

INSI safety and security briefing for journalists covering Iraq

18/06/14

Iraq is one of the world's most dangerous places for journalists and the security situation is changing on a daily basis. Kidnapping, bombs, targeted killings and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are still a daily threat throughout the country and all out military conflict is now a real possibility between the Iraqi military, Shia militia groups and Sunni militants from ISIS.

In the early years of the Iraq conflict, coalition forces responded to security threats and incidents. However since their departure this role has been left to Iraqi security forces who are not always able or willing to respond as quickly or with as many resources as necessary. The most likely threat to your safety is that you are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

1. INSI recommendations:

- Do not consider Erbil and the north as safer than any other region. The whole country should be considered as extremely dangerous
- International and local journalists have previously been detained in Iraq due to allegations of inadequate paperwork, so ensure you register with the relevant ministries. There is nothing to suggest this will change in the near future. Foreign journalists have been banned from entering al Anbar province unless they have specific approval from the relevant authorities (including the Iraqi Ministry of Defence and the Anbar Operations Command Centre)
- Carry out a robust risk assessment prior to travel as some routes into the country are more dangerous than others. Ensure you are self reliant as no help is likely to be forthcoming
- Remember that you may have to work alone while in Iraq and ensure that your security plan is robust and ready for any emergency
- Ensure you have previously worked in a hostile environment or attended a hostile environment training course
- Understand warfare and military tactics, weapon systems and have the correct protective equipment and contingency plans in place
- Have updated trauma skills as there is little medical help available

2. Before you go

Research is key – know the background of the people and clearly understand the factions and their issues. Learn a few useful phrases in the local language, including the words for 'foreign press' or 'journalist'. Know the meaning of local gestures that might be important. Source local information, assess local contacts and carry out thorough risk assessments.

Iraq is Arabic speaking but English is often understood in the large hotels and restaurants. Take US dollars with you, changing some into dinars as soon as possible.

Be physically and mentally prepared. Iraq has poor infrastructure which means it is often difficult to get around. In the summer it is scorching hot with temperatures of 50 degrees centigrade. Just living there will sap your energy if you are not used to it. Electricity often fails so be prepared for this, and take a surge protector for when the generator kicks in, so you don't blow laptops and camera equipment. Ensure you are aware of how Ramadan will affect your work (29 June-29 July).

Have a realistic and workable crisis management plan if things go wrong. There is no one to rely on, so your extraction plans should be based on self help. Ensure you and your driver knows where the medical clinics and hospitals are and know how to get there in an emergency. Travel outside Baghdad must be planned thoroughly with all eventualities taken into consideration. Consider taking two vehicles in case of breakdown.

Ensure you have appropriate insurance in place prior to travel (person and equipment) and ensure you have inoculations for the region.

Basic kit and equipment

Carry a trauma medical kit with clean needles as hospitals tend to be poorly stocked. Ensure you know how to use it. Consider taking a dental care pack and make sure you have personal medication with you. Speak to your doctor as it may be worth taking additional prescription medicines with you in case you become unwell.

Consider taking a satellite phone in case the authorities switch off the mobile phone networks or you are working outside the network range, particularly in the north. Keep emergency phone numbers to hand and programmed into all phones, with a key number you can reach 24/7 on speed dial if possible. Take an unlocked phone so you can use a local SIM card.

You should be familiar with wearing body armour and helmets and it is advisable to take both. Ensure you have the appropriate equipment with you for living and working in a hostile environment. If you don't know what this equipment is you should consider whether you are the right person to be going to Iraq.

Familiarise yourself with weapons commonly used in the conflict, their ranges and penetrating power so you can seek out the most effective cover. Know incoming from outgoing. Know what landmines and other ordnance look like.

3. When you get there

Arriving at Baghdad International Airport

When you land, you will need to fill in a landing card. Bear in mind your own personal security when travelling and try to use a work address if possible.

Most international travellers need a visa, which you must get prior to arrival in country from the Iraqi embassy. You will need a sponsor in Iraq, and you will also need to apply for a media permit. You may also need to show your letter of invitation, so have this ready.

The toilets in the airport are often without toilet paper and running water. Take your own toilet roll and hand wash.

Luggage gets delivered on belts on the other side of passport control, after your passport has been stamped. You may have to put your hand luggage through an X-ray machine as you arrive and then again when you get your hold baggage.

Erbil

Erbil airport is seven kilometres from the old Citadel on the north east side of Erbil. It is recommended that you arrange a pick up prior to arrival. On arrival ensure you have all paperwork for any equipment you may have, including the correct paperwork for any PPE.

Transport from Baghdad airport

Ensure that you have transport prearranged and with a trusted source. The airport is a secure zone and most armed security teams wait at the perimeter for clients as weapons are not allowed inside.

As journalists, your options are to be picked up by your fixer in a low key local car and be discreet when driving into the city. Alternatively, you can use an international company which will provide you with either high profile or low key security, either armed or unarmed. You must make this decision after careful consideration during your risk assessment process.

The Baghdad International Airport road, which runs from the airport to the international zone, is often declared “safe”, however security incidents are common. INSI recommends that you do not class anywhere in Iraq as safe.

Accommodation

There are numerous hotels in Baghdad, and their standards of security vary. There are around 14 hotels in Erbil, again with varying standards of security.

Ensure you use protected hotels, which have been verified as safe by colleagues or security advisers and have undergone security assessments. In Baghdad some hotels are run by international organisations including news organisations, with properly trained and reliable armed security guards.

You should ensure that your hotel has armed protection and a robust security entry system such as X-ray machines and personal body checks. Ensure that the security guards remain awake at night by checking on them yourself. If they are sleeping, move to somewhere where the security is better.

Consider how to secure your valuables if your hotel safe does not work. There are mobile safes on the market, so consider using them.

Food and water

It is possible to visit restaurants, but check with your fixer that your choice is safe. Keep your plans to yourself and don't hang around outside the venue. Be wary of telling people where you are staying.

Assume the water is not drinkable and ensure you use bottled water.

Moving around Iraq

Be cautious when moving from your hotel and telling your travel plans to others. Plan a fast and safe way out before you enter a danger zone.

Consider registering your arrival in country with your embassy or consulate, so they have you on file as being in Iraq.

Make sure you understand the latest security picture by speaking with your fixer, other security organisations, local authorities and residents, then carry out a robust risk assessment.

If travelling by road, use a safe and responsible driver with knowledge of the terrain and trouble spots. Keep speeds down. Ensure you have maps and don't rely on GPS in case satellites are switched off and the information becomes inaccurate.

Travel in close convoy if possible and move with a companion. Do not use military or military-type vehicles unless accompanying a regular army patrol.

Ensure your vehicle is well prepared if going out of Baghdad, with plenty of fuel, and is clearly identified as media. In hot conditions check tyre pressures regularly as a

blow out can be disastrous. Know how to change a tyre and ensure the spare tyre is roadworthy and equipment is available to change a tyre.

Ensure you carry enough water for your trip as the heat can be overwhelming.

Inform your editor/base location of where you are going, your intended time of departure and expected return. Check in frequently and do not be tempted to travel at night.

Television crews and cameras always attract attention. Filming in the streets is still only safe for around 20-30 minutes depending on where you are in the city. Local discreet security can help you gauge this, however a good trusted fixer may be able to do the same.

Do not be tempted to carry a weapon or travel with journalists who do.

ID and media permits are a necessity as there are frequent police checks. If police spot a westerner in a vehicle or on foot it is likely that they will stop you and ask to see your papers.

Meet unfamiliar contacts in public places and tell your office or trusted colleague about your plans. Try not to go alone into potential danger.

Ensure you are aware of the implications if you report from both sides of a conflict and monitor all language outlets to see the impact.

Carry emergency funds and a spare copy of your ID in a concealed place such as a money belt. Have a giveaway amount ready to hand over.

Stay alert at all times, especially after fighting or an explosive event. Abandoned or apparently spent munitions can explode at any time. A terrorist bombing could be followed by a secondary device. Roadside bombs might be planted in rubbish or dead animals. If in doubt don't go on. Do not handle abandoned weapons or spent munitions.

Clothing

Wear civilian clothes and avoid paramilitary type clothing. Avoid bright clothing which stands out. Don't take jewellery or expensive personal belongings and ensure that all your valuables are secure.

Be prepared to wear flak jackets, body armour, helmets, gas masks and NBC apparel as appropriate.

Avoid carrying shiny objects and exercise care with lenses. Reflections of bright sunlight can look like gun flashes.

Communications

Consider your digital and mobile security. If you are planning to use a GPS tracker, ensure that you are aware of the pros and cons of the device. Speak to a supplier who will give you the best advice for the current situation. Have a backup plan in case it does not work or breaks down.

Working with the military

Be very aware of all military (army and militia) in a war. Some soldiers in combat are poorly trained, young and inexperienced and very frightened. They will shoot if they feel at all threatened. Do not assume they know who you are, where you are and what you are doing in the thick of fighting. Others are committed, well trained and will not hesitate to shoot. They will not respect any international laws on the media.

Do not assume they can see you clearly, especially through their sights. Your camera raised to your shoulder could be seen as an anti-tank weapon. Hold the camera low when filming approaching tanks and twitchy soldiers.

Seek the agreement of soldiers before shooting images. Know local sensitivities about picture taking.

Be careful if you draw maps of military positions or establishments in your notebook. Be aware of showing unusual interest in military equipment as you may be seen as a spy.

If you come under fire

Take cover and get behind something which will protect you from the bullets like a wall (ensure it is double thickness brick for an AK round), concrete blocks, thick trees or earth/sand. A hole or a dip in the ground may provide enough cover. In a building find a room without exterior walls such as a hotel bathroom.

Do not take cover in position where someone has recently been firing.

Lie flat on the ground once you are in the cover. Make yourself as small a target as possible and don't peek up from your cover but instead immediately assess your situation and plan a route of escape.

When you decide to leave your position, run if you can (do not zig zag as you may fall over) and try to get beyond the effective range of the weapon.

4. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Ballistic vests

The most common weapon used by counter-insurgents and in conflict areas is the AK-47 assault rifle and its derivatives. AK-47s use 7.62 x 39 mm ammunition (which is different from that used by Nato forces) of variable quality and consistency. AK-47 ammunition may also be armour piercing.

Ballistic vests will stop certain bullets if they are fired at the areas of your body which are protected and can save lives. However, ballistic vests/body armour/flak jackets do not take the place of good planning and a proper risk assessment process.

They are bullet proof depending on the calibre and muzzle velocity of the bullet. Do not allow your ballistic vest to lull you into a false sense of security. It is better not to put yourself in the position where you are being shot at or shelled.

There are two main types of vest: soft vests and soft vests with plates.

The former is made from many layers of woven or laminated fibres. It is capable of protecting the wearer from small calibre handgun and shotgun projectiles as well as small fragments from explosives such as hand grenades. The latter has plates which are usually made from ceramic or polyethylene. These plates are inserted into the pockets of a soft vest and the plates will provide additional protection from rifle rounds. There is often a groin protector, which can be dropped to cover this area when required.

The soft vest will provide resistance to stab and slash attacks from knives and similar close quarter weapons. They also offer good protection against shrapnel and objects such as bricks and bottles.

The plates must only be worn with the vest for which they were designed. This is vital as they are designed to absorb the high energy impact of ballistic rounds and stabs. The plates must never be worn on their own and both plates must be inserted to provide protection.

Look after your ballistic vest as the plates must not be dropped or they will crack and not work when you want them to. Do not throw your vest into the back of vehicles or drop them on the floor. When travelling think about taking the plates out and packing them in amongst soft clothing to protect them. When you insert the plates if you see the words 'strike face', ensure that this is facing outwards, away from your body.



INSI

globalmarket.com

Above is a plate that has been hit. The bullets did not go through the plate and saved a life. If you are shot at and the bullets hit the plate you may experience serious bruising, may be badly winded and may even have some broken ribs.

Soft vests, which are often easier to hide, are commonly worn by journalists doing undercover work or working in riots. Soft vests with plates should be worn in conflict areas or where there is no need to be covert.

Ballistic vests only cover the torso (which houses your vital organs) so the head is extremely vulnerable without a helmet. Make sure you wear a helmet to protect your head. Helmets will not stop bullets but may deflect them.

The specifications for ballistic vests are shown by a system of numbers with NIJ in front of them. The normal specifications are as follows:

- a. Covert body armour (soft vests): armour NIJ level Type IIIA
- b. Conflict zone body armour (soft vests with plates): armour NIJ level Type III
- c. If you believe armour piercing bullets will be used, you must use NIJ level 4 plates for protection. Please see the table below for more details.

It is important to carry out a comprehensive threat assessment, before specifying the threat level for ballistic plates. You should ask the following questions should you need to wear a ballistic vest:

- a. What type and style of weapons will I encounter?
- b. What is the type, style and velocity of the ammunition being used?
- c. What standard is the vest tested to and who tested it? Is it reputable?
- d. Is the manufacturer recognised or accredited by a professional body?
- e. How heavy is it and am I fit enough to wear it in hot countries for long periods of time?
- f. How should it be cared for? What happens if it gets wet?
- g. How is it measured to fit. Does one size fits all? Do you need female shape plates?
- h. When will it need replacing?

Consider what colour vest you want to wear in Iraq. The normal colour for journalists is blue (light and dark). If you are embedded with troops, they will sometimes make you wear the combat colour. However, it is not advisable to ensure that you are seen as neutral and a non-combatant. Consider whether you want to identify yourself as a journalist and whether you want to have 'TV/Press' on your equipment. Some vests have letters that you can attach with Velcro.

INSI UK is a Limited Company registered in England and Wales (No. 07635486)
Registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales (No. 1144296)







Registered Office: Thomson Reuters Building (5th Floor), 30 South Colonnade, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5EP, UK

www.newssafety.org

Vests can cost from £800 to £1500. The weight varies depending on what they are made of. The plates will often stop up to two rounds, after which they may begin to break up.

The table below provides details of weapons types and the type of ballistic vest you will need to protect yourself*

TABLE I - TEST SUMMARY • NIJ STANDARD-0108.01

Armor Type (Protection Level)	Test Ammunition	Nominal Bullet Mass	Suggested Barrel Length	Required Bullet Velocity	Required Hits Per Arm or Specimen	Permitted Penetrations
	22 LRHV	2.6 g	15 to 16.5 cm	320 ± 12 m/s	5	0
	Lead	40 gr	6 to 6.5 in	1050 ± 40 ft/s		
	38 Special RN Lead	10.2 g 158 gr	15 to 16.5 cm 6 to 6.5 in	259 ± 15 m/s 850 ± 50 ft/s	5	0
	357 Magnum	10.2 g	10 to 12 cm	381 ± 15 m/s	5	0
	JSP	158 gr	4 to 4.75 in	1250 ± 50 ft/s		
	9 mm FMJ	8.0 g 124 gr	10 to 12 cm 4 to 4.75 in	332 ± 12 m/s 1090 ± 40 ft/s	5	0
	357 Magnum	10.2 g	15 to 16.5 cm	425 ± 15 m/s	5	0
	JSP	158 gr	6 to 6.5 in	1395 ± 50 ft/s		
	9 mm FMJ	8.0 g 124 gr	10 to 12 cm 4 to 4.75 in	358 ± 12 m/s 1175 ± 40 ft/s	5	0
	44 Magnum Lead SWC Gas Checked	15.55 g 240 gr	14 to 16 cm 5.5 to 6.25 in	426 ± 15 m/s 1400 ± 50 ft/s	5	0
	9 mm FMJ	8.0 g 124 gr	24 to 26 cm 9.5 to 10.25 in	426 ± 15 m/s 1400 ± 50 ft/s	5	0
	7.62 mm	9.7 g	56 cm	838 ± 15 m/s	5	0
	308 Winchester FMJ	150 gr	22 in	2750 ± 50 ft/s		
	30-06	10.8 g	56 cm	868 ± 15 m/s	1	0
	AP	166 gr	22 in	2850 ± 50 ft/s		

(AP) Armor Piercing, (FMJ) Full Metal Jacket, (JSP) Jacketed Soft Point, (LRHV) Long Rifle High Velocity, (RN) Round Nose, (SWC) Semi-Wadcutter

Survivalistboards.com

**The views here are those of the author, however, the information is based on technical specifications and expertise. The information is meant to assist journalists in choosing the best equipment, following a rigorous risk assessment.*

Grab Bag

All journalists should carry a grab bag containing:

- Passes and other permits
- Passport and documents
- Local and foreign currency, credit cards
- Water and snacks
- Prescription and essential drugs
- Sunhat, sunscreen, lightweight sweater
- Mobile phones and chargers with spare batteries or power source
- First aid kit
- Torch with spare battery

INSI UK is a Limited Company registered in England and Wales (No. 07635486)

Registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales (No. 1144296)

Registered Office: Thomson Reuters Building (5th Floor), 30 South Colonnade, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5EP, UK

- Wet wipes and toilet paper
- Compass and map
- Tracker
- Emergency contact numbers (hard copy)

Please contact INSI if you require further advice about working in Iraq.

info@newssafety.org / +44 (0)7766 814274

INSI is not responsible for any problems that occur as a result of following this advice.