A War Far From Over: Iraq’s Landmine Struggle

Nicole Kreger

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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A War Far From Over: Iraq's Landmine Struggle

With the end of major hostilities, there comes an urgent need for UXO/mine clearance teams to start tackling their onerous task. A number of countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to take on this responsibility, hoping to eliminate fear and restore a sense of security to the newly freed Iraqi people.

by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

Mines/UXO in Iraq: A Brief History

Having experienced three major conflicts in as many decades, Iraq suffers greatly from the remnants of these wars. Estimates of the number of landmines in Iraq range from 8 to 12 million—which doesn't include UXO or other debris. The majority were laid during the Iran/Iraq War of 1980–1988. Additionally, a number of landmines and pieces of UXO remain from internal conflict during the 1960s and 1970s as well as the Gulf War of 1990–1991. Some of the explosives were even left behind from World War II.

Most contamination exists in northern Iraq (also called Iraqi Kurdistan) and along the country's borders with Iran and Kuwait. Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, is also heavily mined, as well as the southern city of Basra. A lack of minefield records has made the exact locations of many minefields difficult to identify. In addition to being a threat to the lives of the Iraqi people, landmines and UXO are a significant impediment to economic growth, especially in the areas of foraging, cattle farming and agriculture. Mines are commonly found near water sources and in rural farmland, complicating everyday activities; they also hinder access to a number of important roads, ports, irrigation canals and power plants due to landmine/UXO contamination.

From Bad to Worse: The Effects of Another War

The landmine crisis in Iraq was serious enough before the recent conflict, and additional fighting has only exacerbated the situation. Saddam Hussein littered thousands of mines around the key northern city of Kirkuk, as well as on main roads. Iraqi troops also mined stretches of the southern Persian Gulf in order to block out Allied ships and in many cases left mines behind when they retreated from key areas, often near important locations such as wells, oil fields and important roadways. Additionally, some of the cluster bombs that the Coalition Forces used did not explode and present a great danger because curious children often play with them and people try to take them apart for the value of the metal.

Despite these ever-present dangers, mines and cluster bombs are not the biggest immediate peril for the population. According to Roger Hess, a mine action professional who is currently in Iraq, the primary threat (particularly south of Baghdad) is "the massive amounts of ammunition stockpiles, weapons systems and missile sites that were intentionally placed inside the cities and civilian housing areas by the previous regime." Looting has caused these stockpiles to be exposed and mined together, and many of these weapons are unstable. According to the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), while adult males and boys are most at risk of injury from such weapons, stockpiles and munitions caches are a serious threat to the population as a whole, and the most serious one at present. Iraqi troops left ammunition stockpiles behind in all kinds of locations, including civilian homes, schools and mosques.

The Long Road to Recovery

With all of the war remanants the Iraqi people have to live with, there is a great need for assistance in clearing them. A number of governments and organizations have offered their services in helping contain and eradicate the UXO/cluster bomb problem in Iraq. Several organizations have already begun their clearance activities.

QRDF

In April 2003, the U.S. Department of State's Quick Reaction Demining Force (QRDF), a team designed for short-term rapid response to emergency demining situations, deployed to Iraq from its base in Mozambique at the request of the U.S. Department of State (DOS), Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs (HDYP). Within three days of its arrival, the QRDF quickly began battlefield area clearance (BAC) and demining tasks in and around the capital of Baghdad. In slightly more than three months, the four 10-man teams of manual deminers and eight mine detection dogs (MDD) have cleared approximately one million square feet and destroyed a minefield containing over 1,000 land mines and other items of UXO.

During June, the QRDF conducted clearance operations at two separate locations in Iraq. Two manual clearance teams, each with the aid of four MDD teams, worked on two minefields 98 km south of Baghdad along the main highway from Basra to the capital. Clearance operations on one of these minefields, which was the first one to be cleared in post-war Iraq, was completed during the month. QRDF teams found 280 Italian-manufactured AP mines in this minefield, most of which had been previously planted and later lifted and replaced by the Iraq Army. Prior to the complete clearance of this minefield, two other manual clearance teams, also complemented with four MDD teams, concentrated on clearance of UXO and cluster munitions in and around Baghdad. These BAC tasks were started shortly after the deployment of the QRDF, but quickly grow in size as local farmers made requests to the local command post to have their own fields cleared. In addition to these tasks, the QRDF has also cleared areas around the Iraqi electrical office in Baghdad to enable the repair of two power pylons and around the highway department's housing and office compound. Clearance operations will continue in Baghdad during July.

UNMAS

The United Nations Mine Action Service is in charge of coordinating all of the United Nations' emergency humanitarian response mine action activities. Through the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), UNMAS has established the Mine Action Coordination Team (MACT), which coordinates UN activities for the recently established UN Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator Iraq (UNOCHA). The MACT is leading the development and implementation of the emergency response UN Mine Action Operations Plan for Iraq. As of the time of writing, the MACT was conducting explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) activities with assistance from the Joint Force EOD Center. In addition to these efforts, the MACT is in charge of maintaining the country's Information Management System, the Mine Action Information Management System (IMSMA) database; developing and upholding mine action standards for current operations, and providing accreditation, quality assurance and priority setting.

MinTech

MinTech International teams arrived in Basra in late May and has been conducting EOD tasks in that area. Working under UN auspices, MinTech is fulfilling its duties as part of the UN Rapid Response Mine Action Contract. In July, they began conducting a Rapid Assessment Survey in the outskirts of Basra to monitor the region for UXO.

UNOPS

UNOPS, working under the auspices of UNOCHA, has contracted several local NGOs to conduct mine clearance operations for its Mine Action Program (MAP). UNOPS funded manual clearance teams (MCTs) are engaged in demining activities such as reconnaissance, recovery and destruction in several parts of the country. As of the end of June, the MCTs had completed mine clearance tasks in five minefields in the Governorate of Erbil. At that time, demining activities were underway in 57 minefields in the three northern governorates.
Governments. Additionally, they were conducting permanent marking operations in 10 villages in that area.

From June 1st to June 26th, UNOPS-contracted organizations finished 28 EOD tasks, recovering over 10,000 pieces of UXO and almost 150 AP mines. During these tasks, the teams destroyed an additional 1,220 cluster bomblets, 16 AP mines and 187 pieces of UXO. During the week ending June 23rd, the UNOPS MAP was able to give 254,214 sq m of cleared land back to the local population of Sulaymaniyah governorate. Furthermore, UNOPS Survey Teams have been conducting Landmine Impact Survey (US) activities in the five km zone that borders Iran, an area in which the government of Iraq had previously not authorized the UNOPS MAP to work.

MAG

MAG has been conducting operations in Iraq since the early 1990s and continued to do so during the recent conflict. Now that the war has ended, MAG continues to carry out emergency operations in northern Iraq and is working to expand its services to areas in the south of the country. In the north, Mine Action Team (MAT) and EOD squads are performing clearance tasks in all seven governorates. These activities are based in Kirkuk and Moul in southern Iraqi MAG has established a base in Basra.

In mid-June, four Survey Teams began surveys in all areas of northern Iraq. In one week alone, they identified 99 clearance tasks. At this time, seven EOD teams were working in Kirkuk and eight were working in and around Mosul. During the week ending June 20th, MAG teams were able to return over 50,000 sq m of land to the community in the town of Kifri. Around the same time, MAG completed the clearance of a minefield in a village in the Qayyarah district. This 9,800 sq m piece of land took 15 days to clear, and 16 mines were destroyed in the process. In mid-July, MAG began assessing the mine/UXO problem in the northern governorates using a Rapid Assessment Survey.

U.S. DOS

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) has announced it will implement a humanitarian mine action program in Iraq over the next three years. The DOS's plans include establishing an Emergency Mine Action Team (EMAT), which will train Iraqi staff and provide them with equipment and supplies. This will lead to an indigenous mine action capability within Iraq. Additionally, the DOS is helping MAG expand its efforts.

FSD

The Swiss Demining Foundation (FSD) is conducting reconnaissance and assessment operations in support of the World Food Program (WFP). This fast, flexible personnel have searched a warehouse in Al Hill, where they found three cluster bomblets. Also, they have conducted surveys in dangerous areas for UNHCR, UNMAS, Handicap International and NPA. During these surveys, the group found over 200 pieces of UXO.

DCA

Danish Church Aid, a NGO located in Denmark, is conducting mine clearance operations in southern Iraq, specifically around Basra. Assessments conducted last April and early May led DCA teams to identify five main task categories for the region:

1. Armanent retrieval and demining sites
2. Essential battle areas, minefields and strike areas
3. Non-essential battle areas, minefields and strike areas
4. Damaged or abandoned weapon systems, etc.
5. National capacity building

In accordance with the priorities set by the UN Mine Action Plan for Iraq, DCA is focusing on conducting surveys and assessments for categories 2 and 3 from the above list. The DCA teams began performing advanced disposal/clearance tasks at the end of May and plan to continue these operations through July. Plans for June include conducting priority tasks in Basra, initiating capacity building at the civilian defense structure, cooperating closely with other organizations and requiring a program to document their efforts as well. InterSOS, a non-profit humanitarian organization, has a standby capacity of equipment for clearing cluster bomblets that it has discussed contributing as well. The NGO Norwegian Peoples' Aid (NPA) plans to transition from its pre-war clearance efforts in northern Iraq to post-war emergency assistance around Baghdad, including two EOD teams, four MICOs, one field and five Emergency Response Teams. In addition to these organizations, a number of countries have plans to send troops and EOD teams to Iraq as well. So far, the list includes New Zealand, the Ukraine, Norway, El Salvador, Slovakia, Moldova and Nicaragua.

SRSA

In April 2003, the Swedish government determined it would provide support to UNMAS, to be carried out by the Swedish Rescue Service Agency (SRSA). The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) is funding the effort, which will cost SEK15.6 million. Initially, this included providing one staff member and equipment for the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMMSA) database for a year. Additionally, a fully equipped EOD team consisting of five people worked on clearing UXO in the area of Basra. The team found over 40,000 pieces of UXO in their first two months of operation. SRSA also provided a support team to the UNMAS MACT, including an Operations Coordinator, medical staff, electricians, vehicles and communication capabilities.

At the end of June, SRSA support was expanded to include providing a complete EOD team to the MACT for six months, beginning in July. Additionally, the expanded services include supplying an EOD Technicians, a Communications Officer and a Logistics Officer to the MACT for two months. SIDA will provide the SKS-6.5 million needed for these additions.

Other Contributions

A number of other organizations are beginning or preparing operations in Iraq as well. The Danish Demining Group (DDG) has indicated its intention to fund four EOD teams in the Southern Area Sectors. Mechern, a South African demining organization, has worked in Iraq before, and plans to contribute to the current effort as well. InterSOS, a non-profit humanitarian organization, has a standby capacity of equipment for clearing cluster bomblets that it has discussed contributing as well. The NGO Norwegian Peoples' Aid (NPA) plans to transition from its pre-war clearance efforts in northern Iraq to post-war emergency assistance around Baghdad, including two EOD teams, four MICOs, one field and five Emergency Response Teams. In addition to these organizations, a number of countries have plans to send troops and EOD teams to Iraq as well. So far, the list includes New Zealand, the Ukraine, Norway, El Salvador, Slovakia, Moldova and Nicaragua.

Conclusion

Even before the war, the UN Secretary General estimated that clearing Iraq's minefields could "take anywhere from 55 to 75 years.6 With the added efforts of the recent conflict, the task of ridding Iraq of mines and UXO is a daunting one.

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References


Contact Information

Stacy L. Smith Program Analyst RONCO Consulting Corporation Tel: (202) 785-2791 Fax: (202) 785-2078 E-mail: samith@roncowash.com

Archie Law UNMAS Tel: 212-963-4805

U.S. State Department Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs Tel: 202-736-7132 Website: www.state.gov/ww/global/armspmn/index.html

Lennart Skov-Hansen Danish Church Aid E-mail: lsh@dkca.dk