

Beyond the Device: Rethinking C-IED for Contemporary Threat Environments

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KEY FINDINGS

- Effective counter-improvised explosive device (C-IED) responses need to be threat-informed, context-specific, and adaptable. Rather than applying a single standardized approach to C-IED, states and their international assistance partners should use threat and capability assessments to identify priorities, sequence investments, and adapt responses as threats evolve.
- The effectiveness of C-IED efforts depends as much on governance and coordination as on technical and operational capabilities. Diverse relevant stakeholders need to be connected through clear institutional leadership, appropriate policy and legal frameworks, inter-agency coordination, information management, and mechanisms for learning and adaptation.
- Where improvised explosive device (IED) threats, and the systems enabling these threats, extend across borders, regional approaches can strengthen national C-IED responses. Regional organizations and frameworks, for example, can complement nationally led responses by supporting information exchange, joint or complementary threat analysis, cross-border cooperation and security initiatives, capacity development, and the sharing of expertise and lessons learned.
- The effectiveness of C-IED efforts should ultimately be measured by their contribution to reducing IED-related risks and harm. A human-centred approach supports operational C-IED efforts by integrating civilian protection, victim assistance, and community engagement; recognizing that impacts vary across population groups; and ensuring that C-IED actors safeguard civilians, act responsibly, and remain accountable.
- Reducing IED risks requires complementarity between C-IED and wider interventions, without amending the clear boundaries of its remit. Humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, governance, arms control, and security actors can complement the efforts of C-IED institutions to prevent and reduce IED-related risks, while preserving distinct mandates, comparative advantages, and humanitarian principles.

Context: Adapting C-IED to today's threat environments

The widespread use of IEDs in conflicts during the early 2000s prompted significant investment in C-IED capabilities and the development of more systematic approaches to addressing the threat.¹ The C-IED doctrine that emerged during this period became organized around three complementary lines of effort: 'defeat the device, prepare the force, and attack the network' (Joly and Amoroso, 2025). Together, these efforts sought to detect and neutralize devices, prepare security forces to operate in IED-affected environments, and identify, disrupt, degrade, and ultimately dismantle the IED system—understood to comprise the actors, processes, resources, and relationships directly involved in producing and using IEDs.

These three functions remain central to C-IED measures. Experience over the past two decades has, however, shown that applying these functions effectively requires a common understanding of how IED threats emerge and evolve, and of the environments in which they occur (UNSG, 2024, pp. 8–9). IED threats do not develop in isolation. Materials, knowledge, financing, and technologies move between actors and across borders, while growing access to dual-use materials and technical knowledge creates new opportunities for adaptation. Wider political, social, economic, institutional, and security conditions play an instrumental role in shaping IED threats (Blancafort and Amoroso, 2026). Looking beyond individual devices, incidents, and networks is therefore key to understanding how perpetrators, motivations, resources, and enabling conditions interact with the broader operating environment.

This wider understanding of C-IED threats has direct implications for the coherence of national responses. The Small Arms Survey's work in West Africa suggests that an effective C-IED response involves more than acquiring a predetermined set of technical capabilities (Small Arms Survey,

2024b). Instead, the appropriate combination of prevention, preparedness, and response measures varies according to the nature and level of the threat, while the effectiveness of these measures depends on the governance arrangements through which they are organized and coordinated.

Efforts to measure the effectiveness of the response should take into account the harm it seeks to prevent and reduce. IEDs affect civilians and communities through death and injury, displacement, restrictions on mobility and humanitarian access, damage to infrastructure, disruption of livelihoods and services, and longer-term effects on recovery (UNSG, 2024, p. 2). Taking into account these wider consequences makes it clear that they cannot all be addressed through C-IED measures alone. Some factors that enable IED use, as well as many of its consequences, extend beyond the remit of security institutions. Efforts to reduce IED risks should therefore involve complementary contributions from other relevant stakeholders, although this does not imply making these interventions part of C-IED.

The Survey's research and support in several contexts suggests that C-IED approaches continue to rely on the established three-functions doctrine while increasingly considering the wider factors that shape IED threats and the effectiveness of responses. Drawing on the Survey's research and policy support, this Situation Update examines what C-IED responses require to be effective in today's threat environments, nearly two decades after the emergence of the established C-IED doctrine. It explores how understanding the threat can inform comprehensive and context-specific national responses; how effective governance and institutional arrangements can underpin those responses; and how C-IED responses can connect appropriately with wider efforts to reduce IED-related risks and harm. Published ahead of the forthcoming 2026 UN General Assembly resolution on countering the threat posed by IEDs, the Situation Update is also intended to contribute to ongoing international policy discussions on responses to evolving IED threats.

¹ In this Situation Update, C-IED is used as an overarching term to refer to the broader field or approach; more specific terms, including C-IED measures, capabilities, and responses, are used where relevant.

Understanding IED threats in their wider context

IED threats are often analysed by considering the immediate elements of an attack: the device, perpetrator, method of delivery, and networks supporting manufacture and use (NATO, 2018, pp. 2–3). While these remain essential to threat analysis, they do not fully explain why IED use emerges in a particular environment, how it is sustained, or how the threat may evolve. A fuller picture requires examining the wider actors, motivations, resources, relationships, and conditions that make IED use possible.

The Survey's recent work distinguishes between several interconnected dimensions of this wider threat environment (Small Arms Survey, 2025b, p. 3): context-specific drivers—such as political, ideological, strategic, economic, criminal, or coercive objectives—help explain why actors choose to use IEDs, while context-specific enablers translate intent into capability through, for example, financing, procurement, technical expertise, manufacture, training, and supporting networks. These drivers and enablers interact with a much broader environment, characterized by political, security, economic, social, legal, and informational factors that may facilitate or constrain IED activity.

Access to materials illustrates these interactions. An actor may, for example, be driven to use IEDs by political, ideological, strategic, or other motivations, but its ability to do so may, in turn, depend on access to commercial explosives, precursor chemicals, detonators, or other dual-use items. Procurement and trafficking networks can enable that access, while gaps in regulatory controls—for instance over dual-use components—and porous borders can create conditions that facilitate the acquisition and movement of these materials (Blancafort and Amoroso, 2024, p. 26; UNSG, 2024, p. 15).

Changes in the wider context can also affect the opportunities and constraints surrounding IED use. Technological, regulatory, economic, and environmental developments may, for example, facilitate access to IED-related materials, resources, knowledge, or capabilities, or otherwise reduce the barriers preventing IED activity (National Academies

of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018, p. 2). Similarly, greater access to commercial technologies, digital knowledge networks, electronic financial systems, and innovations across improvised weapon systems can facilitate acquisition, adaptation, and the transfer of knowledge and expertise (UNCCT et al., 2022, p. 30). Such developments do not necessarily generate IED threats themselves; rather, their significance depends on how they interact with existing drivers, enablers, and broader contextual conditions.

Taken together, these interactions show how the IED system is embedded within a wider environment that can enable, constrain, or accelerate its development. Understanding these interactions shifts analysis beyond individual incidents towards examining the relationships and conditions that shape the IED threat over time.

This perspective also supports a more dynamic form of threat assessment. The Survey's approach to threat assessments analyses not only the 'what, how, where, when, who, and why' of IED use, but also broader political, social, economic, and security dynamics (Small Arms Survey, 2025b, p. 9). Rather than treating incident data as an end point, this approach seeks to understand why threats manifest in particular ways, what factors may be sustaining them, and how changes in the operating environment could affect their evolution. This provides the analytical basis for the next step: determining the appropriate combination of preventive, preparedness, and responsive measures in a given context.

Translating threat understanding into context-specific responses

A detailed understanding of an IED threat is not an end in itself. Its value lies in informing decisions about which combination of C-IED measures to apply, where to prioritize investment, and how to develop capabilities as the threat evolves. If IED threats arise from different combinations of actors, motivations, resources, and enabling conditions, the responses to them cannot be assumed to follow a single model.

The Survey's work in West and East Africa illustrates this point (Small Arms Survey, 2024b). For example, in contexts with no significant IED threat and limited national C-IED capabilities, priorities may centre on prevention and preparedness, including controls over explosives and components, border management, intelligence and early warning, and awareness. In areas where a threat is emerging, strengthening coordination and information-sharing arrangements and developing basic operational capacities may also become priorities. In contexts where IED use is more established and C-IED capabilities have developed over time, greater emphasis may be placed on exploitation and investigation, judicial processes, victim assistance, and mechanisms for analysing and adapting to changes in the threat.

These examples are illustrative rather than fixed categories or sequential stages; the appropriate combination of measures will depend on the specific threat, existing capacities, and national priorities.

The Survey's approach to threat assessment combines the analysis of technical characteristics, tactics, actors, motivations, geographic patterns, and wider contextual dynamics with an evaluation of national capabilities (Small Arms Survey, 2025b, p. 3). This can help identify gaps, existing sufficient capacities, and areas where additional investment is likely to have the greatest effect. The Survey's experience in applying the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) C-IED Capability Maturity Model and Self-Assessment Tool (C-IED CMM SAT) (Seddon and Malaret Baldo, 2020) highlighted the need to consider different national starting points—including states with no current IED threat and limited C-IED capabilities, those facing emerging or existing threats, and those confronting established threats after several years of C-IED investment (Small Arms Survey, 2024a, p. 4). Regularly reassessing both the threat and capabilities also helps to ensure that priorities remain aligned with the evolving threat rather than merely responding to past IED use.

This threat-informed approach, combined with a strong awareness of existing C-IED capabilities, is particularly relevant for meaningful international

assistance. The approach can not only help maximize the effectiveness of training, equipment, and institutional models developed to respond to nationally identified priorities, but also avoid ill-advised investment. Furthermore, it can strengthen national ownership by enabling states to determine the necessary measures and capabilities, sequence investments, and allocate resources according to their threat environment and strategic priorities.

Yet capabilities alone are not sufficient: their effectiveness depends on how they are governed, coordinated, and sustained within a coherent national C-IED response.

Organizing and sustaining national C-IED responses

Identifying the appropriate capabilities to address a particular IED threat is only one part of developing an effective national C-IED response. These capabilities must also function together as a coherent system. The Survey's assessments in West and East Africa have highlighted the importance of cross-cutting elements—including policy and strategy, institutional arrangements, inter-agency coordination, information management, and adaptation—in connecting preventive and responsive measures (Small Arms Survey, 2024b, pp. 4–5; 2025a, p. 6). C-IED is not only a technical and operational challenge, but also one of governance.

A national policy or strategy can translate threat understanding into priorities and responsibilities and lay the foundation for coordinated action, while also providing a basis for allocating resources and assessing progress. The institutional arrangements supporting this framework will vary. C-IED efforts may sit within criminal justice, counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, or other security systems, with implications for legal frameworks, institutional responsibilities, and the roles of—and balance between—civilian and security actors. While no single institutional model applies across all contexts, a designated lead entity should have sufficient authority to provide strategic direction and coordinate the national C-IED response (Amoroso, 2024).

The designation of a lead entity is particularly important because C-IED responsibilities and capabilities typically span multiple institutions. Defence and security forces, regulators, prosecutors, and other civilian institutions each have distinct responsibilities and therefore contribute different expertise and information. Effective inter-agency arrangements, ideally coordinated by a designated lead entity, can connect these functions, establish shared priorities, and reduce gaps and duplication (Small Arms Survey, 2024a, pp. 6–7).

This coordination relies on effective information management. Maintaining an understanding of an evolving national threat requires mechanisms to collect, analyse, and share information between institutions and act across institutional boundaries. Fragmented databases, inconsistent reporting, weak feedback loops, and unclear information-sharing procedures can undermine this process. Functional information sharing depends on technical systems alongside agreed procedures, appropriate authorization, clear mandates, and institutional trust; a designated lead entity can help ensure coherence across these arrangements (Small Arms Survey, 2025a, pp. 19–20).

Institutional arrangements may also need to connect with regional mechanisms where IED threats extend across borders—such as when IED-related materials, financing, technical knowledge, and perpetrators move across borders, often through networks operating in multiple countries (UNCCT et al., 2022, p. 27). Regional organizations and frameworks facilitate information exchange, threat analysis, cross-border cooperation, capacity development, and the identification of emerging trends and shared vulnerabilities (Ghana NACSA, 2025). National and regional arrangements must also, however, be capable of responding to changes. As perpetrators adapt technologies, materials, tactics, targets, and methods, continued threat monitoring and institutional learning are essential to inform the necessary modifications to policies, training, capabilities, and resource allocation.

Ultimately, an effective national C-IED response depends not only on the capabilities of individual institutions, but also on their ability to work together as a coherent system. Clear leadership, inter-agency coordination, effective information

management, and mechanisms for adaptation are therefore essential to connect and sustain the various elements of the response. The effectiveness of these arrangements should ultimately be considered in relation to their overarching purpose: preventing and reducing the harm caused by IEDs.

Putting people at the centre of C-IED

An effective national C-IED response cannot be assessed solely by the capabilities it possesses, the devices it neutralizes, or the networks it disrupts. Its broader purpose is to prevent and reduce harm from IED threats. Beyond their immediate effects, IEDs cause death and injury, contribute to displacement and insecurity, restrict mobility and humanitarian access, disrupt livelihoods and essential services, and generate longer-term psychosocial and socio-economic impacts (UNSG, 2024, p. 2).

A human-centred approach therefore broadens the understanding of what defines an effective C-IED response. Preventing attacks and disrupting those responsible remain central objectives, but reducing harm also requires focusing on affected populations and the consequences of IED use. Victim assistance is one part of this response. Drawing on its experience in applying the UNIDIR C-IED CMM SAT in West Africa, the Survey suggested making victim assistance a distinct component of the C-IED response and subsequently incorporated this approach into its assessment in Kenya (Small Arms Survey, 2024b, p. 4; 2025a, pp. 16–17). More recent Survey work has framed such assistance as extending from emergency trauma care to rehabilitation, psychosocial support, socio-economic inclusion, and longer-term recovery (Wild and Amoroso, 2024).

IED threats are not experienced uniformly. Gender, age, disability, socio-economic status, and other factors shape exposure to risk, consequences, access to protection and assistance, and participation in decision-making. Gender-responsive and, ideally, intersectional analysis can therefore strengthen understanding of both the threat and its impacts. The Survey's work has highlighted the value of meaningful participation of women and other under-represented groups in threat analysis, planning,

and policy development (Small Arms Survey, 2024a, pp. 10–11).

Affected communities provide knowledge unavailable through formal security structures, including insights into local insecurity, changes in the operating environment, population exposure, and the everyday consequences of IED use. Appropriate community engagement can therefore strengthen threat understanding, awareness, reporting, preparedness, and prevention. Trust-building is important: Survey assessments have found that weak relations between communities and security forces can hinder outreach and reporting, while sustained community engagement can help build trust, improve reporting, and strengthen responses to IED threats (Small Arms Survey, 2025a, p. 12).

A human-centred approach should not transfer responsibility for security to communities or blur the roles of security, humanitarian, and civilian actors. Rather, it seeks to ensure that C-IED analysis and decision-making consider how threats affect different populations, as well as to create appropriate channels to enable relevant knowledge and experience to inform responses.

Putting people at the centre complements rather than replaces the technical, operational, and governance dimensions of C-IED. It broadens the measure of effectiveness to include reducing harm, supporting recovery, and strengthening the legitimacy and responsiveness of national action (Small Arms Survey, 2026). Yet some consequences of IED use, and some conditions that enable threats to persist, extend beyond the remit of C-IED institutions. This raises the question of how C-IED can connect with wider humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, governance, and arms control efforts, while preserving—and avoiding an indefinite expansion of—its distinct mandates and remit.

Connecting C-IED across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus

Placing human security at the heart of C-IED responses highlights both the wider consequences

of IED threats and the limits of what C-IED institutions can address alone. Some of the conditions that enable or sustain IED threats—including governance weaknesses, illicit flows, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and limited state presence—extend beyond the remit and capabilities of security actors. Reducing IED risks may therefore require interventions across several fields, without implying that all such interventions constitute C-IED.

The humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus provides one framework for understanding these complementarities (Blancafort and Amoroso, 2026). Different actors can address different aspects of the threat environment according to their mandates and comparative advantages. Humanitarian actors may tackle exposure and consequences through explosive ordnance risk education, victim assistance, preparedness, and knowledge of population needs. Development and peacebuilding actors can contribute to infrastructure rehabilitation, governance and regulatory capacity, institutional resilience, and longer-term recovery. Arms control actors can provide expertise on explosives and precursor regulation, diversion, illicit flows, and supply chains, while security and justice actors retain responsibility for intelligence-led operations, investigations, judicial processes, and the disruption of IED systems.

These contributions may overlap without becoming interchangeable. Threat analysis, information management, preparedness, victim assistance, and international cooperation are all areas in which different communities of practice may hold relevant information or expertise. In practice, these interfaces can take different forms depending on the context and respective mandates—such as liaison arrangements, participation in relevant existing coordination forums, complementary assessments, or agreed mechanisms for sharing specific information where appropriate. Humanitarian actors may, for example, benefit from relevant threat information held by security institutions to inform risk analysis and preparedness, while security actors can, where appropriate, draw on humanitarian analysis of population needs, vulnerabilities, and operating environments. Such complementarities should be purpose-specific and designed to protect sensitive information, operational independence, and humanitarian principles.

Connecting these efforts nevertheless requires clear boundaries. A nexus perspective does not imply incorporating different actors into a single C-IED structure. Nor should every intervention that reduces IED risks be labelled C-IED. Humanitarian organizations, in particular, need to preserve the principles and operational independence underpinning their access to affected populations. The objective is therefore not to merge mandates, but to identify where activities can be mutually reinforcing while preserving institutional responsibilities and comparative advantages.

In practice, such complementarity may be difficult to achieve. Coordination challenges within individual sectors, differences in mandates and operating principles, and sensitivities around information sharing can limit the scope for structured cooperation. Complementarity should therefore not be understood as requiring formal coordination between all relevant actors, but rather viewed as a range of possible steps depending on the context—from greater awareness of respective activities and priorities to complementary analysis, appropriate information exchange, or more structured coordination where mandates and operating conditions allow.

Practical mechanisms can support this complementarity: joint or complementary analysis can strengthen understanding of threats and impacts; appropriate information-sharing arrangements can facilitate exchange while safeguarding humanitarian principles and operational requirements; and liaison and deconfliction mechanisms can support humanitarian access and reduce operational risks. For example, in an IED-affected area, security actors may share relevant information on changing threat patterns to inform humanitarian risk assessments and preparedness, while humanitarian actors may provide aggregated analysis of civilian impacts and access constraints. Such exchanges can improve the respective responses without requiring either community to share sensitive information or operate under the same coordination structure.

An HDP nexus perspective therefore broadens the range of interventions relevant to reducing IED risks without necessarily expanding the definition of C-IED itself. A contemporary C-IED approach requires recognizing both where the national C-IED response

can act and where complementary humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, governance, and arms control interventions are needed.

Conclusion: Towards a contemporary understanding of C-IED

The principles that underpin established C-IED doctrine remain relevant. Defeating devices, preparing those exposed to IED threats, and disrupting the networks responsible for threats, as well as the systems that support their use, continue to be essential. The shift in approach examined in this Situation Update does not seek to replace these functions, but rather to place them within a wider analytical, institutional, and policy framework.

C-IED responses should no longer be primarily viewed as a standardized set of capabilities; they should also be understood as a threat-informed, context-specific, and adaptable multi-stakeholder national enterprise. IED threats emerge from interactions between drivers, enablers, and contextual factors. Understanding these interactions is key to informing the appropriate balance of prevention, preparedness, and response. Consequently, there is no single model of—or fixed pathway for developing—national C-IED capacity.

Policy and legal frameworks, institutional leadership, inter-agency coordination, information management, and mechanisms for adaptation are needed to connect individual C-IED efforts and establish a coherent and sustainable approach to addressing the use and threatened use of IEDs. National ownership therefore includes the ability to understand the threat, establish priorities, coordinate institutions, allocate resources, and adapt as the threat evolves.

Efforts to measure the effectiveness of the response should take into account the harm it seeks to prevent and reduce. IED threats affect civilians and communities as well as security and operational environments, making civilian protection, victim assistance, community engagement, gender-

responsive analysis, and accountability just as important as established technical and operational objectives.

Looking beyond the device also means recognizing the limits of C-IED measures. Some conditions enabling IED use and many of its wider consequences fall outside the remit of C-IED institutions. Humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, governance, arms control, and security interventions can contribute in complementary ways to reducing IED risks. The objective is not to expand the definition of C-IED measures to incorporate these activities, but to identify where they can reinforce one another while preserving distinct mandates and comparative advantages.

These developments also have implications for international assistance. External support is more likely to be relevant and sustainable when it is grounded in a shared threat understanding, responds to nationally identified priorities, strengthens institutions and coordination, and complements rather than substitutes national capacities.

The forthcoming 2026 UN General Assembly resolution on IEDs provides an opportunity to reflect this evolution in international policy. Greater attention to threat-informed prevention, national ownership and governance, civilian protection and victim assistance, regional and cross-border cooperation, and appropriate complementarities across the HDP nexus could help align international responses with today’s threat environments. Looking beyond the device therefore means neither abandoning the core functions of C-IED nor expanding its remit, but rather placing those functions within the wider understanding of threats, institutions, people, and operating environments needed to make them effective. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

C-IED	Counter-improvised explosive device
CMM SAT	Capability Maturity Model and Self-Assessment Tool
HDP	Humanitarian, development, and peace
IED	Improvised explosive device
UNIDIR	United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research

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