers.
- > Despite a lower number of incidents across the top three regional hotspots, the kidnap risk remained high in the Indian state of New Delhi and Lahore and Punjab in Pakistan. 38 of 111 kidnappings were recorded in these cities, and most were financially motivated and forced marriage abductions. School teachers, business traders and middle-income families were targeted in the ransom cases, and all were rescued or released against a payment of less than 2,000 U.S. dollars.
- > Unity’s data shows that victims taken in Asia were held for an average of 2-5 days. India, Pakistan, Malaysia, and the Philippines registered multiple kidnappings where the victim was released after two weeks. There were nine politically motivated abductions lasting more than two months. The targets of these attacks were local government officials and villagers abducted in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia.
- > Meanwhile, an increased piracy risk persists in the waters off eastern Malaysia and the Sulu-Celebes sea, despite fewer kidnappings this quarter. The Philippine military launched security operations against the Abu Sayyaf militant group in the Sulu area resulting in casualties on both sides. Heavy fighting also continued between the army and pro-ISIS groups in Maguindanao province in central Mindanao, which led to displace thousands of local citizens.



Fig.15 Regional kidnap countries in Q1.

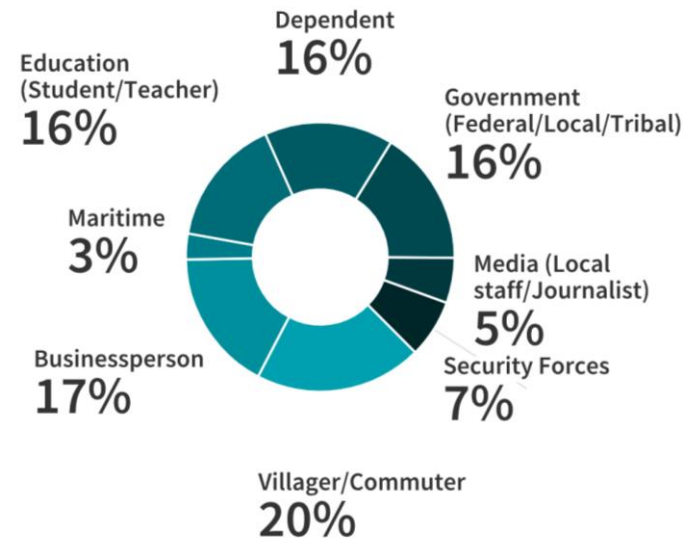


Fig.16 Most targeted groups in the Asia region.

## Thank You

For more information contact us at: [crisisresponse@unityresourcesgroup.com](mailto:crisisresponse@unityresourcesgroup.com)  
AMERICAS – EUROPE – AFRICA & MIDDLE EAST – CENTRAL ASIA – AUSTRALASIA  
[www.unityresourcesgroup.com](http://www.unityresourcesgroup.com)