On the Ground in Iraq

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Background

MineTech International (MTI) has been stationed in southern Iraq since May 2003, working on humanitarian mine and ammunition clearing projects, and as part of its brief history, working to deliver rapid response demining support for the United Nations Office of Project Services (UNOPS).

MTI first arrived in Basrah with a team of around 90 explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) and mine clearance professionals including mine detecting dogs (MDDAs) and dog handling teams. Four emergency survey teams were also deployed to carry out Level 2 technical surveys, initially to locate and identify explosive remnants of war within the southern Basrah governorate using the Information Management System for Mine Action (SIMSMA) format. However, in June 2003, MTI's survey teams were retasked to conduct the National Emergency Survey, with the prime focus of locating information to measure the effect of Operation Enduring Freedom in southern Iraq. As a result, eight survey teams have been working to identify populated areas within each of the eight governorates in southern Iraq and to identify the dangerous areas that are within close proximity to villages. Southern Iraq comprises eight governorates from Baghdad to the Kuwaiti border in the south. The area is bounded by Saudi Arabia to the west, Kuwait in the south and a long land border with Iran in the east. The area has experienced three major conflicts: the Iran/Iraq War (1980–1988), the Kuwait Campaign (Gulf War) from 1990–1991, and most recently Operation Enduring Freedom. In their wake is an enormous accumulation of explosive remnants of war (ERW) among which the local people have been living with for the last 20 years. Ammunition that should have been destroyed has been dumped in rural areas—much of which has deteriorated over the years due to the high saline content in the soil. Added to this is the large amount of ammunition stockpiled by the Iraqi military throughout the region. With the breakdown of law and order, much of this ammunition has been removed from storage so that the copper, brass and aluminium components can be separated and sold in Iran. The result is that the contents of munitions crates have been abandoned and spread over a wide area. There is also the threat of loose propellant having been widely scattered when les­ ters crashed ammunition storage facilities. This has created safety issues not only for the local population but also for the EOD teams dealing with the resulting mess.

In the first few months of activity, the mine clearance teams made a concentrated effort to help farmers gain access to their land in time to prepare fields for cultivation, removing dangerous minefields from agricultural land in the Al Zubayar region, near Kuwait.

Despite the dangers, local people appear to be largely unperturbed about the risks within their communities. This created some problems for the MTI survey teams who were frequently told that there was nothing dangerous within the community when, in fact, there were stockpiles of ammunition. More often than not the children, shepherds and nomads proved to be the best source of information on the whereabouts of dangerous areas—not the village elders.

Basrah

The survey teams, initially working in Basrah, encountered a large amount of ordnance that had been left over from the Iran/Iraq War, in particular a high concentration around the Shatt Al Arab waterway, which was subject to heavy fighting. There had been no attempt by Iraqi governmental organisations to make the area safe for the local population. One particular minefield along the Shatt Al Arab water course is situated in a marshy area with up to 1.5 m of water in some places. The locals use dug-out canoes to go about their business for fear of detonating mines. Their animals, on the other hand, walk in to graze and regularly fall victim to the mines.

In the first week of July 2003, the Survey Teams deployed to the oil facility in Al Faw township. The teams surveyed from the lower Al Faw peninsula northwards. Highlights included the location and survey of a major minefield to the north of Al Faw that is hamper­ ing and blocking the rebuilding of homes, cultivation of agricultural land and fishing activities. The minefield was laid during the Iran/Iraq War and has a heavy metal contamination. The local people are clearing mines and UXO where they are identified.

South of Basrah, the teams found large quantities of ordnance ranging from standard ammunition to abandoned explosive ordnance (EO) from the last three conflicts. The EO was in varying states of condition and stability, with most stock containing large quantities of loose propellant scattered among the munitions. Additionally, another mined area was located 480–589 south of the greater city limits of Basrah, which the MTI manual clearance teams cleared.

Of all the governorates surveyed, Basrah posed the most challenges to the survey teams. It had a high number of internally dis­ placed persons (IDPs) within the province who were creating their own communities with "villages" literally springing up overnight. To the end it was decided that if the people considered themselves to be a community, then they would be surveyed as one. In practice, this meant teams were covering a far larger number of communities than the original mapping information suggested. The survey teams had to travel the road systems and rely on local sources of information to be able to estimate the number of IDPs and covered all of the villages in the area. Additionally, there was ERW strewn across the province from three previous conflicts. The levels of ERW contamination, particularly in the Basrah governorate, led the survey teams to complete multiple dangerous areas for individual communities. To the north of the province, the teams ran into security problems such as being warned off from entering certain areas, encountering potential hostile situations or having to address funda­ mental issues such as lack of electricity, water, medicine, and law and order.

The Threat From Border Minefields

Compared to the EOD problems, mine clearance issues in Iraq are of much less consequence largely because there are few, if any, minefields in the country and these are mainly scattered defensive minefields located around a few ex-Iraqi military installations and are considered to be strategic installations, such as oil and gas fields or refineries. The significant exception is the entire length of the eastern border with Iran, which has been heavily mined, denying access to thousands of hectares of land. Currently, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) does not have any clearance of the border minefields, although MTI personnel have completed a specific six-week mine clearance task to create a safe area around a key border-crossing water point. As movement restrictions have lifted, more people are moving to the Iraqi border; where the going is uncharted. They are moving into minefields that are extremely dangerous and cannot compare with anything in MTI's experience. In the short time working in the border area, MTI personnel have encountered six civilians who were injured after returning to the minefields with livestock. Although the barrier minefields in the border regions are known, it has been reported that the area is prone to flooding during the wet season and consequently mines migrate into areas where people conduct agricultural activity—in some cases preventing farmers from producing crops. Mine awareness education will be vital to protect the families who are now returning to the area if nothing is done to tackle the minefields themselves.

Missan

During the first three weeks of October, the survey teams worked in the Missan governorate. There are limited Coalition Forces (CF) within the province and the main source of ERW is in origin­ ing from both the former Iraqi army and the Iraqi/Iran conflict. The Missan province had been home to an Iraqi Army Corps, thus there is a huge amount of ammunition stockpiled in various degrees of security and condition, ranging from permanent bunker facilities to open field storage sites. The main ongoing ERW threat remains in the bor-
der minefields laid during the Iran/Iraq War.

The Mine Action Challenge continued in the form of an ongoing humanitarian effort to remove these unexploded ordnance from the landscape. The survey teams worked closely with the local community leaders and other organizations to ensure the safe removal of these hazards.

The Legacy

The impact of the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies was devastating, with thousands of civilians killed and wounded. The Coalition forces left behind a legacy of unexploded ordnance that continues to pose a threat to the local population.

The Security Challenge

After the war, the security situation in Iraq remained unstable. The threat of insurgency and terrorism continued, and the local population was left to deal with the aftermath of the war on their own.

Four main issues/questions were continually asked when the teams arrived in a village:

- When will the village have electricity, clean water, and security from banditry?
- What is the current state of the oilfields?
- Will the village have access to medical care?
- Will the village have access to education?

In some cases, unless an answer was forthcoming on these questions, the local people would refuse to discuss anything else.

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