

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 15
Issue 1 *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*

Article 20

April 2011

The Rise in Terrorist Attacks in the Western Sahara

Mohamed Taghioullah Ould Nema
Cabinet of the Mauritanian National Army

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal>



Part of the [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nema, Mohamed Taghioullah Ould (2011) "The Rise in Terrorist Attacks in the Western Sahara," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* : Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol15/iss1/20>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

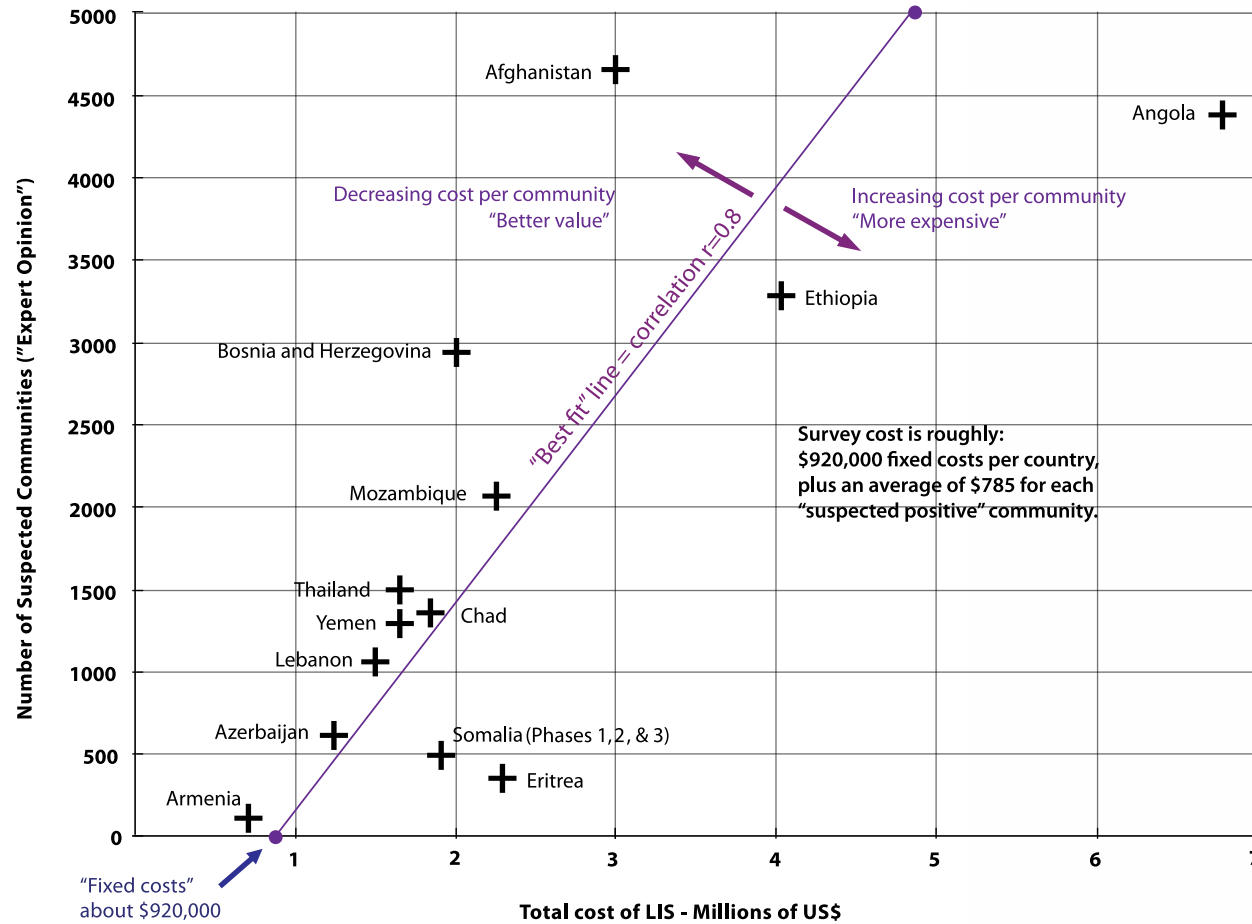


Figure 1: Landmine Impact Survey costs available from reports found on <http://www.sac-na.org>.

spending more time and effort on the initial data collection could be useful. If the number of false positives can be reduced, it is reasonable to assume that overall costs will also decrease. *The Expert Opinion Collection* is usually a relatively small part of the overall survey cost, so investing more resources on accurately collecting data early in the process may be a useful approach to improving the LIS cost-benefit ratio.

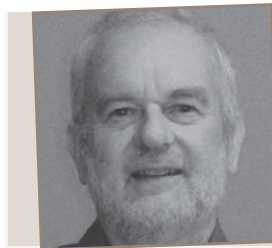
Conclusion

The initial data collection in an LIS designates communities as potentially impacted by mines and UXO. Distinguishing between suspected positives and false positives

early in the process can reduce the costs of the LIS. Based on analysis of the correlation between costs and suspected positives, evidence supports that efficient planning can reduce future survey expenses.

Given the small number of countries that still require an LIS, the outcome of this analysis can give better cost estimates to potential donors and identify the survey parts where savings are most probable in the future. At this stage, with so many Landmine Impact Surveys completed worldwide, rewriting the protocols is likely not useful. Focusing on more efficient implementation and collecting core data in different countries is a better route to cost savings overall. ♦

see endnotes page 83



Russell Gasser is an engineer who became interested in mine action while helping start a wheelchair repair workshop in Nicaragua in the late 1980s. He returned to Warwick University Development Technology Unit in the U.K. in 1996, to write a Ph.D. thesis about advanced technology research failing to deliver new demining tools and equipment. He received his Ph.D. in 2000. After working for the European Commission for three years, he formed a consultancy, Humanitarian Technology Consulting Ltd., to provide mine-action program evaluation.

Russell Gasser, Ph.D.
Humanitarian Technology Consulting Ltd.
Alzey 55232 / Germany
Tel: +49 6731 547 1501
Fax: +49 6731 547 1503
E-mail: RG@htc.eu.com

The Rise in Terrorist Attacks in the Western Sahara

The Mauritanian government is taking steps to prevent Al-Qaeda's terrorist acts, including suicide bombings and kidnappings in the region. Added to this threat are the explosives Al-Qaeda is able to obtain from landmines and unexploded ordnance scattered throughout the region after years of conflict in Western Sahara. The United Nations Development Programme and various countries work to remove these landmines and items of UXO, which is complicated by the lack of a Landmine Impact Survey.

by Lt. Colonel Mohamed Taghioullah Ould Nema [Cabinet of the Mauritanian National Army]

In 2009, while driving toward the French embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania, I suddenly encountered a large blast. As I approached the scene, I saw the worst sight I have ever seen—the results of a suicide bombing explosion. A 20-year-old man had blown himself up trying to kill two innocent embassy staff members while they were exercising. The explosion split the man's corpse into three parts: His head to stomach was dismembered and lying in the center of the path; his lower part was thrown about 12 meters (13 yards) away; and pieces of his legs and other small bits were strewn about on the pavement. He committed this action during the daytime, in front of everyone, and I saw it myself.

Immediately following the attack, fear paralyzed the people nearby. No one wanted to move because they were shocked and revolted by the explosion, and they were worried about additional attacks.

Al-Qaeda's Terrorism in Mauritania

This was the first suicide bombing in the country and the beginning of many *Al-Qaeda el Maghreb Islami* (Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb) attacks in Mauritania. For example,

the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott was blown up by a grenade and assaulted by terrorist fighters, wounding three people. Three French tourists were killed at Aleg (in the deep country). Finally, AQIM killed French captive Michel Germaneau in retaliation for a French raid that killed six AQIM militants.¹ AQIM had kidnapped Michel Germaneau in Niger on the border with Mali and Algeria, but where he was killed remains unknown.^{1,2}

The Mauritanian government is determined to fight terrorists. Many specialized units in counterterrorism are stationed on the borders between Algeria, Mauritania and Mali. The soldiers comprising these units were highly trained in counterterrorism techniques by American and French experts. In addition, the Mauritanian government essentially provided all the needed equipment to the units (e.g., helicopters, vehicles, radar, an armored personnel carrier, night-vision goggles, etc.).

Using technology and satellite data, Mauritania's counterterrorism team is gathering accurate intelligence extending beyond the country's borders to stop the extremists before they can launch new at-



A sentry guards the approach road to a lightly guarded Mauritanian Army munitions supply point. All photos courtesy of John Stevens, PM/WRA, U.S. Department of State.

tacks. A joint tactical-operational center was created in Algeria. This center provides updated intelligence information, assesses the security situation and coordinates shared actions against AQIM.

Other bandits, arms traffickers and drug dealers are located in the same region as the AQIM fighters and can collaborate with them in terms of resupply or equipment support, although AQIM mem-



Mauritanian Army officers and an official from the NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency, during an assessment visit to one of Mauritania's remote and lightly guarded munitions supply points.

Remnants-of-War and Mine-field Removal

Mauritania's humanitarian-demining office has cleared many minefields since signing the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction*. More than 150,000 mines of various types were removed, but the danger continues because many battlefields from the Western Sahara have not been cleared. Data is lacking about the exact mine and UXO locations since no comprehensive Landmine Impact Survey has been completed in the region.³ Western Sahara is contaminated following years of *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro* (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro, or Frente POLISARIO) and the Morocco conflict. The UXO and mines are especially prevalent along the walls called "berms" created by Morocco to protect against the Frente POLISARIO. In addition, terrorists can easily reactivate some minefields (marked areas that are not entirely cleared but have a small safe path within them) by adding one or two landmine strips to change the pattern. While military-camp security is very tight in the main towns, the situation is far less secure in the deep country, which makes it easy for terrorists to obtain weapons.

The main mine-action actors are the Mauritanian Army Engineering Corps and a few Mauritanian non-governmental organizations. The United Nations Development Programme, Canada, the United States and France have supported mine-clearance and mine-risk education programs. However, the lack

of accurate assessment and Technical Survey, coupled with a lack of good management, have undermined Mauritania's success in making its lands safe. As a result, mines can still be found in many locations along Mauritania's northern frontier and these weapons are used by bombers, terrorists or arms traffickers, who can then sell these devices to extremists.

The international community must act quickly to help the greater Western Sahara region solve this issue. Preventing terrorists from obtaining weapons and ammunition is important. Strengthening and better securing warehouses, military premises and camps where arms and munitions are obtainable is one solution; however, the government must also organize an awareness campaign about the danger of these issues and train its personnel to properly store and secure weapons and ammunition. ⚡

see endnotes page 83



Lt. Colonel Mohamed Ould Nema is a graduate of the Mohamed V University in Rabat, Morocco. He participated in several training programs, including courses in France, Egypt, Algeria and Syria, as well as the 2005 UNDP Senior Managers' Course presented by the Mine Action Information Center at James Madison University. Formerly Head of the Mauritanian National Demining Office, he is now Inspector in the Cabinet of the National Army Chief Of Staff.

Mohamed Ould Nema
Inspector
Cabinet of the Mauritanian
National Army Chief of Staff
P.O. Box 208
Nouakchott / Mauritania
Tel: +249 915 471 820
E-mail: ouldnema@yahoo.fr



RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

Research and Development Section Sponsored by

