

James Milnes argues that up-to-date situational intelligence is as important as good hostile environment awareness training (HEAT) when deploying personnel to unstable MENA countries

FEELING THE HEAT

Amid the political and civil turmoil being played out in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), many companies, government agencies, media organisations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are struggling to keep their essential staff safe while still allowing them to do their jobs. In order to cover the full spectrum of threats in the MENA region we would need to devote a number of articles on each area. We can, however, provide a snapshot of the current threats across the MENA region in order to help shape your thoughts and provide some context to the article and the importance of preparing your people appropriately for the threats that they are likely to face.

The conflict in Syria dominates the threat spectrum. Movement of refugees, fighters and weapons has led to a spillover of fighting in border areas, and a disturbing kidnap threat. Bombings in Beirut and fighting in Tripoli show the reach of the war. Blended in with all the "routine" threats is the continued threat of chemical weapons use.

Iraq faces relentless bombings and assassinations while the armed forces are conducting an arduous operation in Fallujah, where extremists have gained a foothold close to the capital. Escalation to military conflict from civil unrest remains possible as Palestinians and Israeli settlers and security forces confront one another over displacement, settlement building and discrimination. Throughout Yemen military operations and dialogue have had little effect upon a rising kidnap and terrorist threat, an increased frequency of attacks in the capital demonstrating this.

Libya is fragmenting, with political and religious differences triggering score-settling between militias. The kidnap and terrorist threat is becoming more vicious, particularly in the east. A creeping insurgency in the urban areas of Egypt is also causing genuine concern. In the Sinai, and on the borders with Libya, increased counter terrorism operations reflect this. From Mauritania to Tunisia uplift in terrorist movement on the Algerian border has enhanced fears of attack. Tunisia, known as a transit route for terrorists, faces a residual threat of terrorism.

Western military forces have long recognised the requirement to prepare all of their personnel for operations in hostile environments. From Northern Ireland to the Balkans and more recently Iraq, Afghanistan and MENA in general, the requirement to operate in a dynamic and asymmetric environment is well documented. The military has also recognised that all personnel would, at times, potentially be operating "outside the wire" and in a very

fluid and hostile environment – not just the frontline combat arms. The frontline became ubiquitous. Therefore, all personnel from administrators to air traffic controllers and logisticians entering theatres of operation required a base level of uplift training focused upon the theatre to which they were deploying and the tasks they were likely to be required to carry out.

Hostile environment awareness training (HEAT) seeks to emulate this preparation, and is designed for close protection operatives as well as the broad spectrum of official "frontline" organisations such as the media, listed charities, aid agencies, NGOs, private security companies and "blue chip" companies operating in potentially volatile areas around the world. The training should cover a wide variety of subjects in order to ensure that deployed personnel are well-versed with the potential dangers and hazards they may face in a hostile arena. Individuals should depart in the knowledge that they have the "tool-kit" with which to operate in their deployed location and take comfort that their training has prepared them to be "comfortable with being uncomfortable".

Companies and organisations must assess what the impact is to their personnel and their overall corporate objectives when determining the extent and type of training that their personnel require. All organisations should be aware of their legal liabilities and moral responsibilities for the duty of care of those working for them either as employees, contractors and/or volunteers. It is critical that the "responsible" organisation undertakes an assessment of the threat, tasks, support structure and capabilities and experience of their personnel. Ultimately, preparations for deployment should ensure personnel are able to complete their tasks effectively and efficiently while being confident they have the necessary skills sets to survive and be able to return on subsequent deployments.

Organisations deploying personnel to hostile environments must ensure their personnel are adequately prepared for the situations that they might encounter. HEAT should form part of an overall corporate strategy that encompasses the broad spectrum of support that individuals require before, during and after deployment. HEAT is an essential element of the culminating training just prior to deployment, and companies should regard this as a final assessment of the individual's capability and capacity to deploy. Supporting people and their issues is about human contact and the ability of training staffs to assess



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the individuals ability to cope with a given set of scenarios before deployment, keep a weather eye on them while deployed and provide a support mechanism around them when they are back in routine activity.

Experience shows that it is very difficult to predict how an individual is going to react "on the day of the race" – how they are likely to cope with a traumatic event, and at what point that trauma will manifest itself – as it is a unique experience. The key is to provide the individual, their families, friends and co-workers with the "tool kits" and confidence that they have been as well prepared as possible for the deployment.

HEAT should be bespoke, agile and reactive to rapidly evolving environments. Courses should be designed to incorporate country or area-specific threat mitigation serials, and the more realistic the training is, the more capacity the individuals will have once deployed. There are core subjects that should be covered, such as first aid, personal protective defence and contact drills. But training providers should also have access to active intelligence cells that can monitor evolving threats and hostile tactics, techniques and procedures. The training establishment should then

have the capability to generate procedures to mitigate the threats and provide suitable uplift or refresher training for deployed personnel while incorporating the new training in to the "live" syllabus. There is a danger that "knee jerk" training is delivered, and it is therefore essential that the threats are appropriately assessed before incorporating new drills in to the training.

All personnel undertaking HEAT should expect that their training will prepare them for the environment to which they are deploying. To facilitate the most effective training we would recommend that clients engage with their preferred training provider as early as possible. This will ensure they have the time to support and analyse the client's threat assessment and design the course to fit with their wider corporate policies and procedures while delivering a dynamic HEAT capability.

There are many training providers from which to choose from, and research is essential to select an suitable and reliable provider. It is important that, when selecting a training provider, they come with a proven track record and they can provide the client with references for their previous experience and deliverables for the specific threat

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Close protection: up-to-date intelligence is essential for safe operations in hostile areas

environment they are looking at. The client company must be able to work with them and they must provide an environment that is conducive to learning and that meets the requirements of all personnel. Instructors must be able to support the assessment of deploying personal and have the ability to provide the client with feedback as required. They must also demonstrate that they have an up-to-date intelligence capability to support the development of training, and be agile enough to understand their clients' needs while delivering training that is robust enough to

support the personnel who are deploying. HEAT training should be dynamic and physically challenging while providing an appropriate level of theory-based training to support the wider picture. Three days in a classroom is not sufficient to prepare even the most hardened of employees, let alone the nervous first-time-abroad member who has only ever seen the world via the Internet or TV screen. We would recommend that you undertake a taster day with training providers before you commit to a contract with a training provider.

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Case Study

The Kurdistan mindset

There are numerous examples across the MENA region where journalists, aid workers, corporate individuals and operators have found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. The question is: were they taking inappropriate risks to get the job done or were they simply not trained appropriately to be operating within that environment?

Elite was recently commissioned to deliver training to an oil and gas company in Kurdistan. We selected two trainers who had the requisite skill sets and experience – both with significant hostile environment and MENA experience. As with every deployment, intelligence and threat assessments were made, the team was briefed and deployed.

To set the scene: there is a distinct difference between Irbil airport and others in Iraq. The security at the airport is not like that of Basra or Baghdad (for example). Security staff wave passengers through immigration without a second look at their passports. Once through, there is a 50-meter walk, and the external doors open to a picking up and dropping off zone. There is limited security at the front of the airport and, unlike other airports in the region,

access for vehicles was free and easy.

As our staff waited for their transport, they noted an atmosphere of unease from many of the other passengers. Two Europeans standing beside them looked very concerned and asked if our staff were armed – when the reply was “no” they retreated into the “safe-haven” of the airport. Several others smiled, but the nervous laughs soon disappeared when their expected armoured vehicles failed to arrive with the customary helmeted gun-toting escorts. Instead, “locals” arrived to collect their “rides” in standard taxis with the passengers’ names written on paper plates, subsequently whisking them away to their destinations. As our staff looked on, it was clear that there was an air of significant unease among most, if not all, of the travellers.

Why is this short story so significant? As the team was conducting preparations for their own delivery, they met a number of the personnel that they had observed at the airport. As conversations went on it became apparent that the other passengers had been told to expect a “war zone”. Their expectations and subsequent mindset had led them to believe they were entering a potentially threatening situation when actually it was a relatively benign

environment. Their blood pressure was up, training in situational awareness had taken over and all the combat indicators suggested that they were going to have to employ aggressive action at any moment should their “taxi” have gone down a route that they were uncomfortable with. It was clear that they could not comprehend the reality of the situation. Based on the HEAT they had received prior to deployment they expected sirens, lights, screeching wheels, armed escorts and dynamic vehicle drills.

This was not the case, and consequently they were all very nervous and “twitchy”. expecting things to go pear-shaped at any moment. A number of people described how, in the event that the “briefed” indicators appeared, they had planned to extract themselves from their taxi – this would not have been a good outcome for the taxi driver and would have left the individuals exposed and on the ground in an unknown environment that they had just turned hostile for themselves! Had their companies provided the correct and relevant training, their stress levels on arrival would not have been so high and they would have been able to deal with the scenario far better, and would therefore be concentrating on the job in hand rather than taking up mental capacity with undue worry.