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More International Support Needed for Clearance

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Warning about mines written on outside wall of building in Raqqa, Syria, January 21, 2018. © Human Rights Watch

(Beirut) – Homemade landmines have killed and injured hundreds of civilians, including more than 150 children, in Raqqa, [Syria](#) since the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) was pushed out of the city in October 2017, Human Rights Watch said today.

ISIS had planted the antipersonnel mines when it controlled the city. They include devices often called booby traps or improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Most appeared to be victim-activated and therefore banned under international law.

"The defeat of ISIS in Raqqa was heralded as a global international victory, but international support for dealing with the aftermath of the battle, and notably the deadly legacy of mines, has not risen to the challenge," said [Nadim Houry](#), terrorism/counterterrorism program director at Human Rights Watch. "Explosive devices have already killed and injured hundreds of civilians, but these numbers will most likely increase as more people return."

During a visit to the city in late January 2018, Human Rights Watch collected information from the Kurdish Red Crescent and international medical organizations working in the area. They found

that between October 21, 2017 and January 20, 2018, mines injured at least 491 people, including 157 children, many of whom died. The actual number of victims is surely higher, as many people have died before reaching any medical assistance and those deaths were not necessarily reported.

Some members of the anti-ISIS coalition have donated funds for demining efforts, notably for clearing "critical infrastructure." But local authorities in Raqqa and medical providers expressed concerns about the limited effort to clear residential areas and said there was a shortage of demining equipment and expertise. The situation has led Raqqa residents to pay local people, who are often ill-equipped, to risk their lives to demine homes.

According to local authorities, more than 14,500 families had returned to Raqqa, notably to neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city, like [al-Meshleb](#), by December 20, 2017. The authorities expect that substantial numbers of people will continue to return, despite the high level of mine contamination and the limited services available in the heavily damaged city.

The Raqqa Civilian Council, which is in charge of the city, issued a directive on November 21 urging people not to return to their homes before neighborhoods had been cleared of mines and other explosive devices. However, many local residents whom Human Rights Watch interviewed said that they had returned to check on their homes despite the risks because they feared looting or wanted to avoid remaining in camps for the displaced.

Residents said that relatives and neighbors were injured by explosives that detonated when they opened their refrigerator or washing machine, moved a large bag of sugar left behind, or simply pushed open a bedroom door. These accounts show that most of the victims were injured or killed by victim-activated improvised explosive devices, rather than by explosives detonated by a vehicle or by remote-control.



Poster warning about danger of explosive remnants of war on roundabout in Raqqa, Syria, January 21, 2018. © Human Rights Watch

Victim-activated devices that explode due to the presence, proximity, or contact of a person fall under the definition of an antipersonnel landmine and are banned by the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, which prohibits any use of antipersonnel landmines under any circumstance. Even if labeled as improvised explosive devices or booby traps, such mines are prohibited by the Mine Ban Treaty, which Syria has not joined.

According to one demining organization working in Raqqa, a common switch or detonator used by ISIS relied on passive infrared sensors, an electronic sensor that measures infrared light radiating from objects in its field of view and detonates when a person merely passes through a particular area. The group noted that such improvised mines have been found in "building doorways, under stairwells, debris piles, roadside, rubble piles and even buried in open fields."

The United States and other members of the anti-ISIS international coalition, including the [United Kingdom](#), [Germany](#), the [Netherlands](#), and [France](#), have provided or promised support for demining efforts, particularly to clear "[critical infrastructure sites](#)" while [training local residents to](#)

[take the lead in clearing residential areas](#). But the local demand for demining is far outstripping existing services.

A member of the Raqqa Civilian Council indicated that families could ask their local neighborhood council to request an inspection of their homes before returning, but that the ability to respond did not meet the demand. In just one Raqqa neighborhood, the local council reported receiving about 10 requests for house inspections a day, while they said that the local authorities' ability to respond is about 10 clearance tasks a week across the entire city.

The discrepancy has driven many local residents to simply pay someone to clear their homes. During its visit, Human Rights Watch saw young men waiting at a roundabout to offer their services to inspect houses and remove rubble, at great risk to their own lives. One local resident said that he paid 25,000 Syrian pounds (about US\$50) for a man to check his house. "It's like playing Russian roulette, but these young men are desperate for money," the resident said.

International donors should make mine clearance and mine risk education a priority to protect people from these avoidable deaths and injuries, Human Rights Watch said. Countries bordering Syria should facilitate access for demining organizations and for humanitarian assistance to survivors.

"Visiting Raqqa, one is struck by the discrepancy between the international support to militarily defeat ISIS and the very timid support to deal with the aftermath," Houry said. "If the situation does not change, the ISIS legacy of landmines will continue to kill for years."

Human Rights Watch is a founding member of the [International Campaign to Ban Landmines](#), which received the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to bring about the Mine Ban Treaty and for its contributions to a new international diplomacy based on humanitarian imperatives.

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