

SEARCHING FOR DANGER

ALONG JORDAN'S NORTHERN BORDER, A TEAM OF WOMEN IS DOING ONE OF THE MOST DANGEROUS JOBS IN THE COUNTRY—CLEARING LANDMINES. THEY'RE THE FIRST ALL-FEMALE DE-MINING SQUAD IN THE MIDDLE EAST
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T THIS STRETCH OF THE JORDANIAN-SYRIAN BORDER

near Mafraq, there doesn't seem to be any clear distinction between the two countries, apart from an official crossing's concrete structure the size of a one-bedroom house and a parallel mound of earth several feet wide stretching into the distance. But there must be something more, something to let people know that on the other side is a separate state.

There is, or rather, there are. They lay dormant underground: more than 40,000 limb-destroying clusters of metal and explosives—landmines—spread out among ninety-three minefields.

Just outside one of these fields, a barbed-wire fence that surrounds the minefields has a large enough gap to allow the curious to observe de-miners as they graze their metal detectors above the ground, gently brushing against the tips of desert weeds. This scene looks like something from Mars in a science-fiction film.

After about fifteen minutes there's an unexpected sound—a soft, high-pitched laugh. One of the de-miners walks toward the fence as a slight breeze reveals a rebellious shimmering strand of hair breaking its way out of confinement from, what seems to be, a *hijab*. Despite working underneath heavy layers of protective fabric and armor in thirty-eight degree weather, this former office worker wears a jovial smile. Her name is Waed Al Hourri and she's one of six Jordanian female de-miners working to clear the remaining landmines along the border with Syria as part of a Norwegian People's Aid de-mining initiative referred to as the Northern Border Project.

Along with her five other team members, twenty-nine-year-old Al Hourri was one of fifty-three women from the surrounding area who applied for a spot on the first all-female de-mining team in the Middle East. After seeing an ad for the job in a newspaper, a relative of Al Hourri's passed the information to her. The humanitarian side of the work attracted Al Hourri. "Areas full of landmines are harmful to humans and that is why I did it," she says.

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In October of 2008, Al Hourri and twenty-three other women began an intensive training course led by the NPA. Five weeks later, eighteen women graduated, and five days after that twelve were selected to begin work. At first, as Al Hourri recalls, many people in Mafraq did not support the idea of women working as de-miners. "Working in the minefield wasn't my intended career path and they would put me down about it," she says.



Previous page: Iman Al Qboos pauses before crossing into the minefield to start her shift. The trench between the mine field and paved road provides a safe escape route.

Side by side with numerous all-male teams, the women have not just kept up with their counterparts but excelled. They're considered some of the best de-miners working on the Northern Border Project. The NPA's mine action special advisor, Yassin Majali, says, "The women's team is one of the top three teams in terms of accuracy, productivity, and in all different levels of evaluation." Al Hourri says that after about a year, many young women in the community began to inquire about training courses and were interested in becoming de-miners. Unlike many other women in the border area, most of the de-miners are now financially independent. "Socially, it hasn't benefitted me. Financially, it has. I'm doing much better," Al Hourri says. "Emotionally, well, it's very nerve-wracking."

Breaking traditional social and gender norms is exactly what the NPA intended to do. Majali says, "One of the ideas in our mind was to have a female de-mining structure within the whole de-mining structure of our organization. The point is to meet gender-equality objectives and to see how much the women can do in this area of work. The third thing is to improve their livelihood." The NPA first implemented this initiative in Kosovo in 1999 with the creation of the first all-women de-miner team in the world. Riding on the heels of this initial success, NPA decided to implement all-women de-miner teams in other countries: Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Jordan. Now, at least on paper, de-mining is considered a unisex occupation.

Above: A plume of dark smoke billows where anti-tank and anti-personnel mines are defused and burned. After the mines are located, they're taken in a wooden box to a safe area and burned. Top right: Manual Clearance Coordinator Qasem Al Smadi. Middle right: Seemingly rudimentary tools such as rakes, brushes, stakes, and mallets are used to locate mines, remove them, and track the team's progress. Bottom right: Handa Al Qteish works with a metal detector, which can detect mines buried up to forty centimeters below the surface.

IN NOVEMBER 2007, just more than a year after implementing the daunting task of clearing 126 Israeli minefields strewn between the Dead Sea and Red Sea, the NPA began preparations to clear the ten-and-a-half-square-kilometer stretch of ninety-three minefields along the Syrian-Jordanian border. By April 1 of the following year, the ground operations commenced with the goal to clear 136,570 landmines by 2009. However, that turned out to be too ambitious a deadline and now they hope to finish next May.

The landmines, planted by Jordan in the 1970s to deter threats spurred by hostility with Syria and to combat smuggling, have prevented the 50,000 civilians in the surrounding area from using the land for agricultural purposes and—in the worse cases—have caused horrific injuries or even deaths. According to the National Committee for Demining and Rehabilitation, there have been 899 victims of Jordan's landmines. Of them, 120 were killed. As Majali explains: "Most of the people who have died from the mines have started playing with it in their hands. They don't know what it is and it sets off near his or her face and vital organs."

In addition to making the land safe for civilians, the other main purpose behind clearing the minefields, according to Majali, is to implement a one-billion-dollar free-trade zone between Jordan and Syria.





A de-miner near the northern village of Jaber clears mines manually using a rake, one of the tools used for sifting through the topmost layer of soil. The sand dune behind her is Syrian territory.

However, despite national motives, Jordan—a signatory of the internationally recognized Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, known as the Ottawa Treaty—has a legal international obligation to clear its ground of landmines by May 1, 2012. On April 1, 2008, Jordan put the treaty into law via the National Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Law. (Iraq is Jordan’s only neighbor to adopt the treaty.)

AFTER ABOUT AN HOUR OF OBSERVING the women in the field, the work begins to look tedious. There have been no explosions, hardly any movement—everyone seems to hover around the same spot for long periods of time. There’s minimal talking. The only danger seems to be from heat stroke underneath the scorching sun and layers of fabric and armor.

However, letting down one’s guard and thinking for a second that de-mining is not dangerous is when the job becomes life threatening. “If I’m not 100 percent confident, then I don’t proceed,” Al Hourri says. “I depend on the detector, and I make sure that nothing dangerous is behind me.” Unfortunately, though, the metal detectors aren’t perfectly reliable. They can’t always detect landmines buried deep in the ground. A male de-miner, named Saleh Al Amawi, found this out the hard way: “I was out in the field looking for mines, and I walked passed one by a meter. On the way back, the detector didn’t give me a signal, and then my foot got stuck in the ground and it exploded.” The explosion blew off the bottom of his foot near the ankle. Although the incident took place in September 2009, he still has pain when he moves. According to Majali, the women’s closest call was when a landmine exploded near one of them and, because she forgot to wear goggles, flying debris scratched her face and eyes. So far there have been sixty-five such incidents in which landmines were accidentally set off by de-mining crews. Six caused severe injuries. A seventh was fatal.

In order to prevent loss of limbs or worse, the NPA requires every de-miner to strictly follow a set of procedures. The organization’s country director, Mikael Bold, says, “If you follow them, you’re not going to get injured.” And according to him, women tend to follow the rules more rigidly while men are a bit more willing to take a shortcut.

In addition to stepping on a landmine, some other dangers come from scorpions, snakes, and the heat. In order to avoid the effects of the latter, the de-miners begin work at 6am, finish at 2pm, and are given numerous breaks under the shade of a tent.

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According to Majali, there are four phases to the process: In the first, the landmines are identified via records from royal engineers and the National Committee for Demining and Rehabilitation. Once the mines are identified, de-miners use metal detectors, rakes, excavation tools, and prodders to locate them, which is what the women were doing during the visit. After they’ve found as many as possible,

minesweeping machines comb the field like a tractor to clear any remaining landmines. The final phase uses a combination of dogs, machines, and de-mining teams to assess the area and account for any missing landmines. “It’s like doing detective work,” says Bold.

As of the beginning of October, the de-mining teams had cleared a total of 105,862 landmines from the Syrian-Jordanian border: 71,834 anti-personnel mines and 34,028 anti-tank mines.

Although the Northern Border Project is making ample progress, its future is uncertain and the postponed deadline is shaky. Bold says, “Looking at it now, maybe they were too positive when reporting; it was a calculation error and more factors have been contributed to the final plan.” According to Majali, the NPA has only secured enough funds to last until the end of the year, but they are currently in the process of talking with donors.

There is also the uprising in Syria to consider. The project was forced to stop a couple of times due to the danger of working near the Syrian town of Daraa—the uprising’s birthplace. And, if unrest continues after the project, it may be an obstacle to generating development interest in the area and releasing some of land to the community.

Despite these impediments, doubt still remains about the ability to clear 100 percent of the landmines. Unfortunately, those buried deeper than the standard fifteen centimeters are sometimes difficult to detect. “If mines are laid deeper than we’re clearing, then there are going to be mines left in the ground,” Bold says. “You need to put the right tool on the right ground and say, ‘We’ve done our best, we’ve done all our reasonable effort to make this land safe.’” It’s not a problem unique to Jordan. In Belgium and France, hundreds of tons of mines and unexploded bombs from World War I are discovered by farmers every year.

ONCE TWO TEAMS OF EIGHT, the project’s all-women de-miner teams have been reduced to one team of six. This dramatic drop was not due to danger or hard conditions but, instead, a budget cut in 2009 and social factors such as marriage. Majali says, “Some of the husbands don’t need them to work and prefer them to stay at home or find other work.” New to the Jordan branch, Bold says he’s experienced this dilemma elsewhere. “What I’ve seen in other programs is when they get married and it’s time to increase the family and get pregnant, they are automatically out of a job because it’s two people to now think about, not only yourself.”

Despite many expert claims that women de-miners excel at their jobs and research from the Mine Action Information Center showing that unisex teams tend to produce high success and fewer injuries, de-mining is still an overwhelmingly male profession.

And, what about the remaining six women? Once the minefields are clear of landmines what do they do? Do they go back to being a housewife? Do they go back to office or factory work, or teaching? Can they transfer to a de-mining project elsewhere in the country or, perhaps, out of the country? When asked about outside work, Majali says, “They will not travel abroad, outside Jordan, to de-mine. Many of them are married with children. One of them is widowed with four or five children. There are opportunities for them in Jordan but they wouldn’t move outside of their communities.” He says there may be occupational training available and open positions they can fill within the NPA.

When I ask Al Hourri what she will do once the project ends she says, “I don’t want to think about it. I’m just concentrating on the present.” ■