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Clearing Minefields in Israel and the West Bank

Recent legislation in Israel has opened the door to demining in Israel and the West Bank. Roots of Peace campaigned for this legislation and will begin demining a village near Bethlehem before the end of 2011.

by Dhyen Or and Heidi Kühn [Roots of Peace]



Palestinian youth cycles past a minefield near Bethlehem.
Photo courtesy of Roots of Peace.

The Mine-Free Israel campaign, a humanitarian effort led by a coalition of organizations comprised of Roots of Peace, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Center for Regional Councils, Council for a Beautiful Israel, local authorities from mine-affected communities and landmine survivors, has paved the way for humanitarian demining in Israel and the West Bank.¹ The campaign recently helped pass unprecedented mine-action legislation in Israel and raise public awareness about mines in the West Bank. According to the new law, the Israeli government established a national mine-action authority, with an annual budget of 27 million NIS (US\$7.3 million),^{2,3} scheduled to begin humanitarian demining in Israel in early 2012. In order to mirror this policy shift in the West Bank, Roots of Peace, the coordinator of the cross-sector coalition mentioned above, adopted a minefield in Husan, a Palestinian village near Bethlehem and raised funds to begin demining there before the end of December 2011. With help from several foundations and individuals, including a legacy gift from Shirley and Paul Dean of

Spiriterra Vineyards, Roots of Peace will remove the landmines and transform the field of death in the midst of Husan village into a field of life, where fruit trees can grow once again, and boys and girls can safely walk and play.

Minefield History

More than 1.5 million landmines laid during the 1950s and 1960s contaminate a combined area of 50,000 acres (200 square kilometers) in the Golan Heights, in the Arava Valley and along the Jordan River.⁴ This includes more than 300,000 landmines contaminating 5,000 acres (20 sq. km.) of agricultural and residential land in the West Bank, with unexploded ordnance further making sites inaccessible.⁵

Mined areas in the region include some religious and World Heritage sites of high significance to Christianity, Islam and Judaism, especially the site known as *Qasr el Yahud* (Palace of the Jews) where many believe Jesus was baptized,⁶ Joshua crossed the Jordan River⁷ and Prophet Elijah is believed to have ascended into heaven.⁸ Approximately 3,000



Minefields and sacred sites in Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Figure courtesy of Avner Goren/Survivor Corps.

anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, as well as booby traps, surround ancient monasteries and places of worship belonging to a variety of religions and held sacred by billions of people around the world.⁹

Husan is a Palestinian village located about 4 miles (6 km) west of Bethlehem and 6 miles (10 km) southwest of Jerusalem, with a population of 6,000 people,¹⁰ half of which are children, and an area of 1,800 acres (7.4 sq. km.), 87 percent of which are classified as Area C¹¹ administered solely by Israel. The remaining area is classified as Area B, jointly administered by both the Palestinian Authority and Israel.¹² Between 1949 and 1967, a Jordanian police station surrounded by a mixed minefield (containing both AT and AP mines)¹³ overlooked the Jordanian-Israeli border from a hill within Husan. In 1993, when a bypass road (No. 375) was paved through the minefield to connect Beitur Illit with Jerusalem, it split the minefield into two parts: one part, south of the road, is fenced and marked and consists of 4.5 acres (18,211 square meters) of grazing and agricultural land; and the second part, north of the road, within a residential area of Husan, consists of 1.5 acres (6,070 sq. m.), and is unmarked, posing a constant threat to residents, especially children, who pass through it daily. Traces of

an old barbed-wire fence, as well as one worn-out yellow sign can be found around this minefield.¹⁴ Over the years, several mine incidents have occurred in Husan, resulting in loss of lives and limbs.

In the past 20 years, several attempts at partially demining the area were made without success.

In August 2000, British demining nongovernmental organization MAG (Mines Advisory Group) completed a technical assessment of the Husan minefields for the Canadian Landmine Foundation and planned to conduct a 12-week clearance of the contaminated area, but the clearance was put on hold due to the outbreak of the Second Palestinian Uprising (*Intifada*). In June 2001, during this *Intifada*, the Israeli military bulldozed two small sections of the southern minefield in order to erect a watchtower on a hilltop overlooking Husan. Additionally, the military shoveled mine-contaminated soil onto the northern minefield to allow the erection of a metal fence between Husan and the bypass road to protect cars from *Intifada* stone-throwers.¹⁴ This redistribution of dirt and contaminants further polluted the northern minefield.

In 2002, at the urging of the NGO World Vision and the Palestinian charity Health Work Committees, MAG attempted to conduct demining in Husan but failed to secure the Israeli authorities' approval and the project did not materialize.¹⁵ Once the *Intifada* subsided, the Israeli courts granted permission to the landowners residing along the edge of the northern minefield to

clear the contaminated land. The Israeli military insisted that only a designated, army-approved, private Israeli firm could conduct the demining, and local residents would have to bear the cost, which was



A marked minefield near Hatzera, Israel.
Photo courtesy of Roots of Peace.

well above their means. Then in 2010, Israeli advocacy group *Yesh Din* approached private Israeli demining firms on behalf of Husan landowners in an attempt to negotiate a low-cost demining contract. Even though *Yesh Din* found a military-approved firm to demine Husan, this firm's estimated cost to complete the work was unaffordable, and the firm required landowners to sign a **No-Shop Agreement** prohibiting them from obtaining a more competitive bid.¹⁶

Israeli Policy Shift

Despite repeated landmine and UXO incidents, until 2011 no mine-action policy existed in Israel. Several failed attempts at introducing a mine-action legislation from 2002 to

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The Center for International Stabilization and Recovery has historically been the information clearinghouse for humanitarian-demining activities. Heidi Kühn, founder of Roots of Peace, calls *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* "The pre-eminent source for strategic, global landmine removal." With the recent addition of *The CISR Sphere*, *The Journal* takes information-sharing to the next level through an easily accessible social network. The mine-action community can now gather, network and absorb the latest in mine-action news online in a number of new ways.

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Do you have questions or comments about our articles? Share them with us. The online version of *The Journal* now includes a commenting feature, allowing readers the opportunity to share information and start dialogues about each issue.

Roots of Peace praises *The Journal* as "an academic keepsake." With [The CISR Sphere](http://cisr.jmu.edu), that status is elevated to an open global source for humanitarian-demining information. Experience how it feels to be a part of [The CISR Sphere](http://cisr.jmu.edu). You can comment and connect as soon as you sign in. Come visit and tell us what you think!

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Landowners view the mined area around their homes.
Photo courtesy of Roots of Peace.

2004 failed due to lack of public support.¹⁷ However, after an intensive public-relations campaign inspired by 11-year-old local landmine survivor Daniel Yuval¹⁸ who lost his leg to a landmine in the Golan Heights in 2010, 73 out of 80 rank-and-file members of parliament cosponsored the Minefield Clearance Act which was eventually passed, with active support of the government and the Prime Minister on 14 March 2011.¹⁷ According to the new legislation, the Israeli National Mine Action Authority was established, and tasked with the creation and implementation of the first national humanitarian-demining plan. In September 2011 INMAA published the first draft of the national mine-action standards, held a first meeting of its advisory committee, which includes members of government offices and public representatives, and announced two pilot projects in the upper Arava Valley to be conducted in 2012.

Demine-Replant-Rebuild Initiative in the West Bank

According to Israeli and international law, the Israeli law does not apply to the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Defense Forces have shared control of civilian and security affairs. Still, the recent policy shift was welcomed by both the PA and the IDF, and raised expectations for a parallel change in mine-action policy in the West Bank. In Husan, local residents, who have been disappointed time and again after failed appeals for the removal of the constant threat of landmines from the midst of their village, are expressing renewed confidence in the possibility of realizing this wish. Once cleared, the land could be returned to productive use, helping boost local economy, which is characterized by high unemployment rates.¹⁹ Following clearance, the local community is planning to replant olive trees, expand the homes of the large families living around the



Roots of Peace Founder Heidi Kühn and Tzachi Hanegbi, Chair of the Israel Foreign Affairs Defense Committee, plant a tree in Israel in July 2010.
Photo courtesy of Roots of Peace.

minefield, and construct their first playground for hundreds of Husan children who have no other place to play.

The Roots of Peace Demine-Replant-Rebuild initiative is a humanitarian interfaith program seeking to bring peace from the bottom-up by removing landmines and replanting the cleared land with traditional plant species (often considered sacred) such as pomegranates, grapes, figs, dates, olives, wheat and barley. Roots of Peace will launch its initiative in the Bethlehem area before the end of 2011 in partnership with the PA and the local council, with a local demining group working according to internationally recognized practices and standards, in coordination with the IDF, and under strict cost and quality management. No demining organization has yet been chosen; the contracting process is still under way.

Looking to the Future

Roots of Peace's pilot humanitarian-demining project in Husan, scheduled to launch before the end of 2011, will set a precedent of local-international cooperation in mine action in the country, help build humanitarian-demining capacity and pave the way for public-private partnerships which will allow for the eventual clearance of all mine-affected communities in the West Bank and the sacred sites along the Jordan River. ◊

See endnotes page 82



Dhyhan Or is the Country Director for Israel and the West Bank at Roots of Peace, where he has coordinated the Mine-Free Israel campaign and the Demine-Replant-Rebuild Sacred Sites project. During the Second Intifada, Or founded the All Nations Café, a social, cultural and environmental hub for Israelis, Palestinians and internationals on the border between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

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