Progress, Challenges and Forecast of Humanitarian Mine Action

NORTHEAST SYRIA
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## BACKGROUND

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## GLOSSARY

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>EHI</td>
<td>Explosive Hazard Incident Database</td>
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<td>EO</td>
<td>Explosive Ordnance</td>
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<td>EORE</td>
<td>Explosive Ordnance Risk Education</td>
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<td>ERW</td>
<td>Explosive Remnants of War</td>
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<td>GoS</td>
<td>Government of Syria</td>
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<td>HMA</td>
<td>Humanitarian Mine Action</td>
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<td>HMAC</td>
<td>Humanitarian Mine Action Coordinator</td>
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<td>HAO</td>
<td>Humanitarian Affairs Office (part of SANES)</td>
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<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Person</td>
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<td>IED</td>
<td>Improvised Explosive Device</td>
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<td>IMAS</td>
<td>International Mine Action Standards</td>
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<td>IMO</td>
<td>Information Management Officer</td>
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<td>ISF</td>
<td>Internal Security Forces (NES)</td>
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<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and Syria</td>
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<td>ISWG</td>
<td>Intersectoral Working Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>MASWG</td>
<td>Mine Action Sub Working Group (in NES)</td>
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<td>NES</td>
<td>North East Syria</td>
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<td>NESMAC</td>
<td>North East Syria Mine Action Center (De facto Mine Action authority in NES)</td>
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<td>NTS</td>
<td>Non-technical Survey</td>
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<td>OPS</td>
<td>Operation Peace Spring (Turkish operation in NES)</td>
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<td>PPE</td>
<td>Personal Protective Equipment</td>
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<td>SANES</td>
<td>Self Administration of North East Syria</td>
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<td>SDF</td>
<td>Syrian Defense Forces (mostly Kurdish forces in NES)</td>
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<td>TSO</td>
<td>Turkish-supported opposition</td>
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<tr>
<td>UXO</td>
<td>Unexploded Ordnance</td>
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<td>WoS</td>
<td>Whole of Syria</td>
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<td>WoSWG</td>
<td>WoS Working Group</td>
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KEY TAKEAWAYS

In Northeast Syria (NES), a total of 359 communities are reported to be impacted by explosive ordnances (EO) on a daily basis.

Since February 2017, the Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) sector undertook 4,255 individual clearance and land release activities, resulting in a total 109,265 explosive devices being removed and destroyed and a total of 29 million square meters (m²) being released back to the communities. Additionally, over 1.5 million people in NES (58% of the region’s estimated population) received risk education.

HMA activities have resumed in 2021, after an 18-month period of limited activity. In 2019, HMA actors evacuated when Turkish forces launched Operation Peace Spring (OPS). The subsequent COVID-19 pandemic delayed their return.

Renewed activity is not yet durable, as four out of six HMA actors that are involved in clearance, survey, and risk education activities are anticipated to run out of funding at the end of 2021. With the same resources as between 2017-2019, HMA actors could clear the vast majority of contamination within three to five years – assuming there will be no major recontamination.

Contamination data is limited to locations where HMA actors are active. The Humanitarian Mine Action Coordinator (HMAC) works with HMA actors to have a transparent data sharing mechanism in place, with consistent levels of detail.

A baseline contamination survey covering all NES has never taken place. Such a survey would be able to map all contaminated and uncontaminated areas, define an overall understanding and prioritize existing needs within a six-month time frame.

As part of transition from the emergency phase into early recovery, the Mine Action Sub Working Group (MASWG) is mainstreaming HMA into Recovery and Rehabilitation. This requires a more structured way of coordination and a mechanism of prioritization. Between 2017 and 2019, coordination efforts focused on immediate and obvious emergency needs. Now, more formal mechanisms are being developed, including coordination with humanitarian and early recovery actors about the contamination state of an area, including health, education, livelihoods, and water.

The Self Administration of NES (SANES) established a NES mine action authority (NESMAC). The HMA sector needs to support NESMAC in creating a planned, systematic, and structured process, including prioritization and strategic planning.

Although a formal HMA monitoring system is part of the NESMAC mandate, it has not yet been developed. The HMAC is currently contributing to the development of a NESMAC Coordination and Monitoring tool that will provide visibility on HMA activities and performance.
CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Following the conclusion of the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) campaign to capture territory held by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Deir-ez-Zor in 2019, the SDF and SANES have established themselves as the dominant security and administrative actors in NES. However, SANES and the SDF continue to face a range of security, governance, and economic challenges that undermine their ability to effectively administer and provide essential services to communities under their control.

Facing resource constraints, SANES has struggled to extend services reliably across its territory. The situation has been compounded by large unemployment, Acute crises—including management of IDPs from the NES and outside, the deterioration of the Syrian Pound (SYP), and ongoing water crisis and food shortages—have compounded these difficulties and imposed further strains on households and communities. Meanwhile, SANES continues to confront sporadic civil unrest, in addition to both external and internal security challenges from actors including Turkish-supported opposition forces (TSO) on frontlines in Ar-Raqqa, Jazira, and Manbij; Government of Syria (GoS) forces in Qamishli and Al-Hassakeh cities; asymmetric attacks carried out by ISIS affiliates and unknown armed actors in Deir-ez-Zor and elsewhere.

Amidst these dynamics, EO contamination\(^1\)—some of which are remnants of earlier conflict and some newly created—remains a significant security challenge in NES. In addition to the immediate threat posed by EO to local populations, debris of war contribute to already-precarious humanitarian conditions by obstructing access of SANES and humanitarian organizations to communities and limiting the extent of service provision and humanitarian programming.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS – KEY POINTS

1. While SANES has consolidated security and administrative authority in NES, it continues to face multiple concurrent humanitarian and security challenges that impact local communities.

2. In recent months, SANES-controlled areas have been impacted by an acute water crisis and consequent electricity and food security challenges. These fall against a backdrop of poor economic conditions, high levels of un- and under-employment, and continued deterioration of the SYP, which exacerbate challenges for households to meet their basic needs.

3. SANES-held areas face ongoing security threats from both external and internal actors. Over the past year, tensions with TSO and GoS forces have generated significant internal displacement, straining formal and informal camp capacity and host communities. Asymmetric attacks carried out by ISIS affiliates and other armed actors have limited the ability of SANES and humanitarian organizations to extend services and conduct programming in areas with significant immediate needs.

4. Access challenges—whether due to active conflict, or EO and debris of war, or other factors—remain a significant barrier to service provision and humanitarian programming that would meet local needs and mitigate impacts of ongoing economic crises. This, in turn, further compounds other challenges, as local grievances over poor service provision and unmet needs can exacerbate tensions with SANES and contribute to conflict.

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\(^1\) EO consists of mines (including landmines, sea mines, improvised explosive devices) and ERW (including UXO and cluster munitions)
HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

While SANES has made progress in extending services within the territory it administers, populations in NES continue to face multiple concurrent humanitarian challenges.

In recent months, SANES areas have been afflicted by an acute water crisis driven by low rainfall levels and reduced water flow through the Euphrates River. This has had significant negative impacts on the availability of drinking water and water for household use. Al-Hassakeh city and portions of the Jazira region have been particularly impacted as a result of depleted groundwater reserves and inconsistent pumping from Alouk Water Station in TSO-controlled Ras al-Ain, affecting approximately 460,000 people. Meanwhile, drinking water stations and irrigation along the Euphrates River have also been impacted. While humanitarian organizations have sought to mitigate these challenges by trucking water into impacted areas, they have not been able to meet the full extent of local needs.

The water crisis has also produced numerous secondary effects. As SANES areas rely heavily on hydroelectric power generation at the Tabqah and Tishrin dams, reduced water flow and consequent reductions in power generation have limited electricity supply for communities across the region.

Further, low rainfall levels throughout the year contributed to significantly reduced wheat harvests during summer 2021. After the 2021 harvest season, SANES purchased just over 200,000 tons of wheat from local farmers, compared to approximately 600,000 tons the previous year— which SANES authorities estimate to be the amount required to meet domestic consumption needs. While SANES will be able to utilize wheat it had stockpiled, this will be insufficient to fill the gap. It remains unclear how SANES plans to address this shortfall. Unless SANES is able to import sufficient quantities of wheat or flour, or unless humanitarian organizations help meet current needs, low wheat supply will critically undermine food security for households across NES.

Acute water and wheat challenges compound a reality of protracted poor economic conditions. Historically underdeveloped by the GoS, NES's economic conditions worsened considerably over the course of the conflict with the destruction of infrastructure and human and capital flight. The region is largely dependent on agricultural and livestock production, while a significant portion of the population is engaged in the informal sector. The deteriorating value of the SYP—which stood at approximately 47 SYP per US dollar (USD) prior to the conflict, compared to 3,460 SYP per USD today—has driven up costs of key economic inputs as well as basic commodities, exacerbating challenges for households.

While SANES and humanitarian actors are seeking to ameliorate these conditions, SANES's response is constrained by its own resource limitations. SANES and humanitarian actors also face access challenges driven in large part by ongoing security dynamics.

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2 iMMAP, Water Dynamics, Crises, and Challenges in Northeastern Syria, July 2021
3 water_crisis_response_plan-september_2021.pdf (reliefweb.int)
4 ibidem
SECURITY SITUATION

SANES continues to confront multiple internal and external conflict dynamics that place communities at risk for violence. Major challenges include conflict around frontline areas with Turkey, sporadic tensions and clashes with GoS forces in Qamishli and Al-Hassakeh, ongoing low-level ISIS attacks, and occasional civil unrest.

OPS, the Turkish military offensive in northeastern Syria, concluded in November 2019, with Turkish forces capturing territory between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain along the Syrian–Turkish border and extending south to Ain Issa and Tel Tamer. Since the conclusion of the offensive, TSO forces have continued shelling towns and villages along these conflict lines while engaging in sporadic clashes with SDF. Most recently, Turkish shelling around Ain Issa, Tel Tamer, and Manbij escalated in August 2021, leading to the displacement of over 8,000 residents from communities along front lines.

In Jazira, the GoS continues to hold pockets of territory in Al-Hassakeh and Qamishli cities. While GoS forces in these areas largely co-exist with SDF and Internal Security Forces (ISF), there have been several notable escalations over the past year. In April, tensions between GoS and ISF forces in Qamishli city escalated, leading to sustained clashes. ISF pushed GoS forces out of positions in the Tay neighborhood and established their own checkpoints. While clashes in these areas have been infrequent, Qamishli and Al-Hassakeh cities are densely populated, with the possibility of considerable humanitarian impacts. During fighting in April, thousands of residents of Qamishli city were temporarily displaced, but were able to return to their homes after the situation improved.

Perhaps the most pressing security issue in the southeast of NES, SANES areas continue to face frequent asymmetric attacks carried out by local ISIS affiliates and other armed actors. These attacks take place most frequently across the Deir-ez-Zor region—particularly in the central and eastern portions of the region—but notable incidents have also been recorded in Ar-Raqqa and Jazira over the past year. Attacks often take the form of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and assassinations targeting SDF members, vehicles, and checkpoints; local civil and municipal authorities; as well as notable tribal figures and civilians. The SDF, with International Coalition support, frequently conducts raids and arrest campaigns against suspected ISIS cells in Deir-ez-Zor.

Less frequently, SANES areas face large-scale civil unrest, which can escalate to clashes between residents and local security forces. In May, at least five residents were injured in protests that turned violent after SANES attempted to raise prices of subsidized fuel. Also in late May, hundreds of residents of Manbij staged protests precipitated by SANES’s aggressive implementation of its compulsory conscription policy. Protests escalated to clashes with local security forces in which at least eight civilians were killed and dozens more injured.

Ongoing conflict dynamics present significant challenges for the humanitarian response. Clashes between the SDF and TSO and GoS forces contribute to internal displacement that strains formal and informal camps as well as host communities. Meanwhile, security issues linked to ISIS and other armed actors create significant access challenges for humanitarian organizations. Persistent poor security conditions in Deir-ez-Zor, for example, have deterred both SANES and humanitarian organizations from extending services and programming to conflict-affected areas. This, in turn, further compounds local grievances over poor governance and service provision that exacerbate tensions with SANES and contribute to sustaining conflict dynamics.
HMA ANALYSIS

Over 20 million m² of NES have EO contaminated land as a result of the armed conflict against ISIS and continuing violence in and around Turk controlled areas. Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, and Al-Hassakeh governorates are most affected. Such hazards pose a threat to civilians, and children are particularly vulnerable.

**Figure 1:** School clearance in Ar-Raqqa - typical example of the rubble and structural damage that has to be removed before access into the main building is secure (picture by Mark Buswell)

**Figure 2:** Marked hazard of emplaced IED in an urban setting along a footpath between damaged buildings (picture by Mark Buswell)
Figure 3: Unexploded airdropped bomb found inside a targeted building (picture by Mark Buswell)

Figure 4: This image shows an IED in the door way. (picture by Mark Buswell)
CONTAMINATION

Since 2017 a total of 58,478,295 million m² of land has been identified as contaminated, equating to a total of 3,129 hazardous areas identified since data was collated and collected centrally.

Contamination in NES is found in areas where ISIS and SDF hostilities occurred. It follows the Kurdish offensive from 2016 to 2019. Most of NES was under the control of ISIS at one point, with the exception of an enclave in Kobani and the far northeastern corner.

NES has been in active conflict since 2014, following the Arab Spring rising and the rapid expansion of ISIS across the region. In 2016 Kurdish forces started an offensive against ISIS from Kobani, taking Manbij and Tel Tamr. From there, they pushed to Tabqaq and Al-Hassakeh respectively, and advanced from there to Ar-Raqqa, which saw the heaviest fighting until the SDF took the city in October 2017. The offensive then moved to Deir-ez-Zor and ended with the capture of Bhagouz on the eastern bank of the Euphrates near the Iraqi border in March 2019.

ISIS relied heavily on improvised weapons, including widespread use of IED’s around homes, key buildings, and roads. ISIS laid these to protect themselves, limit opponent movement and deny use of infrastructure. As a result, there is widespread contamination in both the rural and urban environments. ISIS used of a lot of critical infrastructure, which was subsequently damaged and contaminated during the ensuing battles. For example, schools were used as barracks or prisons and are now high risk EO areas.

Figure 5: This map highlights the tactical use of EO by ISIS in Ar-Raqqa. The yellow blocks show the more conventional use of barrier minefields and the red dots shows the use of IED’s in the urban setting. The red dots are from actual data captured on the phone of a member of an ISIS mine laying team.

Disclaimer and Data Sources
All information is the best available from various sources including public, national and international sources, and has been cross-checked as best as possible.

The geographic data names, administration and political boundaries on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance.

Data source: Explosive Hazards Database.
This is a product of the NES MA WG.
Contact email: im.nesmineaction@gmail.com
Last update of Information: 31 July 2021 Map date: 31 July 2021
Potential New Contamination

A second source of Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) contamination is related to OPS, which was launched in October 2019. Conflict around OPS lines is ongoing, with Turkish forces frequently shelling villages around the M4 highway, including Tel Tamr (to the east of the OPS territory), Ain Issa (south), Kobani and Manbij (west). This repeated bombardment has resulted in a number of villages being abandoned, further adding to the internally displaced persons (IDP) situation. Between 2019 and 2021, there have been 6,732 indirect fire attacks and 2,156 air strikes in NES.5

Figure 6: Map with concentration of incidents by density and areas of potential ERW contamination.

IMPACT ON HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND CIVILIAN LIFE

The sub-districts of Ain Al Arab, Sarin, Al-Hassakeh, Markada, Shadaddi, Tel Tamer, Ras al-Ain and Ar-Raqqa are most affected. A total of 359 communities face hazards from with ERW (14 contaminated sites), IEDs (89 sites), minefields (4 sites) and mostly Unexploded Ordnance (UXO, 224 sites).

5 Based on iMMAP research of Opensource data from Websites reporting on the conflicts in Syria
Although contamination poses a constant threat, it has become a daily reality for the communities who live around it. They deal with limitations, such as blocked access to 7.5% of agricultural and pasture land in NES, 31.7% blocked infrastructure (mostly civilian building complexes, schools, bakeries, bridges, electrical substations, hospitals etc.) and 54% blocked water infrastructure. The latter poses a particular challenge within the larger context of an ongoing drought. In the humanitarian situation affecting NES, including high numbers of IDPs, there is a pressing need to continue clearance in a prioritized and systematic manner, especially targeting the acute water crisis which also impacts food generation and electricity production.

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<th>Blockage Category</th>
<th>Task Completed (2,676)</th>
<th>Task Remaining (453)</th>
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<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Agriculture</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roads</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncategorized</td>
<td>2,065</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
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DATA SETS CATEGORIES ERW BLOCKAGES IN GENERAL CATEGORIES

Since the spring of 2021, the humanitarian situation in the region has deteriorated due to significantly reduced water availability and access. A lack of rainfall and blockages in Turkey and Turkish held areas have resulted in low water levels of the Euphrates River since January 2021. This in turn led to low harvests and reduced operational capacity of several critical water stations supplying larger urban centers and catchment areas.

Figure 7: Map showing status of water infrastructure that are repaired or planning to be repaired

NES also suffers significant power shortages. This is partially caused by broken power lines in areas that have not been cleared of EO.
LANDMINE VICTIMS

Statistics show that men are at significantly higher risk—although many reports don’t indicate sex. Of the victims recorded 42% were recorded as fatalities.

Figure 8: Pie Chart showing the number of persons killed and injured in NES from 2017 to 2021

Socioeconomic challenges force people to adopt risk-taking behavior patterns to earn a living, such as scrap metal collection, truffle picking, and farming in potentially contaminated land. Soon after the defeat of ISIS, many people undertook clearing themselves in their homes, businesses, and fields, leading to countless accidents. The most affected and widely reported victims are children, especially when they are sent out to the fields to do grazing in the countryside of both Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor.
Actual numbers are higher, because our EHI opensource database routinely shows new Explosive incidents and victims. As an example, for the months of July, August and September 2021, the EHI database recorded 46 incidents resulting in 32 injuries and 49 fatalities. Many incidents go unreported, especially in remote areas where victims are likely to be buried within hours after their deaths.

Growing up in an explosive world

Reports of children being injured or killed by UXOs are frequent in NES. A brief selection of news reports alone exemplifies the tragic reality in which many children grow up.

On 28 September 2021, four children were playing on a dirt road near their home in Deir-ez-Zor, when a mine exploded. Two boys ages 2 and 3 died on the scene. A 7-year-old girl and a boy aged 2 were wounded by shrapnel and taken to a hospital in Hajin, 110 km east of Deir-ez-Zor.

On 1 September two boys aged 14 and 15 instantly died as a result of a landmine explosion in the countryside of Kobani, while they were grazing sheep near the Syrian-Turkish border. In the same area, in a similar situation a 15-year-old boy had died in May.

On 24 August a group of children threw stones at a mine remaining from the fight against ISIS in the countryside of Manbij. When it exploded, it killed a 10-year-old boy. This followed another explosion in the same area in June, which killed three children.

(Source: North Press)
HMA SECTOR

Since February 2017, HMA activities have destroyed a total explosive of 109,265 devices, among which there were 16,765 landmines, 86,500 UXOs, and 6,000 IEDs. Rubble removal has been a challenge, especially in urban areas such as Ar-Raqqa city. Contamination is a major threat for humanitarian and early recovery activities, particularly in education, water, and health clusters.

HMA activities follow the same route as the SDF offensive against ISIS, where most UXO contamination is found. In the early days of HMA, the emphasis was on saving lives and critical infrastructure. For example, ISIS used schools as bases, barracks, and prisons, making them a target for SDF. That is one of the reasons why clearance and survey activities focus on schools.

Since 2018, clearance, surveying and risk education activities dealt with multiple setbacks. The Turkish operation of 2019 created a security situation that forced partners to leave NES. This de facto standstill continued in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, HMA activities slowly started to increase, although not all partners have returned. To date, HMA actors have been unable to collect specific data in and around OPS territories, due to frequent shelling leading to high security risks.

Between late 2019 and early 2021, only very limited clearance work was done. Clearing was conducted on an ad hoc basis by NES based actors such as SDF, ISF and the Ar-Raqqa Internal Security Force (RISF), as well as RMCO. The latter is the only local HMA NGO in NES. In addition, many people undertook clearing themselves, leading to countless accidents.

Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic remains the most serious challenge to project implementation. However, most partners are currently resuming clearance and EORE activities and HMA activities in NES are now transitioning into reconstruction and rehabilitation. There remains an emergency need for HMA activities to reduce immediate loss of life in and around the OPS territories.

HMA ACTORS

To date a total of 29 million m2 have been cleared that resulted from 4,255 physical activities. As a result of these actions 109,506 devices are reported to have been found and destroyed.

Currently six organizations are engaging in clearance activities and non-technical survey (NTS). Most of them are also active in EORE. Only actor conducts victim assistance.

This clearing is a slow and labor-intensive process, especially in urban settings. Buildings may have been bombed or littered with IEDs and HMA actors need to clear the rubble without knowing what they will find in buildings that may not have structural integrity.
As other sectors, HMA will move from humanitarian response to early recovery in many regions in NES. This transition is ongoing. The early response was targeted at getting critical infrastructure back into running and to reduce the immediate and obvious threats to life. HMA partners are now transitioning to areas that are less contaminated and don’t present the high levels of direct exposure. People are avoiding these areas because they may have alternative resources and as such are able to reduce their risk-taking behaviors.

HMA in numbers: Since 2017, HMA partners have been able to remove a number of blockages:

- Food Security: 551 x Farms and Grain storage facilities made available for use.
- Education: 130 x Schools and Training institutions reopened.
- Health: 22 x Medical facilities reopened.
- Water: 41 x Water stations reopened.
- Power: 21 x Electricity stations restored.
- Transport: 72 x Facilities including bridges, culverts and stations have been made safe.
- Housing: 1,042 x Access to Housing sites for rehabilitation/reoccupation.
- Others: 558 x Facilities including administrative centers, religious/cultural sites and commercial sites have been put back to use.
Only one HMA actor assists survivors with victim assistance services, offering rehabilitation, prosthetics, and self-care training. Other health INGOs also provide mental health and psycho-social support (MPHSS) for both child survivors and their caregivers. There is currently no referral process for victim support. This was requested at a MASWG meeting in September 2021 and is an action point between the HMA Coordinator and relevant HMA actors.

CURRENT CLEARING ACTIVITIES

A significant amount of capacity in the terms numbers of personnel and equipment were lost or reduced following OPS and then the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, HMA actors have started to re-establish operations, primarily using residual funding from previous grants that is largely due to expire between December 2021 and January 2022.

In NES, HMA operations encounter mostly IEDs or improvised mines. These are well known to HMA actors and built of similar principles such as crush wire, pressure plates, electrical circuits, and various types of main charges. The degrees of complexity are more widely impacted by how the devices and the environments are used.

HMA is by nature a high-risk operation, and the general principle is to do activities remotely whenever possible and to avoid exposing the operators to the potential impact of an uncontrolled explosion. Therefore, it is highly desirable and best practice to utilize equipment that will distance the operator from the devices. The use of robots, drones and machinery all serve the purpose of allowing the organization and operators distance themselves from the effects of any device detonation. During an HMA operation there are certain mandatory standards that apply. This shapes the nature and types of equipment, vehicles, training etc. that need to be in place. Examples of this include Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), medical and trauma support, and communications.

Access strategy

Currently, access in most sites in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hassakeh is possible and security risks are acceptable. These risks are higher in OPS areas and currently security guidelines of HMA partners don’t allow for clearance activities in vulnerable contested areas. In theory, this might be possible through coordination with NESMAC or International Coalition forces, who have communication with the Russian forces.

Security concerns also limit HMA activities in large areas in Deir-ez-Zor, especially in the southern desert areas. Here, mostly local HMA actors are active. The main access solutions are through a community-based strategy, or some sort of bracketed access through local solutions potentially lead by the NESMAC.
DATA COLLECTION

Data is collected by the partners and is part of the conduct of their activities. Through an agreement, the partners provide their data to the HMAC office. Where it's collated, quality assured and then entered into the IMSMA database. From which various stakeholders are able to access the data from the various interactive platforms that are provided. This enables HMA actors to advise communities and humanitarian actors of potential hazards in their project locations.

It should be noted, that the data does not comprehensively cover NES. For example, there is noticeable data gaps for the North Western area, Operation Peace Spring area and the South-West area (Shadaddi, Deir-Ez-Zor, Baghouz) This is better visualized by Figure 11.

Baseline data

All data from HMA partners, that lists the clearance activities and results to date are in the IMSMA. This information is coordinated and collated through HMAC office and administered through the grant by ECHO. The main database in use is widely accepted as the standard for HMA. It collects information. From the end of 2019 through to the beginning of 2021, data activities declined as a result of OPS, when most agencies withdrew from NES.

Contamination data coverage and gaps

Consolidated clearance records held by the HMAC office on the IMSMA data base are the most up to date records held for NES. However, this data should not be viewed as a complete historical record, nor as a full picture.

Currently, survey activities only record the location of hazards, but are not used to identify the areas where no hazards are reported or where surveys have been carried out. As a result, there is no complete and accurate overview of the contamination in NES and a full systematic survey has not been conducted for the region. A joint baseline survey would create insight that could guide clearance activities in a strategic manner, in order to support the implementation of humanitarian and early recovery activities. Combining the baseline NTS data with inter-sector and self-administration work plans would form an essential tool on developing a prioritization system. NTS reporting system collects impact data as well as contamination data.
Figure 10: Map showing the coverage of known land released in NES

It should be recognized that there has been no consolidated regional survey to establish the baseline data and there are known gaps in data coverage. Noticeable data gaps exist along the Euphrates River north of Tabqah toward Manbij and Kobani and south of Ar-Raqqa to Bhagouz. Access to these areas continues to be a challenge due to levels of insecurity. The northwest of NES never received much attention, as the agencies concentrated their efforts following the frontlines and liberation. There is also a noticeable lack of data around OPS areas, including the area between the M4 road and Turkish border.
Baseline data quality

The data received is of varying quality and quantity. This results in various data gaps, generally key information such as what and where type data. Partners are also using various systems with some still providing data in hard copy reports. The lack of digital data collection systems does create more opportunities for data error both at the point of collection and all stages of the data handling process.

HMA partners are concerned that there is duplicated reporting, because other bodies are collecting similar data. The HMAC is in discussion with the Protection Working Group coordinator to centralize HMA data through the HMA Coordination office. This is seen as a major improvement in terms of ongoing coordination, monitoring, prioritization, and advocacy.
HMA COORDINATION

The HMA sector is small and has a very focused set of activities. Until recently, cooperation and coordination between HMA actors had a largely informal character. It operated through the MASWG chaired by the HMAC. During the emergency phase prior to 2019 this functioned effectively, at a time when the SANES faced more pressing needs of active conflict and mass IDP issues. Now, the situation has evolved, and greater emphasis is being placed on coordinating HMA activities with humanitarian efforts into a more cohesive process that also ties into the priorities of the SANES.

The main improvement in HMA coordination is more collaborative action in consistent data collection and coordinated surveying, clearance and EORE activities. This avoids duplication and strengthens the role of HMA data supporting humanitarian and rehabilitation activities. Prior to 2018, a lack of HMA coordination made it technically hard for HMA organizations to implement their programs. There was no consolidated information on a single database to support the rehabilitation of infrastructure in WASH, SNFI, and FSL sectors. Since then, coordination efforts have avoided loss of time and effort.

The over-arching challenge today is link HMA into the mainstream planning of the reconstruction and development plans of SANES and of humanitarian actors. To strengthen the notion that HMA should be viewed as an enabler for other activities, the Mine Action Request for Information system was introduced. This now a source of HMA information for humanitarian and early recovery actors, where they can request information that then processed in under 24 hours -if the information is already available. Hospitals, schools, and water infrastructure have been the greatest beneficiaries of this arrangement.

The Mine Action Request for Information System starts to work. In the past months, the HMAC has been promoting this among humanitarian and early recovery actors. A good and recent example is when Concern approached the HMAC through the shelter cluster. As part of an effort to rehabilitate schools in Manbij, Concern requested information on two sites. Concern staff had seen markings at one site and the other was a former ISIS prison. The HMAC was able to report that the first site was NTS cleared. There was no data on the former prison, and HMA partners had no capability in the area. The HMAC then coordinated with ISF, who did a quick search that concluded that the site was safe. Concern is now refurbishing both schools.

Humanitarian actors who made use of the products, enhanced their reporting and implementation of their programs. For example, Food Security and livelihoods (FSL) shared a master list with 829 records of water infrastructure that need verification of contamination and clearance. With that information, they were able to rehabilitate and restore the usage of pumping/boosting stations, dams, irrigation canals, boreholes, and water treatment plants in the different communities.

Forum

The HMAC remains the focal point for HMA within the NGO Forum. The HMA coordination attends the various working groups and promotes the use of the HMA Request form. The coordinator provides updates the Intersectoral Working Group (ISWG) as and when there is something relevant. He intends to develop a Preliminary Risk Assessment tool whereby partners can request a desktop risk assessment. The ambition is to drive this into mainstream humanitarian and rehabilitation activities, particularly where there are intrusive activities planned in higher risk areas. The proposed baseline NTS of all of NES will be play a very important part of this tool.
Whole of Syria

The HMAC works closely with the other regional coordinators in the understanding of the HMA situational analysis, general standardization, conflict resolution etc., in order to present a cohesive Whole of Syria (WoS) viewpoint and representation.

The HMA coordinator has regular communication with UNMAS and WoS coordination. He participates in biweekly meetings of the WoS Working Group (WoSWG). In addition, he contributed to the ECHO HIP, the Humanitarian Response Plan. Also, he is in discussion with regards to the 4Ws and the issue of bilateral reporting of the partners. The intention is that this will again be coordinated through the HMA Coordination Office.

Mine Action Authorities

An increasingly crucial element for effective coordination is the NES Mine Action Center (NESMAC). SANES established this body, because of concerns over their ability to manage the HMA response in line with their own priorities. Now a fledgling organization with very limited knowledge or support, there is a need for a Mine Action authority in NES. Currently the NESMAC has a mandate from the executive council of SANES to coordinate and manage HMA in NES. It is registered with the Humanitarian Affairs Office (HAO) which is part of SANES and with which it has an MOU.

HMA coordination works very closely with the NESMAC. There are no funds to directly support them beyond the provision of data. The coordinator is developing digital tools in the form of a 3-part dashboard, including Activity Reporting, Capability Reporting and a Coordinating tool. This dashboard will create visibility on what is happening on a weekly basis: which agency has what capacity funded and who is allocated to what task and eventually what priority.

The short term goals are:- 0-6 months

- Continue the coordination between with MASWG, ISWG and NESMAC
- Support the NESMAC to develop information management systems
- Assist them to utilize data efficiently to achieve their immediate goals
- Get the MoU in place and functional between the NESMAC and MASWG
- Support in the development of a structured NESMAC planning.

Mid-Long Term Goals 12-28 months

- Advocate and lobby for HMA in NES to continue to secure funding for continue operational capability
- Work with the NESMAC and donors to develop a fully functioning Information Management Officer (IMO) to become the central point for data
- The HMA Coordinator role would then either develop into a support function between the NESMAC and ISWG/HMA WoSWG, focused on advocacy and lobbying and inter agency coordination.
EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE RISK EDUCATION (EORE)

Between 2016 and September 2021, HMA actors have been providing 107,924 risk education activities had been reported to 1,575,083 beneficiaries. With an estimated population of approximately 2.6 million people in NES, an estimated 58% of the population should have now received an EORE intervention of some sort.

Most HMA actors offer EORE. EORE sessions have been conducted widely in NES to increase the sensitization of ERWs and included Trainings of Trainers (ToTs) to better disseminate the message. EORE activities consist of media campaigns, such as radio, school campaigns, poster campaigns as well as text messages (UNMAS). They are implemented by mixed gender teams to reach as many people as possible and generally follow standard messaging: “don’t touch, mark, report”.

Due to security issues, HMA actors providing EORE have limited access to areas like Deir-ez-Zor and around OPS territories. This also affects EORE activities.

Figure 12: Infographic showing number of EORE beneficiaries by age group.

7 Statement by WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean on the tenth year of Syria crisis - Syrian Arab Republic | ReliefWeb
NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Despite the efforts made to date, the true extent of the ERW contamination and its subsequent effects is not fully known. Due to the nature in which HMA evolved in NES, activities have centered around the most accessible and subsequently densely populated centers. As wider reconstruction efforts begin, more information is required in less densely populated areas, combined with a greater understanding of the planned recovery works to ensure that the limited resources are optimized to maximum effect.

There is a need to expand clearance capacities. The bigger the capacity, the quicker the job is done. In this sense, expansion of national capacity should be the priority. This would allow for a reduction of the reliance on international direct support and increase a sustainable local HMA capacity.

Our data suggest that with numbers of operational assets working at capacity levels from before October 2019, the impact of ERW could be reduced significantly and very quickly. This requires funding for the short and medium term but would lower the need for the longer term. In this scenario, contamination would go to levels as seen in Europe today and a local authority would be able to deal with this.

The current issue of data collection needs to be reviewed and revised to a standardized processes in collection, reporting minimum field requirements, formats of data provision, standardized terminology and definitions, to avoid unnecessary workloads and an inaccurate picture of the HMA challenges.

Quality of data

The quality of the data being provided at best is variable and this significantly impacts its usefulness. The process of data management could be significantly improved by implementing of minimum mandatory standards:

- Minimum mandatory reporting fields – this will ensure that critical data is captured that meets the needs of multiple users.
- Standardized definitions and terminology – ensure consistency of data. Training may be needed for data collectors.
- Data collection system – using digital online/offline data collection systems will reduce the opportunity for data entry errors, automated geo data etc. Electronic system are commercially and freely available.
- Provision of data – timelines for the receiving of data and also for the turnaround and presentation of data would allow for planning on the part of the providers and the users. Standardizing the formats for data will strengthen collation and quality assurance. There should no longer be any reason for providing data in word or pdf format. This procedure is time consuming, increases the risk of data errors and is harder to manage.

Prioritization and selection criteria

Currently there is no common and coordinated prioritization process in NES. Each partner plans its tasks against their own assessment and criteria. The HMA Coordinator and NESMAC, along with all partners recognize that is not effective. As such as part of the development of the NESMAC systems there is a strong need to develop a prioritization mechanism that links the needs and capabilities of the HMA sector and the capabilities of the Humanitarian Sector and SA to implement projects in-line with the pressing needs of the population and rehabilitation and recovery plans.
Quality data collection will be a key part in the development of the NESMAC, allowing it to achieve most of its overarching objectives. Linking data sets from other sectors and SANES would greatly enhance the ability to prioritize, enhance coordination and optimize operational effectiveness and efficiency. This would strengthen the NESMAC ability to implement its role as a tasking and approvals body.

Monitoring system

There is no established formal monitoring system. This has been identified by the SANES and forms part of the NESMAC mandate. The HMA coordinator is currently developing the NESMAC Coordination and Monitoring tool that will provide the NESMAC and HMA Coordinator with visibility on activities and associated performance. This will allow the NESMAC to look at the data and be able to do base line data monitoring. Therefore, data showing unusual patterns can be used to follow up with the agencies or conduct targeted site visits and follow up. The NESMAC also has plans to create an M&E department with four teams comprising eight personnel to conduct on site field monitoring.

ADVOCACY

Funding, prioritization, coordination, structures for monitoring and evaluation, baseline surveying and mainstreaming are needed to strengthen the role HMA actors, especially local ones. This goes against a perceived HMA fatigue in the donor community, which resulted in reduced budgets and other equally pressing needs being prioritized.

Baseline data

The non-technical surveys (NTS) provide the start point for all HMA clearance and education activities. It provides critical data on the location, type, and extent of the contamination in the first instance as well as data on the communities, beneficiaries, and the impact of contamination. At least as important for prioritization and coordination is the recording of where there are no known hazards and which areas are uncontaminated.

Information collection and surveying has been limited to specific areas, actors, and activities. Survey data has predominantly focused on and around the main ISIS battlefronts. Traditionally, survey activities have only recorded the location of hazards and have not been utilized to identify the areas where no hazards are reported or where the survey has been carried. As a result, there is no complete and accurate overview of the contamination in NES. A joint baseline survey would create insight that could guide clearance activities in a strategic manner, in order to support the implementation of humanitarian and early recovery activities. Combining the baseline NTS data with inter-sector and SANES work plans would form an essential tool for developing a prioritization system.

Conducting a systematic community by community level collection of NTS data, enables surveyors to map areas of no contamination with a reasonable degree and accuracy. This would yield a color-coded map which visualizes contamination free areas in a short period of time.

This will provide a good baseline for ongoing prioritization. NTS provide the start point for all HMA clearance and education activities. It provides critical data on the location, type, and extent of the contamination in the first instance whilst having the capacity to provide data on the communities, beneficiaries, and impact of the contamination.
Coordination

Progress has been made in 2021 in improving coordination among HMA partners. More can be done. All HMA actors should be committed to transparently contributing to the data sharing mechanism in place. Additionally, incoming data tends to have inconsistent levels of detail. An objective for 2022 is to improve data consistency. A key challenge across the sector is to standardize the data that is collected and ensure a consistent standard and quality.

There is a clear need to establish a prioritization mechanism that better serves the region and works as an enabler to other reconstruction and regeneration activities. This is symbiotic with the ability to coordinate the effective and efficient use of limited resources. Such a prioritization mechanism would define what clearance, survey and EORE activities would have a priority. It needs to be defined in close coordination with the NESMAC.

Local Response

The MASWG is supportive of the development of the NESMAC. That support needs to be coordinated and aligned to a planned, systematic, and structured process, that is realistic and auditable in terms of deliverables. As a first realistic priority the NESMAC and the HMA Coordinator are developing Information Management tools that will enable the NESMAC to track the operational activities, to have a system of task management and to have insight in the capabilities of HMA actors by donor and project ends dates. It is anticipated that HMA partners will develop additional initiatives.

Priorities for this will be support in developing a 3-year strategic plan, support in building effective systems and resources, practice training and resourcing in line with a strategic plan. However, for any activities to have long term sustainability, the NESMAC needs to be absorbed in the SANES organizational structure and supported with the operating costs and salaries.

The implementation of a third-party M&E system would be an important step to ensure quality control. I would have the primary intention of continual improvement and betterment of the HMA sector. HMA actors need to be compliant with International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) to ensure that clearance and activities are at a satisfactory and acceptable standard. Additionally, agencies need to deliver cost effective activities in the right place and the right time.

Strategic planning is required for HMA response capability, in order to clear contamination in four to five years to create a manageable situation. Local organizations often have a good understanding of the dynamics, security, and politics of their working areas. Their staff are highly motivated and committed to the HMA cause. Local organizations could be a key resource in the longevity planning of NES HMA Capacity.

Mainstreaming HMA into Recovery and Rehabilitation

Especially in and around the OPS territories, continuing EO contamination is likely to be a humanitarian issue. In many other areas, HMA activities are transitioning into the early recovery stage. For 2022, the HMAC aims to enhance multisector coordination, thereby strengthening the link with education, health, livelihood, and water activities for both humanitarian and early recovery activities.

This will improve the pre-activity risk management process. Whilst the HMA support request form is gaining traction, there needs to be constant communication with humanitarian actors and other coordination
bodies, such as the ISWG. However, for HMA to be an integral part of the multi sector approach and become a mainstream consideration there is a need to show partners an immediate useful contribution. The HMA sector intends to develop a preliminary desktop risk assessment 2022, supporting the agencies in their due diligence.

**Funding**

Between 2017 and 2021 HMA actors cleared more than 50% of the known contaminated area. It is reasonable to assume that the remaining known contaminated areas could also be made safe in a similar sort of timeline, with a similar level of resources. A similar level of capacity should be seen as a key component of reducing the impact and risk to more manageable and tolerable levels not dissimilar to those in western Europe.

Combining this approach with a capacity building initiative that includes local organizations, international commitment could be incrementally reduced within three to five years -assuming there will be no major recontamination and clearance capacity and production levels are similar to that prior to OPS. Supporting clearance capacity of local NGOs and a response capability provided by ISF could further strengthen a sustainable development.

To ensure that humanitarian and early recovery actors can safely do their jobs, the maintenance of the clearance, survey and risk education capability is essential. Four of the six partners will have no funding after the end of 2021. Only two partners have confirmed funding into 2022. Clearance activities have recently started to resume. Reduced funding has resulted in a significant reduction in capability and lost momentum. Strengthening a coordinated and structured approach will further improve the clearance of UXO. This requires continued prioritizing HMA action among other essential services, in order to maintain ongoing recovery and save countless lives.
BACKGROUND

This report is a quarterly deliverable by the HMAC. The HMAC coordinates activities and information between HMA actors and represents the HMA sector with the authorities (including NESMAC) in NES. iMMAP is the host agency of the HMAC and manages the IMSMA database. This report is based on data that is collected from the various HMA actors in NES to 2016. The data is collated and processed on the IMSMA platform and made available to anyone who requests in the form of an online Portal, Interactive map and request specific products. Other data used in this report is referenced in footnotes.

For access to the NES Humanitarian Mine Action Activities dashboard go here: https://bit.ly/hmac-nes and For any requests in NES regarding Mine Action go here: https://ee.humanitarianresponse.info/x/RA7hIUEA, or contact the HMAC or contact the MASWG.

Amuda NES, 31 October 2021

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