

STUDY 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



THE WAITING LIST

Addressing the immediate and long-term needs of victims of explosive weapons in Syria.

This report was compiled from June to August 2019 and relies on multiple sources, including review of both gray and academic literature, published and unpublished data from international NGOs (INGOs) working in Syria response, firsthand interviews with patients and Syrian humanitarians working both inside Syria and from cross-border locations, and expatriate staff from INGOs and United Nations (UN) agencies.

Since 2014, a core group of States, international organisations and civil society organisations have been involved in an international discussion to enhance the protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA), recognizing the distinctive patterns of harm witnessed in many conflicts around the globe. It has resulted in an increasing consensus on the need for a political declaration to further regulate the use of these weapons. In 2019, the process entered a pivotal period of negotiations, which should lead to a formal adoption of a political declaration in 2020.

In this key moment, States and other stakeholders cannot miss the opportunity to ensure that victims have access to adequate assistance. Acknowledging the tremendous impact of the use of explosive weapons on the lives of survivors, the families of those killed or injured and affected communities, the political declaration should include a clear commitment and provisions on victim assistance, built on the internationally recognised victim assistance standards. These standards, obligations included in existing disarmament treaties, have become a strong norm to ensure the full and equal realization of all human rights for victims of explosive weapons and persons impaired by other causes, in

compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

On humanitarian access and humanitarian mine action

Since the inception of the conflict in 2011, the use of EWIPA has been a constant pattern of violence in Syria, taking a heavy toll on civilians. Syria's fractured context - marked by a widespread use of EWIPA, heavy contamination by explosive remnants of war (ERW) and acute challenges for principled humanitarian access, including protection of humanitarian workers - demonstrates the urgency of addressing comprehensively the needs of victims of explosive weapons. Almost 12 million people throughout Syria need humanitarian assistance but constraints for humanitarian access have been a constant feature of the Syria emergency response, hindering continuity of services and impacting the provision of assistance to victims affected by explosive weapons.

The intensive use of explosive weapons has led to massive contamination by Explosive Remnants of War in the country; however, a competent response, comprising risk education (RE), survey and mapping of contamination, and clearance, has been hampered by



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lack of access. Across hundreds of affected towns, the presence of contamination entails an increased vulnerability for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees attempting to return home in unsafe areas. Due to the expertise and familiarity with explosive weapons required to carry out mine action activities, it is a highly sensitive element of the humanitarian response.

With clearance likely to take decades, and persons who have received no risk education disproportionately impacted by explosive accidents in Syria, mine action must be prioritised as a key component of principled humanitarian response, both immediately and in the long-term, and access constraints must be addressed.

As long as humanitarian mine action actors face access barriers to carry out risk education and clearance, Syrians will remain unable to return home in safety and dignity.

On access to health care, including medical care, rehabilitation and psychological and psychosocial support

The decimated Syrian health system struggles to cope with the alarming number of EWIPA-related victims. During the two months it took to compile this report alone,

34 hospitals were bombed, and Syria has been called “the most dangerous place on earth for health-care providers.” The use of explosive weapons in Syria has devastated the national health system – previously the envy of the region – in three main ways:

- The targeting or damaging of health facilities by aerial bombardment has halved the number of operational health facilities, left patients afraid or unable to travel to seek medical care, and contributed to a massive exodus of health professionals.
- The combined impact of a lack of health infrastructure and human resources has directly contributed to a rise in infectious and non-communicable diseases across Syria, including the reappearance of polio, which prior to the conflict had been eradicated.
- The use of EWIPA has overwhelmed medical facilities with civilian casualties who require resource and expertise intensive life-saving care, and long-term follow-up such as rehabilitation and mental health and psychosocial services (MHPSS).

This situation will affect the Syrian health system in the long term. The complex array of injuries created by this pattern of harm can lead to long term impairment, especially when the person injured cannot access adequate emergency health care and rehabilitation services. Unmet needs for rehabili-



tation services are bound to increase exponentially. It is also estimated that over half of all Syrians are in need of mental health and/or psychosocial support. The psychological and psychosocial impact of being exposed to this violence, especially for the most vulnerable such as children, cannot be underestimated and will put additional pressure on already-scarce mental health resources.

of basic infrastructure has been estimated to be destroyed or non-functional. This damage of essential infrastructure such as roads, electric installations, and water and sewage facilities, has a long-term impact on the whole system of services.

The use of EWIPA and the contamination by landmines and ERW have contributed to loss of livelihoods due to the destruction of employment, businesses, farms and other economic assets. They have also enhanced the vulnerability of the population due to the scarcity and/or inaccessibility of housing, and rising commodity prices. Seven in ten Syrians are now reported to live in extreme poverty, and half of all Syrians live at risk of explosive hazards. Ninety percent of surveyed survivors of explosive injuries stated that they were no longer working, with men of working age most affected.

In addition, 40% of Syria's educational infrastructure is currently damaged, destroyed, and/or contaminated with explosive weapons. Schools are no longer viewed as a safe environment, leading to appalling school dropout rates (almost 44% between 2011 and 2015).

This major socioeconomic crisis will hinder recovery for generations to come, and the impact of the educational loss will be felt by Syrian children, sometimes referred to as the "lost generation."



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On social and economic inclusion

In addition to endangering the lives of Syrians, the use of EWIPA is dramatically impacting their livelihoods. In Syria, 50%

As evidenced by the high numbers of survivors sustaining lifelong impairments, any policy or framework for VA in Syria or other States must be based upon human rights, and in line with the CRPD, to which Syria is a signatory. A national action plan on victim assistance is needed to support access to basic services including health care and employment, and compensation for lost assets. From this perspective, victim assistance should be understood not as a parallel set of activities for humanitarian actors, but rather as a cross-cutting element for multiple sectors, including health, education, work and employment, social protection and disability inclusion.

Effective victim assistance in a context such as Syria, where the use of EWIPA has affected the majority of the population, whether directly or indirectly, will require a systems approach, establishing relevant baseline data and monitoring progress as a key to fair and equitable response to the rights and needs of victims.

The scope of devastation observed in Syria demonstrates that the use of EWIPA must not become acceptable and norms against its use must be upheld at international level. It shows the complexity of planning and implementing an effective response for survivors, the families of those killed or injured and affected communities in the context of EWIPA.

HI is calling on all States to support the development of a strong political declaration to end the harm caused by the use of explosive weapons with strong provisions for victim assistance.

Humanity & Inclusion's activity in response to the needs of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees.

Since 2012, Humanity & Inclusion, also known as Handicap International, has been working alongside the victims of the Syrian conflict, in particular victims of explosive weapons. The organisation currently has 500 professionals working in the region to assist the most vulnerable Syrians, including persons with injuries and disabilities, and the elderly or isolated. Its team also intervenes to help refugees living in camps or hosted in local communities.

HI provides rehabilitation services and assistive devices and technologies, offers psycho-social support, ensures that the most vulnerable have access to humanitarian aid, raises awareness of explosive remnants of war, and distributes emergency kits.



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