

# Israeli Landmine Policy and Related Regional Activity

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## **Introduction**

Although the dangers posed by landmines are particularly acute in the Middle East, responses to the Ottawa Convention are limited. Jordan, Sudan, Tunisia and Qatar are State Parties, and Algeria has signed but not ratified the Ottawa Convention. The lack of signatories in the region reflects the continuing conflict and instability as well as the role that mines play in territorial defense.

In Israel, there is significant support for both the concept and effort to abolish landmines, but security considerations and continued warfare outweigh arguments in favor of accession to the Convention. Israel is active in international cooperative programs to clear landmines as well as in rehabilitation and education programs.

## **The Defensive Use of Landmines**

Israel's Lilliputian breadth and width, coupled with "hot" borders and a limited area of maneuverability for infantry and armored units, has prompted Israel to make extensive use of mines in combat and border defense. According to U.S. State Department estimates, there are 260,000 mines in Israel, primarily along the borders with Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and territories captured in the 1967 war. In addition, there are a significant number of mines scattered throughout the Golan Heights and the Jordan Park area that were planted by Jordanian and Syrian forces, respectively.

Israeli policy stipulates that mine fields must be clearly marked on maps, as well as fenced off, and that entry to mined areas is strictly forbidden. In July 1998, the Israel Defense Forces Department of Field Security examined the issue of unmarked mines, concluding that "regarding mine fields [that] constitute part of an obstacle laid by our forces on the front lines...there is no possibility of marking them on civilian maps. Regarding mine fields that were laid by enemy forces... [and] minefields located in the vicinity of sensitive sites, such as electrical power stations, water pumps and the like—there is no impediment to marking them on the maps."

## **Landmine Awareness and Casualty/Survivor Assistance**

Unfortunately, arms and explosives are part of daily life in Israel. Thus, Israeli citizens, in general, accept and support policies that are perceived as necessary in response to a hostile environment and fatal terrorist activities. During special terrorism awareness sessions, Israeli school children are also shown detailed pictorial images of various landmines and are taught to avoid them. In addition, all military graduates in Israel possess considerable awareness of mines as a result of their army service.

Soldiers and civilians have fallen casualty to undeclared and declared landmines in the Golan Heights, West Bank and other areas. Israel's comprehensive Bituach Leumi, or National Insurance Service, completely covers the cost of treatment for victims of landmines.

Those who have suffered from injuries caused by landmines (whether soldiers, citizens, tourists, students or anyone who has entered the country legally), are included in the Health Services clause of "Victims of Hostile Activities" regulation, and as such, are given extensive treatment. This treatment includes an initial evaluation, subsequent operations and extensive

orthopedic rehabilitation. Patients are provided with psychological therapy and counseling, as well as occupational, speech and physical therapy. They also receive the appropriate prosthetic device or devices.

As a result of the traumatic experience, landmine victims often experience a variety of difficulties, including stress, anxiety and behavioral and emotional problems. Therefore, before, during and after rehabilitation, the patient interacts with a well-trained, professional staff including orthopedic specialists, therapists, social workers and psychologists.

Israel also provides extensive vocational training and outpatient treatment. The Social Welfare Ministry, the National Health Insurance Institute and the General Sick Fund (Israel's largest HMO) run vocational schools for landmine survivors. Israel's comprehensive rehabilitative vocational facilities enable the landmine victim to return to the workplace—providing him or her with a sense of success and inclusion in society.

Medical centers that are involved in the treatment of civilian landmine victims and survivors are: Beit Loewenstein in Rannana, Tel Hashomer in Tel Aviv-Yaffo, Tel Aviv University Medical Center and Schneider's Children's Hospital in Petach Tikvah.

### **Landmine Marking & Clearance Activity**

The priority given to marking active landmine areas and the clearing of unnecessary mine fields has increased significantly in recent years. In December 1997, the Israeli Ministry of Defense informed the Engineering Unit (in) Central Command Headquarters that: "maintaining the status quo [of unnecessary mine fields] is not acceptable to the defense establishment." The MOD (Ministry of Defense) went on to say: "We would like to find a solution that will lead to the evacuation of the area[s] suspected of being mined and will provide a possibility for complete working of the land."

Between March and September 1998, the State Comptroller's Office conducted an audit of the Israel Defense Forces' policies on mine laying, and in 1999, this office issued a detailed report (partly public and partly classified) on this issue. The Comptroller's report examined the management of various mine issues by the Israeli Defense Forces and examined the degree to which the provisions of Protocol 2 of the CCW are being implemented. Following thorough research, the Comptroller's report recommended several operational, doctrinal and logistical procedural adjustments. These recommendations are in the process of being examined by the IDF.

Landmine clearance is proceeding, albeit carefully, due to the high risk involved in clearance operations. In January 1999, the division of Finances, Equipment and Property in the Israeli Ministry of Defense stated that it was examining the possibility of Israeli Defense Forces evacuating unnecessary mine strips, as well as adjacent areas suspected of being mined. The Ministry of Defense also raised the possibility of using civilian contracting companies to clear suspected areas. To advance the process, the State Comptroller recommended the appointment of an inter-ministerial committee to examine all aspects of the subject and to guide government policy. In addition, Israel has developed a number of advanced mine-clearing technologies and related equipment.

Unfortunately, Israel has considerable expertise in demining, and is acutely aware of the humanitarian problem caused by APs. Therefore, Israel offers assistance to mine-affected countries in the following areas: mine surveys, mine awareness activities, transfer of mine clearance equipment, cooperation in medical and social rehabilitation, and contribution to the Database of Technological Information. Israel has also contributed to the UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Assistance in Mine Clearance, and has held and hosted an international workshop on the rehabilitation of mine victims.

Since 1996, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been engaged in mine clearance and mine awareness operations in Angola. In addition, a comprehensive Israeli NGO, Aid Without

Borders, conducts mine awareness programs in Angola under the auspices of UNICEF. Aid Without Borders has been active in Kosovo as well, where it taught mine awareness to children in conjunction with MAG, a British mine awareness organization.

Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs also operates a joint landmine assistance program with Canada in Guatemala. Canada's sphere of responsibility in the program includes both physical and psychological rehabilitation, while Israel is involved with the economic rehabilitation of mine victims. This economic rehabilitation consists of encouraging and teaching landmine survivors to establish and successfully run independent micro-enterprises or other small businesses.

### **Mine Clearance Along the Borders**

#### *Egypt*

Following the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, Israel provided Egypt with maps of the mine fields that it had placed in the Sinai area, and prior to withdrawing, it demined considerable areas of the Peninsula. While some cooperation in this area continued, in February 2000, Egypt suspended cooperative mine clearance operations with Israel, citing lack of funding, but it also was seen as part of the continuing Egyptian campaign to reduce links with Israel.

#### *Lebanon*

Mines were also used extensively during the period of Israeli military presence in southern Lebanon, following a series of terrorist incursions and attacks during the mid-1970s. In May 2000, Israel unilaterally implemented UN resolution 425 and withdrew all of its forces from Lebanon. Following the redeployment along the international border, Israel gave the United Nations detailed maps delineating the Israeli-planted mine fields in south Lebanon, enabling UNIFIL forces to remove them. Swedish mine-clearing teams in Lebanon (working after the withdrawal) have reported that these maps are accurate, and that they have "full cooperation" from the Israel Defense Force liaison. By November 14, the United Nations reported that it had cleared 1,520 mines.

Due to the refusal of the Lebanese government (which is under the influence of Damascus, as reflected by the presence of 30,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon) to open any channels of communication with Israel, a coordinated demining program remains blocked. Indeed, the conflict and violent attacks have continued, and on October 7, 2000, Hizballah sent forces across the border to kidnap three Israeli soldiers.

The continuing conflict via Hizballah and other terrorist groups operating in Lebanon (backed by Damascus and Iran) has exacerbated the dangers posed by mines in the area. In addition, press reports originating in Lebanon regarding Israeli policy on the use of mines and APWs, including a number citing unnamed United Nations personnel, have been found to be unsubstantiated and designed primarily to isolate Israel politically.

#### *Jordan*

Since the 1940s, the long border between Israel and Jordan has been used as an area of infiltration and direct military conflict. Consequently, many mine fields were laid along both sides of the Jordanian-Israeli border. In 1994, Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty, and in 1997, the two countries carried out a combined project of clearing mine fields along their shared border. Israel also handed over maps of Israeli planted mines and suspected mine areas to the Jordanian authorities.

Israel is currently involved in a multilateral humanitarian landmine clearance project with Jordan and has offered the Jordanian engineering corps additional mine-clearing equipment

and safety gear. In addition, Israel has offered to fund a mine victim rehabilitation program and is willing to provide technical training assistance for its medical staff.

Israel has also treated Jordanian victims of Jordanian landmines. To date, four victims, three adults and a child, have undergone extensive treatment and rehabilitation at Israel's Beit Loewenstein and Schneider's Children's Hospital.

### **Palestinian Authority**

During the Second Meeting of State Parties, the Palestinian NGOs in attendance focused on anti-Israeli political propaganda, rather than the substance of the issues and efforts to develop a basis for cooperation in mine education and clearance and victim rehabilitation. Palestinian activists (funded by groups such as Defense for Children International and belonging to organizations such as Al-Haq) distributed blatantly hostile anti-Israeli literature, press releases and screened films condemning Israeli policy in which the landmine issue was, at best, secondary. Similarly, on July 4, 2001, Al-Haq accused Israeli forces of planting landmines in the proximity of an outpost near al-Khader, in the Bethlehem area. These allegations were not supported with evidence and were denied by Israeli officials.

In this environment, Palestinian claims of Israeli landmine use in the West Bank and Gaza Strip cannot be considered reliable. After publishing these allegations, the *Boston Globe* issued a formal retraction, noting "an editorial July 10 implied that, in the current Middle East conflict, Israel is placing mines in areas where Palestinians live. This claim is not substantiated."

Meir Itzchaki, of the Arms Control Division, Regional Security and Arms Control Department, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, disputed the Palestinian claims in a letter to the coordinator of Landmine Monitor, in which he stated: "Minefields laid by the IDF are, as a matter of routine, fenced, and warning signs in Hebrew, Arabic and English, are placed. Additionally, the IDF conducts safety inspections on a regular basis and transfers the appropriate information to civilian authorities.... Israel has become party to the Amended Mines Protocol II despite the unique circumstances prevailing in the Middle East. Having decided to join this instrument, Israel fulfills its obligations to the fullest extent, and strongly rejects allegations to the contrary."

The Palestinians have also used landmines in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in their war against Israel. According to an Israeli press report, "security sources in Israel have learned that the PA has increased its mine-laying and fortification work in its outposts facing IDF position[s]." In addition, members of various Palestinian militia groups extract explosives from landmines (placed in 1967) for the manufacturer of other explosive devices and have attempted to improvise anti-vehicle mines from bombs and grenades meant for use against IDF tanks.

### **Conclusions**

In the Israeli environment, and in the broader Middle East, it is impossible to separate policies dealing with landmines or any other topic related to security from the broader political framework. Israel's security realities and the continued warfare with the Palestinian Authority following the failure of the Oslo peace efforts, as well as continued threats from many other areas in the region, determine the limits of its landmine policy. As long as these threats continue, the use of landmines as part of wider defensive actions will be seen as both necessary and justified, and Israeli participation in the Ottawa convention will continue to be limited. At the same time, and within these restrictions, Israel has been taking and continues to take the dangers posed by landmines seriously, and offering assistance in mine clearance, education and rehabilitation.

If and when the direction of regional peace initiatives changes, and other countries, such as Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, are willing to resume cooperation with Israel, regional landmine

limitation and removal activities can also resume. National borders do not restrict landmines and other forms of anti-personnel weapons, and floods, as well as other natural processes, often shift the location of mine fields from one side of a conflict line to another. Ultimately, the interests of all of the people in the Middle East require cooperative activities—both to end the need to employ landmines for defense as well as to expand clearance activities that would prevent additional unnecessary casualties.

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