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Sean Sutton
*MAG (Mines Advisory Group)*

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MAG: Mine Clearance in Lebanon

by Sean Sutton | MAG (Mines Advisory Group)

Mines, cluster submunitions, and unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination plague Lebanon as a result of a 15-year civil war ending in 1990, two Israeli invasions in 1978 and 1982, and the July-August conflict with Israel in 2006. The Lebanon Mine Action Centre (LMAC) identified 2,598 mined areas covering 191,000,000 sq m of land. Following non-technical survey (NTS) and clearance operations, there is an estimated 30,316,080 sq m of suspected hazardous area remaining. Although some cluster munition contamination remains from the 1982 conflicts, much of the contamination is the result of the 2006 conflict with Israel, during which nearly four million cluster submunitions were fired into Lebanon. Cluster munition contamination has a huge socioeconomic impact on Lebanon’s agricultural sector; about 1,438,259 sq m of unused land will be available for crop and livestock cultivation after cluster munition clearance is complete.

With LMAC’s supervision, MAG (Mines Advisory Group) began working in Lebanon in 2000. Its clearance efforts are a part of the implementation of the Lebanese Mine Action Strategy 2011–2020, which aims to clear all explosive remnants of war (ERW) from Lebanon by 2021. MAG has cleared about 17 million sq m of land since 2006. Between January and May 2015, MAG removed and destroyed 193 cluster bombs and 33 landmines. MAG operations in Lebanon include minefield marking, risk education, NTS and battle area clearance (BAC) prioritized by LMAC with the assistance of machinery and mine detection dogs. The organization also carried out a national preclearance cluster munition survey of cluster munition strike areas, the only assessment of its kind conducted since the 2006 conflict with Israel.

MAG’s clearance teams are composed of local citizens, allowing them to contribute to the rehabilitation of their own country. MAG also emphasizes gender equality by incorporating women into its teams, which counters the widespread perception in Lebanon that explosive ordnance clearance is dangerous work suitable only for men. MAG employed its first mixed-gender clearance team in 2011. MAG has since expanded its mixed-gender operations to include three BAC teams, one mine action team (MAT), one mixed-gender mechanical team and three community liaison teams. The female searchers are proud that their profession challenges their society’s perception of what work is suitable for women. When interviewed in 2013, Fatima Ghandour of BAC said, “The community does not easily accept the idea of a woman working in danger but, slowly, this must change and we will help with that change. I am able to do the job as well as a man. I do the same job, on the same ground.” Women also assume leadership roles in the MAG clearance teams. According to Fatima Bahmad, who was once a searcher on the BAC team and is now deputy team leader of MAT, “I’m very happy with my job with MAG…As deputy team leader I have new responsibilities—it’s very different from being a searcher.” A single mother, Bahmad’s position at MAG allows her to support her family. MAG intends to remain in Lebanon for the foreseeable future to support LMAC’s Mine Action Strategy to clear the country of all unexploded cluster munitions by 2010 and mines by 2021.

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In March 2015, a group of seven boys were playing when one of them unintentionally set off a cluster bomb submunition dropped nearly a decade ago in 2006. The resulting explosion injured all but one of the boys, and their suffering continues months later. Cousins Hassan, Hassin and Nabil are pictured here three months after they were injured in the explosion. Hassan is recovering from an operation to take fragments out of his brain and needs at least one more operation to remove fragments from his lung. Hassin suffered serious injuries on his face and chest that required reconstructive surgery to his jaw and will require additional operations in the future. Nabil had part of his leg reconstructed and is still paralyzed in one leg.
Mother of two young boys, Fatima Bahmad is the deputy team leader of MAT 2, one of the nine MAG teams working in Lebanon. “I am very happy with my job with MAG. I have learnt a lot and continue to learn. As deputy team leader I have new responsibilities, it is very different from being a searcher. In MAG, men and women are equal; this is usually a man’s job. Before my family and my friends didn’t understand. They thought my job was high risk. They thought it should be a man’s job as few women do what I do. Now after working for some years they feel differently. My family are proud of me and proud of what I have achieved. As a single mother I am providing for my family. My children want me to train them. We want to do what you do, they tell me.”
Ain Majdalein is an ancient village situated high in the mountains in Jezzine district with incredible views of Lebanon's southern coast. Over 1,000 villagers live here, and much of their most productive orchard land is contaminated by the deadly legacy of war. MAG technicians work in Ain Majdalein village to remove cluster munitions.

Ninety-year-old Emlie Maroun explains how villagers would try to clear their land: “I used to collect them in a tire, put brush wood on them and set fire to it. Then I would hide behind a big rock until they exploded!”
For centuries, the dramatic and rugged terrain around Ain Majdalein village was used to grow crops, and the steep slopes, terraced with cobble walls, will be productive once more. The teams are still working on clearance there, finding 92 Mk118 ‘Rockeye’ submunitions.

Valuable, lifesaving lessons: MAG community liaison staff provide a risk education lesson to children in Ain Majdalein village.
The Tannourine Cedar Reserve is a place famous for cedar trees, the national symbol of Lebanon, some of which are believed to be 3,000 years old. An area of the reserve had been closed off since a tour guide stepped on a mine there in April 2015. A MAG mine clearance team, funded by LMAC through BLOOM BANK, worked to clear the area.

MAG technician Mohammed Homaid carefully excavates a garden looking for cluster munitions, finding 45 M42s and one 81 mm mortar bomb so far. The area next door was cleared previously and is now a thriving vegetable garden. The land currently cleared wasn’t used before and wasn’t a high priority, but when the land owner started to build a house he discovered unexploded cluster munitions and called MAG.