

Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA), Contamination and Mine Action

Syria is marked by the intense use of **Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA)**, and the **level of contamination** by explosive hazards is alarming.

The use of EWIPA continues to result in **widespread and extensive explosive contamination, causing injury and death** throughout Syria. Contamination also impedes access to essential services. This, exacerbated by **inadequate health and rehabilitation services** and **socio-economic deprivation** from years of crisis, means that many areas in Syria are not safe for people to return.

Humanitarian Mine action is a central component of the response. It comprises risk education, mine clearance activities, and victim assistance. There is an immediate need for **risk education** to be more **systematic and scaled up**, and for **mine clearance activities** to be executed by **humanitarian mine actors**. Moreover, **survivors of explosive accidents** as well as their families and communities **need specialised inclusive health services, and livelihoods opportunities**. However, **further contamination, injury and death** can only be prevented through the **immediate cessation of hostilities** and, barring that, **respect for International Humanitarian Law**.

Urgent Concerns

Explosive Contamination

- Massive, **widespread and unceasing contamination** by explosive remnants of war (ERW) is the result of **intense use of explosive weapons in populated areas** in Syria including **confirmed repeated use of landmines, cluster munitions and other banned weapons**.⁽¹⁾
- Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), including **booby traps and improvised landmines** are **particularly unpredictable** and difficult to detect, consequently increasing the threat they pose to the civilian population.
- While all population groups are at risk, **children, especially boys, agricultural workers and people on the move** are particular at risk⁽²⁾.
- Key services and infrastructure such as **roads, housing, schools, health centres, and water and sanitation systems** have been destroyed. If not destroyed, they often remain contaminated and unsafe for use. Lost access to productive land for livelihoods and settlement **reinforces poverty, further destabilises communities and undermines opportunities for recovery**.

Not Safe for Return

- **Explosive remnants of war (ERW), landmines and IEDs**, including improvised landmines, present a **physical threat to civilians, limit safe access to services, and impede the delivery of humanitarian aid**.
- The exact **scale and scope of explosive hazard contamination** of most localities and areas is **unknown** due to a **lack of access** and a **lack of local capacity** in humanitarian mine action.

1. Landmine Monitor 2016, Cluster Munition Monitor 2016.

2. Action on Armed Violence, January 2019, *The Reverberating Effects of Explosive Weapon Use in Syria*, January 2019

Facts & Figures

- In their January 2019 report, AOAV stated that **79,206 casualties from explosive weapons** have been recorded from 2011 until 2018, of which 87% were civilians.
- As of January 2019, according to the Mine Action Syria response, an estimated **10.2 million people in Syria are at risk of exposure to explosive hazards**⁽¹⁾.
- In 2018 there were, on average, **187 explosive incidents** per day, with 1 in 4 communities in Syria reporting some form of contamination. The incident causes are different depending on the area but overall, in 2018, 26.1% of the incidents were related to airstrikes, 69.9% to the use of heavy weapons and 4% to IEDs and other explosives⁽²⁾.
- Despite such statistics and ample evidence of the gravity of the situation, **the exact scale and scope of explosive hazard contamination of most localities and areas is unknown** due to a lack of access and a lack of local capacity in humanitarian mine action.
- A technical **explosive hazards survey** is required to **further assess and understand the threats**, determine clearance priorities and inform the population and humanitarian actors in affected areas. **Marking and removal** of explosive hazards is required on the roads and in areas of potential return and humanitarian intervention.
- This work requires time due to the **improvised, diverse and widespread** nature of the contamination.

1. Sub Cluster Mine Action overview at Jan 2019.

2. *Ibid.*

Contamination Impact/Non-Technical Survey surveys* conducted in Syria

Out of a total of 187 Contamination Impact/Non-Technical Surveys conducted by humanitarian organisations in 2018:

- 81% (of communities) report witnessing of shelling, 78% aerial bombardments, 83% ground fighting.
- 100% report at least indirect evidence of contamination.
- 72% report cases of explosive hazard contamination.
- 40% report presence of landmines.
- 59% report presence of Explosive Remnants of War (ERW).
- 34% report presence of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), including improvised landmines.

On reported accidents:

- 51% of the communities report cases of accidents and/or victims, in 12% of the communities it was unknown if the explosive hazards were marked.

The lack of information on the location and presence of ERW increases the risks for the population. Only 8% of communities reported that the hazards were partially marked, and only 4 communities, out of the total of 187 reported that they were all marked. In 58% it was known that hazards were not marked.

* Non-Technical / Contamination Impact Surveys aim at identifying the level and type of contamination in a given community to inform people about areas that are potentially contaminated and help them adopt safe behaviours.

- **Humanitarian actors**, including those providing mine action services, **cannot ensure that the conditions for safe return are met** if they have limited access to the localities concerned.

Testimony from someone who suffered as a result of mine contamination, and was supported by humanitarian organisations working in the field:

“We saw that more and more people were going back to Raqqa so we decided it was time to go home too.

At the time, I didn't know how contaminated our neighbourhood was. But when we came back to our neighbourhood, we found our house completely destroyed, like thirty other ones. There were no more walls or a roof so we set up a small camping site in our old courtyard, in which we could live for the time being.

On that day, my kids were playing around the courtyard

and all of a sudden, a mine exploded in the ground. Two of my sons, Ali (5 years old) and Omar (2 years old), died instantly. Rafif (3 years old) was severely injured.

We were brought in emergency to the Trauma Stabilization Point (TSP) in Raqqa and then to the hospital outside of the city. Doctors immediately operated, Rafif underwent five surgeries in the same week.

Every day at the hospital, we see between 50 and 60 new people, injured by mines and IEDs, being brought to the hospital. People want to go back home, because where do you want them to live?

Usually, when they return, their house is completely destroyed so they just arrange one of the rooms as they can and sleep in it. But everything is booby-trapped. I know so many people to whom it happened. It's the same story, over and over. The same thing happened to our neighbours.”

Recommendations

All stakeholders: donors, international actors (including UN agencies) and involved parties should:

- Recognize that **humanitarian mine action is a prerequisite to any immediate or long-term recovery**;
- Encourage local authorities to rapidly **register, and generally create an enabling environment for organizations engaged in humanitarian mine action**;
- Ensure that **paragraph 11 of United Security Council Resolution 2401 (2018)** which ‘calls for humanitarian mine action to be accelerated as a matter of urgency throughout Syria’, reiterated in paragraph 25 of S/RES/2449 (2018) is **implemented immediately**;
- Commit humanitarian funding to **significantly scale up** mine action activities, i.e. risk education, victim assistance, technical and non-technical surveys and clearance of mines and explosive remnants of war;
- Require that recipients of mine action funding (including any sub-grantees/sub-contractors) conduct their activities

in line with the **International Mine Action Standards and humanitarian principles**;

- Encourage the use of a **comprehensive mine action approach** that includes:
 - **protection** through **clearance and risk education** about the dangers of explosive weapons and risk mitigations measures ;
 - **victim assistance** through **multi-disciplinary health services**, i.e. physical & functional rehabilitation, prosthesis and orthotics (P&O) services, provision of assistive devices, psychosocial support (PSS), and **socio-economic support** through emergency distributions and livelihood activities;
- Include resources in calls for proposals that focus on the effects of the use of explosive weapons and better **data collection**, monitoring and reporting measures on vulnerable people, including persons with disabilities.