

**EXTRACTION OPERATIONS –  
THE SUPREME TEST FOR  
SECURITY MANAGERS**

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DAVID RUBENS  
ASSOCIATES

## David Rubens Associates

David Rubens Associates is a specialist corporate security consultancy offering strategic security services to individuals and organisations across the world.

DRA has worked with government agencies, NGO's, international conglomerates and major global events, and brings a mixture of strategic vision, operational experience and academic research to all of its projects, however large or small.

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**David Rubens**, DRA's founding director, holds an MSc in Security and Risk Management from Scarman Centre, Leicester University, is a Visiting Lecturer on their Global Security and Policing MSc programme, and is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Security and Resilience Department, Cranfield University at the UK Defence Academy, specialising in Terrorism & Public Policy and Strategic Management & Leadership.

David is widely experienced at developing, delivering and managing large-scale strategic security development programmes, and has worked with government agencies and academic institutions in Asia, Africa, Middle East, Caribbean and Eastern Europe.

For further reports, or to discuss the contents, please contact  
David Rubens  
[david@davidrubens-associates.com](mailto:david@ davidrubens-associates.com)

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**David Rubens Associates**  
The Arches,  
Maygrove Road  
London NW6 2EE  
[post@davidrubens-associates.com](mailto:post@davidrubens-associates.com)

## Extraction Operations- The Supreme Test for Security Managers

As recent events across the Middle East have clearly demonstrated, the escalation of a situation from normality to instability, and from there to chaos and on to absolute danger is a process that can complete its full cycle in a matter of hours. As someone who was responsible for the extraction of a number of expats from Lebanon in 2006, and who has used the lessons learned from that experience to manage similar programmes in Egypt over the last two weeks, I would like to put down some of the basic principles that should be observed in dealing with extraction programmes, especially given that the very fact that you are looking to evacuate civilians (rather than just 'travel manage' them) means that in all likelihood the general environment is going to be one of chaos, rapidly changing scenarios, lack of strong information and the need to respond speedily and robustly to the changing situation on the ground as well, of course, as the simple fact that the safety and security of both the Principals and the security team will be at risk throughout the operation. (As an example, CBS correspondent Lara Logan was in Tahrir Square when she and her team and their security people were surrounded by a mob of more than 200 people. Lara was separated from her crew, and still surrounded by the crowd suffered a severe beating and sexual assault before being saved by a group of women and an estimated 20 Egyptian soldiers. She was returned to the US the next day, and was immediately hospitalized).

The speed of the uprising of the anti-government movement in Egypt can be gauged by the fact that, despite the events in Tunisia, even Israeli intelligence agencies were caught by surprise, and in fact had no official response to the attempted overthrow of the government of its closest (and most powerful) neighbour.

Within a few hours, low-level anti-government demonstrations had led to mass demonstrations in public squares in all of the main cities in Egypt, and it was clear that, depending on the response from the police and the army, there was a real possibility of a bloodbath. (For a non-Middle East perspective on this sort of situation, the situation in Thailand in 2009 is an excellent example of where popular anti-government uprisings can take away the option of free travel, and even leaving the country, all within a single day.

Stories about attacks on journalists, and increasingly aggressive rhetoric from government sources concerning Israeli spies and 'foreign-led influences' meant that pro-government vigilante groups (often being no more than plain-clothed police personnel) were soon reported to be openly attacking westerners on the streets of Cairo.

It was at this stage that it became clear that any possible evacuation programme would be on a scale that was unprecedented in recent times.

By this time, the situation had already developed to a point that it was unsafe for westerners to be on the streets, it was unclear whether there would be a major (and extremely violent) reaction to the popular uprising from government forces, normal life (such as the ability to go shopping, to withdraw money from the bank, etc) had broken down, and the government had closed down internet access and mobile phone networks.

In any situation such as this, where all normal operational frameworks are fast disappearing, there are a number of basic operational requirements that need to be established before any further response capability can be developed.

Firstly, and most importantly, you need to have someone on the ground who can give you real-time information on what is going on, and who can make things happen through their own networks and resources. The last thing that any operation being carried out in unstable and fast-changing environment needs is 'long-distance management' being imposed on it by someone who is far away, doesn't understand the situation and who is going to be second-guessing the people on the ground.

On a fundamental level, the role of the person on the ground is to make decisions and to make things happen, which is why you need someone who is connected, has their own network of contacts, speaks the language and understands the culture. If you don't trust them to do that, then you need to get someone in there who does have that capability, and whom you do trust to make those decisions and then put them into practice.

The second thing that is fundamental to the success of any response operation of this nature (and which is tightly connected to the previous point), is the need to set up a trustworthy communications system. As any operational commander knows, the first thing to go wrong in any operation is comms, so you may as well accept that likelihood from the beginning. That is why you need to have a decision-maker on the ground, because the likelihood is that there will not be time (or often even the possibility) of maintaining dependable comms across the duration of the operation.

The third point that is vital to the success of any response programme is the need to have a speedy and effective decision-making structure. It is often the case that there is a very small window of opportunity to get things moving and if everyone on the ground needs to wait until the information has been passed up through five levels of

management, each level only interested in protecting their own access to the next level, then the high likelihood is that by the time that the decision comes back, the window of opportunity has passed, the situation has changed, and the probability is that the people on the ground are at greater risk than they were before, and it will take a higher level of response in order to bring them out. The window of opportunity can often be measured in blocks of as little as thirty minutes, so if it is going to take ten hours to get a response (and even longer if their office is in a different time zone and everyone has closed up for the day), then the likelihood is that that window will be missed.

The fourth point is budget. It costs money to run any operation, but it costs a lot more when it is a sellers (ie security company's) market, the operation requires a high level of specialisation and a range of relatively scarce skills, there is a high level of risk and there are time pressures that are becoming increasingly urgent. Any time spent arguing over budget is likely to mean that by the time that a decision is made, the price will have anyway gone up. The time to decide the budget is not after the quote has been received – it is just wasting valuable time.

What we have learned is that if things are going to happen, it gets done within a few short phone conversations, usually along the lines of:

- Conversation 1:           Them: 'We need to get people out, do you have the capability to get this done?'.  
                                  Us: 'What do you need? Right, I'll confirm and get back to you'.
- Conversation 2:           Us:    'I confirm we have capability. This is what we are going to do, this is the cost'.  
                                  Them: 'Right, I'll let you know'
- Conversation 3:           Them: 'Yes, that's fine, lets do it'.

Once the conversation starts going back and forwards, with requests for clarifications, confirmations, explanations and so on, then it is a clear sign that the client does not feel the necessary sense of urgency to get things done, and that they haven't reached the stage where they have accepted the need to make a decision. Those conversations can take up a lot of unproductive time (especially as the clarifications and confirmations mean coordinating links between the client, their agent, us, the people on the ground and often another controller in yet another country).

Once the operation has been agreed, it is also important to keep everyone in the loop as to what is going on (without, of course, disturbing the operation itself). The single greatest cause of grey hairs and haggard faces amongst operation managers, on whatever level they are operating on, is waiting for information to come in, especially when the situation itself is changing and they feel distanced and isolated. We have consistently been told, after we have completed extraction operations, that the fact that we kept people up-to-date on what was going on, was the thing that they most appreciated. If you are at home at 3 o'clock in the morning, watching pictures of Tahrir Square being attacked by riot police or Manama or Tunis going up in smoke, then a phone call to say 'Your wife is in the car with our people, we expect to be at the airport within forty minutes' is something that is valuable beyond gold. And finally (given that you have agreed the operation and managed to deliver it successfully), there should be a clear hand-over procedure once the Principals have arrived to their safe destination, because in all likelihood there is another group waiting to be brought out, and you don't want to waste time working out whether the operation is actually over or not. Make sure that there is a clear 'Handover of Control' – you don't want that to be disputed by some HR administrator in the Houston head office six weeks later when it comes to settling the bill (and yes, that has happened to us)!

The ability to operate in situations of extreme danger coupled with extreme instability is the ultimate test for the professional security operator. It involves periods of extreme adrenaline for both the person on the ground as well as the controller back in the office – but boy, does the beer taste good when its over!

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