

# Hostages and Kidnapping – A Survival Guide

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For many security advisers working throughout the world the risk of kidnapping is moving increasingly high up the list of potential problems that they are likely to be facing. Certainly once you are out of the 'modernised' western hemisphere, the possibility of kidnapping becomes a very real one.

Recent high-profile kidnapping incidents have taken place in Nigeria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Gaza Strip, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Chechnya, Colombia, Argentina, Jamaica – and those are merely the incidents that make it onto the news pages of western newspapers. There are many more incidents that are never reported, but which are happening on a daily or weekly basis.

As in all security matters, in order to deter or defeat an enemy it is advisable to know as much about them as possible, and certainly for any security person looking to operate in an area where the possibility of kidnapping is an identified risk, it is vital that they have a solid understanding of who are the people that are likely to be carrying out kidnap attempts; what their background, methods and capabilities are; what their aims and objectives are; previous outcomes and methods of negotiations and the likely reaction from government, police military and other agencies, as well as home country government, embassies and consulates.

Each country has its own culture of kidnapping, and the negotiation methods that would work in Nigeria for example, would not necessarily be the most effective response in Chechnya or Columbia.

Most kidnappings can be divided into criminal or political, i.e. they are used in order to raise money from ransom (criminal) or to in some way influence policies that affect them (political), as in negotiations with regional governments over water rights, or the distribution of oil revenues in the Niger Delta. If you are dealing with criminals, then there is usually a clear set of instructions setting out the amount of money required, and conditions for the hand over. Although these negotiations can be drawn out (in Columbia they can go on for years!), it is usually in the kidnappers interest to gain the reputation as honest brokers – you pay up, we set the victim free.

A recent trend in South America, for example, has been what are called 'Cash Point Kidnappings'. People are snatched off the street into a car, driven around before being taken to a cash point where they have money withdrawn on all of their cards, and then are dropped miles away in an unknown area. Whilst this is not a classical kidnapping scenario, the rules of survival are much the same.

Most kidnappings follow the same pattern, and consist of a number of clearly identified stages. Stage 1, The Snatch is the moment that the victim is grabbed, often with violence (as much for its psychological impact as anything else). This is followed by The Transfer, when they are taken to a vehicle and moved away from the first snatch point. Stage 3 is The Drop, when the victim is put into the storage area, whether a room, cellar, underground tank, etc. Stage 4 is settling, when both the kidnappers and victims lose the initial adrenaline rush and settle into some sort of routine, usually consisting of food, toilet activities, and perhaps washing. After this comes The Contact, when communication is set up between the kidnappers and whoever they are trying to negotiate with, then Negotiations, followed by The Handover, when money changes hand, and then The Release.

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In the vast majority of cases, the time of highest danger is in the moments of the snatch and transfer, and then at the end in the time of handover and release. If the victim is still alive on the morning of Day 2, then it is clear that it is not the intention of the kidnappers to kill that person (otherwise they would have done so already), and as long as everyone behaves in a professional manner, there should be no reason why the victim should not be released safely at some stage in the procedure.

What can someone who has the possibility of becoming a kidnap victim do to make sure that they maximise the chance of their survival? Although all kidnap situations are different, there are a number of clearly recognised guidelines that will give you the greatest chance of surviving any kidnapping attempt that you might be involved in.

The first, and perhaps most powerful tool you can use, is to consider the possibility of your own kidnapping in realistic terms. Is it a possibility? If so, who is likely to be doing it, how will they do it, will it be from your house at night, from your car at traffic lights, as you are walking down the road? What are the kidnappers going to want? Is it money, which can be paid quickly, or is it influencing governments, which means that it could be months or years. In Lebanon, two- and three-year kidnaps were common, and BBC journalist Alan Johnston, kidnapped from his car in Gaza City in March, was still unreleased at the time of writing this article in mid-May.

Visualising in realistic terms what a kidnapping attempt might feel like will give you the greatest opportunity of retaining some sort of critical faculties during the absolute terror that a normal kidnapping attempt will create. If you are going to need medication, make sure that you have it with you! (I realise that this is not the same as packing for a weekend away, but to have an emergency bag within hands reach is one more habit that might just save your life).

Once the initial snatch and transfer has been carried out (none of which you will have any control over, and during which you will in all likelihood be both physically and psychologically traumatised), and you are put into a holding area, now is the time that you can concentrate on maximising your survival chances. Remember, your best chance of getting through this alive is to do exactly as you are told, not upset anyone on the snatch team, and wait for the professionals to get you out. So, be a good hostage! Behave yourself. Unless you are under specific threat, or can guarantee its success, escape will probably not be high on your list of priorities, staying alive is.

You do not know how long you are going to be in captivity, so get your mind around the idea that your only responsibility is to maintain yourself in the best condition possible. Brian Keenan, kidnapped as he walked from his house to his job as a University teacher in Beirut was held for four years, John McCarthy, who was kidnapped from his car (despite a bodyguard and back-up car) was held for over five years, most of which were in soul-destroying and often hopeless conditions. Try and maintain a cool mind, try and establish a routine, try and ensure your own health as much as possible.

Give yourself something to hold onto, something that is private to you and which the kidnappers can't get to. It might be your religion, it might be the mind-messages you transmit to your children as you visualise them going to school, it might be the bloody-mindedness that says that they are not going to get you down.... Whatever it is, accept that there will be times when you feel like you can't go on, when you feel hopeless and defeated. Accept that as part of the process, and then think of Nelson Mandela in a cell for twenty-six years.

Stuff happens, and kidnappings are part of that, but as always professionalism, preparation and an ability to adapt to the circumstances around you are the best tools that you can have to ensure that it will become just another story that you can tell your mates in the bar.

