

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Mine action in Syria remains fragmented due to the ongoing instability, the multitude of armed actors, and continuing shifts in control over territory. The United Nations Mine Action Services (UNMAS) has taken on a de facto role as a coordinator of mine action for the whole of Syria. Several actors, including international non-government organisations (NGOs), are present in areas not controlled by the government. In government-controlled areas, however, there is a critical lack of qualified clearance operators with only one international operator, the Armenian Centre for Humanitarian Demining and Expertise (ACHDE), accredited (in 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- Syria should accede to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) as a matter of priority.
- Syria should clear mines in areas under its jurisdiction or control as soon as possible, consonant with its obligations under international human rights law.
- Syria should undertake a baseline survey of anti-personnel mine contamination in areas over which it has effective control.
- Parties to the Syrian conflict should cease all use of anti-personnel mines, including those of an improvised nature.
- Syria should adopt national mine action standards (NMAAS) that are in line with the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS).
- Syria should create the necessary structures to oversee an efficient mine action programme, namely, a national mine action centre (NMAC) and a national mine action authority (NMAA). The process should be underpinned by the adoption of mine action legislation and a multiyear strategy.
- Syria should expedite registration and access for international demining organisations to facilitate a credible humanitarian demining programme.
- Syria and the other parties present in the country should allow mine action operators to move freely across areas under their control and ensure their safety.
- Survey and clearance data from all mine action operators in Syria should be recorded and safeguarded in a digital format and in accordance with the IMAS.

UNDERSTANDING OF AP MINE CONTAMINATION

Syria is heavily contaminated by mines and mines of an improvised nature used extensively by parties to the country's decade-old conflict. It also has mined areas left by a succession of Arab-Israeli wars since 1948.

The Syrian government reportedly laid mines along borders with Turkey and Lebanon in 2012 and Turkish authorities 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 emplaced by Turkish forces.¹

From mid-2019 through October 2020, the Landmine Monitor did not document or confirm any use of anti-personnel mines by the Syrian government or Russian forces participating in joint military operations in Syria, but had yet unconfirmed allegations of new anti-personnel mine use by the Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs).² In September 2019, the Central Division, a faction of a Turkish-backed coalition named "the

Syrian National Army", committed to adhere to a total ban on the use of anti-personnel mines by signing the Geneva Call Deed of Commitment.³

The full extent of anti-personnel mine contamination is unknown. To date, there has been no comprehensive countrywide survey to assess the contamination as access remains restricted by the ongoing conflict, the volatile situation, and the fragmented state of security. Yet, several localised community assessments and surveys consistently reveal large-scale contamination from anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) as well as limited anti-vehicle mine contamination. Massive improvised explosive ordnance (EO) contamination was left in areas liberated from Islamic State and its affiliated groups that controlled large swaths of north-east Syria until their defeat in 2018–19.

In Manbij, close to the Turkish border, heavy casualties from mines, including those of an improvised nature, occurred after Kurdish forces pushed out Islamic State in mid-August 2016.⁴ Islamic State forces 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 (UN) Commission of Inquiry monitoring the conflict in Syria reported in March 2017.⁵ From Raqqa, former capital of the self-proclaimed Islamic State caliphate, to Al-Hassakeh governorate in the north-east, and south to Deir Ezzor and Barghuz (the last remaining Islamic State stronghold overrun in May 2019), retreating Islamic States forces left huge numbers of mines of an improvised nature and other improvised devices.

This contamination has taken a heavy toll on returning civilians: Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) reported that the number of victims of mines 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, beside fields, on rooftops, and under staircases, as well as rigged devices placed in common household items from refrigerators and air conditioners to televisions and cooking pots.⁶ 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.⁷ In Raqqa, where 80% of the city has been destroyed, the ground was littered with rubble mixed with ERW and booby traps left behind by the belligerent parties.⁸

The UN estimated in 2020 that EO contamination was affecting one third of populated communities, with areas that experienced intense hostilities, including Aleppo, Daraa, Deir Ezzor, Idlib, Raqqa, and Rural Damascus, being particularly affected. In the same year, the UN recorded an average of 76 explosions per day, equating to an explosion every 20 minutes.⁹ The Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) report by the UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) highlighted an alarming rise in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), especially those which are vehicle-borne and victim-activated, with 194 attacks verified in 2020. Almost two-thirds of these attacks took place in areas under the control of Turkish-affiliated armed groups in the north-west of Syria.¹⁰

The HALO Trust conducted an EO community contamination impact assessment in north-west Syria (Aleppo and Idlib governorates) between 2018 and 2020. The assessment confirmed EO contamination in over 400 communities (41%

of those assessed),¹¹ with 73% of affected communities reporting agricultural land was blocked, and 48% impeded from accessing housing.¹² Landmines and IEDs combined accounted for only 4% of total contamination, submunitions accounted for 36%, while the remaining contamination was caused by a mixture of other unexploded ordnance (UXO).¹³ This assessment by HALO also revealed 113 suspected minefields (89 in northern Aleppo and 24 in Idlib) and 38 suspected IED fields (34 in northern Aleppo and 4 in Idlib). The types of identified mines and IEDs were not known as data was collected in a rapid survey assessment without deploying non-technical survey.¹⁴

The Syria Civil Defence (SCD), better known as "the White Helmets", surveyed 97 communities in north-west Syria during 2020, of which 71 (73%) were identified as contaminated by some form of explosive ordnance.¹⁵

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) also conducted a joint mine risk needs assessment of 573 communities in Al-Hassakeh, Aleppo, Daraa, Deir Ezzor, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Quneitra, and Sweida governorates. According to the assessment, 530 (92%) of the assessed communities reported the presence of ERW. Of the assessed communities, 57% reported presence of anti-personnel mines, 46% of cluster munition remnants (CMR), and 25% of IEDs.¹⁶

Mines Advisory Group (MAG) has been conducting surveys across several governorates in the north-east of Syria since 2016. To date, MAG has registered approximately 55.82km² of mined area across a total of 806 suspected hazardous areas (SHAs) and confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs), which include areas contaminated with very large numbers of mines of an improvised nature. As at May 2021, MAG had released 81% of the area, leaving 10.63km² requiring further survey and clearance (see Table 1).¹⁷

Working from the Syrian capital, Damascus, UNMAS started an EO assessment in Rural Damascus (South) in August 2020.¹⁸ The assessment locations were identified by UNMAS in line with the UN Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) priorities and with the approval of the Syrian government. As at May 2021, a little over 7km² of SHA had been surveyed, of which over 4.9km² (approximately 70%) was confirmed as hazardous. More than 750 items of EO were located and marked.¹⁹

Syria also has significant contamination from CMR and other ERW (see Mine Action Review's *Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants* report on Syria for further information).

Table 1: Anti-personnel mined area in north-east Syria surveyed by MAG (as at May 2021)²⁰

Governorate	CHAs	Area (m ²)	SHAs	Area (m ²)	Total SHA/CHA	Total area (m ²)
Aleppo	12	455,525	10	177,324	22	632,849
Al-Hassakeh	14	1,384,186	13	595,925	27	1,980,111
Deir Ezzor	7	161,310	4	627,000	11	788,310
Raqqa	77	5,370,103	70	1,863,491	147	7,233,594
Totals	110	7,371,124	97	3,263,740	207	10,634,864

NATIONAL OWNERSHIP AND PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

There is no national mine action authority in Syria. In government-controlled areas, an inter-ministerial National Mine Action Coordination Committee is said to have been formed by a presidential decree in 2019 and is chaired by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr Faisal Mikdad. The committee meets on an ad-hoc basis.²¹

Given the lack of critical national mine action structures, UNMAS liaises with the National Mine Action Coordination Committee chaired by the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and accredits clearance operators on a de-facto basis. UNMAS does not provide capacity-building support to the national authorities, but in 2020, as part of its role in coordinating mine action, UNMAS drafted national mine action standards (NMAS) and associated guidelines and submitted them to the Syrian government for review and approval.²²

Mine action in Syria is coordinated by three response mechanisms: i) the Damascus-based Mine Action Sub-Cluster (MASC) coordinated by UNMAS; ii) the north-west MASC co-chaired by UNMAS and The HALO Trust; and iii) the north-east Mine Action Working Group (MAWG), which sits under the protection working group in the NGO forum-led response and is coordinated by iMMAP. Coordinators of the three structures organise monthly meetings with the respective mine action actors.²³

In north-east Syria, a mine action centre (MAC) was created in January 2021²⁴ by the Humanitarian Affairs Office (HAO) of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The MAC largely supports and facilitates mine action activities but does not maintain an updated database or task operators.²⁵ Mine action stakeholders hold monthly working group meetings and are supported by iMMAP.²⁶ DanChurchAid (DCA) reported having a constructive relationship with and support from the MAC. This has seen it receive unhindered access and permission to operate and import demining equipment. As at May 2021, DCA was in the process of drafting a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the north-east MAC.²⁷ Another operator confirmed a positive relationship with that MAC, but underlined challenges due to the complex and bureaucratic procedures established by the Iraqi side for staff screening

and border-crossing permissions. This results in long waiting times and undermines the mine action efficiency in the north-east. Contingent on future funding, MAG is considering providing support to the existing mine action coordination structure in the north-east in partnership with iMMAP in 2021. MAG will also work with the north-east MAC to elaborate a specific plan for capacity building of the centre.²⁸

Headed by iMMAP under the umbrella of the protection cluster,²⁹ the north-east MAWG is attended by some 27 active members. Its activities include survey, risk education, clearance, and victim assistance.³⁰

In the north-west, mine action is coordinated by the MASC cross-border response from Gaziantep (Turkey-based response) and is co-chaired by The HALO Trust and UNMAS. Some 25 partners attend its monthly meetings. HALO and its partners coordinate and receive approvals from the local Turkish authorities for its work across the border with Turkey. HALO also coordinates with local bodies in the north-west of Syria when necessary. HALO provides explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) and training of trainer (ToT) sessions to the local protection committees and volunteer groups organised under the local councils in the north-west.³¹

In 2020, US\$53 million were requested by the humanitarian sector to respond to mine action needs across Syria. By the end of 2020, only 17% of these needs had been funded. UNMAS Syria Response Programme was seeking US\$30 million for 2021 to support coordination and to scale up mine action interventions, including survey and clearance across Syria, but as at March 2021, the programme was facing an imminent shortfall of US\$9 million for the pilot clearance project alone.³²

In a statement to the Twenty-Fourth International Meeting of Mine Action National Directors and UN Advisors (24th NDM) in May 2021, Syria appealed to the international community to boost its financial support to UNMAS so the UN could expand its support for mine action in Syria, provide equipment to existing national resources, and encourage international NGOs to step in and help Syria clear mines.³³

GENDER AND DIVERSITY

DCA mainstreams gender and diversity in its programme and recruitment policy. As at April 2021, women made up 38% of DCA's Syria programme staff and 28% of the mine action project staff. Moreover, 42% of the supervisory positions were filled by women. DCA was also planning to deploy an all-female clearance team in Al-Hassakeh governorate. DCA ensures that survey and community liaison teams are inclusive and gender balanced by deploying mixed risk education (RE) and non-technical survey teams and by hiring both female and male community liaison officers. DCA disaggregates mine action data by sex and age in its questionnaires, monthly reports and database.³⁴

HALO Trust mainstreams gender, diversity and inclusion in its programme, and disaggregates all mine action data by sex and age. As part of its community liaison activities, HALO holds separate focus group sessions with women and children with the attendance of appropriate staff. In 2020,

HALO designed EORE materials tailored for women, children, and teenagers and included a character with a disability. HALO reports that its field staff represent the communities in which they work in terms of ethnic and social background, and that they are all gender balanced. All of HALO's staff are trained on gender-sensitive content and approaches to EORE messaging. As at December 2020, women comprised 30% of the total number of HALO Trust employees, including its partner organisations in Syria. Women also made up 22% of managerial/supervisory positions and 35% of operational positions.³⁵

MAG has a gender and diversity policy and implementation plan. MAG's community liaison, survey, and clearance activities take gender into account during the planning and implementation phases. These activities are guided by MAG's own standing operating procedures (SOPs) and those of IMAS and are implemented by gender and language

balanced community liaison teams. All mine action data are disaggregated by sex and age. In 2020, women made up 30% of MAG's total number of employees, 50% of its community liaison officers, and 29% of the organisation's operational positions.³⁶

SCD reports having a gender and diversity policy in place. As at May 2021, of the 2,866 SCD volunteers operating in north-west Syria, 262 were women. In addition, of the 256 management positions, 10 were held by women. Women, however, were not represented in clearance and survey teams. SCD reports that, unlike in the south of Syria where it deployed mixed gender survey teams in 2017–18, and despite its best efforts in the north-west, it has been unsuccessful in encouraging female volunteers to join the survey and clearance teams. This is due to the high-risk nature of the work and the impression that it is significantly more hazardous than other roles. Yet, SCD hoped to achieve a 50/50 split when selecting volunteers for two additional survey teams it was planning to train in 2021. Despite not having female volunteers within its clearance and survey teams, SCD ensures that women and girls are consulted

during community liaison activities by seconding female volunteers from other areas of the organisation during EORE and survey activities. Mine action data are disaggregated by sex and age.³⁷

As of end 2020, women made up almost 40% of UNMAS personnel, with 25% of supervisory/managerial roles held by women as well as 32% of operations and security positions. In adherence to UN gender guidelines for mine action, gender is mainstreamed in planning and implementation. UNMAS disaggregates data by sex, age, and ethnic background. Throughout the project cycle, UNMAS takes into consideration how EO contamination impacts beneficiaries differently according to age, sex, physical abilities, and personal background, and recognises the importance of ensuring that messages target women specifically. The programme continues to look for methods to improve targeting and to encourage gender parity in the composition of field teams. According to UNMAS, the recruitment of women, especially for roles involved in community liaison and direct contact with the population, is critical.³⁸

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING

SCD uses Survey123 for data collection and Information Management System of Mine Action (IMSMA) Core for data keeping and management,³⁹ while DCA uses Survey123.⁴⁰

HALO uses IMSMA data collection forms and regularly reports to the north-west MASC and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-led Gaziantep coordination hub. HALO uses mobile-data collection tools and preserves data in Excel and Microsoft PowerBI databases.⁴¹ MAG uses the online server, SharePoint, to preserve its mine action data.⁴²

iMMAP provides technical information management services to the mine action working group in north-east Syria through mobile data collection, geographic information systems (GIS), and maps of explosive hazard contamination, survey, and clearance progress. iMMAP also supports the north-east HAO in setting up its MAC. As at May 2021, the MAC did not have the capacity to manage an IMSMA database on its own. The working group in north-east Syria has recently harmonised data collection forms used by all actors to make it compatible with IMSMA.⁴³

As at June 2021, UNMAS was in the process of setting up IMSMA Core as the national mine action information management system in Damascus. UNMAS manages the database, collating explosive ordnance data from partners across Syria in a central database. Since its accreditation in 2020, the ACHDE has been providing monthly reports on areas worked and items found to UNMAS IMSMA.⁴⁴ It is believed, however, that clearance conducted by the Syrian and Russian forces largely goes unreported.

Despite concerted efforts to establish a centralised database representing the whole of Syria, SCD reported that its clearance and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) data were not accepted in the 4W reporting mechanism of the north-west MASC.⁴⁵ This is reportedly because, as at June 2021, SCD's application to re-join the protection coordination cluster had yet to be granted, and membership of the protection coordination cluster is a pre-condition for active membership in the MASC.⁴⁶ It is of course important that all relevant data on EO contamination, survey efforts, and clearance/EOD operations are captured in a central information management database.

PLANNING AND TASKING

Syria does not have a national mine action strategic plan. Mine action is fragmented and has a long way to develop into a coherent national response. Different actors have set different priorities for survey and clearance as dictated by the circumstances and the authorities under which they operate.

In the north-east, DCA reports that the MAC prioritises urban clearance (houses, schools, and public facilities).⁴⁷ The mine action working group, with the support of iMMAP, also participates in determining areas of operations.⁴⁸ MAG reported that, due to the lack of the necessary mine action coordination structures in 2020, there was no tasking system

in place. MAG's community liaison teams identify hazardous areas through non-technical surveys. They subsequently complete a clearance prioritisation form to assess the impact of EO contamination on communities and to provide data for operational planning, including information on direct and indirect beneficiaries, infrastructure, natural resources, land use and land ownership.⁴⁹

In the north-west, HALO uses data collected from its EO community contamination assessment survey to identify high-priority communities for EOD, focusing on removing contamination that prevents access to basic services or livelihood resources. HALO engages with communities

where it conducts EOD to obtain their informed consent and considers requests from local authorities for interventions.⁵⁰ SCD does not have a specific prioritisation system as the vast majority of its tasks are call-outs or immediate disposal of items encountered during survey.⁵¹

UNMAS reports that it collates EO data from different partners and analyses it to enable needs-based prioritisation and inform the wider humanitarian response with data, maps, and identification of hazardous areas.⁵²

LAND RELEASE SYSTEM

STANDARDS AND LAND RELEASE EFFICIENCY

There are no formal NMAS in Syria, but in 2020, UNMAS drafted NMAS and associated guidelines which are under consideration by the Syrian government.⁵³

Due to the lack of NMAS, most of the operators work to their own SOPs. For example, DCA works in accordance to its global SOPs which derive from IMAS and applies best practice guidelines from the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD). DCA also offers guidance and advocates best practices to the newly established MAC in the north-east of Syria.⁵⁴ In the north-west, HALO's operations are governed by its own SOPs, which are in accordance with IMAS.⁵⁵

OPERATORS AND OPERATIONAL TOOLS

Mine action in Syria has been conducted by a wide range of organisations, largely determined by the circumstances and forces controlling the region at a given time. In areas under government control, these have included mainly Russian and Syrian military engineers and civil defence organisations. Russia deployed several hundred military deminers from its Armed Forces Demining Centre from 2017 onwards, conducting clearance with manual teams supported by mine detection dogs and Uran-6 mine detection robots. Russian troops also provided training courses for Syrian army engineers at Hmeimim air base (Lattakia governorate in the north-west) 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.⁵⁶ Russia started to withdraw troops, including deminers, from Syria in 2018 but its Ministry of Defence (MoD) continued to report mine clearance and EOD in Syria in 2020.⁵⁷

Russia appealed to other countries in 2018 to provide support. Armenia responded by sending an 83-man team to Syria in February 2019, planning to focus its work on the northern governorate of Aleppo.⁵⁸ Armenia rotated a new team to replace the first after four months.⁵⁹ The ACHDE reported having cleared 35,000m² and destroyed 29 landmines and items of UXO during the clearance operation in Aleppo city between February and June 2019.⁶⁰

In areas not under government control, international and national demining organisations conducted clearance in north-east Syria controlled by the SDF. In December 2020, a team of British bomb disposal military veterans volunteered to clear two lanes of landmines, as well as bombs and an IED belt left by the Islamic State in Rojava, Al-Hassakeh governorate.⁶¹ Turkey reported in January 2020 that its security forces conducted mine and IED clearance in areas of northern Syria it occupied.⁶²

DCA has been present in Syria since 2015. Due to the frequent shifts and outbreaks of violence, its Syria country offices have closed and reopened several times. Its staff were relocated to Turkey, Iraq, and then back to Syria in 2020. As at May 2021, and due purely to issues of access, DCA's operations were confined to the parts of north-east Syria not controlled by the government.⁶³

The HALO Trust, which has been present in Syria since 2016, is operational in north-west Syria in opposition-controlled areas of Idlib and western Aleppo, as well as the Turkish-administered areas of northern Aleppo. HALO's programme in 2020 covered EORE, victim and survivor assistance, survey, and EOD. Since November 2020, HALO has deployed an EOD team in the Turkish-administered areas of northern Aleppo in partnership with a Turkish implementing partner organisation. HALO delivers activities through direct implementation, as well as in partnership with local NGOs.

In 2020, HALO partnered with Turkish registered Syrian NGOs, Shafak and HiHFAD, for EORE and survivor assistance activities, and with a Turkish NGO, iMFAD, for non-technical survey and EOD. HALO's capacity of 2020 comprised of six survey teams, one EOD team, and seven EORE and victim assistance teams. As at June 2021, HALO was planning to continue EOD activities in northern Aleppo, expand its EOD capacity westwards to the opposition-controlled areas of Idlib and to start non-technical survey and mine clearance in 2021. However, HALO is facing a serious shortfall of funding for it to operate at the needed scale for EOD, non-technical survey, and ultimately mine clearance. According to HALO, the COVID-19 pandemic had minimally disrupted the operations and project outputs overall. Security, however, remains the key challenge for international staff entering north-west Syria, a problem for all international NGOs and not only HALO Trust.⁶⁴

MAG has been operational in the north-east of Syria since 2016, conducting clearance, EORE, and surveys on contamination, accidents and victims. As reported by iMMAP, in 2020, MAG alone accounted for 70% of clearance activities, 60% of mine action beneficiaries, and 95% of contamination mapped and reported in north-east Syria. Following a forced suspension of its activities in October 2019, MAG resumed its activities in the north-east in late 2020. MAG partnered with two national NGOs only for community liaison activities in 2020, and had no plans of partnership for clearance activities.⁶⁵

As at May 2021, MAG was deploying 10 community liaison teams, three mine action teams, and two multi-task teams in its Shaddadi base in Al-Hassakeh. Funds permitting, MAG is planning to set up a training centre and a second line mechanical workshop. MAG reported that it was intending to

re-open its operational base in Raqqa in October 2021 with a planned capacity of ten community liaison teams, two mine action teams and two EOD teams. In addition, MAG is looking into expanding its presence in the north-east, with a view to re-establishing its operations at the same level as that prior to its suspension of activities. Through a combination of partnered and direct implementation, MAG will address mine and cluster munition contamination to enable the safe return of displaced communities, restore access to agricultural land, and enable the rehabilitation of critical infrastructure and property.⁶⁶

According to MAG, the challenges to the clearance of anti-personnel mines in Syria are: the volatile security situation; the lack of trauma medical care within an hour's reach to the operation site, which is a pre-condition for clearance; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential increase of cases that could lead to additional lockdowns; the potential disputes in housing, land, and property for clearance activities when ownership documents are unavailable for returnees or other community members; and the lack of a functioning national mine action authority, which impedes coordination and clearance prioritisation.⁶⁷

A small national organisation, Roj Mine Control Organization (RMCO), was established in 2016, and was conducting clearance in north-east Syria but reportedly sustained heavy casualties among its deminers attempting clearance of improvised devices.⁶⁸ As at July 2021, RMCO was still operational and was being trained on EOD by the United States (US) forces.⁶⁹

The SCD was operational in Aleppo, Hama, and Idlib governorates (in the north and north-west of the country) and continued to conduct single-item disposal of UXO along with survey in north-west Syria. SCD reported that the items it encountered are predominately CMR, but SCD teams also disposed of abandoned anti-personnel mines it encountered. SCD's operational capacity in 2020 was six clearance teams and four survey teams and it was planning to recruit two additional survey teams in the second half of 2020.⁷⁰

UNMAS signed an MoU with the Syrian government in July 2018. After meeting the then Deputy Foreign Minister, Faisal Mikdad in Damascus in October 2019, UNMAS Director Agnès Marcaillou reported the government had agreed to the involvement of international demining organisations. They would be registered by the government and coordinated by UNMAS, which stated that discussions were underway on plans for survey, marking, and clearance.⁷¹ As at June 2021, only the ACHDE was accredited in government-controlled

areas. UNMAS reported the lack of qualified in-country operators as one of the major challenges to advancing in mine action. This led UNMAS to hire its own UN personnel to conduct the EO assessment survey in the interim, which normally would be conducted through implementing partners.⁷²

To facilitate access for clearance operators, following consultations with the Syrian government in December 2020, UNMAS conducted a global pre-qualification exercise for Syria. Ten mine clearance operators from a wide range of countries were pre-qualified to participate in UNMAS procurement for clearance operations.⁷³ Subject to in-country registration by the government, UNMAS hopes that government acceptance of the listed pre-qualified operators will lead to expanding access for qualified international clearance operators within Syria. UNMAS reports that it might further increase its capacity if the pilot clearance project starts as planned in 2021 and scale up clearance operations. UNMAS has been encouraging safer programming for humanitarian workers, training security focal points in risk awareness, and integrating risk education into a range of humanitarian programmes.⁷⁴

In late 2019, UNMAS identified 50 locations in Rural Damascus, Daraa and Homs for survey and clearance operation. All areas were classified as level three or above on the HRP protection sector severity scale. In February 2020, UNMAS shared the list of these 50 recommended areas/sub-districts with the Syrian government for its acceptance and granting access for the EO assessment. Among the 50 locations, it was jointly agreed with government of Syria to start the assessment in eight locations of high humanitarian priority, also taking into consideration access and logistics questions in Rural Damascus and Homs. The prioritisation criteria covered key issues such as EO contamination, potential land use for housing, land and property issues, access to key infrastructure, returnees/internally displaced persons (IDPs), and support to the UN humanitarian activities.

As at June 2021, an area for a pilot clearance project was identified, initially focusing on agricultural areas in western Ghouta (Rural Damascus), and UNMAS was in the process of preparing a clearance contract. Further humanitarian clearance is subject to Syrian government approvals for international humanitarian mine action operators to register and work in Syria, and the availability of necessary funding.⁷⁵ In its statement to the 24th NDM in May 2021, Syria said that it had facilitated the opening of UNMAS offices in Aleppo.⁷⁶

LAND RELEASE

Syria's continuing instability prevented progress towards a coordinated national programme of mine action. Comprehensive information on outcomes of survey and clearance in any areas was unavailable.

The ACHDE reported to UNMAS that it had cleared 319,820m² of land between February 2019 and December 2020. When items of EO are found by the Armenian teams, they are marked and reported to the Aleppo Governor's office and the Russian Center for Reconciliation. These authorities then liaise with the Syrian army engineers to remove the marked items or destroy them in situ.⁷⁷

SCD teams disposed of 506 items of explosive ordnance in north-west Syria, including two anti-personnel mines, in 2020.⁷⁸

In government-controlled areas, Syrian deminers were reported to have cleared mines and explosive devices in areas recaptured from opposition armed groups. Among tasks completed in 2020 was clearance of the Damascus-Aleppo highway.⁷⁹ According to media reports in July 2020, ACHDE had completed the clearance of 185,209m² in and around Aleppo since it

started clearance operations in February 2019.⁸⁰ Demolitions of cleared items are conducted by the Syrian army.⁸¹ The Russian Federation reported that, since 2016, its specialists have cleared more than 65km² and disposed of 105,000 items of UXO on Syrian territory, including in the city of Aleppo and in Palmyra.⁸²

Northwards, Turkey reported its security forces destroyed 891 mines and 1,660 IEDs in areas of northern Syria it occupied in January 2020.⁸³ In 2020, HALO Trust destroyed 22 items of ERW in Aleppo governorate, though none of the destroyed items was an anti-personnel mine or a victim-activated IED. As at June 2021, HALO Trust EOD team had disposed of 51 items of UXO.⁸⁴ In the north-east, MAG cleared 18,736m² of anti-personnel contaminated land, destroying in the process six anti-personnel mines.⁸⁵

In its statement as an observer to the 18th Meeting of States Parties (18MSP) of the APMBC, Syria stated that “the unilateral sanctions inflicted on the Syrian people pose challenges for the Syrian government to provide the financial, technical and logistical resources [required to clear the mines]”. The statement called for non-politicised financial and technical assistance to the mine action sector in Syria, without pre-conditions and in coordination with the Syrian government.⁸⁶

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- 1 Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Army planting banned landmines”, 13 March 2012, at: <http://bit.ly/2Ybz9rK>; “Thousands of landmines planted along Turkish-Syrian border”, *Middle East Monitor*, 21 November 2013, at: <https://bit.ly/2Mt7efE>.
 - 2 Landmine Monitor Report 2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2Qw7LLy>, p. 3.
 - 3 “Armenian de-miners clear an area of 48,967 square meters in Syria”, Public Radio of Armenia, 27 August 2019, at: <https://bit.ly/3bH7X91>.
 - 4 See, e.g., “Rural Aleppo: explosions on the rise in Manbij City”, *Enab Baladi*, 2 February 2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2MoBbxq>; O. Haj Kadour, “Bus blown up by landmine in Syria’s Manbij: 1 dead, 5 injured”, *Agence France Presse*, 2 February 2019.
 - 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: <https://bit.ly/2SKjUQB>.
 - 7 “Inside Foua: A Shi’a town in the eye of the Syrian storm”, *Middle East Eye*, 19 August 2018.
 - 8 Humanity and Inclusion (HI), “Syria: it will take at least two generations to rebuild”, 25 February 2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3fPFoaf>.
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