



# SYRIA

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- Syria should ensure that its armed forces do not use mines.
- Other states engaged in the armed conflicts in Syria should ensure that their armed forces and any armed groups they support do not use mines.
- Syria should accede to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) as a matter of priority.
- Syria should initiate survey and clearance of mines as soon as possible and take other measures to protect civilians from explosive remnants of war (ERW).

## CONTAMINATION

Mine contamination in Syria is a legacy of Arab-Israeli wars since 1948 and a consequence of the ongoing armed conflicts. No credible estimate of the extent of contamination across Syria exists, though it is believed to be very extensive.<sup>1</sup>

There has been continued use of mines by pro- and anti-government forces across the country. Turkish authorities have reportedly claimed 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>2</sup> At the end of January 2016, US Secretary of State John Kerry criticised the Syrian government for having laid mines around Madaya and other besieged towns in Syria.<sup>3</sup> Soviet/Russian-made PMN-4 anti-personnel mines have been cleared from Madaya. Syrian government use of these mines was first reported in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

In Kobani and the surrounding villages, which were captured from Islamic State (IS) forces in 2015, humanitarian demining operators found a significant quantity of locally produced anti-personnel mines.<sup>5</sup> To the east, IS are said to have surrounded government-controlled areas in the city of Deir ez-Zor with thousands of landmines. According to one witness from Deir ez-Zor's besieged al-Jura neighbourhood who was cited in the media in March 2016, "After a year of living under siege, some inhabitants tried to flee driven by famine and disease. They were either killed by ISIS sharpshooters or exploding mines. Some torn corpses are still lying in the minefields."<sup>6</sup> Mine casualties are reported to have occurred in areas of Hassakeh province in the far north-east contested by Islamic State and Kurdish forces.<sup>7</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>8</sup> There have also been reports that T-84s have been remotely deployed in Daraa governorate in the south-west of the country.<sup>9</sup>

In March 2017, a report by the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria noted the indiscriminate presence of anti-personnel mines, improvised explosive devices, and booby-traps in civilian areas captured from IS

by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) or the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Locally produced mines "continue to be laid" by IS "with devastating effect".<sup>10</sup> In late December 2016, IS fighters began laying mines on roads leading to villages surrounding the Tishreen Dam, as well as in neighbouring areas leading to Minbij. Witnesses detailed how IS used young boys as escorts to lay the mines, in an effort to camouflage their movements. Young boys were made to look like shepherds leading livestock, and at least one boy of 12 died as a result of a mine blast.

## PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

There is no national mine action programme in Syria, no national mine action authority, and no mine action centre.

On the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2165 (2014), the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) was asked to provide assistance for mine action in Syria. UNMAS deployed a team to southern Turkey in August 2015. In addition to coordinating mine action operations, UNMAS has supported impact survey, risk education, and victim assistance.<sup>11</sup> Although a "comprehensive clearance programme is not currently possible, UNMAS believes it is possible to train local capacity to survey and clear cluster munitions and other ERW."<sup>12</sup>

### Operators

The main international NGO demining operator in Syria in 2016 was Mines Advisory Group. Handicap International did not conduct land release in 2016.<sup>13</sup> Syria Civil Defence (also known as the White Helmets), all volunteers, have predominantly been engaged in search and rescue operations across parts of the country. They have been using thermite flares to destroy unexploded ordnance (UXO), mostly unexploded submunitions. Where volunteers have spotted mines, they have reported on the location.<sup>14</sup> The efforts of Civil Defence have been supported by Mayday Rescue, an international not-for-profit organisation based in the Netherlands.<sup>15</sup>

The Danish Demining Group (DDG) has been working only within government-held areas, conducting training of trainers for risk education. As at March 2017, it was awaiting approval for non-technical survey, technical survey, marking and fencing, and clearance.<sup>16</sup>

Russian deminers arrived in Syria in March 2016. In April, the Russian military reported completing demining of the ancient part of the city of Palmyra, recaptured by Syrian and Russian forces in late March from IS militants.<sup>17</sup> In December 2016, an advanced demining unit of the Russian Mine Action Centre was deployed to Syria's Hmeimim airbase to conduct mine clearance operations in Aleppo. Subsequently, a diplomatic source told a news agency that Moscow was calling on the United Nations and other international organisations to provide the Russian military with assistance in demining Aleppo.<sup>18</sup> The former commander of the Russian engineering troops, Colonel-General Nikolai Serdtsev, described the bomb disposal mission in Aleppo as much more "complicated" than the one carried out in Palmyra city.<sup>19</sup>

## LAND RELEASE

Syria does not have a comprehensive civilian programme for survey or clearance of mines. UNMAS reported in early 2016 that conflict in many governorates has prevented access by mine action organisations. The extent and impact of contamination has resulted in Syrians without formal training conducting "ad hoc clearance without the technical ability to do so. The capacity of some local teams conducting clearance has been reduced by half as a result of casualties occurring during operations."<sup>20</sup> SDF forces began demining areas throughout Minbij, to the west of the Euphrates River, shortly after capturing the town in mid-August 2016.<sup>21</sup>

Russian forces have been demining in areas recovered by the Government of Syria. Russia has reported that in March to June 2016 its forces cleared the historical complex of Palmira, destroying in the process 17,456 items of ERW, "including" 432 improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Subsequently, in December 2016, 157 military deminers, 29 machines, and 9 mine detection dogs (MDDs) were involved in demining in Aleppo city. During this process, 34,886 items of ERW were destroyed, "including 19,834 IEDs".<sup>22</sup>

## ARTICLE 5 COMPLIANCE

Syria is not a state party or signatory to the APMBC. Nonetheless, it has obligations under international human rights law to clear mines as soon as possible, in particular by virtue of its duty to protect the right to life of every person under its jurisdiction.

- 1 See, e.g., E. Sauvage, "30+ Years Needed to Clear Syria of Explosive Remnants of War", Handicap International USA, 2016, at: [http://www.handicap-international.us/30\\_years\\_needed\\_to\\_clear\\_syria\\_of\\_explosive\\_remnants\\_of\\_war](http://www.handicap-international.us/30_years_needed_to_clear_syria_of_explosive_remnants_of_war).
- 2 "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).
- 3 US Campaign to Ban Landmines, "Presidential support for Colombia's mine clearance", 6 February 2016, at: <http://www.banminesusa.org/news/2016/02/06/colombia/>; see also <https://twitter.com/JohnKerry>.
- 4 Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Army Planting Banned Landmines", 13 March 2012, at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/13/syria-army-planting-banned-landmines>.
- 5 Handicap International, "Kobani: A city of rubble and unexploded devices", Factsheet, May 2015, pp. 3, 4, 5, at: [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/handicapinternational/pages/2015/attachments/original/1432650458/May\\_2015\\_Syria\\_Kobani\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf?1432650458](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/handicapinternational/pages/2015/attachments/original/1432650458/May_2015_Syria_Kobani_Fact_Sheet.pdf?1432650458).
- 6 A. Ramadan, "Land mines, the silent killers in Syria war", *Arab Weekly*, 18 March 2016, at: <http://www.theArabweekly.com/?id=4301>.
- 7 "Landmines kill 8 in Hama and al-Hassakah", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2 May 2015, at: <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/05/landmines-kill-8-in-hama-and-al-hasakah/>.
- 8 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/>.
- 9 Telephone interview with Luke Irving, Specialist Training and EOD Manager, Mayday Rescue, 16 October 2017.
- 10 Human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations in the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 July 2016–28 February 2017, Conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, UN doc. A/HRC/34/CRP.3, 10 March 2017, §90.
- 11 UNMAS, "Programmes: Syria", Last updated March 2016.
- 12 Email from Dandan Xi, UNMAS, Associate Programme Management Officer, UNMAS, 10 October 2017.
- 13 Email from Catherine Smith, Mine Action Desk Officer, Handicap International, 14 March 2017.
- 14 Telephone interview with Luke Irving, Mayday Rescue, 16 October 2017.
- 15 Ibid.; and see: <http://www.maydayrescue.org>.
- 16 Email from Lene Rasmussen, DDG Regional Manager MENA, 15 March 2017.
- 17 "Russia completes demining of archaeological site in Palmyra, Syria", Euronews, 22 April 2016, at: <http://www.euronews.com/2016/04/21/russia-completes-demining-of-archeological-site-in-palmyra-syria/>. See also "Russian Bomb Experts Clear Landmines from 5,300 Hectares in Syria: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation", Sputnik News, 22 September 2017, at: <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201709221057599042-russia-demines-syria/>.
- 18 M. Al Mounes (AFP), "Russian Defense Minister Hails Demining Work in Syria's Palmyra, Aleppo", *Sputnik*, 21 January 2017, at: <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201701211049842834-russian-dm-demining-work-palmyra-aleppo/>.
- 19 "Russia sends demining team to Syria to clear Aleppo's liberated areas", *Press TV*, 3 December 2016, at: <http://presstv.ir/Detail/2016/12/03/496202/Russia-demine-sappers-Syria-Aleppo-Palmyra-alNusra-Front>.
- 20 UNMAS, "Programmes: Syria", Last updated March 2016; see also, e.g., J. Schipper, "Syrian volunteers risk lives to clear landmines", *Aljazeera*, 8 April 2016, at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/syrian-volunteers-risk-lives-clear-landmines-160405123622730.html>.
- 21 Human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations in the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 July 2016–28 February 2017, §90.
- 22 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) Protocol V Article 10 Report (for 2016), Form E.