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MAG: CLEARING IMPROVISED LANDMINES IN IRAQ

by Chris Loughran and Sean Sutton [MAG, Mines Advisory Group]

These women have just crossed the frontline in eastern Mosul, northern Iraq where hundreds of people are crossing every day. At the camps set up by MAG’s humanitarian partners—often on land that was made safe from improvised landmines and unexploded ordnance by our teams—people who were displaced by the violence are provided with tented shelter and basic supplies. What they want most is to get home as soon as possible, once the violence has ceased. But people are losing lives, limbs, and livelihoods as they return to extensive contamination from landmines and booby traps in their homes, villages, and fields. We are in a race against time to get to these brutal, indiscriminate killers. In just three weeks in November 2016, in a single village east of Mosul, MAG cleared 250 improvised landmines. This could be 250 lives saved. Most of the improvised mines MAG found are powerful enough to rip apart a car but sensitive enough to be triggered by a child’s footstep.

All photos courtesy of Sean Sutton/MAG.

MAG’s recent experience in the Middle East has shown that clearing improvised landmines can be achieved even in the most complex humanitarian contexts. It is imperative that detail and specificity is given to discussions on improvised devices if we are to avoid negative repercussions for the safety of beneficiaries and humanitarian workers.

Munitions deployed on, under, or near the ground that are initiated by the presence, proximity, or contact of a person regardless of whether they are improvised or not are anti-personnel landmines, as defined by the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) and Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).
One of the numerous landmines found close to houses marked off before it is defuzed and then destroyed. A destroyed Islamic State/Da’esh vehicle is in the background. Use of improvised or artisanal landmines is not a new phenomenon. MAG and other humanitarian NGOs have found improvised landmines in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and elsewhere for almost three decades.

Technical Field Manager Mohammad Salaam has worked with MAG for 24 years in countries all over the world. He has never seen a more heavily mined place than his home region in northern Iraq. “We find more every day” he said.
Deminers deal with explosive devices and landmines on the outskirts of Bashiqa, Iraq. Here the MAG team found six different items set up for command control and also pressure wires. Many vehicles passed over these explosives, very close to the pressure wires.

A week’s haul of explosive items are taken for demolition near Bashiqa, Iraq.
It follows, therefore, that improvised landmines fall within the scope of the APMBC and states’ commitment to uphold the highest standards of international humanitarian law.

When we call victim-activated improvised explosive devices (IED) what they are—landmines—it becomes clear that we can draw on the wealth of experience that exists within the mine action sector to tackle them in areas where the fighting has stopped. The humanitarian mine action community has addressed improvised landmines since the origins of the sector. Clearance of landmines—improvised or not—has been a part of MAGs’ operational response from Angola to Afghanistan and Cambodia to Colombia.

This has given MAG the ability and tenacity to respond to new humanitarian emergencies, none more acute than the ongoing crisis in the Middle East. Since 2014, MAG has seen the systematic production and deployment of improvised landmines and booby traps by so-called Islamic State/Da’esh posing an immediate risk to civilians, especially returning personnel and displaced persons. The scale of contamination dictates that the humanitarian need and the need for additional mine action capacity will increase in the coming months, and urgent action is needed to prevent a large-scale landmine emergency.

MAG launched a major humanitarian operation in 2014 in response to evidence of improvised landmine use in areas of Iraq formerly occupied by Islamic State/Da’esh. From September 2015 to January 2017, MAG cleared more than 7,500 improvised landmines, booby traps, and other abandoned devices in Iraq and Syria alone. By the time this article goes to print, we expect the number to escalate. Improvised landmines account for over 99 percent of the
improvised munitions cleared as part of MAG’s humanitarian response in the Middle East.

MAG has updated standard operating procedures (SOP) and organizational policy to respond to this type of context and contamination, and we have recruited and trained additional staff. This includes additional capacity for when funding becomes available. Like any aspect of mine action, skills, training, equipment, and SOPs need to reflect the contamination profile. As always, there needs to be robust quality management systems in place. This is no different for contamination involving improvised landmines, booby traps, abandoned command operated IEDs, or explosive remnants of war (ERW) from improvised munitions.

The real areas of novelty arise from the nature and complexity of the conflicts in which we are seeking to meet humanitarian need. More than ever, conflicts span borders and some parties to conflict do not share the principles and value base that underpin humanitarian action. At the worst and unacceptable end of the spectrum, humanitarian workers are seen as legitimate targets. Inaction has consequences for people who are already enduring unimaginable suffering, so we must continue to develop policies and practices that further humanitarian efforts.

The nature of many current conflicts means that we cannot wait for the conflict to stop if we are to meet humanitarian need. Alongside our colleagues in the humanitarian sector, mine action NGOs undertaking emergency response programs must approach access in terms of areas where active hostilities have ceased. To achieve this requires robust risk and security management. Our continued access and the
safety and security of humanitarian workers and beneficiaries also depends on a clear and visible distinction between humanitarian and military or security action. This is why MAG and other NGOs continue to press for a clear distinction and vision of labor between humanitarian operations and counter-IED approaches.

The challenges are complex, but they are not insurmountable, and we are achieving results. We are enabling the safe delivery of shelter, food, and medical aid by our humanitarian colleagues, and we are saving lives. This is all part of the mine action sector’s continued relevance, dynamism, and tireless work to prevent suffering, death, and injury. 

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Chris Loughran has more than 10 years experience working in the international nonprofit sector. Loughran joined MAG in 2006 and is currently director of policy for MAG, leading the organization’s strategic influencing work on disarmament issues including landmines, illicit small arms and ammunition management. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Oxford (U.K.) and a master’s degree in violence, conflict, and development studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

**Sean Sutton**
Communications Director
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Sean Sutton is an award-winning photojournalist; his well-known pictures show the impact of landmines and explosive remnants of war on communities and have been published and exhibited all over the world. His book documenting how unexploded ordnance affect people in Laos was runner-up for the Leica European Publisher’s Award. Sutton is MAG’s international communications manager and has worked for the organization since 1997.