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Field Notes

Bridging a Critical Mine Action Information Management Gap: Complex Conflict Environments

by Isam Ghareeb Barzangy [iMMAP]

Historically the Republic of Iraq is one of the most severely landmine, explosive remnants of war (ERW), and improvised explosive device (IED) afflicted nations in the world. Though possessed with a robust humanitarian mine action (HMA) program in the three northern Kurdish governorates before the Iraq War (2003–2011), the remainder of the country was largely without any HMA focus until the removal of the Ba'ath regime. Iraq's border with Iran contains major military minefields and ERW, while small arms and innumerable stockpiles of ammunition remain throughout the country. High levels of landmine, ERW, and IED contamination are a major challenge for the government and HMA responders, and increasingly impair mobility among segments of the civilian population, placing the Iraqi people in an untenable situation. The Iraqi political process remains gridlocked, which negatively impacts the work conducted by Iraqi government institutions, including the Directorate of Mine Action (DMA) in Baghdad.

The current protracted conflict in Iraq relating to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has resulted in the displacement of 3.3 million people and a significant increase in contamination. ISIS has employed mines and IEDs in large quantities in both urban and rural areas, targeting security forces, humanitarian aid workers, and HMA operators, making it extremely dangerous for them and also for returnees.

While landmine, ERW, and IED contamination is extensive in areas taken back from ISIS, the absence of a coordinated information management system exacerbated the level of risk to both the humanitarian actors and the returnees. Due to the geopolitical situation, the majority of retaken areas fell under the shared responsibility of the two national mine action authorities in Iraq: DMA in Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency (IKMAA) in Erbil. This shared responsibility created a **Gray Area** in which coordination and information management were absent, preventing organized, coordinated, and evidenced-based HMA activities.

iMMAP in Iraq supports a comprehensive range of HMA information management and capacity-building services to address ERW and IED contamination during and after complex emergencies. Recognizing the urgent need for an information management center, iMMAP in Iraq took the initiative with direct support from the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) to mediate and establish a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the two national mine action authorities, DMA and IKMAA, on 14 September 2015. The MoU authorized iMMAP to set up an information management center to manage and coordinate HMA activities within the retaken areas (Gray Area), which fall under the shared responsibility of DMA and IKMAA. This MoU is the first document signed between DMA and IKMAA since 2003.

Due to the armed conflict and the expansion of the Gray Area boundaries, the MoU has resulted in the establishment of a **Joint Operations Room (JOR)** led and coordinated by iMMAP. JOR provides centralized planning, operations coordination, and information management support directly to HMA organizations working in the Gray Area, filling information gaps and enhancing the HMA response.

The JOR has the following functions:

- * **Information Management.** iMMAP manages and hosts the dedicated Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA), which collects information on hazardous areas and HMA activities conducted by organizations in areas recently retaken from ISIS. iMMAP assists IKMAA and DMA with collecting and processing data as well as organizing required training for organizations working in the field. iMMAP submits all field reports to the IMSMA server for the Gray Area and hands over datasets to DMA and IKMAA offices after a final verification. The humanitarian community

can benefit from this information.

* **Centralized Planning, Strategizing, and Coordination.** This allows for a safer process of the returnees to an environment that is currently highly contaminated with IEDs. For instance, clearance may be ongoing in an area where civilians are returning. Thus, the areas where civilians are returning are prioritized for clearance.

* **Gray Area Coordination.** The iMMAP Erbil office organizes and hosts monthly coordination meetings for all stakeholders involved in the Gray Area. The purpose of these meetings is to update all parties about the current status of ERW and IED contamination in the Gray Area, recent progress, clearance achievements, and the coordination and collaboration mechanisms of the stakeholders in the Gray Area. The participants include the national mine action authorities, nongovernmental organizations (NGO), security forces, U.N. agencies, and representatives of the international coalition forces.

* **Clearance Activity Monitoring.** The clearance activity monitoring team consists of DMA, IKMAA, and iMMAP personnel, and conducts site visits on a regular basis to monitor the clearance activities of mine action operators in the Gray Area. The team documents findings and makes recommendations to the relevant authorities to enhance the clearance process and recommend actions to improve the health and safety procedures of mine action operators.

* **Mine Action Technical Working Group.** iMMAP organizes and hosts meetings for the mine action technical working group on a monthly basis, which invites all mine action stakeholders in the Gray Area to update the group on the current status of ERW and IED contamination and to share experiences from operational activities conducted throughout the area. Participants discuss the latest strategies and tactics practiced by the armed groups and exhibit the items found during clearance activities. The purpose of the meetings is to enhance the safety of the clearance teams.

Summary of Achievements

* The Gray Area MoU has been fundamental to minimizing the mine action information management gap that existed before the commencement of the MoU.

Achievements	Quantity
Non-technical survey (NTS)	14,642,157 sq m
Calculated contaminated area	8,828,842 sq m
Reported cleared area	3,536,164 sq m
Number of recorded hazards	1,027
Number of recorded completion reports	874
Number of destroyed devices	7,012
Number of recorded NTS reports	114
Number of recorded risk education reports	3,157
Number of beneficiaries	117,896

Figure 1. Quantifying the achievements.¹
Figure courtesy of the author.

* The MoU is enabling a planned, prioritized, timely, and evidence-based mine action response that allows for safer return of civilians. It has improved coordination and collaboration of the national mine action authorities.

* The waiver for the registration pre-condition has allowed HMA organizations to work in the Gray Area immediately given that they are registered in either of the national mine action authorities. Prior to this, HMA organizations had to wait months in some cases to complete the registration process in both offices of DMA and IKMAA and to obtain authorization to work in the Gray Area.

* Recognizing that mine action is a collective effort, the MoU has enhanced relations and national collaboration for strategic planning and adherence to conventions. ©

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Isam Ghareeb Barzangy is currently the iMMAP country representative for Iraq and senior technical advisor. Barzangy has held positions from 1999 to 2011 with the United Nations Office for Project Services in various countries in the field of mine action database programming and information management. Barzangy completed his bachelor's degree at the University of Salahaddin in Erbil, Iraq, and his Master of Business Administration from Robert Kennedy College in Zurich, Switzerland. Barzangy completed the CISR Senior Managers' Course in ERW and Mine Action in May 2016.