Syria’s Landmines: Silent Killing

The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor
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Introduction

“The doctor told us that there is no hope for Samer’s legs to be recovered and that it is too late, and there is no choice but to amputate them. The news came like a lightning bolt striking his mother and me. We did not know how we would tell Samer that he will spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair, and how he would live his childhood that ended too soon because of the landmines”.

Father of child Samer Rajab (pseudonym) – Deir Ezzor Governorate

Since the beginning of the popular movement in Syria on March 2011, tens of thousands of civilians have lost their lives as a result of bombings, chemical weapons, cluster munitions, barrel bombs and other military weapons used in the conflict.

The risks looming over Syrians for more than ten years are not limited to the military operations carried out and the weapons used by the Syrian regime’s forces, Russian forces and other armed groups, but also include another lethal weapon that is almost as deadly as the direct military operations: landmines.

At the beginning of the popular movement, the Syrian regime had used mines and explosive devices to terrify people and force them to abstain from
attending demonstrations that demanded the overthrow of the regime. In turn, the regime forces planted explosive devices in residential areas where there were regular gatherings, or in garbage containers near schools. Later, the internal situation in Syria deteriorated and the popular movement expanded in various cities. As some units in the army defected, joined the demonstrators and controlled certain areas, the regime began to bomb these areas with various types of weapons, including naval mines. Although these were usually used to protect national waters, coastal areas, thwart landing operations or stop crossing enemy warships; the regime forces used naval mines to bomb civilians in many Syrian cities, especially between 2015 and 2016. However, many of them did not explode and remain as lethal landmines.

Many armed groups also used landmines, chiefly the Islamic State Organization (ISIS).

In addition to naval mines, many other kinds of deadly landmines were planted in most of the densely populated areas across the Syrian governorates that have experienced unrest and claimed the lives of hundreds of defenseless civilians.

Some of the landmines are known locally as Al–Mastara (ruler), Al–Misbaha (rosary), Hajar (stone), Al–Lizar (laser), and Al–Doussa, which are hidden landmines that explode when touched, pressured, or triggered.

There are still large numbers of unexploded objects and landmines between
civillian homes and in agricultural lands to this day that were left from past extended military operations. They will remain posing danger for the years and decades to come.

With the presence of these ammunition all over the country, there have been losses on a colossal scale, even after the war ended. There will be many more if this sensitive issue is not urgently addressed by the competent authorities and the cooperative parties involved in the conflict.

To eliminate mines scattered in the Syrian territories, the Syrian government and the United Nationssigned in July 2018, a memorandum of understanding to support Damascus’s efforts in the framework of demining. The UN spokeswoman in Damascus at the time, Fadwa Baroud, said that the UN estimates, indicate that 10.2 million people living in 1,980 communities are at risk of the explosive remains of war in Syria.

The various parties in the Syrian conflict are involved in laying mines to varying degrees. However, the greatest responsibility lies with the Syrian regime forces, considering the military equipment and the diverse armament they possess, which includes multiple types of Russian-made mines. A number of these types are only owned by the regime's forces, such as the navy mines that were dropped from their helicopters. However, other parties have also been involved in laying mines across various Syrian cities that have witnessed military operations.

It should be noted that the Syrian regime’s forces possess special weapons
to combat mines, but instead use them in their attacks on civilian areas, including the Russian system UR77-, which is designed to destroy minefields. The Syrian regime used this system in bombing the Jubar neighborhood, south of Damascus and some areas in Aleppo and northern Syria.

In this report, Euro-Med Monitor sheds light on the nature of these mines, their different types and the reasons for laying them. They also review some of the human losses the mines have caused among unarmed Syrian civilians, including children, women and other groups, and highlight the legal aspect that bans these types of weapons on an international level.
Mines and unexploded ordnance have claimed hundreds of civilian casualties over the past years. Many civilians are still at risk in all regions of Syria, especially northern Syria, Raqqa and Aleppo. These two areas have recorded the most victims compared to other regions.

The number of civilians killed due to mine explosions between March 2011 and March 2021 was about 2,637, including 605 children and 277 women.
Some of the victims were workers in sectors that provided special protection in international law – eight paramedics, six civil defense personnel and nine journalists.

More than half (%50.5) of these victims were from Aleppo and Raqqa. The Deir Ezzor governorate accounted for %16 of the victims, then Daraa (%9) and then Hama (%8).

The difference in the numbers of victims from one governorate to another is due to several reasons, most importantly, the multiplicity of the parties trying to control those governorates, and the change in battle lines.

The years of conflict in Syria witnessed a remarkable increase in the number of victims, but 2017, in particular, witnessed the largest number of victims (822 dead) compared to other years.

The numbers show the continued occurrence of casualties, despite the decline in military operations and the passage of several years since laying the landmines by the parties in the conflict. This is due to the presence of many undiscovered minefields despite the efforts made by many local organizations, including the Civil Defense in the northern regions of Syria (the White Helmets).
The number of Syrian civilians killed by landmine explosions
March 2011 - March 2021

2637 dead

- 605 children
- 277 women
- 8 paramedics, including a female
- 6 civil defense personnel
- 9 journalists
Many local teams and some international organizations revealed the different types of landmines that are being used in the Syrian conflict. The persons responsible for planting the landmines could not be identified, due to the multiplicity of the parties controlling the areas where the mines were found, and explosions occurred. Here is a list of the types of landmines that have been used during the conflict:
1. Al–Mastara (ruler):

It is a mine that looks like two rulers placed on top of each other. The mine is then wedged between the door when it is closed and connected to an explosive device, which detonates once the door is opened. This mine causes instant death.

2. Al-Misbaha (rosary):

It is a necklace of beads that explodes as soon as someone touches or stands on it. It may contain more than one knot and its explosion range reaches 80 centimeters.
3. Hajar (stone):

It is a mine fixed with stones and explodes upon touch, or after touching the electrical tape connected to it. The mine may be equipped with a lens that explodes when passing in front of it.

4. Al-Lizari (laser):

It is a mine in the form of a lens that explodes as soon as someone passes behind it, and is the most dangerous type. It works through a light sensor that gives the signal to detonate as soon as someone passes in front of the laser lens or detonates it from a distance. Its danger lies in how difficult it is to detect.
5. Al-Doussa:

It is a mine that explodes when walking over it and is usually covered with dirt, or well-hidden in the ground.¹

In addition, the Syrian regime have used naval mines to bomb cities controlled by the opposition. These mines were dropped from helicopters causing the death and injury of dozens of civilians in those areas. These types of mines include:

1. **RKM:** A mine weighing about 300 kg, used extensively in areas that witnessed unrest at the beginning of the events.

2. **ANTENA:** A Russian mine that explodes upon colliding with a ship or submarine. It is of a large size and its detonation leads to ships sinking.

3. **AMD-1500:-** A Russian mine that weighs about 300 kg and was dropped on areas experiencing unrest.

4. **UDM:** A Russian mine that explodes as a result of being affected by the passage of a ship or submarine from its side. However, regime forces

used it as a landmine in civilian areas.

5. **K-B:** An old model Russian mine with a weight of about 1065 kg, or about a ton of explosives.

The parties in the conflict did not issue any warnings to civilians about the presence of landmines in their surrounding areas, as required by international humanitarian law.

### Parties to the conflict in Syria

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Death Toll

In terms of the governorate
(March 2011 - March 2021)
Tens of thousands of mines and improvised explosive devices were planted during the Syrian conflict, many of which are still unlocated, along with some unexploded ordnance that pose an imminent threat to the lives and safety of civilians.

Omar Al-Halabi, a child from Deir Hafer in the eastern countryside of Aleppo, who was injured by a landmine explosion in late 2016, told Euro-Med Monitor:
“While I was playing with my friends near the house, we saw a piece of iron in the shape of a ball. We approached it and played with it until it exploded. We never knew it was an explosive mine. Because of that, I lost a hand and a foot. Seven months after the incident I was able to install two prostheses”.

On the other hand, many families displaced from Raqqa governorate during the intensity of the fighting in 2017, said they faced great dangers during displacement. This was due to the planted landmines and unexploded remnants of war, which made the escape route fraught with the danger of death.

Khaled, 13, from Raqqa governorate told Euro-Med Monitor: “At the beginning of July 2017, we were displaced from our house due to the fierce fighting. I ran over a landmine, which exploded and injured me and my 14-year-old sister Israa. I got severe wounds in my hands, legs and head, while Israa’s jaw was completely smashed”.

Anti-personnel and anti-vehicle landmines have become the most prominent disastrous remnants of the Syrian conflict that threaten with long-term humanitarian catastrophe. Lied all over the governorates of Syria, the landmines were planted by most of the parties to the conflict. The Syrian regime forces had resorted to using landmines either alone or jointly with the Russian forces. Some opposition factions resorted to this method, most prominently ISIS.

In general, the parties that plant mines booby-trap buildings, cars, household
tools, and food packages in order to prevent their opponents from advancing. Agricultural lands and roads are fertile environment for mine-planting.

Ahmed Samir (pseudonym), 46, from a village in the western countryside of Daraa, who was injured due to a landmine explosion on his farm, told Euro-Med Monitor: “In August 2019, after the departure of ISIS from our village, I entered my farm to work. While I was cleaning it from dry weeds and plowing it, a landmine exploded. The explosion caused my left leg to be amputated”.

“Several months later, I was able to install an artificial limb provided by a medical association in Damascus. Before the accident, I used to cultivate the land and plow it, and I used to make a living from that, but now I cannot do these works because they require physical effort, and I can only do the simple tasks”.

Child Haitham Abbas (pseudonym) from the city of Suran in the northern Hama governorate was injured by a landmine explosion on his father’s farm. He said, «In June 2017 I went to help my father plowing our land in order to plant it. While I was moving in the land there was an explosion that amputated my right foot, and my left foot was seriously injured. It turned out that the explosion was caused by a landmine that was buried in dust”. “I was transferred for treatment in Turkey, where I was completely paralyzed and unable to move except in a wheelchair. I cannot do anything on my own. I always need my brothers to help me do everyday things. As for
my father, he was seriously injured in his right hand as there was an iron shrapnel inside the mine spread upon the explosion”.

The family of the child Nihad Hamid, 16, from Afrin city in the northern countryside of Aleppo, told Euro-Med Monitor: “Nihad died on Wednesday, 10 June 2019, from a landmine in an agricultural land. He was walking in the lands between the villages of Karzaihal and Basta, heading to his family’s farm, where he was surprised in that area with a landmine in it, which caused him to lose his life. At the time of the incident the area was under the control of the Syrian opposition forces.

Mines also threaten people working in demining units, as many of them were killed or injured. Osama Omar was injured as a result of a mine explosion while on his mission. He told Euro-Med Monitor: “In January 2020, we were summoned to an area in the countryside of Lattakia in order to search for and remove the mines in it. While we were exploring the area, the mine suddenly exploded. I was alive, but I was suffering from great pain all over my body”.

“It turned out later that I had a lot of shrapnel in my body, the most difficult of which was the shrapnel that entered my left hand, as the shrapnel caused nerve damage and my movement in my hands, and I still suffer from pain in it, and I cannot use it”.

The parties to the conflict also planted mines next to and inside civilian homes, even though most of these homes do not pose a military threat and
are not used for military actions.

Relatives of the victim Mahmoud Al-Tawil (pseudonym) from the Manbij area in northern Syria told Euro-Med Monitor: “Mahmoud, who is 40 years old, was a father of five children and worked in the field of construction. The situation is difficult, and Mahmoud decided to leave the area and move with us to a safer area”.

“We managed to escape from our house, but Mahmoud decided to return to the house to take some necessary items, as he returned with his uncle and his brother’s wife, but as soon as the door of the house was opened, a mine that was planted at the door of the house exploded, which led to his death immediately, and his uncle and brother-in-law were seriously injured”.

Victims toll
in terms of the year
(March 2011 - March 2021)

Source: The Syrian Network for Human Rights and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
Legal relief

The use or possession of landmines is prohibited by the relevant international covenants such as the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, known informally as the (Ottawa Treaty); the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons; and the Rome Statute. Since landmines are weapons that also target civilians who are not participants in military operations and thus using them may amount to war crimes that require accountability according to the Statute. The report reviews the fundamental international law treaties that prohibit the infringement of human right to life as it is a guaranteed and inherent right that may not be violated in any way.

• **First: Ottawa Treaty**

The Syrian government refused to sign the Ottawa Treaty of 1997 which imposes a comprehensive ban on anti-personnel mines, and requires their destruction, whether they are stored or planted in the ground. The Ottawa Treaty was supplemented by the Oslo Agreement adopted in 2008 regarding cluster munitions and prohibiting their use. The Ottawa Treaty states in its first article that:

“1. Each State Party undertakes never under any circumstances:

a) To use anti-personnel mines;

b) To develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile, retain or transfer to
anyone, directly or indirectly, anti-personnel mines;
c) To assist, encourage or induce, in any way, anyone to engage in any activity prohibited to a State Party under this Convention.”

Article 5 of the same agreement stipulates:

“1. Each State Party undertakes to destroy or ensure the destruction of all anti-personnel mines in mined areas under its jurisdiction or control, as soon as possible but not later than ten years after the entry into force of this Convention for that State Party.

2. Each State Party shall make every effort to identify all areas under its jurisdiction or control in which anti-personnel mines are known or suspected to be emplaced and shall ensure as soon as possible that all anti-personnel mines in mined areas under its jurisdiction or control are perimeter-marked, monitored and protected by fencing or other means, to ensure the effective exclusion of civilians, until all anti-personnel mines contained therein have been destroyed. The marking shall at least be to the standards set out in the Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices, as amended on 3 May 1996, annexed to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects.”

This convention, which prohibits and restricts the use of certain conventional weapons that may be considered excessively harmful or indiscriminate in effect, stipulated several key principles in its preamble, the most important of which were:

• The general principle of protecting the civilian population from the effects of hostilities.

• The principle that it is prohibited to use in armed conflicts weapons, missiles, equipment and methods of warfare that are of a nature to cause excessive damage or unnecessary suffering.

• The principle prohibiting the use of methods or means of warfare that are intended or expected to cause extensive, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment.

This convention and the protocols annexed to it came to address issues related to the necessity of clearing mines, record information related to them, and ways to protect civilians and humanitarian organizations from these mines as follows:

**Demining**

The disposal of remnants of war such as landmines is an inherent obligation of each of the parties to the conflict in the areas under its control, Article 3 of the Fifth Protocol annexed to the Convention on Prohibiting or Restricting
the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons That May Be Considered To Be Excessively Injurious Or Indiscriminate In The Effects:

“Each High Contracting Party and party to an armed conflict shall bear the responsibilities set out in this Article with respect to all explosive remnants of war in territory under its control.”

The same was confirmed by Article 4 of the Ottawa Treaty which states that: “Each State Party undertakes to destroy or ensure the destruction of all stockpiled anti-personnel mines it owns or possesses, or that are under its jurisdiction or control, as soon as possible but not later than four years after the entry into force of this Convention for that State Party.”

**Recording landmine-related information**

The process of recording and transmitting mine-related information is one of the most important measures that must be taken to facilitate its disposal, which is stipulated in Article 4 of Protocol V annexed to the Convention on Prohibiting or Restricting the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons That May Be Considered To Be Excessively Injurious Or Indiscriminate In Effect, as it provides the following:

“High Contracting Parties and parties to an armed conflict shall to the maximum extent possible and as far as practicable record and retain information on the use of explosive ordnance or abandonment of explosive ordnance, to facilitate the rapid marking and clearance, removal or destruction of explosive remnants of war, risk education and the provision
of relevant information to the party in control of the territory and to civilian populations in that territory.”

The same was confirmed by rule 82 of the customary international humanitarian law databases issued by the Red Cross, which stipulates that various parties to the conflict must record the places where landmines are planted in order to facilitate their dismantling later, as it confirms that “A party to the conflict using landmines must record their placement, as far as possible”.

**Protecting civilians from landmines**

The principal to protect civilians from the effects of remnants is one of the most important issues emphasized by the humanitarian legal rules, as Article 5 of the Protocol V annexed to the Convention on Prohibiting or Restricting the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons That May Be Considered To Be Excessively Injurious Or Indiscriminate In The Effects:

“High Contracting Parties and parties to an armed conflict shall take all feasible precautions in the territory under their control affected by explosive remnants of war to protect the civilian population, individual civilians and civilian objects from the risks and effects of explosive remnants of war. Feasible precautions are those precautions which are practicable or practicably possible, taking into account all circumstances ruling at the time, including humanitarian and military considerations. These precautions may include warnings, risk education to the civilian population, marking,
fencing and monitoring of territory affected by explosive remnants of war, as set out in Part 2 of the Technical Annex.”

**Protecting humanitarian organizations**

Humanitarian organizations and their workers have received special care from international humanitarian law against the effects caused by the remnants of war, and the conflicting parties must provide them with sufficient information on the remnants of war. Whereas Article 6 of Protocol V annexed to the Convention on Prohibiting or Restricting the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons That May Be Considered to be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects, stipulates the following:

“1. Each High Contracting Party and party to an armed conflict shall:
Protect, as far as feasible, from the effects of explosive remnants of war, humanitarian missions and organizations that are or will be operating in the area under the control of the High Contracting Party or party to an armed conflict and with that party’s consent.
Upon request by such a humanitarian mission or organization, provide, as far as feasible, information on the location of all explosive remnants of war that it is aware of in territory where the requesting humanitarian mission or organization will operate or is operating.”
Third: the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court

Organized attacks with mines against civilians are considered a war crime according to the charter of the International Criminal Court, considering that these attacks are directed at persons who do not participate at all in military actions and are not present in places having a military character. Article 2 / b of Article (8) regulating crimes the war on many acts that constitute crimes and require international criminal accountability, including:

- Intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities.
- Intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects, that is, objects which are not military objectives;
- Intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge that such attack will cause incidental loss of life or injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects or widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment which would be clearly excessive in relation to the concrete and direct overall military advantage anticipated;

Fourth: Basic International Treaties

Several basic conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Geneva Conventions have provided for the protection of the right to life and considered it one of the most important rights that should not be touched,
as the texts came as follows:

- Article (3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: «everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.»
- Article (6) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states, “Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life.”
- Article (3) common to the four Geneva Conventions prohibits at all times and places “violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds” against persons who do not take an active part in an armed conflict.
- Article 4 of the Second Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions also prohibits “All persons who do not take a direct part or who have ceased to take part in hostilities.”
Recommendations

Based on what is established in the report, The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor recommends the following:

1. The parties to the conflict, mainly the Syrian regime forces, must stop planting mines, completely destroy stockpiles, and abide by the rules and provisions stipulated in international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

2. The parties to the conflict must remove all mines planted in the areas under their control, disclose maps that clarify their locations, and put warning signs indicating their presence in a way that guarantees the protection of civilians.

3. The United Nations, through its specialized agencies, should intensify efforts aimed at helping to clear mines, secure equipment, techniques, and technical human cadres, and secure adequate funds for them.

4. The Syrian government must provide the necessary compensation to victims and their families for the damages they suffered and enable them to return to their normal lives again.

5. The Syrian government and the ruling parties in the various regions should implement intensive awareness campaigns using all possible means to alert the dangers of mines and publish general
safety guidelines for prevention and warning.

6. The Syrian government should establish free and fast communication mechanisms through which Syrians can request immediate and urgent assistance and report the presence of unknown or suspicious objects.

7. The international community should support programs and initiatives that provide treatment and rehabilitation services to mine victims, including material and logistical support; and help secure prostheses for victims and physical, psychological and social rehabilitation for them.