Old Issues, New Threats

Mine Action and IEDs in Urban Environments

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LSE IDEAS

STRATEGIC UPDATE

FEBRUARY 2020

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The nature of conflict is changing. Today Iraq and Syria stand as a measure of the difficulties of post-conflict recovery. A central problem, there and elsewhere, is explosive threats contaminating the environment during and after conflict. To mitigate this threat to a society's recovery, the sector of "Mine Action" emerged over 30 years ago. However, the sector's policy and practices are coming under renewed strain from contemporary conflict trends of urbanisation and non-state armed groups' use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

This Strategic Update focuses on the sheer difficulty of helping post-conflict communities in Iraq. Its main case study will be the plight of Mosul, Iraq's second city, which—more than two years since its liberation from Daesh—is still estimated to have over 300,000 residents living in camps unable to return to their former homes.[1] The article remains relevant for the future of Syria, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan and other countries where Daesh and other non-state armed groups have used IEDs both as a weapon of choice and as a way of creating post-conflict instability.

Today, there is a fundamental question facing Mine Action: Does this complex challenge, of improvised devices and urban environments, necessitate a fundamental re-think in the policy and practice of Mine Action programming?

BACKGROUND

Through its five UN-mandated pillars of activity,[2] Mine Action's role is to ensure humanitarian assistance, reinforce peace and security, and act as a catalyst for sustainable development.[3] At inception in 1989, its task seemed insurmountable. Not only was the prospect of eliminating landmines as a global threat deemed unachievable, but the political and organisational landscape for doing so was totally uncharted.[4]

There were nearly 100 million unexploded landmines deployed in more than 60 countries around the world, with Cambodia, Angola and Afghanistan the worst affected. The vast majority were anti-personnel landmines produced by licensed arms companies. Circa 8,000 individuals fell victim each year, of whom half were killed.[5]

Despite that challenging context, the creation of Mine Action helped build the momentum that led to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) and the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM),[6] alongside the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). Together, these have served as a strategic and operational framework to promote a common and consistent approach to demining efforts.[7] That progress has been accompanied by concrete achievements on the ground, with the trade in anti-personnel mines grinding to a near halt, and a reported 53 million landmines destroyed by signatory states. Mine Action has also successfully widened its scope incrementally to focus not just on landmines, but also on other explosive hazards and remnants of war.[8] This is consistent with the mission of meeting the needs created by the evolving nature of conflict.

Mine Action has gradually shifted its emphasis from meeting the basic security needs of the civilian population and humanitarian workers (i.e. enabling short-term relief and promoting safety), to ensuring developmental outcomes supporting structural advancement such as access to services. Mine Action therefore enables not just survival, but also recovery from conflict.[9] Figure 1 illustrates the stages of Mine Action interventions overlapping and moving from a focus on humanitarian relief to development.[10]

THE IMPACT OF IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES (IEDS)

Since the rise of Daesh in 2014, a new era of IEDs represents a significant challenge to the progress achieved by Mine Action. From 1999, when the APMBC came into force, to 2011, the number of annual landmine victims dropped by a half from 8,800 to 4,300 by 2011.[11] However, by 2016, this number rose back to more than 8,000 (42% of them children), with nearly 2,100 killed.[12] IEDs overtook conventional anti-personnel mines by some distance as the leading cause of these casualties.[13]

This threat is not new but the use of IEDs has proliferated and diversified, becoming more urbanised and more explicitly targeted at civilians. These factors have

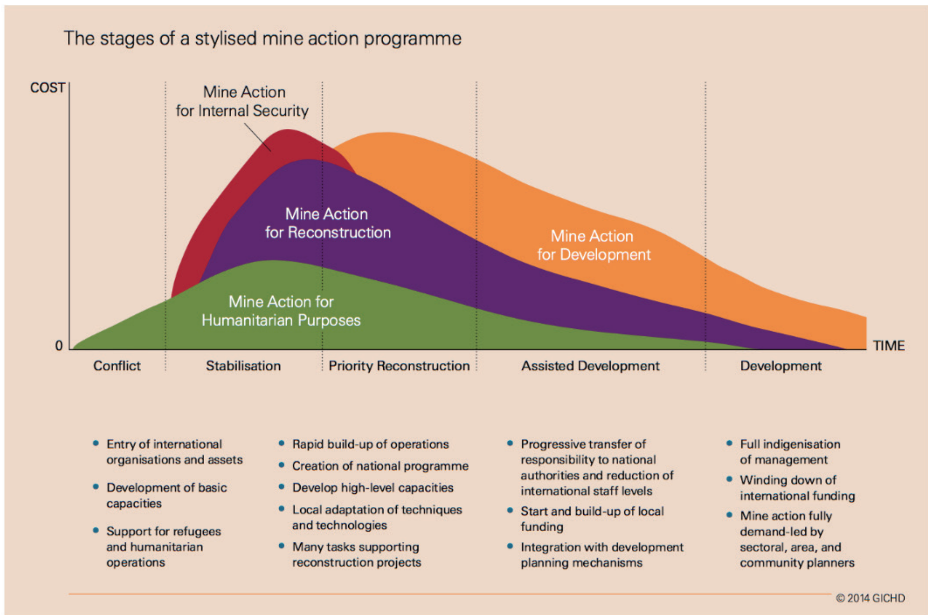

Figure 1. Mine Action Stages (GICHD 2014)

severely increased the challenges for those tasked with clearing IEDs and has made it much harder for Mine Action to focus on its enablement of development goals in terms of the repair of infrastructure and rehabilitation of homes in a timely manner.[14]

Previously, Mine Action operations were largely focused on removing conventional mines produced by established arms companies with well-known disposal procedures. Technical skills for conventional mines could be taught to local operators by experienced personnel in a matter of weeks. However, clearing IED–which have countless more variations than industrially manufactured weapons (e.g. different construction and employment which may further change over time to target response tactics)—is far more complex and requires personnel with skills that are harder to find and take longer to develop. Guy Rhodes, the former Director of Operations at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, points out:

> "In such theatres, operators have to review skill sets of their field staff, and national authorities are under pressure to scrutinize accreditation procedures of organizations under their responsibility. Furthermore, donors consider value for money from a wide variety of proposals and look to issue grants and contracts with appropriate reference to international norms."[15]

Figure 2. Author witnessing the destruction in Mosul first-hand in 2017 at the Great Mosque of al-Nuri destroyed by ISIS © Dave Luke

The concern regarding donor motivation is certainly not a new one in the humanitarian sphere. This factor was highlighted in the UN-commissioned review of the Kosovo Mine Action operation in 1997: 'In any peace-building operation, Mine Action should not be a discretionary activity left to the charitable impulses of the donor community'.[16] Funding bodies have long been criticised for favouring quick, easy results over long-term, more complex tasks. It is especially concerning if work on IEDs is competing for funds with the clearance of conventional mines as the work effort and resources required are very different.

Adaptation to this new reality is also not helped by the somewhat semantic debates about the definitional and technical differences between conventional mines and IEDs. Yes, reinforcing the normative frameworks of the sector is essential, but the more important debate is whether the existing operational frameworks and skillsets established for mines are still fit for purpose with IEDs. This is an issue clearly seen when looking at the example of Iraq.

MINE ACTION AND IRAQ

The situation in Iraq is particularly relevant because it illustrates how the linear nature of recovery displayed in Figure 1 above does not always reflect the complexities on the ground—not least because of the challenges presented by IEDs. Today, operators must deal with different 'stages' of recovery concurrently, facing different challenges in different parts of the same governate or even in the same town.

For example, despite the defeat of Daesh in Iraq over two years ago, the country's second city, Mosul, remains a 'three-dimensional minefield with the dangers of war still present everywhere'.[17]

During the years of its putative caliphate, Daesh produced improvised munitions on a near industrial scale.[18] They left behind IEDs in Iraqi homes, schools, hospitals and elsewhere, specifically designed to target civilians returning to their old towns and cities, in order to prolong insecurity and delay economic redevelopment.

Again, improvised explosive threats in post-conflict zones are not a new threat, with Afghanistan and Chechnya in the 1990s being heartfelt examples. However, the scale, urban environment and targeting of civilians today is a combination that is fundamentally different. This has forced Mine Action to confront two major questions: First, how should it adapt its operational practices on the ground? Second, how should it adapt its policies and doctrine to meet this new challenge?

OPERATIONAL PRACTICES

Even during the most intense periods of conflict against Daesh in Iraq, there was little optimism about what would come during the recovery period. In 2016, US State Department representative Jerry Guilbert warned of the challenges and complexities to follow:

> "Disposal teams and civilians will be fighting the last vestiges of the caliphate long after it collapses. You have to treat every item you see as if it's an IED until you prove it's not, so that necessarily makes the pace of work go a lot slower".[19]

Additional challenges lie in co-ordination and prioritisation. As with every post-conflict or humanitarian crisis situation, where a plethora of agencies, donors, commercial organisations and state actors occupy a congested physical and political space, Mine Action's work in Iraq has been impeded by overlapping responsibilities and competing agendas.

Mine Action derives its tasks in Iraq from two primary sources: the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) and the Iraqi Directorate of Mine Action. Their priorities and resourcing decisions are in turn affected by a wide variety of political and practical requests from various international, national and local authorities. In theory, consistent with Mine Action's mission, those priorities should be determined by an objective assessment of where the greatest humanitarian need lies. However, assessments of priorities are rarely objective in an Iraqi political system that is consistently dogged by the patronage of particular regions, religious sects and local leaders. What exacerbates the problems of prioritisation and inter-agency coordination in Iraq is the more complex, urbanised and improvised nature of the threats Mine Action are tackling. In this already challenging environment, technical frictions over where to start the response and what to prioritise–even within a single city like Mosul–do not just breed delay and indecision, but distrust amongst the local population for Mine Action responders and the local authorities.

Ongoing work in the Geneva International Centre of Humanitarian Demining proposes that the growing diversity of improvised threats in urban environments, like Iraq, requires a new mechanism for risk and 'mission analysis'. In their view, this mechanism ought to be based on principles, judgment and organisational risk thresholds, rather than relying solely on the tightly followed and standardised operational protocols which the sector has developed over decades.

On a crucial practical level, they are clearly right. At the beginning of the conflict response, much of the Mine Action work was carried out by commercial companies funded by UN Mine Action Service and the US Department of State. Mine Action agencies were chiefly staffed by Iraqi national staff supported by a relatively high ratio of international personnel, largely with extensive experience in dealing with IEDs from prior military careers. As NGOs took more responsibilities, they also required a large influx of similar, mostly ex-military experts to support the capacity development of national staff in the clearance of IEDs. While Mine Action has always had a flow of ex-military personnel, the pace and quantity required due to IED contamination have increased in recent years. At times this has caused some frictions with existing staff that have built up considerable experience in conventional mine clearance. It has taken time for the two perspectives to mix in what were crisis response conditions. But undoubtedly there is now a closer technical and cultural alignment where technical IED staff new to Mine Action have learned the humanitarian principles and objectives underpinning Mine Action's work, and the staff with more conventional Mine Action experience have come to appreciate the experience these new additions have brought in tackling the IED threat at scale and in urban areas. In this way, the proposal of the Geneva International Centre of Humanitarian Demining—a new mechanism of principles, judgment, and risk thresholds—is a consolidated account of what has already, organically begun in response programming to replace the procedures of the past, found to be too rigid.

Mine Action agencies are also now seeing their slower-burning, internal capacity development programmes catch up, develop their operators with sufficient knowledge and skills to face the challenge from IEDs. However, it is still widely acknowledged that clearing IEDs from urban areas so they can be re-populated is the least mature skillset of the sector, yet the most complex issue still to be faced. The operational guidance set out in the IMAS has also been updated for IED Disposal and Building Clearance; however, this was substantially delayed due to debates over technical and definitional issues, as well as differing cultural positions amongst stakeholders and contributors. This was such a drawn-out process that an appraisal into the policy review board process has recently been commissioned by the UN.

In mitigation, it is obvious that incentivising and delivering change must be based on evidence of threat and priorities. For Iraq, there was legitimate concern initially–in the absence of accurate data and subsequent analysis–that decisions for funding and tasking risked being made on the basis of 'expert opinion' only. Nevertheless, the fact that those positions would need to be brought closer together, and much more quickly, should have been forecast and potentially mitigated. This could be achieved, for example, with more impartiality in the decision-making bodies

and certainly without the confusion created for donors who were hearing differing funding bids regarding proposed priorities and operational objectives. Only now is there growing factual evidence available to help classify explosive threats, as will be made clearer through advances in information management such as IMSMA, the Information Management System for Mine Action,[20] and a forthcoming UN-authored "Lethality Index". Collating this type of evidence should help inform both the prioritisation of efforts and funding allocations in the future, in Iraq and beyond, now that sufficient information is available to test and support expert opinions.

POLICIES AND DOCTRINE

While the adaptation of operational practices to the challenges of IEDs from Daesh in Iraq has been a difficult and protracted process, it should influence and speed up the response to similar challenges left behind by armed groups in other conflict zones. However, still unresolved is the debate in how Mine Action should adapt its policies and doctrine to reflect this shift.

It has been clear for decades that recovery from modern types of conflict will require more comprehensive solutions than the simple provision of humanitarian relief.[21] However, while there is a clear need to integrate a range of humanitarian, developmental, political, security, and reconciliation objectives into recovery, the example of Iraq illustrates how difficult it is to do so successfully. The problems being encountered by Mine Action in trying to develop a properly integrated strategy in Iraq are therefore far from unique, albeit–as noted above–they are also exacerbated by Mine Action drawing its funding from a number of external donors with diverse relief goals and political priorities.[22] These challenges make it even more difficult for Mine Action agencies in Iraq to adapt to changing needs, maintain political neutrality, and ensure coherent messaging about their mission.

Again, the tactics of Daesh, in particular the use of IEDs in urban areas, have created a real difficulty for Mine Action to define and maintain a wide enough and more predictable 'humanitarian space'[23] in which to conduct their operations. This concern has led the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining to call for 'a requirement to systematise the evaluation contexts to ensure focus on humanitarian objectives and to uphold humanitarian principles.'[24] This is not a new requirement, with conflict responses as far back as Afghanistan and the Balkans in the 1980s raising similar concerns about whether the demining agencies working there had a sufficient technical and contextual understanding of the situation they were operating in to ensure the establishment of an effective and principled humanitarian plan. However, those concerns are hugely increased in Iraq given the new nature and sheer scale of Daesh's IED legacy. As a result, they have led to a debate about whether demining policymakers

Figure 3. Mosul's 3D Mine-field. © Dave Luke 2017

should endeavour to apply and adapt the established Mine Action framework of conventions and treaties to this challenge or consider IEDs as a separate issue and develop bespoke associated policy tools.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, among others, have argued for keeping the policy response to IEDs within the scope of the current treaties. This is in order to provide ongoing clarity to States Parties for the fulfilment of their 'obligations' in relation to reporting and clearing explosively contaminated areas and providing mine risk education.[25] However, IEDs have also been the subject of annual UN resolutions since December 2015 (UN 70/46), calling for the development of more effective and specific strategies to tackle the problem which acknowledges the change in complexity. This widening of the policy space includes another related issue with the growth in intelligence and military-led Counter-IED activities in Iraq and beyond, including the targeting of the networks behind them.[26] The mixing or overlapping of Mine Action and Counter-IED activities is a well-voiced fear in this sector as it risks severely blurring the lines between security, military and humanitarian objectives. Hannah Bryce of Chatham House suggests this policy ambiguity is primarily why responses to IEDs have been so fragmented.[27]

It can be argued that, twenty years after the APMBC came into effect, the shift towards IEDs is a measure of its success given that non-state armed groups have not been able to access as many conventional munitions.[28] Thus it would also be a natural evolution for the current convention to switch focus to the new threat. Nevertheless, how to 're-think' or update the normative frameworks in a timely manner remains up for debate.

CONCLUSION

Humanitarian responses in conflict situations are growing more difficult, less predictable and increasingly non-linear. Iraq illustrates this problem, given the scale and complexity of the challenge posed by the IEDs left behind in urban environments, specifically to prevent the return of civilians and the recovery of cities like Mosul.

Not for the first time, Mine Action is therefore having to wrestle with how to define and maintain a 'humanitarian space' for its work, whether its current policy tools are applicable, and at a practical level, whether it has the operational expertise to meet the challenge.

Similar issues can and have been overcome by Mine Action in the past, but the real challenge in future conflict response lies in understanding and rising to the uncertainty and intensity posed by these improvised threats in urban conditions. Dealing with this complexity–rather than developing some new version of Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention–is arguably the paradigm shift in policy and operational practice most urgently required. This will particularly prove to be the case once Libya, Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen move into a post-conflict phase.

As Mine Action has learned in Iraq, standardised solutions and existing policy tools are not working quickly enough. Future responses must therefore be based on principles and local contextual understanding rather than past templates, and responses should be resourced by a suitably trained and experienced workforce of international expert mentors (from a mix of military, commercial and humanitarian backgrounds) growing a sustainable local capacity from the start even during crises response phases.

Donors and institutions must also be educated about the nature and scale of this new challenge, and they must agree to relinquish control and reduce their expectations of predictable or immediate results. It is an unfortunate but inevitable fact that the future of post-conflict recovery holds a tremendous amount of complexity and uncertainty. Traditional methods of explosive threat mitigation and traditional measures of such success have, unfortunately, become too simplistic for our present circumstances.

Mine Action has responded, if incrementally, to these new challenges, and the lessons it has learned will benefit efforts in future conflict response. The only question now is whether there has been sufficient change to ensure the sector is ready to respond, in a timely manner, to the urban and improvised trends which are the new nature of conflict. ■

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2 Five Pillars of Mine Action: Survey and Clearance (demning), Risk Education, Victim Assistance, Stockpile Destruction, Advocacy. Activities which aim to reduce the social, economic and environmental impact of mines and (other) Explosive Remnants of War including cluster munitions and now IEDs.

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The nature of conflict is changing. Mine Action's policy and practices are therefore coming under strain from the contemporary conflict trends of urbanisation and non-state armed groups (NSAG) using improvised explosive devices (IEDs). This Strategic Update considers if there is a paradigm shift underway or if the current frictions are growth pains for this generation of humanitarian responders.

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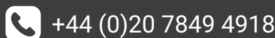
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