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Occupied Palestinian Territories

by Chad McCoull [Mine Action Information Center]



A half-century of conflict has contributed to the current unstable situation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, split between the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and the Fatah-controlled West Bank. Both explosive ordnance and unexploded ordnance remain from the civil struggle between Hamas and Fatah political factions, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Earlier this year, Israeli forces imposed dominion over the Gaza Strip, plunging the region into a humanitarian crisis. On 23 January 2008, a series of Hamas-detonated landmine explosions along the border wall in

Rafah, Gaza Strip, opened passage for tens of thousands of Palestinians to escape into Egypt.¹ No signs of resolution are yet in sight for these regions impeded by continual violence and escalating poverty.

Mine Problem

In the midst of hostilities, Palestinian militants have employed several varieties of explosives such as bombs, landmines, booby-traps and homemade anti-vehicle mines.² It is not unusual for children in Gaza to discover explosive remnants of war as well as small arms and light weapons in their own neighborhoods.³ Civilians continue to recycle found materials into improvised explosive devices such as anti-vehicle mines, mortars, rockets and roadside bombs.² Reports also describe unexploded ordnance originating from Israel, including missiles, grenades and small arms ammunition.²

Palestinian minefields have neither been contained nor labeled, so authorities cannot accurately appraise the severity of mine contamination.³ In Gaza Strip, both Israeli and Hamas brigades have planted mines in locations prone to onslaught such as the Egyptian border, blockades and checkpoints, Palestinian-occupied buildings, Israeli training camps and the roads of northern Gaza.² Along the border of the West

Bank and Jordan, at least five minefields have been discovered.² In September 2006, firemen watched helplessly as a wildfire, intensified by the blasts of buried landmines, devastated an olive grove, costing hundreds of farmers their seasonal harvest.⁴

While the Israeli Defense Forces undertake mine clearance during emergency situations, the Palestinian police force is the only body that regularly participates in explosive ordnance disposal.² The Palestinian police teams' scanty supply of archaic vehicles and equipment prevents them from responding to all emergencies. After working with these EOD teams for a year, the European Union Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support concluded that implementing a specialized education program should be a top priority for EOD improvement.²

To date, no steps have been taken toward enacting a policy for explosive ordnance, and because the Palestinian Authority is not legally recognized as a state, it is not qualified to join the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.² According to the 2003 "Roadmap for Peace," written by the international community to encourage an end to conflict, security reform, poverty reduction and institutional capacity building need to be top priorities for the Occupied Palestinian Territories development.⁵ As of February 2008, the PA Ministry of Interior was putting the finishing touches on the three-year Palestinian Reform and Development Plan, which has garnered US\$7.8 billion from the international community.⁶ A primary objective of this plan is to establish a Security Sector Reform Programme, which could include mine-action proposals.⁶

Mine Casualties

The Occupied Palestinian Territories lacks a comprehensive, reliable method of casualty data collection, and hospitals do not catalog the causes of patient casualties.² For the year 2006, the Palestine Red Crescent Society piloted a centralized casualty-reporting database, which will hopefully be fully implemented one day.² Though the collective total of casualties is unknown, Defence for Children International recorded at least 2,500 mine- and ERW-related casualties and injuries from 1967 to 2000 and 99 casualties from 2000 to 2007.⁷ The majority of the 550 additional casualties reported by European Union Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support from 2004 to 2005 were IED-related.²

From January 2007 to July 2007, seven Palestinian children died and 47 Palestinians were injured as a result of ERW, mostly in the Gaza Strip.² On 4 June 2007, five children, ages newborn through five, were killed by an ordnance explosion.⁸ Seven children were killed by unexploded ordnance in 2002, two in both 2003 and 2004, six in 2005, three in 2006 and seven in 2007.⁸ So far in 2008, 66 children have been killed due to Israeli-Palestinian violence, however, only one child has been killed by UXO.⁹

Mine Action

In 1999, Handicap International and Defence for Children International implemented mine-risk education for contaminated areas.¹⁰ In recent years, MRE programs have touched the lives of children and adults. Participants in these programs have increased from 59,720 people in 2005 to 81,892 people in 2006.² Credit for this advancement goes to 200 volunteers trained by the Palestine Red Crescent Society, which is financed by UNICEF and the International Committee of the Red Cross. MRE continued through March 2007 and began again in June 2008. The Mine Action Awareness Campaign in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has not yet obtained funding for a program that would protect 100,000 children and 50,000 families from landmines, UXO, small arms/light weapons and IEDs. If it is endorsed, this program would inform nomads, fishermen, farmers, political groups and militants through instructional summer camps, primary education schools and regional meetings.

Limited funding has posed problems for all Palestinian mine-action efforts, with particular regard to the inception of a Palestinian National Mine Action Committee. The United Nations Development Programme has spoken on the need for establishing an “institutional framework through technical assistance so as to ensure establishment of a mine-action policy, clear strategy, and formal structures at all levels.”² A single entity has not yet been established for the purpose of coordinating Palestinian mine-action activities; therefore, communication has been difficult between local organizations and the major international organizations concerned with mine action such as UNICEF, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the European Union Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support.⁷

Victim Assistance

There are 5,025 beds in 76 hospitals across the Occupied Palestinian Territories—equaling one hospital for every 49,500 people.³ Of the 40,000 Palestinians injured in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 2000, 10 percent have been disabled permanently, due to a lack of victim-assistance programs.² No specific state programs exist to serve the needs of the 2,500 Palestinians who have been victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance from 1967 to 1999.⁷ The Occupied Palestinian Territories disabled community faces many challenges, including the poor quality of Palestinian Authority-provided health insurance,² the stigmatization associated with disabilities and the ineffectiveness of the People with Disability Rights Law.⁷

Small towns and villages throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip are lacking in rehabilitation clinics, which are more prevalent in Palestinian cities.⁴ Though the Ministry of Health provides 70 percent of all health services, nongovernmental organizations and international organizations provide almost all physical rehabilitation for conflict-disabled persons.² In addition, the Ministries of Health, Social Affairs and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East provide care for the disabled, including psychosocial, occupational and reintegration programs. Since 1999, Handicap International has aided in wheelchair production, psychiatric hospital renovation, patient satisfaction studies, residential rehabilitation outreach, psychological assistance for refugee children and rehabilitation directory initiatives.⁹ Since 1999, the Medical Relief Aid Equipment Loan Center, part of the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, has offered medical equipment rentals for the disabled.⁴

Local NGOs provide health, economic and humanitarian support to millions of Palestinians in need. The Palestine Red Crescent Society offers many different forms of service for the Palestinian populace and refugees, including an emergency hotline, sports and arts for disabled children, a disability-awareness campaign, rehabilitation training, a parenting-improvement project, door-to-door needs assessments and delivery of emergency supplies.⁷ Other notable NGOs assisting mine victims include the Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation, the Palestinian Medical Relief Society and the General Union of Disabled Palestinians.

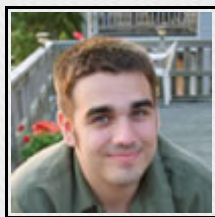
In November 2007, a member of both the PRCS and the General Union of Disabled Palestinians, Fidaa™a Mardawi, received the Palestine International Prize for Excellence and Creativity for her leadership in the rehabilitation of disabled conflict victims.⁵ Although disabled herself, Mardawi has excelled at sports, even participating in the 2000 Sydney Olympics.⁵

Future Development

UNICEF is busy reframing Palestinian mine-risk education to focus on small arms and light weapons, which is the greatest cause of casualties.² Though for the last two years the United Nations Development Programme has intended to help the Ministry of Health launch a centralized system of supervision, no

progress has been made.² This step towards improving survivor assistance is important in order to stabilize the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Only time will tell whether the UNDP's 2005 goal to establish a comprehensive mine-action strategy will come to fruition; however, there may be hope in the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan. 🌱

Biography



Chad McCoull worked for the *Journal of Mine Action* from January 2007 through May 2008 as an Editorial Assistant. In May 2008 he graduated from James Madison University with a Bachelor of Arts in technical and scientific communication and a minor in writing and rhetoric. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in the same field at James Madison University.

Endnotes

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