



# Global Insights Report

Your reliable source of intelligence for Kidnap,  
Ransom, Extortion and Piracy around the world

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Venezuela, Guatemala, Iraq, Piracy

August 2023

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# The Americas

Mexico and Latin America



# Venezuela

## 152nd Global Peace Index

Venezuela ranks 152 out of 163 countries on the Global Peace Index, indicating a very low state of peace.

## 600 Border Homicides

Over 600 homicides and 330 kidnappings were recorded in Venezuela's border areas in 2022.

## 54.2% Decrease in Kidnapping

A Government Minister announced in July that kidnappings decreased by 54.2% in Venezuela through 2023 so far.

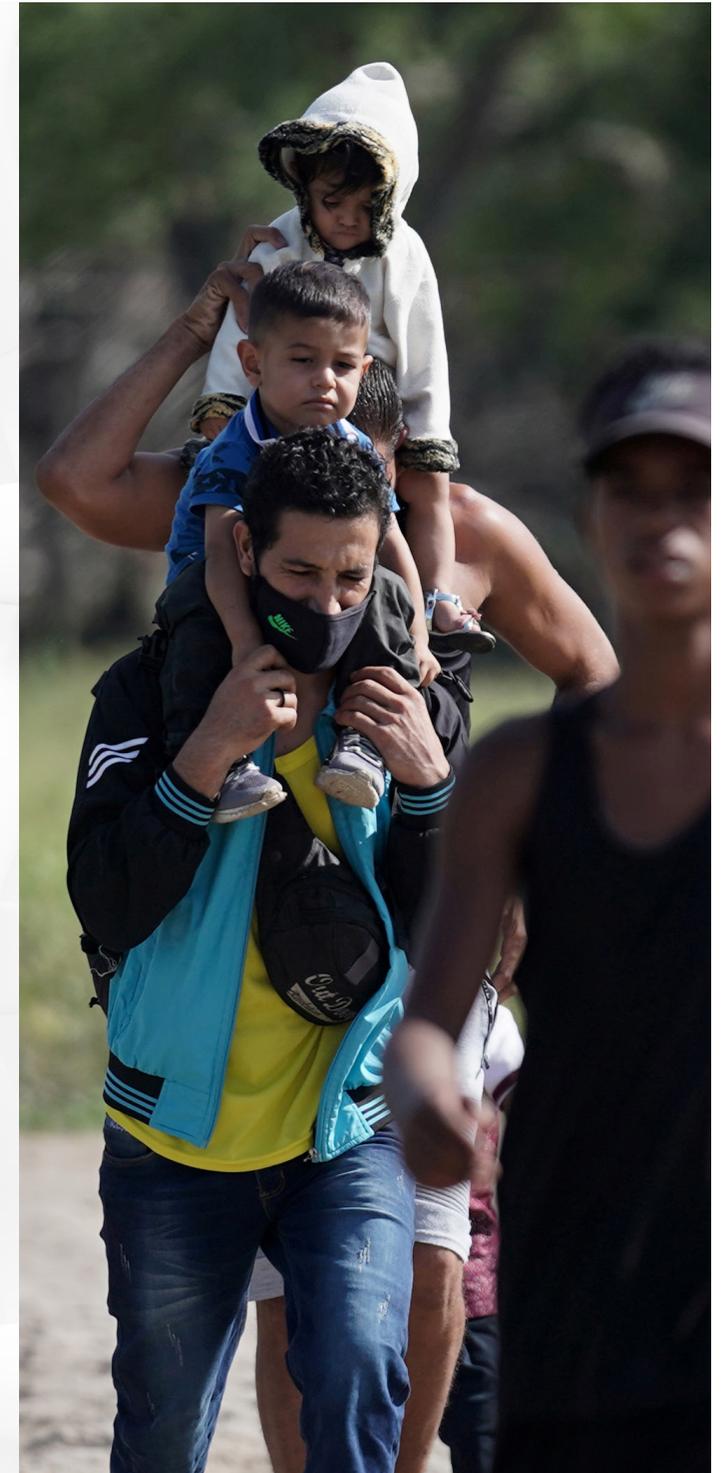
Source: Remigio Ichaso

## 23,764,297kg

A total of 23,764,297 kilos of drugs were seized by security agencies between January 1 and June 13, 53% in the western border state of Zulia. Source: National Anti-drug Superintendence

## 14 US Citizens Detained

14 US citizens were unlawfully detained or held in Venezuela through 2022. Source: The James W Foley Legacy Foundation





# The Americas

Mexico and Latin America



## Venezuela

Venezuela has long experienced kidnapping threats, reflected in the country's Global Peace Index ranking, placing it in the 93rd percentile among the least peaceful countries worldwide, with border areas near Colombia and Caribbean countries serving as hotspots for widespread criminality. Criminal gangs, often linked to the drug trade, alongside Colombian guerrilla groups, are known to conduct

kidnappings, with some victims held captive within Venezuelan territory. Such incidents are often linked to groups operating in the prolific drug trade, which, despite the seizure of 23,764,297 kilos of drugs, remains extremely profitable and violent. The concentration of drug trafficking through the border of Zulia and northern coastal states accessing the Caribbean places such states at an elevated kidnap risk. Throughout 2022,

over 330 kidnappings and 600 homicides were reported in the border areas of the country reflected in international government advice with the UK Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office advising against all travel within 80 km of the Colombian border, 40 km of the Brazilian border or to Zulia State, reflecting the heightened security risks.





## The Americas

Mexico and Latin America



## Venezuela

Alongside the threats of kidnapping from criminal organisations, further risks are posed to foreign nationals by the State's continuing practice of unlawful detainment. According to a 2022 seminal study by the James W Foley Legacy Foundation, there were 14 US citizens unlawfully detained or held in Venezuela through 2022, more than in any other country, double that of Russia. At the start of 2023, at least four US citizens remain unlawfully detained by the Venezuelan government, despite the release of seven US captives in late 2022. The risks of detainment and effective kidnapping by the government remain high, and US State Department officials have frequently voiced their belief that the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro, detains US citizens primarily as bargaining chips for leverage over Washington's concerns of long-standing geopolitical disputes. Such international tension only raises the operating risks of international firms and especially high-value Western employees who may face political detainment or state harassment.





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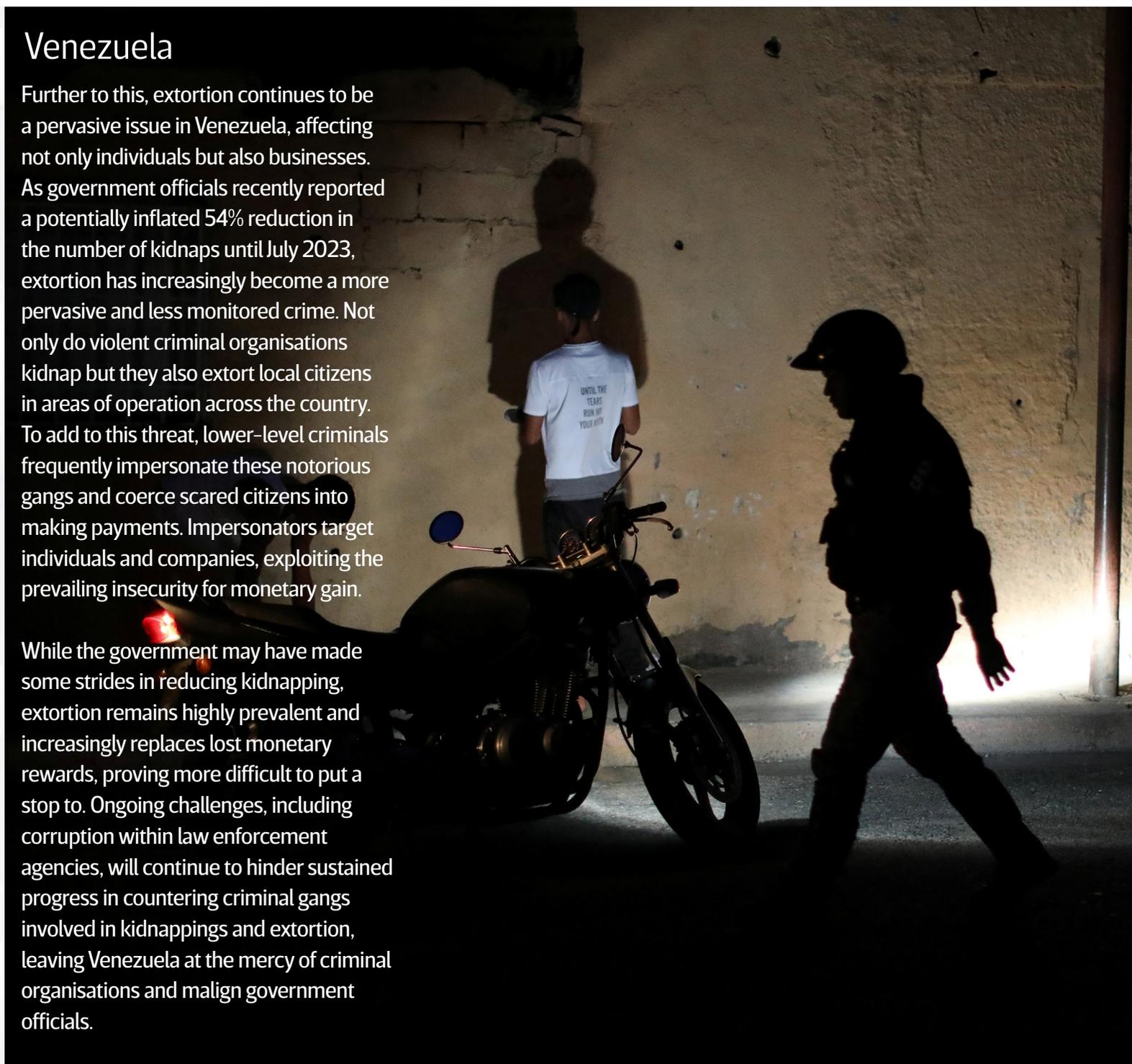
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## Venezuela

Further to this, extortion continues to be a pervasive issue in Venezuela, affecting not only individuals but also businesses.

As government officials recently reported a potentially inflated 54% reduction in the number of kidnaps until July 2023, extortion has increasingly become a more pervasive and less monitored crime. Not only do violent criminal organisations kidnap but they also extort local citizens in areas of operation across the country. To add to this threat, lower-level criminals frequently impersonate these notorious gangs and coerce scared citizens into making payments. Impersonators target individuals and companies, exploiting the prevailing insecurity for monetary gain.

While the government may have made some strides in reducing kidnapping, extortion remains highly prevalent and increasingly replaces lost monetary rewards, proving more difficult to put a stop to. Ongoing challenges, including corruption within law enforcement agencies, will continue to hinder sustained progress in countering criminal gangs involved in kidnappings and extortion, leaving Venezuela at the mercy of criminal organisations and malign government officials.





# The Americas

Mexico and Latin America



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## Guatemala

### \$40-57 USD

### Extortion Industry

The Extortion industry in Guatemala is valued at \$40-\$57 USD million per annum

Source: Global Financial Integrity estimates

### 3004 Victims of Homicide

Guatemala recorded, 3004 victims of homicide through 2022, 175 more than in the previous year, reflecting a homicide rate of 17.3 per 100,000 below the regional average of 18.0

Source: National Civil Police records

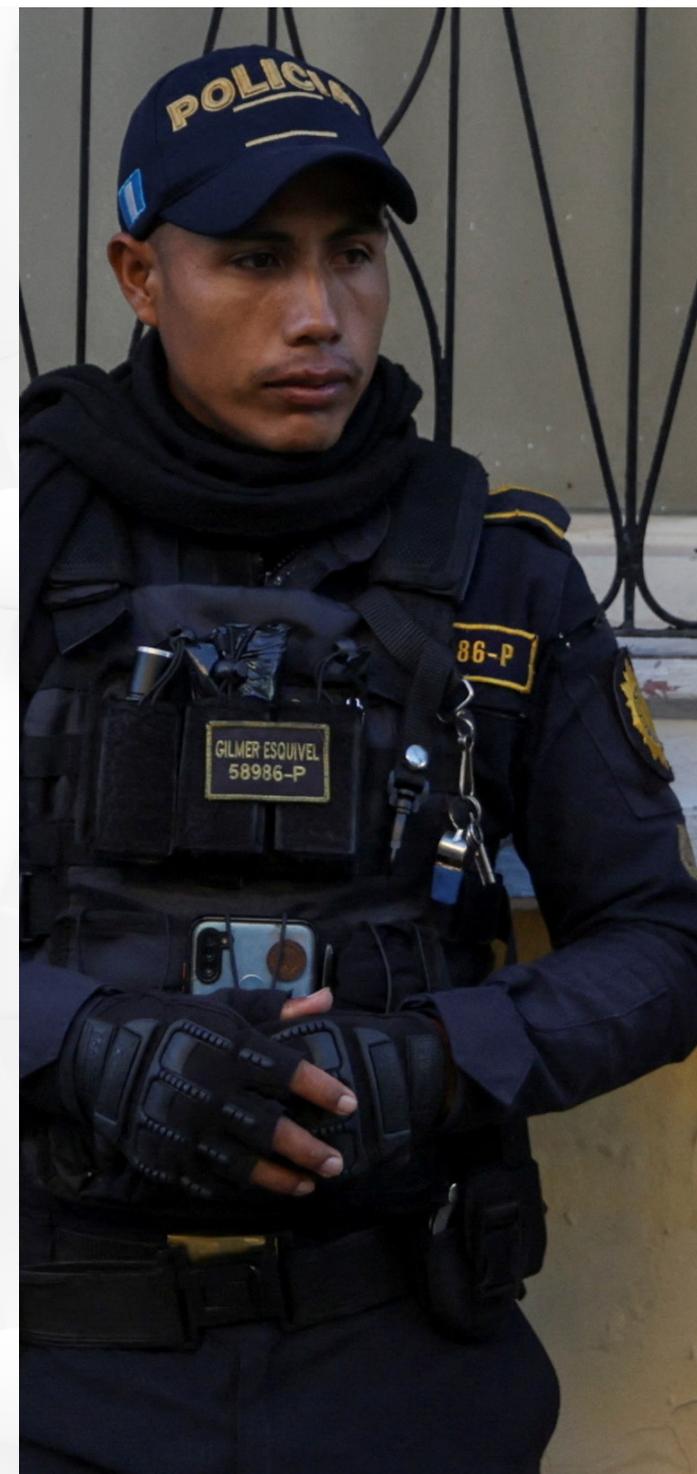
## Kidnappers Captured

On July 12th the National Civil Police reported the capture of four alleged kidnappers, who were holding a doctor captive for a reported ransom of \$200,000 USD.

Source: National Civil Police

### US Level 3: Reconsider Travel

The United States classified Guatemala as 'Level 3: 'Reconsider travel warning'

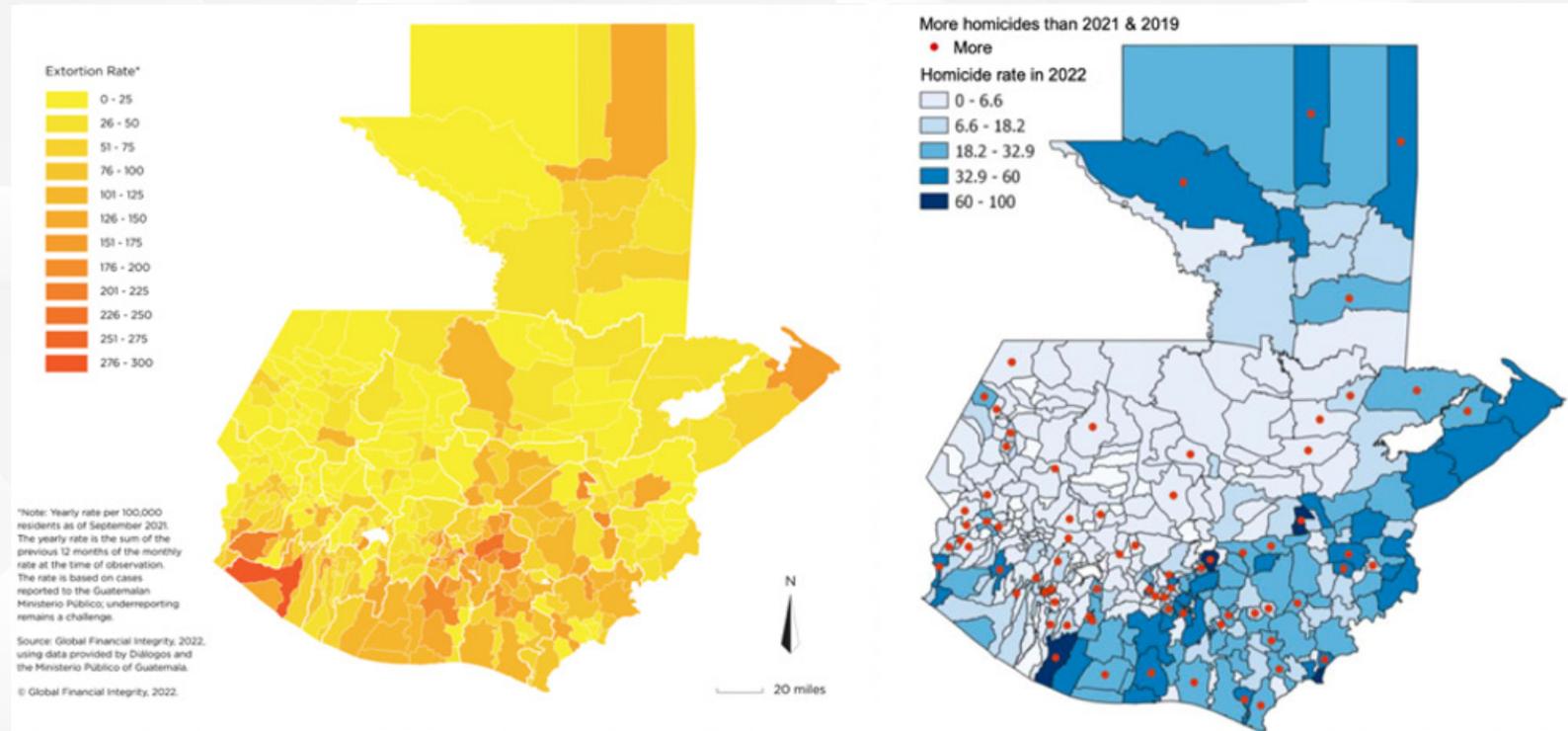




## Guatemala

Extortion has long been a pervasive issue in Guatemalan society. A recent study estimated the annual proceeds of extortion in Guatemala to be between \$40 and \$57 USD million per annum according to the Global Financial Integrity Institute (GFI). The prevalence of extortion means that citizens ranging from political elites to rural impoverished individuals are all likely targets of extortion demands by often armed criminal organisations, placing a universal risk on those travelling or doing business in Guatemala. Extortion crimes are also known to be used by

criminal organisations such as MS13, operating in Guatemala, to fund more violent criminal activities. The mapping of homicides and extortion clearly reflects this, with a close correlation. However, it shows that border areas are those most exposed to the risk, reflecting the prevalence of transnational criminal organisations in border regions of the country as well as a nationwide asymmetric risk environment.

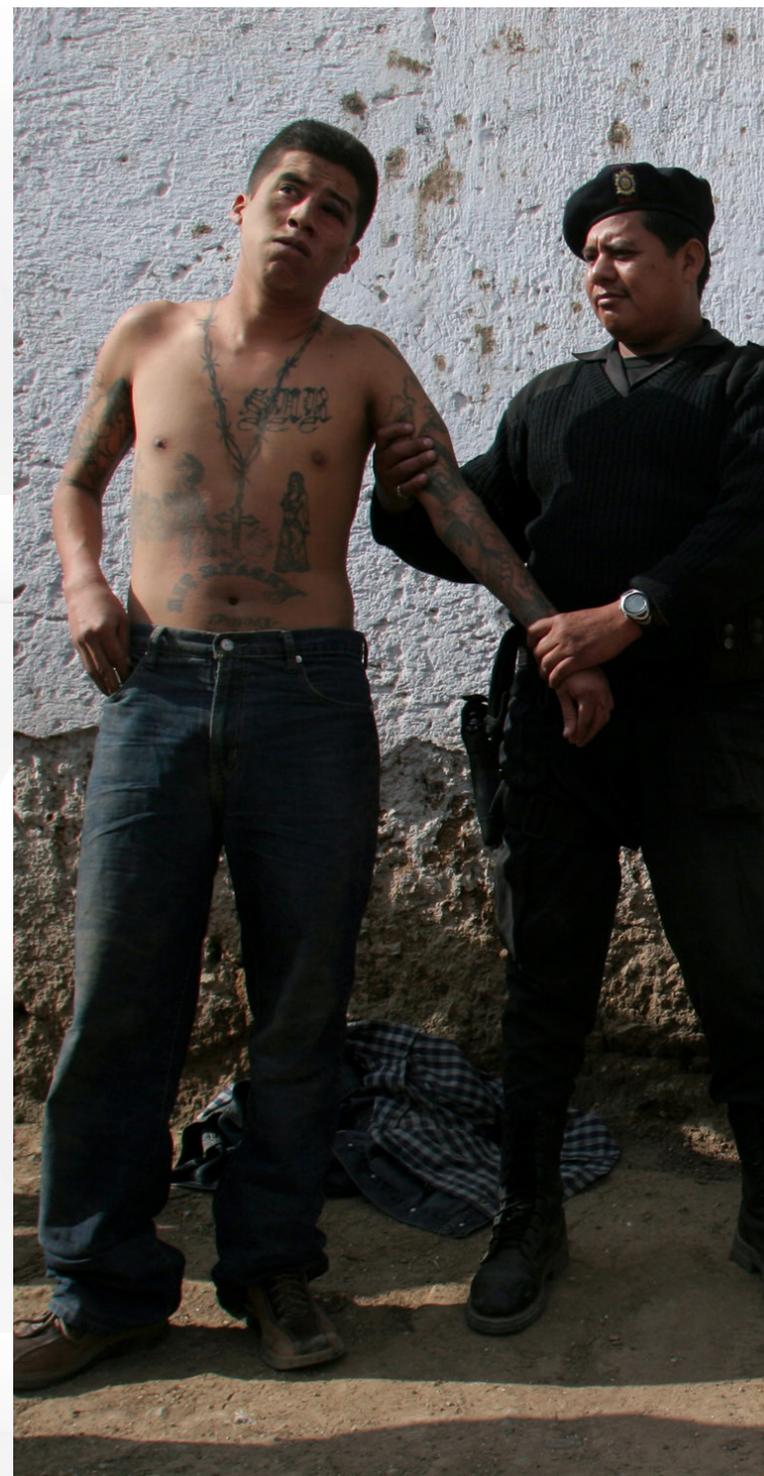




## Guatemala

Criminal organisations in Guatemala perpetuate a cycle of violence and fear that deeply affects the nation. Alongside extortion, Guatemala experiences high but not regionally ground-breaking levels of violent crime, with 3004 homicide victims in 2022, reflecting a homicide rate of 17.3 per 100,000 (National Civil Police records). Such levels of violent crime place the country below the regional average but reflect a still elevated risk of violent crime. However, due to gang crackdowns in El Salvador, authorities have raised concerns that fleeing gang members may increase the likelihood of territorial disputes and drive a new wave of violent crime in a country already plagued by criminal organisations. Although currently unrealised, there is a fear that a wave of El Salvadorian criminals could drive new levels of kidnapping, extortion and ransom risks throughout Guatemala.

The menace of kidnapping for ransom further exacerbates the security situation in Guatemala. Criminal organisations may opportunistically capitalise on their victims for substantial sums of money. This was recently seen in July when a doctor was kidnapped with a ransom of \$200,000 USD demanded before his successful rescue after nearly a week of detainment. Foreign nationals are also placed at an elevated risk, especially within urban environments where opportunistic illegal taxi drivers routinely conduct “express kidnappings.” In June, a Dutch tourist was kidnapped and held for a ransom of \$5,000 USD. Due to their perceived wealth and naivety, tourists can become targets of such criminal operations. Further highlighting the need for prior risk mitigation measures upon travel or business to a country long plagued with similar criminal risks faced throughout its neighbouring region.





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# Iraq

## 1500 Kidnapping Reports

In 2022, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) received 1500 kidnapping reports across the country

## 1,000,000 Forcibly Disappeared

A United Nations report at the end of 2022 concluded that up to 1 million citizens have forcibly disappeared in Iraq over the last 50 years.

## Tsurkov Kidnapping

In March 2023, an Israeli-Russian citizen and Princeton academic, Elizabeth Tsurkov, was kidnapped while conducting field studies and has yet to be released.

## Al Asadi Kidnapping

In February 2023, a high-profile Iraqi environmental activist and often government critic, Jassim Al Asadi, was believed to be kidnapped and his location remains unknown.

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Jassim Al Asadi



## Iraq

While the country’s kidnap risks have dramatically decreased since the height of conflict and the territorial defeat of the Islamic State, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) still received 1500 kidnapping reports across the country. The territorial loss of the Islamic State has undoubtedly reduced the widespread practice of kidnapping by both military and terrorist organisations. However, in

remote areas of Iraq, local populations, most notably young girls, can still face the risk of kidnapping by religious fundamentalists. While Islamic State forces may not have the capacity they once did to target foreign nations or operate in major urban environments, the threat remains present in remote regions. This was highlighted by the kidnapping of 3 fishermen in Wadi Zghitoun, Northern Iraq, in April of this year. Islamic terrorist

organisations still pose a risk to foreign nationals and could opportunistically kidnap Western citizens. This has been outlined by the US Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), including a heightened risk for individuals working for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who may have a greater presence in rural areas.





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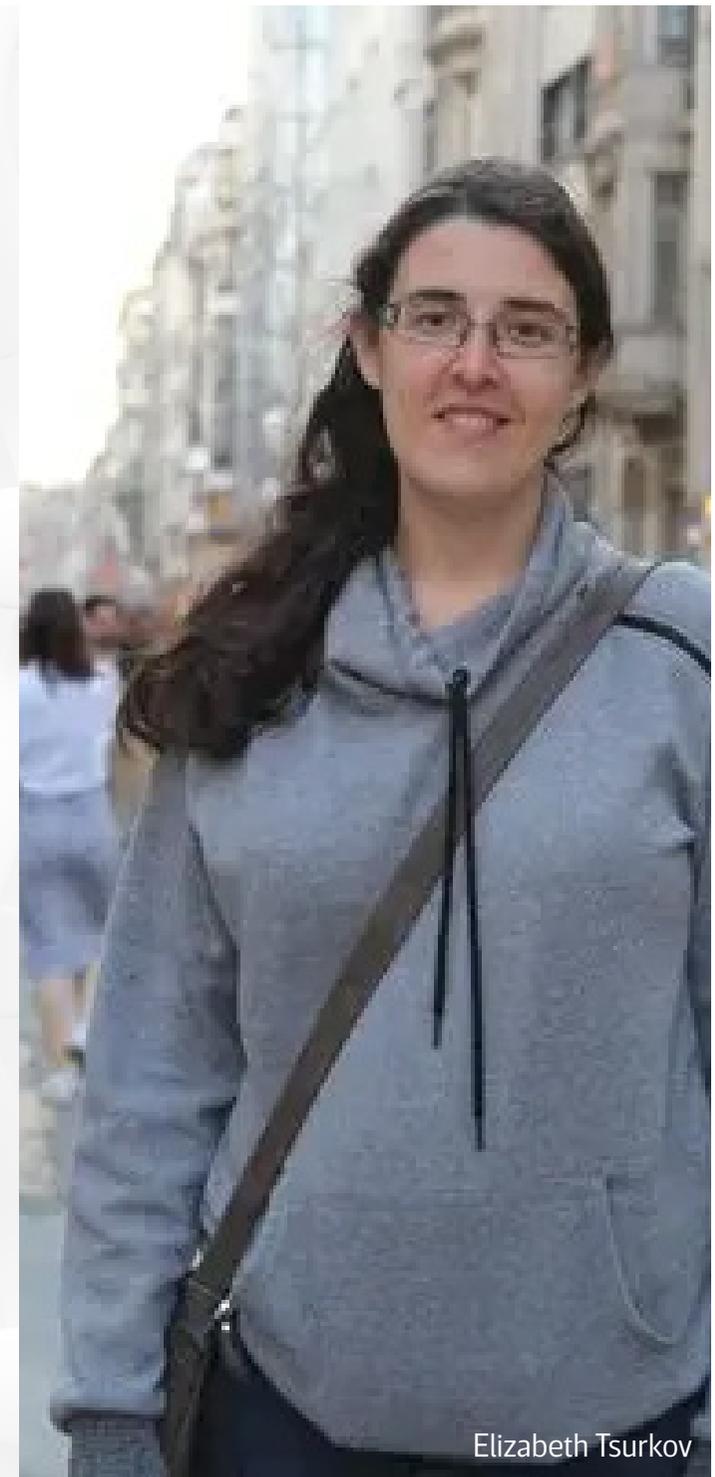
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## Iraq

While Islamic terrorism presents a reduced kidnap risk, a significant threat comes from state forces that have long conducted unlawful detainment and kidnappings of dissident voices, with up to 1 million people having “disappeared” in the last 50 years, according to a 2022 United Nations report. The February 2023 kidnapping of a high-profile environmental activist, Dr. Jassim Al-Asadi, who was often critical of the government, is feared to have been a recent example of a state-led kidnapping. With no ransom demanded and no contact made with his family, it aligns with past government actions. Furthermore, the April kidnapping of a Kurdistan human rights activist Ali Mahmoud, in similar circumstances, highlights the potential continuing widespread abuses of the Iraqi governmental forces and the ability of the state to silence dissent. While recent government rhetoric has acknowledged past failings, the recently proposed draft Law on Freedom of Expression and Peaceful Assembly would give the Iraqi authorities the ability to arbitrarily prosecute anyone who makes public comments that violate “public morals” or “public order.” Such a law could increase the frequency of forced disappearances and state-led kidnappings, placing any dissenting voice, whether domestic or foreign, at a heightened risk of state abuses.

Regional tensions and rivalries have further exacerbated the kidnapping landscape. A prominent example is the abduction of Elizabeth Tsurkov, allegedly believed to have been orchestrated by Iranian-affiliated militias aligned with the Iraqi government, on suspicion of her spying for Israel. The high-profile kidnapping of a foreign citizen highlights the willingness of the state regime to even target Western academics. With escalated tensions between the United States and Iran, and Iranian-backed militias wielding substantial influence within Iraq, they could pose an increasing threat to foreign nationals.



Elizabeth Tsurkov



## Piracy

# Piracy

## 38 Piracy Incidents

From April to June 2023, there were 38 incidents of piracy reported, a 41% rise on the first three months of the year.

Source: International Maritime Bureau

## Iranian Navy

Iranian naval forces have seized at least three internationally flagged commercial tankers, since April, resulting in the deployment of additional US marine forces to the Strait of Hormuz.

## 5 Fold Increase

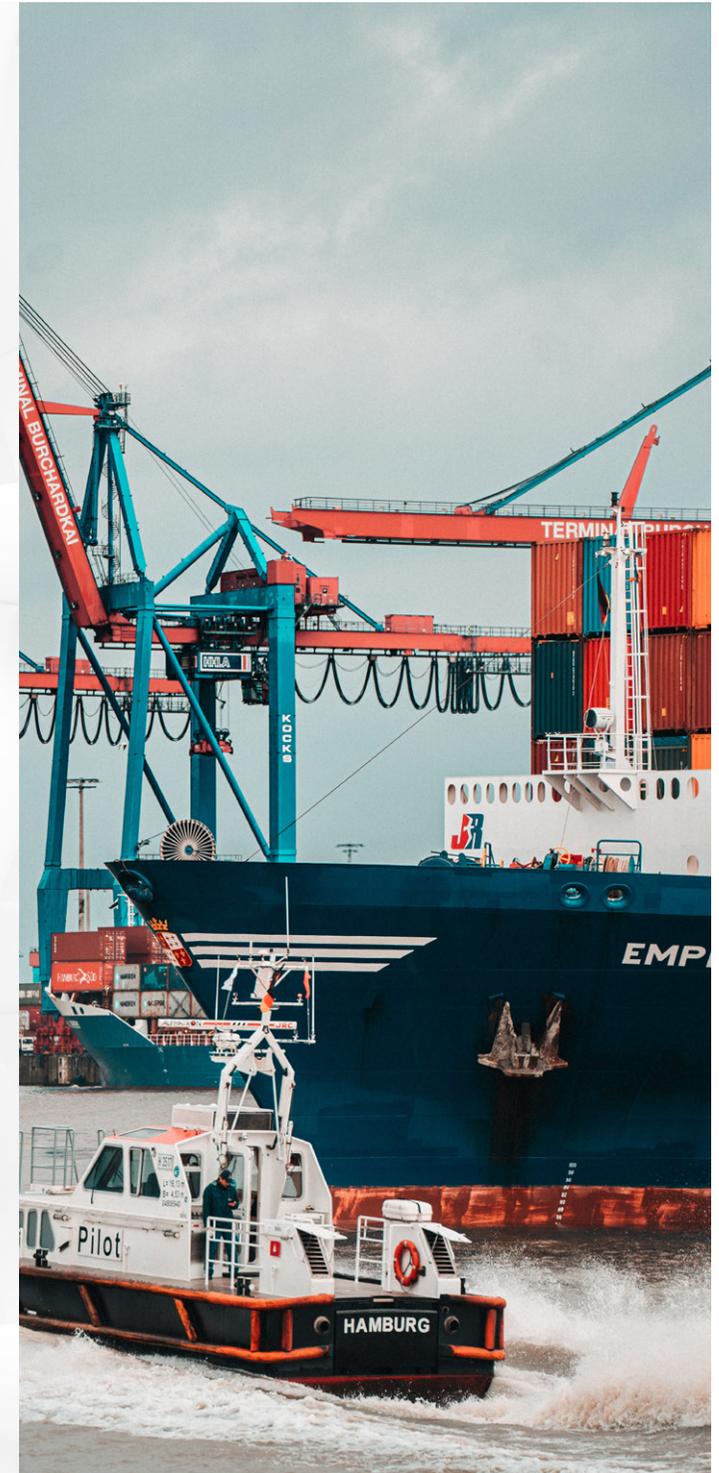
There has been a 5-fold increase in the number of crews impacted by piracy incidents between January–March 2023 vs April–June 2023.

Source: International Maritime Bureau

## Hostage Taking

April to June witnessed the kidnapping of 8 crew members and hostage-taking of 34 people in maritime incidents.

Source: International Maritime Bureau





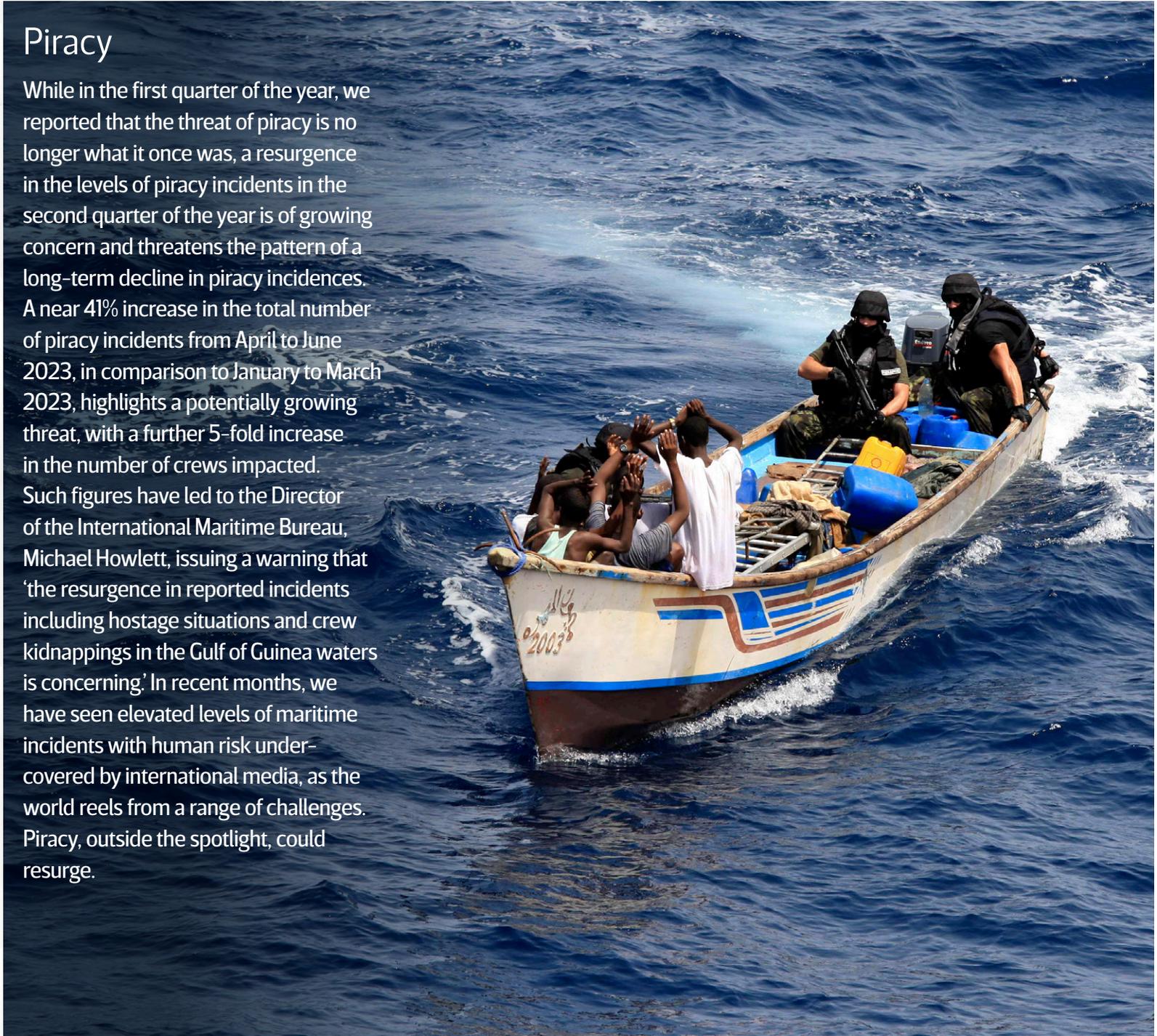
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## Piracy

While in the first quarter of the year, we reported that the threat of piracy is no longer what it once was, a resurgence in the levels of piracy incidents in the second quarter of the year is of growing concern and threatens the pattern of a long-term decline in piracy incidences. A near 41% increase in the total number of piracy incidents from April to June 2023, in comparison to January to March 2023, highlights a potentially growing threat, with a further 5-fold increase in the number of crews impacted. Such figures have led to the Director of the International Maritime Bureau, Michael Howlett, issuing a warning that 'the resurgence in reported incidents including hostage situations and crew kidnappings in the Gulf of Guinea waters is concerning.' In recent months, we have seen elevated levels of maritime incidents with human risk under-covered by international media, as the world reels from a range of challenges. Piracy, outside the spotlight, could resurge.





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## Piracy

In recent months, through the Gulf of Guinea, the global epicentre of piracy incidents, we have witnessed a number of incidents. This includes a worrying and growing trend of ships being attacked further offshore in international waters to delay the national coast guard's response times and elevate the chances of success. This was seen on April 10th when a Singaporean-flagged tanker was the target of a piracy attack in international waters about 600 km south of Abidjan and remained unresolved for 5 days. Further to this, the Gulf of Guinea has

seen a resurgent threat of maritime kidnapping and hostage-taking with two separate hijackings this year, responsible for 31 crew members being held hostage, with communication and navigation equipment destroyed and partial cargoes stolen.

Another area of growing recent concern comes in the Strait of Hormuz, where soured relations between the United States and the Iranian regime have led to a recent rise in the number of internationally flagged commercial tanker seizures by the Iranian navy. Since April,

three internationally flagged ships, transiting international waters, have been seized against international law by Iran's navy in response to moves by the United States to confiscate shipments of sanctioned Iranian oil to East Asia. Such actions have necessitated an escalating global reaction, with the US only in recent weeks deploying a more frequent naval air force patrol. The maritime concern is driven by geopolitical tensions heightening the risk of transit in the Strait of Hormuz for the latter half of 2023.





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## Contact

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