Hostage Aid Worldwide

Global Hostage Report 2023

Analytical Insights and Key Findings from the Year that Changed Everything

PRESENTED BY
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A Global Voice for Hostages

Hostage Aid Worldwide

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Hostage Aid Worldwide

President's Message

In 2023, our world faced unprecedented challenges, and the data within this report is a testament to the critical work our organization has undertaken. I am honored to share with you Hostage Aid Worldwide's Global Hostage Report 2023 – a groundbreaking compilation that not only sheds light on the data and analytics of hostage and unlawfully detained situations but also propels our collective efforts toward a more informed and resilient future. Our vision at Hostage Aid has always been to not only respond to crises but to preemptively address the root causes and consequences of hostage situations with new data-driven tools and platforms. The 2023 report signifies our dedication to this vision, providing a foundation upon which we can collectively build a safer and more secure future.

As we navigate the complexities of our world, let this report be a catalyst for change. Let us utilize these findings to strengthen our partnerships, engage with communities, and advocate for policies that promote safety and resilience. Together, we can make strides toward a world where the threat of hostage situations is minimized, and the path to recovery is swift and supported.

As 2024 begins, help us continue being the independent and free voice of hostages around the world. It is through your support that we continue to evolve and innovate, ensuring that no hostage or their family faces these challenges alone.

With gratitude,

N. Zakka

Nizar Zakka
President, Hostage Aid Worldwide

Hostage Aid Worldwide

Hostage Aid's Mission

Hostage Aid Worldwide is an independent and free non-profit NGO 501(c)(3) that serves as a global voice for hostages and unlawfully detained.

Hostage Aid was established in September 2020 by a group of former hostages from around the world, families of hostages, and subject matter experts, all of whom, based on their different personal experiences as well as suffering have banded together to fight for the release of hostages globally while aiming to prevent this inhumane act of hostage taking from occurring against other innocent people.

Hostage Aid complements the great work that is being carried out by other organizations that help and advocate for hostages in addition to providing humanitarian relief and support to current and former hostages who were unlawfully detained. Since its establishment, 95% of its funding is from its Board of Directors with less than 5% from different private donors and no funding whatsoever from any government.

Please Note: The term hostage/unlawfully detained as used by Hostage Aid refers only to civilians (dual or foreign nationals) taken hostage in another country. This excludes any active military and combat persons. Hostages/unlawful detainees with a single nationality abducted in their own country are not included.

Meeting with families outside the White House

Welcoming Mr. Tomeu Vadell and his family on May 4 after his release from captivity in Venezuela

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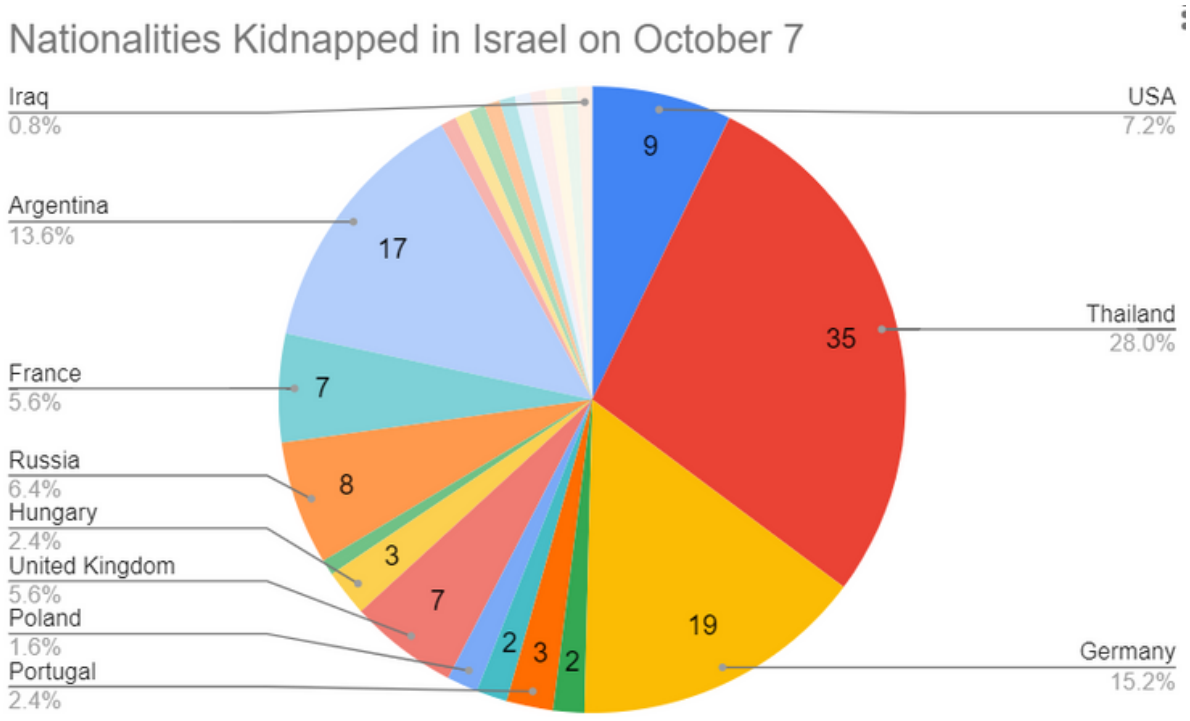
2023 Key Events (Israel)

Year 2023 was the most drastically eventful year for hostages and unlawfully detained persons globally since 1979, the most significant event being the Hamas attack on Israel. On October 7, Hamas militants and other Palestinian militant factions abducted around 125 foreigners and dual nationals from more than 20 different countries, to the Gaza Strip.

Billboard on Azrieli Center in Tel Aviv calling for the return of hostages. (AP Photo)

Since then, 76 foreigners & dual nationals have been released, most during a one-week truce from November 24 till November 30.

This number included 23 Thai citizens, one Filipino and one dual Israeli-Russian citizen who were freed as part of separate negotiations.



Nationalities kidnapped in Israel on October 7 in addition to Israelis.
Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

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2023 Key Events (Iran and Venezuela)

Two additional major events for hostages and unlawfully detained occurred in 2023.

Iran (September 2023)
In September, the United States and Iran negotiated a deal to release five American hostages and unlawfully detained. All five were freed in exchange for five Iranians in U.S. custody, and an agreement by U.S. President Joe Biden to unfreeze $5.9-billion in Iranian assets.

Venezuela (December 2023)
On December 20, the Biden administration announced the release of 10 Americans who had been detained in Venezuela. The deal also included the release of 20 political prisoners and a fugitive wanted by the U.S.. In exchange, the U.S. released a close ally of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro who is accused of bribery and money laundering.

Siamak Namazi, who was released during a prisoner swap deal between U.S. and Iran, arrives at Doha International Airport in Qatar. (Mohammed Dabbous/Reuters)

Americans formerly held in Venezuela arrive in San Antonio, Texas after their leaving Venezuela

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Visualizing Hostage Data

In 2023, Hostage Aid launched two new data-driven platforms to better understand hostage and unlawfully detained cases around the world back to 1975. These platforms are the Hostage Metrics Engine and the Hostage Risk Checker.

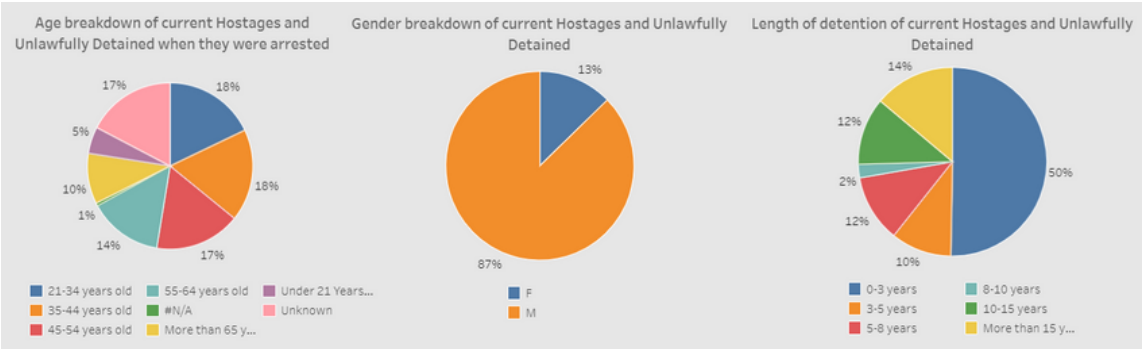
Hostage Aid has built the Hostage Metrics Engine over the past 2 years. It represents the largest database of known unlawfully detained and hostage cases globally since 1975. This unique database provides very interesting insights about the issue of hostage diplomacy and political hostage taking. The Hostage Aid team, which includes academics (university professors and graduate students), data scientists, and predictive modeling experts, is currently working on developing predictive models using this database.

Hostage Aid will be sharing insights on a regular basis through it's weekly reports. Subscribe at https://hostageaid.org/daily-news-brief/.

The goals of this data analysis and these visualizations are threefold:

1. To disrupt the hostage business model by providing data.
2. To offer tools and data to families and governments, enabling a scientific understanding of outcomes to aid loved ones and citizens.
3. To provide accurate risk assessments for individuals and companies operating globally.

Hostage Aid would also like to thank Georgetown University and their Graduate School on Statistical Data for their time and assistance with these platforms.



Screenshots of the Hostage Metrics Engine

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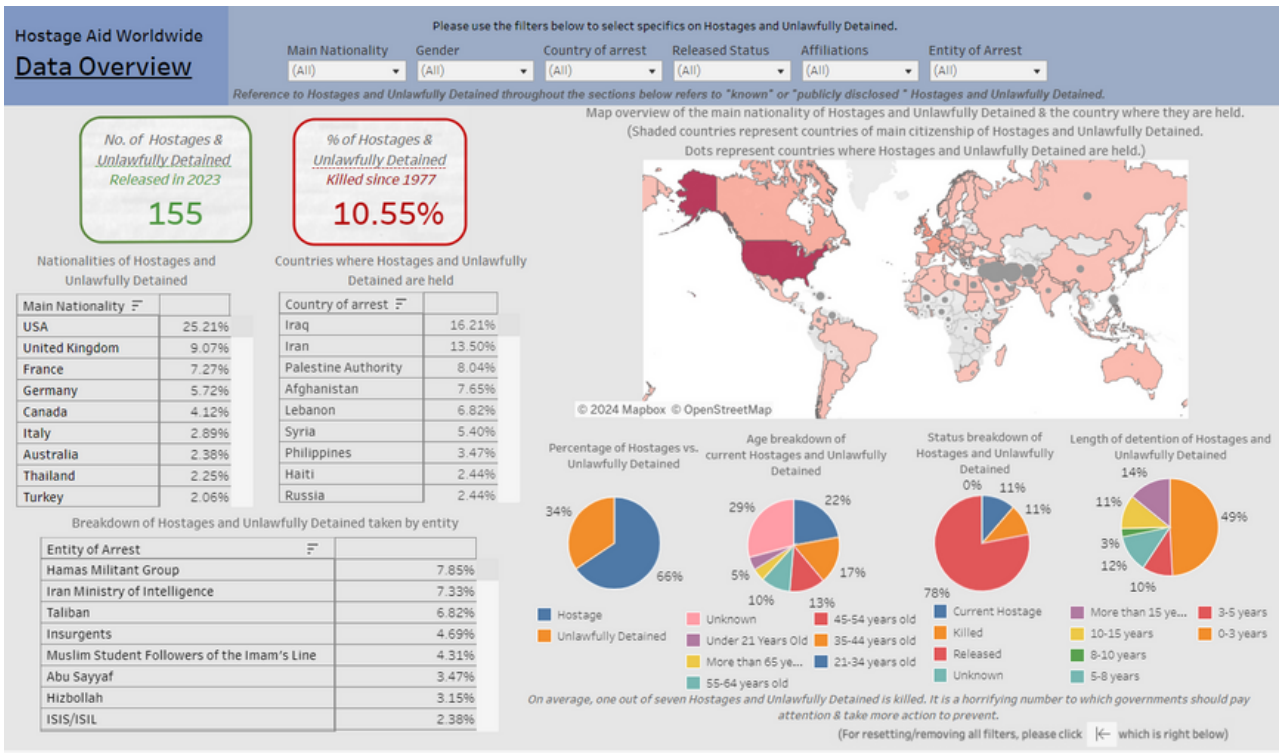
Hostage Metrics Engine

The Hostage Metrics Engine is a data platform designed to collect previous and current hostage and unlawfully detained cases along with dozens of parameters around each case.

Hostage Aid analyzed thousands of cases to collect the most accurate data available along with tens of thousands of data points. This data is then combined with deep analytical tools to understand patterns, correlations, and trends over time across a range of metrics including nationality, age, occupation, state and non-state perpetrators, and release metrics.

Hostages and unlawfully detained are counted if they are arrested or kidnapped outside of the country of their nationality. The platform can be found in the HAW mobile app and its website: https://hostageaid.org/hostage-metrics-engine/



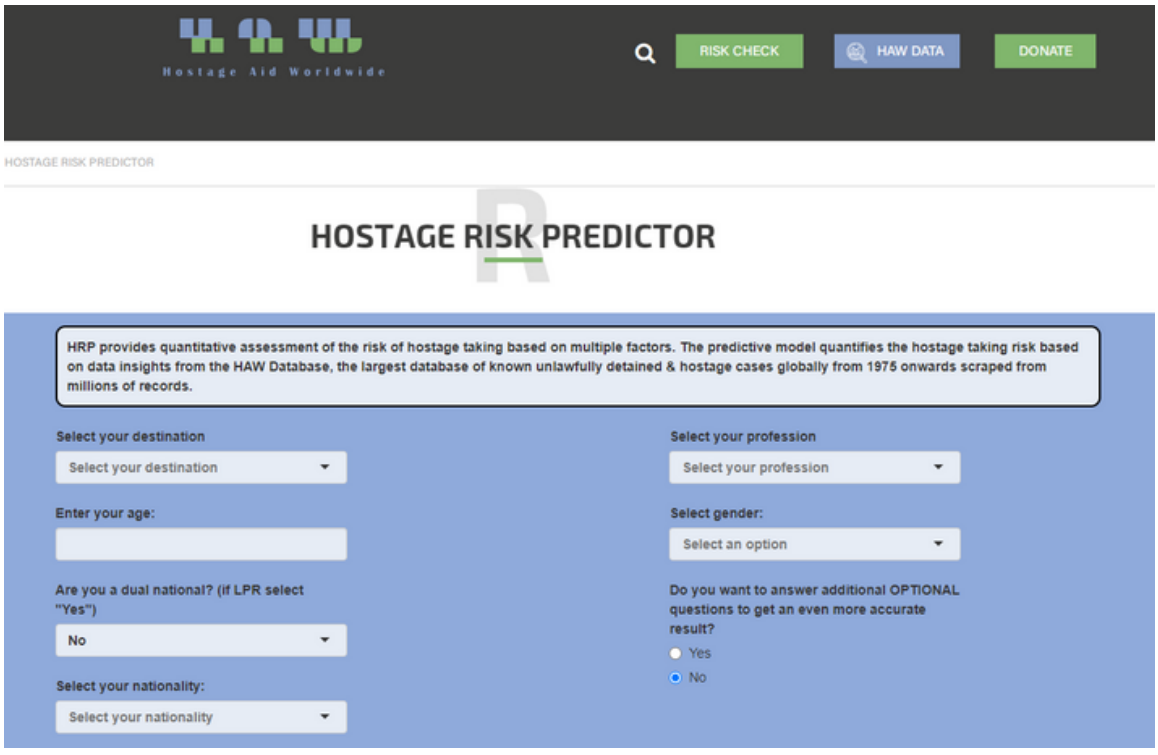
Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

Hostage Risk Predictor

Hostage Aid developed a second new platform in 2023 called the Hostage Risk Predictor. The Hostage Risk Predictor provides a quantitative assessment of the risk of hostage taking based on multiple factors. The predictive model quantifies the hostage taking risk based on data insights from the Hostage Metrics Engine Database, the largest database of known unlawfully detained and hostage cases globally from 1975 onwards scraped from millions of records.

The Hostage Risk Predictor was developed to provide people with free tools to better understand their risk of being taken hostage or unlawfully detained before they travel. The platform analyzes parameters like destination, nationality or dual-nationality, age, and profession to provide a composite risk score along with an explanation of the factors most impacting the score.

The platform can be found in the HAW mobile app and its website: https://hostageaid.org/hostage-risk-predictor/



Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

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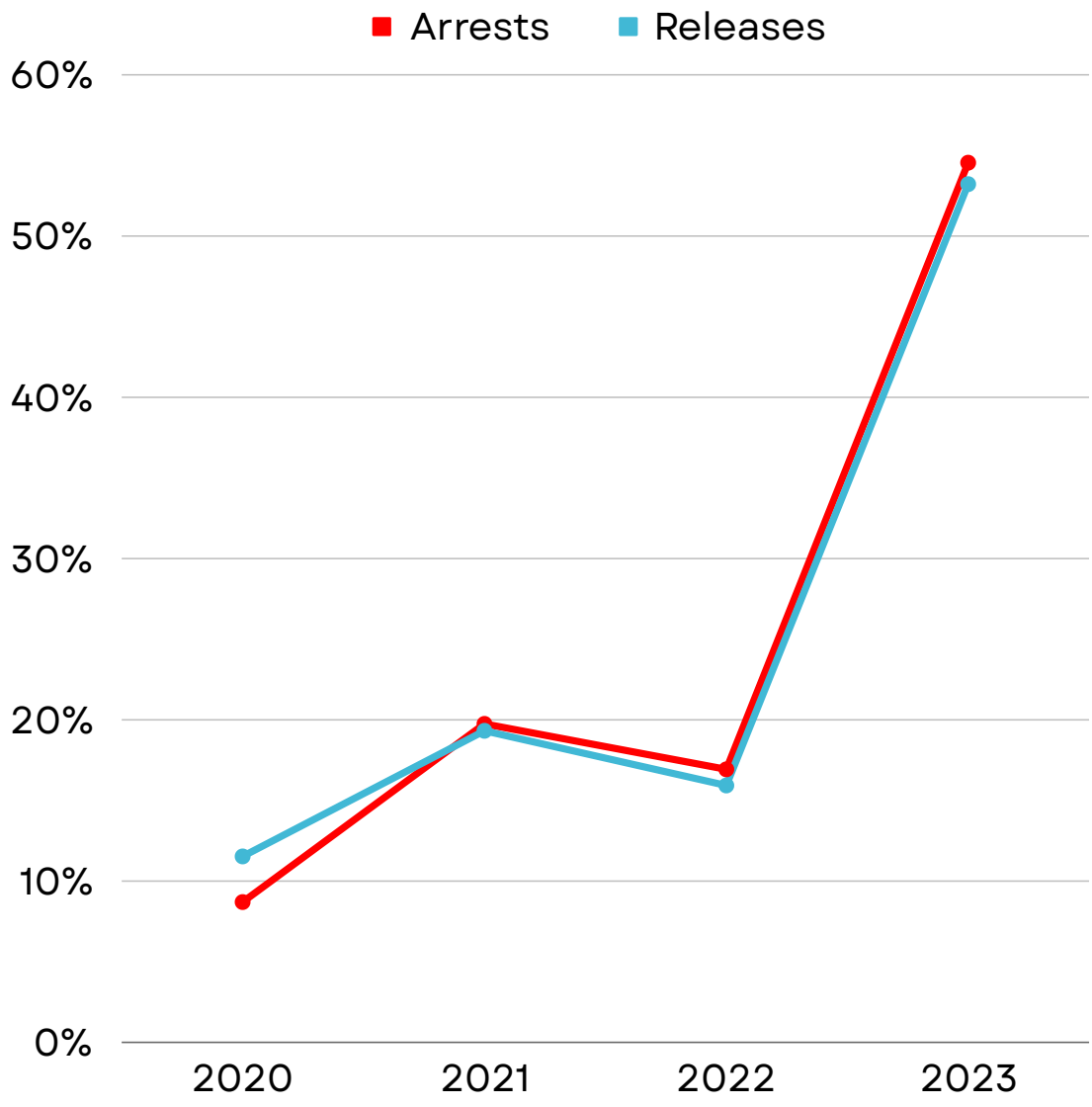
2023 Data Review

In 2023, the situation in Israel and Gaza obviously factored heavily into any data analysis of hostages. Compared with 2022, 2023 saw a 322% increase in arrests and kidnappings of hostages and unlawfully detained with Israel and Gaza representing over 70% of these cases. Without these cases, the world would have seen a 27% decrease in hostages and unlawfully detained for the year.



Arrest and Release Trends from 2020-2023
Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

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2023 Data Review (Arrests)

In 2023, the vast majority of arrests and kidnappings in 2023 took place by the Hamas militant group which represented over 70% of the records. Afghanistan and Libya were tied for second (4.02%) with Iran coming in third (3.45%). Worker was the top occupation taken hostage or unlawfully detained in 2023 at 24.71% of cases followed by Student (22.41%) and Unknown represent 15.52% of cases at the end of 2023.

Top Arresting Countries in 2023		
Country of Arrest	**Affiliation**	**Totals**
Palestine Authority	Non-State **% of 2023 Total**	70.11% **70.11%**
Libya	Non-State State **% of 2023 Total**	3.45% 0.57% **4.02%**
Afghanistan	State **% of 2023 Total**	4.02% **4.02%**
Iran	State **% of 2023 Total**	3.45% **3.45%**
Malaysia	Unknown **% of 2023 Total**	2.87% **2.87%**
Haiti	Non-State **% of 2023 Total**	2.30% **2.30%**

Top Occupations of Hostages and Unlawfully Detained in 2023	
Occupation	**Totals**
Worker	24.71%
Student	22.41%
Unknown	15.52%
Journalist/ Media	5.17%
Tourist	5.17%
Academic/ Author/ Professor	3.45%
Medical	3.45%

Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

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2023 Data Review (Releases)

In 2023, there were several significant releases globally. The majority of the releases were either via Ransom/Swap (43%) or Negotiated release (38%) followed by On Bail (7%) and Humanitarian Grounds (5%). Top nationalities released in 2023 were the United States (21.66%) followed by Thailand (16.56%), Germany (10.83%), France (6.37%), Argentina (5.73%), and the United Kingdom (4.46%).

Natthaporn Onkaew arrives home in Thailand on December 1, 2023 after being held hostage in Gaza. Photo by REUTERS/Chalinee Thirasupa

Types of Releases in 2023	
Ransom/Swap	43%
Negotiated	38%
On Bail	7%
Humanitarian Grounds	5%

Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

Top Releases by Nationality in 2023	
USA	21.66%
Thailand	16.56%
Germany	10.83%
France	6.37%
Argentina	5.73%
United Kingdom	4.46%

Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

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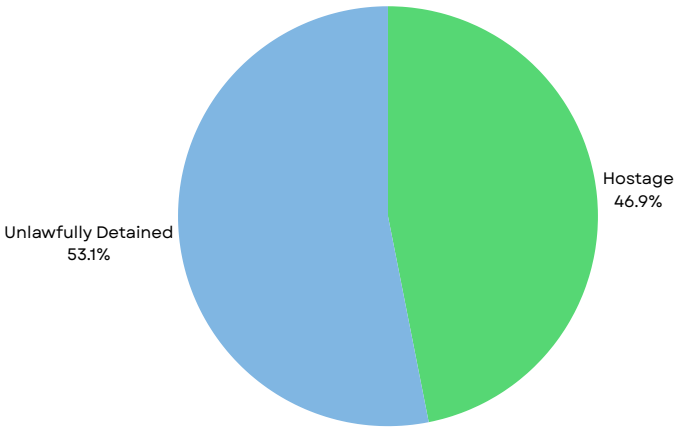
Current Hostage Statistics

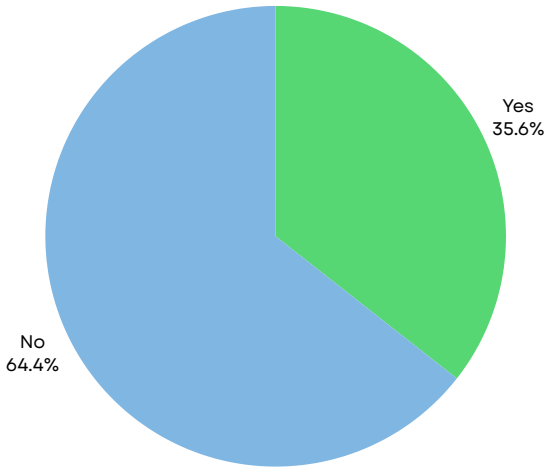
At the end of 2023 there were 53 nationalities including lawful permanent residents (LPRs) held hostage or unlawfully detained around the world. U.S. citizens including LPRs represented 18.89% of current cases followed by the United Kingdom (8.89%), France (7.78%), Germany (5.56%), and Thailand (5.00%). Here are some basic statistics on the current hostages and unlawfully detained by nationality, dual nationality, and status.

Current Hostages by Nationality	
USA + U.S. LPR	18.89%
United Kingdom	8.89%
France	7.78%
Germany	5.56%
Argentina	5.00%
Thailand	5.00%
Lebanon	3.33%
Canada	3.33%
Italy	2.78%
Myanmar	2.78%

Status



Dual-National?



Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

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Country Comparisons

We will now compare statistics on the main Western countries for hostages and unlawfully detained cases: the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Citizens of these countries are kidnapped in high numbers since the 1970s. Examining the data, we find that France has seen better outcomes historically than the United States and the United Kingdom.

For detentions, nearly 7 in 10 citizens of the United Kingdom who are taken hostage or unlawfully detained are held for more than 3 years while less than 3 in 10 citizens from France are held for more than 3 years (see Figure 1).

French hostage journalist Olivier Dubois, who was held hostage in Mali for nearly two years, arrives home to France on March 21, 2023.
(Photo by Agence France-Presse)

% of Detentions Over 3 Years in Duration 1979-2023	
United Kingdom	69%
USA	58%
France	27%

Figure 1

This trend continues for the percentages of hostages and unlawfully detained who are killed. 14.6% of hostages and unlawfully detained from the United Kingdom are killed while less than half of that amount are killed in French cases (See Figure 2). The statistics on numbers killed need a deeper study to better understand the approaches that resulted in this different outcome between countries.

% of Hostages Killed 1979-2023	
United Kingdom	14.6%
USA	8.2%
France	6.3%

Figure 2

Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

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Arrest Statistics

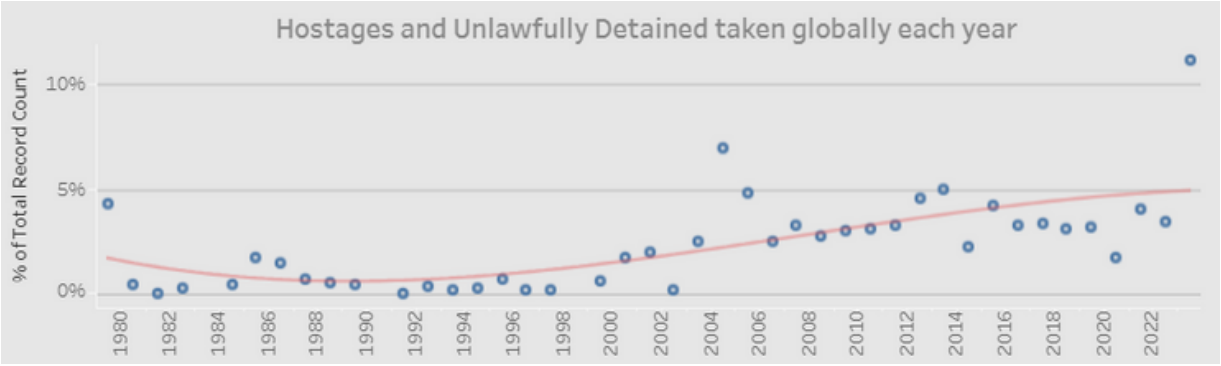
Overall trends (1979 - 2023)

During the last few decades, the practice of hostage-taking and illegal detention has undergone a transformation, spurred by geopolitical shifts, technological advancements, and changes in global security dynamics. Although it's crucial to acknowledge that trends can vary substantially based on the location and specific context, here are some general trends that have emerged from the 1970s to the present day:

Blindfolded American hostage surrounded by captors outside the U.S. embassy in Tehrān, November 9, 1979. (Photo MPI–Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Political Motivations and Terrorism (1970s-1980s): The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a significant number of hostage incidents driven by political motivations. Terrorist organizations, such as the Red Brigades in Italy, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and various Palestinian groups, were responsible for numerous high-profile hostage takings during this period.

State-Sponsored Hostage-Taking (1979-1990s): Some states engaged in hostage-taking for political leverage during regional conflicts. The Iran hostage crisis (1979-1981) and the taking of hostages by Iranian proxy Hezbollah during the Lebanese Civil War are examples of state-sponsored actions.



Arrest and kidnapping trends 1979 - 2023
Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

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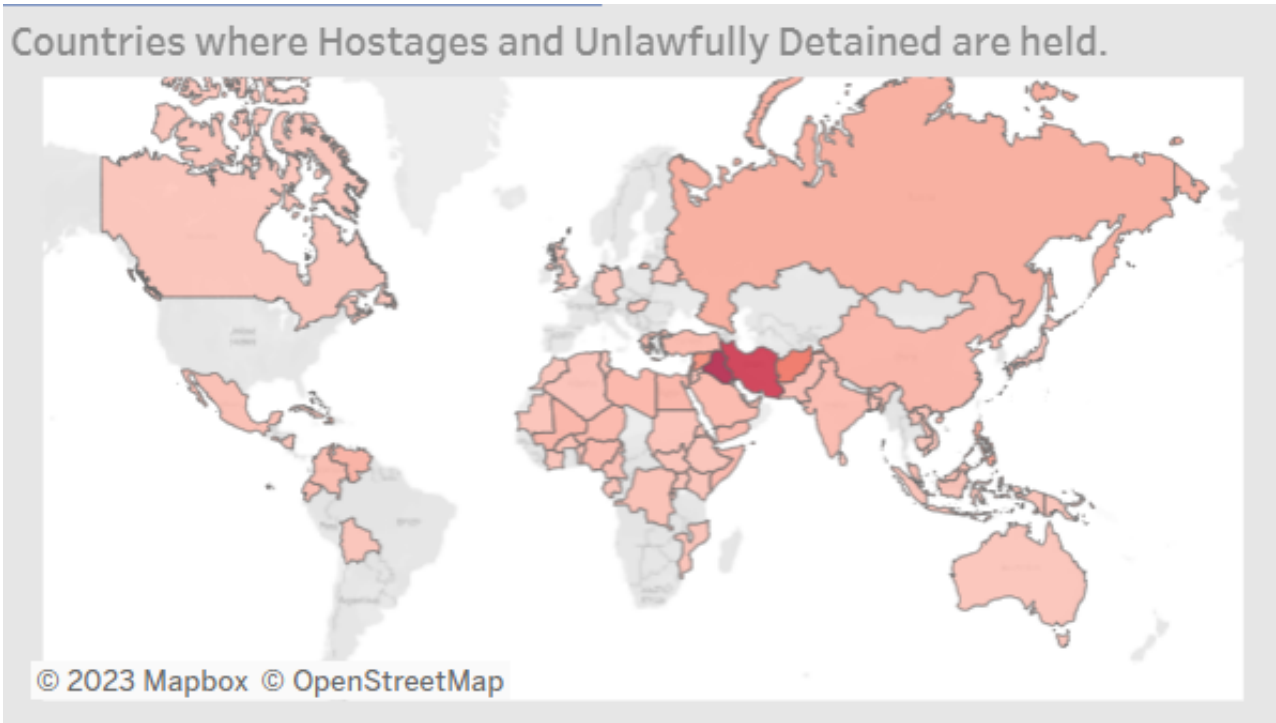
Arrest Statistics

Criminal Kidnappings for Ransom (1990s-Today): In recent decades, there has been a rise in criminal kidnappings for financial gain. Criminal organizations or individuals often target wealthy individuals, tourists, or expatriates, demanding ransom for their release.

Jihadist Terrorism (2000s-Today): The rise of jihadist terrorism, particularly with groups like al-Qaeda and later ISIS, has led to a significant number of hostage takings. The motivation often includes ideological and religious factors, with the intent to instill fear and exert influence.

Humanitarian Workers and Journalists as Targets (21st Century): Humanitarian workers and journalists have become increasingly targeted by various actors, including terrorist groups. The motives often include disrupting aid efforts or silencing independent reporting.



Arrest and kidnapping insights by country 1979-2023
Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

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Arrest Data Overview

Overall trends (1979 - 2023)

Next we look at the overall historical trends for the countries taking hostages and unlawfully detained since the 1970s. Iraq remained the leader but the majority of their cases took place from 2005 to 2007. Iran is second with many of their cases taking place in 1979 with the Iran Hostage Crisis and a steady pace of state-sponsored arrests and kidnappings over the last two decades.

Palestine Authority quickly moved to third with the hostage-taking by the Hamas militant group in 2023. Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Syria were also top countries. Hamas also became the top entity taking hostages in history overtaking the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence.

Entity Responsible for Taking Hostages (1979-2023)		
1.	Hamas Militant Group	7.85%
2.	Iranian Ministry of Intelligence	7.33%
3.	Taliban	6.82%
4.	Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line	4.31%

Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

Top Countries of Arrest (1979-2023)	
Iraq	16.22%
Iran	13.45%
Palestine Authority	8.04%
Afghanistan	7.66%
Lebanon	6.82%
Syria	5.41%
Philippines	3.47%
Haiti	2.45%
Russia	2.45%
Venezuela	1.99%

Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

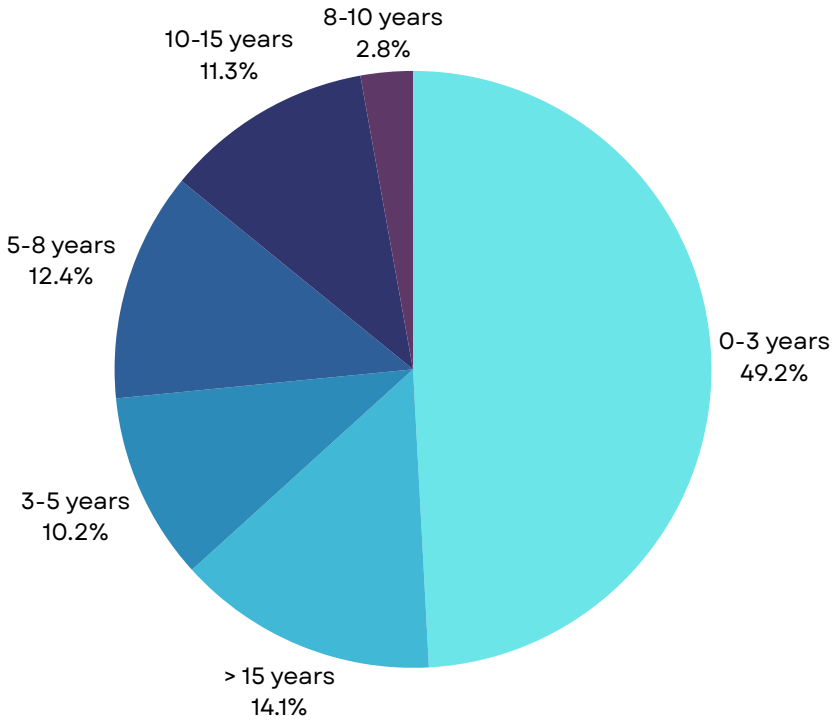
Hostage Aid Worldwide

Arrest Data Overview

Overall trends (1979 - 2023)

Americans have been the highest nationality taken hostage and unlawfully detained since the 1970s and they represent over 1 in 4 of those taken. Americans represent 25.21% of the cases in the database followed by citizens of the United Kingdom 9.07%, France 7.27%, Germany 5,72%, Canada 4.12%, Italy 2.89%, Australia 2.38% and Thailand 2.25%.

For length of detention for hostages and unlawfully detained since the 1970s, nearly half were detained between 0 and 3 years. You can see the full breakdown of the length of detention below.



Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

Main Nationalities of Hostages (1979-2023)	
USA + US LPR	25.21%
United Kingdom	9.07%
France	7.27%
Germany	5.72%
Canada	4.12%
Italy	2.89%
Australia	2.38%
Thailand	2.25%
Turkey	2.06%
South Korea	1.74%

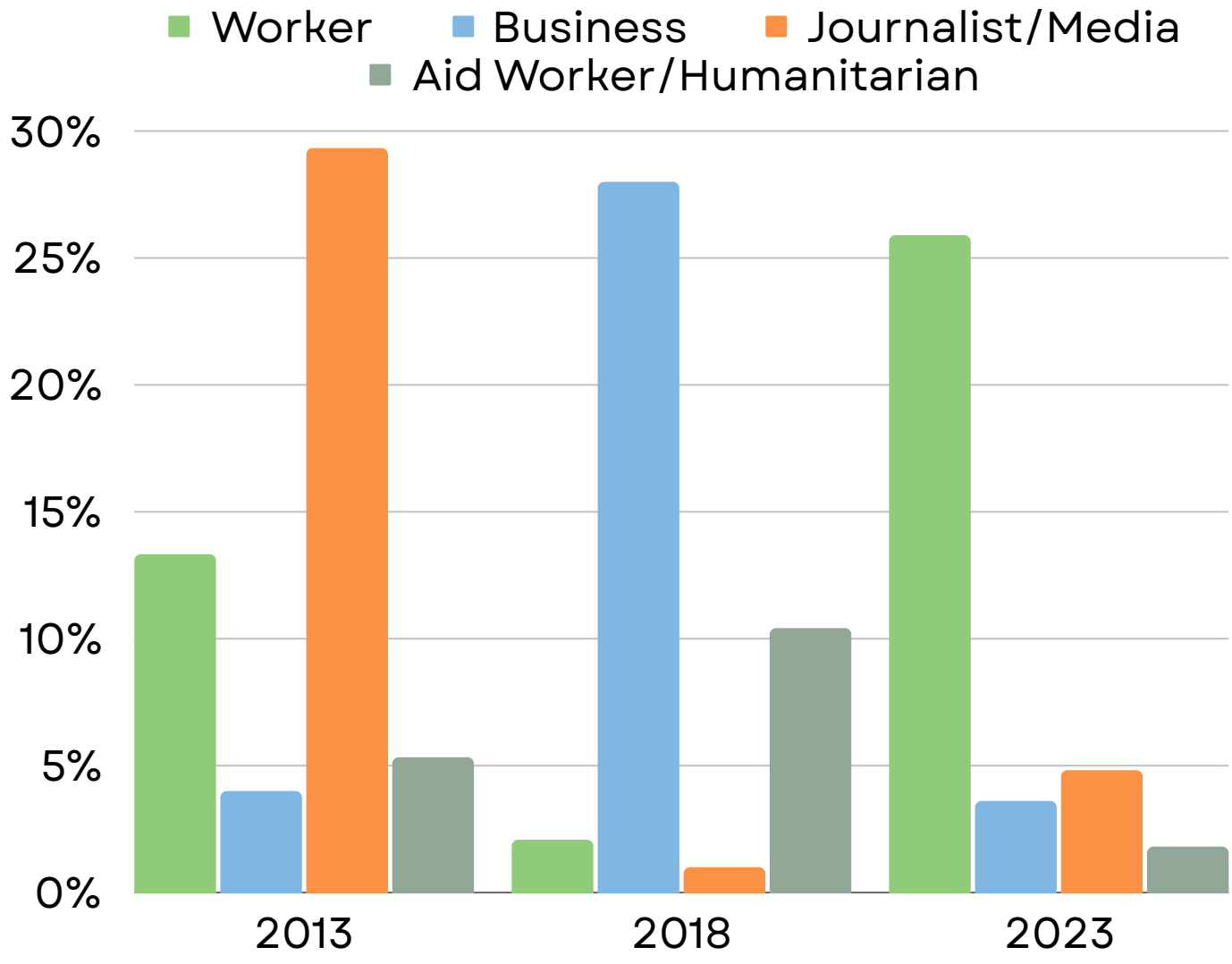
Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

Hostage Aid Worldwide

Occupation Overview

Overall trends (2003 - 2023)

Below are some trend lines for just some of the occupations of hostages and unlawfully detained from 2003 until 2023. Workers saw spikes in 2003 and 2023 with other spikes for journalist and media professionals in 2013 and business professionals in 2018.



Data provided by the Hostage Metrics Engine

Release and Resolution Trends

Overall Trends (1979 - 2023)

The trends related to the release or unfortunate death of hostages and unlawfully detained persons have varied over the decades and have been influenced by geopolitical shifts, changes in conflict dynamics, and the strategies employed by different actors. Here are some trends the world has seen from the 1970s until today:

Political Negotiations and Release (1970s-1980s): During the 1970s and 1980s, political motivations often drove hostage-taking incidents. Some hostages were released through negotiations, such as the Algiers Accords that led to the release of hostages held by Iranian militants at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1981.

Failed Rescue Attempts (1970s-1980s): This period saw some high-profile rescue attempts, including the U.S. attempt to rescue hostages in Iran in 1980 (Operation Eagle Claw) and the Israeli rescue mission at Entebbe in 1976. While some were successful, others resulted in the deaths of hostages.

State-Sponsored Hostage-Taking (1980s-1990s): State-sponsored hostage situations sometimes resulted in the release of captives following diplomatic negotiations. For instance, the release of hostages held in Lebanon during the 1980s was influenced by diplomatic efforts.

Kidnappings for Ransom (1990s-Today): Criminal groups or individuals often release hostages upon receiving a ransom payment. Unfortunately, some hostages have been killed despite ransom payments due to various factors, including the failure to meet the demands.

Release and Resolution Trends

Overall trends (1979 - 2023)

Jihadist Terrorism and Brutality (2000s-Today): In instances involving jihadist groups, the fate of hostages is often unpredictable. Some are released after negotiations or as part of political agreements, while others have been subjected to brutal executions, intended to instill fear and gain global attention.

Media and Propaganda (2000s-Today): Terrorist groups have increasingly used hostage situations as a means of propaganda. Hostages are sometimes released as part of negotiated settlements or for propaganda purposes, while others have been tragically killed for maximum media impact.

Targeting of Specific Groups (21st Century): Certain groups, such as humanitarian workers and journalists, have been specifically targeted by various actors. Hostages from these groups may be released after negotiations or, sadly, subjected to violence.

Social Media Impact (21st Century): The rise of social media has influenced the dynamics of hostage situations. Hostage-takers may use social platforms to communicate demands or showcase the treatment of hostages.

It's important to note that these trends are generalized, and each hostage situation while similar in its core aspect, is unique.

There is also emerging data that the longer a hostage or unlawfully detained person remains in captivity, the more money it will ultimately cost a government in ransom or concessions. Therefore it is important to secure releases as early as possible. Although not a traditional ransom, most recently in September 2023 the U.S. secured the release of five Americans in Iran by exchanging five Iranians in U.S. custody in addition to unfreezing $5.9-billion in Iranian assets.

Conclusion

As the data summaries and visualizations provided by HAW's Hostage Metrics Engine reveal, hostage taking has substantially increased over recent years. The increasing trend manifests the undeniable role of hostage taking in international affairs and the weaponization of the hostage business model by certain state and non-state actors in gaining political and financial leverage. Our report provides further evidence of an increasing trend of hostage diplomacy as a threat to global and regional security.

There is a clear pattern that identifies the links between the hostage taking and terrorism (e.g., Jihadist terrorist groups and state-sponsored terrorism), while the hostages are often from the Western nations (citizens, dual citizens, or LPRs). The increasing trend in the release and resolution statistics (which correlates with the increasing trend in hostage taking) on the one hand reveals "success" in negotiating for the release of hostages, but on the other hand, when taken into account the growth in "ransom" (whether in terms of financial or political concessions), it also reveals the "success" of the hostage business model and thus, we speculate further increase in hostage taking cases and growth in the financial and political asks of the hostage takers.

We recommend governments to work together towards putting timely and effective preventive measures. To this end, HAW will continue to provide consultation to governments around the world, business, academic, and other related entities to shape policy and implement effective measures and procedures to prevent hostage situations and unlawful detentions. Raising the political cost of hostage taking is a critical component to halt the increasing practice of hostage diplomacy. This cannot be achieved without a coordinated multistakeholder approach at the international level that should include governments, and the international community and, in particular, the different bodies of the United Nations.

Conclusion

In the meantime, the response to hostage taking situations should be improved. Often, it takes months (and sometimes years) for the families of hostages to navigate the legal and political complexities of the case, to get effective and useful advice on campaigning for their loved ones, and to simply connect with government and international entities that should advocate for the freedom of their loved ones. We recommend the implementation of a holistic approach to build effective crisis management and resolution; a coordinated multistakeholder approach that bridges the families of hostages, legal experts, the government entities including the legislators, intelligence community, and negotiators, as well as the advocacy and rights organizations at the global and regional levels, and the United Nations.

An international experienced body, such as the United Nations, can take the lead in convening a hostage forum, in partnership with stakeholders, to participate in dialogue and agree upon recommendations and strategies that will enable the development of a sustainable legal and practical framework. This forum will give rise to a multi-stakeholder body to oversee the progress and implementation of these consensual recommendations that will eventually lead to reducing new cases, accelerating release, and dismantling the hostage business model on a global level.

Hostage Aid Methodology

Collecting data on hostage and unlawfully detained situations is difficult. Some negotiations are secret and details especially in older cases, before the Internet, are hard to find. It is sometimes hard to determine whether someone is unlawfully detained or detained due to breaking laws in a particular country.

HAW staff is located in multiple countries and is collecting reports and news in numerous languages. They employ a combination of methods to collect data, including:

- Collaboration with Authorities: Working closely with government agencies, law enforcement, and international bodies to gather official data on hostage situations.
- Field Research: Engaging in on-the-ground fieldwork to investigate and verify reported hostage and unlawfully detained incidents in both countries of nationality and arrest.
- Monitoring News Sources: Keeping a close eye on news reports coming out of country of nationality, country of arrest and globally to identify and verify incidents of hostage situations or unlawful detentions.
- Engagement with Communities: Building relationships with affected communities and individuals to gather firsthand information and ensure a nuanced understanding of the situations.
- Data from International Organizations: Collaborating with international organizations that focus on human rights, conflict resolution, or related fields to access and cross-verify data.
- Open Source Intelligence (OSINT): Utilizing publicly available information from various sources, including social media, to gather insights and confirm details about incidents.

Hostage Aid Methodology

Based on available data, and unless it is a secret rescue operation, Hostage Aid hasn't seen any evidence that would suggest a link between reporting on a negotiated release or swap (which the public was made aware of) and jeopardizing the release or the situation of a hostage or unlawfully detained. This is certainly a delicate matter and requires case-by-case considerations, however, as is known in the larger context of human rights advocacy, not reporting on or discussing a case does more harm than good.

Hostage negotiations are complex and may fall apart due to complications that may arise during the process itself and this is unrelated to advocacy or simply reporting on it. We believe that not reporting on these particular cases could lead to several issues including:

a. lack of transparency, which might lead to less accountability for those involved while making more room for disinformation by the hostage-takers;
b. making it easier for the negotiators to drop a deal at the last minute; and
c. allowing hostages to be left behind.

- Analysis of Patterns and Trends: Employing analytical tools and methodologies to identify patterns, trends, and emerging issues related to hostage situations. It's important for any organization involved in such critical work to prioritize accuracy, impartiality, and the protection of sensitive information.

Hostage Aid Worldwide

Hostage Aid Contact Us

Contact Information

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The **Independent & Free** Voice of Hostages around the World!

Hostage Aid Worldwide