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Report

Clearance of improvised explosive devices in the Middle East

Monday 22 – Wednesday 24 May 2017 | WP1548



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The increasing use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in a growing number of contexts has led to the issue featuring more and more prominently on disarmament and security policy agendas. In particular, the scale and intensity of the regional conflict involving Da'esh in the Middle East has seen the use of improvised munitions on an unprecedented scale, further amplifying the priority attached to IEDs as a policy issue.

Executive summary

The meeting addressed:

- The scale and nature of the challenges faced when clearing Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen;
- The extent to which the IED threat differs from that of traditional landmines;
- The operational challenges faced by military, commercial and humanitarian stakeholders in IED clearance, and how to address them;
- The role of donor states in response to increasing IED contamination;
- The suitability of the current International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) to respond to the IED threat, and the need for IED-specific standards.

Key points and recommendations

- While the threat of IEDs is not new, the scale of contamination in the Middle East is unprecedented. Non-state actors such as Daesh are deploying ever-more sophisticated devices to level the playing field in asymmetric warfare.
- The evolution of IED technology is rapid, and security contexts in contaminated areas can change on a daily basis. Effective information sharing is needed and should be formalised through a functional operational platform.
- Successful risk management is dependent on information sharing. Experienced actors should share regional expertise with new entrants to minimise risk to personnel.
- Donors should recognise the complexity and high risks around IED clearance in the Middle East. They should be accordingly flexible in their expectations of outcomes.
- IED clearance should ideally be coordinated by a functional national authority. Where this is not possible, international authorities should coordinate clearance funding in collaboration with donors, while working to build the capacity of national authorities.
- There is a wide range of views within the sector on whether new, separate IED clearance standards are necessary. Work should be done to assess whether IMAS

can accommodate IED clearance. If distinct standards must be developed, inclusion of all relevant stakeholders at all stages of development is essential. New standards should be complementary to IMAS.

The scale of the threat

1. IED technology and its deployment are increasingly sophisticated. There is significant evidence of growing technical expertise within Daesh and other non-state actors. Access to IED precursors in Middle East is widespread; the destruction of ammunition depots by Gaddafi has resulted in the dispersal of military equipment across Libya and further afield. There will be no lack of resources and expertise to make explosives in the decades to come. This has given Daesh the capacity to manufacture increasingly sophisticated devices, including vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs). However, groups have also proved capable of resorting to homemade devices when military goods are scarce. The need for technological capability and equipment to meet this expanding threat is clear.
2. In Iraq, IEDs are responsible for 82% of casualties in the conflict, while in Syria it is estimated that IED clearance will take 40 to 50 years. The complexity of the conflict in Syria and Iraq makes the IED threat even more acute. The ongoing conflict is active with multiple players, and urban warfare is the new norm. Contamination can vary significantly depending on which groups have occupied a region.

Defining the threat

3. By their nature, IEDs are challenging to define. The term encompasses a range of devices with no common denominators; some consist of military components, while others are fabricated from civilian materials. Humanitarian agencies have found most IEDs in Iraq and Syria to be victim-operated improvised mines that would fall within the definition of traditional anti-personnel mines. However, this cannot be taken as universal. Contextual definitions may add more value than technical descriptions: 'hot' devices are positioned with the aim of assassination, while 'cold' devices are left behind by fleeing groups. Definitions play an important role in securing donor commitment and agreeing international standards. But they should not become a barrier to IED clearance, which fundamentally should focus on reducing harm now.

Information sharing

4. IED technology is unpredictable in comparison to mass-produced military devices, and the security context in Iraq and Syria is constantly changing. Humanitarian actors, commercial operators and military forces therefore have an unprecedented need for access to accurate and timely information, and must benefit from each other's experience and knowledge. Suboptimal collection and sharing of information poses significant barriers in the response to the current IED threat. While some information sharing exists within humanitarian and military circles, there is room for better cooperation between these circles. There is frustration within the humanitarian and private sectors that information sharing is one-way; militaries often have information which is useful and relevant to the work of NGOs and contractors, but this is not always shared in a timely manner. The sector should find ways of sharing information across circles as well as amongst players.
5. Inevitably there are barriers to information sharing in active conflicts. Information on IED contamination is often acquired second-hand through civilians, and lacks vital technical details. This increases the risk to personnel and hinders their capability of ensuring an area is cleared. Engaging with communities is essential in order to extract quality data. For military parties, the declassification of information must be addressed before data can be shared. Organisations working within humanitarian principles must address the question of how information will be used by other stakeholders: do humanitarian organisations have an ethical prerogative to share information if doing so

makes them party to a conflict?

6. The sharing of critical information is, however, recognised as necessary amongst all parties, including donors, who require assurances that all possible measures are in place to ensure the safety of personnel. To promote safety, information regarding incidents and current risks to operators should be shared not just informally at a local level, but formally in national and international fora. A functional operational platform is required to share information at a central, formal level; international authorities such as the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) could facilitate this. National authorities also have a role to play in managing information sharing. Where there is no functional national authority, a national forum for information sharing should be established by international stakeholders. The type of information to be shared, and the way information will be stored, should be agreed.

Risk management

7. The increasing complexity of IEDs means that the need for technical capability is higher than ever. However, contextual analysis is equally essential for robust risk management. In IED-contaminated conflict zones such as those in the Middle East, security contexts can change over a short distance or timeframe. This, combined with factors such as unpredictable population movement, creates a granular and volatile environment. In Iraq and Syria, even delineating conflict and post-conflict contexts is difficult, as post-conflict environments may exist within a wider area of conflict. Given the dynamic security context, risk assessment should be a continual process to assess whether organisations can continue to operate, and to identify minimum capability requirements to avoid exposing staff to unacceptable levels of risk. Organisations remain sensitive to context and maintain, at the very least, informal risk assessments. However more could be done to formalise contextual risk management processes. Best practice and principles for risk management should be reflected in IMAS or future IED clearance standards.
8. The aim of an organisation; how their work is perceived, and the technical complexity of devices are all contributors to risk levels, as is the proximity to conflict: actors will face varying threats depending on the areas in which they operate. Within active conflict zones, security forces generally have the capacity to manage IED threats, with special security forces handling the most complex cases. Space for humanitarian operations exists in areas of low proximity to conflict; as the security situation improves, this humanitarian space can expand. Organisations' own parameters will dictate their appetite for risk. Ultimately, whether or not to continue operations remains a judgement call for each organisation, dependent on context and that organisation's objectives. Such a judgement call is too subjective to be written into formal standards.
9. For NGOs, upholding humanitarian principles is essential to all operations. This must be accommodated into any risk assessment to manage risks to personnel, the wider security environment, and the reputation of the organisation. IEDs are often deployed by non-state groups, in political and armed opposition to states. The conduct of such groups within international norms varies. The disregard shown by Daesh to human rights limits the scope for humanitarian groups to conduct non-politicised work. While all organisations have the same goal, some vary in their methods and adherence to humanitarian principles. If an error is made by one actor, the impact can be felt by the whole sector. The 'do no harm' principle should be taken into consideration. For example, Daesh are known to monitor IED clearance to understand operators' methods and technologies. They adapt their production of devices in response. A long-term risk of clearance is therefore that it could facilitate the advancement of the IED threat. While in reality the humanitarian benefit of clearance will usually outweigh strategic risks of this nature, this is not a given. In assessing the scope and nature of their operations, operators should be aware of such risks and be sensitive to feedback.
10. Information sharing is central to robust and dynamic risk management. With context, and therefore operational risks, changing daily in a conflict zone, organisations must

have access to all available information sources. Organisations with an established presence in certain IED-contaminated areas will have developed trusted relationships with their network of sources, enabling them to understand the situation and respond to changes in circumstance at the earliest possible moment. Groups which are new to working in such areas will face greater risk. To reduce the levels of risk and uncertainty to which these new entrants are exposed, information sharing mechanisms between organisations operating in the same region should include the sharing of regional expertise and experience developed over time.

11. The flexibility of donors is also key to sound risk management. Appetite for risk is partially linked to funding, so donors should understand the implications of what they are asking operators to do. Donors should be flexible in their expectations of outcomes. The context in the contaminated area, which can change quickly, can significantly impact what outcomes are realistically achievable. The range of outcomes that can be realised may change over the lifetime of an agreement or contract between operators and donors, and donors should be responsive to this. Donors should recognise that IED clearance in recently liberated areas of Iraq and Syria will be time-consuming, complex, and risky. Efficient and effective management systems will be required to ensure that donors and their implementing partners can respond to changes in context.

Coordination and prioritisation of funding

12. With finite resources available, what actions should take priority? In Iraq and Syria, some donors have prioritised the restoration of key infrastructure over the resource-heavy clearance of homes. Such efforts contribute to stabilisation and aim to give communities a sense of progress after liberation from Daesh. However they do not necessarily produce the greatest humanitarian benefit. All donors have a need to assess how to focus resources for maximum impact, and many are of the view that all mine action should be led by humanitarian needs. Where IED clearance is motivated by stabilisation objectives, the scope for coordination with other donors and NGOs may be limited. Conversely, humanitarian action should be consistent with stabilisation efforts.
13. Colombia's mine action programme has demonstrated that national ownership of IED clearance is key to success. Ideally, a functioning national mine action authority should coordinate funding for IED clearance. Where there is no national authority, an international organisation such as UNMAS may be best placed to fill this role. This 'shadow' authority should set priorities in consultation with foreign donors, and work to gradually build the capacity of a national authority. The role of national authorities, and the lines of transition from shadow to real national authorities, could be considered in international standards.

Standards

14. In light of the unprecedented scale of the IED threat, UNMAS has been commissioned to create a new set of IED Disposal (IEDD) standards. The view of UNMAS is that the IED threat is sufficiently distinct from landmines to warrant a separate set of standards from the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). One distinction is the political context: while the removal of landmines bears little impact on the political situation, IEDs are installed by non-state actors. Thus humanitarian groups are unable to implement clearance programmes due to their need to adhere to humanitarian principles of neutrality, whereas commercial actors not face this limitation. From a technical perspective, IED technology evolves more quickly than factory-produced landmines. Even if IEDs are produced on an industrial scale, they are not as consistent as landmines. The unpredictable nature of IEDs increases the risk of casualties for demining personnel. IEDs therefore require a greater level of expertise than landmines. Standards allow operators to identify capability gaps and address them to keep personnel safe, and to ensure that an area has been cleared. As well as providing assurances of capability to manage the risk to personnel, standards help to manage risk to operating groups and donors. In the event of a coroner's inquest, an

internationally agreed set of operating standards will provide the necessary framework to investigate whether enough was done to ensure safety.

15. The creation of a set of standards distinct from IMAS creates potential for conflict; work will be required to ensure that these two sets of standards complement and reinforce each other, and do not create confusion for operators. To avoid this conflict, could IMAS be adapted to accommodate IEDD? This has proven to be the case in Colombia, where the national authority DAICMA has successfully adapted IMAS to address IED contamination. Several factors have allowed IEDD to be treated as a typical humanitarian mine action programme in Colombia. The peace agreement signed with the FARC has transformed significant areas of contaminated land into humanitarian space. DAICMA is now able to receive information on the location of devices from those who laid them, albeit non-systematically. While the devices were not fabricated by a state entity, the production methods of the FARC have been more widespread and consistent than in the Middle East. It is not clear whether IMAS could be adapted to deal with IED contamination with the same level of success in Syria or Iraq, where the military situation changes daily and IEDD is a stabilisation priority as much as a humanitarian one. Nonetheless, discrepancies in standards which could confuse operators and national authorities should be avoided if possible. Some stakeholders have argued that the majority of IEDs in Iraq and Syria are improvised anti-personnel landmines, rather than non-landmine type devices, and can be addressed through IMAS. Therefore, rather than a new set of standards, the most pressing need is for discussion on how existing standards, mechanisms and practices can be developed to respond to varying contexts.
16. The issue of how best to address IEDs within the existing IMAS framework is currently under discussion with the IMAS Review Board, and feedback is open to all. Consultation with all stakeholders is essential for any work on new standards; IMAS gained its legitimacy through the inclusive nature of the consultation process. The whole sector should be involved at all stages of development, as any new standards should be developed by those who will apply them. The scope, status and application of new standards should be reviewed to ensure there is no duplication with IMAS, and to minimise the impact on national authorities, who would be expected to develop national IEDD standards distinct from their national mine action standards (NMA).

Fiona Henry

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