

Explosive Remnants of War Contamination Response in Libya

by Damir Djakovic and Katarina Cviki Balić [ITF Enhancing Human Security]



Figure 1. Map of Libya.
Figure courtesy of CISR.

Abu Grain is a town located 106 km (66 mi) east of Misrata and 138 km (86 mi) west of Sirte with an estimated population of 2,000 inhabitants. The town is known for its strategic road intersection connecting the Mediterranean cities of Misrata and Sirte with the desert district of Jufra. Between February and March 2016, Abu Grain's population fled as Islamic State (IS) group forces advanced into town in an attempt to expand control toward the west of its stronghold in Sirte. According to the Libyan Red Crescent, Abu Grain's inhabitants mostly fled to Bani Walid, Misrata, and Tripoli.

While in control of Abu Grain, IS forces began to advance further west in the beginning of May 2016. However, they were stopped by Al Bunyan Al Marsous (ABAM) forces shortly thereafter at Sidada Bridge, only 6 km (4 mi) outside of Abu

Grain, and open conflict ensued. After five days of clashes, ABAM regained control of Abu Grain on 11 May 2016, slowly pushing IS fighters back toward Sirte until mid-June 2016, when ABAM entered the city.

Immediately after the conflict in Sirte, the Libyan Mine Action Center (LibMAC) sent a two-member team from the LibMAC Risk Education (RE) division to Abu Grain to research explosive remnants of war (ERW) contamination in the area. The team assessed potential risks posed by ERW to the local population who were expected to return to the village from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. During a two-week period, LibMAC personnel collected information on the present population numbers and whereabouts as well as on the destruction in Abu Grain and contamination

from landmines, improvised explosive devices (IED), and ERW. They were joined by LibMAC's quality-assurance officer, allowing the team to compose dozens of non-technical



Area of Abu Grain in close proximity to the strategic intersection, May 2016.
All photos courtesy of LibMAC.



Training delivered by LibMAC RE section staff in Tawarga IDP Camp in Tripoli, Libya (February 2016).

surveys and hazard area information reports by mid-June. Reports were delivered to the Information Management System Mine Action database officer in LibMAC and are being processed further before being utilized as the foundation for future mine action operations.

Given the results of the initial assessment in Abu Grain—as well as data of widespread use of landmines, ERW, and significant IED contamination in many parts of Libya—prevention of further devastation caused by explosive weapons will need to become the focus of mine action in much of the country. Explosive weapons are often used in cities, towns, and villages from which civilians fled but will likely return.

In the case of Abu Grain, it is believed a large majority of the population returned to the town by the end of July 2016. In order to help the returnees in recognizing the threats present in their hometown, and to prevent significant loss of life and additional damage to homes and infrastructure, LibMAC launched a non-technical survey campaign in August 2016.

LibMAC's RE division carried out urgent RE campaigns previously at the IDP Tawarga Camp in February 2016. Although LibMAC's staff does not normally implement RE campaigns, there are possibilities for them to deliver in

situations where no other Libyan implementing partner is present or available in the area. The RE campaign in Tawarga IDP Camp, delivered by five LibMAC representatives, trained 25 IDPs who serve as focal points and will share the information they learn with their camp in Tripoli. An ITF Enhancing Human Security RE technical adviser supported and oversaw the campaign and training sessions. The ITF technical adviser developed strategic RE plans and carried out RE capacity building within LibMAC by implementing intensive on-the-job training.

Since 2014, the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) has supported capacity-building activities of the ITF technical adviser and of other ITF operations in Libya. Initially, ITF provided administrative and financial support to LibMAC and capacity building for the operations section, implemented through the employment of an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) technical adviser.

Like other Libyan implementing partners, ITF's international personnel withdrew from Tripoli in mid-2014 due to security concerns over anticipated armed conflict between various militias in the city. During this period of time, no

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Risk education materials recently developed for use in August 2016 in Abu Grain, Benghazi, and Sirte, Libya.

organization other than Libyan military engineers had access to perform clearance or battle area clearance (BAC) in the country. Since 2014, program operations are facilitated remotely with the ITF administrative coordinator and RE technical adviser on the ground in Tripoli.

Despite the extremely volatile situation, ITF ensures LibMAC receives technical support. Field conditions in Libya and the absence of international partners led those currently in Libya to devote more attention to remote training, ensuring that LibMAC personnel (especially in Tunis) build much-needed local expertise. Similarly, with hostilities continuing and clearance operations unable to continue, the focus shifted to helping local populations learn about the risks associated with ERW.

The RE technical adviser deployed in November 2015, which led to significant progress in LibMAC's RE operations. Under the supervision and guidance of the technical adviser, a number of relevant supporting documents and strategic plans were developed, including necessary standard operating procedures for effective RE campaigning.

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LibMAC RE section chief during training sessions in Tawarga IDP camp in Tripoli, Libya (February 2016).

With very solid groundwork laid by the RE technical adviser, ITF envisions additional, stronger support for RE activities. Conscious of the risks posed by ERW in Libya, prioritizing education will involve providing more comprehensive, long-term, and geographically widespread support for RE activities. Based on the assessment of LibMAC's needs and in consultations with PM/WRA as the donor, ITF proposes to support LibMAC's RE section to minimize the deadly impact

of mines, ERW, and IEDs as much as possible while strengthening LibMAC's operations division, as the national focal point for all operations must not be neglected. Nevertheless, much of the planning will largely depend on the security situation in the field and the possibilities for geographical expansion of LibMAC and its overall access in Libya. ©

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