



Demining in Syria: ‘People are desperate to go back to their houses ...



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Words & photographs

There have been more than 900 mine-related injuries or fatalities in Syria since the fall of the Assad regime

Mofida Majthoub is almost a dot in the distance, alone in her mission. She crouches down, her hands moving carefully and deliberately. She wears no protective gear – it would be pointless this close up, she says, and would weigh her down.

She is about to “render safe” the improvised explosive device (IED) in front of her: first removing the detonator from the charge with her hands – this takes six tense minutes – then rejoining colleagues, at a distance, to pull it out of the ground with a long cord, in case there’s an “anti-lifting device” that could cause it to blow up.

There are 7.5kg of explosives in each of the three other IEDs discovered nearby, all believed to have been left by Islamic State, which controlled much of this territory years before. This one, discovered the previous day, is thought to contain 10kg but they cannot know until they remove it and “remove the threat”, she says. In the end, it is roughly 6kg.

The red-haired 45-year-old is a former freelance wedding photographer and business marketing graduate. She comes from Saïda, in southern Lebanon, and has been working with the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) international NGO for almost a decade, rising to become a technical field manager. Majthoub first joined the organisation in Lebanon,

where MAG put out a call for female deminers. “At the beginning my family thought that I was kidding,” she says.

She initially worked clearing anti-tank and anti-personnel mines left by Israeli forces after 2006, then she went to Lebanon’s northeast, removing explosives left by Islamic State (also known as IS or Isis). Her supervisor in Lebanon lost two hands and an eye doing this work, she says. Since 2023 Majthoub has been in Syria.

“It’s not an easy job. It’s very hard. The majority, they cannot handle it. They get scared. Once they see the device they think ‘this is real’, we don’t want to work any more,” she says. Majthoub also gets “a little bit” scared “but not terrified”. It is only concerns about the safety of her teams that affect her sleep.

Landmines and improvised explosive devices, the remnants of war, remain a danger long after fighting is over. It’s a sad irony that deaths from them often increase when peace is achieved, as large movements of people return to reclaim their homes or farm their land.

“People are excited and they are desperate to go back to their houses. In their mind the main threat is gone,” says Majthoub. “We are facing a lot of accidents because of this.”

‘Landmine emergency’

Jon Brown, global director of communications for MAG, says “the situation that has emerged in Syria since [the] fall of the Assad regime could well be the biggest landmine emergency since the defeat of IS”. Figures collected by the International NGO Safety Organisation indicate there have been more than 900 related injuries or fatalities in Syria since the fall of the Assad regime last December, though it is not clear how comprehensive those figures are. On June 5th medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) said its teams inside one emergency room, in Deir ez-Zor National hospital, saw one person a day who had been wounded by explosions of landmines, unexploded ordnance or booby traps. “Nearly two-thirds have life-threatening or severe injuries, and nearly a quarter have traumatic amputations,” said the head of MSF’s Syria mission, Will Edmond. “Shockingly, two out of five of the people we’ve seen have been children.” Staff from another medical facility in Idlib, northwest Syria,

told MAG they treated more than 500 victims of explosives between December 2024 and April 2025. In comparison, though Ukraine is often identified as the most mined country in the world, 580 casualties were reported by the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor in 2023, the last full year for which data is available.

A lack of co-ordination and organised information, and severe limitations on movement in Syria, has greatly hampered efforts to clear explosives. The Assad regime – which planted mines – prevented or massively hindered the work of international organisations. MAG is seeking permissions from the new government in Damascus to expand geographically. But it operates on a budget of \$6 million a year – with funding mostly from the US, Norway and the Netherlands – and says

scaling up is difficult without more support.

In 2024 there were 76 new hazardous areas encompassing more than 7 million sq m of land identified, staff say. Since 2016 more than 80,000 explosive items have been destroyed. These include projectiles, improvised chemical items, blast mines, light bombs, cluster munitions and missiles. Cleared areas include a school that now serves 700 students, a water station, roads, houses, health and community facilities.

The well-respected Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has reported that 3,631 civilians were killed across Syria due to the explosion of landmines and cluster munition bomblets in March 2011-March 2025, including 949 children and 356 women. At least 10,856 more civilians suffered permanent disabilities.

Majthoub manages four teams with 10 deminers in each team. They begin early in the morning and finish at about noon, as energy drops when the sun gets too harsh, potentially risking their safety. Accompanying them are a medic and ambulance, though the closest hospital is a two-hour drive away.

It is slow and painstaking work to do safely. In a full day’s shift, on this particular task, each may clear an area of 200-250m sq. Deminers cannot work if the wind is too strong though, as they cannot hear their equipment properly, and cannot work in winter, when rain comes and mud is thick.

They are fluent in warning markers. Red stones indicate a separation between clear and uncleared areas; white stones mark a control point with medics and vehicles. A blue picket indicates the beginning of that day’s clearance, and yellow is an anti-personnel mine. Yellow topped with red marks the point where an IED was removed. In one team deminers

range in age from their 20s to their 50s, and come from parts of Syria including Hasaka, Kobani and greater Aleppo. They include a former Islamic State prisoner, a well digger and small business owners.

Team leader Faisal Barkal (44) was a schoolteacher. “The main reason I joined was I experienced an accident,” he says. “In 2015, when we returned back to Kobani, I entered my house and a mine blew up ... I had only a little information about mines, I opened the door ... I stepped around 1m inside and suddenly I heard the explosion.” His back is still riddled by a deep scar. Barkal wanted no one else to “face what I faced”.

“Too many people got hurt,” says deminer Mohammed Melhi (32). His cousin’s child lost limbs as a result of playing with a mine, not knowing what it was.

Deputy team leader Maya Jolo (22) has been working with MAG for three years. She is originally from Kobani, though her family was displaced multiple times due to war. “People are suffering, too many people lost their lives, parts of their body,” she says. “My family are not comfortable [with my work] but I love my job.”

“I’m very optimistic now that Syria will get support ... [to] make more areas safe,” she says. When all the explosives are cleared and sustainable peace is achieved, she says, grinning: “I will get married ... Or look for another job.”

Suspected explosives

Brown, the communications director, says risk education is critical. As well as educational sessions, this involves communicating through digital channels, TV, billboards, targeted Facebook ads and school curriculums. MAG also has a hotline for people to report suspected explosives.

Shading from the sun in a tent in the village of Kisret Sheikh Jumaa, on the outskirts of Raqqa, seven men and three women listen to MAG facilitators describing scenarios.

“What kind of areas do you think are contaminated?” Etab Mlais asks the group. She gives some examples: former front lines, abandoned military checkpoints, then shows pictures of potential warning signs, including crossed sticks and a pile of rocks, telling them never to remove these as it puts others in danger.

Everyone here knows what war feels like. Mlais was once buried in rubble for hours. Another man arrives on crutches. He is missing one leg. Haji el-Ahmed (21) says he was collecting truffles, four months ago, when he came across a concrete water tank. As he entered to explore its inside, there was an explosion.

The victim remained conscious. He remembers a woman using the scarf on his head as a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. Two men drove him to hospital, more than an hour away, where he spent two days. El-Ahmed lost his left foot.

“Many things become difficult, before I was walking, now it’s hard to work,” says El-Ahmed, who has a wife and a two-month-old boy. He used to collect plastic and metal to sell. Now he does not think of the future: his only hope is to get a prosthetic limb. He approached an NGO but they have too many requests and told him to wait. Another recent victim was Yusuf Mohamed al-Ibrahim. The 11-year-old was grazing his grandfather’s 10 sheep when he came across two 23mm

explosive bullets. Ibrahim put one on the ground and threw the other one at it. He believed any explosion would only go upwards, and not out, but it hit him. He lost one hand.

“Everything he does, it’s difficult now,” says his mother, Amina Hamdo el-Azzadine (38), close to tears. “He can’t wash his face, he needs two hands to wash his face.” The boy’s father, Mohamad Ibrahim el-Ahmed (40), asks if there is any organisation that could help his son get a prosthetic hand. El-Ahmed was a driver before the family was displaced from Aleppo in 2017. “Our economical situation is zero,” he says. “I had cars, sheep, camels ... Once we came here we lost everything.”

Demining is vital to improve the economy, observers say. Farmer Ahmed al-Raji’s family owns land close to the previously contested Tabqa airbase, in Raqqa province. Thirteen families usually live there – the 43-year-old and his 12 brothers, along with their wives and offspring. He remembers how, when the relatives returned from a displacement camp at the end of 2017, they discovered munitions and dead bodies.

They hoped to plant crops again “but couldn’t because of the contamination”. A child lost his eyesight in an explosion. Two shepherds were killed in another. “I was very scared,” he says. Deminers have been clearing the land since 2022. They’ve discovered at least 109 cluster munitions and 18 23mm “bullets” so far, but their work is typically slow. Al Raji’s family begin planting as soon as patches are declared clear. “I lost a lot,” he says. “There is no future if the contamination is still here.”

Later that week Majthoub is up early again, stacking dozens of sub-munitions and an anti-tank mine – which the MAG team discovered on various sites – inside a newly dug hole on a remote piece of land.

She places a charge and connects a detonator, adding 200 grammes of the chemical explosive C-4. She then shelters behind an abandoned building to press a button, setting off the controlled explosion. A ballooning cloud of smoke and debris is visible first, before the wave of sound. Most of the MAG team does not flinch.

A local official has come to observe. Ahmed Hame, a representative of the authorities in northeast Syria’s de facto autonomous region, calls explosives “the first in all the challenges” the area is facing. He says three international groups, as well as local organisations, are working on demining northeast Syria, though one recently suspended activities because of the US aid cuts.

For her part, Majthoub feels certain she is doing something meaningful. “I like adventurous things,” she says, but mostly “it’s about the people and the lives we are saving.”



“People are suffering, too many people lost their lives, parts of their body. My family are not comfortable [with my work] but I love my job – Maya Jolo (22), who has been working in demining for three years