EU-funded demining makes safe return to towns and villages in Iraq possible

There are plenty of toys left behind on the side of the streets of Mosul just liberated by the Iraqi forces. The toys - left there by Da’esh on purpose - hide an explosive charge so that children will pick them up unaware of their killing potential.

Booby traps have been disseminated so that citizens are afraid to perform even the simplest of acts within their own homes. A Qu’ran sitting upon a coffee table is primed to explode as it is picked up, a light switch acts as a detonator.

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are used as psychological weapons to undermine the reconciliation process underway and this is why the EU has decided to concentrate on demining work, leading efforts to clean liberated areas from explosives and restore civilians’ sense of normalcy.

Now that the occupation of Mosul has finally come to an end, the EU is well aware of the importance of protecting civilian lives so that the return of Iraqi citizens and the re-establishment of trust between
communities can begin, as highlighted in a statement issued after the liberation of Mosul by EU High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid & Crisis Management Christos Stylianides.

Video of EU Humanitarian Aid in Iraq: Helping people affected by the Mosul offensive
More than three million Iraqi Internally displaced people (IDPs) are waiting to return to their homes and the EU wants to ensure their right to do so in safety.

“We are demining the areas liberated from Da'esh to allow people of Iraq go back safely to their homes and their lives,” said High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini presenting the Council Conclusions on Iraq on 18 June 2017.

The European Union is by far the main humanitarian donor in Iraq with EUR 309.25 million of total humanitarian assistance since 2015 and among the top donors for demining and decontamination efforts, something that the High Representative identified as an integral component of the EU’s work to stabilise the country.

“This work is essential. Our European Union experts are demining the liberated areas in Iraq; our engineers are working at the Mosul dam; our investments are supporting the economy” Mogherini said in March 2017.

Council Conclusions
In light of recent developments, on 18 June the Council discussed and adopted conclusions on Iraq. In its conclusions, the Council commends the Iraqi Government of Prime Minister al-Abadi and the Iraqi security forces for the significant advances they have made in the military campaign against Da'esh over the past months. It also reiterates its steadfast support for Iraq's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

“Military power is essential [under certain circumstances], but it is not enough – neither to end the war nor to win the peace,” the HRVP added.

It is really through our demining action that the humanitarian, security and political aspects of our support to the Iraqi people come together.
Hope after brutality

The scale of the challenge to make sure Iraqis return safely to their houses might seem overwhelming.

Iraq, especially along its eastern border, is full of mines and unexploded bombs as old as the Iraqi-Iranian war of the 1980s.
Location of mines and remnants of war per area. Iraq Action Program Overall (DMA)

On top of those remnants of war, there are new explosive devices produced on an industrial scale whose number can only be speculated on.

**iTrace**
Made of components that are cheap and readily available, IEDs have become Da'esh's signature weapon. Their chains of supply differs from those of military weapons, as for the most part the components are commercial goods less scrutinised and regulated than the transfer of weapons.

Through the iTrace project, **Conflict Armament Research (CAR)**, an independent organisation mandated by the European Union, wants to monitor this supply of diverted goods in order to prevent Da'esh from killing more civilians.

The use of IEDs, mines and explosives to hit civilians far from the frontlines is nothing new. Da'esh killed a minimum estimated number of 25,000 Iraqi civilians since June 2014 according to the UN Mission to Iraq.

But the extent to which Da’esh is now set to leave nothing but ashes behind is unprecedented in its scale and brutality.

Even the wooden floor of a school has been torn down and rebuilt on top of pressure plates that detonate mines as soon as children rush back to class.
As Iraqi land is being liberated it is increasingly evident that it is a race against time. More and more IDPs are striving to return to their homes, but this has to happen in safety.

The EU Delegation to Iraq took the lead in coordinating demining actions, making sure the different organisations working on it operate together to effectively counter the cynical way in which Da'esh was contaminating Iraqi soil.
The EU's new approach

“No country has the resources to address today’s crises alone," Mogherini told the Coalition partners in July 2016.

However, as she reminded her colleagues, the EU is the only one “who talk to all the players in the region and beyond.”

In Iraq, the EU has been working at its best, making a comprehensive use of all its diplomatic networks, power, work as donor and partner, focusing on the ground on concrete actions that foster positive change.

"If you want to tackle issues, the European Union is the only actor that can incentivise cooperation," the HRVP added.

In leading international efforts on explosive management in Iraq, the EU used its great convening power to bring together different and often competing actors in order to maximise resources.

“This is what the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) is about,” said EU Delegation to Iraq’s Charlie Stuart.

“We bring people together to solve problems,” he added.

Iraqi forces, UN missions and private contractors conduct cleaning operations with no set and common standard, while NGOs and humanitarian agencies carry out risk education and victim assistance activities. However, all these actors were not talking to each other, with the bulk of the Iraqi experts employed in the military actions on the frontlines.
The EU Delegation to Iraq conceived a simple, but effective coordination mechanism that has generated meaningful results in a short time lapse. It assesses and sets the effects it wants to achieve in each area, synchronising every different actors to go in and do their job.

Kids in a school that was recently re-opened receive education and training on how to recognize hazards. Picture: Sean Sutton - MAG International

In Ramadi, for instance, more than 6,000 students were able to return to their studies thanks to the clearance of the university, completely booby-trapped by Da’esh. Another 2,000 people were able to return to the city’s teaching hospital and resume their jobs.

"The Blended Approach"

To overcome experienced coordination constraints on demining, the EU reached out to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), NGOs, contractors and the local and central Iraqi authorities bringing all the actors together so that clearing booby-traps on the frontlines is coordinated with risk education campaigns for IDPs, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction efforts. Most importantly, the actors were brought together to share knowledge and develop a clearance standard that could be used to train more local actors.

The UN Security Council recently praised this “blended approach” first pioneered by the European Union in Iraq and that will now be employed in other post-conflict scenarios around the world.

In the past year and a half, under the EU coordination, the United Nations Mining Action Service
(UNMAS) has surveyed and cleared more than 1.8 million sqm of land in and around Fallujah, around 160 thousand sqm in al Anbar.

In Mosul, Mohammed eagerly contemplates the clearance of Mosul University so that he can fulfil his dreams of one day becoming a doctor. “I am thankful for the efforts of the EU to make my city safe,” he said.

With better coordination, donors’ money was less likely to be wasted and the European Union’s initial contribution of more than EUR 16 million generated a further USD 200 million in the space of 2 years.

As more and more Iraqi land is liberated, the EU’s successful approach to demining tested in some areas is effectively applied and replicated elsewhere.

But the focus is not only on the densely populated urban areas. Iraqi farmers and shepherds living in the poorer and more remote rural areas that had been targeted by Da’esh recruitment can now return to harvest their land and tender their flocks.

*All pictures by Sean Sutton - MAG International

www.eeas.europa.eu

Source URL: