On International Day for Mine Awareness: Syria Is Among the World’s Worst Countries for the Number of Mines Planted in Unknown Locations

2,829 Civilians, Including 699 Children, Have Been Killed by Mines in Syria Since 2011
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I. Brief Background:

April 4 marks the annual International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action, declared by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 60/97 of December 8, 2005. This date in 2022 comes just after Syrians commemorated the milestone of 11 years since the start of the popular uprising in Syria, which subsequently turned into an internal armed conflict.

We at the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) have documented the extensive use of mines by different parties to the conflict for almost 11 years, with the only exceptions to their use being the US-led coalition forces and Russian forces which we have not documented using mines. We have also documented hundreds of deaths and injuries due to the explosion of these mines, with the armed conflict in Syria being one of the worst globally in terms of the lack of any respect shown for the rules of international law, in particular by the Syrian regime, which possesses tens of thousands of mines; the ease and low cost of manufacturing mines have also enabled other parties to the conflict to use them extensively, with all parties showing absolute indifference to disclosing their locations or clearing them, which means that their lethal danger has been extended for many decades and threatens the lives and movement of Syrian citizens, particularly children, which is especially evident in the governorates that have witnessed clashes and changes in the controlling forces and their areas of control.

The latest annual report issued by our partners in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC) revealed that the number of annual casualties recorded in Syria is currently the highest since the ICBL-CMC began its reporting in 1999. The report also concluded that Syria saw the highest documented number of annual casualties due to mines globally in 2020. In December 2021, we issued a statement discussing the report’s findings.

As a member of this international coalition, SNHR has monitored over the past eleven years the use of cluster munitions, anti-personnel and anti-vehicle landmines, which are weapons designed to be placed under or above the ground, then to explode because of the proximity or contact of a person or vehicle, causing deaths and injuries, across Syria. SNHR also has a detailed database detailing all the documented incidents involving these munitions, including the locations and times of the incidents, and we believe that there are dozens of minefields that have yet to be discovered.

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1 We generally use the term ‘the Syrian regime’ rather than ‘the Syrian government’, because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is that of a totalitarian dictatorship based on ruling the nation in an authoritarian fashion through a very limited group of individuals, primarily the President of the Republic and his selected leaders of the security services, while the ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, play a restricted, largely ceremonial role, which is limited to implementing precisely what the ruling regime orders, without any decision-making power or active role; this means that the government’s role is wholly subordinate and limited to serving the regime, with all the main powers being concentrated in the hands of the President of the Republic and the security services. Governance in Syria is wholly decided by the autocratic authority of the ruling family and there is no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade there for show; the Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he nominally presides which are in turn under the command of the President, while the Minister of Justice cannot summon a civilian-level security agent other than the head of a security branch; the security branches, along with the president, are the true power and the governing regime in Syria. Although we acknowledge that the United Nations and its agencies use the term ‘the Syrian government’ in general, we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

We often are unable to identify the party responsible for planting a mine or mines, and thus are also unable to hold them responsible for the resulting deaths and injuries. We also face severe difficulties and challenges which prevent us from assigning responsibility for killings caused by landmines to a specific party involved in the conflict, with these obstacles added to the challenges mentioned in our general methodology, with the most prominent of these being:

- Most of the parties to the conflict use this type of weapon.
- The multiple changes of control by parties to the conflict and forces over the areas where minefields exist. None of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria have revealed maps of the locations where they planted landmines.

**Prohibited Weapon:**

Use of this weapon is prohibited under international law, with military forces planting mines primarily for the purpose of preventing the advance of opposing forces towards certain areas, contributing to their own areas’ fortification and protection. The nature of military mines’ usage requires that their locations should not be disclosed to or detected by the adversary in order to cause the greatest human and equipment losses possible among the adversary’s forces. Because their location cannot be easily identified, particularly by civilians, with conflicting forces planting mines in many different areas, they are, therefore, by the nature of their use, a very indiscriminate weapon, and in most conflicts, mines are removed only after decades, making them an arbitrary weapon which doesn’t distinguish between civilians, military forces and combatants.

Given the impossibility of deploying such weapons in a safe or responsible manner, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a number of NGOs have made great efforts to work towards an absolute, universal ban on the use of mines because they are contrary to the basic principles of the law of war, with these efforts culminating in the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (Ottawa Convention)\(^3\), which entered into force in March 1999. 164 states\(^4\) worldwide – the vast majority of the world’s nations - are currently party to the convention, making the international mine ban a binding international norm for all states and parties to the conflict, whether they are signatories or not.

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II. The Death Toll of Victims Killed Due to the Use of Mines by the Parties to the Conflict in Syria:

Between March 2011 and April 4, 2022, SNHR documented the deaths of at least 2,829 civilians, including:

- 699 Children
- 294 Women (adult females)
- 8 Medical Personnel
- 6 Civil Defense Personnel
- 9 Media Activists

due to hundreds of mine explosion incidents in various Syrian governorates.

The following map shows the distribution of mine casualties by governorate where the killings took place as follows:
We note from the map that most of the landmine victims were killed in Aleppo and Raqqa governorates, with the death toll from landmine explosions in both governorates comprising approximately 49% of the total death toll, followed by Deir Ez-Zour governorate with approximately 17% of the total, then by Daraa and Hama with approximately 9%; these are followed by the remaining governorates which account collectively for 17% of the total, at rates ranging between 2% and 6%, while Damascus, Suwayda, Quneitra, and Latakia ranked last with a ratio of less than 1%, and we recorded no mine victims in Tartous. The varying percentages between different areas are caused by many factors, the most prominent of which are the changing nature of control over the areas and the multiplicity of the parties that controlled areas of the same governorates at different times, with Aleppo governorate being one of the governorates which saw the highest rates of shifting control among the various parties.

The following is the distribution of the death toll by years since 2011 to date, which has not stopped as of 2022:

- **Between March 2011 and the end of 2011:** We documented the deaths of six civilians, including two children, accounting for nearly 0.21% of the total death toll.
- **2012:** We documented the deaths of 31 civilians, including two children, accounting for nearly 1.1% of the total death toll.
- **2013:** We documented the deaths of 101 civilians, including 22 children and seven women, accounting for nearly 3.57% of the total death toll.
- **2014:** We documented the deaths of 97 civilians, including 11 children and seven women, accounting for nearly 3.43% of the total death toll.
- **2015:** We documented the deaths of 246 civilians, including 48 children and 18 women, accounting for nearly 8.7% of the total death toll.
- **2016:** We documented the deaths of 489 civilians, including 119 children and 62 women, accounting for nearly 17.28% of the total death toll.
- **2017:** We documented the deaths of 822 civilians, including 201 children and 81 women, accounting for nearly 29.06% of the total death toll.
- **2018:** We documented the deaths of 427 civilians, including 97 children and 42 women, accounting for nearly 15.09% of the total death toll.
- **2019:** We documented the deaths of 291 civilians, including 76 children and 46 women, accounting for nearly 10.29% of the total death toll.
- **2020:** We documented the deaths of 99 civilians, including 23 children and four women, accounting for nearly 3.5% of the total death toll.
- **2021:** We documented the deaths of 181 civilians, including 78 children and 25 women, accounting for nearly 6.4% of the total death toll.
- **Between January 2022 and April 2022:** We documented the deaths of 39 civilians, including 20 children and two women, accounting for nearly 1.37% of the total death toll.
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The data indicate that nearly one-third of the death toll was documented in 2017, which saw the highest death toll compared to the other years, with casualties continuing to occur as a result of mine explosions despite the decline in military operations and the passage of several years in some cases since the mines were planted, with many of the remaining mines discovered by local organizations working to clear them, including the Civil Defense organization (the ‘White Helmets’). Based on this information, we believe that there are still many minefields and individual mine locations that have not yet been discovered, which will threaten the lives of generations of Syrians for decades to come, with children being among the worst affected.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations:

Conclusions:

We are marking the International Day for Mine Awareness with this brief report to show the terrible human losses inflicted on Syrian citizens by these mines between March 2011 and April 4, 2022, and to underline our belief that the massive death toll of victims killed by mines in Syria further confirms the need for the world to be free from these heinous weapons.
Despite SNHR’s documentation of continuous horrific deaths and injuries due to the use of landmines and our repeated heartfelt appeals for all sides to end their use, along with urgent requests for the essential intervention of international teams to help expose the locations where landmines are deployed and to put pressure on the controlling forces in Syria to determine their locations of deployment in order to reduce the number of casualties among civilians resulting from them, these abysmal weapons continue to be used, with barely any help forthcoming to help de-mine the areas affected. To make further progress towards that goal, the SNHR has spent nearly 11 years monitoring mine incidents including determining the locations and types of landmines, and the casualties resulting from their explosion. We also plan in the future to prepare maps containing the coordinates of the locations where mine explosions have occurred in various Syrian governorates, facilitating the work of local demining teams and helping to create greater awareness among the local population and local authorities in the areas affected to take all possible precautions and safety measures to avoid further such incidents.

**Recommendations:**

1. Increase the support for organizations working in clearing landmines, especially the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets).
2. End the use of cluster munitions and antipersonnel landmines.
3. Reduce the area of the land contaminated by cluster munitions or landmines.
5. The UN Security Council and the international community should increase logistical assistance to local organizations and local police working in the field of detecting and dismantling mines.
6. Allocate a significant amount of money for clearing mines left over by the Syrian conflict from the United Nations Mine Action Service, particularly in areas with specialists prepared to carry out this task with transparency and integrity; begin to compensate victims and their families; focus on provision of the psychological treatment process for survivors, and support humanitarian organizations working in the field of psychological care.