

ISSUE PAPER

Kidnapping for Ransom: A Growing Challenge in Pakistan

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Issue Paper

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BY

DR. SYED KALEEM IMAM

Introduction

Kidnapping for ransom is defined as an act of hostage-taking or illegally imprisoning. It involves the confinement of a person and threatening them to coerce a third party to meet certain demands for the release of hostages. The Hostage Convention, established by the United Nations, defines hostage-taking as an international crime and requires signatory states to criminalize hostage-taking in their domestic laws and to prosecute those involved (International Convention against the Taking of Hostages, 1979). It is a crime that has become a global concern, impacting societies worldwide.

Recent examples in Africa (Nigeria, Burkina Faso), Latin America (Haiti, Mexico), Middle East highlight how it is a global issue as criminal organizations and militant groups generate monetary gain through extortion. This act is thus a violation of the fundamental human right to wellbeing and freedom.

In Pakistan, considering the already uphill struggle for safety and stability, the risk of kidnapping for ransom makes the situation more worrisome. It threatens fundamental rights of both foreign nationals and local residents, undermining Pakistan's security

dynamics through illegal confinement by militant groups and criminal syndicates. Hence, this is not just another crime; it is a blatant assault on the foundations of a society. It not only compromises our social order but also jeopardizes the economic stability that maintains our well-being.

Evolution of Kidnapping in Pakistan

Ransom related abductions in Pakistan are linked with the country's socio-political environment, and its undercurrents have shifted significantly with time. Before the 1970s, this crime was uncommon due to relatively stable political conditions. However, the Afghan-Soviet War of the 1980s brought weak governance, a lack of rule of law, and political instability, creating a vulnerable environment that fueled criminal activity. As a result, kidnapping for ransom became widespread in the 1990s, as criminal groups exploited the situation for financial gain.

In the early 2000's, there was a notable rise in abduction cases. Militants such as Taliban, al-Qaeda and criminal gangs engaged in this activity used captivity for ransom as a revenue stream which continued to increase in the 2010's (Reuters, 2008). Kidnapping was a lucrative source to finance their activities and as a pressure strategy to wield radical influence or demand the release of their detained members. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Balochistan and even urban metropolises were particularly affected by this phenomenon.

The situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) was particularly challenging, as there was a surge in kidnapping incidents due to the war on terror. This increase is associated with the

reduction of state-supported groups, leaving militants unassisted and turning to coercion. The statistics from the UNODC reveals that in 2017, the kidnapping rate in Pakistan was 8.8 cases per 100,000 population. This increased slightly in 2018 to 9.5 cases per 100,000 population. Despite a decrease in crimes such as murder and robbery by substantial difference from 2010 to 2020, kidnapping increased by 5.94% during the same period (Gallup, 2023).

Two unique notable cases of women kidnapping sparked outcry in Pakistani society in 2019. Dua Mangi and Bisma Saleem were both abducted, allegedly for ransom. Karachi authorities successfully apprehended the gang responsible for both kidnappings and safely recovered the hostages. The primary suspect was arrested on March 19, 2020, and later indicted by the anti-terrorism court in January 2021.

In Punjab, violence against women surged significantly in early 2023, with 5,551 women kidnapped, equating to two kidnappings per hour. Lahore alone reported 1,427 cases, accounting for one in four victims. During this period, 613 children were also abducted, averaging five kidnappings daily, with one-third of these cases in Lahore. The city additionally reported 210 human trafficking incidents. Karachi, notorious for high crime rates and gang activity, faces similar challenges (Tribune, 2023).

Organized groups systematically target affluent businessmen for financial gain, often hired to settle personal disputes. However, abduction for ransom extends beyond financial motives and is frequently driven by personal or business vendettas, making it more violent and less structured. Victims often include members of religious minorities, foreign nationals,

humanitarian workers, and journalists. Human rights groups report that roughly 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls are kidnapped, raped, and forcibly converted by Muslim men annually. The Pontifical University in Rome estimates that about 2,000 forced conversions and marriages occur every year in Pakistan (International Christian Concern, 2022). Due to limited infrastructure, kidnappers often can't hold victims for long periods, sometimes leading to violence or even killing victims after ransom payment.

Exploring the Motives Behind Ransom Kidnapping:

Kidnapping for ransom in Pakistan is driven by political, economic, and social factors, exacerbated by fragile law enforcement and community awareness. Identifying the core causes is crucial to understanding why individuals engage in these activities:

Political Factors

In areas like FATA, Balochistan, and KP, the absence of structured law enforcement and governance enables criminals to operate with impunity. Political instability in border regions with Afghanistan further creates an environment conducive to crime. Additionally, terrorist organizations require funds to support their operations, and ransom abduction is a source of revenue. Corruption within political and law enforcement systems further exacerbates this problem.

Economic Factors

Extreme poverty and the widening income gap push individuals towards criminal activities like kidnapping for financial gains. In conflict-

prone areas, a lack of job opportunities leads many to join criminal networks. Informal settlements resulting from rapid urbanization provide fertile ground for criminal activity due to limited law enforcement and social services. Moreover, inflation and economic instability force individuals to seek alternative revenue sources, including kidnapping.

Law Enforcement Challenges:

Officers lacking secure tenure are vulnerable to external pressure, hindering their ability to combat crime while external interference undermines police autonomy, leading to inefficient policing. Additionally, law enforcement agencies lack technological support, limiting their investigative capabilities. Ineffective coordination between provincial and federal authorities hinders a timely response and limited resources, substandard training, and infrastructure impede the development of safe strategies.

Impact on Families & Communities:

Families of kidnapped individuals endure psychological trauma, living in constant fear for their loved ones along with financial suffering due to high ransom demands and loss of their primary earners. In such regions, economic development suffers as businesses face challenges and residents withdraw from social and economic activities. The inability to curb kidnapping erodes trust in law enforcement and public institutions hence skilled individuals may migrate to safer regions or countries, further hindering economic progress.

Current Cases and Evaluation of Law Enforcement Response

In 2022, Sindh recorded 94 cases of extortion abduction, involving 113 kidnapped individuals. Police successfully rescued 112 victims, with 21 returned after ransom payments and 91 freed without any payment. Karachi reported the most cases, with 59 incidents and 70 victims. All abductees were safely recovered (21 with ransom and 49 without), leading to 88 arrests and 8 acquittals. In Hyderabad, all 5 arrested individuals were acquitted, while Shaheed Benazirabad and Hyderabad each reported one case, with both victims safely recovered without ransom. One notable incident involved a 6-year-old boy abducted in Karachi on June 22, 2022. The kidnappers demanded 20 million PKR but settled for 4 million. He was rescued on April 19, 2023, from District Kashmore. Although 17 individuals were acquitted out of 132 accused, these statistics highlight the effectiveness of law enforcement in Sindh, particularly in rescue operations without ransom payments.

In Punjab, ransom cases increased significantly from 62 in 2022 to 109 in 2023. In 2022, of the 232 individuals charged, 21 were acquitted, and despite 154 arrests, only three were convicted, indicating a low conviction rate. Similarly, in 2023, out of 480 accused, 38 were cleared of charges, while 226 were detained without verdicts. However, Punjab Police managed to rescue an 11-year-old kidnapped in January 2024. Supervised by the DIG and led by the SP, the team used advanced surveillance technology like hue-and-cry alerts, monitored CCTV cameras, Safe City footage, and CDRs. The boy was successfully returned without a ransom payment. In another case, a 72-year-old in Pakpattan was abducted through a "honey

trap" scheme. Working with Sindh Police, an operation employing advanced tactics led to the safe recovery of the abductee.

In 2022, Balochistan recorded 28 abduction incidents, dropping to 25 in 2023 and further reducing to just two by early 2024. Despite legal proceedings in each case, no convictions were made during this period, and acquittals rose from four in 2022 to six in 2023. Arrests increased from 93 in 2022 to 58 in 2023, and only five suspects were apprehended in 2024 so far, leading to a reduction in kidnappings. The recovery rate reflected police initiatives, with 39 abductees rescued in 2022, 26 in 2023, and two in 2024. While Balochistan's proactive case management has resulted in high retrieval rates, the rise in acquittals and lack of convictions points to gaps in judicial effectiveness. However, a troubling incident in April 2024 saw gunmen abduct nine men from a bus and later kill them, highlighting the ongoing challenges with organized violence (Reuters, 2024).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) experienced a decline in ransom-related cases from 2022 to early 2024. In 2022, 28 cases were reported, which dropped slightly to 25 in 2023 and only two cases by April 2024. Despite all cases being charged, no convictions were achieved, and acquittals increased from four in 2022 to six in 2023. The decreasing caseload in courts indicates somewhat effective legal proceedings. Positive police action resulted in a high recovery rate for victims, demonstrating successful rescue operations. However, January 2024 saw a disturbing incident in Tank district where Judge Shakirullah Marwat was kidnapped. Although no group claimed responsibility, a video from the counterterrorism department showed that the militant group abducted the judge and demanded ransom. Law enforcement

responded with an operation that killed six militants and safely rescued the judge in a joint intelligence operation. While reports suggest no ransom was paid, unverified sources claim 50 million PKR was handed over (Gul, 2024).

Comparative data for ransom cases in Islamabad reveals notable differences between 2022 and 2023. In 2022, four cases were reported involving seven accused individuals, with none acquitted. A ransom of 5.6 million PKR was paid, two cases were canceled, and two remained under trial. In 2023, six cases led to the arrest of 18 suspects, none of whom were acquitted. The total ransom paid significantly decreased to 0.15 million PKR, with one case canceled and five still under trial. The data shows an increase in reported cases and arrests in 2023, but a sharp decline in ransom payments suggests successful law enforcement efforts in disrupting the financial incentives of these crimes.

No cases of kidnapping for ransom were reported in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), or under the jurisdiction of the Railway Police and the National Highways & Motorway Police (NHMP).

Pakistan's Legal Framework

Kidnapping cases across various provinces in Pakistan paint a grim picture. However, the country's legal framework, primarily Article 365-A of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) of 1860, addresses different types of kidnapping, including kidnapping from Pakistan, kidnapping from lawful guardianship, and kidnapping with intent to murder or wrongful confinement. Penalties range from imprisonment for up to seven years and fines to life imprisonment or even capital punishment in certain cases.

Section 365-A of the PPC specifically imposes execution, life imprisonment, and property forfeiture for ransom crimes.

Supplementary legislation like the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act of 2018 further targets human trafficking and exploitation with strict punishments. Additionally, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2016 introduced stringent penalties, including the death penalty, for kidnapping children or sexual abuse. The Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997 also mandates severe penalties in cases involving militants or terrorist groups.

While Pakistan has established comprehensive laws to combat kidnapping and ransom crimes, enforcement remains challenging due to insufficient resources, corruption, and poor coordination among law enforcement agencies, significantly weakening the framework's effectiveness.

Moving Forward

While it is a serious crime, it can still be controlled through appropriate recommendations.

a. Improving Law Enforcement and Judicial Processes:

Combating kidnappings necessitates rigorous training and capacity-building for law enforcement. Establish specialized anti-abduction response squads equipped with cutting-edge resources and technology. Implement transparent vetting protocols to eliminate corrupt personnel involved in ransom schemes, and strengthen the judicial system for swift offender prosecution. Ensure the legal framework is robust and adaptable, imposing harsher penalties where required. Reinforce coordination and intelligence-

sharing between national and international law enforcement agencies, enhancing information flow to dismantle kidnapping networks and secure victims' recovery.

Implement Grassroot Prevention and Educational Initiatives:

Educational campaigns should be developed to raise awareness about kidnapping risks and mitigation strategies. Community-driven initiatives like neighborhood watch programs can promote vigilance and encourage timely reporting of suspicious behavior. Families and organizations should receive training programs on effective responses to abduction situations. Lastly, fostering collaboration between government and the private sector will enhance security strategies and facilitate the dissemination of crucial information.

b. Legislative Reforms and Innovative Strategies:

Modernize the regulatory framework on kidnapping for ransom to enhance robustness and adaptability. Strengthen legal consequences and preventive measures by establishing a national committee comprising government, civil organizations, and law enforcement. Regulate communication platforms and financial transactions to dismantle criminal networks. Ensure international collaboration to tackle transnational kidnapping and disrupt cross-border crime. Develop victim assistance and rehabilitation programs to support those affected and promote socio-economic development in vulnerable regions.

c. Negotiation and Special Response Teams:

Engage experienced negotiators to conduct secure dialogue in hostage situations,

coordinating closely with security agencies. Form specialized response teams with advanced training in conflict resolution tactics to ensure efficient management of high-risk situations. Equip these teams with cutting-edge technology and intelligence to handle a broad range of scenarios, emphasizing the safe retrieval of hostages while minimizing risks to their lives. Establish clear protocols for joint operations between negotiators, response teams, and other relevant agencies, ensuring a unified strategy throughout the crisis.

d. Geo-Fencing Technology:

Use geo-fencing technology to monitor, track, and suppress kidnappers by establishing digital boundaries and enhancing surveillance and response times. Deploy drones for aerial monitoring in remote areas prone to kidnappings. A multi-pronged approach combining advanced technology, community education, legal reforms, and specialized victim support programs will empower LEAs to tackle ransom-related kidnappings more effectively.

Additional measures recommended:

a. Pre-Kidnapping: Risk Assessments and Hotspot Mapping:

Conduct regular risk assessments and create maps of kidnapping hotspots to help law enforcement focus preventive efforts in high-risk areas. Encourage businesses, NGOs, and public institutions to design and deploy strict security protocols, including pre-employment screening for staff and secure transport policies. Establish citizen surveillance committees to supply street-level intelligence and assist law enforcement in identifying potential threats.

b. Amid Hostage Situation: Crisis Response Plans:

Ensure institutions and organizations have comprehensive crisis response plans in place, with clear guidelines for communication, negotiation, and coordination with law enforcement. Establish support systems that provide families with legal advice, counseling, and information to help them navigate the complexities of dealing with a kidnapping. Form rapid response units that can be deployed quickly in emergencies to handle rescue operations, negotiations, and coordination.

c. Post-Kidnapping: Victim Rehabilitation:

Develop comprehensive rehabilitation programs that provide psychological, financial, and social support to help victims reintegrate into society. Conduct thorough follow-up investigations to identify and dismantle kidnapping networks and ensure perpetrators

are prosecuted. Implement public awareness campaigns highlighting the importance of reporting crimes and supporting victims, which can promote a more supportive and vigilant society.

Conclusion

Kidnapping for ransom in Pakistan threatens national security and stability. Even though existing legal frameworks aim to address this issue, enforcement challenges and militant activities have aggravated the situation. Stronger law enforcement is crucial, as are preventive measures, legislative reforms, and inter provincial and international cooperation.

After-action reviews are essential for identifying lessons learned and refining ongoing counter-strategies following kidnapping cases. To create a secure environment for all, it is imperative to address root causes and implement proactive economic and psychological reforms.

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Dr. Syed Kaleem Imam is a former civil servant, known for his extensive contributions in law enforcement, academics, and organizational development. He has a PhD in Politics and

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He held the position of Inspector General of Police (IGP) in several regions such as Punjab, Islamabad, and Sindh, further serving twice on the National Highways and Motorways. As the Federal Secretary of the Narcotics Control Ministry, he played a key role in formulating national policies that harmonized with international strategies.

He has been the Chief of Operations in Mozambique, Planning Coordinator in Liberia, and UN Police Commissioner in Darfur, Sudan. His service was honored with three UN peace medals, the Quaid Azam Police Medal, the President's Police Medal, and the Sitara Imtiaz and Tamagha-i-Imtiaz.

Moreover, Imam has been instrumental in shaping academic discourse through his numerous national and international publications to his credit and frequently participating in public forums, training institutes, and media outlets. Besides being a security analyst, he is also a law and governance consultant, a strategist, and a policy practitioner.



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