On the Ground in Iraq

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Background

MineTech International (MTI) has been stationed in southern Iraq since May 2003, working on humanitarian mine and ammunitions clearing projects, and as part of its brief history, working to deliver rapid response dressing support for the United Nations Office of Project Services (UNOPS).

MTI first arrived in Basrah with a team of around 90 explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) and mine clearance professionals including mine detecting dogs (MDDs) and dog handling teams. Four emergency survey teams were also deployed to carry out Level 2 technical surveys, initially to locate and identify explosive remnants of war within the southern Basrah governorate using the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMISMA) format. However, in June 2003, MTI’s survey teams were tasked to conduct the National Emergency Survey, with the prime focus of gathering information to measure the effect of Operation Enduring Freedom in southern Iraq. As a result, eight survey teams have been working to identify populated areas within each of the eight governorates in southern Iraq and to identify the dangerous areas that are within close proximity to villages.

Southern Iraq comprises eight governorates from Baghdad to the Kuwaiti border in the south. The area is bordered by Saudi Arabia to the west, Kuwait in the south and a long land border with Iran to the east. The area has experienced three major conflicts: the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Kuwait Campaign (Gulf War) from 1990–1991, and most recently Operation Enduring Freedom. In their wake is an enormous accumulation of explosive remnants of war (ERW) among which the local people have been living with for the last 20 years. Ammunition that should have been destroyed has been dumped in rural areas—much of which has deteriorated over the years due to the high salinity content in the soil.

Added to this is the large amount of ammunition stockpiled by the Iraqi military throughout the region. With the breakdown of law and order, much of this ammunition has been removed from storage so that the copper, brass and aluminium components can be separated and sold in Iran. The result is that the contents of munitions crates have been abandoned and spread over a wide area. There is also the threat of loose propellant having been widely scattered when loaders crashed ammunition storage facilities. This has created safety issues not only for the local population but also for the EOD teams dealing with the resultant debris.

In the first few months of activity, the mine clearance teams made a concentrated effort to help farmers gain access to their land in time to prepare fields for cultivation, removing dangerous anti-personnel landmines and obstructions from agricultural land in the As Zubayr region, near Kuwait.

Despite the dangers, local people appear to be largely unperturbed about the risks within their communities. This created some problems for the MTI survey teams who were frequently told that there was nothing dangerous within the communities when, in fact, there were stockpiles of ammunition. More often than not, the children, shepherds and nomads proved to be the best source of information on the whereabouts of dangerous areas—not the village elders.

Basrah

The survey teams, initially working in Basrah, encountered a large amount of ordnance that had been left over from the Iran-Iraq War, in particular a high concentration around the Shatt Al Arab waterway, which was subject to heavy fighting. There had been no attempt by Iraqi governmental organisations to make the area safe for the local population. One particular minefield along the Shatt Al Arab water course is situated in a marshy area with up to 1.5 m of water in some places. The locals use dug out canoes to go about their business for fear of detonating mines. Their animals, on the other hand, were in no great and regularly fell victim to the mines.

In the first week of July 2003, the Survey Teams deployed to the oil facility in Al-Faw township. The teams surveyed from the lower Al-Faw peninsula northwards. Highlights included the location and survey of a major minefield to the north of Al-Faw that is hampering and blocking the rebuilding of homes, cultivation of agricultural land and fishing activities. The minefield was laid during the Iran/Iraq War and has a heavy metal contamination. The local people are clearing mines and UXO where they are identified.

South of Basrah, the teams found large quantities of ordnance ranging from standard ammunition to abandoned explosive ordnance (EO) from the last three conflicts. The EO was in varying states of conditions and stability, with most sites containing large quantities of loose propellant scattered among the munitions. Additionally, another mined area was located 400–500 m south of the greater city limits of Basrah, which the MTI manual clearance teams cleared.

Of all the governorates surveyed, Basrah posed the most challenges to the survey teams. It had a high number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the province who were creating their own communities with ‘villages’ literally springing up overnight. To the end it was decided that if the people considered themselves to be a community, then they would be surveyed as one. In practice, these recent teams were covering a far larger number of communities than the original mapping information suggested. The survey teams had to travel the road systems and rely on local sources of information to be able to guarantee they had picked up the required information and covered all of the villages in the area. Additionally, there was ERW spread across the province from previous conflicts. The levels of ERW contamination, particularly in the Basrah governorate, led the survey teams having to complete multiple dangerous areas for individual villages.

To the north of the province, the teams ran into security problems such as being warned off from entering certain areas, encountering potential hijack situations or having to address fundamental issues such as lack of electricity, water, medicine, and law and order.

The Threat From Border Minefields

Compared to the EO problems, mine clearance issues in Iraq are of much lower consequence, largely because there are few, if any, minefields in the country and these are mainly scattered defensive minefields located around a few ex-Iraqi military installations and are considered as be strategic installations, such as oil and gas fields or refineries. The significant exception is the entire length of the eastern border with Iran, which has been heavily mined, denying access to thousands of hectares of land. Currently, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) does not own any of the border minefields, although MTI personnel have completed a specific six-week mine clearance task to create a safe area around a key border crossing water point. As movement restrictions have lifted, more people are moving to the Iran border, where the geography is unsuitable. They are moving into minefields that are extremely dangerous and cannot compare with anything in MTI’s experience. In the short time working in the border area, MTI personnel have encountered six civilians who were injured after returning to the minefields with their livestock. Although the barrier minefields in the border regions are known, it has been reported that the area is prone to flooding during the wet season and consequently migrates into areas where people conduct agricultural activity—in some cases preventing farmers from producing crops. Mine-awareness education will be vital to protect the families who are now returning to the area if nothing is done to tackle the minefields themselves.

Missan

During the first three weeks of October, the survey teams worked in the Missan governorate. There are limited Coalition Forces EO within the province and the main source of ERW is in origin from both the former Iraqi army and the Iranian conflict. The Missan province had been home to an Iraqi Army Corps, thus there is a huge amount of ammunition stockpiled in various degrees of security and condition, ranging from permanent bunker facilities to open field storage sites. The main ongoing ERW threat remains in the bor...
der minefields laid during the Iraq/Iraq War.

The Miinan governorate in many ways is an easier environment in which to work. The local people removed the Baath Party from power, liberating their governorate without the help of Coalition Forces, and there was no conflict in the governorate during Operation Enduring Freedom. MTI was given assistance by all local community leaders, which ensured a significant element of security, although problems with armed gangs in the southern portion of the governorate did limit activity.

Once the survey along the various axes of the Miinan governorate was completed, the survey group moved to the town of Al Kau in the Wasei province, northwest of Miinan, at the end of October. MTI was again welcomed by the local governor, who recognized the major effort that had been made to remove the stockpiles of mines, and the resulting explosion caused a wing of the complex to collapse, scattering ordnance throughout the school grounds.

The EOD clearance teams in general now face a wide range of challenges, from both the scale of the project and the state of the explosive material, which can be rusty and corroded, buried up to a metre deep. In Al Zahy, teams have been clearing EO remainders from under three sections of collapsed roofing. Searching through the rubble is slow and tedious because the top roof covering has melted into the rubble and concealed a lot of it in a semi-solid mass. Despite this, in one week the teams recovered 1,609 items weighing 7,900 kg.

The teams are working in varied climatic conditions with, on the one hand, extremes of heat that make it difficult for the dog teams and, on the other, amongst thick dust clouds. Communications have been limited and there is still no networking signal in southern Iraq. All mail has to be forwarded and sent from the CPA internet terminal, which was out of order for prolonged periods in February and March of 2004. However, without doubt, the biggest challenge facing all teams, and inevitably all future reconstruction and aid teams, is the issue of security.

The Legacy

What is apparent to everyone is the enormity of the problem still facing the Iraqi people. Latest estimates are that there are still 1,000,000 tonnes of ammunition scattered over Iraq, equivalent to more than half the stockpile of the entire U.S. military machine, and that figure excludes the minefields.

The final count of community villages surveyed was recorded as 1,029, with data collected on 527 dangerous areas within close proximity to the villages. The impact on the population is continual and devastating. While deployed in the Miinan province, a key project for the EOD teams from December through February of this year was the clearance of a school at Al Mazzahah, a town 40 km south of Almisafah. This school, like many others in Iraq, had been used as an ammunition storage depot in the belief that Coalition troops would target it. Unfortunately, the children managed to set off a portion of the stockpile, and the resulting explosion caused a wing of the complex to collapse, scattering ordinance throughout the school grounds.

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The Security Challenge

Often the problem from the Iraqi community was the misidentification of MTI staff as part of the Coalition Forces. Four main issues/questions were continually asked when the teams arrived in a village: When will the village have electricity, clean water, medication and security from banditry? In some cases, unless an answer was forthcoming for these questions, the local people would refuse to discuss anything else.

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