

By Scott Stewart

Looking at the world from a protective-intelligence perspective, the theme for the past week has not been improvised explosive devices or potential mass-casualty attacks. While there have been suicide bombings in Afghanistan, alleged threats to the World Cup and seemingly endless post-mortem discussions of the failed May 1 Times Square attack, one recurring and under-reported theme in a number of regions around the world has been kidnapping.

For example, in Heidenheim, Germany, Maria Boegerl, the wife of German banker Thomas Boegerl, was reportedly kidnapped from her home May 12. The kidnappers issued a ransom demand to the family and an amount was agreed upon. Mr. Boegerl placed the ransom payment at the arranged location, but the kidnappers never picked up the money (perhaps suspecting or detecting police involvement). The family has lost contact with the kidnappers, and fear for Mrs. Boegerl's fate has caused German authorities to launch a massive search operation, which has included hundreds of searchers along with dogs, helicopters and divers.

Two days after the Boegerl kidnapping, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) posted a message on the Internet claiming to have custody of French citizen Michel Germaneau, a retired engineer who had previously worked in Algeria's petroleum sector. Germaneau was reportedly kidnapped April 22, in northern Niger, close to the border with Mali and Algeria. The AQIM video contained a photo of Germaneau and of his identification card. The group demanded a prisoner exchange and said that French President Nicolas Sarkozy would be responsible for the captive's well-being.

Also on May 14, Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, a high-profile attorney and former presidential candidate, was kidnapped near his ranch in the Mexican state of Queretaro. Fernandez had left his home in Mexico City to drive to his ranch but never arrived. His vehicle was found abandoned near the ranch on Saturday morning and the vehicle reportedly showed signs of a struggle. It is not known who kidnapped Fernandez or what the motivation for the kidnapping was.

At the moment a kidnapping occurs, the abduction team usually has achieved tactical surprise and usually employs overwhelming force. To the previously unsuspecting victim, the abductors seemingly appear out of nowhere. But when examined carefully, kidnappings are, for the most part, the result of a long and carefully orchestrated process. They do not arise from a vacuum. There are almost always some indications or warnings that the process is in motion prior to the actual abduction, meaning that many kidnappings are avoidable. In light of this reality, let's take a more detailed look at the phenomenon of kidnappings.

Types of Kidnappings

There are many different types of kidnappings. Although kidnappings for ransom and political

kidnappings generate considerable news interest, most kidnappings have nothing to do with money or political statements. They are typically kidnappings conducted by family members in custody disputes, emotionally disturbed strangers wanting to take a child to raise or strangers who abduct a victim for sexual exploitation.

Even in financially motivated kidnappings, there are a number of different types. The stereotypical kidnapping of a high-value target comes most readily to mind, but there are also more spur-of-the-moment express kidnappings, where a person is held until his bank account can be drained using an ATM card, and even virtual kidnappings, where no kidnapping occurs at all but the victim is frightened by a claim that a loved one has been kidnapped and pays a ransom to the alleged abductors. Some of the piracy incidents in Somalia also move into the economic kidnapping realm, especially in cases where the crew or passengers are seen as being more valuable than the boat or its cargo.

Since kidnapping is such a broad topic, for the sake of this discussion, we will focus primarily on kidnappings that are financially motivated and those that are politically motivated. Financially motivated kidnappings can be conducted by a variety of criminal elements. At the highest level are highly trained professional kidnapping gangs that specialize in abducting high-net-worth individuals and who will frequently demand ransoms in the millions of dollars. Such groups often employ teams of specialists who carry out a variety of specific tasks such as collecting intelligence, conducting surveillance, snatching the target, negotiating with the victim's family and establishing and guarding the safe-houses.

At the other end of the spectrum are gangs that randomly kidnap targets of opportunity. These gangs are generally far less skilled than the professional gangs and often will hold a victim for only a short time, as in an express kidnapping. Sometimes express kidnapping victims are held in the trunk of a car for the duration of their ordeal, which can sometimes last for days if the victim has a large amount in a checking account and a small daily ATM withdrawal limit. Other times, if an express kidnapping gang discovers it has grabbed a high-value target by accident, the gang will hold the victim longer and demand a much higher ransom. Occasionally, these express kidnapping groups will even "sell" a high-value victim to a more professional kidnapping gang. (On a side note, most express kidnapping victims tend to be male and are most frequently abducted while walking on the street after dark, and many have impaired their senses by consuming alcohol.)

In the United States, it is far more common for a relatively poor person to be kidnapped for financial motives than it is for a high-net-worth individual. This is because kidnapping groups frequently target groups of illegal immigrants, who they believe are far less likely to seek help from the authorities. In some cases, the police have found dozens of immigrant hostages being held in safe-houses.

Between the two extremes of kidnapping groups — those targeting the rich and those targeting the poor — there is a wide range of kidnapping gangs that might target a bank vice president or branch manager rather than the bank's CEO, or that might kidnap the owner of a restaurant or other small business rather than an industrialist.

In the realm of political kidnappings, there are abductions that are very well-planned, such as the December 1981 kidnapping of Gen. James Dozier by the Italian Red Brigades, or Hezbollah's March 1985 kidnapping of journalist Terry Anderson. However, there are also opportunistic cases of politically motivated kidnappings, such as when foreigners are abducted at a Taliban checkpoint in Afghanistan or AQIM militants grab a European tourist in the Sahel area of Africa. Of course, in the case of both the Taliban and AQIM, the groups see kidnapping as an important source of funding as well as a politically useful tool.

Understanding the Process

In deliberate (as opposed to opportunistic) kidnappings based on financial or political motives, the kidnapers generally follow a process that is very similar to what we call the terrorist attack cycle: target selection, planning, deployment, attack, escape and exploitation. In a kidnapping, this means the group must identify a victim; plan for the abduction, captivity and negotiation; conduct the abduction and secure the hostage; successfully leverage the life of the victim for financial or political gain; and then escape.

During some phases of this process, the kidnapers may not be visible to the target, but there are several points during the process when the kidnapers are forced to expose themselves to detection in order to accomplish their mission. Like the perpetrators of a terrorist attack, those planning a kidnapping are most vulnerable to detection while they are conducting surveillance — before they are ready to deploy and conduct their attack. As we have noted several times in past analyses, one of the secrets of countersurveillance is that most criminals are not very good at conducting surveillance. The primary reason they succeed is that no one is looking for them.

Of course, kidnapers are also very easy to spot once they launch their attack, pull their weapons and perhaps even begin to shoot. By this time, however, it might very well be too late to escape their attack. They will have selected their attack site and employed the forces they believe they need to overpower their victim and complete the operation. While the kidnapers could botch their operation and the target could escape unscathed, it is simply not practical to pin one's hopes on that possibility. It is clearly better to spot the kidnapers early and avoid their trap before it is sprung and the guns come out.

Kidnapers, like other criminals, look for patterns and vulnerabilities that they can exploit. Their chances for success increase greatly if they are allowed to conduct surveillance at will and are given the opportunity to thoroughly assess the security measures (if any) employed by the target. We have seen several cases in Mexico in which the criminals even chose to attack despite security measures such as armoured cars and armed security guards. In such cases, criminals attack with adequate resources to overcome existing security. For example, if there are protective agents, the attackers will plan to neutralize them first. If there is an armoured vehicle, they will find ways to defeat the armour or grab the target when he or she is outside the vehicle. Because of this, criminals must not be allowed to conduct surveillance at will. Potential targets should practice a heightened but relaxed state of situational awareness that will help them spot hostile surveillance.

Potential targets should also conduct simple pattern and route analyses to determine where they are most predictable and vulnerable. Taking an objective look at your schedule and routes is really not as complicated as it may seem. While the ideal is to vary routes and times to avoid predictable locations, this is also difficult and disruptive and warranted only when the threat is extremely high. A more practical alternative is for potential targets to raise their situational awareness a notch as they travel through such areas at predictable times.

Of course, using the term "potential targets" points to another problem. Many kidnapping victims simply don't believe they are potential targets until after they have been kidnapped, and therefore do not take commonsense security measures. Frequently, when such people are debriefed after their release from captivity, they are able to recall suspicious activity before their abduction that they did not take seriously because they did not consider themselves targets. One American businessman who was kidnapped in Central America said upon his release that he knew there was something odd about the behaviour of a particular couple he saw frequently sitting on a park bench near his home prior to his kidnapping, but he didn't think he was rich enough to be targeted for kidnapping. As soon as he was abducted, he said that he immediately knew that the awkward couple had been observing him to determine his pattern. He said that he often thought about that couple during his two months in captivity, and how a little bit of curiosity could have saved him from a terrifying ordeal and his family a substantial sum of money.

The same steps involved in a deliberate kidnapping are also followed in ad hoc, opportunistic kidnappings — though the steps may be condensed and accomplished in seconds or minutes rather than the weeks or months normally associated with a well-planned kidnapping operation. And the same problems with lack of awareness often apply. It is not uncommon to talk to someone who was involved in an express kidnapping and hear the person say, "I got a bad feeling about those three guys standing near that car when I started walking down that block, but I kept walking anyway." This frequent occurrence highlights the importance of situational awareness, attack recognition and proper mindset maintenance.

Potential targets do not have to institute security measures that will make them invulnerable to such crimes — something that is very difficult and that can be very expensive. Rather, the objective is to take measures that make them a harder target than other members of the specific class of individuals to which they belong. Groups conducting pre-operational surveillance, whether for an intentional kidnapping or an opportunistic kidnapping, prefer a target that is unaware and easy prey. Taking some basic security measures such as maintaining a healthy state of situational awareness will, in many cases, cause the criminals to choose another target who is less aware and therefore more vulnerable.

Also, most people who are kidnapped in places like Afghanistan or the Sahel know they are going into dangerous places and disregard the warnings not to go to those places. Many of these people, like journalists and aid workers, take the risk as part of their jobs. Others, like the European tourists abducted in the Sahel (and some of the pleasure boaters kidnapped by Somali pirates), appear to naively disregard the risk or to be thrill-seekers. In the recent Germaneau case in Niger, due to the number of highly publicized kidnappings in the Sahel region over the past eight years, and Germaneau's personal history of working in Algeria, it

would be hard to argue that he did not know what he could be getting himself into (though we are unsure at this point what motivated him to run that risk). After Germaneau's kidnapping, his driver was subsequently arrested, raising the possibility that he was somehow complicit in the abduction. This is a reminder that it is not at all unusual for kidnapping gangs to have inside help, whether a maid, bodyguard, interpreter or taxi driver.

In retrospect, almost every person who is kidnapped either missed or ignored some indication or warning of danger. These warnings can range from observable criminal behaviour to a consular information bulletin specifically warning people not to drive outside of cities in Guatemala after dark, for example. This means that, while kidnapping can be a devastating crime, it can also be an avoidable one.

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