

Iraq: UN demining agency rejects desecration accusations, involving historic Mosul churches

The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) in Iraq issued a [statement](#) on Thursday rejecting allegations made earlier this week by a non-profit organization there, alleging that personnel had carried out explosive hazard clearance inside two historic churches in Mosul “in a barbaric and arbitrary manner.”

The allegations, published earlier this week on the website of the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization (HHRO), the Iraqi non-governmental organization in question, accused UNMAS of “crimes no less grievous and insolent than the crimes of Daesh,” and claimed that the clearance was conducted without church authorization, “in a barbaric and arbitrary manner with utter disregard for the holy and religious sanctity” of the two churches, located in the Hosh al-Khan area of the Al Maedan district, in Mosul.

Although UNMAS – and its partner for the clearance project, G4S – were not directly named, UNMAS Iraq said in a statement that it was taking the allegations seriously, open to further investigation of the allegations, and continuing to work closely with the Iraqi Government.

The agency has invited HHRO and officials of the Syriac Catholic Archbishopric in the Nineveh Plains, “as well as other relevant Iraqi authorities, to meet in person to carefully consider the facts relative to their statements and hope they will offer to correct the record when known.”

UNMAS said it was “keen on safeguarding all archeological, religious and historical sites”, from the assessment phase of de-mining and other clearance operations, working “closely with the Iraqi State and religious authorities to ensure this national treasure is secure and safe, to prevent any additional damage to that inflicted by the terrorists and the conflict”.

To date, UNMAS Iraq and G4S teams have cleared and safely removed 53 suicide belts from the church sites, 74 munitions of various types, seven improvised bombs, and assorted ammunition and materials such as home-made explosives. According to the agency, the site and the accumulated debris remain heavily contaminated with explosives and will require further clearance.

The UN’s demining agency further explained that, since it started operating in Mosul in November 2017, over 1,500 clearance tasks have been carried out, resulting in the removal of approximately 48,000 explosive hazards of all types, heretofore without any complaints.

In 2014, the jihadist terrorist group ISIL, known in Arabic as Da’esh, occupied Iraq’s second city of Mosul, an historic centre of Christianity in

the Middle East for centuries, demanding that they convert to Islam, pay tribute, or face execution. More than 100 churches and other religious sites were destroyed or demolished.

Many other Christian enclaves across northern Iraq, and those of other religious minorities, were overrun and destroyed by Da'esh fighters during more than three years of occupation.