

Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA), Contamination and Mine Action

In a context marked by a very intense use of **Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA)**, HI, alongside other humanitarian mine actors, is alarmed at the **level of contamination** by explosive hazards in Syria. This use results in wide extensive explosive contamination, causing injury and death throughout Syria. It also impedes access to essential services. The level of contamination, along with inadequate health and rehabilitation services, socio-economic deprivation after years of conflict and the high level of basic needs amongst the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugee populations, means that many communities in Syria are not safe for Syrians to return.

Mine action is a central component of humanitarian action and bound by humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality and independence. It comprises Risk Education, mine clearance activities and Victim Assistance. Presently, there is an immediate need for **Risk Education** to be scaled up and for mine clearance activities to commence by humanitarian mine actors. **Survivors of explosive accidents, their families and communities need specialised services, inclusion initiatives to ensure the protection of their rights and livelihoods opportunities for resilience and recovery.**

Urgent Concerns

Explosive Contamination

- After more than seven years of conflict, **contamination by explosive remnants of war (ERW) is massive, widespread and unending.**
- Contamination by explosive remnants of war (ERW) is the result of **intense use of explosive weapons in populated areas in Syria, including confirmed repeated use of landmines and cluster munitions, banned weapons.**⁽¹⁾
- Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), including booby traps and improvised landmines, are particularly unpredictable and difficult to detect, increasing the level of threat.
- While all population groups are at risk, **children, especially boys, agricultural workers and people on the move** are at particular risk.
- Key services and countless infrastructure such as **roads, housing, schools, health centres, and water and sanitation systems** have been destroyed. If not destroyed, they will often remain unsafe for use because of contamination. Lost access to productive land for livelihoods and settlement reinforces poverty, further destabilises communities and undermines opportunities for recovery.⁽²⁾

Not Safe for Return

- Presence of explosive remnants of wars (ERW), landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) represents an **immediate physical threat to civilians, a risk of grave injuries and death. It limits safe access to services and impedes the delivery of humanitarian aid.**
- In areas where the level of destruction has been very high, activities considered to be the most at risk are **returning home, removing rubble and rebuilding, farming and tampering with unknown devices.**

Facts & Figures

- As of November 2017, an estimated **7.3 million people in Syria are living in communities reporting explosive hazards**: 1.3 million people are living in communities that reported explosive hazards casualties in the **previous six months; 31% of contaminated locations report casualties resulting from explosive hazards**; 5% of communities report that explosive hazards removal has taken place.⁽¹⁾
- According to a survey of the International NGO Safety Organization (INSO), 33,394 attacks involving explosive weapons took place in Syria in 2017, accounting for 70% of reported incidents. This represents an **average of 91 attacks, in the form of bombing or shelling, every day.**
- Despite such statistics and ample evidence of the gravity of the situation⁽²⁾, **the exact scale and scope of the explosive hazards contamination in most localities and areas of Syria is still unknown** due to a lack of access to most areas for international actors and a lack of local capacity in humanitarian mine action.
- A technical explosive hazards survey is required to further assess and understand the threats, determine clearance priorities and inform the population and humanitarian actors in affected areas. Marking and removal of explosive hazards is required in areas of potential returns and humanitarian intervention, as well as routes to get there.
- This work requires time due to the improvised, diverse and widespread nature of the contamination.

1. Rapid Assessment on Mine Action (UNMAS/NPM), November 2017.

2. HI reports: Everywhere the bombing followed us (2017); Syria, A Mutilated Future (2016); Hidden Victims of the Syrian Crisis (2014).

1. Landmine Monitor 2016, Cluster Munition Monitor 2016.

2. Humanitarian Response Plan 2018 (still pending final approval), Syrian Arab Republic.

Contamination Impact/Non-Technical Survey surveys* conducted in Syria

Out of a total of 524 Contamination Impact/Non-Technical Survey surveys* conducted in Syria [by HI and partners] from the beginning of 2013 until the end of 2017:

- 52% (of communities) report witnessing of shelling, 50% aerial bombardments, 44% ground fighting.
- 99% report at least indirect evidence of contamination.
- 75% report cases of (explosive) contamination.
- 42% report presence of landmines.
- 54% report presence of Explosive Remnants of War (ERW).
- 23% report presence of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

On reported accidents:

- 63% of the communities report cases of accidents and/or victims. Yet in 58% of the communities it was unknown if the explosive hazards were marked.
- Absence of information on the location and presence of ERW in most communities increase risks for population. Only 10% of communities reported that the hazards were partially marked, and only 3 communities, out of the total of 524 reported that they were all marked. And in 31% it was known that hazards were not marked.

* Non-Technical Survey / Contamination Impact Survey aim at identifying the level and type of contamination in one given community at informing communities on areas identified as potentially contaminated, for the people to know where the threat is and to adopt safe behaviours.

■ Humanitarian actors, including those providing mine action services, **cannot ensure that the conditions for safe return are met if they have limited access to the localities concerned**. In such cases, the humanitarian community should strongly encourage people to not return to areas affected by the conflict (including areas declared cleared) until adequate information has been communicated on the remaining risks.

Principled Humanitarian Mine Action

- Over-reliance on stabilisation mechanisms and commercial actors for mine action activities, in particular clearance, contribute to blurring the lines between military activities and humanitarian intervention. This in turn risks fuelling conflict and increases security risks for humanitarian actors.
- In all countries where HI implements mine action activities, we promote a **comprehensive approach to Armed Violence Reduction (AVR)**, using a multifaceted methodology. This approach, which we strongly recommend for the Syrian humanitarian response, includes:
 - Advocacy on stopping the harm caused to civilians by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas;
 - Participation in humanitarian mine clearance in contaminated areas;
 - Education of populations under threat from the dangers of weapons and on risks and mitigation measures to be taken;

– Provision of Victim Assistance linking mine action activities with health care through physical rehabilitation, mental health and psychosocial support.

- At Whole of Syria level, the protection coordination[1] also requests that clearance actors adopt an **integrated approach** to:
 - Remove explosive hazards to reduce the risk of injury or death for civilians and humanitarian actors and reduce barriers to access to other humanitarian services;
 - Conduct surveys to accurately evaluate the scope of the explosive hazards contamination to better inform the needs-based prioritization of future clearance activities;
 - Conduct casualties data collection so that Risk Education can be prioritised to reach those most in-need, including in neighbouring countries amongst the host and refugee communities who are currently, or could be, affected by explosive hazards in the future;
 - Conduct Risk Education for at-risk groups including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), farmers, (re)construction workers, children and refugee populations;
 - Provide Victim Assistance services to survivors of explosive hazards accidents, including rehabilitation services and psychological and psychosocial support;
 - Promote the participation of communities and other sectors in priority-setting.⁽⁴⁾

4. Cluster protection: Protection needs overview v1. October 2017

Immediate Recommendations

Donors and international agencies should:

- Signal strongly that **humanitarian mine action is an essential and priority activity in Syria now and in the future**.
- Commit to funding a **significant scale-up** in Risk Education, surveys and clearance of mines and explosive remnants of war, and Victim Assistance.
- Support **Syrian response capacity** to effectively respond to these threats in the short and long-term.
- Use their leverage and influence to ensure that **access to all areas is granted to humanitarian mine actors**.
- Ensure **funding for mine action activities is covered by humanitarian funding mechanisms**.

United Nations Security Council Members should:

- Ensure that **paragraph 11 of United Security Council Resolution 2401 (2018)** which 'calls for humanitarian mine action to be accelerated as a matter of urgency throughout Syria' be **implemented immediately**.

Mid-to-long term recommendations

Donors should:

- Prioritise funding in accordance with the needs of the persons affected by the conflict; paying particular attention to injury, disability, age and gender vulnerability factors.
- Ensure a comprehensive response to the basic needs of the persons affected by the conflict and to persons with specific needs, including physical rehabilitation and psychosocial support.
- Include resources for better data collection, monitoring and reporting measures on vulnerable people on the effects caused by the use of explosive weapons within the call for proposals.