

## Working Around Weapons

### INSI Security Advisory

19/06/14

Journalists often work in countries where weapons are a normal sight in the hands of security forces or militias and rebel groups. But they and their owners should be treated with respect. Weapons are dangerous in the hands of the wrong people, and those being used in conflict zones are even more dangerous as you may get caught in the crossfire.

This advisory provides information to help you work more safely around weapons.

#### 1. Knowledge dispels fear

In a conflict zone, you are more likely to be hit by a stray bullet or fragment than to have one fired directly at you. Be aware of your situation and what is around you at all times. Consider whether you could be a target by association or find yourself in the target area of an intended battle. Knowledge is power. It makes it easier to do your job.

Remember it is the operator of the gun who is the danger as it is they who choose to pull the trigger. The more a person practises with a weapon the more skilful they become and the more accurately they can hit a target. Remember that weapons are used to kill.

Journalists should never carry a weapon when carrying out their job.

#### 2. What are the threats from weapons?

##### a. Direct small arms fire

This includes weapons that are carried by people, including pistols, assault rifles, machine guns and shoulder launched weapons like rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). Getting caught in small arms cross fire, when one side is shooting at another, is one of the risks for journalists in conflict zones.

##### *Effective range*

The effective range of a weapon is the range at which it has the optimum chance of hitting the target, if the person firing has the sights set correctly and has aimed correctly. It is the range at which the person firing can consistently hit, and severely wound, a human torso within the limits of the weapon and the ammunition.

The effective range of a:

- **pistol** is approximately 30 metres (98 feet)
- **assault rifle** 300-400 metres (984-1,312 feet)
- **general purpose machine gun** 600-800 metres (1,968-2,624 feet)
- **rocket propelled grenade** 300 metres (984 feet) feet, though RPGs have a back blast area, so don't film from behind. The flash from the front of the grenade going off may well attract fire from the other side.

Pistol



General Purpose Machine Gun



Assault Rifle



Rocket Propelled Grenade



## b. Indirect fire

This includes indirect attacks using grenades, shelling, rocket attack and mortar fire, though it is unlikely most journalists will see this. The main dangers here are the blast itself and the shrapnel it produces. Remember that ground conditions will mitigate the effectiveness of the mortar/artillery.

The killing area on the ground for grenades is around 20 metres from the site of the explosion. Mortars can be fired in bursts so the killing area depends on the amount of mortars fired. Rockets have a killing area of around 200 metres.

If you hear a lone round some distance off this may indicate bracketing (when combatants let off the barrage of rounds to test and adjust their accuracy before launching a full attack), so be aware of your surroundings and the sounds you hear in the near and far distance. Consider the possible target and the direction of fire.

### 3. Protecting yourself under fire

Don't run about. Get down. Get into cover, even a dip in the ground, but be aware of airbursts so also have some overhead cover. Assess the situation. If necessary or possible move to a better position.

If you are being fired at or are caught in crossfire, consider the following:

- What type of weapon it is? Can you see it? Can you get beyond the effective distance?
- Can you hide? If so, get behind something which will provide cover from the rounds/bullets (cover from fire). This includes double thickness brick, thick trees, concrete, buildings, stair wells, behind the engine block of a car, sand and earth
- Hide where the person firing cannot see you (cover from view). This includes bushes, rubbish bins and thin trees
- Think about lying on the floor and waiting for the firing to finish
- A moving target is much more difficult to hit
- If nothing better is available, find a fold in the ground, lie flat and wait. You may avoid getting caught in crossfire.

#### Crossing open ground

- Move as fast as possible and keep low
- Move in manageable distances like 50 metres, then get down and rest
- Do not over extend yourself and keep a reserve of energy
- Maintain control of the team and equipment and decide whether it is better to run together or individually

#### Protection

You can help yourself when working around weapons and it is important to know the types of bullets and what will – and won't – stop them. Using an armoured vehicle will provide protection against certain types of weapons as will ballistic vests and helmets (they won't stop bullets but have been known to deflect them).

*If you wish to know more, contact INSI's ballistic expert, on [info@newssafety.org](mailto:info@newssafety.org).*

*See our website, [www.newssafety.org](http://www.newssafety.org), for detailed information about protecting yourself in a conflict zone.*

*This advisory is meant to assist journalists in making their own decisions following a rigorous risk assessment. INSI takes no responsibility for any problems that occur as a result of following this advice.*