Iraq: A Photo Essay

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MAG (Mines Advisory Group) has worked in Iraq since 1992 to make land safe for populations affected by decades of conflict. Landmines, cluster munitions, other unexploded bombs, as well as new contamination from the recent conflict with ISIS, have left a deadly legacy that prevents communities from using their land, and displaced populations from returning home safely.

This historic contamination has been compounded by new contamination from the recent conflict with ISIS since 2014. Over 3.4 million people were displaced at the height of the crisis and the fighting has seen large areas of Iraq contaminated with landmines of an improvised nature, manufactured on an industrial scale, and deployed in urban, village, and rural settings.

The situation has led to numerous accidents among returning populations and continues to prevent many others from returning to their homes, placing a strain on resources in other areas of the country.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Landmines and Unexploded Bombs Destroyed</th>
<th>Land Released by Deminers, Dogs, and Machines (sqm)</th>
<th>Direct Beneficiaries</th>
<th>Risk Education Sessions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9,648</td>
<td>6,334,116</td>
<td>397,134</td>
<td>18,219</td>
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</table>

Results of MAG's work in Iraq in 2018.
All graphics and images courtesy of Sean Sutton/MAG.

Fifty-nine year-old Hamas Said Abdulkhader, who has served as the village leader of Wlyawa for many decades, remembered what it was like back in 1983: “When helicopters flew overhead and bombed the area, we fled. It was like doomsday.”

Iraq

A photo essay by Sean Sutton [MAG, Mines Advisory Group]
In December 1991, a man from the village lost a leg to a mine. Tragically, just ten days later, Hamas' brother was killed. "HE WENT UP A HILL TO SEE WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE ORCHARD AND ON HIS WAY BACK HE STEPPED ON A MINE."

Between 1993 and 1994, there were two more accidents where villagers lost a leg. A year later, two children—seven-year-old Ako and nine-year-old Awat—came upon a mine and were both killed. Each year, the village lost about 50 animals: dogs, sheep, cows, and goats.

"There were mines to the north, east, south, and west of us, only 20 meters away from where we lived," Hamas continued. "Seven families stayed, the other thirteen left."

After the Kurdish uprising of 1991, the Iraqi army left the area. Subsequently, 20 families returned and tried to rebuild the village, however, the presence of landmines made this impossible. Hamas said, "The first accident was in 1983, when, after we had fled, one man went back to the village to get some things from his house. He was killed by a mine. That's how we found out there was a problem."

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MAG began clearance in Wlyawa in 1996. One team worked in the village for two years and cleared prioritized land close to the houses, on both sides of the road, and one of the minefields going up the hill. More than 200 landmines were removed from the village. Due to the scale of contamination in the area and the limited availability of resources, the team then moved on to work in other villages. In 2016, MAG returned to the village and continued to carry out clearance of the remaining mine-fields around the village. In the past year alone (October 2017–September 2018), 59,354 m2 of land was released and returned to the community. During the clearance activities,
a total of 354 dangerous items were found and safely removed from the land, including 229 anti-personal mines and 125 items of unexploded ordnance (grenades, mortars, rockets, and projectiles).

The Sharbazher district is known for agriculture, especially its vineyards. Before the war, Wlyawa produced tobacco, dried grapes, pears, peaches, plums, and figs. One specialty of the village was growing acorns, which can be crushed and used to feed animals. The village sold more than 200 tons of acorns every year. Even today, agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the remaining villagers in Wlyawa. They produce raisins, jam, and candy with grape paste and almonds or walnuts.

The villagers also grow a fruit called medlar, and sumac, a flavoring spice that is widely used in the Middle East. There are gum trees in the area, from which the gum is sold for medicinal purposes and for producing chewing gum. MAG’s clearance teams are currently working on Wlyawa’s agricultural land.

Hamas explained the significance of this land for his village: “The land that is not being cleared by MAG includes the best orchard and the best vineyard in the area. It also has a spring that is very important for the village. The area is about five hectares and is perfect for agriculture. We can use a tractor on the land, and the ground is very fertile. The people who moved to the city because of all the mines have grown tired there. The economy is very bad, they want to come back home. In the past, we used to export products to southern Iraq and Iran. Now, we have to import goods to survive.

The mines are further from the village, so thankfully the danger is less than it was before. But still the community is denied access to some of their most fertile land. Yet, our future looks brighter because of MAG’s work. When we gain access to all our land again, I expect many people to return. This land is rich.”

In March this year, MAG deminers found a watch in a minefield, at a spot close to where a mine had detonated. The supervisor working at the site knew Hamas and that his brother had been killed in the area, so called him. I asked him if it was a rectangular Orient watch, and he said
that it was,” Hamas said. “I felt my brother’s spirit. I was both sad and happy at the same time. I lost my brother, but now I have gained many new brothers, the MAG staff. That’s how I feel. Yes, I lost one brother but have gained many more. This watch, I had bought this watch in 1988. My brother said it was a beautiful watch, and so I took it off and gave it to him. THE WATCH STOPPED AT TWENTY MINUTES PAST TWO IN THE AFTERNOON, WHICH WAS THE MOMENT MY BROTHER WAS KILLED.” Hamas paused for a moment before continuing, “The village will return to the way it used to be. We can rebuild it. We just need the land to be safe. Saddam’s army is still here. They are a strong army, they don’t run away from the snow, and no one can see them, but they are still here. But MAG will save us. Life is hard in Sulaymaniyah city for our people who have not yet returned. Many don’t have jobs, and this is their home, this is their land. But they need safety.”

MAG has deployed several teams in and around Wlyawa village. There are many minefields that remain, and several decades after these mines were laid, they continue to have a devastating effect on the population of the village. Hamas’ story and what Wlyawa has experienced is all too common among villages in the area, highlighting the ongoing need for clearance of remaining legacy minefields. When cleared, the people from Wlyawa and other villages can finally leave the war behind them and rebuild their communities fully, free from fear and danger.

Namiq Aziz has six children and two wives. He and his family live in the middle of a minefield. They are the only family living here but many others would like to return to their village and their ancestral land. The location of the village is stunningly beautiful in the middle of rolling hills. The fertile area is famous for many kinds of crops.

There are landmines all around their farm and the cost has been high. Namiq’s mother lost a leg to a mine that had rolled down the hill and landed near the front door. His cousin Karsan lost his eyes and his arms in a landmine explosion and Karsan’s son Jamal was killed just behind their house.
“Then in 1994 my mother stood on a mine by the front door and her leg was blown off. The mine had rolled down the hill.”

“Then my cousin, Jamal’s son Karzan ... set off a mine and was blinded. He also lost an arm. This was in 2000.”

Namiq was also injured—he cleared dozens of VS50 landmines to make a safe path through one of the minefields so that his sheep could reach a good pasture.

Some detonators from the mines he had in a bag exploded and he lost some of his fingers.

“The first accident was with my cousin called Jamal. He died 100 meters away from our house in 1992.”

“There were 15 families living here before. They were good times and we lived well. There is good pasture land for livestock and also perfect land for agriculture. We grew tomatoes, tobacco, watermelons, and lots more and sold a lot of produce. The village was famous for good eggs and people used to come from other villages to get eggs. Turkeys have also been very special here—every house had many of them. We feed them a special diet. Honey, the honey is very special—we used to sell a lot. IT WAS GOOD UNTIL THE WAR STARTED ...”
A MAG demining supervisor with a disarmed Valmara-69 bounding fragmentation mine. Namiq had reported the mine to the MAG team that had rolled out of the minefield close to his house.

The mine was in good condition inside with the seals completely intact despite many winters and fires since it was planted in 1983.

The Iranians attacked the area and there were a lot of air strikes. We fled on our feet with nothing—we left everything behind. There was 150 of us with babies and elderly people and we went to a camp near Kanraw. We stayed there for a year and then went to Suaymaniya where I worked as a laborer. It was hard, we faced difficult times. We couldn’t come back home until 1992 because fighting continued. After the war with Iran there was war between [the] Iraqi army and the Peshmerga.

I was amazed at what I saw when I came back. There was a burnt truck and many bodies. Everything was burnt and destroyed—even the land and the trees were burnt. There was barbed wire all around and lots of ammunition on the ground. We knew there might be landmines. Wherever military had been there might be landmines.

I was so happy to go home but so sad to see it all destroyed. About 15 families came back but few stayed. As soon as they saw the village they turned around. It was mined. Now we know where the mines are and we do our best to avoid them but every year we still lose many sheep and goats and I am always worried about the children. Now there are more than 30 families that would like to come home. We need to clear the mines, then our village will come back to life.”

-Namiq Aziz

Five-year-old Sidra helps look after the goats. She stays with relatives in Sulimaniyah during the week when she goes to school but the rest of the time she is at home surrounded by minefields.
Goran Salaadin, 28
Dog Handler

“I started working for MAG as a deminer 10 years ago. In the first two years, I found more than 100 landmines. Then I was given the chance to become a dog handler and I realized this was a great opportunity. Some people think dogs are dirty animals but I love my dog. My first dog was called Harri but he got old and was retired. He is very happy now and lives with a family. Quewe doesn’t really like people, except for me. We understand each other very well. She tries to bite people when tired and she easily gets jealous.”

-Goran Salaadin

“Quewe and I have been together for four years. She is demanding and works hard but needs to rest well when she is tired. She doesn’t really like people, except for me. We understand each other very well. She tries to bite people when tired and she easily gets jealous.”

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-Goran Salaadin

“Dogs are especially effective with Type 72 minimum metal mines as detectors are difficult to use—also areas with a lot of metal and a lot of scrap. I have seen areas that would take deminers 70 days to clear with a MAT cleared by dogs in just three days.”
"I joined the Peshmerga when I was 15. There was a lot of fighting and I fought in many places. I was injured twice, once shot in the stomach and once burnt by chemical weapons. A plane dropped them and I was blinded. Many people died. That was in 1987.

The village was on the other side of the hill before but that area is completely mined and we can't go there. The first landmine accident was in 1996 when my cousins Bakr and Sadiq were injured clearing mines. Bakr lost his leg and Sadiq lost his hands and an eye. Also, that year five of my children had an accident. They found a mine and did something to it and Saman, 6, Rezgar, 10, and Chro who was 5 died and two survived. The next one was my uncle, Amad Rahman—he was killed. His son was also killed here just few weeks ago when he set off a Valmara.

THEN I LOST TWO CHILDREN SARWAR, 9, AND SURUCH, 4, WHO WERE LOOKING AFTER SHEEP. My older brother Mahmud was shepherding a few years later. He sat down to rest. After a while he moved and somehow set off a mine. He was also killed. All of them were killed by Valmaras.

I was forced to do demining myself, I had no choice. I was going to lose all of my family. I was never scared of demining—I just had to do it. In one hill I cleared and disarmed tree sacks full; about 300 kilos!

You can see where Valmaras are usually but the small ones (V550s) are often under the ground about 30 cm apart. The Valmaras were usually 1.5 meters apart. I would find a row and follow them using a hoe to scrape the ground. My cousins died doing this but they didn't know what they were doing and they shouldn't have done that. So, they died.

My family have been living in a lot of fear—not a little, a lot. Too much.

Most of the land here is dangerous. Most of my family don't live here anymore. They can't. If the land was safe they would be back immediately.

They are safe where they are—but they are miserable. They do bad jobs and live a hard life. Here they could build a house and have cows and sheep. This is our land and they would be happy if they could be here.

We used to grow thyme, tobacco, barley, rice, wheat, and there were orchards and vineyards. There are lots of trees here—almonds, hawthorn, and more. The people are poor. They have lost their arms and their legs. WE NEED TO BE FREE FROM THESE LANDMINES. We are not free—we cannot go anywhere. We live in fear, we have no safety."
Karim walks past unexploded ordnance next to the spot where three of his children were killed.

"My family have been living in a lot of fear—not a little, a lot. Too much."
Wlaghlu Village

“Wlaghlu village is the biggest village in Sharbazar and has suffered more than any from landmines. In the 1970s there were about 150 families living there. It was a major center of trade between Iraq and Iran and had a big market—it has always been very strategic. The area is very mountainous and was the center of the uprising because it was hard for the Iraqi army to get up here. This was the base of the revolution. Because of this the area was very affected by the war. A lot of landmines, bombs, and chemical weapons were used here.

There was also a lot of fighting between Iran and Iraq. This was a main frontline area for a long time from 1980 to 1988. In the Iran and Iraq war, most of the bombs landed here. So this was the center of the two wars from 1976 to 1988. 1988 was the beginning of Anfal. The area was evacuated. Saddam’s army moved all the people to collective towns. One-thousand five-hundred were killed or never seen again in just one night.

After the no-fly zone and establishment of the green line people started to come home in 1992. NGOs helped a lot with water, shelter, and food but there were problems. **AS SOON AS PEOPLE STARTED TO REBUILD THEIR HOUSES THEY STARTED DYING.**

Many were killed by UXO. When they tried to farm, they died. Every day about 10 or 12 people died in the area. People brought their livestock and they died too. Many animals were lost.

Eighteen villages in subdistricts and about 40 percent of the land is mined. There are two villages where no one has returned because of landmines, but people are starting to go back now. Qulajakh village on the other hand is still completely abandoned, destroyed and full of mines.

**THE PEOPLE IN THIS DISTRICT ARE LIVING IN A CAGE.** A cage made of landmines. Saddam systematically destroyed and mined the villages. The hills and countryside were already mined.

Now most of the people originally from here are having a difficult life. They know now where the landmines are—but the animals don’t. The animals go into the minefield and the children go to get them out and then they die. This is a hard life.

In the last 10 years a lot has changed here. Many people have built houses next to the minefields. There isn’t anywhere else for them [to go.] We need the donors to support the mine clearance here. We have fertile land and all we want is to return to how life was here in the 70s. We need our land. The area is very famous—it was the bread basket for the region. Clearance of the minefields will have far-reaching benefits for the population near and far. An American company wanted to build a dairy factory because this is a perfect area for cows. We have always had cows here. But they couldn’t do it because we don’t have enough land to have more cows. We produce enough goods in the area to just feed ourselves. But we should be trading. If we could trade we can develop and we can prosper.”

See endnote page 62

Village leader
Marif Hussein Mohamed and Mohammed Osman Ahmed chat near a wall.
Shells have been used as building material and a number of them still have a live detonator attached.

Sean Sutton
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MAG, Mines Advisory Group
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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.