WAR IN CITIES
PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING
THE HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES
FOR CIVILIANS
Cover photo: Hodan District, Mogadishu, Somalia. People walk through rubble-strewn streets in the aftermath of an explosion in the city.
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FOREWORD

Global population data indicates that population growth will be absorbed by urban centres. “More and more, contemporary warfare takes place in supermarkets, tower blocks, subway tunnels, and industrial districts rather than open fields, jungles or deserts,” and it will affect the lives of even more civilians than in recent decades. As fighting hits the cities of Iraq, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen – and of many other countries – the ICRC receives daily reports of the tremendous devastation that armed conflict causes in urban centres.

In footage from today’s urban war zones we see death and injury, extensive damage to homes, infrastructure and public spaces, and flows of exhausted, frightened people uprooted from their homes. Cities continue to face security restrictions, curfews and checkpoints, as repeated attacks or sudden resumptions of hostilities affect people’s daily lives and livelihoods. What is not immediately visible, underneath all that destruction, is the harm to people’s lives and to the environment of the city. Urban warfare puts many lives on hold and brings many others to an abrupt end. Some lives have been dramatically uprooted, others permanently changed by injury, trauma, grief and fear.

The suffering, destruction, fear, hate and loss of dignity caused by urban warfare must end. Great efforts have been made in recent years to mitigate the consequences of urban warfare by inciting warring parties to better protect civilians and others who are not taking part in the hostilities. Unfortunately, this is not enough. State and non-state parties must do more to prevent, reduce and mitigate the suffering of people as they navigate war in their cities.

We intend this report to stimulate reflection on how urban conflicts are fought. Treating the associated human suffering as “tragic but unavoidable” is not good enough. The scale and severity of the consequences, both immediate and long-term, should prompt states and non-state armed groups to pause, and to consider how they can place the protection of civilians at the heart of all their urban operations and how they can change the way they undertake such operations.

Greater knowledge and understanding of the complex, interrelated effects of urban fighting will reduce the suffering of civilians and other people protected by international humanitarian law (IHL), and will help the warring parties fulfil their obligations to uphold the rights of those people.

\[ Christian Cardon de Lichtbuer \]
Chief Protection Officer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“When the violence broke out ... we lost everything.” The voice of an Iraqi father displaced from Sinjar in 2014 echoes thousands of others. Over the last decade, armed conflict has affected tens of millions of people in the towns and cities they call home. Through its presence and its humanitarian activities, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), together with the National Societies of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement), has witnessed first-hand the unbearable toll that armed conflict has taken on urban centres and their inhabitants.

The large-scale, complex consequences of armed conflict for urban populations are unacceptable. Those responsible urgently need to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and accumulated patterns of civilian harm involved. A change of mindset is crucial: parties to conflict must accept their responsibility for minimizing the suffering of civilians, whose protection must be at the centre of those parties’ policies and practices.

In this report, the ICRC analyses the humanitarian consequences of hostilities in the urban environment and seeks to raise awareness among parties to conflict, especially civilian authorities, of the resulting harm to civilians – its causes, its extent, and its interrelated and sometimes hidden nature. A better understanding should also prompt members of the international community to fulfil their obligations to prevent, reduce and respond to the impact of urban warfare.

Armed conflict has specific, large-scale, multi-faceted effects on urban communities and infrastructure. Protecting people from harm means more than just preventing death and physical injury. Much suffering is interrelated, is not immediately visible and is long-lasting.

Drawing on a combination of field research, interviews and a literature review, this report compiles and analyses the ICRC’s observations and direct experience regarding the consequences of armed conflict for urban populations in 14 contexts across central and northern Africa, Asia, the Caucasus, Europe and the Middle East, between 2014 and 2022. The observations are presented holistically in a largely decontextualized fashion, rather than as case studies. Most of the patterns of harm observed are exclusive to the urban landscape. Some also occur in other settings, but are particularly serious in urban environments. Urban populations experiencing armed conflict have multiple needs based on intersecting factors such as gender, age and disability that affect different aspects of their lives. These needs – and an individual’s coping strategies – can change during the different phases of a conflict or as a person’s circumstances change.

PEOPLE WHO REMAIN

Firstly, people who remain in a city during fighting, whether by choice or necessity, may face siege and encirclement, ground operations within the city, indirect fire (from weapons such as artillery, tanks, rockets and mortars) and aerial bombing. Each type of operation or fighting presents its own set of humanitarian and legal concerns. For example, civilians are often trapped when entire towns or other populated areas are besieged or encircled, causing unspeakable hardship. Such operations, as they have been conducted in recent years,
have gravely affected people’s ability to work, obtain food, medical care and other essential services, and flee to safety.

Sieges have seriously hindered access by impartial humanitarian organizations, and hence the provision of humanitarian relief to populations in need.

Ground operations within cities have left people trapped by the fighting, unable to cross front lines or engaging in negotiations to move those front lines to allow evacuation of the sick or wounded. Indirect fire and aerial bombardment have caused death and injury to civilians and devastating damage to urban infrastructure. In particular, when explosive weapons with a wide impact area are used in populated settings, they are very likely to have indiscriminate effects and have proven to have devastating consequences for civilian populations. Asymmetric warfare, characterized by an imbalance between the military capacity of the parties to the conflict, can also create risks for civilians.

PEOPLE WHO LEAVE

Secondly, there are distinct risks for civilians fleeing a city. While voluntary displacement is a self-protection strategy, it can also be a significant and long-lasting consequence of urban warfare. Flight itself often brings danger. People who flee may have to deal with weapon bearers or face additional restrictions of movement, such as checkpoints or curfews. If fighting is taking place, they face the danger of getting caught up in the crossfire, sometimes having to run for their lives to reach a place of safety or assembly point. There is also a significant risk of weapon contamination. Flight is often in haste, with no time to collect documentation or other personal items, and civilians may have limited information about how best to leave. In many contexts, there simply are no safe escape routes.

Moving the civilian population, which includes issuing warnings/instructions for people to flee and conducting an organized, temporary evacuation, can be valuable means of reducing risk to civilians. However, such movements have presented serious dilemmas for parties to conflict (and humanitarian organizations) regarding how to plan and execute the most protective course of action for the population, and how to address the significant humanitarian issues. The security screening of people displaced from urban environments has also exposed them to harm. Security checks at checkpoints or assembly points as people leave cities may involve harassment and ill-treatment, and lead to disappearance or torture.

PEOPLE RETURNING

Thirdly, people living in the aftermath of urban warfare or seeking to return home often face immense difficulty in rebuilding their former lives. In several of the contexts we analysed, the level of destruction, the continued absence of essential services and related difficulties regarding livelihoods have delayed safe and dignified return.

Some problems that affect safe and dignified return:

- If bodies are left in destroyed houses or buildings, they may never be identified, and may pose religious and cultural problems for people who want to live in those places.
- Weapon contamination in the form of emplaced devices and explosive remnants of war (ERW) has created legacies of lethal harm for many communities and clearance requires expertise, time and resources.
- Problems related to legal documentation and property tenure can complicate return.
- Not knowing what has happened to someone who is missing perpetuates emotional suffering and other harm to those left behind.

THE SPIRAL OF COMPLEX, INTERRELATED AND ACCUMULATED HARM

The consequences of urban warfare go beyond the direct, physical effects of the fighting; they also include indirect and cumulative (or reverberating) patterns of harm.

These patterns seriously endanger the lives and well-being of civilians, who may suddenly find themselves sick or injured, traumatized by the fighting, lacking clean water, and gas or electricity to cook or heat their homes or with no income to support their families. They may need to take additional risks by moving while military operations are ongoing, to find water and fuel for heating and cooking.

Just when people most need them, medical facilities may suffer power outages and a lack of clean water. All too often, fighting causes direct damage to health facilities and harm to patients and staff.

Children’s education may be disrupted for extended periods.

The natural environment may be damaged when attacks release wastewater or leave behind toxic materials, harming people’s health for years to come.

Such indirect and cumulative consequences are accentuated when the fighting is protracted, causing degradation of essential services over time, risking their complete collapse/irreparability, and with knock-on consequences for the provision of other services.

These cumulative effects generate a spiral of harm that profoundly affects people’s safety, their food and economic security, their physical and mental health and ultimately their well-being and dignity. If damage goes unrepaired or danger continues to disrupt people’s livelihoods, the consequences not only become long-lasting but can reach a tipping point at which the people affected can no longer absorb and adapt to the additional shocks and trauma that inevitably arise from conflict in densely-populated urban environments. The impact of urban warfare will be too much for a person to bear and they will no longer be able to cope without external support. It is therefore crucial to prevent this decline by protecting civilians long before their lives and livelihoods are entirely disrupted.6

People should never be expected to be resilient to IHL violations. Greater compliance with IHL would do much to diminish the impact of urban warfare on civilians and the places where they live.

However, because the risk of harm to civilians is so high in urban settings and the consequences can affect so many people, robust protection of civilians may require belligerents to put the protection of civilians at the centre of planning and practice, and go beyond respect for the law. We need a change of mindset regarding the conduct of urban warfare, with a resulting shift in policies, planning and practices that reflects the specificities of urban settings and addresses the problems that armed conflict in these settings presents for the civilian population. Longer-term, authorities also need to ensure accountability for serious violations of IHL by conducting effective investigations and prosecuting alleged war crimes. They should also develop effective compensation mechanisms for victims of violence and devise a consistent and long-term approach to the issue of missing persons that covers all who have gone missing, and their families.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES OF URBAN WARFARE ON CIVILIANS

Remain in the City
- Bodies left unrecovered for extended periods
- Health facilities damaged/destroyed, health staff killed/injured
- Ill-treatment and harassment during screening and detention
- Displacement, involving further danger
- Disruption to services such as electricity, water, sanitation and health
- Families separated during flight
- Civilian families separated
- Civilians screened on the spot, ill-treatment, forced disappearance or murder
- Schools destroyed: children in danger of abuse, early marriage, etc.
- Need for immense financial resources to rebuild the city
- Severe long-term physical and mental health problems
- Danger from explosive remnants of war
- Need for legal documentation and property rights
- Difficulties with legal documentation and property rights

Fleeing the City
- Death/injury as a result of crossfire and other dangers
- Reliance on aid, owing to lack of livelihood options
- Displacement, involving further danger
- Having to abandon family members who cannot walk or run
- Destruction of buildings and services preventing return
- Lack of information and limited means of communication
- Ill-treatment and harassment during screening and detention
- Disruption to services such as electricity, water, sanitation and health
- Precarious situations, including poor accommodation
- Need for immense financial resources to rebuild the city
- Severe long-term physical and mental health problems
- Danger from explosive remnants of war
- Need for legal documentation and property rights
- Difficulties with legal documentation and property rights

Aftermath
- Destruction of cultural objects
- Destruction of buildings and services preventing return
- Reliance on aid, owing to lack of livelihood options
- Displacement, involving further danger
- Destruction of buildings and services preventing return
- Reliance on aid, owing to lack of livelihood options
- Disruption to services such as electricity, water, sanitation and health
- Precarious situations, including poor accommodation
- Need for immense financial resources to rebuild the city
- Severe long-term physical and mental health problems
- Danger from explosive remnants of war
- Need for legal documentation and property rights
- Difficulties with legal documentation and property rights
The ICRC has recently published two documents setting out recommendations regarding urban operations, covering military doctrine, training, planning and conduct of operations:

- *Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Commander’s Handbook,*7 for state armed forces, in particular for officers in command roles and staff officers below divisional level

In 2022, the ICRC published a report entitled *Explosive Weapons with Wide Area Effects: A Deadly Choice in Populated Areas*9 covering the humanitarian, technical, legal and operational aspects of this topic. It contains recommendations for political authorities and armed forces regarding preventive and mitigation measures to protect civilians against the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas (EWIPA) and implement an avoidance policy.

The ICRC provided an overview of the challenges posed by the urbanization of armed conflict in its 2019 report *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts.*10 Recommendations to avoid and reduce harm to children, people with disabilities and on the basis of gender are set out in additional guidance. To limit repetition we will not cite the corresponding publications here, but they are highly relevant.

This report is addressed to:

- state civilian authorities that exercise some form of governance in territories under their control and provide direction to state armed forces
- non-state armed groups that exercise some form of governance in territories under their control and provide direction to the armed wing of a non-state armed group.

Through this report, the ICRC calls on state and non-state authorities, at all levels to implement the following recommendations to prevent, mitigate and respond to civilian harm and other humanitarian consequences of urban warfare. While not exhaustive, they contribute to the overall aim of placing the protection of civilians at the heart of all urban operations, resulting in a shift in policies, planning and conduct that reflects the specificities of urban settings and takes into consideration the strengths and coping strategies of the population, their vulnerabilities and the city’s interconnected essential social systems.

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PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS BEFORE THE START OF URBAN OPERATIONS

1. Draft and implement a Protection of Civilians Strategy mandating all possible measures to minimize hostilities in populated areas. Such measures include (but are not limited to):
   • conducting hostilities outside populated areas or moving the population outside areas of hostilities
   • not locating military objectives in or near populated areas
   • taking other measures to enhance the protection of civilians during hostilities in urban environments.

2. Identify the full range of civilian harm likely to result from urban warfare, and issue accurate and effective guidance to all authorities to track, collect and store data on:
   • injuries, deaths and missing persons
   • destruction and damage to infrastructure, property and the natural environment in order to facilitate documentation of civilian casualties, disaggregated by age, gender and disability where feasible.

3. Collect information on the basic needs of the civilian population (e.g. health, food and water) and plan urgent temporary measures to ensure the self-sufficiency of supplies and services.

4. In collaboration with local communities and, where appropriate, with humanitarian agencies:
   • Take measures to protect:
     • civilian infrastructure critical for essential service delivery
     • people who operate, maintain and repair that infrastructure
     • sites where essential service provider stocks are stored.
   • Take preventive measures to ensure the continuity of essential services.
   • Where prevention is not possible, prioritize restoration of service delivery as quickly as possible in a manner that is inclusive, equitable and strengthens the systems’ resilience.

5. Identify, map and regularly update the locations of critical civilian infrastructure and associated networks, and transmit these to the operational military decision-makers so that they do not locate military objectives in their immediate vicinity and also to prevent prolonged disruption of essential services, considering the foreseeable direct and indirect effects of attacks.

6. Identify, map and regularly update the locations of health facilities and the main access routes for those facilities and other emergency services, and issue clear instructions to armed actors stating that these areas must not be subjected to the consequences of fighting, and that they must exercise precaution when fighting nearby.
7. Ensure an understanding of the functioning of national, regional and local food systems, to protect them from shocks and strengthen their resilience to the greatest extent possible. For those responding to the effects of conflict, this may include support for rapid response plans, anticipatory action and dedicated funding pools.\textsuperscript{12}

8. Whenever an urban area is at risk of becoming besieged or encircled, reiterate clear instructions to armed actors stating that:
   - civilians within such areas must not be attacked, nor made to starve
   - civilians must be allowed to evacuate a besieged area to seek shelter, food and health care without undue delay
   - once impartial humanitarian relief has been agreed to, they must allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of that relief into besieged or encircled areas, subject to the parties’ right of control.

9. Take adequate measures, including rehearsals and simulations, and issue clear instructions to armed actors, to:
   - facilitate safe evacuations and escape routes for civilians, if they wish to leave the city, and for wounded and sick combatants, ensuring that they receive the necessary medical attention
   - conduct security screenings of civilians in accordance with minimum rules that will ensure respect for the people being screened, which includes:
     - taking account of age, gender and disability
     - putting trained personnel in charge of the process
     - using appropriate locations for the screening process.

10. Take adequate measures and issue clear instructions to armed actors to ensure that humanitarian personnel and objects used for humanitarian relief are respected at all times. These include:
    - medical personnel, facilities and transport, both military and civilian
    - persons and objects displaying the red cross, red crescent or red crystal emblem.

11. Take adequate measures to limit the impact of urban operations on the natural environment, such as:
    - carrying out prior assessments of the pollution of air, soil and water sources that may be expected, including from damage to industrial sites or oil refineries and from weapon contamination
    - mapping areas of particular environmental importance or fragility as part of operational planning
    - liaising with civilian agencies that have environmental expertise.

12. Maintain an archive system for the proper storage of property and life-cycle documents (birth, marriage and death certificates) allowing for their retrieval or duplication in case of loss or destruction during hostilities.

13. Provide first responders and forensic establishments with adequate training, equipment, supplies and vehicles for the appropriate management of bodies.

14. Issue guidelines regarding engagement with external bodies (such as the ICRC, United Nations agencies, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, international organizations, civil society organizations and local communities) that have a specific mandate during armed conflicts, and conduct activities to verify and enhance preparedness and coordination such as rehearsals, simulations and tabletop exercises.


15. Adopt an avoidance policy to the effect that explosive weapons with a wide impact will not be used in populated areas unless sufficient mitigation measures are taken to limit their wide area effects and the consequent risk of civilian harm, including long-term consequences for city infrastructure and services.

16. Endorse and take the necessary steps to implement the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.\(^\text{13}\)

17. Establish procedures for recording the personal details and other relevant information regarding the following categories of person, and for forwarding this information to the ICRC’s Central Tracing Agency (CTA):
   - deceased persons
   - separated persons
   - missing persons
   - persons deprived of their liberty.

18. During an international armed conflict, establish National Information Bureaux to collect information on the following categories of person and forward this to the CTA, for onward transmission to the party concerned and their families, where appropriate:
   - prisoners of war
   - wounded, sick, shipwrecked and dead military personnel belonging to the adverse party
   - other protected persons in their hands.

19. Issue clear instructions to local authorities and humanitarian agencies regarding the reception and processing of displaced communities, and allocate the necessary budget. Action required may include, for instance:
   - setting up a task force to coordinate the various activities
   - equipping camps with adequate shelter, food and other essential items and services, to ensure the well-being and dignity of displaced people
   - ensuring that the population hosting displaced communities also receives support.

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\(^{13}\) EWIPA Dublin Conference 2022, Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, Dublin, 2022: [https://www.dfa.ie/our-role-policies/international-priorities/peace-and-security/ewipa-consultations/](https://www.dfa.ie/our-role-policies/international-priorities/peace-and-security/ewipa-consultations/). As of April 2023, 83 states had endorsed the Political Declaration.
PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS REMAINING IN THE CITY DURING OPERATIONS

20. Issue clear instructions to armed actors:
• to give effective advance warning to the civilian population prior to an attack or other military operation that may affect them, in a language they can understand and through accessible means (e.g. visual signals, markers, sirens, radio, TV, social media, leaflets, internet-based messaging apps or SMS), sufficiently far in advance that they have time to leave, find shelter or take other measures to protect themselves
• to refrain from any attack on civilians who do not heed a warning for whatever reason, and to take all feasible measure to avoid or at least minimize incidental harm to them
• on the location of humanitarian and medical personnel and objects, to protect them from attacks, obstruction and looting and to prevent collateral damage
• to ensure safe access for service providers to maintain and assess critical infrastructure, and to carry out repairs in case of damage.

21. Issue clear instructions to armed actors and detaining authorities in relation to people deprived of their liberty, to:
• spare them from the effects of attacks
• avoid locating military objectives in or near places of detention or, if this is not possible, re-locate detainees to premises away from the combat zone and/or facilitate their early release or parole
• treat them humanely and without any adverse distinction in all circumstances, and provide them with adequate material conditions and access to basic services.

22. Regarding health care:
• Take all possible measures to facilitate access to health care and prevent undue delay in obtaining such care.
• Provide and facilitate dissemination of information for health-care personnel and civilians who need health care, regarding dedicated routes or checkpoints for people providing or seeking health care, together with any requirements for passing through checkpoints (documentation, referral authorizations, etc.).

23. If the authorities cannot provide supplies essential to the survival of the civilian population, and once humanitarian relief has been agreed to, implement procedures that will ensure its rapid and unimpeded passage, subject to the parties’ right of control.
24. Take all possible measures to search for, collect and evacuate the wounded and sick, and to ensure the safe and undelayed passage of medical personnel, medical equipment and people seeking health care.

25. Collect the identities of the following categories of person, together with the measures taken with regard to them, and forward this information to the CTA:
   - deceased persons
   - separated and unaccompanied children
   - missing persons
   - persons deprived of their liberty.

26. During an international armed conflict, ensure that the National Information Bureaux collect information on the following categories of person and forward this to the CTA, for onward transmission to the party concerned and their families, where appropriate:
   - prisoners of war
   - sick, wounded, shipwrecked and dead military personnel belonging to the adverse party
   - other protected persons in their hands.

27. Implement appropriate mechanisms, such as civilian-casualty tracking systems, to collect disaggregated data on incidents resulting in death or injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects, including infrastructure and the natural environment.

28. If allegations of violations are reported or received, conduct thorough, independent and impartial investigations to establish the facts and, depending on their outcome, take the appropriate corrective measures, including, if appropriate, disciplinary sanctions or criminal prosecutions.
PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS FLEEING FROM, OR BECOMING DISPLACED TO, BETWEEN OR WITHIN CITIES

29. Make all possible efforts to:
   • agree evacuation procedures with the authorities of the adverse party
   • take practical measures to ensure a safe, voluntary, sustainable and dignified evacuation
   • provide civilians being evacuated with timely and complete information, including their onward destination and safety instructions
   • receive them under adequate material conditions (in terms of shelter, hygiene, health and nutrition)
   • prevent family separation.

30. During evacuations or displacement:
   • Take exceptional care to protect civilians from harm, including:
     • sexual and other exploitation, abuse, and violence
     • child recruitment
     • discrimination or revenge based on ethnicity or other criteria.
   • Take measures to reduce risks to children, women, older people, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.
   • Provide evacuees/displaced persons with sufficient assistance, including timely and appropriate medical care, food, water and shelter.

31. Ensure that security screenings and other measures are conducted in full compliance with IHL and human rights law, particularly with regard to humane treatment, material conditions and procedural safeguards in cases of detention, and that the prohibition against collective punishment is observed. Ensure that oversight and accountability mechanisms are in place and, to the extent feasible, that screening takes place away from the dangers of the combat zone.

32. Take all possible measures to prevent family separation or, if temporary separation is necessary during the screening process or in the case of detention, to restore and maintain contact.

33. When seeking the assistance of humanitarian organizations, ensure that evacuations of the sick, wounded and dead, or the civilian population at large, are carried out in a way that respects the principles and minimum standards of humanitarian organizations that might be assisting.
34. When people are moving to safer areas, once humanitarian relief has been agreed to, allow and facilitate its rapid and unimpeded passage, subject to the parties’ right of control.

35. Cover the basic needs of civilians who have gone through security screenings and/or are displaced to camps or host communities, including by providing adequate food, water, hygiene, shelter and safety, and do not restrict their movement by default.

36. Take all possible measures to facilitate access to health care by people who are fleeing or are otherwise displaced. This includes:
   • actively searching for people who need health care
   • providing information about availability of and access to health services
   • supporting medical evacuations
   • ensuring the safe and undelayed passage of medical personnel, medical equipment and people who need any kind of health care.

37. Provide holistic medical support, including mental health and psychosocial services, to civilians displaced to camps or host communities, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups such as victims/survivors of sexual violence.

38. Start implementing steps towards sustainable solutions for displaced persons as soon as possible, facilitating the affected populations’ participation in all phases of decision-making.

39. Ensure that evacuated or displaced persons can access essential services, employment and accommodation, e.g. by helping them to replace official documentation, informing them about procedures and making referrals.
PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN THE AFTERMATH OF HOSTILITIES OR WHEN THEY RETURN TO THE CITY

40. As soon as circumstances permit:
   • Take all possible measures to search for, identify, collect, temporarily store and evacuate the deceased without adverse distinction.
   • Facilitate their return to their families.
   • Ensure that all available information is recorded.
   • Ensure that the location of graves is marked.

41. Take all possible measures to facilitate access to health care by people who have remained in the city or are returning to it. This includes:
   • actively searching for people who need health care
   • providing information about availability of and access to health services
   • supporting medical evacuations
   • ensuring the safe and undelayed passage of medical personnel, medical equipment and people who need any kind of health care.

42. Invest efforts and resources in including mental health and psychological support in the health services provided.

43. Facilitate, fund and support local bodies in the reconstruction of damaged urban areas and infrastructure and in the protection of the natural environment, incorporating community perspectives and a systems analysis approach to building urban resilience.

44. Allocate resources, technical expertise and adequate equipment to the removal and clearance of emplaced devices and ERW, mark contaminated locations and conduct risk awareness training for civilians.

45. Adopt procedures to ensure the recognition of documents issued by non-state actors, appropriately restore property rights and re-issue documentation of significant life-cycle events lost during hostilities, to ensure that individuals and families can meaningfully access their legal rights without discrimination or retribution.
46. Regarding allegations of specific violations:
   - Conduct effective investigations to clarify the circumstances of such violations.
   - Take the appropriate corrective measures, including, if appropriate, imposing disciplinary or criminal sanctions to ensure accountability for crimes committed.
   - Set up compensation mechanisms for victims of violations.

47. Regarding the impact of urban warfare:
   - Collect data on the impact of urban warfare from armed forces, humanitarian organizations and other bodies (e.g. civil society organizations and environmental actors).
   - Conduct after-action reviews.
   - Implement lessons learned and good practices regarding planning and implementation measures taken to protect civilians and civilian objects.

48. Take practical steps to promote and facilitate other sustainable solutions to displacement, including local integration or relocation to another part of the country, and protect internally displaced persons from secondary displacement, forcible return or relocation to any place where their lives, safety, liberty or health would be at risk.

49. Facilitate (through adequate procedures and services) the safe, voluntary and dignified return of displaced persons to their homes or places of habitual residence as soon as the reason for their displacement ceases to exist, regardless of their background, political beliefs, gender, or ethnic or religious affiliation.

50. Mobilize humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors to facilitate and coordinate a long-term response, to achieve sustainable solutions in a timely and efficient manner.
INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM

Burgeoning urban populations and evolving trends in warfare have meant tens of millions suffering the effects of armed conflict in the towns and cities they call home. Non-international armed conflicts are especially likely to culminate in urban areas, often involving protracted fighting. As we draft this report, the escalation of the international armed conflict in Ukraine has focused global attention on the devastating effects of urban warfare involving states.

The ICRC has been present on the urban battlefields of recent years, and together with other components of the Movement has witnessed first-hand the unacceptable toll that war has taken on urban populations and their cities. Today, wars are often fought “not in trenches and fields, but in living rooms, schools and supermarkets”, and the suffering of civilians has been profound.

Urban warfare has destroyed previously busy neighbourhoods in cities such as Aleppo, Marawi, Mariupol and Mosul. In today’s urban war zones, the ICRC witnesses death and injury, psychological trauma, widespread damage to homes, infrastructure and public spaces and flows of exhausted, frightened people uprooted from their homes. Other cities such as Beni and Mogadishu continue to face security measures, curfews and checkpoints, as repeated attacks and sudden resumptions or escalations in hostilities affect their daily lives.

The density of urban populations and structures means that hostilities in towns and cities involve extreme proximity between civilians and civilian objects on one hand, and belligerents and other military objectives on the other. Fighting therefore results in civilian fatalities and the destruction of urban infrastructure. Fatalities and destruction increase when one or both parties use co-mingling as a deliberate tactic.

It is impossible to ignore the terrible impact of warfare on urban populations and action is urgently needed to prevent and mitigate it. Parties to a conflict are required to comply with international humanitarian law (IHL) and observe the rules of distinction, proportionality and precaution. In urban areas this can be more difficult, but the direct and indirect effects of a party’s attacks in urban areas are foreseeable and avoidable to a large degree. Where they are reasonably foreseeable, parties to the conflict have a responsibility to avoid or at least minimize them. They also have a responsibility to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects under their control from the effects of attack. This can include, for instance, removing military objectives from the vicinity of civilians and civilian objects. Civilians can be protected most effectively when they are not surrounded by fighting of the sort that occurs in urban environments.

Better compliance with IHL will significantly reduce the impact of urban warfare on civilians and the places they call home. However, because the risk of harm to civilians is so high in urban settings, and the consequences of urban warfare affect so many people, effective protection of civilians may require policies and processes that provide protection additional to IHL. That is not to say that civilian casualties and damage to

civilian objects always constitute IHL violations. Rather, the ICRC’s observation is that warfare leaves the populations of urban areas vulnerable to harm and creates serious and long-term consequences for them, in all circumstances.18

**THE SCOPE: UNDERSTANDING RISK, HARM AND MITIGATION**

- How do specific tactics or other conduct in urban warfare create risks for civilians?
- What are the challenges encountered when seeking to mitigate civilian harm during military operations in urban areas?
- What is the effect of failing to mitigate such harm?
- What risks do civilians face at various “moments”, such as when fleeing a city, negotiating checkpoints, crossing front lines, being evacuated or attempting to return home?
- What are the risks for other people, such as soldiers or fighters who are hors de combat?19
- What other factors or layers of harm have the greatest impact on protection?
- What good practices have parties to conflict adopted to prevent or remedy civilian harm?

The present report seeks to answer the above questions, deepening understanding of the specificities of urban warfare and the vulnerabilities of urban populations. It stresses the breadth, diversity and relatedness of the human consequences by analysing patterns of harm and, where possible, their underlying factors. This means not simply setting out a “list of horrors” observed in urban warfare but also highlighting the intersection of the underlying factors and circumstances contributing to civilian harm, plus those that might mitigate it. That, in turn, includes understanding that armed conflict affecting urban settings and populated areas accentuates the vulnerability of certain groups and creates new vulnerabilities and stigmatization. Armed actors and civilian authorities create risks through both acts of commission and acts of omission.20

We shall approach the humanitarian impact of urban warfare from a broad perspective, recognizing that people’s needs go beyond food, water and shelter. They also need the authorities to fulfil their obligations and to respect the rights of everyone affected by armed conflict, in order to preserve their safety, physical well-being and dignity.

The direct physical harm to civilians and their homes from attacks and other forms of destruction are serious problems, and we shall of course be discussing them here, but they are not the only problems that people face. People are also harmed by being isolated and besieged, unable to move or access essential services, undergoing repeated displacement, losing their livelihoods, food security or access to education, suffering psychological harm and conflict-related environmental degradation. This report will therefore also examine consequences that are less visible, tangible or measurable. The harm caused by urban warfare goes beyond life, limb and buildings to the very fabric of people’s lives and of the urban environment.

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19 A combatant who is hors de combat is one who: (i) is in the power of an adverse party or (ii) is clearly expressing an intention to surrender or (iii) has been rendered unconscious or otherwise incapacitated by wounds or sickness, and is therefore incapable of defending themselves. Provided that in any of these cases they abstain from any hostile act and do not attempt to escape, they may not be made the object of attack. See ICRC Customary Law Study: [https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/hors-de-combat](https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/hors-de-combat).

The approach taken in this report also reflects the ICRC’s specific mandate and expertise with respect to armed conflict, regarding the treatment not only of civilians but also of combatants who are hors de combat or have died, and people deprived of their liberty. The report also discusses the management of humanitarian concerns in the aftermath of hostilities, since this often receives less public attention.

The harm caused by urban warfare goes beyond life and limb and buildings, to the very fabric of people’s lives and of the urban environment.

The aim is to stimulate much needed discussion with state and non-state authorities on the extent, nature and major causes of civilian harm resulting from urban warfare, thereby influencing the way they plan and conduct operations so that they comprehensively fulfil their obligations to prevent or reduce civilian harm.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Humanitarian response during urban conflict is challenging, for both practical and political reasons. Humanitarian organizations, including the ICRC, are constantly improving their understanding of the urban operating environment, to make their response as effective as possible. Those organizations are being stretched by the number of urban conflicts being fought simultaneously around the world, their inherent dangers, the increasingly large populations affected and the technical/practical specificities of the humanitarian response required.21

The ICRC’s learning benefits from its specialist sectors, which highlight the links between humanitarian risks, needs and responses.

In the last ten years, the ICRC and the other components of the Movement have made significant efforts to raise the awareness of parties to conflict regarding issues of concern observed in urban warfare.

These issues include:
- the use of EWIPA
- attacks on health-care personnel and facilities (to which the Movement has responded through the Health Care in Danger initiative)
- failure to protect essential services
- displacement.24

23 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, War in Cities, op. cit.
The Movement has also been promoting a deeper awareness of how civilian experience of hostilities can diverge dramatically depending on such criteria as age, gender and disability.25

The complexities facing humanitarian organizations in urban warfare provide an important reminder that the parties to armed conflict cannot – and must not – rely exclusively on those organizations to look after the civilian population, or to respond to their needs in the aftermath of hostilities. Parties to conflict must include these responsibilities in their planning and operations. This is a legal requirement as well as a practical one, because it is states and non-state armed groups exercising effective control that bear primary responsibility for meeting the basic needs of the civilian population.

One cannot accept as unavoidable the suffering that results from urban warfare when there is always action belligerents can and must take to prevent or at least minimize it. Fortunately, there are clear examples of parties to armed conflict adopting procedures that seek to mitigate civilian harm. Those procedures include avoiding the intensification of war in a city.

While better compliance with IHL would significantly reduce civilian suffering, one must see protecting civilians in urban warfare holistically. There is hence a need for a fuller and more thorough understanding of the patterns of harm experienced by people caught up in conflict, and their aggravating and mitigating factors.

Marawi City, Philippines. Displaced persons faced shortages of drinking water, a lack of viable livelihood opportunities and an absence of permanent places to live.

SOURCES, STRUCTURE, CORE CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGY
SOURCES

This report is primarily based on the ICRC’s recent operational experience in urban contexts affected by armed conflict. This has included monitoring, analysing and receiving allegations about conflict-related incidents and observing the effects of armed conflict on the civilian population and other protected persons.

The ICRC’s information comes from:
- direct observation
- talking privately with people affected by urban warfare, including survivors and eyewitnesses
- confidential discussions with armed actors, authorities and community leaders on humanitarian concerns regarding compliance with IHL.

We have supplemented this experience and knowledge by a detailed desk review of selected literature.

The information comes from international and non-international armed conflicts in Africa, Asia, the Caucasus, Europe and the Middle East that have affected urban populations between 2014 and 2022.

We shall also discuss:
- protracted situations and shorter periods of hostilities within a broader armed conflict
- situations in which the parties tried to avoid heavy fighting in cities and those in which cities suffered intense fighting or bombardment
- situations in which a non-state armed group had de facto control of an urban space and those where that was not the case.

The ICRC engages in bilateral confidential dialogue with states, their armed forces and non-state armed groups to identify and promote policy and practical measures related to urban warfare. To respect the ICRC’s bilateral, confidential approach, we shall generally avoid naming the contexts from which we have taken our information. In some instances we shall refer to specific contexts, however, by way of example and/or by reference to publicly available information.

STRUCTURE

PART ONE
- Characteristics of urban warfare relevant to the protection of civilians, looking at the strengths and vulnerabilities inherent to the urban environment and why warfare affecting urban centres can have complex and profound humanitarian consequences.
- Armed actors and the specificities of the conduct of hostilities in urban areas.

PART TWO
- The patterns of harm facing civilians and others protected by IHL when remaining in a city, when fleeing or being evacuated and in the aftermath of fighting.

Discussing the observed humanitarian consequences of urban warfare through these three lenses does not mean that civilians – or urban warfare itself – follow a particular linear trajectory, nor that everyone experiences the same risks in those different situations or movements. The purpose of this approach is simply to structure the reflection around different “moments” that civilians navigate.
- The vulnerabilities of certain groups in those situations, in particular people deprived of their liberty.
The report also includes recommendations to state and non-state authorities on measures to prevent and reduce civilian harm.

Our report has certain limitations:

- Security and access constraints have made the collection of reliable data difficult at times. In certain contexts, Movement staff could only work remotely or make short visits to affected areas because of the inherent dangers.

- While our analysis focuses on patterns of harm/risk considered particular to urban warfare, some of the topics we shall cover are not unique to such situations. We have included those topics because they occur on a significantly large scale, because of the density of population and infrastructure, because of the tactics and weapons used by belligerents or because they become especially relevant at a particular “moment” that civilians navigate.

- This report does not examine in detail how civilian experiences of urban warfare vary depending on age, gender and disability. The ICRC’s observations and recommendations for parties to armed conflict regarding improved protection for civilians with particular characteristics are the subject of subject-specific publications, which should be read to complement the recommendations in this report.

- Broader questions such as historical causative and prevention factors for conflict, transitional justice and community reconciliation are beyond the scope of this report.\(^{26}\)

- The report does not discuss peacekeeping forces in detail, although they were present in some of the contexts analysed.

For all these reasons, the report makes no claim to be exhaustive or comprehensive. Despite its length, it only scratches the surface of the harm done by urban warfare and the possible ways of preventing, reducing and responding to it.

\(^{26}\) See Note 12 above.
DEFINITIONS

Urban
This report uses terms such as “urban areas”, “urban settings”, “towns” and “cities” interchangeably to refer to complex, densely-built, populated areas that usually also have an influence over a larger area. They include urban centres and their outskirts, and are contrasted with “rural areas.”

The report also considers the impact of hostilities occurring outside such urban centres insofar as they significantly affect people living within populated areas. Military operations such as sieges around an urban area, or damage to essential infrastructure located outside a city such as a power station, dam or airport, dramatically affect the delivery of services to an urban population.

Urban warfare
This report uses the term “urban warfare” as shorthand to refer to hostilities and other military operations occurring in, or significantly affecting, urban areas during armed conflict, whether international or non-international, and therefore to which IHL applies, such as siege and encirclement or damage to critical infrastructure delivering essential services, even if located outside the built-up area. Although other forms of urban violence can occur in parallel with or even be exacerbated by an armed conflict, those are regulated not by IHL but mainly by human rights and domestic law, and are outside the scope of this report.

The report focuses primarily on kinetic operations as opposed to other forms of warfare such as economic, information or cyber operations. These also entail a risk of civilian harm, and the ICRC has addressed those topics elsewhere.

The purpose of the report is not to define or delimit “urban warfare” as a concept but to better understand the humanitarian problems it causes. We shall therefore not limit ourselves to intense, sustained and/or close-quarter ground combat within a city but will also examine various forms of hostilities that affect urban centres in very different regions of the world, together with other dynamics originating from those hostilities that affect civilian lives.


29 ICRC, Urban Services During Protracted Armed Conflict: a Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected people, op. cit., p. 29.

Bouar, Nana-Membéré prefecture, Central African Republic. The ICRC gives a session on IHL to the Central African armed forces.

SETTING THE FRAMEWORK: WAGING WAR WITHIN LIMITS
IHL embodies the basic principle that war must be waged within certain limits. Those limits exist to preserve the lives and dignity of human beings, and protect those who are not or are no longer taking part in hostilities – especially civilians.

The main IHL principles governing the conduct of hostilities – distinction, proportionality and precaution – are all about protecting civilians from the effects of fighting. Stringent protection is afforded to, for example, objects indispensable to the survival of the population, medical and humanitarian infrastructure and personnel, and objects containing dangerous forces. While the circumstances of urban fighting might make the application of these rules more demanding than in open terrain because of the proximity of military objectives and protected persons and objects, it is precisely for this reason that the rules are most critical in such environments.

In addition to the IHL rules on the conduct of hostilities, of equal importance during urban warfare are those legal obligations that seek to protect those who are not or are no longer participating in the fighting.

While the circumstances of urban fighting might make the application of these rules more demanding than in open terrain because of the proximity of military objectives and protected persons and objects, it is precisely for this reason that the rules are most critical in such environments.

These include:

- protections afforded to people under the control of a party to the conflict, such as those deprived of their liberty, living in occupied territory or trapped in besieged or encircled areas;
- essential rules requiring the wounded and sick – both civilians and members of an enemy’s armed forces – to be treated with respect and to be protected;
- comprehensive rules to:
  - account for people in the hands of the enemy
  - prevent families becoming separated and people going missing
  - ensure that those who die during armed conflict are treated with dignity and properly identified.

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• prohibition of discrimination in the application of IHL on the basis of race, religion, sex or any similar criteria; various rules require that parties take into account the specific risks and distinct needs of certain groups, including women, people with disabilities and older people
• rules protecting children, displaced persons and the natural environment
• rules on humanitarian relief and the prohibition of starvation, which are designed to ensure that people affected by armed conflict are not deprived of supplies essential to their survival or made to starve.

Protecting civilians affected by urban warfare starts with full and good-faith compliance with IHL. What we continue to observe in urban conflict zones across the globe – the devastating consequences of fighting in cities and other urban areas – raises questions about how parties to armed conflict interpret and apply it. There is an urgent need for critical reflection on how to improve military practices at the tactical, operational and strategic levels to ensure compliance with IHL obligations and reduce civilian harm during the conduct of urban warfare.

Recently, the ICRC has set out some of its views and published the findings of research on IHL challenges arising out of the urbanization of conflict, together with legal issues that need further clarification.

Processes and policies designed to encourage greater compliance with IHL and/or provide additional protection are also critical. Since 2011, the ICRC has called on states and all parties to armed conflict to make it their policy to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas, and in any case not to use them unless they have taken sufficient measures to limit those wide area effects and reduce the consequent risk of civilian harm. These weapons are inappropriate for urban combat, because there is a significant likelihood that their use in such an environment will indiscriminately affect not only military objectives but also civilians and civilian objects. The ICRC encourages all states to endorse and fully implement the recently adopted Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, including a commitment to restrict or refrain from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas when such use is expected to cause civilian harm.

At the national level, the ICRC continues to support states through activities that include providing IHL input for military manuals and doctrine, participating in workshops, round tables and training and developing tools to support implementation in domestic law. The ICRC remains ready to assist states in this respect.

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39 Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, op. cit. As of April 2023, 83 states had endorsed the Political Declaration.
Gaza Strip. Plumes of smoke and dust rise above damaged buildings following a series of air strikes.

Sergeevka, Ukraine. A solitary woman walks past a scene of devastation in the village of Sergeevka.
PART ONE

CHARACTERISTICS OF CITIES AND URBAN WARFARE
By 2050, almost 70 per cent of the population is expected to live in urban areas of several hundred thousand to over ten million inhabitants.\textsuperscript{40} So when war comes to cities, more people will be affected. Warfare in a city affects far more than its physical structures and human life and limb; it is important to think of the city also as the multifaceted socio-economic networks and interconnections that link the population and the city’s spaces, and create its environment. Part One discusses the pre-existing characteristics of the urban setting and population that influence urban warfare and its humanitarian consequences.

The sheer number of those affected makes it increasingly complicated for parties to a conflict and authorities to avoid, manage and respond to urban hostilities.

Some examples:

**CIVILIAN DEATHS**
During fighting between 2014 and 2017 in Iraq and Syria, the ICRC found that civilian deaths in urban areas were on average five times more likely than during hostilities elsewhere.\textsuperscript{41}

**PROPERTY DAMAGE**
The military operation in Mosul displaced close to one million people, killed 10,000 civilians and in western Mosul alone, destroyed 40,000 homes.\textsuperscript{42}

**ARMED ACTORS**
Civil society recorded the violent deaths of over 4,500 people in and around Beni Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), between April 2017 and December 2022.\textsuperscript{43} Fighting was still in progress when the present report was compiled.

**DISPLACEMENT**
Almost the entire population of Marawi, Philippines, was displaced in 2017. Both civilians and weapon bearers were killed, an estimated 5,000 structures were affected and central parts of the city were completely devastated by the fighting.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{43} Kiru Security Tracker: https://kirusecurity.org/.

EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS

In Libya, between April and July 2019, the ICRC documented the displacement of over 120,000 civilians, mainly as a result of the continuous use of heavy explosive weapons (in particular large air-delivered bombs, multi-barrel rocket launchers and mortars) in residential areas of Tripoli.45

CIVILIAN INJURIES

In Gaza, during the 2009 military operations, approximately 1,160 civilians were reported killed over the course of the 23-day hostilities, and around 5,000 injured.46 During the 2014 military operations, a reported 1,500 civilians were killed and approximately 11,000 people were injured, most of them civilians.47

UNLAWFUL ATTACKS

In Somalia, in October 2017, a truck bomb in central Mogadishu caused a nearby fuel tanker to explode, killing at least 500 people and wounding over 300.48

The risks to which a population is exposed during armed conflict are far more complex than numbers alone can portray. Cities are remarkable mixtures of geographical terrain, historical background and contemporary community. They are complex, populated areas of interconnected public and private infrastructure, formal and informal markets, services and spaces.49

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49 ICRC, I Saw My City Die: Voices from the Front Lines of Urban Conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, op. cit., p. 38.
1.1 URBAN ENVIRONMENT: THE CITY AND ITS PEOPLE

Cities can be culturally, demographically, socially, economically and politically important or symbolic, and may provide opportunities for education and well-being. A city often houses extensive, interrelated systems of governance and administrative power and organization. This can include local councils, public service providers, emergency services, community warning systems and elements of civil society.

Cities also offer economic opportunities, including access to markets and financial mechanisms for a monetized economy. Urban infrastructure and commercial and logistics networks enable the delivery of public services covering both household and commercial needs. Access to essential services such as food, health care, reliable water, waste management, electricity and education is itself an attraction for people and heavily influences economic growth, public health and the general well-being of people residing in a city. This is true before, during and after conflict.

Interconnections are also increasing because they are digitalizing. Cities often have communication tools and information technology infrastructure such as internet, mobile phone towers and media for collecting data, sharing information and processing financial transactions. There are likely to be better schools and a resulting higher concentration of educated, networked people. Cities often provide opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation, driving societal transformation.

In urban settings, livelihoods, well-being and development are often intimately tied to the city’s interconnected services. People living in urban areas depend far more on local markets to buy food because they cannot produce their own. Markets cover their essential needs by generating income to pay for essential services and communications and city-dwellers rely on the commercial and logistics networks — public and private — for food, medicines and other commodities.

Commercial centres may host the business services (finance, legal services, clearing houses, customs, quality control, etc.) that the wider economy depends on for business and livelihoods. Businesses and traders may face coercion or extortion from armed groups to continue trading, and may be attacked if they fail to comply.

City planning and zoning laws may become irrelevant as parts of the city become uninhabitable and may be difficult to re-establish post-conflict. Increasing interconnectedness means that disruption to one element risks affecting the entire network of services, with massive consequences. For example, if fighting disrupts the electricity supply, water treatment and health-care services may be disrupted or fail.

Urban populations are typically used to buying and consuming goods and services in real time, and do not necessarily keep contingency stocks in case of shocks. People who are used to obtaining everything quickly from the market may not know what the alternatives are in an emergency. While cities are central to regional and even global food systems, they rely on complex supply networks and distribution systems. When transport, storage and access are disrupted, food availability and safety can be destroyed overnight.

51 For a definition of essential services, including people, hardware and consumables, see ICRC, Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict: A Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People, op. cit., p. 18.
An urban population used to an abundance of goods and services may be less efficient in the use of resources compared to populations used to scarcity. For example, people accustomed to ready access to water at home and more regular access to health care will have to reduce their consumption and change their habits. Disruptions to those services, to markets and to the cash-based economy can therefore hit urban populations harder. The risks to and indirect effects on the population and their ability to cope are also exacerbated as armed conflict becomes protracted.

### DIVERSITY, INEQUALITY AND THE PRESENCE OF DISPLACED PERSONS

There is typically more diversity in city communities, formed by individuals whose identities are shaped by such factors as socio-economic status, race, gender, age and disability. How these factors combine can promote inclusion or exclusion, with conflicts exacerbating existing power dynamics or creating new ones, influencing the vulnerability, marginalization and exclusion of individuals and groups.

During a conflict, inequalities between groups may be sources of added risk for those who are disadvantaged. Opportunities linked to the city mean that some segments of the population have the wealth and resources to get through the hostilities, whereas hostilities can reduce access and survival chances for those who are poorer or who face discrimination on such grounds as gender, race or disability.

For instance, the urban poor (numbering nearly one billion globally) cannot afford to keep stocks of food, making them far more vulnerable to shocks that impact markets. So even before the outbreak of hostilities, some residents will have trouble covering their everyday needs in a safe and dignified manner because they have fewer resources and opportunities. War will affect everyone, but it will exacerbate pre-existing inequalities.

The challenges associated with rapid urban growth have seen an increase in informal settlements – such as slums or shanty towns – where shelter, livelihood opportunities and public services are less formal. Some displaced people from rural areas retain rural ways of organizing themselves and their families even when they move to a city.

Reliable and fair governance, inclusive urban planning and security sector reform – or the lack thereof – also affect community vulnerability. People displaced from clashes and violence elsewhere increasingly seek refuge and essential services in urban centres. In some cases, the security of national or regional capitals has been strengthened to prevent them falling to armed groups, and cities may offer greater freedom, privacy and livelihood opportunities than displaced person’s camps. Fighting in one part of a city can cause population movements to another, safer part of the city – as in east and west Mosul – or to a nearby city or its surroundings. Pre-existing challenges or inequalities due to scarcity of resources and services (shelter, water, sanitation, electricity, etc.) are aggravated in neighbourhoods hosting displaced persons, who may become part of a city’s more vulnerable population.

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PUBLIC SPACE AND SOCIAL INTERCONNECTION

At its best, an urban environment is pluralistic and provides inclusive sites where people meet, greet, swap information and transact to earn an income and purchase what they need. Problems stemming from armed conflict can constrain such activity and social interaction. Hostilities within the city can seriously limit or even destroy these, possibly leading to social isolation.

Destruction of buildings and infrastructure is sometimes regarded as unfortunate but unavoidable, on the assumption that they can be repaired or rebuilt (cultural property being an important exception; see further discussion below). However, as well as ignoring the truism that it is far easier to destroy than to build, this attitude underestimates the seriousness and magnitude of such harm. Urban structures and civic spaces stand for far more in the lives of communities and individuals than the spaces alone. After all, infrastructure is designed and built to meet human needs and serve the public good and thus also contributes to survival, welfare, livelihood and identity, and to cultural and social life. During war, the previously functional and ordered city is shattered and order dissolves into chaos. This can be highly distressing and disorienting, and changes a person’s relationship with their city.

Urban structures and civic spaces stand for far more in the lives of communities and individuals than the spaces alone.

It is therefore important for parties to a conflict to understand that war damages the city as a whole, with its complex relationships represented by social, cultural and economic interactions.⁶⁰

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1.2 ARMED ACTORS AND THE CONDUCT OF HOSTILITIES IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

Control over a city and its population is generally of strategic importance for the belligerents, with social and political aspects to the fighting – including questions of identity – that push the city’s people to the forefront. As the ICRC’s Patrick Hamilton puts it, “[t]he society is what the parties to the conflict are fighting for, through, with or against”.61 The city’s population and physical footprint are also crucial to decisions regarding the scale of military operations. It takes a large force to capture, control or defend a city like Baghdad or Kyiv – and its population.

 Civilians often have to contend with a complex mosaic of armed actors involved in the hostilities affecting their town or city, including state armed forces and fighters from non-state armed groups. There may also be other weapon bearers, such as police and other state security forces, local militias assigned to provide security or local groups manning checkpoints. The unique and congested urban environment, combined with the diverse characteristics and policies of different armed actors, will influence how those armed actors conduct their hostilities in urban areas.

This section sets out the ICRC’s observations regarding armed actors and the conduct of hostilities in urban settings as they apply to the humanitarian consequences for civilians and civilian objects. Specific types of urban operation are discussed in Part Two of the report.

61 P. Hamilton, “Challenges raised by contemporary urban conflicts in humanitarian action: the ICRC perspective”, op. cit.
THE DIVERSITY OF ARMED ACTORS

The armed actors involved in the contexts considered in this report are diverse, as are the means and methods of warfare available to them. Their character, objectives, resources, preparedness, training and experience of urban fighting all vary, as does their coordination with other actors. In cities and elsewhere, there is an increase in conflicts involving non-state armed groups, varying from small self-organized groups to decentralized armed groups consisting of loosely-linked cells, through to centralized armed groups with an organization and structure closely resembling that of state armed forces. While there are some notable exceptions, non-state armed groups typically have less combat power than state armed forces, in terms of personnel, training, equipment and weapons.

The number of actors involved in conflicts is on the increase, and overlapping webs are proliferating that involve alliances, proxies and other types of support relationships between states, and between state and non-state armed actors. These blur the distinctions between the behaviour patterns of the various armed actors. Support to parties to conflict by states, multinational coalitions and non-state armed actors – through arms transfers, training, intelligence sharing, or logistic and kinetic support – is an increasingly prevalent feature of conflicts where the ICRC operates, including situations of urban warfare.

When armed actors fight alongside each other in loose coalitions with unclear coordination, this can lead to a diffusion of responsibility that heightens the vulnerability of civilians. In certain contexts, there have been defections from state armed forces to opposition groups, or forces have disbanded or morphed into more localized units operating only in certain areas or for certain commanders, further blurring their accountability.

ICRC operations reveal that state armed forces, non-state armed groups and other weapon bearers have different levels of knowledge and acceptance of IHL. This may be even more the case when people without previous military experience take up arms hurriedly. In several contexts, law enforcement and other security agencies have reinforced military units tasked for urban operations, despite having no military training. Some armed groups have rejected IHL outright (although not necessarily the obligation to protect civilians), while others base their conduct on rules and principles derived from other sources (traditional, religious, etc.).

The ICRC report The Roots of Restraint in War shows that the combination of these factors means that warring parties differ in their ability to minimize harm during their operations and, more importantly, in their policies and attitudes towards protecting civilians in the first place.

In recent years, several actors have turned their attention to the conduct of their operations in urban environments, and have placed increased emphasis on the protection of civilians. Efforts have been made during hostilities, such as facilitating escapes or undertaking evacuations, making specialist advisers available or taking particular care to spare religious and other cultural buildings from harm.

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63 Ibid., p. 23


65 ICRC, The Roots of Restraint in War, op. cit.


67 See, for example, R. Stewart, “Lessons encountered during the battle for Mosul”, NZ Army Journal, No. 4, 2018, p. 19: https://natlib.govt.nz/records/1207810?search%5BSubject%5D=Battle+casualties&search%5BSubject%5D=Battles&search%5Bpath%5D=items.
At the same time, several parties have acknowledged their limited experience of urban warfare and have said that urban hostilities found them underprepared, and have highlighted a need for greater training and learning – including from other states’ experiences.\(^\text{68}\)

For example:

- During the 2017 fighting in Marawi, the Philippine secretary of defence stated publicly that the armed forces were experienced in fighting in jungles but not in urban settings, and needed different training and tools.\(^\text{69}\)

- While Iraqi security forces involved in the battle for Mosul knew they needed to protect civilians, it was reported that they needed more training on how to assess civilian harm and how to create safe escape routes for civilians.\(^\text{70}\)

Even when parties claim that protecting civilians is important, it is not always clear to troops on the ground how they can best achieve this, and in certain cases other factors have been prioritized, such as force protection.

### HOSTILITIES IN URBAN SETTINGS

The density, diversity and interconnected nature of urban settings make them an especially challenging environment for military operations, imposing particular demands on command and control, manoeuvre and logistical support. Urban terrain presents “cluttered and congested operating spaces” that demand significant human resources, careful and detailed planning, and appropriate intelligence gathering and targeting processes.\(^\text{71}\)

### The challenges of fighting in built-up areas

Military analysts speak of the multidimensional nature of the urban setting; how belligerents must consider the physical external spaces (such as streets and the outsides of buildings) and the hidden internal spaces (such as inside buildings and subterranean systems).

The cluttered terrain limits visibility down blocked-off streets, around corners, into basements and through buildings. This poor visibility makes it difficult to accurately assess civilian presence and “pattern of life” data for targeting decisions, and to accurately estimate expected civilian casualties or damage to civilian objects. The absence of such an overview is an obstacle when it comes to implementing rules on proportionality and precaution in attack.\(^\text{72}\)

In narrow or hilly streets, especially once rubble has accumulated, military forces may struggle to manoeuvre safely in armoured vehicles. These difficulties can be accentuated in the older parts of a city, or its historic centre, if such areas are more densely constructed or were built using earlier methods and materials than newer suburbs.\(^\text{73}\)

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Why do belligerents choose to fight in cities, despite the challenges?

Despite the challenges, and in part because of them, it has long been predicted that armed conflicts would increasingly shift to urban spaces. Reasons for this include cities’ political, cultural, demographic, economic, symbolic, religious and/or social significance. Another reason is that the density and characteristics of urban settings can present military advantages and disadvantages for attackers and defenders. For example, many contexts have seen not only homes and other buildings being used for defence, but networks of bunkers and tunnels allowing shelter and movement around parts of the city. Rubble over a basement or ground floor can protect defenders against bombardment.

The asymmetric nature of conflict may lead an armed group to adapt its military strategies to amplify its strengths and mitigate its weaknesses. An urban setting can offer greater parity to a numerically inferior force facing a militarily superior force. So while some members of non-state armed groups may originate from the city and the city may have economic or symbolic importance as mentioned above, it is also logical that some armed groups choose to operate in a city so as to compensate for their enemy’s military advantages in warfighting technology, for example in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. Even where a party to a conflict does not control territory, a busy urban centre can provide cover for ad hoc attacks.

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BROADER CHALLENGES FOR CIVILIAN PROTECTION IN URBAN HOSTILITIES

The proximity of civilian and military objectives
Despite evacuations or voluntary displacement, belligerents and military objectives were in very close proximity to civilians and civilian objects in the contexts observed, exposing the latter to greater risk of harm.

On the one hand, the very nature of urban settings complicates the distinction between the two; even if one can often identify the enemy, their location close to civilians or civilian objects requires careful targeting decisions to ensure compliance with IHL and otherwise minimize civilian harm.

Furthermore, armed actors may move through different parts of a city, or use civilian buildings such as schools, places of worship or homes as firing positions.

They may establish headquarters and support facilities in the urban area that would make such facilities legitimate military objectives in case of armed conflict.

They might also seek to deliberately shield their operations by positioning themselves at or near critical infrastructure that delivers essential services to civilians, such as a water treatment plant, putting those services at great risk. Combatants often protect such positions using mines, command-detonated ordnance or improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Some fighters may stay with their relatives or shelter from the weather in their homes during the fighting, exposing their families to attack. An additional consequence of using civilian homes for military purposes is that this may force the occupants to leave, exacerbating displacement and preventing return, in addition to the economic and financial hardship the occupants already faced as a result of the conflict.
Civilian structures that have previously been used for military purposes may be contaminated with booby traps and other explosive devices.

**Health care in danger**

The ICRC’s research indicates that the widespread misuse of medical facilities by armed actors is a significant problem. Armed groups have stationed themselves in front of hospitals, operated out of the same compound or stored weapons in medical facilities. Such misuse can result in a medical facility losing the protection it should enjoy under IHL, which may expose the facility, its patients and its personnel to attack. In many of the contexts we examined, hospitals and clinics were closed, damaged or destroyed because military operations had been conducted from them or nearby.

**Schools**

The use of school buildings for military purposes inevitably impacts children’s access to education. Such practices can also transform schools into military objectives within the meaning of IHL, exposing them to attack. Military use of schools and attacks that damage them have long-term effects on education, increasing child protection risks such as exploitation and abuse, child labour and early marriage, reducing resilience and risking future peace and stability. The ICRC considers the Safe Schools Declaration and Guidelines useful reference documents regarding the protection and continuity of education during urban warfare. By implementing the Guidelines, armed forces and non-state armed groups can limit the effects of armed conflict on students, teachers, education facilities and education.

**Subterranean areas**

Some armed actors have used subterranean areas such as tunnel networks or underground bunkers for force protection and the storage of weapons.

Civilians are at greater risk when such underground spaces are used for military operations underneath or close to civilian buildings, including key structures such as hospitals and schools, and where efforts have not been made to remove the civilian population from the vicinity. The responsibility for avoiding or at least minimizing the risk of harm from attacks on subterranean targets rests with those planning and deciding upon attacks, and above-ground structures and the civilians using them are at risk of grave harm if the underground structure is attacked.

The ICRC has also recorded significant damage to underground water and wastewater pipelines, in some cases resulting in pollution of drinking water, as an incidental effect of attacks on such tunnels. Leaks and flooding involving wastewater treatment plants have resulted in the discharge of untreated sewage into nearby areas or the interruption of water supplies in those areas.

**Indirect fire weapons**

Civilians suffer from the firing of indirect fire weapons (such as artillery rockets and mortars) from densely-populated areas. In one setting examined, weapons fired from a populated area not only risked fire in response, but exposed those nearby to danger owing to the inaccuracy of the weapons used (e.g. mortars) and/or their unreliability (e.g. rockets that explode prematurely or fall short and explode in local civilian areas).

**Human shields**

In some contexts, civilians have been used as human shields. By this we mean using the presence of civilians or other protected persons to shield certain points or forces from attack, or to shield, favour or impede military operations.

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Such conduct is absolutely prohibited by IHL and can amount to a war crime.\(^{79}\) In some instances, a related tactic involved deliberately gathering civilians in a location (e.g. hiding them in a building from which the party was firing) with the aim that a counterattack against that position would cause significant civilian casualties and attract criticism against the adversary. A variant of such tactics involves a party seeking to attract attacks from the enemy that would damage significant civilian objects such as places of worship or important cultural property.

**Deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian objects**

Of particularly grave concern are situations in which civilians – such as ethnic or religious minorities or others perceived to be associated with the enemy – are deliberately subjected to violence, including murder. Direct targeting of civilians has been reported, and in some contexts studied this has included mass killings of hundreds of civilians.

Some examples:

- The community in and around Beni (DRC) has suffered repeated violent attacks and murders by armed groups for several years.
- In another context, the ICRC received allegations that unknown perpetrators were killing civilians because of ethnic enmities or by way of revenge.
- In still other contexts, armed groups have directed their operations at urban population centres and essential civilian infrastructure, such as airports and water or gas installations, as part of a deliberate target selection policy, in addition to attacking military objectives.

Deliberately killing civilians and attacking civilian areas and objects are not unique to urban warfare and are not only related to the conduct of hostilities. Indeed, civilians under the control of a party may also suffer murder and other types of violence. In an urban setting, however, such acts can pose a particular threat to civilians, because members of the targeted communities may be subjected to siege or encirclement, may have to hide at home for long periods under difficult circumstances or may be trapped in an enclave, too afraid to even attempt to flee and sometimes needing specific rescue efforts, which may include an escort by peacekeeping troops.\(^{80}\)

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Difficulties for armed actors responding to humanitarian crises
As an added complexity, parties to a conflict must also consider the humanitarian consequences that arise for urban populations.

Duties include:
- issuing warnings to the extent feasible
- evacuating the sick and wounded
- collecting, identifying and handling the dead appropriately, which includes keeping adequate records and informing families
- facilitating humanitarian assistance to populations in need
- protecting the population by considering whether organized larger-scale evacuations are necessary (and protecting people from unlawful forced displacement)\(^{81}\)
- undertaking appropriate and safe screening of people fleeing from urban environments (where relevant)\(^ {82}\)
- removing ERW
- managing large-scale and often repeated waves of displacement and return, which includes ensuring adequate conditions for receiving displaced persons
- working towards destigmatization and reconciliation within and between communities.\(^ {83}\)

Parties must consider how to respond appropriately to the humanitarian impact of hostilities at the planning stage, confirm this response during training and integrate it into their military operations. They must not leave these issues until after the fighting is over, nor can they leave them entirely to humanitarian organizations.

Force protection and civilian harm
The need to protect elements of a military force operating in an urban area may affect the priority given to reducing civilian harm. The ICRC has observed in certain contexts that, in their choice of means and methods of warfare, armed forces have sometimes prioritized the protection of their combat troops and those of their allies ahead of that of civilians, so increasing the exposure of the latter to harm.\(^ {84}\)

For example, when an armed force begins to sustain heavy casualties, such as when it is clearing an area house–by–house and progress slows, a decision may be taken to use indirect fire against buildings, rather than deploy troops to better identify civilian presence before attacking.\(^ {85}\)

Force protection can also be a factor in a decision to impose a siege and/or to stay mostly outside a city and subject the area to indirect fire and aerial bombardment, to reduce the exposure of one’s own personnel to direct fire.

Even where rules of engagement contain special instructions for urban zones, such as prohibiting the use of explosive weapons with warheads larger than a specified size, exceptions may be made to enhance the protection of troops when in contact.\(^ {86}\)

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\(^{81}\) Ibid, pp. 53–56.

\(^{82}\) Ibid. pp. 57–63.

\(^{83}\) P. Hamilton, “Challenges raised by contemporary urban conflicts in humanitarian action: the ICRC perspective”, op. cit., pp. 186, 188.

\(^{84}\) See also ICRC, Explosive Weapons with Wide Area Effects: A Deadly Choice in Populated Areas, op. cit., p. 109.


Similarly, conducting operations at short notice can increase the risk of harm to civilians, particularly where close air support is called for, in comparison to pre-planned operations where precautions such as early warnings can be more effective.

Where the urban setting is well known to the attacking force, and/or the operations are pre-planned, there tends to be greater opportunity for targets to be carefully selected and attacked with means and methods matched to the target, with due consideration for the expected incidental harm to the civilian population and objects.

**The ICRC’s position**

In the ICRC’s view, the protection of own or friendly forces is a relevant military consideration that carries weight in decisions regarding precautions and when assessing the military advantage of an attack, but only insofar as it is “concrete and direct”, which is primarily the case when troops are under attack (i.e. when acting in “self-defence”).

In such circumstances, parties must give humanitarian considerations appropriate weight in relation to force protection. Those considerations include the extent of incidental civilian harm expected to result from the use of heavy explosive weapons. The greater the risk of incidental civilian harm anticipated from the attack, the greater the risk to its own forces the attacking party may have to accept.

Force protection can never justify the use of indiscriminate fire as a measure to avoid the exposure of own or friendly forces. So although force protection is a legitimate concern for an armed force during armed conflict, it cannot be at the expense of the civilian population. Moreover, even where this is not the intention, force protection must not have the practical effect of placing the lives of one’s own troops above the lives of the civilian population.

**Inherent tensions in “saving the city” from enemy violations**

The behaviour of the adversary is sometimes used to justify the conduct of the attacking force, which claims to have the aim of re-asserting control over the territory and “freeing” the population.

In such situations, the subsequent civilian harm has sometimes been considered the price to pay to eject enemies, so as to “save the city” and prevent further harm. There has been some pushback from certain military authorities regarding the question of civilian casualties, blaming the other party’s approach to civilians in the first place.

In a similar vein, the perceived legitimacy of one’s own aims – such as protecting the urban population from atrocities – has sometimes been used as a justification for downplaying or ignoring IHL obligations pertaining to the protection of civilians.

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The fact that one party to a conflict puts civilians and civilian objects at risk by intermingling with the civilian population, or even violates IHL, does not relieve the other party of its obligations under IHL.

Within the logic of IHL, such positions are a matter of concern. While the conduct and tactics of the enemy are relevant factors that can influence the feasibility of precautions, compliance with IHL is not subject to reciprocity.\textsuperscript{91} The fact that one party to a conflict puts civilians and civilian objects at risk by intermingling with the civilian population, or even violates IHL, does not relieve the other party of its obligations under IHL.

Operations of which the aim was to reassert control over the urban centre or specifically to destroy the enemy outright \textit{in situ} have demonstrably caused far greater levels of civilian casualties and destruction.\textsuperscript{92}

The paradox therefore remains that some operations of which the stated purpose was to protect civilians or “save” a city were in fact not planned with the protection of civilians as their main aim. The main aim was simply to defeat the enemy, with the result that the operation was exceptionally dangerous for the civilian population, particularly when combined with an armed group not allowing civilians to flee to safer areas.

\textbf{Monitoring and investigation of civilian harm: learning and applying the lessons of urban warfare}

Practices such as systematic post-attack battle damage assessments and after-action reviews following an operation can ensure that lessons learned feed future attacks and operations, and may contribute to mitigating civilian harm and improve military policy and practice during urban warfare.

Such practices can result in a more thorough assessment of harm to civilians and civilian objects, including the cumulative effects of previous strikes.\textsuperscript{93} The ICRC recommends that to inform this assessment, one should disaggregate civilian casualty statistics by age, gender and disability where feasible.

During urban warfare, a specialized civilian-casualty tracking cell can:

- help establish the extent of civilian harm by collecting data
- monitor these elements over time to understand the underlying causes of harm to civilians, i.e. the correlation between such harm and the means and methods of warfare
- provide the basis for making amends.

Such cells have been deployed in some of the contexts that this report examines, including by non-state armed groups.

Acknowledging civilian harm offers dignity to the victims and their families and may facilitate reconciliation. Civil society reports indicate, however, that very few compensation payments have been made to people who have suffered harm as a result of urban warfare.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{91} CIHL Rule 140: “Reciprocity”: \url{https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule140}.

\textsuperscript{92} Center for Civilians in Conflict, \textit{Policies and Practices to Protect Civilians: Lessons from ISF Operations Against ISIS in Urban Areas}, op. cit., p. 43.


Possible reasons for the small number of payments include:

- the fact that few states have a mechanism for offering compensation to affected civilians
- failure to use those mechanisms that do exist
- making payments only for certain types of harm (such as death) but not others (such as injury or damage to property).

Robust requirements for internal reporting following potential IHL violations, along with effective investigations capable of establishing the facts and determining responsibility, can ensure accountability and facilitate measures to prevent recurrence.95

The ICRC has observed that some states and non-state armed groups investigated allegations of certain specific violations (such as despoliation of the dead, abuse of captured fighters or looting), sometimes resulting in prosecutions of those who harmed civilians and the imposition of sanctions on them.96 However, many allegations are never investigated, including more general allegations arising from urban warfare, specifically allegations of incidents occurring repeatedly over a period of time such as damage to essential infrastructure, high numbers of civilian casualties or the inability of humanitarian personnel to access neighbourhoods in need.

However, some states have established bodies of inquiry to investigate suspected incidents of civilian harm and damage to civilian objects as they occur, and to ensure accountability.

Examples include:

- the National Commission of Inquiry and the Joint Incidents Assessment Team regarding the conflict in Yemen, which the Saudi-led coalition established to investigate allegations of unlawful coalition attacks
- the Fact-Finding Assessment Mechanism established by the Israel Defense Forces following operation “Protective Edge”.97

While the establishment of such bodies is an encouraging development, they sometimes lack the independence and impartiality required to effectively investigate violations and prosecute alleged perpetrators.

The ICRC maintains a fruitful dialogue on IHL compliance and humanitarian issues with many weapon bearers. We have noted positive changes in attitudes and behaviour by certain armed actors over time and have observed efforts to mitigate civilian harm during military operations in urban areas. This indicates a willingness to comply with IHL during hostilities and has helped to limit civilian harm, including damage to and destruction of civilian objects and infrastructure.

In some settings, however, acts of concern were perpetrated repeatedly until the end of the combat phase of military operations, thereby continuing to harm civilians. For the ICRC, this demonstrates fundamental differences in approach between those operations that prioritize the protection of civilians and civilian objects in the achievement of their objectives, and those that accept devastating humanitarian consequences as unavoidable to defeat the enemy.


Axum, Tigray Region, Ethiopia. Several schools are being used as shelter for displaced people who have fled their homes because of fighting.

Anbar, Iraq. A damaged health care centre before it undergoes repairs to make it operational once more.
Gaza. A mother of six helps two of her children to study during a blackout.

PART TWO

UNDERSTANDING CIVILIANS’ EXPERIENCES OF HARM IN URBAN WARFARE
We shall now turn our attention to the patterns of harm that civilians face, by examining three “moments”:
• when they remain in the city
• when they are fleeing or being evacuated
• when they attempt to return home.

We are not suggesting that people’s experiences of urban warfare follow a set trajectory or that people or their needs are homogenous. Rather, each “moment” encompasses considerations that it is important to understand, and that will differ depending on such factors as a person’s socio-economic status, age, gender, disability and ethnicity, plus the type of fighting and the specific situation.

Civilians and civilian objects are the central features of the urban setting, and parties to a conflict will interact with them in different ways. A deeper understanding by belligerents of civilians’ experiences should help them mitigate civilian harm during urban warfare.

UNDERSTANDING CIVILIANS’ ATTEMPTS TO COPE DURING ARMED CONFLICT

Civilians move around a conflict zone in various ways, engaging with their communities, possibly taking risks, and interacting with the parties to the conflict – complying or perhaps resisting. They may act spontaneously or strategically, as individuals, as families or as communities, with the aim of preserving physical safety, saving lives or obtaining sustenance.

Strategies for physical safety include:
• avoiding large gatherings
• sheltering
• avoiding contact with armed actors
• running from immediate danger
• fleeing the area of hostilities, or even fleeing the country by crossing international borders.

In some contexts, people have shared information or warnings about dangers and have organized networks of “spotters” who can share warnings via radio or instant messaging. People have taken personal risks to accompany or disguise friends or neighbours of a particular religious affiliation or ethnicity, to help them flee the city through checkpoints.

Some people cope with the poverty and uncertainty of conflict by:
• rationing their food and money
• selling assets
• seeking out humanitarian assistance
• begging
• smuggling food for the population
• engaging in transactional sex or sex practised for extreme need.

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Families may have to sell productive assets and borrow at exorbitant rates, impoverishing them for decades or even generations.

Extreme poverty in wartime accelerates the loss of childhood:
- Negative coping strategies include withdrawing children from school, child labour, child marriage and recruitment of children into armed groups.
- Where schools are still operating, the precarious economic situation might force parents to withdraw children from school to save money on school fees or because children might be able to work and contribute to the family income.
- Families may seek marriage of their children, particularly girls, earlier than planned, not only to reduce the number of people to feed but also in the hope that this will shield girls from kidnapping or other abuse by armed groups.101

Civilians may pay “taxes” to armed groups or provide support services in return for guarantees that they will escape harm, and local community leaders sometimes negotiate with armed actors on behalf of their community to arrange evacuations of the sick or wounded or to assert certain rights.102

Individuals may denounce people to the authorities or actively discriminate against certain groups.

Some civilians may be encouraged or forced to take up arms and openly resist an adversary. If they engage in fighting, they will lose their protection against attack for such time as they do so.

**CIVILIANS HAVING TO UNDERTAKE NEW ROLES**

Many of these examples show how civilians take up roles to provide “life-critical sustenance and services”103 that would otherwise be provided by specialized individuals, services or agencies that cannot carry out those roles because of the conflict.

Untrained people act as first responders or general practitioners, searching for survivors in rubble, performing first aid, providing ambulance services, collecting and burying dead bodies or putting out fires. They may have to take up new work or other income-generating activities, learn how to reinforce or repair their homes, clear ERW on their property or in their neighbourhood,104 or organize community access to food, water or generators. In at least one context, medical students and general practitioners had to conduct surgery as demand outstripped the availability of surgeons. In Gaza, communities have sometimes organized a shared generator, rebuilt roads or helped provide essential services.105

Taking on new or dangerous activities can have both positive and negative consequences. It may provide short-term gain, show agency, courage and a sense of control and/or demonstrate an individual’s resilience and adaptability. Longer-term, it may affect the traditional social fabric of the community in positive ways, for example by demonstrating the competencies of women or other marginalized groups. However, even where they are voluntary, these new roles might also increase risk. While improving security for some they may degrade it for others. They can be unsustainable or damaging long-term, even if they appear necessary short-term.106

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102 CIVIC, “We Did not Know if We Would Die from Bullets or Hunger”: Civilian Harm and Local Protection Measures in Yemen, CIVIC, 2019, p. 35: [https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/YEMEN_BulletsorHunger_FINAL_PROOF.pdf](https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/YEMEN_BulletsorHunger_FINAL_PROOF.pdf)
THE PERCEPTION OF HELPING THE ENEMY

Parties sometimes see certain civilian-led activities to mitigate harm as favouring the other side. More organized activities, such as first response or the provision of medical services for the enemy, may attract attacks or other violence and inadvertently increase risk to the individuals concerned or others in the community. Parties have sometimes perceived simply sheltering in place as supporting the enemy.

Parties have obliged people to demonstrate support through their conduct, exposing them to greater risk. This may take the form of demanding that a community establish a local defence force or denounce members of an opposition group. In some instances, such support has been a condition for the provision of humanitarian relief, in blatant violation of IHL provisions stipulating that such aid must be delivered impartially and with no adverse distinction.

In several contexts, parties have intentionally blocked or delayed humanitarian aid destined for certain areas.

When a party to conflict accuses part of a local population of supporting the enemy, people from that community describe that party’s presence as creating a climate of fear rather than a sense of security.

Perceived injustices, humiliation or social inequalities have driven people to align with or join non-state armed groups, just as the actions of such groups have driven people to enlist in support of the state or other party fighting against them.

Civilians are at greater risk of ill-treatment, arbitrary detention, disappearance or extrajudicial killing when one side perceives them as associated with the other.

This perception can arise from:
- kinship, familial or tribal links
- ethnic or religious identity
- place of origin
- remaining in territory controlled by an opposition group
- alleged past actions
- gender and age, including belonging to any of the following categories:
  - men and boys of a certain age too quickly treated as security risks
  - women married to or otherwise closely associated with group members
  - children allegedly recruited by the group
  - children born as the result of rape.

In the most extreme cases, a party has perceived civilians as the enemy and illegally targeted them because of their identity. In addition to the risk of attack during hostilities, such stigmatization creates other risks for the safety and dignity of people perceived to be associated with the enemy, including women and children.

In one context we studied, civilians were too frightened to claim the body of a relative in case the deceased person was perceived to be an opposition fighter.

Parties sometimes impose collective punishment on groups of people they perceive as associated with the enemy. This may include weaponizing basic services, e.g. by shutting off the water supply to a community to increase pressure on the enemy.

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INCOMPLETE INFORMATION FOR DECISION-MAKING

Civilians’ decisions about how to navigate urban conflict – whether to stay or go, which parts of the city are safe – depend on situational awareness. However, information is far from complete in crisis situations, compounding the uncertainty as to what might happen. This can be due to insufficiently detailed warnings or instructions from authorities, because internet access or other communication or news tools are disrupted or shut down, or because of misinformation or disinformation campaigns.

Conversely, people affected by a contemporary conflict may face a fog of information, requiring them to assess the reliability of information about imminent bombardments, escape routes, sniper positions, alleged abuses by the enemy or other factors before making decisions.\(^\text{109}\)

To ensure that people with disabilities can also access essential information, it should be offered in a variety of formats, taking into account the diversity of their impairments.\(^\text{110}\) Similarly, presenting information in different formats may ensure that information is also available to people who cannot read or cannot move around freely, problems that disproportionately impact women and girls.\(^\text{111}\)

A city in crisis may feel disorienting, with people cut off from family and friends and no longer knowing which information sources to trust. Obstacles to situational awareness can expose people to danger or deprive them of opportunities for greater protection.

When families have to make a choice, in many cultures it is often a man who holds greater decision-making power for the family. This can cause both parties to conflict and humanitarians to underassess the specific risks and needs that women and children encounter.\(^\text{112}\)

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\(^{111}\) ICRC, Gendered Impacts of Armed Conflict and Implications for IHL, op. cit., p. 18.

\(^{112}\) C. Baudot, “Humanitarian consequences and protection risks faced by civilians during urban warfare”, in International Institute of Humanitarian Law, New Dimensions and Challenges of Urban Warfare, 43rd Round Table on Current Issues of International Humanitarian Law, FrancoAngeli, 2021, pp. 81–82; https://iihl.org/new-dimensions-and-challenges-of-urban-warfare/; Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, War in Cities, op. cit., preambular para. 8 emphasises that the humanitarian response “must ... favour a multidisciplinary, integrated and scalable approach, based on the equal participation and full involvement of women ...”.
HOW THE SPIRAL OF ACCUMULATED HARM AFFECTS RESILIENCE

Urban warfare can have serious knock-on, cumulative consequences for the civilian population in addition to the direct physical damage caused.

For instance, the ICRC has articulated in some detail the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of warfare on essential urban infrastructure and related services,113 stressing their interdependencies and interconnectedness.114 For instance, an attack on a power plant not only causes direct damage (the direct impact), but can also result in power cuts that cause the failure of water treatment plants and essential equipment in hospitals, leading to patient deaths and public health crises (indirect impacts) and resulting in massive humanitarian consequences for civilians, civilian infrastructure and basic services. Over time, those impacts can have a cumulative effect, such that the level of disruption or disrepair makes it impossible to restore the system.

113 ICRC, Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict. A Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People, op. cit.
The experience of the ICRC and other components of the Movement reveals that many situations involve even more complex interdependencies and interconnections than the example above.115 The shock of armed conflict disrupts the normal functioning of the infrastructure, services, networks and spaces that are a driving force for cities and central to their functioning. It also has the potential to trigger displacement, destroy livelihoods and harm the overall urban environment.

People’s unmet needs accumulate over time, as one disruption has consequences for other important elements of urban life.

The cumulative spiral of harm may profoundly affect aspect of a person’s well-being and dignity, including:

- access to food and food production
- income
- health — including mental health
- mobility
- access to legal documentation
- access to information about missing family members.

Everyone has a certain capacity to withstand difficult times and to recover from shocks — their resilience capacity.116 How resilient an individual is to the shocks and stressors of armed conflict depends on the degree to which they are exposed. In a city, direct impact is likely. Resilience capacity also depends on an individual’s preparedness and asset base — including physical, financial, human, social, political and natural livelihood assets.117 These assets in turn influence the livelihood strategies people adopt. Once people have no more income or cannot access it, they often need to rely on other temporary coping mechanisms such as quickly accessing new sources of food and income, buying from other less expensive markets or reducing consumption or expenditure, as described above. Many coping mechanisms have a negative effect on health, nutrition and education, which further weakens people’s resilience capacity.

People’s coping mechanisms also depend strongly on the governance environment before and during the crisis, i.e. the presence and functioning of public institutions, private entities and civil society, plus policies, laws and cultural customs.118 If the harms build up and coping mechanisms and adaptation become insufficient, with inadequate or insufficient support through governance structures, people’s well-being can deteriorate dramatically and surviving the crisis is no longer possible. This deterioration may be rapid, quickly leading to life-threatening situations. In other cases the decline may be slow, with people affected by ongoing urban conflict trapped in vicious cycles of negative coping strategies for generations. Once an individual is caught up in such a cycle, it is very difficult for them to escape and recover without external assistance.


116 For the ICRC, resilience is the ability of individuals, communities, institutions and systems to anticipate, absorb, adapt and respond to and/or recover from shocks and stressors derived from conflict/violence and hazards, without compromising their long-term prospects. This is without prejudice to the obligations of states and other duty bearers towards the civilian population.


118 Ibid. p. 20.
It is therefore crucial to act long before lives and livelihoods are entirely disrupted.\textsuperscript{119} While resilience can enhance a person’s response to armed conflict, people should never have to become resilient to IHL violations.\textsuperscript{120} Furthermore, the ICRC promotes resilience within a situation of violence and conflict, rather than resilience to such situations. Indeed, the space for resilience is shaped by the actions of weapon bearers and parties to the conflict, by the pressure they impose on essential services and by people’s (positive) coping mechanisms and the level of threat they pose to people’s safety and dignity. Better knowledge of people’s protection efforts and possible community agency does not diminish the responsibility of belligerents to protect the civilian population. Rather, such knowledge should inform and reinforce their efforts to prevent and mitigate civilian harm.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. p. 32. See also descriptions in ICRC, Displaced in Cities: Experiencing and Responding to Urban Internal Displacement Outside Camps, op. cit., p. 65.

2.1 EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE REMAINING IN A CITY

This section explores the experiences of people who remain in a city during urban warfare, in particular:

- instructions issued to the population – to stay or to leave – and the actions of the parties
- the specific patterns of risk from different types of operation, including siege and encirclement, ground operations, indirect fire and aerial bombardment
- how the needs of civilians in cities correspond to interconnected patterns of harm that accumulate over time in complex ways
- the experiences of people deprived of their liberty in urban centres during armed conflict.

SOME CIVILIANS WILL ALWAYS REMAIN – AND THEY DO NOT LOSE THEIR PROTECTION

1. Some cannot leave

Even if the authorities have issued warnings or instructions to leave, some people will be unable to do so:

- People who are sick, wounded or pregnant may be unable to leave, at least without special assistance.
- Older people and those with disabilities will face particular barriers to movement and might be left behind, however unwillingly.
- People deprived of their liberty are simply unable to leave voluntarily.
- Gender may restrict the ability to leave, for example when conscription policies prevent men from leaving, or if women face laws, policies or practices that restrict their movement if unaccompanied by men.

Lanao del Sur, Marawi City, Philippines.
This teacher continued to hold classes despite the conflict.
2. Some choose to stay

The reasons that civilians give for choosing to stay include:

- protecting property from looting or damage
- remaining with family members who cannot leave
- the lack of safe escape routes
- inadequate shelter options.

In some contexts, people fear encountering even worse harm during flight, particularly when a party to the conflict is perpetrating violence – including murder – against certain ethnic or religious communities.\textsuperscript{121}

From eastern Ukraine to Mindanao, it is sometimes older family members who choose to stay, either to protect assets or because the rigours of flight and displacement are too physically demanding. Some feel better able to navigate the situation at home than the unknowns of fleeing, or feel safer in the hands of the party controlling their current location than they would in territory controlled by the adversary. Some stay because they think the situation will pass in a few days, as may have happened previously.

3. Some are forced to stay

Even if they wish to leave the city, civilians do not always have clear opportunities to flee the hostilities, at least not without great risk. In several contexts studied, a party to the conflict used threats and violence to actively prevent civilians from leaving.

In Mosul, for example, civilians reported that they tried multiple times to leave their neighbourhood to seek safety elsewhere but that fighters threatened to kill them if they did so, or attacked them when they attempted to flee.\textsuperscript{122}

Restrictions imposed by siege or encirclement of the city or part of it, or border restrictions, have also prevented or inhibited movement. In one context, for example, civilians were only allowed to cross a checkpoint to leave the city without their personal belongings. They were only allowed to enter the city on foot, and medical and food supplies they were trying to bring in were often confiscated at the checkpoint.

Snipers have sometimes been used to enforce such restrictions.

The long siege of Aleppo involved even tighter restrictions, trapping civilians without sufficient food and other essential items and tripling their cost.\textsuperscript{123}

Another example is Gaza, where residents cannot seek shelter outside Gaza’s borders when hostilities break out.


WARNINGS

One of the precautionary measures to take during urban military operations is the issuance of effective advance warnings to the civilian population of attacks, or of advice to seek shelter or evacuate. Such warnings might encourage flight or an organized evacuation of the city, or movement to safer areas within the city, or may consist of an instruction to take shelter at home.

**Warnings do not make an attack lawful.**

For instance, at the beginning of the battle of Mosul in 2016, civilians were reportedly instructed by the Iraqi government to remain inside their homes as much as possible. Four days before the start of the military operation in one neighbourhood, flyers were reportedly dropped requesting that the inhabitants stay away from positions of the opposition armed group.124

In another context, residents received warnings to evacuate an area, through leaflets or sometimes even telephone calls or SMS, before targeted strikes hit the area.

However, warnings sometimes give only a general instruction, such as to leave the area, with no clear indication as to where to go or when to move in order to be safe. The party giving the warning may not sufficiently facilitate safe escape routes or may not give people enough time to relocate. As a result, civilians cannot always act on warnings. In some cases, blanket announcements of attacks on population centres through social media fail to specify which locations will be hit or where civilians can find safety.

Warnings do not make an attack lawful; an attack may be unlawful even if an appropriate warning is issued. Parties to a conflict sometimes issue warnings and time limits for an armed group to surrender and/or for civilians to evacuate the area before attacking, but make (unlawful) declarations that any person remaining after that time will be considered targetable as a military objective or that no mercy will be shown. In one context analysed, pamphlets were dropped urging civilians to leave the area within an unachievably short timeframe, with the entire province being (unlawfully) declared a military objective.

TYPES OF FIGHTING DURING URBAN WARFARE – AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

While every example of urban warfare is unique, urban operations over the past decade display certain characteristics, which we shall discuss in the following sub-sections.

Particular methods and operational strategies result in particular patterns of harm for people remaining in the city. They also make certain IHL rules particularly relevant, such as the prohibition of starvation and the obligation to permit relief operations and humanitarian access during sieges or encirclement.

**Siege or encirclement**

Although not defined under IHL, siege can be described as a tactic to encircle an enemy’s armed forces, in order to restrict their movement or cut them off from support and supply channels.

The aim of a siege is usually to force the enemy to surrender. Historically, this was achieved through starvation and thirst, but in contemporary conflicts besieging forces usually attempt to capture the besieged area through hostilities.125

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Control by the besieging party may be complete or partial; it may entirely prevent the movement of people and goods, or only make this extremely difficult. Limitations might be imposed on the entire city or just part of it, possibly preceded by a broader and/or looser encirclement.

It is not illegal to impose a siege, but IHL protects civilians trapped in sieges through limits on what the parties can do during such operations, principles governing the conduct of hostilities and rules that prohibit starvation and govern relief operations and humanitarian access.

In recent urban warfare, parties have besieged or encircled areas to isolate and contain the enemy, prevent it from withdrawing or receiving reinforcements from outside, and ultimately to defeat the defending force and take military control of the area. Defending a city can also lead to siege-like restrictions.

The restrictions of a siege:
- seriously affect the provision of items essential for the survival of the civilian population
- prevent or inhibit the movement of civilians and civilian goods, including life-saving food, water, medicine and humanitarian assistance
- prevent civilians from seeking safety elsewhere.

A party may consider the urban centre under siege to be sympathetic to the party controlling it, and limit civilian access to essential goods and services for the military purpose of eroding civilian support for the enemy and/or forcing the enemy to surrender.

Civilians may be able to move about the city to some extent, but face the dangers of hostilities and interactions with armed actors.

Cities may be besieged within a broader area that also includes outlying rural districts. This can be an important lifeline, as people can use such areas for agriculture, providing some food for the otherwise isolated population.

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126 Ibid.
Besieging forces may leave some routes in and out of the city open to people and goods, or arrange for the evacuation of civilians.

The restrictions of a siege can constitute collective punishment of the population. It was in this humanitarian and legal context that the ICRC expressed concern for Syrian civilians under siege in 2013, and in 2016 called for the immediate lifting of all sieges across Syria.\textsuperscript{129}

In 2017, the ICRC recognized the disastrous consequences of sieges in recent armed conflicts, as revealed by harrowing stories from residents of Fallujah, Madaya and other urban centres, taking the position that “siege as it is practised in the Middle East today is unconscionable and often unlawful”.\textsuperscript{130}

**Ground operations and front lines**

Where two or more parties each control part of an urban area, there may be one or more front lines within or around the area. Such situations can also arise when one party has first besieged an area and then launched operations aimed at seizing territorial control.

Those front lines may be relatively stable or move frequently depending on the hostilities. In some cities, the traditional locations of political, ethnic or religious groups have contributed to the positions of front lines during conflict, or to certain neighbourhoods becoming enclaves. Geographic features such as mountains or bodies of water may form natural front lines, to divide a city’s battlespace or as bases for military action.


Civilians close to the front lines face a particular set of risks from sources such as proximity to hostilities and the presence of mines or similar weapons.

If those front lines shift as the battle progresses, or if fighting expands to multiple fronts that are active simultaneously, new residential areas suddenly become “front-line adjacent”.

Civilians face threats when attempting to cross front lines to stay ahead of the fighting, reach services or supplies or reconnect with family in the opposing force’s territory.

Front lines may separate families as they seek safety in the chaos, possibly leaving behind the most vulnerable members of their families, such as older people, people with disabilities or sick people. Families may have to leave such people behind because they cannot keep up with the rest of the family or because it is not possible to carry or otherwise move them. They may even have to leave the dead body of a family member. When separated families are unable to rapidly restore and maintain contact following separation, they may report family members as missing.

If first responders such as the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society or the authorities cannot access an area safely, bodies of civilians and combatants may be left for days until safe retrieval and proper forensic procedures become possible. This makes it more difficult to identify the dead and treat them with dignity.

For an attacker, the purpose of ground operations is usually to secure the area and/or to destroy the enemy. In examples studied, this approach led to increased civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure.

During house-to-house clearance operations, one party may encourage civilians to give them information about the whereabouts of the other. If obtained appropriately, such knowledge of the whereabouts of fighters and civilians could potentially avoid harm to other civilians. However, in at least one setting, civilians were forced to check a street for snipers or threatened with consequences if information they provided about the enemy turned out to be incorrect.

Ground operations may also entail screening people on the spot, leading to risks for civilians that include harassment, ill-treatment or the assumption that they are associated with the enemy because they have not left the area. Worst of all are cases of extrajudicial killings and disappearances during or following house-to-house clearance operations, based on such assumptions or because the person was a relative of a fighter.

In dense urban areas, commanders sometimes entrust subordinates to “operate in a decentralized manner during urban operations, either alone or in small groups and make decisions independently without advice, including legal advice.” This can lead to a lack of supervision by commanders and increase the risk of harm to civilians and others not taking part in hostilities. The absence of police and civil authorities increases that risk still further.

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131 ICRC, “Needs of the civilian population in increasingly long conflicts: selected issues”, op. cit., p. 42.
**Indirect fire and aerial bombardment**

Indirect fire and aerial bombardment, using weapon systems capable of delivering significant explosive force from range and over a wide area,\(^{136}\) cause high levels of civilian casualties when used in populated areas.\(^ {137}\)

Bombing and shelling kill and wound people through multiple types of physical injury, leading to long-term impairment of many, especially in areas where emergency health care is inadequate or inaccessible. They also leave behind large amounts of unexploded ordnance (UXO). People told the ICRC about being trapped for several days under the rubble following a strike. The ICRC’s first-hand experience and documentation, and data collected by other field-based organizations, confirm that women, children and other groups are particularly at risk. The use of heavy explosive weapons, especially when protracted, also causes serious long-term psychological trauma, particularly for children.\(^ {138}\)

Front lines, airports, or urban neighbourhoods that also house bases or other installations of the belligerents are frequently bombarded. However, the ICRC has recorded numerous incidents in which airstrikes, indirect fire and other fighting damaged or reduced to rubble entire parts of cities, including civilian housing, critical civilian infrastructure, schools, places of worship, clinics and hospitals.

The munitions themselves, or toxic substances released when facilities or structures are damaged, can contaminate urban areas for years and pose a grave threat to public health.\(^ {139}\) Several cases were reported of air-strikes hitting munitions depots close to houses, with secondary explosions and projected ordnance resulting in significant casualties and destruction or damage to houses and commercial buildings.

Such incidents create ongoing risks for the civilian population, particularly children, from large quantities of UXO and toxic materials in the areas in which they live, work and play.

Bombing, shelling and the use of other heavy explosive weapons may harm monuments and other objects or sites of environmental or cultural significance, sometimes incidentally but often as a result of deliberate attacks for religious, ideological, political or other reasons. This can in turn damage local economies, for example through the loss of tourism, but it also affects people’s histories, cultural identities and memories.\(^ {140}\)

It is clear that the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas can trigger direct and indirect humanitarian consequences affecting a far larger part of the population than those in the immediate vicinity of the actual explosion and do so in complex, interconnected ways.\(^ {141}\) These consequences are also generally long-lasting and pose a monumental challenge to post–conflict reconstruction and development, including the extended time period and immense resources needed to rehabilitate the city.\(^ {142}\)

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136 Explosive weapons are weapons activated by the detonation of a high-explosive substance, creating a blast and fragmentation effect. They include improvised explosive devices (IEDs). See ICRC, “Needs of the civilian population in increasingly long conflicts: selected issues”, op. cit., and ICRC, Explosive Weapons with Wide Area Effects: A Deadly Choice in Populated Areas, op. cit.


140 Ibid.


Choice of weapons and developing technologies

Some armed groups use less sophisticated or makeshift weaponry, such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or locally produced rockets that are less accurate and less reliable, often rendering attacks indiscriminate.

Non-state armed groups will often attempt to undermine their enemy’s technical advantage. The use by state armed forces of night vision capabilities is one example of this disparity, and explains why fighting in the contexts we analysed tended to occur mainly during daylight hours. This increases the risks to civilians as they used public spaces for essential activities, such as going to work, school or the market. Such groups may capture heavier, more sophisticated or more precise weapons from the enemy, or receive them from a supporting entity, but lack the knowledge and training to use them appropriately and lawfully.143 As technology develops, cheaper off-the-shelf surveillance products such as unmanned aerial vehicles have become increasingly available. If parties use them during military operations in accordance with IHL, this may help to avoid or reduce civilian harm.144

Technology alone cannot “fix” the underlying military challenges of urban settings. The crucial requirement remains paying greater attention and taking constant care to protect civilians.

Some military forces have acquired technical capabilities with the potential to reduce harm to civilians, such as weaponry with greater precision, tools that enhance vision and intelligence collection or munitions that cause less collateral damage (although these can still cause civilian harm).145 Such weapons and equipment might enable more accurate estimates of collateral damage, better distinction, or the use of lower-yield munitions to achieve the same military effect, or may lead to fewer targeting errors.146

According to some authors, however, technological developments have not necessarily mitigated the effects of urban warfare on civilians. Instead, they have led to greater use of weapons, allowing attacks to go ahead where they might previously have been abandoned on the grounds that it was not possible to conduct them lawfully using earlier, less precise munitions. This may increase the harm to civilians.147 In dense urban settings such as Mosul where enemy fighters could seek shelter in or below buildings, or move swiftly between them, the availability of precise weaponry led to a pattern of multiple strikes “chasing” the enemy as they changed position, causing massive destruction and civilian casualties as areas were cleared of risks before troops slowly moved forward.148

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Whatever technical tools are used in urban warfare – for force protection or to better protect civilians – technology alone cannot “fix” the underlying military challenges of urban settings. The crucial requirement is still to pay greater attention and to take constant care to protect civilians.\footnote{149}{A. Hills, *Future War in Cities: Rethinking a Liberal Dilemma*, op. cit., pp. 140, 142. See also the broader discussion in D. Copeland and L. Sanders, “Engaging with the industry: integrating IHL into new technologies in urban warfare”, op. cit.}

Furthermore, operations to “liberate” urban territory from an enemy still require more traditional ground operations. Forces with sophisticated technologies and training may still need to fight house-by-house, room-by-room to achieve victory in urban warfare.\footnote{150}{See, for example, D. Stewart, “Protecting civilians during urban warfare: challenges from recent conflict and future prospects”, op. cit., pp. 38, 40; W. Wells, “The challenge of applying the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution in urban environment characterized by dual-use objects and intermingled civilians and military”, in International Institute of Humanitarian Law, *New Dimensions and Challenges of Urban Warfare, 43rd Round Table on Current Issues of International Humanitarian Law*, op. cit., pp. 104–105.}

We can therefore expect belligerents to continue to use traditional methods such as sieges, tunnels, booby traps and snipers, together with less accurate artillery and mortars, albeit complemented by modern precision capabilities.

Recent urban warfare has also involved the use of weapons or munitions that are prohibited under IHL because of their nature or the way they are used. The ICRC has publicly condemned the repeated use of chemical weapons in the form of toxic gases, nerve agents and other chemicals, all of which are prohibited under IHL and have inflicted death or horrific injuries on civilians.\footnote{151}{ICRC, “Chemical weapons: An absolute prohibition under international humanitarian law”, ICRC, Geneva, 18 July 2013: https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/interview/2013/07-18-syria-chemical-weapons.htm; ICRC, “ICRC emphasizes the prohibition of chemical weapons at 26th Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention”, ICRC, Geneva, 29 November 2021: https://www.icrc.org/en/document/prohibition-chemical-weapons-26th-conference.}

Anti-personnel landmines, cluster munitions and booby traps attached to civilian objects such as houses have also had serious consequences for civilians, and have left a deadly legacy for civilians and urban communities, especially where local authorities lack the capacity to remove them safely.

**Asymmetric warfare**

The balance between conduct of hostilities and protection of civilians may be further endangered in situations of asymmetric warfare.\footnote{152}{See ICRC, *Asymmetric Warfare*, https://casebook.icrc.org/a_to_z/glossary/asymmetric-warfare.}

Such warfare is common in urban contexts and tests the non-reciprocal character of IHL rules.

For instance, a militarily weaker or less sophisticated force, generally without the capacity for more permanent control over the urban territory in question, may carry out sporadic attacks on the militarily stronger or more sophisticated force. They may attack military objectives, but they may also conduct unlawful attacks, including acts of terror directed against civilians, or civilian infrastructure such as an airport or market.

The weaker party may be operating from within the urban area or be located externally, entering intermittently for guerrilla-style attacks. In the urban environment, even attacks on lawful military targets risk serious harm to civilians and civilian objects, and serious humanitarian consequences.

One scenario in which asymmetric hostilities occur is that in which one party has lost control of an urban area to another. The party that has lost control may still have the capacity to infiltrate the city, use IEDs and conduct hit-and-run attacks against armed forces or civilian targets, and it may still control segments of the population. Some such attacks, including suicide attacks, are more common immediately after part of a city has changed hands, i.e. when the new occupier has yet to establish full control over law and order, or where continuing hostilities prevent its troops from staying to secure the area.
ZONE UNDER SPECIAL PROTECTION

Although we did not observe the use of such zones in the contexts examined, protected zones deserve a mention, as treaty and customary IHL provide for several types of zone that benefit from special protection. Such zones have the potential to reduce the impact of urban warfare on people not or no longer taking part in hostilities or to protect certain areas, by guaranteeing that they have been demilitarized. Zones under special protection can also reduce damage to essential infrastructure. However, areas of this type do not remove the obligation to attack only military objectives.

IHL does not oblige parties to a conflict to create protected zones. Creating such a zone requires the agreement of the parties, which presupposes a level of confidence rarely encountered in armed conflict. This need for agreement is also the main reason why so few have been established.

IHL provides for various types of protected zone, in both international and non-international armed conflicts (through special agreements for the latter). Designating and demilitarizing an area implies a common understanding and agreement that neither party will gain a military advantage from occupying or targeting the area as part of their military operations. Where that is so, there is a better chance that it will remain protected.

The types of zone differ as to their locations and the categories of person that have access to them, but their common goal is to create areas where civilians, the sick and the wounded can seek shelter from hostilities. People in a protected area can still fall into enemy hands, however. The area must be clearly marked and must be demilitarized, with no military personnel, equipment and installations inside it. The parties to the conflict must issue clear instructions to their personnel not to use such areas for military purposes and not to attack them.

There are four types of protected zone:

1. **Hospital and safety zones and localities** are available during international armed conflicts to civilians or military personnel who need health care. They are set up outside the area of active hostilities, either in time of peace or during conflict.

2. **Neutralized zones** are open to all civilians and to sick and wounded combatants. They are set up within the area of active hostilities, during conflict.

3. **Non-defended localities** can be established for any inhabited place near to or in a zone where armed forces are in contact.

4. **Demilitarized zones** are created with the express agreement of the parties and cannot be used for military operations. They are located outside the area of active hostilities.

In non-international armed conflicts, the parties can conclude special agreements to replicate some of the provisions applicable in international armed conflict.

The UN has at times established safe areas that do not fall under IHL, without the prior agreement of the parties.

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The ICRC can act as a neutral intermediary or initiator by virtue of its right of humanitarian initiative. It can also administer these areas temporarily under very strict conditions, which include respect by the parties of the agreement they have entered into and the effective demilitarization of the area. If it does not decide to administer an area itself, the ICRC may nevertheless provide services and assistance to the protected persons within it. These include health, social and economic assistance, water and shelter, restoration and maintenance of family links, registration and monitoring of some or all of the people in the area, etc. Historical examples of protected zones established by the ICRC include Dacca in 1971, Nicosia in 1974, Saigon and Phnom-Penh in 1975, Nicaragua in 1979 and the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) in 1982.159

LIVING IN A CITY AT WAR: CUMULATIVE AND INTERCONNECTED PATTERNS OF HARM

Living in a city at war means being stuck in the middle of hostilities.

Life becomes a series of impossible decisions: whether to stay or flee and how to navigate whatever urban fighting the day might bring.

It also entails many risks:
- If the water supply fails, people may have to collect water from sources farther away and carry it to their homes.
- Additional movement in hostile environments will expose vulnerable people to increased risks of violence, including sexual violence.
- The social and community fabric – which might otherwise provide protection – is also weakened.
- The close proximity of diverse populations in shelters and camps for displaced persons may bring additional risk.

Some countries limit the free movement of people and goods between areas held by their enemies, to prevent the smuggling of contraband or other support to them. When mobility is restricted or international borders closed, people cannot leave their country to escape the area or obtain essential medical treatment. An armed actor that takes control of an area might impose stricter, different or confusing cultural, religious or behavioural rules. Movement restrictions might disproportionately affect different genders. Food, water or medicines might become more expensive or unavailable.160

Essential services

This report has already highlighted the dependence of urban populations on complex, interconnected infrastructure systems for essential services such as drinking water supply, wastewater treatment, electricity and health care, together with the fragility of those services in time of war.161 The interconnectedness of essential infrastructure, such as buildings, water and sanitation installations, health-care facilities, communication services and transport networks, makes them vulnerable to disruption or even collapse when they are damaged by fighting. A party may deny services to specific areas as part of a deliberate strategy to exert pressure on civilians living there, or to force a change in the enemy’s behaviour.

Even where the physical infrastructure is unaffected, hostilities or movement restrictions will affect service delivery far beyond the urban area.

  conventions-12-august-1949.
161 ICRC, Urban Services During Protracted Armed Conflict: a Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People, op. cit.
For instance:

- Fighting may make it difficult for technicians to carry out routine operations, maintenance and repairs, both in the city and in the surrounding areas.
- Goods or equipment needed for operations or repairs may no longer be available if the fighting and/or sanctions have affected the market or the importation of goods into the city.
- Experts, including technicians and experienced medical staff, may have fled to safer areas or abroad or might no longer be receiving salaries because of severe reductions in cash flow or customer payments, or because financial systems are no longer operating.  
- Foreign nationals working in these services may leave the country when war breaks out; examples include international technicians running Libya’s advanced water supply system and hospital staff.
- Staff may be killed while on duty or going to work, stop going to work because of the dangers, or be recruited into the armed forces, leaving crucial gaps.

Even if personnel and materials remain available, it is extremely difficult to maintain interconnected infrastructure and service delivery across front lines and checkpoints, or under siege. Front lines may cut across the power, water and sewer lines that distribute these services around the city, and interdependent power and water networks, or referral systems between health facilities, might fall under the control of different armed factions.

For example, people in one region of eastern Ukraine rely on a vast, centralized water supply network criss-crossing the line of contact, and hostilities near essential infrastructure have regularly interrupted services, impeded repairs and maintenance and contributed to the “brain drain” of personnel operating these essential services. In response, the ICRC has facilitated two ceasefire agreements whereby the parties agreed to halt hostilities so that a water filtration station could be repaired, restoring water supply to approximately 1.5 million people.

Even where workarounds are possible, the quantity or quality of services can decline. For instance, power cuts may disrupt the cold chain, affecting the safe storage of food and medicines. Water shortages or a drop in water quality increase the risk of water-related and other infectious diseases such as cholera and diarrhoea, leading to increased malnutrition and infant mortality.

In Benghazi, Libya, parts of the sewerage network were severely damaged during clashes, rendering sewage and storm water pumping stations inoperable. Extensive wastewater flooding occurred regularly in the low-lying areas of the city, posing a risk to public health and the environment.

It may become difficult for people to look after their personal hygiene, and they may be unable to take preventive measures against the spread of infectious diseases, such as sheltering in areas with adequate ventilation, access to clean water and reasonable levels of occupation.

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163 ICRC, I Saw My City Die: Voices from the Front Lines of Urban Conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, op. cit., p. 53.
Because they impact whole neighbourhoods, these factors can lead to epidemics, just when it is more difficult to detect and respond to increases in the communicable diseases that cause them. Urban communities suffering armed conflict may experience an increase in cholera and tuberculosis and a shortage of capacity to care for chronic diseases such as diabetes or hypertension.

**Health care**

Power cuts and a lack of clean water can also affect hospitals and primary health-care centres.

While generators might ensure that computer equipment, essential machinery and cold-chain storage continue in an emergency, larger hospitals might need more power than emergency generators can deliver, forcing them to reduce services or treat only high-priority cases.

Ambulance services require fuel and a functioning referral system, both of which might be absent. This may increase the need for urgent humanitarian relief, and can contribute to long-term displacement.

In Yemen, some hospitals could remain open during the fighting only because they received fuel donated by humanitarian organizations. Many other hospitals and clinics had to close, leaving thousands of people without life-saving treatment, including those with chronic illnesses. Such service delivery problems occur just when there is a need to provide life-saving care for large numbers of people with conflict-related injuries.

Violence is likely to increase during conflict, and that includes sexual violence. There will therefore be increased demand for care and support for victims/survivors of sexual violence, but fighting may impede access to post-exposure medicines and psychosocial support.

Urban warfare also affects care for people with non-communicable diseases, together with routine health activities such as vaccinations and maternal and newborn care. Patients may be afraid to leave home for medical appointments or may have to spend what little money they have on food and water.

Movement restrictions also affect health care. These may include:

- curfews
- roadblocks
- checkpoints
- additional administrative procedures for the distribution of medical goods, movement within the city or the transport of casualties from one area to another.

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166 M. Talhami and M. Zeitoun, “The impact of attacks on urban services II: Reverberating effects of damage to water and wastewater systems on infectious disease”, op. cit.


Education
Attacking schools in urban areas or using them for military purposes can have far-reaching effects on children and the broader civilian population, disrupting students’ education, damaging buildings and material that are often important to the whole community, and possibly provoking attacks from opposing forces.

Temporary or permanent school closures, teacher flight and a decline in the quality of education leave large gaps in children’s education that may never be plugged. They also endanger a country’s longer-term development, undermiming economic, political and social development, poverty reduction efforts, maternal and child health, and future prosperity and stability.

Girls, women and other marginalized groups are often disproportionately affected.175

Markets, livelihoods and connectivity
Warfare in cities attacks all vital systems, including markets, which are strategic targets for destruction, co-option and coercion. Cities are central to food systems and livelihoods that extend far beyond the city itself. They are often targeted specifically because of their wealth and infrastructure, and the strategic or economic impact of destroying or controlling them. Cities are also a source of good quality or affordable agricultural and manufacturing inputs, which are often damaged or destroyed during hostilities. As a result, major port cities are often contested, threatening imports and exports, damaging the fisheries sector and affecting the lives and livelihoods of those who make their living from fishing.

Cities are also part of the coping mechanism for rural areas and migrant workers. Rapid urbanization in many places, including the Middle East and parts of Africa, is driven by climate change and fluctuations in agricultural incomes. Cities are a source of remittances for rural communities and even poorer countries. These urban remittances may be the meagre safety-net that allows rural agriculture and food production to continue. Migrant workers, students, asylum seekers and other newcomers are among the most vulnerable in an urban crisis, as they often lack the social networks or other resources to either leave or shelter in place. People on fixed incomes, such as elderly, sick and disabled people, are also extremely vulnerable to such effects of conflict as shortages, inflation and the need to frequently move to shelters or evacuate the city.

Markets may also be reshaped by armed conflict, and spending or appropriation by armed groups may crowd them out. Armed groups may commandeer or monopolize fuel, trucks and other means of transport, causing shortages for businesses.

Where parties to conflict are well-financed (e.g. through external funding, the capture of natural resources or trafficking) they can pay higher prices, causing shortages and inflation for the local population.

Cities under attack breed multiple parallel regimes and opportunistic predation. Warring factions may tax, restrict, appropriate or block food and other commodities. Weapon bearers imposing informal taxes may do so to exercise control, to punish the population, to raise funds for their war effort or subsistence, for personal enrichment or as a simple abuse of power. In a divided city, multiple checkpoints may make it too costly or risky to transport goods on a regular basis. There may be shortages of such goods as cooking fuel and clean water, as water and energy facilities are disrupted or destroyed.

Sometimes food itself becomes a weapon of war. For millennia, warring parties have blocked or controlled food supplies to pressure or punish civilian populations and to force military or political outcomes. Siege tactics often serve the explicit purpose of starving the population, which is prohibited by IHL and constitutes a war crime. During sieges and encirclements, there is often a two-way economy of negotiation and trading, from which armed groups on both sides can profit. There may be an ancillary or major objective of simply extorting whatever wealth or resources are available in the city, leaving citizens impoverished. Inside the besieged city, the economy morphs in line with growing scarcity; people may resort to barter where currency

becomes meaningless, and any wooden items may become valuable as firewood in the absence of fuel. During the siege of Aleppo, the parties to the conflict took turns controlling and taxing certain access routes to maximize their own profits.

Urban warfare also affects people’s livelihoods and the markets from which they derive them, as these are central elements of people’s lives and resilience. The market is the principal means by which billions of people in cities derive income, access services and buy basic commodities. Unlike in rural areas, it is largely impossible to be entirely self-sufficient in a city. Any disruption will have far-reaching effects that can lead to coping strategies affecting health, nutrition and education.

Even if a family still has money, food and other commodities may become unavailable because they can no longer reach the city (e.g. if a siege restricts the passage of people and goods), or because fighting or movement restrictions make local production, cultivation or transportation difficult or impossible.

In other contexts, basic goods might remain available, but prices rise because security risks, damaged infrastructure, delays from border restrictions, informal taxation and other considerations make it more costly to bring goods to market.

People may have to spend all their money on essential goods, sometimes cutting down on food quantity and diversity. This may lead to malnutrition and other health problems – even starvation or death. One example is when flights to Sana’a airport in Yemen were required to land in Saudi Arabia first for inspection of their cargo.176

Disruption caused by war can affect the availability and accessibility of commodities; the urban poor will be particularly affected, as they generally lack savings and access to land for food production. This is what happened in Afghanistan after August 2021, with the freeze on bank transactions and the temporary curtailing of humanitarian activities.177

Integration of markets means that damage to urban food systems has far-reaching effects. Cities are often contested because of their strategic infrastructure and commercial assets, such as ports, granaries and warehouses, and are at the centre of food and agriculture supply chains. Urban warfare affects not just the food security of urban residents, but also people living nearby who depend on food imports, processing, safety standards and transport logistics.

Fighting may damage or redirect supply chains in multiple ways. Attackers may target key infrastructure, such as roads, railways and bridges, but defenders may also destroy infrastructure to defend the city. Interruptions to the cold chain because of damage to power systems and storage facilities causes food safety problems and disease, and destroys frozen food stocks. Large spaces, such as factories, warehouses and schools may be taken over by displaced government offices, or by displaced persons.

Because markets are dynamic, they can often adapt, at least to some extent. The prices of remaining commodities will rise, for instance. Communities and private sector agents usually find ways to ensure that supply meets demand for goods and services, especially if an informal sector within the market was already thriving before the crisis. Certain parts of the market might collapse entirely while other parts flourish, and the boundaries between informal and criminal economies might become more blurred. However, just as with

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other essential services like water or health care, controlling markets or a community’s access to them is often part of military strategy, such as when a party to a conflict imposes a siege with the deliberate aim of depriving people of food.

In many contexts, a war economy has flourished in the economic interests of a few, who have exploited the scarcity of goods. In urban settings, especially during sieges, people may have to sell their assets, including personal items of both sentimental and monetary value, to pay black market prices for essential commodities.

As digital technologies and connectivity become omnipresent in urban societies, any disruption to internet access may affect people’s safety, access to essential services, economic sustainability and resilience mechanisms.178 Connectivity within those community networks is a basic urban service that also needs protection and restoration when a shock occurs.179

**The effect of protracted urban warfare**

The complexities of urban warfare, the proliferation of armed actors and the complex support relationships between them mean that fighting often lasts for months rather than days.180 Sieges in some of the examples we reviewed have continued for years. Protracted hostilities stress and degrade essential services in ways that risk their irreparable collapse, even if hostilities cease, with the risk that those who depend on those services will die.181

Any of the types of fighting described above can become protracted.182 Even where battles are shorter, hostilities may recur repeatedly as one party and then the other seeks control of a city, or may flare up from time to time, as in Gaza and Israel or in the area affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In many contexts, a war economy has flourished in the economic interests of a few, who have exploited the scarcity of goods.

In other settings, such as Beni or Mogadishu, communities live with sporadic attacks and the accompanying fear. Attempts to enhance security result in movement restrictions or checkpoints. All these factors cause harm to the civilian population that accumulates over time.

Even before the 2022 escalation of hostilities, families living in eastern Ukraine continued to experience shelling and shooting to and from populated areas, causing civilian casualties and damage to civilian buildings.

The scale of the impact of urban warfare and the complexity of helping service providers ensure the continuity of essential services such as water, wastewater treatment, electricity, health care and schools, over extended periods, makes humanitarian response very costly.

Weapon contamination is also a major problem in urban conflict, and clearance may take a long time.

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181 M. Talhami and M. Zeitoun, “The impact of attacks on urban services II: Reverberating effects of damage to water and wastewater systems on infectious disease”, op. cit., p. 1293.

A significant part of the ICRC’s budget is devoted to “these seemingly never ending, long entrenched wars, characterized by multiple conflicts, that go through periods of low intensity and high intensity, violent outbursts and periods of uneasy calm”\(^\text{183}\). The entities involved need to simultaneously provide rapid repairs or other emergency solutions, work with a longer time frame in mind to avoid the collapse of essential services and strengthen their resilience – i.e. enhance their ability to respond to emergencies.

The duration of the direct impact of fighting affects the baseline resilience of an essential service.

Baseline resilience is a combination of:
- system redundancy (availability of duplicate infrastructure components or substitute staff)
- emergency preparedness and response (number of qualified staff, volume of prepositioned stocks of consumables and quality of infrastructure).

The more protracted a conflict becomes, the more baseline resilience will decrease, and the greater the impact of an attack on/incidental damage to civilian infrastructure will be.\(^\text{184}\)

**PEOPLE DEPRIVED OF THEIR LIBERTY IN THE CITY**

People deprived of their liberty have particular vulnerabilities and needs during urban warfare.

Those in places of detention in cities, including immigration detention facilities, face many of the same threats as the general urban population, such as incidental harm from explosive weapons and shortages of basic commodities and essential services. However, they do not have the option of fleeing to a safer location or seeking shelter from bombardment in a basement. Even where conditions of detention were acceptable before fighting started, they will deteriorate if food, power and water supply degrade or if the conflict leads to arrests and therefore an increased prison population.

Moreover, in a volatile conflict environment with pressure on all resources, local government and even detaining authorities may not give priority to maintaining or restoring essential services to detainees, some of whom may be affiliated with the enemy. Mass arrests may overwhelm detention facilities, threatening health and respect for judicial guarantees. If the justice system has collapsed, detainees may stay in overcrowded places of detention for extended periods without access to courts and no chance of release.

Places of detention also hold children; their health – physical and mental – is generally at even greater risk than that of adult prisoners, and they may experience great suffering.

Fighting in or near places of detention will probably interrupt channels of contact and communication (written, phone, video call, visits) between detainees and families. In addition, the detaining authority may suspend contact for security reasons. Movement restrictions in the city or displacement of families may mean they cannot visit detention facilities to deliver food, clothing, hygiene items, money or other essentials.

Fighting may also directly affect places of detention. In the contexts we have examined, fighting in cities near detention facilities led to staff leaving and detainees escaping, sometimes to seek shelter. Some places of detention were targeted by fighters, sometimes to free detained members of their group or other detainees, and these attacks sometimes had deadly consequences for detainees and staff.\(^\text{185}\)

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\(^{184}\) M. Talhami and M. Zeitoun, “The impact of explosive weapons on urban services: Direct and reverberating effects across space and time”, op. cit.

Armed forces called in to reinforce security in places of detention do not always have the necessary training, knowledge or equipment.

Because places of detention are secured areas, they may be adjacent to active military positions, part of a building used for military purposes or located inside a compound belonging to an armed group, putting the detainees at risk of harm during an attack on that military objective. Parties also attack places of detention deliberately, in violation of IHL, even though they have the coordinates.

Detainees and hostages may be hidden in unofficial/undeclared/secret locations, such as homes, schools or public buildings. As these locations are even less likely to be notified to the opposing side, people held there are at serious risk of harm from the fighting.

Examples documented by the UN and other organizations present in Yemen include:

- a prison in Hudaydah hit in October 2016, killing a reported 60 detainees and fighters
- a military police facility being used to hold detainees in Sana’a hit in December 2017, killing a reported 30–40 civilians including detainees
- facilities used to detain irregular migrants in Sa’ada hit in January 2022, killing and injuring over a hundred foreign nationals\(^\text{186}\)
- an immigration detention centre in Tajoura, eastern Tripoli district, Libya, hit in July 2019,\(^\text{187}\) with reports of over 50 people killed, including children, and over 100 injured.\(^\text{188}\)


If hostilities affect a place of detention, detaining personnel may have to seek shelter and protect their families, rendering them unable to ensure the security of the facility and the well-being of the inmates.

After an incident such as an airstrike hitting a place of detention, it may be difficult to manage the bodies of the dead in a dignified and proper manner. The situation also poses problems for their families. Medico-legal systems and technical resources are lacking in some countries and this, together with the urgent nature of such situations, may mean that nobody is able to claim the bodies. Furthermore, methods such as visual identification are used that do not conform to international forensics standards or even national law. Problems related to the management of bodies, including the complex process of identification, notification and handing over of bodies to families, particularly affect foreign nationals. These may include migrants or foreign fighters who have neither identification documents nor next of kin in the country.

Given all these risks, the detaining authorities are bound by IHL and have a duty of care to keep people deprived of their liberty in premises removed from combat zones, in order to protect them from the effects of hostilities. They are also required to ensure that people deprived of their liberty can maintain contact with their families.

Circumstances may lead detaining authorities to adopt different ways of meeting these obligations.

In one setting, some detainees at a prison near urban front lines were transferred to another place of detention.

In another context, many police stations and prisons were evacuated, with detainees placed under house arrest or granted home leave. While this was a precautionary measure intended to secure the detainees’ well-being and safety from attack, there were allegations that those under house arrest were not subsequently allowed to leave their homes, even when entire neighbourhoods were evacuated owing to the hostilities.

If proper plans are not drawn up – or are drawn up but not implemented – sudden evacuations in response to major events such as airstrikes hitting places of detention can result in harm to detainees.

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2.2 EXPERIENCES WHEN FLEEING THE CITY OR EVACUATING

This section discusses the types of harm that people have experienced when they are fleeing or being evacuated from a city.

The need to flee can arise for individuals, groups targeted by campaigns of violence or an entire population. This may occur before the start of hostilities, during fighting or after an enemy has been pushed out of a city area. Given the size and density of urban populations, massive displacement is a major consequence of urban warfare, with additional humanitarian needs often arising from that new situation. The very process of fleeing or being evacuated presents serious risks to civilians.

A number of factors can influence the direction of flight, including the number of routes considered safe, the location of extended family or community and the existence of camps for displaced people.

In the contexts we examined, displacement was sometimes a multi-step process. After fleeing the city and arriving at an assembly point, displaced people were sometimes moved to the closest screening site/camp initially, but then chose a longer-term place of shelter reflecting the above-mentioned social or political considerations.

Sometimes civilians have no choice. Under specific circumstances described below, a party to the conflict may order them to evacuate.

Saguiaran evacuation centre, Lanao del Sur, Philippines. Displaced from ground zero, where the battle was ongoing, a woman waits for her family members to join her.
PATTERNS OF HARM IN THE CHAOS OF FLEEING

People who flee before conflict breaks out or at the very early stages may be able to gather important personal items or leave by vehicle, although even then they may well face dangerous interactions with fighters.

In subsequent stages of fighting, people might have to flee in haste, leaving behind such personal items, including documents. In some settings, people could not or did not leave until fighting in their area had calmed sufficiently and/or the opposing forces had reached their street – sometimes after months of fighting, or after long sieges had been lifted.

In west Mosul, for example, streets and buildings where armed opposition forces had previously been fighting were recaptured, causing civilians to run to areas held by the state armed forces.

The general risks of hostilities in the city are accentuated by the fact that people fleeing – including people with disabilities, older people and children – generally need to move greater distances to reach a place of safety or an assembly point. As a result, there is more risk of their encountering fighters, checkpoints, crossfire and other dangers.190

Civilians needing to leave their homes often have limited information about where to go and how, and limited means of communication through which to seek that information. In several of the contexts we examined, safe evacuation routes were limited or entirely absent, even though civilians had been told to leave.

Fleeing brings a heightened risk of families becoming separated and people going missing. However, family separation is sometimes a planned coping mechanism. In one of the contexts we examined, children were sent to a location away from the hostilities because separation was expected to be brief, but they ended up being separated for an extended period because of financial and other constraints.

Families may be separated before the event forcing them to flee takes place, such as when evacuation begins while children are at school and parents are at work. They may become separated during evacuation, perhaps because family members lose sight of each other while running away. And they may become separated after the event, for instance at checkpoints, in shelters or in camps.

To make separation even more painful, family members are often unable to maintain or restore contact during conflict, as communication channels are affected or movements restricted. Children in particular may not have the knowledge or means to restore contact. Not knowing if family members are safe exacerbates suffering. The number of people going missing in urban warfare can be high, as the number of people at risk may be greater in densely populated areas. Furthermore, people fleeing may not know where to obtain health care.

RESPONSIBILITIES REGARDING EVACUATION

Military analysts sometimes propose evacuation or relocation of those most vulnerable to the effects of hostilities, before the start of urban operations if possible, as a measure of last resort to save the lives of civilians and limit their exposure to additional risks.191

Facilitating the safe exit of people not or no longer participating in hostilities who wish to seek safety elsewhere, or organizing a temporary lawful evacuation, can indeed protect people. IHL provides for such action to be taken when required to protect civilians, or for imperative military reasons.

Displacement is a serious consequence of armed conflict – depending on the circumstances even sometimes a violation of IHL – and creates cascading problems in humanitarian terms. Even if parties have given instructions for the population to evacuate, civilians will certainly still be present in and around the city where hostilities are taking place, which means that parties must exercise care and restraint in attack.192

In some instances, mass evacuations have formed an integral part of siege warfare. Evacuation has sometimes harmed civilians, having been used as a means of forcing communities considered sympathetic to the enemy to withdraw their support and/or change sides. In other cases, parties allowed evacuations in exchange for ceasing bombardments and restoring basic services or allowing humanitarian relief operations.

Military authorities may order civilians to vacate their homes and relocate, often at short notice and without allowing them to take any belongings. The aim may be to clear areas where opposition fighters are expected to be hiding, or to punish civilians the authorities perceive to be supporting the enemy.

Many people have reported experiencing or witnessing violence against civilians and civilian property, and not receiving any form of assistance or protection during their displacement.193

There is no easy solution, but a thorough understanding of the context (security, political, social, economic) and its links with the outside world is necessary, alongside an awareness of the risks facing civilians, in order to balance two important aspects:

- On the one hand, while protecting people in situ must remain the priority, the parties must allow them to leave dangerous areas if they wish to seek safety elsewhere. Moreover, IHL obligations towards such

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groups as the sick, the wounded, older people, people with disabilities, pregnant women or children may require their evacuation and care. Humanitarian pauses or ceasefires have sometimes been arranged in conjunction with humanitarian agencies to evacuate the sick, wounded or dead.

- On the other hand, IHL seeks to protect civilians from forced displacement. Parties to a conflict must not forcibly displace the civilian population unless imperative military reasons or the security of the civilians requires an evacuation. Even then, evacuation must continue only for as long as the conditions warranting it exist. This means that evacuating people at risk is an exceptional and temporary measure, to be undertaken primarily when people are under imminent physical threat and/or there is no other way of protecting their lives and well-being.

While civilians often flee spontaneously and in a disorganized fashion, there are examples of official instructions/suggestions to flee, and examples of troops successfully helping civilians move to safety. In many of the contexts we examined, efforts were made to rescue trapped civilians, provide escape routes for flight, remove IEDs on routes that civilians were likely to use and organize evacuations. In other circumstances, the failure to evacuate the population, or delays in organizing evacuation, have deprived civilians of adequate protection and forced them to self-evacuate at great risk, not knowing when, where and how to escape safely.

Any movement of the civilian population presents practical challenges to the parties to the conflict and to the authorities, and raises humanitarian considerations. However, evacuations undertaken with insufficient preparation and/or without the agreement of the parties to the conflict pose significant protection risks to the population and to any humanitarian organizations involved. In cases where evacuations were not properly planned, they have ended up taking place under unsafe conditions, sometimes with long waiting periods during which it was not possible to meet minimum standards or provide sufficient and timely information. Unplanned or poorly-planned evacuations do not just pose risks to personal safety; they make it more difficult to ensure proper material conditions, such as food, water, shelter, medical care and toilet facilities. In some cases, it has not been clear that evacuation was temporary and that evacuees had the right to return and redeem their property.

If the parties are unable or unwilling to organize an evacuation and there is no other way of protecting the lives and well-being of people at risk, humanitarian agencies such as the ICRC may facilitate such operations. However, they can only do so if certain conditions are met, such as:

- compliance with humanitarian principles
- provision of security guarantees
- rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief
- the free consent of the people to be evacuated
- clear consent from the parties to the conflict; that consent must also list the categories of people to evacuate and set out the procedures to follow.

The authorities and the parties to the conflict may ask the ICRC to carry out an evacuation, or the ICRC can exercise its right of initiative and offer its services, under strict conditions and criteria.

For instance, in one context we examined, the ICRC worked with other humanitarian agencies and components of the Movement to provide transportation and medical services for people with disabilities and their immediate family members, so they could be moved to a safe location where their basic needs would be met and they could continue their treatment.

Dialogue with parties to the conflict must take place:
• before any evacuation, to try and prevent it if possible
• during the evacuation, to ensure that it takes place in accordance with the agreed criteria and procedures
• after the evacuation, to review the conduct of the operation.

SCREENING AND VETTING OF DISPLACED PERSONS
Displacement, including evacuation from urban areas, can often lead to chaos. To maintain security, state authorities often set up security screening procedures to vet the population in situ, at checkpoints or in reception centres.\(^{197}\)

While identifying security risks such as weapons and separating combatants or fighters from the civilian population are among the authorities’ key responsibilities, a number of humanitarian and legal considerations require attention during such screening processes.\(^{198}\) In addition, people who have reached an assembly point sometimes remain at risk of physical harm from the hostilities.

State authorities should:
• conduct screening in secure areas within adequate facilities, to ensure safe and dignified conditions and humane treatment\(^{199}\)
• establish objective criteria, to reduce exposure to harm
• prohibit adverse distinction
• require dignified and gender-sensitive searches and interviews
• provide people with adequate information regarding the screening process
• take all possible measures to reduce the risk of family separation.\(^{200}\)

For instance, the ICRC was involved in restoring family links in the Iraq and the Philippiness, specifically between people who had been separated when fleeing urban centres – including children separated from parents or guardians.

Acts that may occur during the screening process
• Harassment and ill-treatment, especially of those who are of military age and/or perceived to be supporters of the opposition group.
• Screening of women by men owing to a lack of female personnel.
• Disappearance and/or torture after arrest at a screening point.
• Authorities separating families when trying to identify fighters among civilians leaving an area, detained at a screening site or entering an area.
• Enforced disappearance because of a person’s status as a combatant/former combatant, or because they are perceived to have a link to hostilities.
• Detention in unsuitable premises close to or at a screening point, rather than in a more appropriate location further from the fighting.
• Arbitrary detention following mass arrest.
• Arrests of people in camps for displaced persons, based on informant denunciations.

Personnel should receive adequate training in conducting security screening procedures.\(^{201}\)

The process in at least one context involved both official and unofficial lists of “suspect” people compiled from various sources, including denunciations from informants. Those lists may not have constituted adequate grounds on which to take serious measures against people so identified. If the individual assessment

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\(^{197}\) Center for Civilians in Conflict, Policy Brief on Civilian Protection in the current Mosul Campaign, op. cit., p. 15.


\(^{199}\) Center for Civilians in Conflict, Policies and Practices to Protect Civilians: Lessons from ISF Operations Against ISIS in Urban Areas, op. cit., p. 68.

\(^{200}\) Ibid.

\(^{201}\) Ibid, pp. 65–66.
conducted through the screening process identifies an imperative threat to national security, authorities might be entitled to impose severe restrictions on the liberty of the individuals concerned, but only in accordance with an established international or domestic legal framework, for a limited duration and pursuant to an individual assessment of each case without discrimination.

EXIT ROUTES FOR THE ENEMY

In some contexts, the withdrawal of fighters and military equipment has been allowed or negotiated in order to liberate the city and end the siege. Such an option may or may not be announced to the enemy, and the fighters may or may not be safe while they are using a given route. Providing exit routes for fighters, as alternatives to surrender or fighting until death or capture, may decrease the risk to civilians.

However, such exit routes may create other risks, for example if fighters force civilians to accompany them as human shields. Civilians, whether fighters’ families, people afraid of the enemy or others simply seeing an opportunity to flee, could choose to use the same route. In all these scenarios, civilians are at heightened risk: of incidental harm if the fighters are attacked or if force is applied indiscriminately to those leaving the urban area, or of direct attack if the accompanying civilians are treated as affiliated with the armed group and considered targetable – in contravention of IHL.

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2.3 EXPERIENCES AFTER FIGHTING HAS ENDED AND WHEN RETURNING TO THE CITY

As fighting subsides, civilians start coming out of hiding or returning to their homes. Some displaced families will be eager to return home as soon as possible, even while there is lingering insecurity and sporadic fighting. They may want to at least assess the damage to their property, collect important documents or assets they left when fleeing or check on family members.

People who had fled may be able to return and resume their lives because a sustainable solution has been implemented, and can resume livelihood activities such as businesses once essential services are restored. Sustainable solutions are essential to long-term peace, stability and recovery in post-crisis countries. They are most often achieved where the fighting has been shorter and perhaps less destructive, or the period of displacement has been shorter, or a person comes from a less affected area of a city.

While some returns are spontaneous, others require organized procedures, including security screenings, official authorizations, restrictive policies and legislation. In some cases the authorities refuse permission to return.

Multiple obstacles and delays to safe and dignified return may result in large numbers of people remaining in protracted displacement. The locations of camps or informal settings, together with housing inequalities within the displaced populations, may further affect the length of displacement and the prospects for sustainable return and reintegration.

Some families will not want to return home, preferring to integrate into their location of refuge or to
resettle elsewhere.

In many instances, the security situation will remain volatile, particularly if the underlying conflict is unre-
solved and/or hostilities are continuing in other parts of the country.

Even if the armed conflict has ended, there may be difficulties for urban populations because of weak gov-
ernance or a lack of security, with curfews continuing, security checkpoints and armed actors remaining in
the area, frequent arrests taking place on suspicion of collusion and restrictions being imposed on movement
to opposition-held areas.

This section:
• illustrates how the dire humanitarian consequences of urban warfare have a lasting impact
• discusses the challenges that authorities must overcome as people seek to return home.

In addition to facing the difficulties of physical injury and damage to homes, infrastructure and livelihoods,
many people surviving armed conflict struggle because of the psychological trauma they have experienced:
• they may be mourning family members, including children, and their greatly altered neighbourhoods
  and city
• they may still be searching for news of missing family members
• they may be unable to obtain legal documentation concerning their property, land, marriage or birth,
  or the death of a family member, as it went missing during the hostilities
• they may be exhausted after prolonged periods of displacement and uncertainty, and now have to
  rebuild their lives from scratch because they have lost their savings and other assets, either suddenly,
  or gradually while trying to survive.

RETURNING TO PHYSICAL DAMAGE AND DESTRUCTION
In most urban centres, damage is extensive, affecting thousands of buildings and the infrastructure that
underlies essential services, and consequently the population relying on them. In extreme cases, fighting
destroys all or part of a city.

Environmental pollution from rubble and damage to facilities containing pollutants add further long-term
risks to public health.

Rebuilding is expensive and rebuilding safely takes time. In some cases, essential services cannot be restored
because those with the requisite skills to do so have left and not yet returned.

Looting may contribute to the collapse of community services such as pharmacies, clinics and water and
wastewater installations.

In communities where people commonly hide cash and other valuables at home rather than use banks, mas-
sive looting of private homes and shops may occur. If combatants or fighters are still occupying a property,
the former residents may be afraid to reclaim it or may be worried about interacting with armed or police
forces regarding reclaim, payment or damages.

As a result of the fighting, policing and judicial systems may be absent or only functioning to a limited extent,
making it even more difficult to obtain redress for loss or damage. In one context we studied, people whose
homes had been severely damaged by the adversary’s attacks received government financial support that
allowed them to stay in temporary accommodation. In another context, government assistance was available
for each returning family at the end of the screening process.

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In many contexts, the extent of urban destruction simply does not permit the safe and dignified return of displaced families. Families may return to camps because they have found their homes, places of worship, schools, hospitals, shops and places of work damaged or destroyed. Living conditions may be too difficult, with no basic services or economic opportunities and no immediate prospect of improvement.

In Ramadi (Iraq) for instance, only about 60 per cent of people had returned more than a year after the battle ended.\textsuperscript{206}

Two years on from the fighting in Marawi, Philippines, about 100,000 displaced people were still unsure about when they might be able to go back, because their homes had not yet been rebuilt.\textsuperscript{207}

**WEAPON CONTAMINATION CREATES A LETHAL LANDSCAPE**

Urban warfare leaves behind a range of weapons in civilian spaces, including emplaced devices and ERW.

Emplaced devices include landmines, booby traps and IEDs, many of them victim-activated.

ERW comprises both ordnance that has failed to explode and abandoned ordnance, such as ammunition stockpiles left unsecured when forces have to withdraw.

The ICRC has previously described such weapon contamination as producing “a lethal landscape, especially in urban areas”.\textsuperscript{208} Emplaced devices and ERW are a lasting legacy of urban warfare, posing significant risks to civilians after the fighting is over. Those risks include not only death and injury but also socio-economic consequences and disruption of essential services, trapping a city in the shadow of war.

\textsuperscript{206} ICRC, *I Saw My City Die: Voices from the Front Lines of Urban Conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen*, op. cit., p. 32.

\textsuperscript{207} ICRC, “Marawi: two years on”, op. cit.

The financial hardships caused by conflict mean people take more risks out of desperation to earn a living, increasing the number of accidents and hence the number of people with life-altering injuries.

The presence of ERW in the rubble of buildings vastly complicates first response efforts to rescue survivors. Emplaced devices and ERW can obstruct subsequent efforts to recover the dead, clear rubble or repair roads.²⁰⁹

Both emplaced devices and ERW hinder the delivery and reach of humanitarian aid, further exacerbating people’s already precarious situation.

They also prevent access to services and livelihoods such as schools and former workplaces, and make vital subsistence activities like farming on the outskirts of urban areas hazardous.²¹⁰

As discussed below, not being able to recover, identify and ensure the dignity of the dead seriously affects families and communities and increases the risk of the deceased becoming missing persons.

Emplaced devices and ERW can have long-term environmental impacts, contaminating soil and water supplies²¹¹ and affecting the provision of essential services to hundreds of thousands of civilians.

In the ICRC’s experience, the risks posed by emplaced devices and ERW in urban areas are often underesti- mated.²¹² Indeed, most contexts examined for this report lacked survey and clearance resources to support affected communities in a safe and timely manner in the aftermath of conflict. Clearing weapon contami- nation is more challenging and time consuming in urban areas because of the locations of the items and the presence of more bodies, injured people and critical infrastructure.

**CIVIL DOCUMENTATION AND TENURE**

People may experience problems related to legal documentation and to housing, land and property (HLP) tenure.

During hostilities and displacement, important documents such as birth and marriage certificates, national identity cards and proof of HLP tenure may be lost, stolen, confiscated or invalidated for multiple reasons. Moreover, people living in areas under the control of a different authority may not have been able to obtain documents for life-cycle events or property transactions, or to replace expired IDs, or the group in control may have issued their own forms of such documentation. If such documents are non-existent or another party to the conflict refuses to recognize them later, children may lack the documents required to enrol at school or to obtain identification documents such as passports.

For instance, people who have fled Syria, including Palestinians, continue to encounter problems obtaining the supporting documentation required to complete certain civil registrations, in particular births.²¹³

There are also implications for civil documentation and the enjoyment of HLP rights when people go missing during conflict. If a widow cannot obtain proof of her husband’s death, she will be unable to remarry, obtain child custody or claim inheritance rights or other social benefits. In some cases, children are unable to demonstrate their legal connection with their family, resulting in an increased risk of statelessness.

Moreover, people with missing relatives – including refugees and internally displaced persons – may be reluctant or unable to approach authorities to report or even ask about their relatives to obtain such documents, for fear of being arrested during the process, through lack of awareness of the reporting mechanisms or because of the risk of financial extortion by intermediaries.

These experiences may stigmatize certain groups, as the lack of proper documentation can increase suspicion and the risk of retribution. As analysts have explained regarding Syria, people “have become caught in these networks of competing legal regimes”.

People who face stigmatization because they hold identity papers from an armed group formerly in control of the territory where they lived may fear initiating legal or administrative proceedings, or withdraw applications to avoid the risk of security screening, which itself might lead to their papers being confiscated and/or to detention. They may be scared to move outside their neighbourhoods or camps, for example to work or seek health care, on account of suspicion and recrimination.

Death certificates may be particularly difficult to obtain. Even if the family knows that a person is dead, the death may be hard to prove, especially if the deceased had an affiliation (real or perceived) to an opposing party. The administrative and legal processes cost money, not only for fees but often for transport as well. Some women have faced exploitation, such as demands for bribes or sexual favours in exchange for processing their applications.

A related challenge is that many people cannot prove their ownership of housing, land or property because of missing title deeds. This has a significant impact on return trends and decision-making, quality of life and housing conditions, social cohesion, livelihoods, economic opportunities and access to justice or other dispute resolution mechanisms – all of which are important factors when people are trying to rebuild their lives.

In some settings, security forces or other civilians have occupied people’s homes, or there are competing claims regarding properties. Women-headed households face particular difficulties in reclaiming their land and housing, resolving disputes and seeking compensation for damaged property. Some women do not raise the issue with the individual or entity occupying their property out of fear of retribution, while some women believe, sometimes wrongly, that they are not entitled to property or do not have inheritance rights. National laws may – in effect or by design – create additional obstacles for certain returnees who are trying to reclaim their property.

The overall risk is that people end up in “bureaucratic limbo, leaving newborns undocumented, marriages invalid, and individuals who have lost IDs, passports, birth certificates, or property documentation ... cut off from a range of other rights.” Both returnees and residents may end up in precarious situations, staying in sub-standard accommodation without formal agreements, which heightens the risk of eviction.

In some systems, people must complete security and identity checks and/or renew civil documentation in their place of origin or place of resettlement – but return to those locations may be difficult or impossible for all the reasons described. Asylum seekers and refugees who wish to return may face additional challenges in complying with procedural requirements for reclaiming property and/or retrieving official documentation.

216 M. Sosnowski and N. Hamadeh, “The right to have rights: legal identity documentation in the Syrian civil war”, op. cit., p. 7.
MISSING PERSONS AND THE DIGNITY OF THE DEAD

Too many people have gone missing as a result of urban warfare in the past decade.

Civilians may become separated during hostilities, while fleeing, or while displaced; communication infrastructure and public services that could have prevented loss of contact or facilitated the search for missing people may no longer function. A person is understandably “missing” for their family as soon as there is no news, even if the person happens to be safe somewhere.

Combatants also go missing during military operations, for various reasons:

• they may fall under the power of an opposing party which, through negligence or ill-will, does not report their capture
• they may die and their bodies remain unrecovered and/or unidentified, despite obligations regarding the dignified treatment of the dead, including proper forensic procedures and identification
• they may flee the fighting and want to remain hidden to avoid reprisals or legal or disciplinary consequences.

While these situations can arise in all armed conflicts, the nature of hostilities in urban settings may increase both the risk of people going missing and the difficulty of locating them.

The sheer number of people who flee hostilities in urban areas severely complicates tracing and the restoration of family links, while the difficulty of retrieving human remains from the rubble, often contaminated by ERW as discussed, is greater in built-up, densely populated environments.
Uncertain whether their loved ones are alive or dead, unable to mourn in the absence of proof and still hoping for the person’s return, families experience a type of loss known as “ambiguous loss”. Such loss may disrupt people’s ability to function in daily life, and daily life may be more challenging in the family member’s absence – economically, administratively or legally – or even dangerous. The majority of those who go missing are male, often leaving female family members in an extremely vulnerable situation as they search, including the risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Parties to a conflict are required to account for the dead and to handle the bodies of deceased civilians and fighters in a dignified manner. They did not always do so in the contexts we studied.

Some bodies were not retrieved, but were instead left in the rubble. Others were not managed in a thorough, scientific manner that would have made it possible to identify them later. Measures that should have been taken but were not include taking samples, documenting the body and the location where it was buried, and placing permanent markings at the place of burial.

In at least one context, ICRC delegates saw scattered human remains and unmarked mass graves.

The long-term consequences of such factors are momentous:
- poor understanding of the scale of the problem and needs
- no official investigations (if the legal framework requires the body to have an identity and/or a missing person declaration)
- families deprived of information confirming the death of their relative, meaning no end to the ambiguous loss mentioned above, and less chance of justice or reconciliation.

In several contexts, the problem was exacerbated by the medico-legal system and forensic agencies (including first responders) rapidly being overwhelmed by the huge number of deaths in their city. It sometimes became impossible to find proper storage, identify the dead and return their bodies to their families.

ICRC support was often needed in the form of body bags, forensic kits, technical support and training for law enforcement, judiciary and forensic staff and, in several contexts, the renovation of a city’s only functioning mortuary. In several contexts, authorities called on the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society to evacuate dead bodies, which they are not always equipped to do. The ICRC was sometimes even more directly involved. For example, in Aden, Yemen, dead bodies had to be kept in a refrigerated truck on ICRC premises – an improvised mortuary – for several days.

SECURITY SCREENING OF RETURNEES

Some authorities have implemented an official process whereby displaced persons can request authorization to return, either from within the country or from abroad, which includes security screening.

While this can be part of security governance, authorities sometimes refuse prospective returnees’ applications when they perceive them as affiliated with former enemies, with such applicants even risking arrest and detention. The screening process itself can therefore represent a barrier to return, the more so for people who have had negative or traumatic experiences with security authorities.

Family separation can be another consequence of security screening, if some family members receive permission to return and others do not. Children may be separated from a parent, elderly people may be left without their main caretaker and households may be left without the main breadwinner.

Lastly, in addition to security concerns for refugees returning, access to adequate information on security screenings – including what exactly the process entails – can inform people’s decisions. Even for a person not returning from abroad, security clearance might involve an investigation over an extended period, during which they may live under movement restrictions (possibly self-imposed). This in turn can affect their access to essential services and a livelihood.

THE CHALLENGES OF REBUILDING AN URBAN SOCIETY

Even in the absence of administrative barriers, some people may not return because the area where they used to live is controlled by armed actors who have made threats against anyone possibly associated with an adversary – e.g. where a person’s husband or brother was alleged to be a fighter.

Some communities reported that the return of certain families to their homes would lead to retaliation or rejection because of their perceived affiliation with or proximity to the enemy, or because of sectarian divisions.  

This kind of stigmatization has real-world effects, including:

• damaging people’s homes or not allowing them into them
• insulting or threatening them
• marking their homes with a certain label
• blocking their access to basic services such as health care.

Returnees may encounter violence such as beatings, or even be killed, and authorities do not always react with investigations and prosecutions.

People may also suffer double vulnerability, in that they see themselves as victims of injustice and violence after living under the control of a given group, whereas others see them as supporters of that injustice and violence, or at least complacent about it.

A family’s main breadwinner might have died in fighting or been arrested, leaving the family to cope not only with that but also with additional stigma because of who he fought with. Some people have to distance themselves from family members just to cope, severing emotional ties that could otherwise provide support.

Deep grievances created or worsened by conflict lead to stigmatization of the (former) enemy and discriminatory perceptions about particular groups. Resentment and hurt among victims of particular groups, combined with other elements present in urban warfare – young people caught up in violence, children missing education, the departure of educated, skilled members of society and the whole community’s grief, exhaustion and trauma – can lead to renewed violence.

218 ICRC, I Saw My City Die: Voices from the Front Lines of Urban Conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, op. cit., p. 66.
While such factors are not unique to urban warfare, the number of people affected worsens the situation. During the stabilization phase in the aftermath of urban warfare, it can happen that only the “unwanted” or economically extremely vulnerable families are left in displacement. In some contexts, the longer one remains in displacement, the more one runs the risk of being perceived as suspicious or of supporting the enemy. Accidents of timing or financial circumstance can thus inadvertently beget risks to safety and perpetuate displacement, deepening the physical, financial, social and emotional toll on people of war in the city where they used to live and depriving the city of some of its former inhabitants. For instance, families associated with the Islamic State group have been excluded, denied repatriation or held in camps, such as Al Hol camp in Syria.219

The challenge in seeking to break cycles of violence is to ensure investment and support for communities that are today vulnerable and marginalized because of their past proximity to the enemy, including non-state armed groups designated as terrorist groups. Moreover, even the “simpler” work of reconstructing and rehabilitating essential services needs to be done in ways that do not disenfranchise groups and proactively protect against discriminatory practices.220


CONCLUSION

Hostilities have long been predicted to increasingly take place in urban settings. Images of the bombed-out ruins of cities demonstrate the tremendous devastation caused by armed conflict in cities over the last decade, devastation that continues today. What is not immediately portrayed, underneath all that destruction, is the deep and lasting harm to people’s lives and to the social fabric of the city, whether people wish to stay or are forced to stay, while they are fleeing or while they are trying to return or rebuild in the aftermath. Because armed conflict has specific, large-scale, and multifaceted consequences for the communities and infrastructure of urban environments, protecting people from harm in those environments requires particular attention.

Given all the challenges and concerns outlined in the report, parties to conflict should ideally avoid hostilities in cities, to protect the civilian population and civilian objects against the effects of attacks. However, the political, cultural, economic, religious and/or social significance of cities means that this is not always possible.

This report has documented the consequences of urban warfare for civilians, drawing on operational examples from various regions where the ICRC is working. Greater knowledge and understanding of the interrelated impacts can lead to more precise efforts to prevent, mitigate and respond to the harm that civilians and other people protected by IHL suffer during urban hostilities. The report aims to enhance understanding of the intricacies of protection needs in urban conflicts by informing weapon bearers, policy makers, other authorities and humanitarian organizations of the problems observed, thereby strengthening the ICRC’s dialogue with parties to conflict and other authorities regarding the consequences of urban conflict and their legal obligations.

The recommendations set out in this report provide guidance to state and non-state authorities on measures they should take before, during and after hostilities, to enhance their contingency planning in case of urban warfare and to ensure that the protection of civilians features at the heart of urban military operations at all stages.

This study should provoke reflection, and encourage efforts by warring parties to mitigate harm to urban communities in the future. The ICRC stands ready to support parties to conflict in their efforts and initiatives to prevent and reduce the human cost of warfare in cities, so as to alleviate the suffering of men, women, girls and boys affected by armed conflict.
The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

People know they can count on the ICRC to carry out a range of life-saving activities in conflict zones and to work closely with the communities there to understand and meet their needs. The organization’s experience and expertise enables it to respond quickly and effectively, without taking sides.