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How to stay safe abroad in uncertain times



KEN WELSH/GETTY IMAGES

The courtyard of Istanbul's Blue Mosque.

As the U.S., Russia, and other nations discuss a way forward on Syria—and whether that involves a military strike or not—I'm still fielding worried questions from travelers who are unsure whether to cancel trips to Turkey, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, western Africa, and other places with significant Muslim populations. These are places where, yes, pockets of anti-American/anti-Western sentiment do exist and where there could possibly be some sort of incident over the next few months. Of course, the same is true of certain neighborhoods in London and Paris. And New York City too, for that matter.

So here's what I'm telling most of these travelers: I'm headed to Morocco myself in November. Go ahead and travel. Just be smart about it. How? Read on.

Shortly after September 11, 2001, I went to Turkey on assignment for *Condé Nast Traveler* to test how to travel safely in a Muslim country. In 2006, when the United States was at war with Iraq (like Syria, a Muslim country bordering Turkey), I went again to southeastern Turkey, spending a week close to both the Syria and Iraq borders. I've traveled through Syria as well—with no guide, in a rental car that I drove myself—and I've also traveled in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Israel, and the West Bank. (And let me just add that most people you meet in Syria, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon are unbelievably friendly, hospitable, and generous. In Syria, had my rental car broken down on the road, the next person passing by would have invited me for coffee in his home with his family while he fixed the car.)

So, while I'm no counterterrorism expert, I think I'm in a position to suggest a few smart things that travelers headed to uncertain areas can do, say, carry, and wear.

To make sure that my advice is up-to-date, I spoke with Dan Richards, CEO of *Global Rescue*, a security-services and medical-evacuation company that gets travelers out of harm's way in times of crisis—say, if a government declaration says you should leave the country—and that I myself have a membership with and have recommended to friends and relatives. According to Richards, the only change since the War in Iraq, in terms of recommended precautions for travelers to take, is that better and cheaper technology exists today for maintaining your ability to communicate in an emergency.

Should you get caught in an incident, you can easily lose the ability to communicate by cell phone, says Richards. "Cell-phone capability is typically unavailable because cell phone towers have been destroyed or are blocked, so people who would normally rely on their smartphones can't use them." Internet access could be unavailable as well. So it's wise to carry a communication device that does not depend on Internet or cell-phone technology. Richards recommends either an *Indium satellite phone*—today you can rent one for about \$50 per week—or a *DeLorme inReach satellite messenger device*, which allows two-way text messaging by satellite with anyone anywhere in the world. Should a crisis occur, even if you have Internet access, Richards does not recommend relying on Twitter. "The problem with Twitter is the amount of misinformation that gets tweeted," says Richards. "The information is only as good as the source you're getting it from."

The likelihood that any individual traveler would get caught in an incident is, of course, extremely low. Do not confuse the probability of an anti-Western incident happening in a country you're visiting with the probability that it will happen to you. Also keep in mind that some spots are more precarious than others. "Most likely we will be in a quiet period until we see what develops. If there is a U.S. strike, in Israel there is a very real possibility of increased activity," says Richards. "Turkey is very different. Turkey would more likely be impacted by demonstrations and civil unrest, whereas Israel could be the recipient of increasing rocket attacks and acts of terrorism."

Here are my tips for staying safe in places where there could be anti-Western sentiment:

- ◆ **Don't advertise your Americanness.**
 Forgo bold colors in favor of earth tones. Wear nothing that could identify you as American: No Nikes, jeans, baseball caps, or logos. And no religious jewelry—such as a Christian cross or a Star of David.
- ◆ **Dress conservatively.**
 Don't display more skin or wear more revealing clothing than is the accepted norm. Avoid ostentatious displays of wealth, such as big jewelry, that could make you a target.
- ◆ **Try not to look like a tourist.**
 Don't walk around with a guidebook under your arm or a camera around your neck. Don't study your map on the street or in a parked car. Go into a safe, busy store or restaurant before pulling out a map or guidebook.
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- ◆ **Monitor the news.**
 This means staying at a hotel with reliable Internet access and with CNN, BBC, and Al-Jazeera. Check local English-language news Web sites morning and evening. Consider carrying a pocket world band radio so you can listen to the BBC and Voice of America anywhere, even if you're without Internet access.
- ◆ **Avoid public gatherings in large public squares.**
 Don't get caught in a political demonstration or rally that might expose you to an angry mob. Often the gatherings happen in the same symbolic square each time (e.g., Taksim Square in Istanbul).
- ◆ **Bypass discos, nightclubs, or bars where westerners or Americans typically gather.**
 A place that is popular with the expat community or foreigners represents a possible target. Skip the Hard Rock Café this trip.
- ◆ **Be careful what you photograph.**
 Don't shoot airports, train stations, government buildings, or people who don't want their photo taken. Always ask someone before taking his or her photograph. When you don't speak the local language, "ask" by motioning with your camera and motioning to them, smiling throughout, showing via hand signals that you'd like to take their photo and you're asking if it's okay. See what reaction you get. (This is good procedure in any country—not just Muslim ones.) If you want to photograph a person who's selling something—say, fruit or spices—buy some and snap a photo of the transaction. (This makes the act feel like an exchange rather than an exploitation.)
- ◆ **Use hotel-arranged taxis.**
 Avoid taking the bus or other public transportation. "Don't put yourself in a confined space where you're potentially a victim," says Richards. "On the other hand, don't travel around in an armored black Mercedes limousine either because you'll be immediately identified as someone who is worth targeting. Taxis can be risky but are also a good way to stay under the radar. Best bet is to have a vetted driver or, at a minimum, one you use from a well-known location who has proper credentials." Have your hotel call you a taxi. Arrange to have cars pick you up at the airport and drive you to and from restaurants at night.
- ◆ **Make sure your hotel has a great concierge.**
 You want a concierge who will make smart transportation arrangements and can detail the safety do's and don'ts of the area.
- ◆ **Don't travel with a tour group.**
 Tour groups are targets, says Richards, because they represent a concentration of foreigners in one place. "The tour company may be able to bring some security to the group, but the countermeasures are not outweighed by the ability of the attackers to do some real harm," he says.
- ◆ **Hire a private English-speaking "guide"—more fixer/expediter/strategist than guide, actually—who will keep you safe.**
 You can find a first-rate fixer through an excellent travel firm specializing in that destination. For Turkey I recommend *Earl Starkey* of *Sophisticated-Travel* in Istanbul. For Israel I recommend *Joe Yudin* of *Touring Israel*. For the U.A.E. I recommend *Lindsay Wallace* of *Linara Travel*. They have excellent guides who will keep you safe. Don't want a guide? Plan your walks or routes with the concierge's input.
- ◆ **In European cities, avoid Muslim suburbs.**
 Richards advises avoiding neighborhoods where emigrants from Syria live or where there is a track record of civil unrest or violence against foreigners.
- ◆ **Say you're Canadian.**
 If you're suddenly put on the spot by an angry-sounding local asking if you're American, don't be ashamed to pretend you're Canadian. In fact, sometimes I carry a small Canadian-flag pin inside my handbag, just in case.
- ◆ **And here are a few things to carry as you sightsee:**
 - A cell phone programmed with emergency numbers—for police, medical emergencies, and your hotel.
 - A neck pouch for keeping large bills and credit cards hidden under your clothing.
 - Your hotel's business card, in the local language, so you can show it to taxi drivers and get back to safety quickly.
 - A mini-flashlight in case you're caught in the dark.
 - A color photocopy of your passport (the cover and first two pages) to serve as an ID while the real thing sits in your hotel-room safe.