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History

The Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers on the ancient Mesopotamian plain has been called the Cradle of Civilization as the birthplace of earth's earliest civilizations. After many conquerors, Iraq was invaded by Arab Muslims in the seventh century adopting its present-day language and religion. Iraq achieved independence from Great Britain in 1932 and has since been ruled by military strongmen. In 1979, Saddam Hussein acceded to the Presidency and declared the Iraq/Iran border agreement (the Algiers Agreement) null and void, claiming sovereignty over the Shatt el-Arab region and sparking the Iraq/Iran War.

Landmines/UXO Overview

Iraq is considered one of the most mine-affected nations in the world. Iraq's landmines have been emplaced for three main purposes: to protect its borders during the lengthy war with Iran (1980—1988), to ward off invasion during the Gulf War (1990—1991), and to subdue the Kurdish population. Though the greatest concentration of mines is found in the three northern governorates, they are also present along the border with Iran in central and southern Iraq. The country produces and exports AP mines, yet most of the large number of mines deployed in Kuwait and Iraqi Kurdistan were imported.

The UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) has run a Mine Action Program (MAP) in Northern Iraq since 1997 as part of the Food for Oil Program, which enables aid to reach the country despite sanctions imposed as a result of the Gulf War. The MAP has identified 25 types of landmines planted in more than 3,200 mined areas over approximately 491 square kilometers.

Casualties

The UNOPS MAP reports that since 1980, 9,289 people have been injured or killed by landmines in the northern territories. However, this number may only be a fraction of the actual number of victims because hospitals keep the records of mine casualties, and in rural regions, victims often do not have transportation for the long journey to a medical facility. Handicap International (HI) estimates that 30 percent of landmine victims in Iraq die before reaching a hospital.

Demining

Along with the extensive Mine Action Program, other groups engaged in demining in Northern Iraq include the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), Solidarity, the Kurdish Mine Removal Society and the Kurdish Humanitarian Mine Clearance Organization.

Reality Check

After the Gulf War, the Kurdish people returned to their heavily mined mountainous homeland, where they are able to cultivate only 50 percent of the

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agricultural land due to mines. Restoring the land is necessary to ensure the region's long-term economic well being. In the meantime, basic chores such as farming, herding animals and collecting firewood are life-threatening activities.

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