

REPORT



ENTREPRENEURS OF INSECURITY

Kidnapping for ransom in the
Chad–CAR–Cameroon borderlands

Titilope F Ajayi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was made possible through the contributions and support of many individuals and institutions. The author is deeply grateful to interlocutors in Chad, who generously shared their time, experiences and insights.

Sincere appreciation goes to the national authorities, security-sector representatives and regional stakeholders who engaged with this research and provided valuable context and feedback. Their willingness to reflect on sensitive dynamics strengthened the analytical depth of this study.

Thanks go to the field partners and intermediaries whose commitment and expertise facilitated data collection under challenging conditions, and for the guidance and collaboration of colleagues within the Central Africa Observatory on Transnational Organized Crime, notably Professor Saïbou Issa and Dr. Remadji Hoinathy, whose inputs enriched the methodology and analysis.

Finally, thanks to our funding partners, whose investment in evidence-based research has enabled ongoing work to better understand and address the drivers of insecurity in Chad.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Titilope F. Ajayi is a senior researcher with the Central Africa Observatory on Transnational Organized Crime. She brings over two decades of experience analyzing conflict dynamics, political violence, security governance and gender across West and Central Africa. Her recent work has focused on Chad and South Sudan, examining how transnational organized criminal economies, state and community responses, and regional political dynamics shape insecurity. She has led multi-country field and policy research for governments, regional organizations and international partners, producing evidence that informs strategies on conflict prevention, protection and security governance in complex and changing environments.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CAR	Central African Republic
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
ISWAP	Islamic State–West Africa Province
JAS	Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad
KFR	Kidnapping for ransom
MNJTF	Multinational Joint Task Force
XAF	Central African CFA franc





Executive summary

Kidnapping for ransom (KFR) is an escalating threat in Chad and its neighbouring states in the Central Africa region. While concentrated in the southern border regions near Cameroon and the Central African Republic (CAR), there are KFR hotspots across the country with subtle variations per region (see Figure 1). What began as a tactic of sporadic rural banditry in the 1990s has evolved into a structured, transnational criminal economy, increasingly tied to cycles of armed conflict, cross-border insecurity and institutional fragility. Building on prior indications from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) that the expanding scale and scope of KFR in Chad could spark a regional security crisis, this thematic report aims to provide evidence-based analysis of the dynamics of KFR in Chad and its borderlands, offering actionable recommendations for prevention and response.

Recent trends, as extracted from ACLED data and ISS review of local media reports, indicate a sharp rise in KFR incidents: over 1 500 kidnappings have been documented in Mayo-Kebbi Ouest and Logone Oriental over the past two decades, with a marked rise since 2019/2020 and a corresponding increase in ransoms paid.¹ Among the latest incidents is the kidnapping and rescue by Chadian security forces of six Cameroonian children in Larmanaye, near the Chad–Cameroon border in July 2025.²

Perpetrator profiles have shifted from loosely organized local bandits in the 1990s to more networked and multinational formations blending criminal, insurgent and opportunistic actors – including some community members and rogue security personnel – whose local and transnational complicity sustains the trade. Victims range from herders, traders and farmers to humanitarian workers, civil servants, state officials and wealthy people, and their relatives.

The impacts are multilayered and widespread: in addition to ransom payments (which often reach millions of Central African CFA francs, or XAF, per incident) communities face the loss of livelihoods, forced displacement, sexual violence, death, fractured social cohesion and eroding trust in local and national security institutions. Key drivers include economic marginalization, porous borders and weak governance across Chad and its neighbours, compounded by political instability and limited state presence in rural areas.³

State responses remain fragmented and largely reactive. Although security forces occasionally conduct rescue operations, Chad lacks a comprehensive strategy to prevent and respond to KFR. Victims' families are often left to negotiate and pay ransoms directly, further fuelling the criminal economy. Civil society organizations, though well-positioned to support victims and raise awareness, face structural fragmentation and are largely excluded from formal security policy spaces. Financial and telecommunications institutions, whose cooperation is vital to tracking and disrupting KFR networks, operate in a vacuum, with no legal obligation to support investigations.

Inasmuch as KFR in Chad has significant transnational dimensions, regional responses – including regional economic initiatives and bilateral security agreements between Chad, Cameroon and the CAR – have been inconsistent and unable to meaningfully address KFR in affected areas.

Methodology

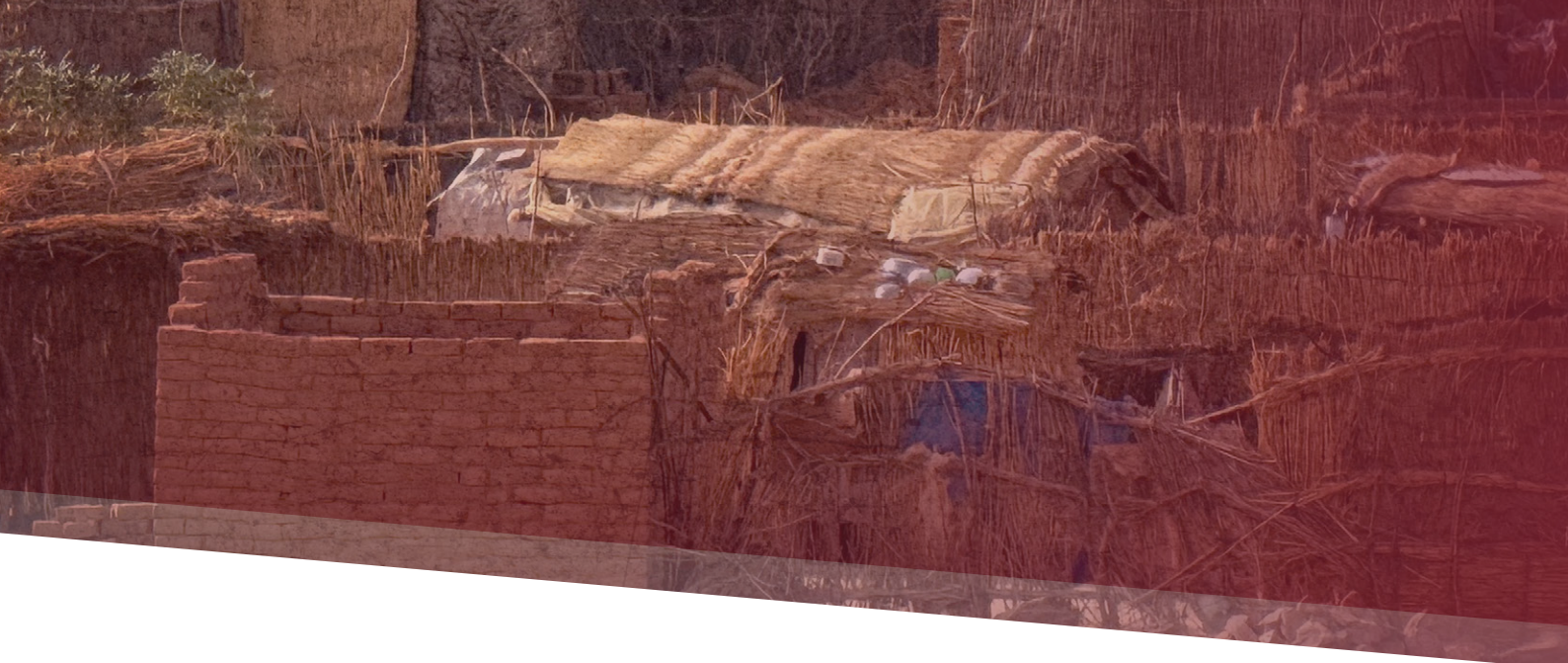
This report examines the drivers, dynamics and implications of KFR in Chad, with particular attention to its cross-border dimensions in the tri-border area with Cameroon and the CAR, and its links to wider governance challenges and transnational organized criminal economies. Relying largely on ISS field research, community-level insights and emerging policy analysis, the report offers a nuanced assessment of current trends and implications, identifies gaps in policy and practice, and proposes concrete recommendations for national and regional actors. It also explores the roles of civil society, the media and international partners, emphasizing the need for a coordinated, whole-of-society strategy that combines prevention, protection and accountability to disrupt the KFR economy and restore stability and trust in state institutions.

Fieldwork was conducted between June and August 2025 in N'Djaména, and the tri-border areas of Chad–CAR–Cameroon (southern Chad: Bertoua, Meiganga, Garoua-Boulai, Yokadouma) and Chad–Libya–Sudan (northern Chad). Interviews and focus groups involved political, justice and security authorities; civil society actors; local journalists; community/traditional leaders; cross-border economic operators or traders; mining operators; and local and cross-border crime experts.

Key recommendations

To forestall a regional security crisis, law enforcement approaches to combating KFR must be accompanied by the following policy actions:

- Develop and adopt a national KFR strategy, outlining a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach involving security, justice and civilian actors.
- Establish legal and institutional mechanisms to compel the cooperation of telecommunications and financial service providers in investigations related to KFR.
- Strengthen community-based early warning systems, and expand psychosocial and legal support services for victims and affected families.
- Mandate a dedicated intelligence mechanism to collect, track and analyze data on KFR incidents, actors and trends, ensuring timely, evidence-based responses and improved coordination among political, security, judicial, civil society and local actors.
- Enhance the role and coordination of civil society organizations, ensuring inclusive participation in policy dialogue, prevention efforts and victim support mechanisms.
- Improve regional and cross-border cooperation, particularly with Cameroon, the CAR and Nigeria, to track networks, share intelligence and harmonize response frameworks.



Introduction

Kidnapping for ransom (KFR) is no longer an isolated rural crime in Chad; it has become a structured, cross-border criminal economy that is steadily undermining community security, state authority and regional stability. It is concentrated in the country's southern borderlands with Cameroon and the Central African Republic (CAR), colloquially known as the 'Triangle of Death' (see Figure 1).⁴

KFR has evolved from opportunistic banditry in the 1990s into a profitable and persistent criminal enterprise. Today's operations involve a blend of local actors, organized criminal groups, terrorists and, in some cases, complicit elements within security forces and community structures. This entrenched threat demands urgent and coordinated policy attention.

Reliable statistics are difficult to obtain due to under-reporting, community silence and fragmented monitoring systems. Yet, a growing body of evidence from humanitarian organizations, civil society actors and local authorities suggests that in parts of Mayo-Kebbi Ouest, Logone Oriental and Logone Occidental, hundreds of abductions occur annually, with thousands of cumulative cases over the past two decades.⁵ Ransoms vary widely – from small payments in livestock to significant cash sums – reflecting the highly adaptable nature of perpetrators' targeting strategies. The financial scale of this economy remains opaque but is believed to run into millions of Central African francs annually, with an estimated total value of XAF52.4 million in southern Chad in 2023 alone.⁶ This money finances both subsistence-level opportunists, insurgencies and armed rebellions, and well-connected criminal intermediaries.

Key drivers of KFR in southern Chad include economic deprivation, weak governance and complicity of the local communities. Chronic underdevelopment, high youth unemployment and limited access to formal economic opportunities create an environment where illicit income streams become viable survival strategies for complex systems of perpetrators, intermediaries and informants. Governance deficits compound the problem: weak rule of law, the short periods of time suspects are detained for and porous borders facilitate repeated offending. Socially, the problem is sustained by the instrumentalization of youth, women and community actors – both willing and compelled – who provide intelligence, logistical support and safe passage for perpetrators. Local norms that discourage reporting or encourage negotiation over prosecution further entrench these dynamics.

The governance context in Chad and its neighbours is marked by fragile state authority, uneven security force presence and highly localized enforcement capacity. In southern Chad, KFR is rarely treated as a serious national security priority, particularly when compared with the government's focus on counterinsurgency in the Lake Chad Basin and northern regions. In the Triangle of Death, similar governance gaps create permissive spaces for cross-border operations, with perpetrators exploiting the lack of synchronized security cooperation.

Regional responses remain fragmented. While frameworks like the Economic Community of Central African States and the Lake Chad Basin Commission provide potential platforms for cooperation, neither currently addresses southern KFR in a targeted manner. In practice, cross-border coordination is ad hoc and reactive, often mobilized only after major incidents. The absence of integrated intelligence-sharing systems, harmonized legal frameworks and sustained joint operations has created a vacuum that criminal groups exploit, allowing them to adapt faster than states can respond.

Despite its devastating impact on individuals, communities, production systems like the pastoral economy, and national cohesion, KFR remains a poorly understood and inconsistently addressed issue in both national and regional security frameworks.

This report begins by situating KFR historically and geographically, tracing its shift from sporadic incidents to a sustained illicit economy. It then examines the operational mechanics of kidnapping networks, including their recruitment patterns, ransom negotiation practices and cross-border mobility. A subsequent section unpacks the enabling environment – economic, governance and social factors that sustain the trade – before turning to a review of current response measures at national and regional levels. The report concludes with actionable recommendations aimed at strengthening deterrence, disrupting networks and addressing the socio-economic vulnerabilities that underpin the trade.

Aerial view of a village in southern Chad. Incidents of kidnapping for ransom are concentrated in the region bordering Cameroon and the Central African Republic.
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By focusing on both the criminal economy and the governance architecture that allows it to persist, this report seeks to move the policy conversation towards a proactive crisis response. KFR in southern Chad is not simply a security challenge, but a complex socio-political and economic phenomenon whose resolution requires sustained coordination across justice, security, development and community engagement sectors. Without such a multidimensional approach, the risks are clear: a deepening of local insecurity, the expansion of criminal influence in rural governance, and the gradual normalization of ransom as an acceptable economic transaction.



Historical overview of ransom kidnappings in Chad

KFR in Chad, one of several forms of abduction, is part of a long continuum of predation and insecurity in the country and its borderlands. It traces its roots to the road ambushes and banditry that spread across the Lake Chad Basin and the tri-border area with Cameroon and the CAR in the 1980s and 1990s. Research by Saïbou Issa⁷ shows how *coupeurs de route* (armed men ambushing travellers, mostly traders, on rural roads as they travel to or from cattle markets with large sums of money)⁸ emerged during periods of state collapse and cross-border rebellion. These groups initially relied on quick thefts and cattle raids. Still, dispelled by initial state security responses, they gradually discovered that detaining victims for ransom offered higher and more predictable returns.⁹

By the early 2000s, hostage-taking had become a distinct criminal enterprise. Groups adopted semi-military organization, rotating guards and using scouts to identify high-value targets such as herders, traders or local officials.¹⁰ The practice was no longer opportunistic or episodic but deliberate, constituting a new ‘modality of banditry’ adapted to the fragile geopolitical economies in which it emerged and weak security enforcement.¹¹ At this stage, kidnapping remained localized to border prefectures but already displayed the transnational features that now define Chad’s KFR landscape.

For about a decade and half from the mid-2000s through the 2010s, kidnapping networks matured and multiplied, embedding themselves in wider illicit economies. Ransom negotiations, transport and payments were managed through brokers and local intermediaries who linked criminal groups with victims’ families. These networks intersected with other illicit flows – arms trafficking, contraband fuel and cattle rustling – creating overlapping economies of violence. Over time, ransoms became an informal tax on mobility in parts of southern and western Chad.

During this period, the social profile of kidnapers also changed. Many were demobilized fighters or unemployed youth operating in areas where the government’s reach was limited and economic options were scarce. Their local knowledge, kinship ties and familiarity with the terrain enabled them to operate undetected, while community complicity, often driven by fear or necessity, further normalized ransom

negotiations as part of daily life or travel. With most studies focusing mainly on men, only recently have the diverse roles of women and gender dynamics in KFR economies started to receive more attention.¹²

By the late 2010s, KFR had become a mature, adaptable and organized criminal enterprise. The southwest, especially Mayo-Kebbi Ouest and Est, emerged as the new centre, with at least 1 500 abductions recorded by local groups over the past 20 years.¹³ These numbers are likely under-reported, as communities have become accustomed to negotiating their safety through informal ransom payments due to the absence of state security. These kidnappings usually target farmers, civil servants and herders, and are often carried out with help from informants embedded in rural markets. KFR activities differ in other regions. For instance, in northern and eastern Chad, armed groups use kidnapping to fund their operations or expand influence in peripheral areas.

Viewed from a historical perspective, KFR in Chad is not an isolated or sudden phenomenon but a logical outcome of decades of governance gaps, economic marginalization and regional entanglement. What began as opportunistic roadside banditry has evolved into a socially embedded, professionalized ransom economy with cross-border logistics. ISS interviews revealed that targeted kidnappings have intensified over the past 10 years,¹⁴ becoming the most lucrative and widespread criminal activity in the Cameroon–Chad–CAR tri-border area where rising civilian abductions have been documented.¹⁵ This is enabled by a calculated selection of victims, a relatively inexpensive modus operandi, and the remarkable ability of armed groups and highway robbers to adapt to the realities on the ground.

One interlocutor said that KFR was a ‘new horizon of terrorism’ in Chad,¹⁶ meaning a convergence of tactics where economic and political violence increasingly share the same methods, actors and effects, even if their underlying motives are different.

Women play various central and peripheral roles, including sometimes as brokers or intermediaries, highlighting how the ransom economy penetrates household and community life.¹⁷ The same structural factors identified by Issa 20 years ago – state fragility, porous borders and the monetization of insecurity – continue to define the landscape today. The persistence and growth of KFR reinforces how violence in Chad’s borderlands has become self-sustaining, feeding off the very insecurity it helps create.

Insecurity

Chad’s KFR landscape is deeply rooted in the country’s long history of war, rebellion and ongoing political instability. Since gaining independence in 1960, Chad has faced repeated civil wars, coups and regional rebellions that fractured authority and made violence a common tool for negotiation and survival. From the civil wars of the 1960s and 1970s, through the era of Hissène Habré’s authoritarian rule and Idriss Déby’s continual clashes with armed insurgencies, war has militarized generations of young men, many of whom continue to cycle between rebellion, banditry and community-based militias.¹⁸

The militarization of society during this period created enduring patterns of inter- and intra-community violence. Local disputes between ethnic groups, clans and lineages were frequently weaponized by national elites and rebel leaders, embedding communal antagonisms within broader struggles for state power. As a result, tensions between pastoralist and farming communities, or between different ethno-regional groups, often escalated beyond local disputes into armed confrontations, sustained by the circulation of fighters and arms from wider conflicts.¹⁹ Many of these conflicts are being compounded by the negative effects of climate change and changing patterns of land use.²⁰

Repeated cycles of rebellion, militia mobilization and incomplete demobilization have created a reservoir of ex-combatants who easily shift between political violence and banditry. For example, in southern Chad, former rebels and militia fighters from the CAR conflict who were poorly integrated during demobilization processes have reconstituted themselves as armed bandit groups, sustaining themselves through extortion and hostage-taking for ransom.²¹ This blurring of wartime practices and criminal entrepreneurship highlights how KFR is embedded in conflict economies. The northern regions of Chad, particularly Tibesti and Borkou, have long been epicentres of rebellion, with cycles of armed uprisings and smuggling economies creating fertile ground for KFR as both a financing tool and a tactic of territorial control.²²

The availability of weapons is a crucial enabler. Following the collapse of Gaddafi's regime in 2011, flows of small arms and light weapons spread across the Sahel and Central Africa, empowering rural militias, highwaymen and pastoralist youth. In Chad's northern and central regions, these weapons enabled a shift from opportunistic cattle raiding to more organized and profitable kidnapping operations.²³ Similar dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin further illustrate the role of arms circulation: Boko Haram and factions of the Islamic State–West Africa Province (ISWAP) factions have repeatedly looted military stockpiles, strengthening their operational capacity for high-profile abductions, both in Nigeria and in Chadian border zones.²⁴

State fragility

Chad has undergone longstanding governance deficits marked by centralized authoritarian rule, contested successions and limited state reach in rural and border areas, described as 'totally lawless and beyond the control of any state'.²⁵ The 2021 death of President Idriss Déby and the subsequent military-led transition under his son, Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, have deepened uncertainty. While the current leadership has pledged reforms and a return to civilian rule, persistent insecurity and growing repression have reinforced public scepticism.²⁶ In many remote areas, absent or under-resourced security outposts offer little deterrence against organized criminal or insurgent actors, leaving communities to depend on informal protection networks, some of which are co-opted by armed groups with both political and criminal agendas.²⁷ The absence of state authority in many of these areas, coupled with the 'inefficiencies of national security forces', has produced 'borderland economies of survival and control', where local actors, traders, rebels and bandits coexist within a system that blurs criminal and political lines.²⁸

Economic and cultural factors

Economic shifts have further shaped the operational landscape for KFR in Chad. The discovery of gold in northern and eastern regions over the past decade has fuelled artisanal mining booms, drawing internal and cross-border migrants into poorly regulated zones.²⁹ These sites have become magnets for criminal and insurgent groups that exploit the absence of state control to tax miners, control trade flows and, in some cases, conduct kidnappings to secure revenue and influence. Alongside this, underdeveloped formal economies in rural and border regions – especially for youth – have driven dependence on informal and illicit activities, from smuggling to armed 'protection services, which can intersect with KFR networks.³⁰ Chad's reliance on oil exports, combined with global price volatility and limited economic diversification, further deepens livelihood insecurity.³¹ In this fragile context, ransom payments – whether in cash, gold or livestock – function as both a survival tactic for communities and a profitable

enterprise for armed actors.³² Although it reflects a logic of immediate survival, ransom payment feeds a vicious cycle whereby the profitability of KFR fuels its perpetuation.³³

The deep rootedness of seasonal transhumance in Chad's rural economy and society has also become a structural risk factor for KFR in the country's central, eastern and south-western borderlands. Herding routes often traverse sparsely governed areas where security forces are absent and communication infrastructure is weak, creating opportunities for armed groups and bandits to intercept herders, seize livestock and abduct individuals for ransom. In several cases documented by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and the project Enhancing Africa's ability to Counter Transnational Crime,³⁴ pastoral conflicts and rustling incidents have escalated into organized abductions targeting transhumant families and cattle traders, with ransom payments increasingly monetized through cross-border criminal networks. The embeddedness of transhumance in local livelihoods means these risks are cyclical and predictable, mirroring the seasonal mobility of both herders and criminal actors who exploit them.³⁵

Regional and cross-border dynamics

Regionally, Chad's porous borders with its neighbours situate the landlocked country in a corridor of instability, at the crossroads of regional conflict systems, illicit trade routes and armed group movements. This precarity makes Chad acutely vulnerable to the spread of KFR and other forms of transnational organized crime. Armed conflicts in these countries, coupled with the spread of violent extremist groups such as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS)³⁶ and ISWAP, have facilitated cross-border arms trafficking, combatant movement and the blending of criminal and insurgent tactics. These conflicts have also destabilized communities, displaced populations and armed militias, and disrupted trade around border areas. In these environments, KFR is used not only to generate revenue, but also as a coercive strategy to intimidate communities, punish noncompliance and assert territorial control.³⁷

Together, these dynamics have fostered an environment in which KFR has become both a thriving criminal enterprise and a survival economy, particularly in remote and under-governed regions.

The topography of the Chad–Cameroon–CAR border region is also conducive to transnational criminality.³⁸ The landscape combines forests, open savannahs, river valleys and intersecting rural paths that form a fluid network of informal routes, which are difficult to monitor and therefore allow people and goods to bypass official checkpoints and evade detection. On a map, the border looks like a straight line, but in reality, the terrain comprises countless alternative paths.³⁹ Criminal actors exploit this flexibility, relying on generations of local knowledge and the ability to adapt quickly to limited security presence.



Mapping the dynamics of KFR in Chad

Available data, largely from journalists, suggests that an estimated 1 500 people have been kidnapped in the border area of Chad–CAR–Cameroon alone over the last 20 years. But this figure is unreliable, owing to a scarcity of reliable statistics; reporting is uneven and documentation is poor and dispersed. Figures for other regions are hard to access and verify, owing to sporadic reporting by victims' families and dispersed monitoring. Some kidnappings occur in the interior, but the majority take place in border areas, with southern Chad (Mayo-Kebbi, Logone, Moyen-Chari, Mandoul near the Cameroon/CAR borders) the most visible KFR hotspot. Figure 2 below provides an overview of abductions by region while Figure 3 profiles selected cases between 2019 and August 2025.

A typology of actors and roles

KFR is perpetrated and enabled by a layered configuration of financially motivated actors involved directly or indirectly in different aspects of KFR operations. There are three main layers: criminal group/network owners and leaders (often referred to as godfathers/sponsors); perpetrators (both professional and opportunistic); and diverse accomplices and enablers⁴⁰ (lookouts, assailants tasked with capturing victims, guards responsible for their detention, and sometimes separate negotiators in order to compartmentalize information). ISS research indicates that this typology reflects a growing professionalization of groups.⁴¹ Local experts corroborated this, suggesting that KFR perpetrators operate as distinct groups that sometimes collaborate, as opposed to a coherent criminal network. As one key informant explained: 'There are many groups, each with its own members and nobody has any idea how many groups are involved in kidnapping for ransom'.⁴²

Targets

- Schoolchildren
- Pastoralists
- Women and girls
- Humanitarian workers
- Community leaders
- Traders/transport workers

Perpetrators

- Boko Haram/ISWAP/JAS
- Cross-border bandit networks
- Local communal militias
CAR armed groups (3R, Anti-Balaka)

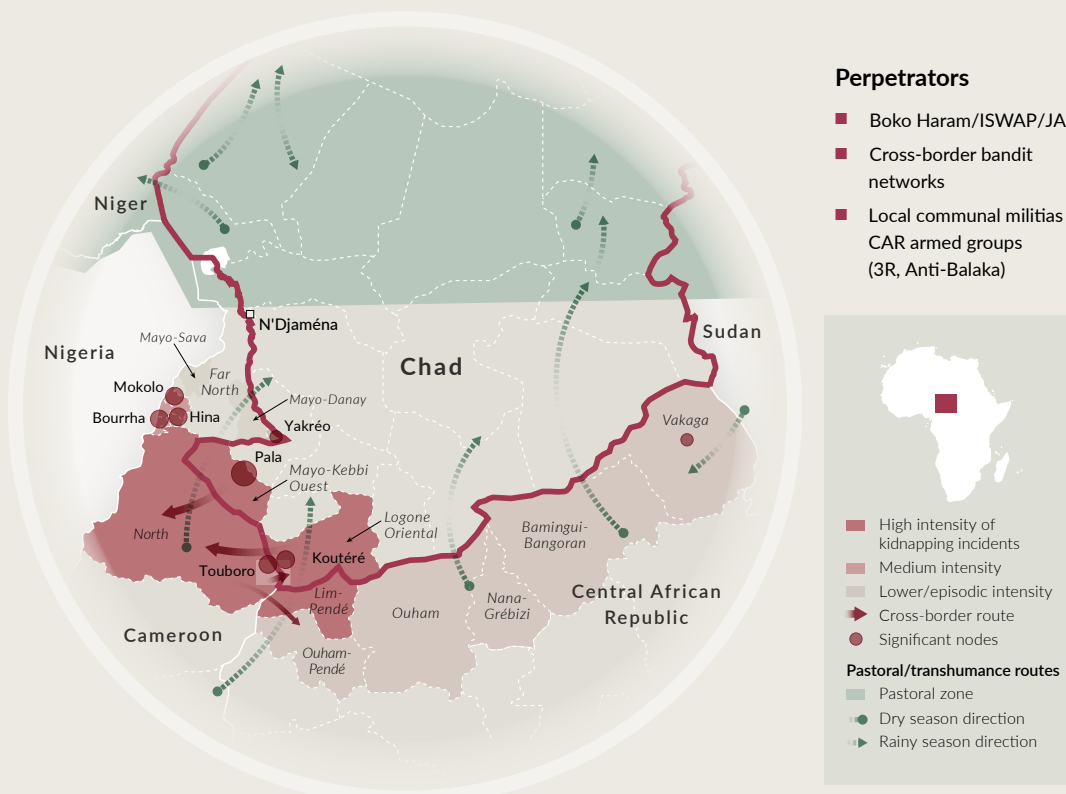


FIGURE 1 Conflict and kidnapping hotspots in Chad and its borderlands.

Approx. date range	Region/area	Countries involved	Key actors	Victim profiles
2005–2025	Mayo-Kebbi Ouest and Logone Oriental (Triangle of Death)	Chad, Cameroon, CAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cross-border bandits ■ Ex-rebels ■ CAR-based criminal networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Pastoralists/herders abducted during transhumance ■ Women and adolescent girls for ransom, gender-based violence, forced marriage ■ Traders and drivers along cross-border routes ■ Community leaders held to pressure villages ■ Refugees/returnees abducted during transit
2013–2025	Far North Region (Bourrha, Hina, Mokolo, Mogode, Touboro–Koutéré)	Cameroon, Chad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Boko Haram ■ ISWAP ■ Local bandits ■ Armed spillovers from CAR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Bus passengers/moto-taxi users abducted at fake checkpoints ■ Schoolchildren/teachers in raids on rural schools ■ Market women/traders abducted on roads ■ Young men suspected of collaboration ■ Humanitarian/health workers in insecure zones

Approx. date range	Region/area	Countries involved	Key actors	Victim profiles
2015–2025	Western CAR border zones (Vakaga, Ouham-Pendé)	CAR, Chad, Cameroon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3R rebels Anti-Balaka Armed Fulani groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chadian herders crossing into CAR Local civilians caught in retaliatory violence Humanitarian convoys/churches as targets Nomadic communities
2010–2025	Gobo/Yakreo area (Mayo-Sava)	Cameroon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local militias in ethnic conflict (e.g., Massa vs Mousgoum) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community leaders abducted as leverage Women and girls kidnapped amid communal disputes Farmers/cattle owners in reprisal attacks Internally displaced people vulnerable due to lack of protection
2000–2025	Northern Chad (Tibesti, Borkou, Ennedi)	Chad, Libya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local bandits Former rebel factions Smuggling networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traders and herders along remote routes Migrants/refugees Local community leaders as leverage Nomadic groups

FIGURE 2 Overview of cross-border kidnappings, actors and victim profiles in Chad and its borderlands, by location.

SOURCE: Author's compilation from desk sources and fieldwork

Date (approx.)	Location	Targeted victims	Alleged perpetrators	Ransom demanded/paid (XAF)	Details/outcome	Source
22 Aug 2025	Goumadji, Nanaye Department	2 men: head of Travaux village and an inhabitant of Koutak village	Not specified	None paid	Kidnappers caught and hostages rescued shortly after abduction by Chadian security forces during a pursuit operation	https://tchadinfos.com/2025/08/23/mayo-kebbi-ouest-deux-otages-liberes-a-gagal-dans-le-departement-de-nanaye/
Apr 2025	Dokab, Moundou	7-year-old child	Kidnapping was orchestrated with the complicity of the mother's cousin, a student staying with her who handed the child to kidnappers in exchange for money	15 million	Intelligence services and police cooperation led to arrests of suspects	https://tchadinfos.com/2025/04/30/moundou-les-ravis-seurs-qui-avaient-rec-lame-15-millions-de-fcfa-pour-la-liberation-dun-enfant-enleve-ont-ete-ap-prehendes/

Date (approx.)	Location	Targeted victims	Alleged perpetrators	Ransom demanded/ paid (XAF)	Details/ outcome	Source
22 Apr 2025	Mbatnaye and Faytaobout	4 hostages: 2 women (1 pregnant) and 2 men	Not specified	Not specified	The criminals were caught in Djibao, a Cameroonian locality	https://tchadinfos.com/2025/04/29/mayo-kebbi-ouest-quatre-otages-liberes/
5 Jan 2025	Paou, Monts de Lam, Logone Oriental Province	Wife and 4-month-old baby of Tamkeré Élie, director of the official school of Ngaram Tapol 2 village, Paou canton, Larmanaye. The baby was abandoned on the way.	Armed men	50 million demanded	Unknown	https://shorturl.at/EVXjS
10 Oct 2024	Mayo-Kebbi Ouest	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified; at the time of their kidnapping, the victims were stripped of their belongings, including a sum of 1.7 million	7 hostages freed and 3 alleged accomplices of the thugs arrested in the forest of Sena Oura National Park by Legion No. 17	https://realitesinfo.com/2024/10/10/mayo-kebbi-ouest-7-otages-camerounais-liberes-et-3-malfrats-arretes-presentes-a-la-presse-locale/
Sept 2024	Mayo-Kebbi Gamboké village, Pala-Erdé, Mayo-Dallah, and Travaux, Goumadji, Nanaye	3 people within 24 hours: 1 family man, 2 security guards of an enclosure	Unknown men 'armed to the teeth'	Not specified; perpetrators left a phone contact on a piece of paper and did not specify the ransom amount	Hostages rescued by security forces	https://hamama-media.com/province/mayo-kebbi-ouest-trois-personnes-enlevees-en-24-heures/
Sept 2024	Fende 2	Two Chadian health workers (a third was killed in captivity)	Armed group	Not specified	Unknown	https://reliefweb.int/report/chad/serious-security-incident-fixed-health-post-fende-2-chad
Feb 2024	Dono Manga	Polish doctor	Armed men on motorbikes	Not specified	Rescued after 3 days by joint French–Chadian operation; kidnapers killed	https://eclairageweb.wordpress.com/2024/02/10/deux-medecins-expatries-enleves-a-dono-manga-tandjile/

Date (approx.)	Location	Targeted victims	Alleged perpetrators	Ransom demanded/paid (XAF)	Details/outcome	Source
Jan–Feb 2024	Bongor	Adolescent ‘Malik’	Armed men	None; hostage sold to camel herders for free forced labour	Hostage trafficked to the remote area of Abkhouta, Ouaddaï province; likely in transit to the north, to be sold to a local trafficker, according to local testimonies	https://tchadinfos.com/2024/03/14/au-tchad-le-fleau-denlevements-denfants-a-des-fins-dexploitation-persiste/
25 June 2023	Entrance to the village of Kobo, 10 km from Goré	Driver, Adam Mahamat Youssouf, as he was driving towards the CAR border	3 armed robbers dressed in American military uniform	15 million demanded	Passengers were stripped of their belongings and the driver was kidnapped and held in bush for 7 days; shot and abandoned when he cried for help, rescued by passersby	https://shorturl.at/oxwKI
9 June 2023	Manéné village, Tagobo Foulbé, Lamé	Two men	5 unknown armed men	6 million and 500 000	Hostages held for 19 days and released after ransom payment	https://tribuneechos.com/mayo-kebbi-ouest-deux-otages-liberes-contre-6-millions-500-mille-de-fcfa-dans-la-sous-prefecture-de-lame/
Feb 2023	Konkia, Lake Province	Six fishermen taken during organized attack on fishing community	Suspected Boko Haram and/or ISWAP factions	Not specified	Hostages taken; some released	https://ndarason.com/tchad-au-lac-six-pecheurs-enleves-a-konkia/
30 Jan 2023	Lipetchokno and Tindakndi villages	2 men, abducted, on 4 and 18 January 2023	Unknown gunmen	30 million and XAF20 million, respectively	Hostages freed by intervention of nomadic herders (1 died during the confrontation)	https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Tchad-des-otages-liberes-et-un-eleveur-decede-dans-une-operation-de-sauvetage_a120888.html
Dec 2022	Mayo-Kebbi Ouest	Not specified	Unknown gunmen	20 million	2 hostages freed for ransom, leaving hostage in captivity: an 11-year-old child kidnapped on 7 September 2022	https://x.com/alwihdainfo/status/1607416431276171266
Oct 2022	Wadi Fara, north-eastern Chad	French-Australian conservationist	Not specified	Not specified	Victim released 2 days later in Tibesti after Chadian–French military rescue operation	https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Tchad-un-resortissant-franco-australien-enleve-au-Wadi-Fira_a118593.html

Date (approx.)	Location	Targeted victims	Alleged perpetrators	Ransom demanded/paid (XAF)	Details/outcome	Source
11 July 2022	Pao, Ngal, Monts de Lam, Logone Oriental	Two children under the age of 10. Kidnappers tried but failed to kidnap their father.	Armed men	Not specified	Not specified	https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Tchad-deux-enfants-enlevés-dans-un-village-aux-Monts-de-Lam-cette-nuit_a115065.html
20 May 2022	Pao (Logone Oriental),	The senior administrator of the Lycée de Mbaïbokoum, Mr. Houlda	Not specified	5 million	Killed by his kidnappers with 5 other Cameroonian hostages in neighbouring territory, despite the payment of a ransom; the 7th hostage, a minor, was left alive and raised the alarm	https://shorturl.at/guYGK
29 Sept 2021	Mayo-Kebbi Ouest, Kouala, Gagal	5 people, including a 12-year-old girl	Armed men in military fatigues carrying combat weapons	Not specified	Not specified	https://shorturl.at/aDQ7h

FIGURE 3 Selected internal KFR incidents in Chad disaggregated by location, 2019–2025.

SOURCE: Author's compilation from desk sources and fieldwork

Polycriminality is a notable dynamic, with some criminal groups responsible for KFR also involved in other forms of transnational organized crime, such as trafficking in drugs and persons. And there are additional intersections with criminal profits from one activity used to fuel operations in another.⁴³ Furthermore, criminal and armed groups and networks from Chad, Cameroon and the CAR occasionally collaborate for specific operations, such as criminal escorts or for kidnappings.⁴⁴ However, there do not seem to be direct linkages between KFR groups and terrorists, although occasional kidnappings and abductions are performed by terrorists with known ideological leanings. At the regional level, extremist factions linked to Boko Haram and ISWAP have adopted ransom-taking as a key source of revenue, using the proceeds to recruit fighters, purchase weapons and maintain cross-border mobility.⁴⁵

Godfathers and sponsors

The first layer comprises 'big men', as they are called on the ground, who control KFR groups and give the instructions for kidnappings to take place. Their identities are largely unknown, although their motive would appear to be to profit from the economy, managing the perpetrators (see below).⁴⁶ One security expert observed, 'These are not street boys or retired military or security persons, but [they are] people who have made a conscious choice to be involved in kidnapping for ransom'.⁴⁷ Some informants said they strongly believe that this group includes politicians and senior security actors.⁴⁸

Perpetrators

Some people use the term *zar(a)guinas* or *coupeurs de route* ('road-cutters' in English)⁴⁹ as an umbrella term to describe core KFR perpetrators in Chad.⁵⁰ Over the years, they have drawn in all kinds of profiles: ex-soldiers, dismissed rebels, cattle herders and members of marginalized pastoral communities trying to survive.⁵¹ They operate in small, mobile bands, using poor roads, bushland and local knowledge to ambush travellers, rob traders, and abduct people for ransom.⁵² They have been described as 'entrepreneurs of insecurity',⁵³ as they profit from instability and connect local grievances with cross-border crime.

As central to criminal economies and diverse as perpetrators are, the fieldwork for this report suggests that they do not account for the multiplicity of local and cross-border KFR actors in Chad and surrounding areas. Local analysts described incidental 'criminals': one-off actors who use KFR as a means to an end, such as raising capital to start legitimate businesses.⁵⁴ Although there are overlaps, professional kidnapping networks with cross-border logistical support and strategic intent cannot be compared with opportunistic kidnapers exploiting contextual vulnerabilities and victims' precarities.⁵⁵ Treating these distinct groups as a monolith presents a false picture of KFR and risks undermining the design of effective, targeted responses.

In terms of ethnicity, many interlocutors believe perpetrators to be of Hausa and Fulani ethnicity, based on the languages they have heard them speak.⁵⁶ However, given that pastoralists who circulate in the region speak many languages, mainly Fulfulde (Fulani), Hausa, Arabic and Sango, kidnapers' ethnicities are likely to be more diverse. This gives credence to the belief that kidnapers, locally known as *ravisseurs* or *malfrats*, are nationals of different countries, namely Chad, Cameroon, the CAR, Niger and Nigeria.⁵⁷ However, many easily acquire identity documents from other countries, making their identities hard to confirm.⁵⁸

Although this constellation of actors are linked by their involvement in KFR, little is known about the extent or nature of their operational collaboration. Emerging evidence of divergent mobility patterns and tactics underscores the need for in-depth sociological research to better understand their identities, relationships and distinct modes of operation.

Accomplices and enablers

The third layer comprises traditional rulers, community members, family members, youth, taxi drivers and women who are part of the commercial, criminal and sexual economies, including around the forest reserves in border areas. These people act as informants who identify potential kidnapping targets. They also host perpetrators who sometimes mingle in their targets' communities by disguising themselves as visitors and relatives of community members.⁵⁹ According to one activist, 'they [enablers] are so well informed that they know when their targets are home and which specific rooms they sleep in'.⁶⁰

Victim profiles and motives for kidnappings

Patterns and forms of KFR vary across regions and borderlands, reflecting the impact of geography, livelihood systems, conflict histories, economic drivers, cross-border criminal networks and dynamics, and local insecurity profiles. Despite these variations, common threads emerge. For instance, the most preferred targets are pastoralists, transhumant traders, gold collectors and traders, and other economic actors, as they represent 'pockets of solvency' capable of mobilizing resources quickly. This makes

KFR a veritable criminal economy, structured around a rational calculation of costs and benefits.⁶¹ Our analysis demonstrates the interwoven nature of KFR with other non-ransom forms and its implications for national and regional criminal economies.

Motives for KFR are multifaceted and vary according to the perpetrator profile, but they collectively reflect a broad pattern of financial and strategic gain, including economic predation, conflict retaliation, the financing of armed groups, and recruitment for extremist groups and gold mines. Perpetrators specifically target gold collectors, intercepting financial and material flows at both ends of the illegal gold trade.⁶² Many perpetrators' motives are largely monetary, as evidenced by the relatively well-to-do profiles of targeted victims.⁶³ Besides these target groups, anyone suspected of having the means to pay ransoms, no matter how small, can be targeted.⁶⁴

Some actors are driven by survival, such as Fulani herders dispossessed of their cattle wealth through KFR, conflict or climate-induced displacement from other countries, notably the CAR.⁶⁵

At the local level, ransoms provide a steady income for polycriminal networks involved in cattle rustling, arms trading and smuggling, helping them sustain logistics and buy protection.⁶⁶ Reports from the UN Security Council Panel on the Lake Chad Basin confirm that ransom payments in cash and kind often circulate through the same intermediaries and routes that service other illicit economies.⁶⁷ As a result, KFR has become not only a criminal enterprise but also a financial lifeline that connects local banditry to wider networks of violent extremism.⁶⁸



Refugees and displaced persons fleeing the civil war in Sudan who shelter in camps such as this in Aboutengé, eastern Chad, have been occasionally targeted by kidnappers. © Eva Krafczyk/picture alliance via Getty Images

In Mayo-Kebbi and Moyen-Chari, farmer–herder disputes over land access and cattle theft are frequently accompanied by retaliatory abductions, where families are kidnapped until rival groups pay ransom or return stolen livestock.⁶⁹ Traditional leaders have occasionally been targeted, particularly where they are seen as gatekeepers to community resources or conflict mediation. Abductions are conducted by armed groups straddling both sides of the border, including ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka factions, with Chadian auxiliaries.⁷⁰ Motives are overwhelmingly economic, though disputes rooted in farmer–herder tensions sometimes fuel kidnappings for punishment or leverage. Motives include financing of militias and projection of power into Chadian border villages. Since 2013, the spillover of CAR’s civil war has entrenched these dynamics, transforming KFR into a transnational revenue stream.

KFR trends in northern Chad (Tibesti, Borkou near the Libya/Niger borders) illustrate a shift in victim profiles over the past decade. In the 1990s and early 2000s, traders and truck drivers on desert routes were frequently ambushed. More recently, the gold rush in Tibesti has made local and foreign miners from Sudan and Niger prime targets.⁷¹ Armed groups and rebel factions abduct miners for ransom or to secure territorial control of mining concessions, embedding KFR in extractive economies. The circulation of arms from Libya and the porous desert borders reinforce this dynamic. Unlike in the south or east, KFR in the north is closely linked to rebel financing, reflecting the hybrid character of predation and political insurgency.

In western Chad (Lac Province near the Nigeria/Niger borders, Lake Chad Basin), which is facing a protracted terrorist crisis, KFR is shaped by the insurgencies of JAS and ISWAP who carry out abductions in this region. Victims include fishermen, pastoralists and market traders, abducted both for ransom and as instruments of coercion to enforce compliance with insurgent taxation or intelligence demands.⁷² Fishermen are targeted because they work in areas controlled by armed groups, often carry food and supplies, and are seen as possible informants for security forces.⁷³ Chiefs and community leaders have also been targeted to destabilize local governance. Although ransom demands prevail, abductions are often inseparable from broader insurgent logics of control, punishment and recruitment. This distinguishes the Lac Province from other regions, where economic ransom extraction is the dominant motive. Over the years, KFR in this area has moved from opportunistic banditry to being embedded within insurgent operational practices.

In eastern Chad (Ouaddaï, Sila, Wadi Fira near the Sudan/Darfur borders), KFR often overlaps with intercommunal conflict and cross-border conflict economies. Victims are typically targeted from among rival pastoralist communities (Zaghawa, Tama, Arab groups) or traders moving along Sudanese

There have been occasional kidnappings of foreigners for profit. Jérôme Hugonnot, a wildlife preservation NGO worker, seen here, who was kidnapped in 2022, speaks after his release at a military base in N’Djaména.

© AFP via Getty Images



routes. Kidnapping has functioned both as predation and as a tactical instrument in cycles of revenge, particularly during and after the Darfur conflict, when Chadian communities were drawn into cross-border hostilities.⁷⁴ Refugees and displaced persons in camps have also been occasional targets, highlighting the vulnerability of these populations. Motives include ransoms, but kidnappings also serve as coercive tools in communal disputes or to assert control over trans-Saharan trade and arms routes. Although cases appear more sporadic than in the south, their entanglement with militia financing and conflict dynamics makes them structurally persistent. There have also been occasional kidnappings of foreign humanitarian workers and other foreigners or expatriates for profit.⁷⁵

Operating tactics and modalities

The patterns of action that lead to KFR typically involve some level of close surveillance of carefully selected targets, followed by acts of kidnapping, which are usually sudden and violent, by groups of three to nine heavily armed men.⁷⁶ Attacks often happen late at night, between 11pm and 2am, although some schoolchildren have been taken during the day.⁷⁷ Blindfolded hostages are then taken away and transferred to isolated locations, usually across borders, and forced to move every hour to avoid detection.⁷⁸ These tactics are used to make it difficult for national forces to intervene and to exploit jurisdictional boundaries and the lack of coordination between the security infrastructures of the tri-border states.⁷⁹

Perpetrators are often masked or turbaned men reportedly speaking Hausa, Peul or, more often, Chadian Arabic, which is seen by some local experts as an intentional strategy to defy ethnic identification, given the status of Chadian Arabic as a lingua franca across the country.⁸⁰ 'They will take victims from Chad to Cameroon and Cameroon to Chad [and other countries]. They use Cameroonian phone numbers and the ransoms are paid in Chad for Cameroon victims and in Cameroon for Chadian victims.'⁸¹

During captivity, kidnapers constantly threaten to hurt or kill hostages if ransoms delay or hostages and their family members do not cooperate.⁸² One activist said, 'Sometimes perpetrators will kill victims or relatives of victims if they resist during a kidnap attempt. They also kill those who slow them down after being kidnapped and hostages who resist instructions. They kill too if security forces or community defence groups chase them after a kidnapping and need to escape abruptly'.⁸³ Some women and girls suffer sexual assault and rape during captivity, although there is not enough data to determine if this is opportunistic exploitation or a systematic tactic of kidnapers.⁸⁴ Although many incidents have historically involved one or two individuals, there seems to be a growing trend, notably in the Lake Chad Basin, toward larger-scale, mass kidnappings involving large groups being taken at a time.

The ransoms demanded range from XAF1 million up to about XAF40 million, depending on the perceived profile of the hostage and their family, as well as the ability of the community to contribute.⁸⁵ Ransoms are paid in different currencies, including naira and Central African francs. Payments can be made in cash or kind in the form of cattle, which are either swum or transported by kidnapers across shallow lacustrine borders using motorized canoes.⁸⁶ There is a chain of processes and people through which payments travel between families of hostages and the recipients of the ransom, making it hard to identify beneficiaries. Hostages can be held for up to two months, though many abductions reported by local media last an average of a few days to several weeks. American missionary Stephen Godbold, kidnapped in October 2007 by the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad, was held for nine months,⁸⁷ while a state-employed medical team was reportedly held for up to two years because the government refused to pay a ransom.⁸⁸

Gender dynamics

Women play critical but understudied roles in KFR economies.⁸⁹ Most experts interviewed for this report framed women's roles primarily in terms of victimhood, focusing on their personal abductions and the emotional toll of having their husbands or children kidnapped and advocating for their rescue and ransom payments.⁹⁰ However, this narrative contrasts with emerging evidence of female perpetrators whose roles mirror those of women in groups like Boko Haram – including recruitment, logistics, gun running and surveillance⁹¹ – with some having been arrested and imprisoned.⁹²

Cultural norms that discourage women's involvement in violence have helped camouflage their direct and indirect roles, including as informants, enablers, clients and perpetrators. Such norms also overlook the transactional economies surrounding KFR, obscuring both women's agency and their exploitation within these networks. According to one interlocutor, 'even if any women are involved in KFR, it will likely be involuntary'.⁹³

Perpetrators of KFR, enriched by ransom payments, use their financial power to engage in pseudo-transactional relationships with women in order to buy access to local intelligence in an understudied sexual economy.⁹⁴ Women are reportedly being instrumentalized by kidnappers to identify potential targets or facilitate abductions, highlighting the complex and gendered roles women can play not only as victims, but also as enablers within affected communities. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for accurate documentation and designing gender-transformative interventions that recognize and respond to women's complex agency.

Beyond ransoms: Other forms of kidnapping in Chad's criminal economy

KFR is only one form of kidnapping and abduction committed by diverse actors for various reasons in different parts of the country, including the capital, N'Djaména. KFR occurs alongside, and sometimes overlaps with, other forms of kidnapping motivated primarily by retaliation, strategic advantage and leverage, and human trafficking.

Many non-KFR incidents are political and involve abductions of media and opposition figures by state security personnel.⁹⁵ The latest example is Dr Assyongar Succès Masra, president of the Les Transformateurs opposition party, taken forcefully from his home by men in military uniform in May 2025.⁹⁶ Kidnapping in such cases functions as a tool for intimidation and silencing in a climate of control and fear-driven self-censure.⁹⁷

High-profile cases that end in rescue before a ransom demand is made or with no public disclosure of ransom may have political undertones to the extent that selected expatriates are targeted for political negotiation under this category, but the extent to which this is true is ambiguous. A notable example occurred in 2022 when Jérôme Hugonnot, a Franco-Australian conservationist, was abducted in eastern Chad and released three days later following coordinated security and diplomatic efforts.⁹⁸

Other kidnappings are purportedly cultural. In one famous case, a young female TikTok influencer known as Miss Simian was allegedly kidnapped from her home in N'Djaména by armed men in January 2025.⁹⁹ Her sister attributed the attack to a kinsman army general who reportedly said she was 'ruining their "honour"' by using social media.¹⁰⁰ Kidnapping here served as a tool for social control and correction or punishment, in this case, of women seen as culturally deviant.

Exploitative kidnappings target victims for varying purposes. Terror groups – namely JAS and its armed sub-groups, Bakura and Buduma¹⁰¹ – abduct women and girls in the Lake Chad Basin region for sexual and domestic slavery and also target children to become recruits, suicide bombers and labourers.¹⁰² In northern Chad, children¹⁰³ from vulnerable families and those living in isolated areas are taken and trafficked for forced illegal gold mining¹⁰⁴ and domestic labour,¹⁰⁵ and to work as shepherds for camel herds.¹⁰⁶

Kidnappers also target and kill people seen as threats, such as journalists, vigilance committee¹⁰⁷ members and activists who expose their activities in a form of power play and punishment.¹⁰⁸ KFR actors have threatened some activists and journalists for denouncing them or giving information to authorities.¹⁰⁹ American missionary Steven Godbold was kidnapped by the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad, a rebel group, on suspicion that he was working for Chadian intelligence.¹¹⁰

Although KFR and non-ransom abductions have different motives, and disparities in media reporting reduce the visibility of non-ransom abductions, the forms are related. They operate within the same criminal economies and are sometimes committed by the same actors, as is the case with terror groups in the Lake Chad area, causing motives to intersect. Further, non-ransom kidnappings help reinforce the power and territorial control of armed and criminal actors, helping to sustain the same criminal order and compel communities to continue complying with their demands. Understanding the criminal sub-economy of non-ransom kidnappings is thus a key aspect of effectively addressing KFR in Chad.

Abductions as personal retribution

Some abductions have also been initiated by victims' friends, family members or community members as part of personal conflicts stemming from financial envy or petty disagreements. In one case widely reported in local and global media, Bessami Vaïo, who was kidnapped just after selling about 40 oxen, was told by his kidnappers: 'You can thank your friends, they're the ones who betrayed you'.¹¹¹ Informants shared several such stories of people arranging the abductions of siblings for revenge or leverage during family disputes.¹¹² In another example, a woman had her older brother kidnapped because he accused her of witchcraft.¹¹³ Similarly, a young man had his older brother killed and got his family kidnapped over an inheritance dispute.¹¹⁴



Assessing the consequences and implications

KFR has had a number of negative, interrelated consequences on different aspects of the economy, society, regional stability and development in Chad and its borderlands.

National security and regional stability

At national and regional levels, KFR is steadily undermining state authority and legitimacy in the tri-border area and threatening regional stability. On one hand, KFR and other criminal economies have developed their own systems of control and influence that often rival the authority of the state. This creates and empowers informal power brokers who redistribute resources through patronage networks and enforce their own rules, typically through fear, loyalty and/or violence. These dynamics are especially pronounced in border and peripheral areas where state presence is weak. Over time, such areas risk sliding into parallel governance, operating outside national oversight and providing safe havens for traffickers, armed groups or communities mobilizing for violent purposes.¹¹⁵

On the other hand, the Chadian state's slow pace of policy and security responses, which was repeatedly noted by many during fieldwork, is fuelling declining trust in the state's ability to protect its citizens and driving them into transactional relationships with armed groups for protection. This increases the risks of escalating violence, emerging local militias and socio-political fragmentation with corresponding cross-border impacts.¹¹⁶

Disrupted lives, livelihoods and social cohesion

The impacts of KFR are acute at the community level. The fear of being kidnapped has forced many Chadians to flee their homes and villages for towns in and outside the country. These mass displacements, often to other communities facing arguably lesser crises, are putting pressure on oversubscribed natural resources and worsening inter- and intra-community conflict in contexts of rapidly deteriorating social

cohesion. Forced displacements also keep children out of school, creating a risk of grievance that could drive future rebellions among already marginalized populations where state presence is limited. Educational disruption and deprivation, along with other adverse impacts, are exacerbated by the reluctance of civil servants, including teachers and medical workers, to relocate to affected areas due to fear of harm.

KFR is also distorting traditional rural livelihoods of farming, herding and trading. Herders and farmers are forced to sell livestock and abandon farmlands to take up new, often less lucrative occupations, causing drastic reductions in their earning ability and incomes. This has had a significant negative impact on food security and the economies of affected communities. Poverty is rising as some victims are forced to sell all their assets (herds of cattle or entire harvests) to raise resources to pay heavy ransoms, making them unable to afford basic expenses and thereby increasing the risk of generational deprivation.¹¹⁷

Rising criminality

All these impacts have the cumulative effect of increased vulnerability to criminality, especially among youth and people of former means dispossessed by conflict or KFR.¹¹⁸ Gendered implications include increased precarity of women and girls regarding sexual exploitation and transactional sex for survival. The emergence of professional middlemen who liaise between kidnapers and hostages' families is evidence of a growing criminal political economy and the entrenchment of spoiler groups with a stake in prolonging the status quo.

Kidnappers systematically co-opt such groups, which include traditional leaders in some communities, through financial incentives, deepening insecurity and undermining accountability. Upon arriving in a community, bandits may pose as legitimate figures and intentionally overspend on local goods or give chiefs envelopes containing XAF100 000–200 000 (US\$177–345), concealing their presence. After successful operations, kidnapers can give chiefs up to XAF1 million (approximately US\$1770) in exchange for their silence or active interference with security efforts. This flow of ransom money through traditional structures embeds kidnapping into local governance, blurring the lines between authority and illegality.

Generational trauma

Victims of KFR often endure severe psychological trauma resulting from prolonged captivity, physical torture, witnessing killings and, for women, sexual violence.¹¹⁹ One activist explained, 'Survivors live in fear and anguish, and many say they are still afraid the kidnapers will return, by reason of which they have nightmares, display isolationist behaviour, and express distrust that makes them avoid other people'.¹²⁰

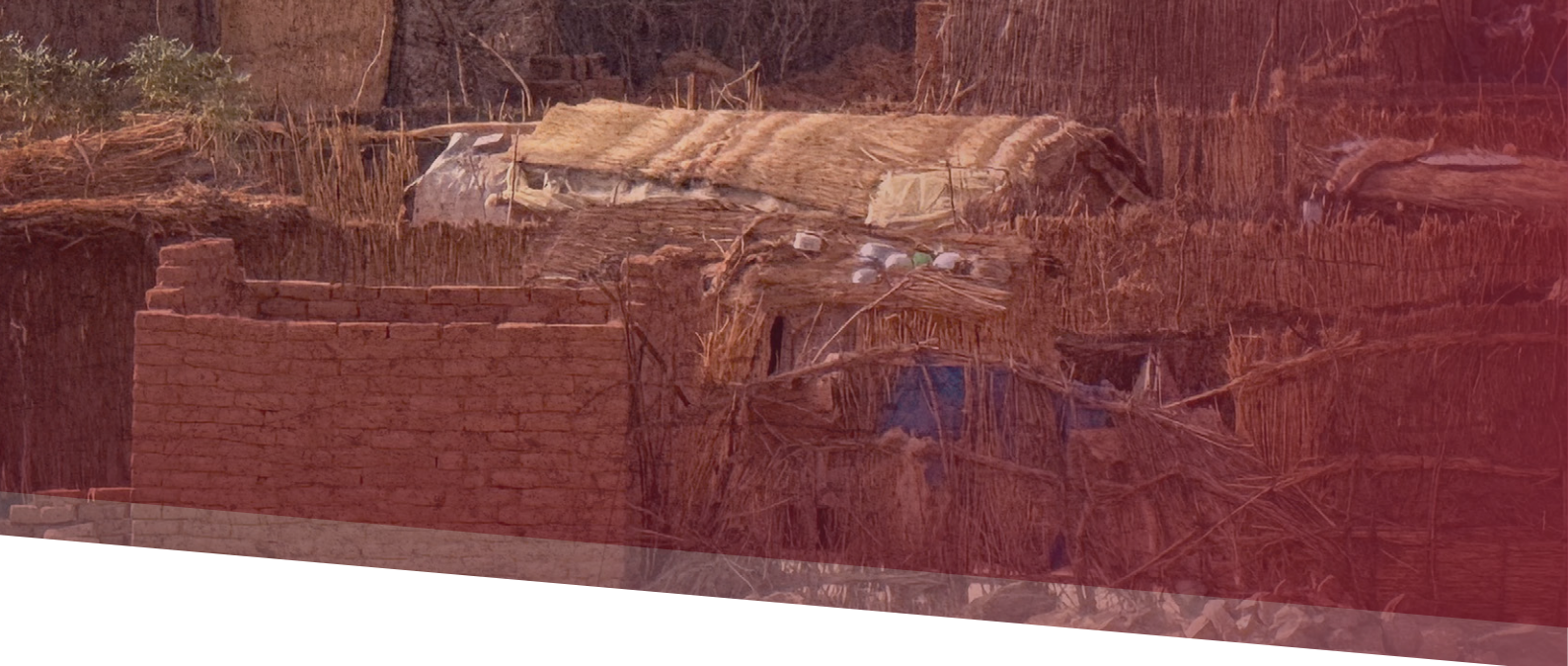
These experiences are rarely met with adequate post-traumatic support, leaving survivors and their families to cope alone with lasting emotional and mental health consequences. As interlocutors said, 'There are many victims but the level of available support does not correspond'.¹²¹ For men, the inability to protect or provide for their families during or after abduction can lead to feelings of emasculation and social failure. This perceived loss of status and control may, in turn, fuel harmful coping mechanisms, including increased tensions within households and rising incidences of gender-based violence.

Some civil society organizations try to provide support services but working in affected areas is unsafe and puts them at risk of becoming targets. Unstable funding also limits their efforts: one NGO was cut off from former US funding early this year. One activist from this NGO said, 'We are now dependent on funding from UN torture programmes but this limits the scope of what we can do and who we can support'.¹²²

Insecurity and arrested development

Insecurity has steadily undermined development and driven out humanitarian engagement in parts of southern Chad and the tri-border area, leaving affected communities without essential services, protection and relief. Over the past decade, many programmes that once addressed governance, rural development and community resilience have either scaled down or withdrawn altogether as security risks intensified. Local security experts said the shift has been stark: 'Ten years ago there were many projects, some funded by the EU, but now there are only a few targeted on parks',¹²³ referring to the current development focus on conservation in southern Chad, led by organizations like the Sahara Conservation Fund. While these projects play an important role in environmental protection, the decline in broader development and stabilization efforts has left significant gaps in support for communities already exposed to insecurity and economic marginalization.

As an ISS study recently noted, the tri-border area remains a 'powder keg of crime', amid high and rising insecurity resulting from decades of protracted conflict, arms flows and the proliferation of violent armed groups.¹²⁴ As criminal networks continue to gain strength and notoriety, partly fuelled by the lack of coordinated individual and collective responses by affected states, the region risks sliding into a severe security crisis in which armed groups outpace state authority.



Countering KFR: Overview of responses

The state's role and responses

On the whole, the state's responses to KFR have been insufficient and ineffective. The Chadian government has mainly adopted military tactics, successively deploying the Direction générale des services de sécurité des institutions de l'État, an elite military unit, and the Groupement Mobile d'Intervention de la Police, a special force within the Chadian national police responsible for maintaining order. It also mounts special operations like the joint French-Chadian mission that rescued a Polish doctor kidnapped in southern Chad in 2024.¹²⁵

Previous ISS research has observed that military operations supported by reinforcements from other provinces have occasionally helped rescue hostages and arrest kidnappers, but these outcomes are inconsistent. Some governors – appointed provincial leaders, many of whom are military or former military personnel – have effectively mobilized security efforts to pursue kidnappers and free hostages. The government has sometimes replaced governors seen as ineffective – such as Général Teguen Idibei Berdé, who was replaced after six months – in regions like Mayo-Kebbi where KFR is widespread. Although this suggests a serious stance on the part of the state, it is part of a broader pattern of frequent political reshuffling, including a major overhaul of the security sector in 2024. Locals view it as patronage tactics hindering effective responses to security issues. Some governors use personal connections with provincial authorities in other countries to facilitate cross-border intelligence exchanges, but these efforts are generally informal and unstructured.

State security efforts have yet to contain KFR for several reasons. In the past, Chad's simultaneous commitments to multiple military coalitions and peace support missions – including the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which is fighting JAS and ISWAP along Chad's western border – left limited security resources to address other threats, making them appear overlooked. As an interlocutor said, 'Resources are a challenge: there is a deficit and there are not enough security agents to patrol the vast borders and protect the people who live there.' Analysts have also noted how the war in Sudan has shifted

Chad's focus to its eastern border, with border security costing approximately US\$3 million a day. This may explain the lack of a dedicated security task force constantly patrolling the border areas in northern and southern Chad and the inadequate presence of security actors and outposts in affected communities. Both have often caused delayed security responses that have gradually eroded community trust in the state's ability to protect them.

The state has also led security operations in partnership with community vigilance groups in affected areas. However, the relationship has become strained due to a lack of resources and groups' frustration over what they see as limited recognition for the high-risk roles they play in protecting civilians and reporting crimes. Despite operating in areas where the state presence is weak and often being the first to respond before security forces arrive, their contributions often go unacknowledged in official discussions or support systems. This perceived lack of credit has worsened mistrust, even though these groups remain vital links between communities and the state.

Buoyed by the notion that KFR is 'against Chadian culture'¹²⁶ – an allusion to the local social intolerance for violence – the Chadian government seems to be treating KFR as an external threat to be defeated militarily. This approach overlooks internal sociopolitical dynamics and how security responses are antagonizing already aggrieved citizens. This approach also creates a paradox between Chad's globally reputed military aptitude and its inability to surmount its growing KFR problem – a challenge caused less by a lack of tactical/operational effectiveness and more by a narrow-militarized response and insufficient troops, equipment and funding. Further still, during security interventions, communities are reportedly compelled to pay security actors for petrol and food,¹²⁷ deepening existing fractures between state and citizens. Coupled with heavy ransom payments, this amounts to double taxation that further alienates citizens from the state.

The externalization of KFR also leads to issues with the allocation of security resources. In N'Djaména, several participants mentioned that KFR is considered 'a problem of the south' that does not affect people elsewhere. Since many wealthy northerners live and work in southern Chad, this distancing can also be seen as targeting them. It may also be linked to a long-standing history of north-south divisions, fuelled by northern dominance of political and security power for much of Chad's history.

The collusion and complicity of senior officials and security actors through arms rentals to criminals and disruptions of justice is another weak link in effective security responses. This is partly due to security actors not being paid properly and turning to crime as a means of survival. Additionally, a long history of civilian abuse by security personnel, including recent incidents in KFR- and conflict-affected areas, has fostered distrust that hampers fruitful collaboration. Civilians also fear retaliation by perpetrators if they are seen working with security forces. Politically, frequent reshufflings of ministers, governors, prefects and sub-prefects¹²⁸ by successive ruling governments have negatively impacted leadership and coordinated action against KFR. The heavy reliance on military responses has failed to address the complex root causes of insecurity, many of which are worsened by the very use of force as the primary solution.

Regional security responses

As analysts have warned, the nature of insurgency and organized criminality in the region makes unilateral approaches untenable.¹²⁹ Yet the current security landscape is fragmented, with collective security efforts focused primarily on countering terrorist attacks by JAS and ISWAP along Chad's borders with Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon. Regional responses have included initiatives under both bilateral and multilateral security cooperation frameworks. Bilateral mixed commissions on defence

and security – particularly between Chad, Cameroon and the CAR – have discussed the creation of joint border security forces.¹³⁰ However, these efforts have been sporadic and inconsistent, limiting their ability to compensate for weak national responses to cross-border threats. And those existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms operate in parallel with limited coordination. Their overall impact is undermined by overlap of structures, and lack of clear articulation on how they collectively address shared threats of terrorism, KFR and transnational organized crime.

Inter-state tensions have compromised regional efforts. For example, long-strained relations between Chad and the CAR led to the closure of their joint border for almost a decade. In late 2024, however, both governments began cautiously re-engaging,¹³¹ driven by shared security concerns and a recognition of the need for coordinated border management. Notably, the Chad–CAR mixed commission met at ministerial level for the first time in almost 10 years,¹³² signalling a gradual thaw in relations and tentative efforts to rebuild trust after years of tension.

Chad and Sudan once maintained a joint border force, created in 2010 to stabilize their shared border after years of tension. Comprising about 3 000 troops with shared command, the force helped monitor movements and reduce cross-border raids but became largely inactive after Sudan's civil war broke out in 2023. Instead of a standing joint force or formal agreement with Libya, coordination has been more ad hoc: sporadic contacts and limited cooperation between N'Djaména and General Khalifa Haftar's forces against Chadian rebel groups in southern Libya. Besides the MNJTF, headquartered in N'Djaména, there is no dedicated collective security force fighting transnational organized crime in other parts of the country. The MNJTF is primarily mandated to lead the fight against terrorism and ensure peace and stability in the Lake Chad Basin area.¹³³ There is no comparable dedicated force fighting against KFR in affected areas. The force has achieved notable successes against terrorists and related groups, but its ability to maintain and grow these gains is increasingly at risk. Tactical and operational limitations – exacerbated by Niger's recent withdrawal and Chad's announced plan to follow after deadly attacks on its forces in 2024 – pose serious threats to the MNJTF's effectiveness. The MNJTF remains severely underfunded and lacks the operational capacity needed to address the growing scale and complexity of the terror threat in the Lake Chad Basin, let alone KFR.

The MNJTF now stands at a critical juncture. If funding constraints continue, the force risks severe degradation. This comes at a time of declining troop numbers, rising insecurity, and growing convergence between powerful criminal groups and terrorist actors, a worrying trend already afoot in northwest Nigeria.¹³⁴ A weakened MNJTF reduces cross-border coordination, leaving more operational space to armed actors. Jihadists could exploit this leeway to strengthen their relations with Sahelian criminal networks, further heightening security risks.

In this context, there is urgent need for all parties – member states, regional bodies and international partners – to convene and re-evaluate the security architecture in Chad and other conflict-affected regions.

Collective security efforts are being further compromised by uncertainty around the status of policies needed to facilitate cross-border security movements, such as the right of (hot) pursuit. Regional security actors rightfully note that this exists in international law,¹³⁵ while state security and civil society observe that its absence has prevented security actors from pursuing and apprehending fleeing kidnappers. International law does provide the right of hot pursuit but only at sea:

General international law does not recognize a right of hot pursuit on land since it would be a violation of the territorial sovereignty of a state. Hot pursuit on land could only be legally exercised if the explicit consent of the states concerned were included in an international agreement.¹³⁶

These divergent views on one particular policy suggest that relevant policy frameworks are either non-existent or inaccessible to policy actors, providing further evidence of a disconnect between security and civilian actors.

Security intelligence is shared at a regional level through the Regional Intelligence Fusion Centre created in 2014 to facilitate communication among states affected by the Boko Haram crisis.¹³⁷ While it is functional and useful, its primary focus is counterterrorism intelligence. Security experts also noted a gap between the availability of good intelligence and effective, actionable strategies – a disjuncture partly occasioned, at a regional level, by disparities in capacity and training of security actors in different countries.¹³⁸

Community and civil society responses

Allied to state responses, some communities have created committees of the wise, anti-KFR vigilance committees or self-defence groups, which can be loosely described as vigilante groups.¹³⁹ They all perform similar functions, including night patrols, surveillance and intelligence,¹⁴⁰ but self-defence groups are usually armed, whereas the others are typically unarmed or use sticks, and bows and arrows. The latter are no match for the Kalashnikovs and other sophisticated weapons kidnapers sometimes use.¹⁴¹

‘Vigilante’ groups usually comprise young men and other community members who know the area well. They play a crucial role channelling local information to security agents.¹⁴² Furthermore, their embeddedness in communities enables them to function as front line responders to kidnappings, before security officials arrive. However, although vigilantes have the advantage of local intelligence, they are generally unpaid and are not present in all communities.

Civil society actors have advocated for more effective, collaborative and hybrid responses to KFR.¹⁴³ Women activists and groups have organized protests denouncing the violence of KFR as part of a broader movement against instability and gender-based violence.¹⁴⁴ Some civil society organizations provide practical support to survivors, including medical and counselling services, but many face resourcing, logistical and infrastructural challenges that impede their work.¹⁴⁵

Legal and strategic gaps

Some of Chad’s political leaders have expressed tough policy stances against KFR. In 2020, former president Idriss Deby Itno stated that he had ‘given strong instructions to eradicate the phenomenon of child kidnapping for ransom’.¹⁴⁶ At a campaign rally in April 2024, now-president Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno told the National Security Council, ‘The fight against the phenomenon of kidnapping for ransom will be my priority’.¹⁴⁷ However, few have made similar statements and rhetoric has not translated into concrete, effective responses.

Adding to the inconsistencies in the state’s responses to KFR is the lack of a clear and strong legal framework to address it. Although the state classifies KFR under anti-terrorism laws, this mix-up with ideologically motivated acts fails to reflect the unique aspects of ransom-driven crime. Consequently, suspects are often held in pre-trial detention for between one and three years but are released without trial due to procedural gaps and the absence of solid legal provisions. This situation is worsened by corruption in the judicial system and collusion among some security actors. This pattern has created a

permissive environment where perpetrators suspect they will be released eventually, which encourages ongoing cycles of re-offending.

The country's heavy focus on militarized responses has also failed to address the root causes of KFR, which are deeply rooted in poverty, marginalization, weak local governance, and community fragmentation. Development and peacebuilding efforts remain minimal or non-existent in affected areas. This security-focused approach not only isolates communities but also worsens the already fragile relationship between the state and its citizens.

Another critical gap is the exclusion of local populations from security dialogues and operations. Security actors often operate without tapping into the intimate local knowledge communities hold, leading to missed opportunities for early warning, intelligence-gathering and community-based prevention. This disconnect not only reduces the effectiveness of security responses but also deepens public disillusionment with the state's ability to protect them.

There is no standard position on how to respond to KFR, leading to fragmented and often conflicting approaches by the state and affected communities. The state prioritizes regime protection and adheres to a policy of refusing to pay ransoms, arguing that doing so could incentivize further attacks. In contrast, families and communities – driven by urgency and personal loss – often mobilize quickly to secure the release of loved ones, including by negotiating with or paying kidnappers. These opposing strategies operate at cross purposes, weakening the overall response. One security official described a 2021 abduction involving state medical workers (a doctor and two nurses) reportedly held captive for two years due to the state's refusal to pay ransom.¹⁴⁸ We were unable to verify the incident but found a case of three health workers kidnapped in Lake Chad in 2019 and held for 10 months.¹⁴⁹ The latter case, like many others, highlights the human cost of the absence of a coordinated national policy on KFR.

Another challenge is the lack of mechanisms to compel cooperation from corporate entities like telecommunications companies, which may have access to relevant intelligence. For example, in the Mayo-Kebbi region in September 2024, perpetrators left a phone number on a piece of paper, although they did not immediately specify a ransom. The same issue applies to financial institutions, which can help track unusual money movements to identify people involved in incidents. Currently, there are no clear structures to require or enable these actors to support investigations or help identify individuals using phone numbers and bank accounts linked to ransom demands. Although ransom payments are mostly made in cash or cattle, banks are seen as a potential source of intelligence on unusual financial activity that could be traced back to kidnappers and their accomplices. This gap highlights a broader weakness: the absence of a coherent, state-led strategy that recognizes the complex nature of the KFR crisis, clearly defines roles and mandates collaboration across sectors.

Civil society actors, while vocal, are often seen by the security establishment as adversaries rather than partners. This perception limits opportunities for meaningful collaboration on preventive strategies. Reports by journalists and civil society organizations are frequently ignored or not acted upon, contributing to a sense of impunity and state disengagement from the everyday security concerns of its citizens. This lack of official response to public information feeds a broader culture of silence and mistrust. There is a pressing need to foster a more constructive relationship that leverages the unique capacities of civil society in trust-building, local mediation and community engagement.

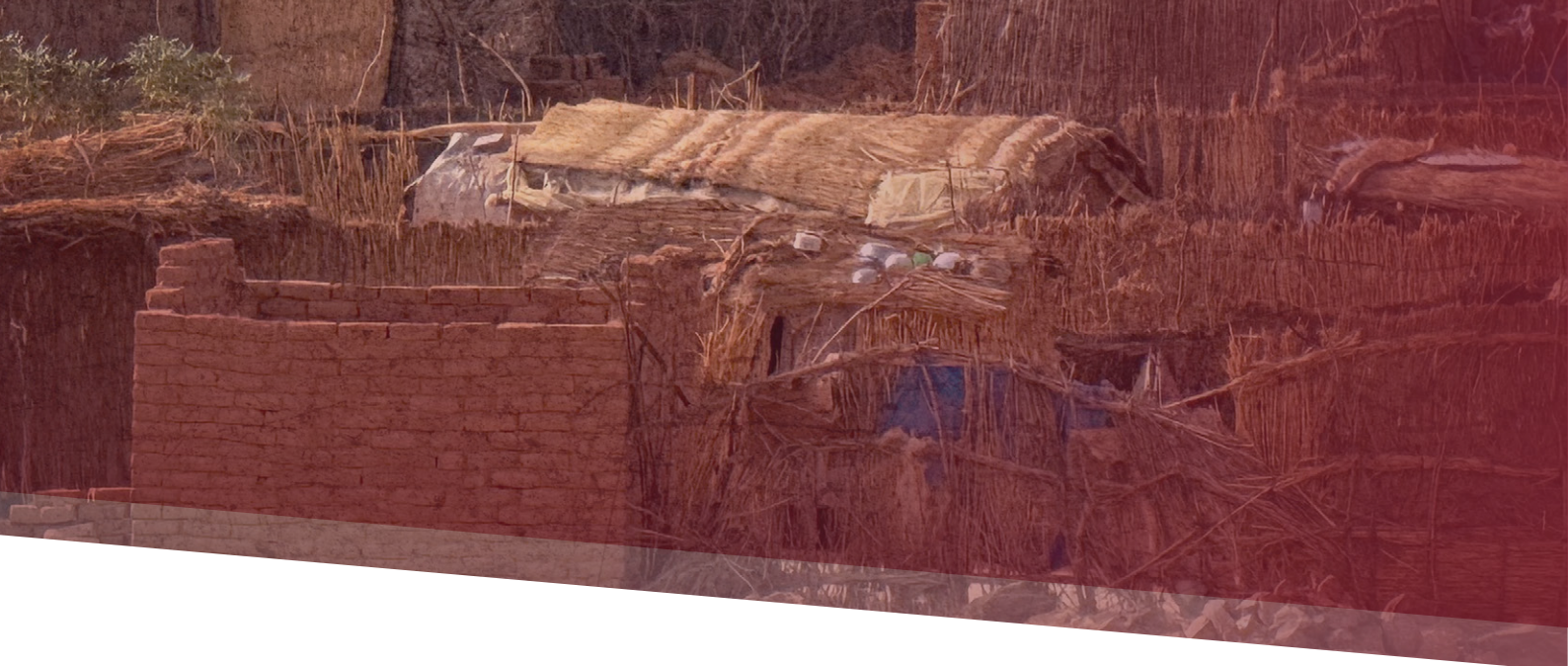
That said, civil society in Chad is fragmented and lacks cohesion. It is evolving in a dispersed and often uncoordinated manner, with limited solidarity across organizations. Generational divides persist, with more established and better-resourced civil society organizations often viewing newer actors as less

legitimate and excluding them from collaboration. Some prominent platforms have remained closed networks, operating as small circles of five to six organizations for years without admitting new members. This lack of inclusivity undermines collective advocacy efforts and weakens the overall impact of civil society in addressing insecurity.

Information gaps

Local media outlets report on KFR, especially in south-western Chad, along with local and community initiatives and rescue efforts. Media sources like Tchad Infos and Alwihda provide accessible data on many incidents, including through social media. One local radio station in Pala (the capital of Mayo-Kebbi Ouest), Radio Soleil, is trying to map and list cases of KFR and those involved. However, overall reporting often lacks enough details about victims, interventions and outcomes, making it hard to track data independently outside of official sources. Besides limited access to conflict zones, journalists said that high self-censorship due to state restrictions is common, and they are often arrested or threatened for reporting sensitive issues.¹⁵⁰ The 2023 shutdown of Alwihda Info over alleged 'insulting' coverage of the president is a prime example. Some media outlets and journalists circumvent this issue by utilizing social media, but unstable internet connections can hinder the sharing and access of information.

Information sharing is also hampered by limited access to communication in remote parts of Chad. Interlocutors explained, 'There is also a challenge with mobile telephony because the available networks do not cover all affected areas'.¹⁵¹



Conclusion and recommendations

Respective of unreliable data on KFR, current expert analyses and the increasing number of media reports suggest that it is a growing threat in Chad and beyond. This threat is worsened by long-lasting internal and cross-border conflicts, a rising humanitarian crisis, socioeconomic instability and greater state fragility. The increase of KFR in Chad reflects broader governance and security issues: limited state authority, institutional fragmentation, impunity and a lack of strategic coordination across sectors. If left unaddressed, or addressed ineffectively, KFR could lead to a bigger humanitarian crisis and prolonged suffering for affected populations. Even worse, a convergence or strategic alliance between criminal networks and terrorist groups – similar to patterns seen in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin – could pose a serious threat to national and regional security.

As the findings of this report show, addressing KFR requires more than tactical security measures; it demands a long-term, integrated strategy that includes legal reform, intelligence-sharing, cross-border cooperation, community engagement and investment in civilian protection. Furthermore, as previously noted by ISS, the cross-border nature of KFR necessitates collaboration among the three countries in the Chad–Cameroon–CAR tri-border area.¹⁵² Accordingly, we propose the following key policy recommendations and priority areas of focus for future research.

■ **Strengthen security responses**

There is a clear and urgent need to enhance security responses in communities affected by KFR and in border regions. The government should focus on developing a comprehensive strategy to tackle KFR as a critical aspect of transnational organized crime, which influences the threat of violent extremism. This strategy should highlight the complex nature of KFR and outline clear, inclusive approaches for addressing it. Taking this step would help mend the fractured relationship between the state and its citizens in affected areas by showing political commitment and a desire to improve security.

The strategy should further address multiple security gaps identified in past state responses: poor coordination; overly militarized interventions; the need for quicker, proactive responses; early warning mechanisms; state-civil society collaboration; targeted intelligence; inclusion of local actors;¹⁵³ and adequate resourcing for security institutions.

■ **Implement governance and security reforms**

Along with immediate, targeted anti-KFR interventions, long-term governance and security reforms are crucial. Chad's ongoing crackdown on political opposition and free speech, described by several journalists, highlights the need to integrate governance and accountability measures into national and regional security strategies. State and regional bodies should ensure that anti-KFR efforts are not solely military-driven but rooted in transparent, participatory and accountable institutions. This involves strengthening civilian oversight of security operations, promoting inclusive local governance structures, and increasing transparency in resource allocation and personnel deployment. Regional organizations like the African Union and the Economic Community of Central African States should assist member states in embedding democratic governance principles within security cooperation, recognizing that lasting solutions to KFR depend on legitimacy, public trust and institutional coherence.

Existing legal and policy frameworks should be reviewed to determine their relevance for prosecuting KFR and revised as needed to enhance the legal support for state responses. This includes clarifying the status of agreements regarding the right of pursuit. The three countries in the tri-border area also need to conduct policy reviews and updates to strengthen regional and bilateral frameworks, including bilateral joint forces. The Central African Police Chiefs Committee could serve as a strategic partner in this effort.

■ **Review collective security arrangements**

Given the increasing pressures on regional security arrangements, especially the MNJTF, there is an urgent need for renewed strategic dialogue among national governments, regional organizations and international stakeholders. Instead of working separately, actors must collaboratively evaluate the effectiveness of current frameworks, identify structural gaps, and clarify how different initiatives align. Improving coordination, redefining roles and adapting to emerging and converging threats, such as KFR and armed group collusion, will be vital for maintaining gains and protecting both regional stability and civilians. As ISS has previously suggested, security actors should prioritize working with youth vigilance committees, whose deep local knowledge makes them key partners in gathering intelligence and tracking kidnappers.

■ **Deepen inclusive and peacebuilding approaches**

Current militarized approaches need to be blended with peacebuilding interventions that probe and respond to the underlying drivers and enablers of criminality in KFR-affected areas. ISS research shows that the securitization of KFR has obscured its deeper linkages with other forms of illicit markets, from smuggling and trafficking, to conflict finance. This dynamic has masked the nature of KFR as a symptom of multiple systemic dysfunctions: state fragility, socioeconomic marginalization, porous borders and institutional corruption. To be effective, any intervention must comprehensively address KFR as a systemic problem.

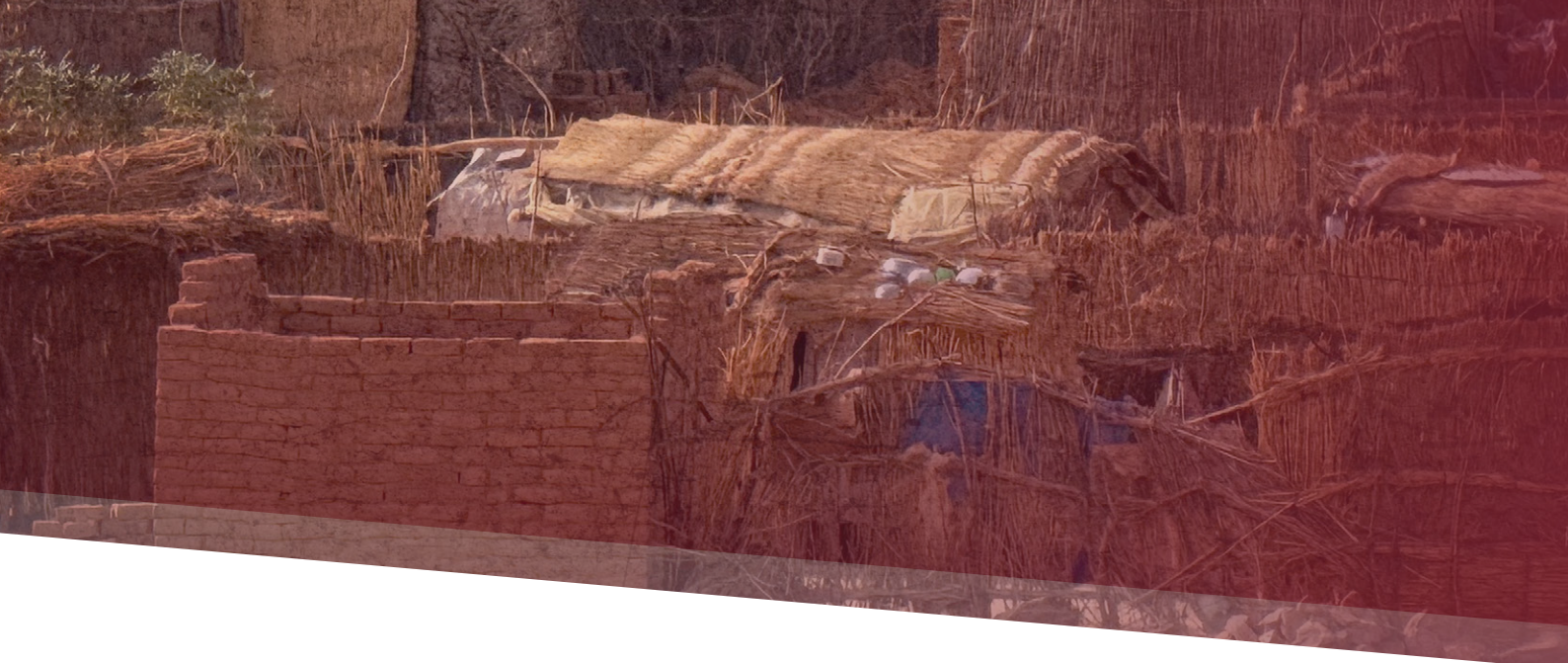
Civil society plays a vital role in tackling insecurity, especially through raising awareness, supporting victims and advocacy. Civil society organizations should concentrate on public education, including promoting basic security awareness, such as the dangers of leaving children alone and how to observe and report suspicious activity. They are also crucial in providing psychological support and care for victims of violence, particularly KFR. The media complements these efforts by amplifying messages and increasing public understanding of security threats. Civil society organizations additionally offer valuable research and community insights that help develop more locally tailored responses. Furthermore, experienced civil society organizations with thematic expertise should

engage in ongoing advocacy, urging the government to implement more effective and community-centred security policies.

Besides strengthening social cohesion in Chad, it was suggested that creating a network of civil society organizations working on transnational organized crime in Central Africa could help promote partnerships and collaboration for more effective national and regional responses to KFR.

■ **Expand knowledge and research**

State and regional authorities, with the support of research institutions and international partners, should invest in context-specific studies that differentiate between different categories of perpetrators, such as professional criminal networks and opportunistic local actors. Understanding their motivations, networks and methods of operation is crucial for developing tailored responses, including targeted disruption of organized groups and community efforts to prevent opportunistic kidnappings. Without this detailed insight, security responses risk being both ineffective and counterproductive.



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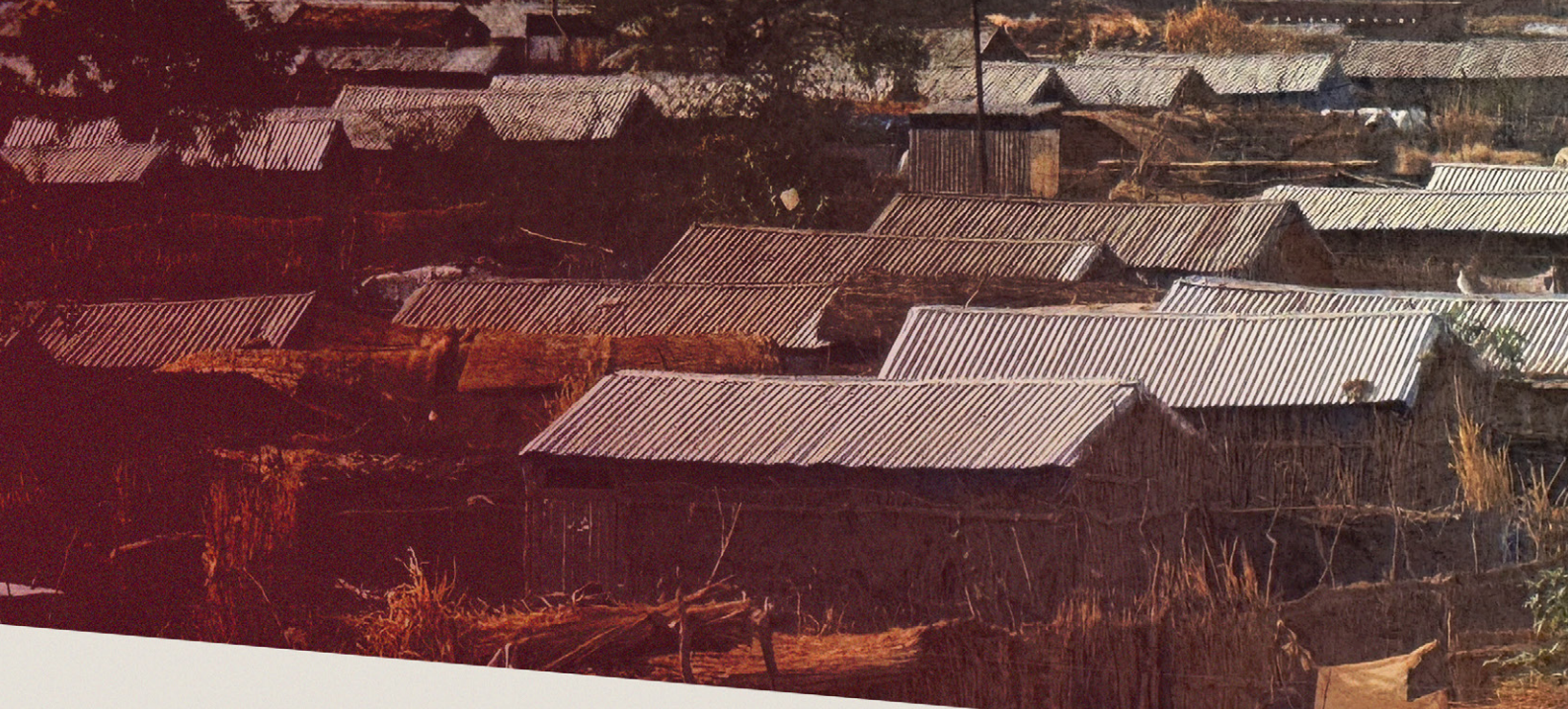
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