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**P**ersonnel employed in areas of conflict and hostile environments face a different set of challenges compared to those working in areas where conflict is uncommon. These threats range from violence perpetuated by armed militias and militant to roadside IEDs. Personnel face the unique risk of being seen as targets of opportunity by armed militants in areas of conflict. The opportunity is often created through the kidnapping of personnel, and those kidnapped are often held at a ransom. There is also a risk that personnel kidnapped can be executed by armed militants to send a political message to their opponents.

The risk of personnel facing armed militants in conflict areas is high. This risk varies from region to region, as militants do not randomly attack on whim. Armed militias and militants, like any armed forces, have objectives, strategies and goals. Personnel working in or near high-profile facilities face the greatest risk from attack. Personnel located in low-profile facilities and areas face minimal risk, though low-profile sites and facilities are still prone to attack if security is not at the same level as high-profile facilities. An example of this occurred on 11 – 12 September 2012 in Benghazi, Libya when an American consulate was attacked by militants, leading to the deaths of four Americans, including the American ambassador to Libya J Christopher Stevens, and seven Libyans. The attacks in Benghazi were well co-ordinated and planned. Such attacks from militants are not random acts of violence – they are carefully planned.

Strategic facilities that contribute significantly to a region's economic activity pose the highest risk. Armed militants and militias often will target these facilities to gain access to revenue resources. Another source of revenue may be the kidnapping and ransoming of personnel located in such facilities. An example of this occurred in Algeria in January 2013, during the violent takeover of an oil drilling facility and subsequent hostage situation. It is important to note that foreign personnel face the highest risk of kidnappings, both in and away from the workplace, though that risk is highest away from the workplace. The kidnapping of individuals is often carefully planned and personnel who are kidnapped were most likely targeted. This is to say militants profile personnel to see who will yield the most profit from ransom.

While kidnapping is a real threat, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) pose a more serious threat to personnel employed in conflict areas. IEDs pose a more serious threat to personnel than kidnappings or armed clashes with militants. An IED can be placed anywhere: crowded markets, city/town centres, government buildings, busy streets, highway underpasses, and residential areas. There is also a risk of roadside IEDs when travelling between towns and facilities.

The explosions themselves from IEDs are deadly, but the greatest threat from an IED explosion is the shrapnel, which can include broken glass, nails and ball bearings. Shrapnel poses the greatest risk due to the speed at which these objects travel. A historical example of an IED used on civilians in the West is the Oklahoma City bombing on 19 April 1995. Timothy McVeigh used an IED made from fertiliser, partially destroying the Alfred P Murrah Federal Building.

Threat assessment and prevention should therefore be the top priority of employers who deploy staff to hostile environments. The first step in assessing potential threats is to be aware of the facilities that personnel are placed



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in. Employers must differentiate between facilities that are high-profile and low-profile; a high-profile site is more prone to attacks than low-profile sites. Criteria must be established that allows employers to identify and classify the workplace.

The second step is to train personnel in safety and security procedures. These procedures will need to cover security while at the workplace and also when they are off the clock. The training sessions should thoroughly cover situational awareness, risk mitigation and environment awareness. In the context of kidnappings or attacks, personnel will need proper training in behavioural risk assessment. Personnel must be aware of the behaviour of



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individuals with whom they will come into contact on a daily basis while employed in hostile environments.

It is important for personnel working in hostile environments to maintain situational awareness at all times. Part of being aware of a situation is to have a certain level of cultural literacy – an awareness of the culture of the host country or region in which they find themselves. Within the context of the local culture, personnel must discern between normal interaction and out of the ordinary encounters. Being able to discern daily interactions and activities occurring around them is an important skill.

Risk mitigation is also important, and is closely linked to situational awareness, which helps to minimise the risk of attacks and kidnappings of personnel. Minimising the risk of IEDs requires a different set of skills altogether, however, and one which requires personnel who are highly experienced in working in and around conflict zones or specifically trained for the task. Mitigating the risk of IED attacks takes a number of steps. The first step is being able to identify IEDs. This requires environment awareness – being aware of the terrain personnel are transported to and from – and being able to identify ideal locations in which IEDs may have been planted.

When choosing a company to train personnel in situational awareness, it is important to choose one which is properly certified. Protection professional and investigators from ASIS International, for example, are well prepared for situational awareness training in safety and security. Both certifications require extensive professional experience in security and investigations. These professionals are able to walk personnel through basic situational awareness and environmental awareness. Those certified have met a standard requirement of experience in security work. Usually coming from backgrounds in private security, law enforcement, military and government, trainers must have an extensive work history in security and should be carefully screened. Trainers also need an extensive experience in the training of personnel in safety and security.

As we discussed earlier, when it comes to identifying IEDs, only highly trained and experienced professionals should be used. Ideally, companies should hire personnel who have an extensive background in the military, and especially personnel with extensive experience in conflict areas and hostile environments whose job was to specifically identify IEDs and safely dispose of them. Having security personnel on site with experience and training in bomb removal is crucial.

Tailoring the safety and security of personnel to the country or region of employment matters when it comes to preparing personnel for the challenges faced with working in foreign countries. There are additional challenges for personnel who work in hostile environments, starting with the language and culture barrier. The first step in preparing personnel for this challenge is to provide comprehensive language training and cultural awareness training. Personnel do not need to master the local language, but the training should give personnel a baseline knowledge of the language. That baseline is based upon the



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following: greetings, directions, introductions, and basic conversation.

Cultural awareness training should also provide personnel with a basic understanding of the local culture and customs practiced within the country or region. Training personnel in cultural awareness will allow them to have a better grasp of their awareness of the environment and situation. This also lowers instances of miscommunication which are common in cross cultural interactions. Personnel are not expected to become experts in the local culture, but must demonstrate a basic awareness of the local culture. This basic awareness will be crucial in the safety and security of personnel in hostile environment.

Finally, understanding the local terrain and geography of the area is crucial to the safety and security of personnel working in hostile environments. When major events occur that pose a high risk of personnel being targets – including military coups, civil unrest and terrorist attacks – it is crucial to have policies regarding consolidation, where personnel are given instructions to meet in a safe and secure location. This practice is most commonly practiced in the United States Peace Corps. Peace Corps volunteers consolidate when major events occur in-country that pose a security risk. The purpose of this is to ensure that, if personnel are potential targets of armed militants, there is a plan to ensure their safety. Having them consolidate also simplifies the logistics of evacuating personnel to a secure location out of the hostile environment if they are targeted.

**Ready for anything: hostile environment training should be tailored to the area to be visited**

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