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Loise Skilling
DanChurchAid

Maria Zapasnik
DanChurchAid

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Addressing the Explosive Hazard Threat in Northern Syria: Risk Education on Landmines, UXO, Booby Traps, and IEDs

by Louise Skilling and Marysia Zapasnik [DCA]

Explosive hazards pose a great threat to civilians in Syria. A rapid return of displaced people usually occurs as soon as an area is declared **newly taken**. During this period, there is limited medical and explosive clearance capacity although there are high risks from explosive hazards, including booby traps and improvised explosive devices (IED) specifically targeting civilians in their homes. This article focuses on addressing the threat of explosive hazards in northern Syria and draws on risk education material designed by humanitarian mine action organization DCA to target adult returnees in Syria.

Syrian Context

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates the conflict has displaced 11.3 million people—6.3 million within Syria and 4.8 million as refugees. Parties to the conflict repeatedly breach international humanitarian law and international human rights law. In some instances, civilians and civilian infrastructure appear to have been directly targeted during attacks.¹ The extensive use of explosive weapons during the six years of conflict poses a grave threat to Syrians, first responders, humanitarian operations, and livelihood activities. The situation in Syria is highly complex and constantly changing. This is illustrated by the map of Syria in Figure 1 and the various actors controlling different territories of the country as of 7 June 2017.

Explosive Contamination in Syria

Analysis of explosive contamination resulting from the conflict in Syria has shown that the types of explosive weapons used are varied and include landmines, various ordnance (e.g., artillery), cluster munitions, booby traps, and IEDs.^{2,3}



IED risk education to recent returnees in northern Syria, 2016. All graphics courtesy of DCA Syria.

According to Action on Armed Violence (AoAV), Syria is one of the states most affected by explosive violence, with 86 percent of fatalities between 2011 and 2016 being civilians.⁴

The International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) define an IED as:

A device placed or fabricated in an improvised manner incorporating explosive material, destructive, lethal, noxious, incendiary, pyrotechnic materials or chemicals designed to destroy, disfigure, distract or harass. They may incorporate military stores, but are normally devised from non-military components.²

Almost any object can be made into an IED or a booby trap. They can be found anywhere and are usually intended to be undetectable and designed to target the unwary.

A booby trap is defined by IMAS as:

An explosive or non-explosive device, or other material, deliberately placed to cause casualties when an apparently harmless object is disturbed or a normally safe act is performed.²

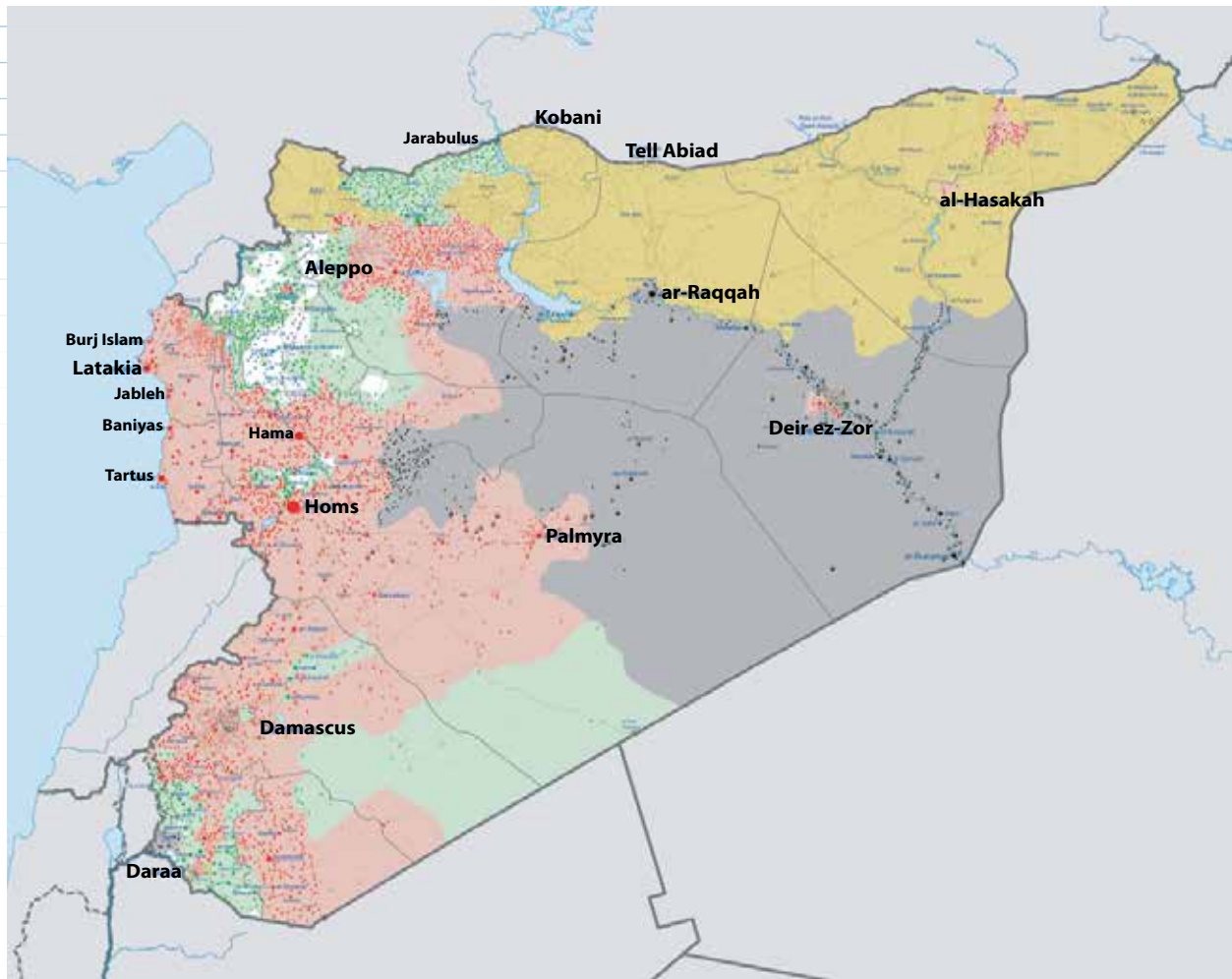


Figure 1. Territorial control of Syria by various actors as of 7 June 2017.

A few weeks after the end of the hostilities in Kobane, northern Syria, a humanitarian worker described the situation as follows:

The streets were littered with explosives – people had to watch every step they took ... as more families returned to rebuild their lives, reports of incidents involving explosives became a daily occurrence. Some victims made it to a medical facility and survived, but many did not. It was devastating to witness that for people who had already lost so much, there was still more to lose.⁵

It has been suggested that organized armed groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have no intention of distinguishing between civilians and combatants. Placing explosive devices in residential homes and specifically targeting displaced populations planning to return home would strongly suggest attempts to create fear among the civilian and displaced population.⁶ This was evident from the attack ISIS claimed on the displaced populations gathering to discuss

returning home to Al-Bab town on 24 February 2017, which resulted in 70 fatalities.

The international community has stressed the ongoing critical need for humanitarian mine action in Syria through risk education and clearance.^{7,8} IMAS defines mine/ERW risk education as:

Activities that seek to reduce the risk of death and injury from mines and ERW, by raising awareness and promoting safe behavior. These activities include information exchange with at-risk communities, communication of safety messages to target groups, and support for community risk management and participation in mine action.²

At this time there is debate within the mine action community whether the topic of IEDs (including IED risk education) should be mainstreamed throughout existing international standards or whether a separate set of standards needs to be developed.⁹ It is DCA's point of view that IED risk education should be incorporated into existing international standards.



Risk education to rubble clearers in northern Syria, 2016.

Rapid Return of Displaced Populations To Newly Taken Areas

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) captured the city of Menbij from ISIS on 12 August 2016. During ISIS's control of Menbij, explosive devices were planted in doorways, refrigerators, televisions, water taps, toys, and under clothes and mattresses. Needs and Population Monitoring (an information management tool that tracks and assesses the needs of displaced populations within Syria) estimated that 13,220 displaced people returned between 13 August and 7 September 2016, increasing the total population of Menbij to 86,448 during the month of August in 2016.^{10,11} Between August and September 2016 Human Rights Watch recorded 69 civilians who were killed by explosive devices in Menbij, 19 of which were children.⁷

Medical data relating to incidents that occurred in Menbij during August 2016 showed a dramatic increase in the number of injuries related to blasts from explosive devices in the last three weeks of the offensive, reaching a peak in the week following the SDF's announcement of their full control of the city when a large proportion of displaced people began rapidly returning to the city. The high rate of injuries and deaths caused by explosive hazards in Menbij directly correlates with the returning of the displaced population. Incidents peaked

in mid-August 2016 but then appeared to drop significantly. According to local authorities, this was a result of most residents returning to the city that month and then becoming acutely aware of the risks posed by explosive devices.⁵

In the *Medecins Sans Frontieres'* (MSF) report, "Set to Explode: Impact of Mines, Booby Traps and Explosive Remnants of War on Civilians in Northern Syria," a resident from Jirn describes how his relative was killed when he returned home. "In July 2015, he came back alone to check on the situation before allowing his family to join him. When he tried to open the door of his house, the whole house exploded. He died and his family has still not returned. He wasn't the first one," the resident said.⁵ It is evident that IEDs and booby traps were placed by the departing organized armed group to target civilians, cause maximum damage, and create fear amongst residents intending to return to their homes.

Land and property grabbing is a common issue within emergency situations; and in the context of Syria, this appears to be a significant concern amongst the displaced population.¹² The Global Protection Cluster (an organization dedicated to coordinating protection-related responses to displaced populations) reports that explosive hazards and **housing, land, and property** issues are within the top three protection concerns for Syrians in 2017.¹³ This may explain the



Risk education to children in northern Syria, 2015.

urgency for displaced populations in Syria wishing to return to their homes as soon as they perceive it safe to do so.

Risk education can support civilians returning to their homes and their everyday routines. When areas are newly taken and the displaced population chooses to return, there are limited health care facilities and inadequate medical emergency assistance should an incident occur. Through raising awareness about the threats posed by explosive hazards, the risk of injury and death to civilians can be minimized.

Risk Education Campaigns

DCA began its humanitarian mine action activities inside Syria through local implementing partners in 2014 and directly in 2015. As well as clearance activities in Kobane, DCA conducted risk education activities and campaigns in Al Ladhkiyah, Idlib, Aleppo, Ar Raqqa, and Al Hassakah governorates in northern Syria. In 2016, DCA provided tailor-made and audience-specific risk education to more

than 68,000 at-risk boys, girls, men, and women using a variety of different modalities. Safety messages shared during direct sessions were augmented by awareness raising campaigns using conventional media, such as radio and television as well as social media.

Needs and risk assessment. DCA has designed risk education campaigns for the Syria response based on needs and risk assessments conducted within the targeted locations and via liaison with members of the mine action sub cluster and United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) Syria. Risk education materials were pretested with the local population, taking into consideration the local context in relation to the appropriate language to be used and the conservative nature of the area. DCA developed an internal monitoring and evaluation system to conduct quality assurance and quality control in the locations where risk education is delivered.

Adult returnee risk education material. DCA's risk education campaign includes designing material specifically to



Figure 2. Adult returnee poster.

target adult returnees. The explosive threat posed to civilians in Syria involves landmines, unexploded ordnance (UXO), booby traps, and IEDs, or a combination of these explosive items; as a result, risk education materials targeting adult returnees have been designed to include all explosive threats. As seen in Figure 2, the different categories of explosive items are distinguished on the poster. Considering the limited time and opportunities that were available to target those returning home, this was considered the most efficient and effective approach to raising awareness about the threats posed by explosive hazards.

For the risk education materials, all photographs were taken of explosive items from relevant areas in Syria, including IEDs. While any object can be made into an IED, and the designs are continually evolving, images of IEDs relevant to the geographical location and time period were provided. The text above the IED images clarifies that these are only some examples, highlighting that these are not an exhaustive representation of IEDs. This is similar to displaying images of explosive remnants of war (ERW) on risk education material, as it is not possible to illustrate all of the different colors, materials, sizes, and shapes of explosive hazards that could pose a risk.

Risk education material should also provide information on what to do if suspicious items are found. However, the clearance capacity within Syria is limited and varies between geographical locations. Another consideration is that the power dynamics are frequently shifting at the local level. For these reasons it was decided the simple message **report to the local authority** if suspicious items were found would be used. This information will hopefully direct reports of suspicious items to clearance assistance if it is available locally while remaining nonpartisan.

The IED threat and the approach required for IED risk education varies in different countries, contexts, and periods of time. Risk education campaigns in Syria should be tailored for the geographical area, specific target group, and phase of the conflict. Messages and materials that are currently considered appropriate will need to be reviewed as the context evolves. Risk education, including raising awareness of IEDs and booby traps is crucial to the humanitarian response in Syria in order to minimize the number of fatalities or injuries caused by explosive hazards to displaced and returning civilians. ©

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Louise Skilling
Independent Consultant



Louise Skilling is an independent consultant, a Ph.D. candidate with the International Centre for Policing and Security, and a member of the Centre for Policing Research Cognate group at the University of South Wales, U.K. Louise has conducted consultancies and evaluations for UNMAS Somalia, UNMAS DRC, HALO Trust Syria, DCA Syria program, MAG Laos PDR, and MAG Iraq. Prior to this, she worked for MAG for five years as their Senior Community Liaison Advisor monitoring and evaluating their programs globally in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Marysia Zapasnik
Program Manager
DCA



Marysia Zapasnik is the Program Manager of the DCA Syria Program, and has managed humanitarian projects and programs as part of the Syria response since July 2015. As a Community Liaison and Explosive Threat Awareness Specialist, Marysia has trained and managed risk education and non-technical survey teams for various mine action organizations in Burma, South Sudan, Syria, and Vietnam, and has also provided training to students from Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Turkmen Ministries of Defence. Marysia holds a degree in Archaeology and Anthropology from Cambridge University (U.K.).