

# Eight Million Tonnes of Unexploded Mines and Munitions Endanger All Children in Northern Iraq

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*"I was playing football with friends when a bomb exploded right under my feet. They took me to the hospital: both my legs and also the lower part of my left arm were amputated."*

Kaum was just 14 when in 2014 he fled the village of Bartalla, 20km east of Mosul, as the Islamic State group began its rampage across Iraq. For three years, he lived in a refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan. In December 2017, he finally returned home and his daily life was slowly returning to normality – when he accidentally detonated an explosive remnant.

His life was changed forever.

*"I can't go to school anymore because I am still traumatised. My friends are helping me, they always give me a ride to go out with them, but I know I will never be able to play football with them again."*

We met Kaum at the East Mosul rehabilitation centre. His story details an emergency inside the emergency. A year after its liberation, the area surrounding Iraq's second largest city remains a ticking time-bomb.

According to UN Habitat, [eight million tons of explosive remnants contaminate the city](#).

Thousands of people have been injured returning home from camps for the displaced.

*"It is very difficult for those who return to rebuild their homes because under the rubble there are still many IEDs, explosive devices and remnants. IEDs were mainly home-made by [the Islamic State group] and for this reason they are even more dangerous," says Hawar Mustafa, programme coordinator at Emergency, an Italian NGO.*



Prosthetic clinics have teamed up after the manufacturer's factory was targeted [Laura Cappon]

Mustafa coordinates the emergency rehab centre in Sulemaniya, which coordinates with its partner in Mosul to provide prosthetic limbs after the local factory that produced them was hit, seriously compromising production.

The emergency center in Sulemaniya still receives a high number of patients from Mosul.

Mahfouz is one.

He was walking with his son through the streets of Bab Sinjar's old district in Mosul when an explosive device inside a nearby car detonated due to a small fire.

"Since I lost my leg, I can't work anymore," Mahfouz tells The New Arab. "I was a driver and now I can't do anything anymore. I'm sitting home and my son is the only one providing an income for the family.

"Now with this prosthesis I feel better and I hope to be able to drive soon, perhaps with a car with special equipment, which would allow me to resume a sort-of normal life after years of war."

Hundreds of displaced people are still living in camps and refuse to return to their homes because of the numbers of "victim-activated IEDs" and explosive remnants in the city.

"A couple of weeks ago, Iraqi soldiers found a grenade in a building beside my house. It was a former IS member's house and now the authorities forbid us to enter in any building which was occupied by IS," Nawal says.

She lives in Badush, northwestern Mosul. Her daughter is among 4,800 people who - according to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) - lost a limb during the war.

"There are still a lot of explosive devices in my area - and this is a huge problem. Our daily life is already difficult, we don't have drinkable water; we have to boil it before use it. My daughter's life was destroyed when she lost her leg and I don't want it to happen again - to me or to anyone else of the family."

In the same village, Jazm lost his legs in October 2017. He was playing football with his friends close to a concrete factory. He was only 11 years old at the time.

"After the amputation, I spent ten months without going to school. I was hospitalised for months and underwent surgery several times. My eyes were also damaged by the explosion," he says.

"Now that I wear a prosthesis, I will try to return to school, because I want to go to college. I would like to study medicine in order to be able to help people in need as the doctors helped me after the incident."

The presence of anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance is not a new problem in northern Iraq. Three decades of fighting in Iraq's northern governorates of Dohuk, Arbil and Sulaymaniyah left behind a huge number of landmines and bomblets. According to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), these devices threaten an estimated 1,100 communities in northern Iraq and cause an average of 30 accidents per month.



New prosthetic limbs are crafted carefully and slowly, and demand is high [Laura Cappon]

The consequences have been felt by entire generations.

Naswan is from west Mosul. He lost his hand when he was only ten years old, picking up a grenade from the ground when he was playing in the outskirts of the city. Twenty-five years later, his cousin lost a leg when he accidentally detonated a mine in the rubble of his former family home.

"I can't believe the same thing happened to my cousin," Naswan says. "He returned to rebuild his partially destroyed house. As soon as he entered, a bomb went off, and his mother was also injured. I'm scared: the area is not properly cleared and I'm afraid not only for my three sons and my daughter but for everyone around."

The work of securing the city of Mosul and the surrounding area is moving at a slow pace. According to the UN it could take another ten years, during which many more people will be victims of these hidden devices.

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