



# SYRIA

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- Syria should ensure that its armed forces and other state agents do not use mines.
- Other states engaged in supporting the Syrian regime should ensure that their armed forces and any armed groups they support do not use landmines.
- Non-state armed groups should cease all use of landmines.
- Syria should accede to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) as a matter of priority.
- Syria should establish a national mine action authority and facilitate participation by international demining organisations in developing an effective mine action programme.
- Syria should initiate survey and clearance of mines as soon as possible and take other measures to protect civilians from mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW).

## CONTAMINATION

Syria is contaminated by landmines left by successive Arab-Israeli wars since 1948 but particularly by the conflict in Syria since 2011. Ongoing hostilities and reports of continuing use of landmines by pro- and anti-government forces have prevented systematic large-scale survey to determine the extent and types of contamination.<sup>1</sup>

Landmines, whether commercial or of an improvised nature, affect all regions and vary according to the armed groups active there. In 2017, Islamic State and other non-state armed groups reportedly used landmines in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Idlib, and Raqqa governorates.<sup>2</sup> Contamination is likely to be particularly dense in areas that were occupied by Islamic State.

The Syrian government reportedly laid mines along borders with Turkey and Lebanon in 2012 and Turkish authorities reportedly claimed five years ago that between 613,000 and 715,000 mines had been planted along the Turkish-Syrian border, making clear they were not replaced by Turkish forces.<sup>3</sup> Heavy casualties that occurred in Manbij, close to the Turkish border, after Kurdish forces pushed out Islamic State in mid-August 2016 attest to massive contamination by mines and other improvised devices that were still inflicting casualties in 2017.<sup>4</sup>

Islamic State heavily mined the approaches to Manbij and around the Tishreen dam to the east of it, using young boys disguised as shepherds to lay the mines, the United

Nations Commission of Inquiry monitoring the conflict in Syria reported in March 2017.<sup>5</sup> From Raqqa, former capital of the self-proclaimed Islamic State caliphate, to Hassakeh governorate in the north-east, and south to Deir ez-Zor, retreating Islamic State forces left massive contamination by mines of an improvised nature and other improvised devices that have taken a heavy toll on civilians returning in their wake.

Medical non-governmental organisation (NGO) Médecins sans Frontières reported that the number of victims of landmines and other explosive devices it treated in north east Syria doubled between November 2017 and March 2018. Half of them were children. Its patients reported discovering mines and booby-traps on roads, alongside fields, on rooftops, and under staircases, as well as rigged in common household items from refrigerators and air conditioners to televisions and cooking pots.<sup>6</sup>

In north-western Idlib and neighbouring Aleppo governorates, volunteers similarly report mines and other explosive devices planted in agricultural fields,

next to roads, inside villages, and around schools and hospitals.<sup>7</sup> Rebel forces which subjected the towns of Foua and Kfraya to years of siege are said to have left hundreds of mines in surrounding fields as well as individual explosive devices in many homes.<sup>8</sup> Further south in Hama and Homs governorates, open-source reports of mine casualties, although unconfirmed, are suggestive of significant contamination left by all sides during years of conflict.<sup>9</sup>

In parts of southern governorates bordering Israel and Jordan accessible to volunteers, they have reported fewer mines than other types of explosive hazard,<sup>10</sup> but Syrian reports point to the presence of Russian PMN-2 and PMN-4 anti-personnel mines.<sup>11</sup> Remotely delivered T-84 anti-vehicle mines were reportedly used in the Golan Heights in the south-west of Syria (already heavily contaminated with anti-personnel mines).<sup>12</sup> There have also been reports that T-84 mines have been remotely deployed in Daraa governorate in the south-west of the country.<sup>13</sup>

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## PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

Syria does not have a national mine action authority or a national programme for survey and clearance. Mine action has been conducted by a wide range of organisations, including military engineers of parties to the conflict, civil defence organisations, humanitarian demining organisations, and commercial companies.

Russia deployed several hundred military deminers from the Armed Forces Demining Centre supported by mine detection dog teams and Uran-6 mine detection robots. Deployments included 200 deminers sent to Aleppo governorate, 150 to Palmyra, and 175 who were due to be sent to Deir ez-Zor governorate.<sup>14</sup> Some deminers were reportedly among troops due to return to Russia under the withdrawal announced in December 2017.<sup>15</sup> Russian deminers also provided training for Syrian army engineers at Hmeimim air base and at training centres established in 2017 in Aleppo and Homs. By the start of January 2018, Russian armed forces reported they had trained 900 Syrian engineers.<sup>16</sup>

International humanitarian and commercial operators were active mainly in north-eastern Syria in areas recaptured from Islamic State by Kurdish and US-led coalition forces, but their identities remain anonymous on the basis of security concerns. Syrian Civil Defence, supported with training and funding through Mayday Rescue, had clearance teams working in five governorates (Daraa, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Quneitra) and conducted a range of other activities (community liaison; risk education) in several other governorates.<sup>17</sup>

The HALO Trust partnered with a Syrian NGO, SHAFAK, which conducted community impact survey, risk education, and victim data collection in Aleppo, Idlib and Rural Damascus provinces in 2017. The partnership agreement with SHAFAK, based in Gaziantep, Turkey, started in mid-2016. Deteriorating security forced it to stop operating in Rural Damascus in March 2018.

In mid-2017, HALO Trust started partnering with another Syrian NGO to recruit, train, and deploy teams for non-technical survey and disposal of ERW. In mid-December 2017, these three teams deployed in Daraa and some districts of Quneitra provinces, and were reconfigured into five teams in March 2018. The teams worked under supervision of five HALO Trust international staff working from a remotely located operations room. The teams photograph all items for identification and receive instruction on disposal and render-safe.<sup>18</sup>

Following UN Security Council Resolution 2165 (2014), which authorised cross-border humanitarian assistance into Syria, the UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator requested the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) to provide assistance for mine action in Syria. In 2015, UNMAS opened an office in Gaziantep and established a mine action sub-cluster to integrate mine action into the broader Syria humanitarian response. In September 2017, UNMAS opened an office in Beirut to coordinate support provided through offices in Gaziantep and Amman for 27 mine action organisations, undertaking activities that included community-level contamination impact surveys, marking of some hazardous areas, risk education, and clearance.<sup>19</sup> UNMAS also maintained an incident database in Amman, making data on contamination available to humanitarian agencies. By June 2018, UNMAS said it had received almost half of its \$14.8 million appeal for 2018.<sup>20</sup>

After months of discussions, UNMAS signed an MoU with the Syrian government in July 2018, Syria's state news agency quoted UNMAS director Agnès Macaillou as saying the agreement provided an encouraging start for UNMAS to undertake the necessary role in mine risk education.<sup>21</sup>

## LAND RELEASE

Continuing conflict prevented a coordinated national programme of mine action in 2017 though mine action interventions gathered significant momentum, albeit at levels that varied in different regions according to the level of security.

UNMAS reported that contamination impact surveys and non-technical surveys were conducted mostly in north-west and southern Syria, within Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib, and Rural Damascus, governorates, and in Quneitra governorate, particularly in the sub-districts of Atareb, Busra Ash-Sham, Hrak, Izra', Maaret Tamsrin, and Suran.<sup>22</sup> International operators also conducted community impact assessments and non-technical and technical survey in the north and north-east of the country.

Russia said its armed forces mine clearance personnel conducted four operations in 2016–17, including two at historic Palmyra, one in Aleppo and one in Deir ez-Zor, clearing a total area of 66km<sup>2</sup>, 1,500 kilometres of roads, and more than 17,000 various buildings and structures. It said the Russian military deactivated 105,000 explosive items, including over 30,000 improvised explosive devices.<sup>23</sup>

Russian media reported that military deminers had cleared more than 30km<sup>2</sup> in Syria between December 2016 and the end of February 2017.<sup>24</sup> Army engineers reported clearing some 20km<sup>2</sup> in Palmyra in 2016 and 2017, removing more than 24,000 ERW, but did not break down the items.<sup>25</sup> A Russian Defence Ministry spokesman was reported to have claimed that Russian deminers had

cleared an area of 3.6km<sup>2</sup> around Aleppo, along with 75 kilometres of road, destroying 1,000 ERW, all in the space of a week.<sup>26</sup> Russian and Syrian army engineers were also active around Damascus and its suburbs, where opposition-held areas became the target of a major Syria-Russian offensive in early 2018.

In the areas of north and north-east Syria recaptured by Syrian Democratic Forces and the United States-led coalition, humanitarian and commercial operators sharply scaled up operations, employing several hundred staff to conduct community needs assessment and ERW clearance in al-Hassakeh, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa governorates. Mines of an improvised nature made up more than three-quarters of items destroyed by one international operator round Raqqa and more than 60% of items it destroyed in Hassakeh governorate.<sup>27</sup>

Syria Civil Defence (SCD) conducted community impact surveys that provided a basis for clearance teams to plan and prioritise tasks. At the start of 2018, capacity included one clearance team in each of Hama, Idlib, and Quneitra governorates and two teams in Daraa, clearing mostly cluster munitions.<sup>28</sup> HALO Trust and SHAFAK started operations in early December 2017, with community liaison teams surveying and compiling maps of contaminated areas in Daraa and by March had conducted 234 spot tasks involving mainly UXO.<sup>29</sup> After Syrian government forces took control of southern governorates in July 2018 mine action in Quneitra and Daraa ceased.<sup>30</sup>

## ARTICLE 5 COMPLIANCE

Syria is not a state party to the APMBC, but nonetheless has obligations under international human rights law to protect life, which require the clearance of mines in areas under its jurisdiction or control as soon as possible.

- 1 Email from Gilles Delecourt, Senior Programme Manager, United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), 22 May 2018.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 "Syria: Army planting banned landmines", Human Rights Watch, 13 March 2012, at: [www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/13/syria-army-planting-banned-landmines](http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/13/syria-army-planting-banned-landmines); "Thousands of landmines planted along Turkish-Syrian border", *Middle East Monitor*, 21 November 2013, at: [www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/8443-thousands-of-landmines-planted-along-turkishsyrian-border](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/8443-thousands-of-landmines-planted-along-turkishsyrian-border).
- 4 "ISIS mines still a threat to residents of Manbij", *Zaman*, 3 February 2017.
- 5 Conference Paper by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, UN doc. A/HRC/34/CRP.3, 10 March 2017, para. 90.
- 6 "Syria: patient numbers double in northeast as more people return home to landmines", *MSF*, 3 April 2018, at: [www.msf.org/en/article/syria-patient-numbers-double-northeast-more-people-return-home-landmines](http://www.msf.org/en/article/syria-patient-numbers-double-northeast-more-people-return-home-landmines).
- 7 "Syrian volunteers risk lives to clear landmines", *Al Jazeera*, 8 April 2016, at: [www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/syrian-volunteers-risk-lives-clear-landmines-160405123622730.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/syrian-volunteers-risk-lives-clear-landmines-160405123622730.html).
- 8 "Inside Foua: A Shi'a town in the eye of the Syrian storm", *Middle East Eye*, 19 August 2018.
- 9 See, e.g., "5 killed, 6 injured in landmine blast in Hama countryside", *IRNA*, 3 September 2018; and "4 Civil Defence workers killed clearing landmines in northern Homs", *Zaman al Wasl*, 18 May 2018.
- 10 See, e.g., The HALO Trust, "Survey and explosive hazard removal in Dar'a and Quneitra Governorates, Southern Syria", undated but 2017, p. 6.
- 11 Ivan Kochin with N. R. Jenzen-Jones, "Russian PMN-4 anti-personnel mines in southern Syria", *Armament Research Services*, 1 October 2015.
- 12 M. Hiznay, "Remotely delivered antivehicle mines spotted in Syria", *Human Rights Watch*, 25 April 2014, at: <https://landmineandclustermunitionblog.wordpress.com/2014/04/25/remotely-delivered-antivehicle-mines-spotted-in-syria/>.
- 13 Telephone interview with Luke Irving, Specialist Training and EOD Manager, Mayday Rescue, 16 October 2017.
- 14 "Russia sends demining team to Syria to clear Aleppo's liberated", *PressTV*, 3 December 2016; "Russia sends 150 demining experts to Palmyra", *Reuters*, 16 March 2017; "Russian sappers arrive in Deir Ezzour", *Tass*, 11 September 2017.
- 15 "Russian sappers arrive in Syria's Deir Ezzour", *Tass*, 11 September 2017.
- 16 "Russian military boosts qualified Syrian sappers to demine war-ravaged country", *Tass*, 9 January 2018.
- 17 Telephone interview with Luke Irving, Specialist Training and EOD Manager, Mayday Rescue, 28 March 2018; Mayday Rescue, "Syria Civil Defence, Explosive Hazard Mitigation Project Overview, Nov 2015–Mar 2018", 1 March 2018; email from international mine action operator on the basis of anonymity, 3 May 2018.
- 18 Interview with Tim Porter, Regional Director for the Middle East, HALO Trust, in Geneva, 15 February 2018; email from Adam Boyd, Programme Manager, HALO Trust Syria/Jordan and Rob Syfret, Deputy Programme Manager and Operations Manager, HALO Trust, 18 May and 13 and 21 June 2018; HALO Trust, "Survey and Explosive Hazard Removal in Dar'a and Quneitra Governorates, Southern Syria", undated but 2018.
- 19 Interview with Gilles Delecourt, UNMAS, Geneva, 16 February 2018; and email, 22 May 2018; UNMAS, "Programmes in Syria", updated March 2018, at: <http://www.mineaction.org/programmes/syria>.
- 20 Interview with Paul Heslop, Chief of Programmes, UNMAS, in Geneva, 13 February 2018; UNMAS Syria webpage, updated June 2018, at: [www.mineaction.org/programmes/syria](http://www.mineaction.org/programmes/syria).
- 21 "Syria, UN Mine Action Service, Sign MoU", *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 8 July 2018, accessed at [www.syrianews.cc/syria-un-mine-action-service-sign-mou/](http://www.syrianews.cc/syria-un-mine-action-service-sign-mou/).
- 22 Email from Gilles Delecourt, UNMAS, 22 May 2018.
- 23 "Press release on signing a memorandum of understanding between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the UN Mine Action Service", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation, 7 July 2018.
- 24 "Russian deminers continue to clear east Aleppo of explosives", *Almasdam News*, 28 February 2017.
- 25 "Russian army engineers demined 24,065 explosive objects in Syria's Palmyra", *Defence World.net*, 6 October 2017.
- 26 "Russian sappers demined some 890 acres in Aleppo in a single week", *Sputnik International*, 30 January 2017, at: <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201701301050140911-russian-sappers-demine-aleppo/>.
- 27 Email from international mine action operator on condition of anonymity, 3 May 2018.
- 28 Telephone interview with Luke Irving, Mayday Rescue, 28 March 2018; Mayday Rescue, "Syria Civil Defence, Explosive Hazard Mitigation Project Overview, Nov 2015–Mar 2018", 1 March 2018.
- 29 Email from Adam Boyd and Rob Syfret, HALO, 18 May 2018; and HALO Trust, "Survey and Explosive Hazard Removal in Dar'a and Quneitra Governorates, Southern Syria", undated but 2018.
- 30 Skype interview with Luke Irving, Mayday Rescue, 24 July 2018; and email from Alannah Ellis, Programme Officer, HALO Trust, 10 September 2018.