WAR IN CITIES
PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING
THE HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES
FOR CIVILIANS
EXTRACT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS
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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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.1 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.2

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.3

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.

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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.5

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

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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.
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*,6 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*8 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*.9

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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 and
- 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.

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.11

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

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• 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*.\(^{12}\)

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.

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.
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.
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.
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.