



Kidnap and Ransom



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Iraq Alert (UPDATE): Abduction of American journalist reiterates extreme risk of kidnapping in Iraq likely posed by Iran-backed militias; avoid all travel

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Current Situation:

- Following the Iraqi Ministry of Interior's (MoI) confirmation that a foreign national has been [kidnapped](#) in Baghdad, further reports emerged to corroborate that the reporter is Shelly Kittleson. This includes CNN reporter Alex Plitsas, who confirmed that Kittleson was abducted and "may have been taken hostage in Baghdad by Khatib Hezbollah [KH]." Plitsas stated that he is Kittleson's US point of contact.
- In addition, the news website "Al-Monitor" released a statement indicating that the organization was aware and alarmed by the kidnapping of Kittleson, who is a contributor to the agency.
- As of the time of writing, the MoI has not released any further information on the investigation.
- An additional report indicated that the US Administration is aware of the development, and it is tracking the situation.

Source: [Alex Plitsas](#)

Assessments & Forecast:

1. The risk of kidnapping in Iraq is extremely elevated, and similar instances are not unprecedented. The most notable incident in recent years was the [abduction](#) of the Israeli Russian academic researcher, Elizabeth Tsurkov, in Baghdad's Karrada district in March 2023. Israeli authorities later [confirmed](#) that she was held by Kataeb Hezbollah (KH). Despite the intelligence indications that KH held Tsurkov, she remained in captivity for 903 days. She was only released following extensive diplomatic pressure placed on the Iraqi government by then-US President Donald Trump. During Tsurkov's time in captivity, there was no apparent attempt by Iraqi federal law enforcement to release her.
2. The current kidnapping of Kittleson is highly notable as it comes amid the ongoing US/Israel-Iran war, which has substantially elevated regional tensions and triggered significant Iran-backed militia action. This particularly includes Iraq, in which Iran-backed militias have been conducting repeated attacks against US-linked targets, as well as Kurdish targets in northern Iraq, and in some cases, federal government targets. This is a pattern that [emerges during regional times of crisis](#), including during the Israel-Hamas conflict. It reiterates Iraq's position as a flashpoint arena for geopolitical tensions between the US and Iran.
3. In the current circumstances, given precedent and given Kittleson's nationality, it remains likely that she was kidnapped by an Iran-backed militia, with KH being the primary potential actor, as suggested in current reporting. This is because KH is today the most prominent and most ideologically aligned faction with Iran. In this context, Kittleson's kidnapping is highly likely politically motivated and highly unlikely to be resolved in a relatively simple kidnap & ransom process. Given precedent, it is also plausible that the involved militia would succeed in keeping Kittleson and in rendering Iraqi federal forces' countermeasures futile. This is partly possible given the clout and influence of KH and other Iran-backed militias within the country, including among the predominantly Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). This clout, in some cases, also translates into complete control of certain areas of Baghdad and these groups' ability to extract intelligence.
4. It is plausible that, given the high stakes in the context of the US-Iran war, Kittleson would be held as a bargaining chip and as leverage intended to pressure Washington to end its military campaign against Iran. Washington is unlikely to cave into such potential pressure and instead is more likely to increase its leverage against the Iraqi government, as well as employ coercive measures against Iraqi militias, exacerbating further Iraq's role as a flashpoint arena between the parties.
5. Regardless, Iraq's security landscape continues to be volatile and one in which powerful militias that are aligned with Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operate with a high degree of impunity. This includes not only KH but [several other prominent Shiite militias and their associated front groups](#), which further provides them with opacity and plausible deniability. In addition, such factions and Iran itself tend to view soft targets, including businesspeople, journalists, academics, and more, as legitimate targets based on the latter's nationality. This substantially increases risks to US nationals at the moment, especially in states where Iran's influence is profound.
6. Therefore, additional kidnapping incidents of Americans, and to a large extent also other Western nationals, on Iraqi soil are highly likely.

Recommendations:

1. Continue avoiding all travel to Iraq amid the current escalation between the US/Israel and Iran and the extensive risks posed to US nationals in the country.
2. US nationals who remain in Iraq, including professionals from different occupations, are advised to maintain as low a profile as possible and leave the country due to the elevated risk of kidnapping.
3. Remain cognizant of the fact that Iran and its regional allies tend to view soft targets as legitimate

targets.

4. In general, maintain elevated vigilance and situational awareness at all times.
5. Limit contact with unknown individuals and be suspicious of suggestions and inquiries from unknown parties.
6. Avoid sharing personal information, travel and itinerary details, travel locations, and any personal information with anyone, including local service providers.
7. Avoid unaccompanied travel.
8. If essential, update a trusted contact and share your location with them.
9. Always be aware of suspicious people or vehicles when you are entering and exiting your hotel.
10. Avoid publicly displaying your American identity and sharing this information with unknown individuals.