

SCAN POLICY BRIEF



Irregular migrants from the Horn of Africa with European sponsors¹ kidnapped for ransom and held in the Sinai

Based on data provided by national law enforcement authorities it is clear that individuals of Eritrean origin living in Sweden and at least two other European countries have been extorted as sponsors for Eritrean kidnapping victims held hostage in the Sinai Peninsula. The extortion operations in these cases were run by Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) of Bedouin origin exploiting irregular migrants who had been kidnapped in Eritrea and Sudan by OCGs of Rashaida origin. The hostages were held in prison camps, where they were subjected to extreme forms of violence and torture for the purpose of securing ransom payments from their European sponsors.

In recognising that the reported cases are part of a wider threat – namely, the kidnapping of individuals from Eritrea and, to a lesser extent, Ethiopia and Sudan for the extortion of ransoms from sponsors in countries of origin and Diaspora communities in the Western world –, effective law enforcement responses will require a dual focus on activities in impact regions and in the Sinai, from where these extortion operations are run.

Key Findings and recommendations:

- While the number of cases recorded by law enforcement authorities in Europe is thus far rather low, the real figure for the extortion of European sponsors for hostages in the Sinai may be considerably higher. Building on the growing public awareness, tailored campaigns encouraging affected individuals to come forward should aim to reduce the fear of reprisals, which is currently cited as the principal obstacle to the reporting of extortions.
- In Europe, agents of legitimate money transfer services have been approached by middlemen from Gaza, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon in order to facilitate the transfer of ransom payments. Public private partnerships with financial service providers that facilitate transfers to Africa and the Middle East could provide an additional source of data to identify unreported extortion cases.
- In multiple cases, sponsors have been extorted by cash handlers that are based in Europe and working for Bedouin OCGs running the prison camps in the Sinai Peninsula. In response to an increase in cases that are reported to national competent authorities in Europe, the centralised analysis of this data at Europol would enable the detection of cross-border links between different cash handlers operating in Europe. It should be recalled that within the framework of the Task Force Mediterranean, the responsible national authorities of the affected Member States are encouraged to systematically make available relevant information, including personal data, to Europol for the purpose of supporting the fight against facilitators.
- The extortion operations impacting on Europe are run by Bedouin OCGs from prison camps in the Sinai. Aside from providing a single point of contact for national investigations in Europe, the deployment of a project aimed at improving the security sector of Egypt such as project 'Interpol RELINC in Libya' would facilitate the initiation of local investigations on the basis of cases identified in Europe.
- Recent concerns related to the geographical expansion of this threat to Libya should be investigated in the framework of Interpol's existing Project RELINC in Libya. Aside from supporting local authorities to combat this threat, Interpol's findings could be used by Frontex and EASO in providing dedicated support to Libya in migration management.

¹For the purpose of this report, the term 'European sponsors' refers to individuals living in Europe who have been subjected to ransom demands for kidnapping victims held in the Sinai, including both relatives and non-relatives of the victims.

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Intermediaries in Europe used for the transfer of ransom payments to the Sinai

In those cases made known to law enforcement, ransoms extorted from European sponsors have ranged from €4.400 to €25.700. In most cases, the extortion processes involved multiple negotiation steps and sequential increases in the ransom amount, whereby separate payments were made to multiple cash handlers used by Bedouin OCGs in locations inside and outside of Europe. In one case, the initial payment of €9.000 during a face-to-face handover in Eritrea was followed by an additional payment of €5.200 to a cash handler in Israel. European agents of legitimate money transfer services have also been contacted by suspects through mobile phone calls from Gaza, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon with instructions for contacting sponsors and organising financial transfers. However, on being notified of the payment conditions by the sponsors, these agents refused to facilitate the transfers.

The involvement of cash handlers based in Europe that directly contact sponsors with ransom demands on behalf of the Bedouin OCGs has been recorded in several cases. For instance, a sponsor located in Sweden was contacted by two Swedish-speaking suspects on local mobile phone numbers demanding €24.000 for a victim being held in the Sinai. Threatening that non-compliance would result in the victim's death and sale of the victim's organs, the suspects attempted to arrange face-to-face meetings in Sweden for the handover of ransom payments. Subsequently, the sponsor was sent regular threat messages via SMS and presented with a shortened deadline on the premise of planned trips by the suspects to Egypt to deliver the ransom in cash. On being requested for proof-of-life, one of the suspects stated that he was able to confirm the victim was still alive; although no contact would be facilitated between the sponsor and the victim until the ransom was paid. In this case, the victim was killed and the transaction was not completed. In another case, payment of the initial ransom amount in a face-to-face meeting with a cash handler in Egypt was directly followed by a phone call to the European sponsor from a suspect based in Sweden who demanded an additional payment.

Transportation of kidnapping victims to prison camps in the Sinai Peninsula

In the reported cases involving the extortion of European sponsors, the victims were kidnapped in Eritrea or Sudan. For instance, one group of irregular migrants was abducted by a Rashaida OCG after they crossed the Eritrean-Sudanese border. The group was taken by car into the desert, where they were held in a temporary camp for several days (i.e., chained together under shrubs). Following the arrival of more victims, the group was driven to the coast and transported by boat to the Sinai. On arrival, the victims were taken to a prison camp run by a Bedouin OCG in which others were already being held as hostages.

In the Sinai, the victims were held as hostages in houses that had been modified for use as prison camps and the application of torture (e.g. ceiling hooks to suspend victims by their hands). The hostages were provided with phones on which to call sponsors and request the payment for their release. Hostages with sponsors in Western countries (e.g. in Europe) were segregated and subjected to particularly severe forms of violence, including the application of torture during the phone calls with their sponsors. The threat of being killed and organs (e.g. kidneys) being removed illegally and sold was a common feature in the cases recorded by law enforcement. Although the hostages were released in some of the cases involving European sponsors, ransoms have also been paid for victims who were subsequently killed or are currently reported missing (feared dead).

The abduction of individuals from Shagarab refugee camp (Sudan) was also reported by an irregular migrant of Eritrean origin within the framework of a Frontex joint operation. The migrant stated that, during his stay in the camp, he was repeatedly approached by members of the Rashaida offering to smuggle him to another country for a very low price. However, the offers were rejected on the grounds that irregular migrants who trusted these smugglers subsequently found themselves trapped as hostages in the Sinai. While the information provided on activities in the Sinai was concurrent with the cases recorded in Europe, the transportation of victims in these cases was reportedly carried out by road with the additional involvement of suspects of Egyptian origin.