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## Humanitarian Demining Efforts in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

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# *humanitarian demining efforts* In The Occupied Palestinian Territories

## Introduction

In an August 2002 assessment of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that the following areas in the OPT are not properly fenced, marked or cleared:

- Minefields from the 1967 Middle East war—unmarked minefields were reportedly found between Jordan and the West Bank, in the Jordan Valley and in other strategic areas in the West Bank.
- Israeli military training zones.
- Areas of confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>1</sup>

Though no minefields have been officially declared in the Gaza Strip, Ayid Abu Qtaish, mine awareness coordinator of Defence for Children International (DCI), Palestine Section, has no doubt the area is contaminated.<sup>2</sup>

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) have drawn criticism for their humanitarian demining (HD) efforts, or lack thereof. However, a National Mine Action Committee, composed of both Palestinian and international organizations, has taken the lead in mine awareness efforts in the OPT.

## HD Efforts by IDF and PNA

In February 2003, Israel outlined its stockpile destructions efforts, stating that 12 tons of mines were destroyed by the military in 2002. However, Abu Qtaish of DCI told *Aljazeera* that Israel's efforts were not enough. Qtaish told *Aljazeera*, "Practically speaking, there has been no mine clearing. There is a big difference between clearing minefields for military purposes and clearing them for humanitarian purposes. In the latter case, the number of mines must be zero."<sup>3</sup>

Israeli HD efforts have also been criticized. Last year, IDF declared the village of Husan, in the West Bank, a mine-free zone. *Aljazeera* reports that, following the announcement, three people from the village died when a mine exploded.<sup>3</sup>

Conversely, the PNA has made no recent official statement about banning anti-personnel mines. Palestinian groups have access to both anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines. Media reports indicate that these groups are using landmines and explosive devices, made from the explosives taken from landmines, in attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians.<sup>1</sup>



**March 2004:** Four soldiers were wounded when an explosive device detonated underneath an IDF tank in the northern Gaza Strip.<sup>4</sup>

**April 2003:** Four IDF soldiers were injured in the Gaza Strip when the armored vehicle they were traveling in struck a landmine.<sup>5</sup>

**February 2003:** Four IDF soldiers were killed when an improvised Palestinian landmine destroyed their tank in the Gaza Strip.<sup>5</sup>

**March 2002:** Three IDF soldiers were killed when their tank ran over a mine planted on the Karni-Netzarim road in the Gaza Strip.<sup>6</sup>

**February 2002:** Three IDF soldiers were killed and a fourth wounded when an 80-kg mine exploded underneath their tank in the Gaza Strip.<sup>6</sup>

**November 2000:** Two Israeli civilians were killed and nine others, including five children, were injured when a schoolbus struck a roadside bomb in the Gaza Strip. Three of the injured children lost limbs in the attack.<sup>7</sup>

by Jennette Townsend, MAIC

## HD Efforts by the National Mine Action Committee

In response to the lack of mine action in the OPT, a National Mine Action Committee was established by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UNICEF, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the Palestinian government.<sup>1</sup> The Palestinian Red Crescent Society, DCI in Palestine, and the Palestinian Ministries of Education, Youth and Sports, Interior, and Health are also members.<sup>3</sup> The committee, which was established in August 2002, coordinates mine action activities in the OPT. Activities include:

- Teaching MRE
- Developing a national mine action plan
- Ensuring UXO awareness messages are consistent and coherent
- Carrying out surveys to assist in the appropriate design and prioritization of activities<sup>1</sup>

Abu Qtaish told *Aljazeera* that the emphasis on MRE and awareness activities versus landmine removal activities is due to Israeli restrictions on removal of landmines. A Canadian initiative to demine the village of Husan near Bethlehem was stopped short due to an Israeli ban on the import of mine-cleaning materials and restrictions on the method of clearing.<sup>3</sup>

## Future Danger

DCI emphasized the increased danger that comes with the possible re-deployment of conventional weapons to those areas to the PNA. The fear is that, with

the increased mobility of Palestinians in the areas, the number of landmine/UXO accidents will increase. DCI has made it a part of its agenda to address this issue in hopes of avoiding the high number of casualties that occurred following the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon.<sup>2</sup>

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