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De-dehumanization: Practicing humanity

Natalie Deffenbaugh*
Donor Relations Manager and formerly Protection Policy Adviser, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, Switzerland
Email: ndeffenbaugh@icrc.org

Abstract

The concept of humanity has been much discussed with respect to humanitarian work and international humanitarian law. There is today an idea of a single humanity, with each member equally valued beyond superficial differences in belief, nationality, ethnicity etc., and a global legal framework exists to prevent needless human suffering, including in war.

Dehumanization arises linguistically as the negation of a common, positive and mutually supportive humanity, though there is no single definition, and it certainly predates its opposite. Research indicates that dehumanization increases the risk of conflict/violence, increases the risk of abuses therein, and makes it harder to resolve conflict.

This paper gives an overview of how humanity is currently defined and used, notably by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as one Fundamental Principle of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and what dehumanization means especially in relation to conflict and violence. The paper then explores why and how dehumanization happens and the real-world harm that can result when it is espoused or tacitly condoned by

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those in positions of power. Finally, the paper examines how global legal frameworks and the principle of humanity, bolstered by impartiality, independence and neutrality, in particular as enacted by the ICRC, work to curb and push back against some of the worst harms that dehumanization can cause.

Keywords: humanity, dehumanization, Fundamental Principles, armed conflict, violence, humanitarian action, international humanitarian law, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Introduction

Murder, enslavement, rape, torture, genocide: these are among the worst things that human beings do to other human beings. They are not new, as a long historical record from diverse peoples shows, and are frequently linked with war. They are more likely to go unchecked when perpetrated under the aegis of people in power. And they are often tied to an idea that the targets are not really human.

The concept of humanity has been much discussed with respect to humanitarian work and international humanitarian law (IHL). There is a powerful idea today of a global, common humanity, with each member of the species *Homo sapiens* being equally valued beyond differences like belief, nationality and ethnicity, and global legal frameworks do exist to prevent needless human suffering, including in armed conflict.

Dehumanization arises linguistically as the negation of such a common, mutually supportive and legally recognized humanity, though there is no single definition, and it certainly predates its opposite. Research indicates that dehumanization increases the risk of conflict and violence, increases the risk of abuses therein, and makes it harder to resolve conflict.

The first part of this paper gives an overview of how the concept of humanity is currently defined and used, notably by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as one Fundamental Principle of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement); what dehumanization means, especially in relation to conflict and violence; and the real-world harm that can result. The second part looks at why and how dehumanization happens, especially when overtly espoused or tacitly condoned by those in positions of power.[1] Finally, the third part examines how global legal frameworks, including IHL and the principles of humanity and impartiality, as enacted by the ICRC in particular as well as others in the Movement, curb and push back against some of the worst that dehumanization can do.

1 The first and second parts lay the foundation for the third, especially for readers who are non-expert in dehumanization studies.

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Understanding humanity and dehumanization

The human and humanity: A principle to practice

The idea of "humanity" is relatively new and has generated much discussion. With emerging philosophical ideas of a universal brotherhood (*sic*), and (perhaps ironically) a greater emphasis on the individual, ultimately came an idea of a single humankind – each member valued for their own intrinsic traits, but fundamentally one family.[2] In this paper, I suggest a practical concept of human/humanity; the principle of humanity then enjoins action to realize that concept and produce humane treatment. For the ICRC and the Movement, this practice of humanity is a Fundamental Principle.[3] Though not adopted formally until 1965, it is at the root of the much older humanitarian movement and clearly calls for action to uphold the human being's fundamental worth. It is the driving force for everything that humanitarians in the Movement, and most of those outside it, do (see "Fundamental Principles" below).

In his seminal work *Un souvenir de Solferino*, Henry Dunant uses "humanity" (*humanité*) nine times, mainly in the last pages, which describe his idea to respond to the inhumanity he witnessed at Solferino in 1859.[4] Recounting the horrors and butchery of the battle itself, Dunant tellingly describes men fighting as "ferocious beasts",[5] but he then details acts that affirm those creatures' place in the human realm: working to preserve human life and recognizing the dignity of the humblest soldier suffering his wounds in silence; restoring the individual identities of the mass of men wounded and fallen on the battlefield; conveying messages to their loved ones far away and thus honouring and affirming their value within universal experiences of family and community.[6]

Dunant's "humanity" refers both to the group of all humans but also, more frequently, to the expectation, or even impulse, that calls humans to respond in the face of others' pain. Some scholars break Dunant's dual

2 In addition to what follows, Kontler reviews thinking around "diversity *versus* unity, and the diversity *within* unity", and the challenges posed by distinct practices (perceived as negative or less desirable) in people recognized as physically human. "[T]he quest for humanity remained a thoroughly contingent pursuit, and 'mankind' an unstable notion, over several centuries of intense European engagement with the subject." László Kontler, "'Humanity' and Its Limits in Early Modern European Thought", in Maria Kronfeldner (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, 1st ed., Routledge, Abingdon, 2021, p. 61.

3 The Fundamental Principle of humanity is given in Figure 6. See ICRC, *The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, 1986, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/red-cross-crescent-movement/fundamental-principles-movement-1986-10-31.htm (all internet references were accessed in February 2024).

4 Henry Dunant, *Un souvenir de Solferino*, Institut Henry-Dunant and Slatkine Reprints, Geneva, 1980, pp. 42, 61 (fn.), 80, 92, 103, 107, 109, 112, 113. Note also Dunant's references to "Tutti fratelli" (p. 59) and "Sono madre" (p. 82), evoking universal brotherhood (*sic*) and fundamental human relationships. The influence of Dunant's Christian faith is clear, but his call to action in the face of suffering is areligious and universal, further exemplified by the founding in 1868 of the precursor of today's Turkish Red Crescent Society in the Ottoman Empire. See Turkish Red Crescent Society, "About Us", available at: www.kizilay.org.tr/about-us/history.

5 H. Dunant, above note 4, p. 8.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 58, 84.

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meaning into human/humanity[7] or humanity-humankind and humanity-sentiment.[8] In each case, the latter meaning is key to understanding the principle of humanity; humanity-sentiment has also been termed "ethical behaviour", the "kindness of humans",[9] which more clearly evokes action.

Humanity is also intrinsic to IHL[10] and other widely accepted international norms: "As a principle, humanity implies an inherent worth and dignity of the person, and by extension, the right to life." This, along with the "social and relational nature of human beings",[11] informs the need for and fulfilment of the principle through IHL. As it prescribes the conduct of parties to conflict, IHL reflects a further understanding of humanity as "restraining the capacity for armed violence and limiting its effects on security and health"[12] (see "Legal Frameworks" below).

Another duality, placed already in the context of dehumanization, supports the influence of humanity elsewhere in international law. Alongside "a universal *humanity*" – effectively humanity-humankind – there is "a shared reciprocal *humanness* – … properties … such as rationality, morality, civility, etc. that characterize how humans are, and how they treat and should treat each other reciprocally in specifically human ways". This entwined pair "has found public codification, most importantly in the various legal initiatives and declarations concerning human rights, crimes against humanity, etc."[13]

7 Pictet discusses "human" and "humanity" as follows: "*Human*, in its original sense, refers to all that concerns man. However, in the sense which is now of interest to us, the word human is used to describe a man who is good to his fellow beings. … *Humanity* is therefore the sentiment or attitude of someone who shows himself to be human. Following Littré's dictionary, we would define humanity as a sentiment of active goodwill towards mankind. The word humanity in this sense is so perfectly suited to the Red Cross that it was chosen to designate its essential principle. At the same time, the word also serves to specify human nature and even the human species as a whole. In addition, it is rather more a feeling than a principle, so that perfect logic would suggest a preference for the word humanitarianism. These are minor drawbacks however and we should maintain the word humanity, for it is simple, direct and closer to man [*sic*]." Jean Pictet, "The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 19, No. 210, 1979, p. 143, available at: https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/S0020860400019872a.pdf.

8 See Robin Coupland, "Humanity: What Is It and How Does It Influence International Law?", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 83, No 844, 2001, p. 972, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/irrc-844-coupland.pdf. Coupland refers to "the human race; mankind; [and] human beings collectively", alongside "the character or quality of being humane; behaviour or disposition towards others such as befits a human being."

9 Hugo Slim, "The Power of Humanity: On Being Human Now and in the Future", *Humanitarian Law and Policy Blog*, 30 July 2019, available at: https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2019/07/30/power-of-humanity-being-human-now-future/.

10 "There is nevertheless a link between these two fields [principles of the Movement and principles of IHL], for humanitarian law had its origin in the ideal of the Red Cross, which continues to stimulate its development. Thus, there are certain principles, such as those of humanity and of non-discrimination, which in a sense are common to both." J. Pictet, above note 7, pp. 131–132.

11 Larissa Fast, "Unpacking the Principle of Humanity: Tensions and Implications", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 897–898, 2015, pp. 112, 116, available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383115000545.

12 R. Coupland, above note 8, p. 988.

13 Maria Kronfeldner, "Preface", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. xvii. See also Richard Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", in Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3: *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

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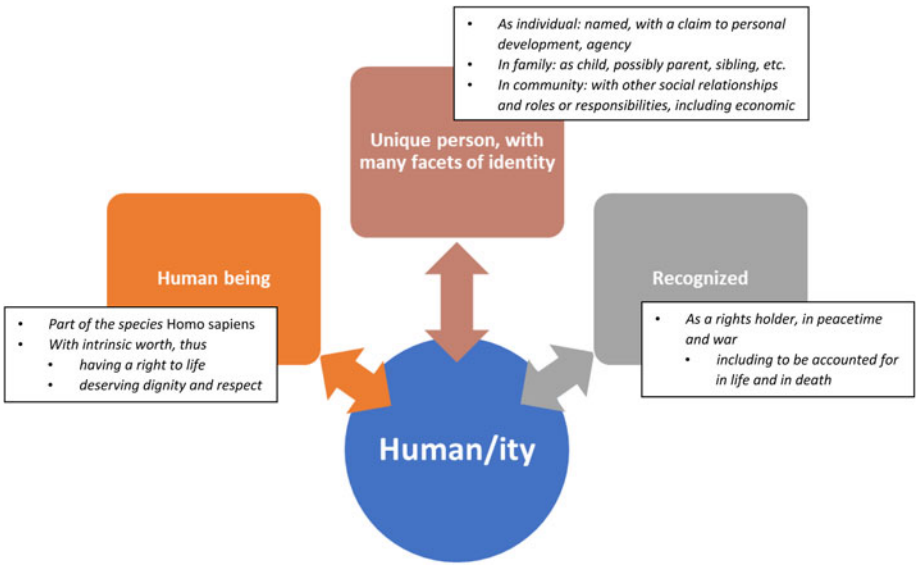


Figure 1. Mapping the human – what humanity means in practice, including through the ICRC's work.

From these discussions and further reflections below, I suggest that humanity in practice contains three elements, presented in Figure 1. The first "**human being**" element corresponds to humanity-humankind. The second element, which describes a **unique and multifaceted individual** with relationships to others, reflects humanity-sentiment and Pictet's "humanity" but is neutral in terms of behaviour: humans also do bad things to their fellow beings. Hence the need for the third element, which affirms **a human's standing within the rules** that divide acceptable from abhorrent actions and which a practice of humanity must also uphold.

The boundaries of these elements are of course porous; each member of the species is also genetically unique, and there are traditions in family and community relationships that also confer functional recognition. Still, the three elements broadly reflect increasingly complex stages of human interaction: from simple physical existence (still requiring at least two other humans to be involved), to interactions with ever-wider social circles based on one's personality and abilities, to one's place in a larger, abstract structure built by and for humans but also distinct from any single person. The three elements comprise a single **humanity as it should be practiced** and as it can be reinforced, by humans toward other humans.[14]

Thinking big about the concept, it is easy to lose sight of the human bodies involved[15] – which is all the more reason to address a very physical paradox. Maybe

14 See "Curbing Dehumanization" below; hence also the bidirectional arrows in Figure 1.

15 Sophie Oliver, "Dehumanization: Perceiving the Body as (In)Human", in Paulus Kaufmann, Hannes Kuch, Christian Neuhäuser and Elaine Webster (eds), *Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2011, p. 94.

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the bodies are so obvious that they can be taken for granted (or we think we have addressed them, including with rules for the dignified treatment of mortal remains), but having a human body, even one that eloquently expresses its personhood, may not be enough to be considered human today: many people are not treated as such if they cannot present an administrative form of identity.

Arendt saw that political entities confer the "right to have rights",[16] providing or endorsing an administrative identity. More recently, Phillips has stated that "[p]eople assert, rather than prove, their claims to be regarded as human", elaborating on the evolution of "human" as a designation historically employed more to exclude than include, and which confers status.[17] Furthermore, building on Arendt's work, "[t]hose who have lost their legal standing and political membership cannot make a claim to human rights based on their belonging to humanity only".[18]

Identity documents of some kind have been used for millennia, though generally only to govern travel within or outside a government's domain.[19] Today, however, they are indispensable to most people in daily life. To be recognized as human increasingly depends on a record external to the person seeking that recognition – a record that affirms or denies the person's right to have rights. Without it, the person's full humanity is suddenly suspect.

This is the case for many stateless people, for children and others whose birth was not registered or who lost papers in the chaos of conflict and flight, for people whose documentary identities are not or are no longer accepted by the authority at hand, and for families of missing people.[20] The ICRC meets such people regularly and sees the consequences. Without papers, it can be impossible to get an education, work, secure shelter, marry, demonstrate widowhood, claim inheritance, vote. Not being able to do such things – that is, not being fully recognized as a human being – endangers other aspects of identity, including just staying alive.

> Lack or loss of civil documentation in Al-Hasakeh Governorate was reported as occurring in 100% of assessed communities (compared to 61% in 2020) and spread across all sub-districts to varying degrees.[21]

16 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, World Publishing Company, Cleveland, OH, 1962 (first published 1951), p. 296.

17 Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015, pp. 9, 20–46. "When we speak the language of the human, we engage in a politics of inclusion; yet in offering our definitions of this human, we endorse something that serves to exclude."

18 Luigi Corrias, "Dehumanization by Law", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. 205. A discussion of the development of the modern human rights system, particularly in relation to Arendt's 1951 work (above note 16), is beyond the scope of this paper.

19 World War I saw the introduction of more systematic border controls. John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State*, 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018, pp. 136–137. As a side note, "British tourists of the 1920s complained … about attached photographs and physical descriptions, which they considered led to a 'nasty dehumanisation'". Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985, p. 92.

20 The indeterminate status of a missing person – neither clearly alive nor dead – confounds most legal and administrative frameworks.

21 2021 multi-sector needs assessment results for Syria. See Syria HCT Coordinated Response, *Protection Sector Update: Al-Hol Camp, Syria*, June 2022, available at: https://reliefweb.int/attachments/dbe2b70c-6034-4a16-993c-94f111bac529/Protection-Sector-Update-Al-Hol-June-2022.pdf.

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The increasing digitalization of birth registries, immigration records and identity documents themselves makes things even more complicated. Even if someone has physical documentation, it may be denied or its validity questioned if it doesn't match up with a digital database. Biometric IDs (while presenting other challenges) might solve that problem, linking administrative identity directly with a person's unique human body, but an authority still has to issue the document – to grant the status. Thus, again, we see the importance of action to make the concept of humanity a reality.

Approaching dehumanization

"Dehumanization" is, linguistically, a negative; perhaps because "humanity" also has many faces, there is no single understanding of the concept.[22] My practical definition, relevant for the ICRC and the wider Movement, sees dehumanization as **perceiving or acting as if someone is less than human**, **in violation of one or more elements of the model of humanity** shown in Figure 1, and **thereby causing or being more likely to inflict harm**: see Figure 2.[23] This is informed by others' approaches, which are worth a brief survey.

One tension is between dehumanization as a psychological process (only) versus actions that are seen as dehumanizing and that cause or increase the risk of harm. Smith defines dehumanization precisely and uniquely as "conceiving of others as subhuman creatures" – attributing a "subhuman essence" to people.[24] This rigorously separates cause – dehumanizing belief – from harmful effects, whether words or other actions; this dehumanization is also distinct from other forms of derogation,[25] and more dangerous. Smith's theory is compelling but uniquely difficult to adopt in practice: how can we know what perceptions were at work when someone commits, encourages or tolerates specific harmful acts?[26] Nevertheless, the theory does resolve an important paradox: since dehumanized people remain, objectively, human at all times, is any "dehumanization" real? It

22 "Dehumanization happens when people are depicted, regarded, or treated as not human or less human. … What 'being human' means as part of dehumanization varies, is often idealized, and is rarely about an easy-to-capture matter. … [N]ot much agreement exists beyond [this notion] in the scholarship on dehumanization." M. Kronfeldner, above note 13, p. xvi. Though this paper discusses examples and practices from across the world, a further caveat is that the scholarship on dehumanization remains heavily Western.

23 As with their "humanity" inversions as shown in Figure 1, the three elements shown in Figure 2 also have porous boundaries, though I have tried to be precise in both cases by referring to *access* to rights. The examples given hopefully clarify further.

24 David Livingstone Smith, *Making Monsters: The Uncanny Power of Dehumanization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2021, p. 26. See also his earlier work: David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*, St Martin's Griffin, New York, 2011, p. 26.

25 Thus also forestalling what Nick Haslam calls "concept creep". Nick Haslam, "The Social Psychology of Dehumanization", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. 140.

26 As Smith himself says, "it becomes an open question whether the dehumanizing mentality lurks behind any given episode of animalistic derogation". D. L. Smith, above note 24, *Making Monsters*, p. 235.

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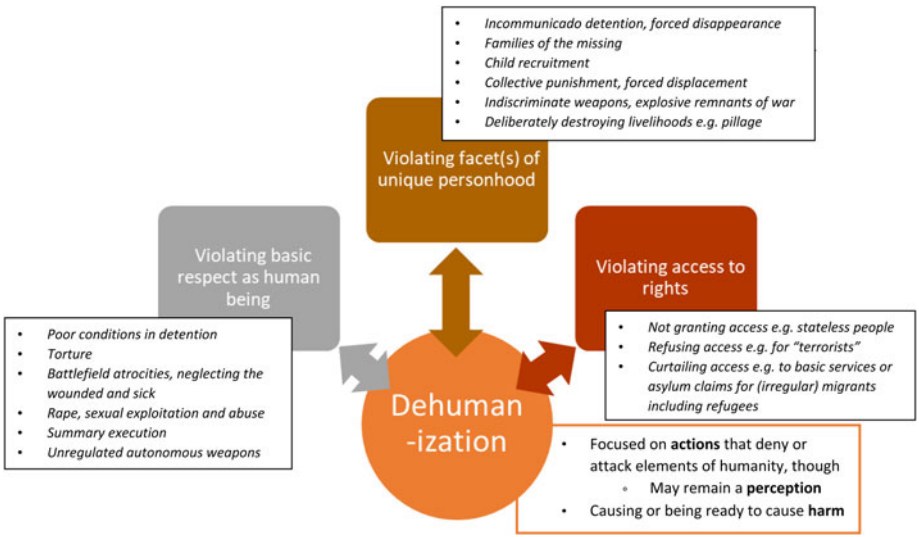


Figure 2. Dehumanization in a nutshell, with possible manifestations/indicators that the ICRC encounters in conflict.

is, in the mind of the perceiver: because human psychology is not logical, we can hold simultaneous, contradictory beliefs.[27]

That **people always remain objectively human** is a central fact, and there are other common threads among varied conceptions. Dehumanization is generally agreed to be bad.[28] It is also seen as important because of the harm that it causes in the world,[29] so people's actions are key. It is associated with difference, with in-group versus out-group distinctions, and with divisions among or within communities, including based on political control, language, cultural practices, religion, and appearance (see Figure 4).

Out of many other concepts of dehumanization, three in particular mirror the elements of humanity outlined in Figure 1.[30] The first is dehumanization as "**not recognizing the respective other as *also human***",[31] roughly corresponding to an

27 "For example, solid objects like the chair on which you are sitting look and feel gapless. But physicists tell us that such objects consist mostly of empty space. Even though our eyes tell us that solid objects are gapless, we defer to the physicists because, in our culture, they are supposed to know." *Ibid.*, pp. 238–239.

28 Maria Kronfeldner, "Introduction", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. 20. For context, a potential positive dehumanization is agreeing that a lover treat one's body as a pillow: Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 1995, p. 265. This is discussed further in Maria Mikkola, "Why Dehumanization is Distinct from Objectification", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. 329.

29 The study of dehumanization seeks to explain – and to prevent – particularly harmful instances of suffering and oppression including those less common today, like slavery.

30 Many discussions of dehumanization go well beyond these, exploring entrenched societal attitudes and norms. One can even conclude that any person not enjoying the full range of human rights is dehumanized. Conflict magnifies such harms, but this paper will not address these broader discussions beyond the section on "Efforts Elsewhere in the Movement" below.

31 M. Kronfeldner, above note 28, p. 15 (emphasis in original).

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exclusion from humankind while also touching on the need for others to acknowledge one's humanity. Seeing someone only as Jewish or Muslim, as during the Holocaust or the Bosnian War, drowns out their fundamental identity as a member of the same species and makes it easier to deny any ties or "recognitional attitudes (like solidarity, respect, and empathy)".[32]

The second is a "**disregard for, and undermining of, the unique singularity of human persons**".[33] This can include aspects of individual identity such as one's name, personality and pursuits, and aspects of belonging such as a family name/lineage or role in the community. One's associations can overwhelm their fundamental individuality, though, and similarly prevent them from being seen as their own unique human – as is arguably the case with the detention in northeast Syria of children of people with (perceived) affiliation to the so-called Islamic State (IS) group.

The third is that "dehumanization **consists … in having one's legitimate human interests actually violated**".[34] Such interests are codified in domestic and international legal frameworks, including international refugee law and IHL. Mikkola's conception reinforces the importance of those frameworks for trying to address dehumanization in practice, as they seek to prevent basic violations evoked by the other two bodies of law.

Approaching dehumanization as outlined in Figure 2 is a pragmatic choice suited to the situations of conflict and violence in which the ICRC works.[35] True to its linguistic roots, this understanding of dehumanization denies or attacks elements of humanity with which the ICRC is concerned, emphasizing real-world actions. While humanitarian work is not a laboratory, dehumanization as perception is nevertheless a real and measurable psychological phenomenon that can prompt action (see next section). Perception thus remains important, as does the adjective "less" in the phrase "less than human", because the intent is ultimately to diminish.[36]

Last but not least, the literature describes three ways in which dehumanized people are re-classified, roughly corresponding to animals, objects or machines, and the possible origins of each.[37] For our conflict-centred discussion we can treat these as subcategories, or even methods, of dehumanization, with the first two being most

32 *Ibid*., p. 15.

33 Sara Heinämaa and James Jardine, "Objectification, Inferiorization, and Projection in Phenomenological Research on Dehumanization", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. 309.

34 M. Kronfeldner, above note 28, p. 16; full discussion in M. Mikkola, above note 28. See also L. Corrias, above note 18.

35 Further informed by others' thinking, e.g. Beyond Conflict, *Decoding Dehumanization: Policy Brief for Policymakers and Practitioners*, May 2019, available at: https://beyondconflictint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Decoding-Dehumanization-Policy-Brief-2019.pdf.

36 Notwithstanding discussion of monsters/demons and attribution of superhuman powers to the dehumanized: D. L. Smith, *Making Monsters*, above note 24; Nick Haslam, Yoshihisa Kashima, Stephen Loughnan, Junqi Shi and Caterina Suitner, "Subhuman, Inhuman, and Superhuman: Contrasting Humans with Nonhumans in Three Cultures", *Social Cognition*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2008.

37 "Animalizing dehumanization reduces the person to a more primitive life form …. Mechanizing dehumanization reduces the person to being a robot …. Objectifying dehumanization reduces the person to a passive thing." Susan Fiske, "How Status and Interdependence Explain Different Forms of Dehumanization", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. 255. There is, however, disagreement about whether seeing humans as objects is part of mechanistic dehumanization. See also Nick Haslam,

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relevant for people being targeted for harm (see "Creating the Enemy" and "Language Matters" below).

Dehumanization causes real world harm

Working in the most desperate conflict environments in the world, the ICRC sees great suffering caused by some of the worst of human behaviour: in the ways conflict is waged and civilians are treated in life and upon death; in places of detention; or when certain people or groups are apparently not afforded the protections due under international law. Dehumanization lurks behind this suffering (see Figure 2).[38]

> The ICRC … has long been witness to the devastating killing of civilians leading to further spirals of violence and hatred.[39]

Blatant dehumanization can be measured,[40] and perceiving other people as less than human is robustly associated with direct violence, increasing support for conflict, violence, torture or retribution, and less support for helping behaviours, inter-group forgiveness and reconciliation.[41]

Some scholars argue that dehumanization directly incites violence.[42] This is not likely to be true in all cases, but dehumanization does increase the risk of violence and aggression in both conflict and non-conflict situations,[43] potentially inciting as well as facilitating harm (see Figure 3). Indeed, lowering or removing

"The Social Psychology of Dehumanization", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. 132; Beyond Conflict, above note 35, p. 4.

38 Again, this is not to minimize the suffering that the less extreme effects of dehumanization cause for millions whose humanity is violated, including by blocking full access to rights: think of the Taliban's treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan or systemic racism in many countries.

39 ICRC, "Israel and the Occupied Territories: Targeting Civilians Leads to Further Spirals of Violence and Hatred", 10 October 2023, available at: www.icrc.org/en/document/israel-and-occupied-territories-targeting-civilians-leads-further-spirals-violence-and-hatred.

40 Notably via the "Ascent" measure of blatant dehumanization, as illustrated by the iconic "Ascent of Man" image depicting the stages of evolution from ape to human: see Nour Kteily, Emile Bruneau, Adam Waytz and Sarah Cotterill, "The Ascent of Man: Theoretical and Empirical Evidence for Blatant Dehumanization", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 109, No. 5, 2015, available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000048. See also Nour Kteily and Emile Bruneau, "Darker Demons of Our Nature: The Need to (Re)Focus Attention on Blatant Forms of Dehumanization", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 26, No. 6, 2017.

41 Research summarized in Beyond Conflict, above note 35.

42 See e.g. Tage S. Rai, Piercarlo Valdesolo and Jesse Graham, "Dehumanization Increases Instrumental Violence, but not Moral Violence", *PNAS*, Vol. 114, No. 32, 2017, available at: https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1705238114. For an overview, see Nick Haslam, "The Many Roles of Dehumanization in Genocide", in Leonard S. Newman (ed.), *Confronting Humanity at Its Worst: Social Psychological Perspectives on Genocide*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, pp. 124-126.

43 Beyond Conflict, above note 35; ICRC, *The Roots of Restraint in War*, Geneva, 2018, available at: www.icrc.org/en/publication/4352-roots-restraint-war; David M. Markowitz and Paul Slovic, "Social, Psychological, and Demographic Characteristics of Dehumanization toward Immigrants", *PNAS*, Vol. 117, No. 17, 2020, available at: www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1921790117; Babak Bahador, "Classifying and Identifying the Intensity of Hate Speech", Social Science Research Council, November 2020, available at: https://items.ssrc.org/disinformation-democracy-and-conflict-prevention/classifying-and-identifying-the-intensity-of-hate-speech/.

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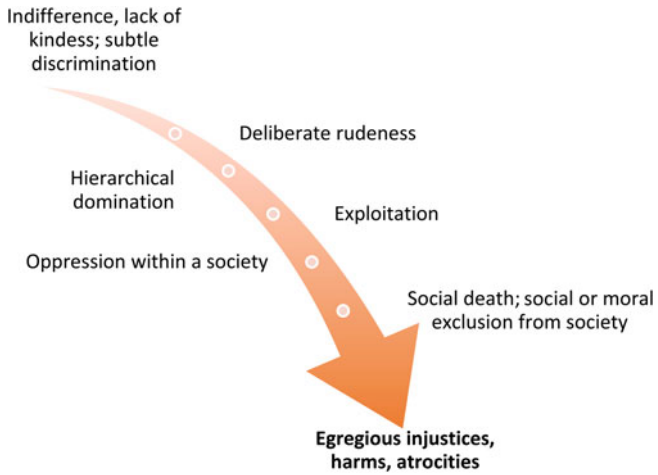


Figure 3. A spectrum of negative consequences of dehumanization. Source: adapted from Maria Kronfeldner, "Introduction", in Maria Kronfeldner (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, 1st ed., Routledge, Abingdon, 2021, p. 12.

inhibitions that normally keep humans from harming each other can be considered a hallmark of dehumanization.[44] Human beings, as social animals, usually adopt moral standards and have an innate psychological mechanism for controlling human-on-human violence and aggression.[45] Breaking down inhibitions on aggression and our human preference to avoid violence takes effort (see "Overt Efforts, including Language" below).

One or more avenues remove a person or group from moral consideration and may even make their mistreatment a moral duty.[46] Moreover, some moral principles, such as loyalty, begin to take priority over other norms, such as those around care. Empirical studies support this hypothesis in both non-conflict and conflict settings, showing that dehumanization is associated with, for example, less compassionate responses to injustice experienced by dehumanized minorities; aggressive attitudes and greater support for limiting immigration of certain groups; and support for aggressive "counterterrorism" policies – including a lack of concern for civilian casualties and a desire for vengeance.[47] Research on the 2014 Gaza War found that dehumanization predicted hostile outcomes such as

44 Edouard Machery, "Dehumanization and the Loss of Moral Standing", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. 145. See also the summaries in M. Kronfeldner, above note 28, p. 23, and D. L. Smith, *Less Than Human*, above note 24, p. 264.

45 D. L. Smith, *Making Monsters*, above note 24.

46 See e.g. Roger Giner-Sorolla, Bernhard Leidner and Emanuele Castano, "Dehumanization, Demonization, and Morality Shifting: Paths to Moral Certainty in Extremist Violence", in Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock (eds), *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2011, available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444344073.ch10.

47 N. Kteily, E. Bruneau, A. Waytz and S. Cotterill, above note 40.

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collective aggression, refusal to engage in peaceful dialogue, and acceptance of significant civilian casualties.[48] Studies also reveal a correlation between dehumanization and diminished intention to respect IHL, increased support for a war, and opposition to a peace treaty.[49]

Dehumanization: Mechanisms and responsibility

Dehumanization: Why and how

It can be difficult to distinguish the "why" and "how" of dehumanization, not least as the process may be iterative and can also extend across years if not centuries.[50] Dehumanization can both cause and result from harm; some people might exploit existing (even latent) dehumanizing perceptions for various ends, while others might try to dehumanize from scratch. In any event, it is particularly concerning when the authorities are involved.

As alluded to above, the question of moral standing is central to most examinations of dehumanization and informs both why it occurs and how it can be so powerful. Opotow cites dehumanization as an important "symptom" of moral exclusion, whereby "individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply".[51] This helps motivate violence. For Kelman, an early theorist who looked at cases of sanctioned massacres, dehumanization may be even better at **enabling violence**.[52] Smith, much more recently, agrees, stating that "the aim of dehumanization is … to disactivate inhibitions against harming [people]".[53]

There is usually an element of advantage gained by the dehumanizer relative to the dehumanized. Dehumanizers generally construct and then perceive in the dehumanized a **threat**, which allows the dehumanizers to see themselves as

48 Emile Bruneau and Nour Kteily, "The Enemy as Animal: Symmetric Dehumanization during Asymmetric Warfare", *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 12, No. 7, 2017, available at: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0181422.

49 See e.g. Beyond Conflict, above note 35; Nour Kteily, Gordon Hodson and Emile Bruneau, "They See Us as Less than Human: Metadehumanization Predicts Intergroup Conflict via Reciprocal Dehumanization", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 110, No. 3, 2016, available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000044; Emanuele Castano, Daniel Muñoz-Rojas and Sabina Čehajić-Clancy, "Thou Shalt Not Kill: Social Psychological Processes and International Humanitarian Law among Combatants", *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2020, available at: https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pac0000410.

50 Smith notes that dehumanizing beliefs "can lose their causal efficacy, and become latent, but they can be reignited by changes in a social ecology that is hospitable to them, including effective dehumanizing propaganda". D. L. Smith, *Making Monsters*, above note 24, p. 256.

51 Susan Opotow, "Moral Exclusion and Injustice: An Introduction", *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 1990, p. 1. See also Adam Waytz, Kurt Gray, Nicholas Epley and Daniel M Wegner, "Causes and Consequences of Mind Perception", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 14, No. 8, 2010, p. 386.

52 Herbet C. Kelman, "Violence without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers", *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 1973, p. 48, available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1973.tb00102.x.

53 D. L. Smith, *Making Monsters*, above note 24, p. 255; David Livingston Smith, *On Inhumanity: Dehumanization and How to Resist It*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2020, p. 100.

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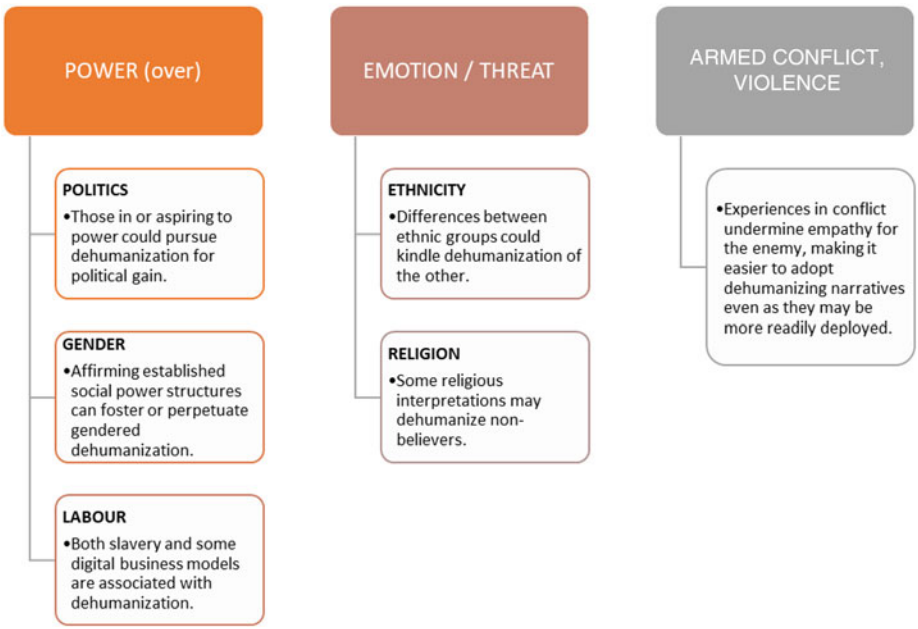


Figure 4. Drivers of dehumanization, especially by those in power.

the current or potential victims.[54] This can further justify a supposedly defensive action: those wielding power are the ones at risk, not the marginalized group. A desire for **prediction and control** are linked with tendencies to dehumanize.[55] The thread of **fear** running through these elements helps explain why dehumanizing narratives can be so powerful. If we are afraid for our well-being or way of life, or that of our family or community,[56] it becomes easier not to see the real or perceived source of the threat as another human being.

> At the time, I easily convinced myself that this was a matter of survival and self-defence.[57]

One can also promote dehumanization, implicitly or explicitly. Building on an internal analysis of dehumanizing language that the ICRC commissioned in 2020, Figure 4 organizes key external drivers that could be exploited by people in

54 In Smith's conception, "the most dangerous and destructive kind of dehumanization transforms others into monsters" who "pose … *a threat to the natural order itself*". D. L. Smith, *Making Monsters*, above note 24, p. 254 (emphasis in original). More generally, see Daniel Muñoz-Rojas and Jean-Jacques Frésard, *The Roots of Behaviour in War: Understanding and Preventing IHL Violations*, ICRC, Geneva, 2004, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0853.pdf.

55 A. Waytz *et al.*, above note 51, esp. p. 384. For an overview of the "mind perception" theory of dehumanization, see N. Haslam, above note 37, p. 133.

56 Abraham Harold Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation", *Psychological Review*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 1943.

57 Biljana Plavsić, "Statement of Guilt: Biljana Plavšić", International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, 17 December 2002, available at: www.icty.org/en/content/statement-guilt-biljana-plav%C5%A1i%C4%87#

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authority.[58] The grouping by power, emotion/threat and conflict is not rigid: more than one driver may well be at work.

The "conflict" driver illustrates especially well the overlap between why and how dehumanization happens, as well as the links between drivers. Though conflict can start as a "simple" power play, it can also emerge based on a dehumanizing ideology, and further perpetuate that ideology (see "It Works Both Ways" below).

> One of the similarities between the Lebanese experience and modern conflicts … is how easily the various sides managed to dehumanize their adversaries on ideological, political, ethnic and religious grounds …[59]

Who is responsible, and to what degree

Any individual can come to perceive another individual or group as less than human, and they might cause harm by acting on that perception – but, because of their power and influence on systems and thinking, we must worry especially when authorities go down this path.[60] Authorities might pursue dehumanization **overtly**, as a strategy to counter political rivals or some (often imagined) enemy. There is also a middle ground of **tacit encouragement** or tolerance, where authorities fail to dispute or counter dehumanizing narratives or other actions by private individuals or groups, possibly because of a perceived alliance with their political goals. Finally, dehumanization might also arise more **insidiously** over time (including as a response to others' dehumanization of oneself) in ways for which authorities are less directly responsible.[61]

Frick separates the "activity" of dehumanization into four categories,[62] from thoughts about to treatment of the dehumanized, corresponding to varying degrees of harm and, implicitly, responsibility for that harm. For simplicity, words and treatment are all considered as actions; even an expression of thought, coming from an authority figure, carries weight and could injure someone who was otherwise unharmed (see "Language Matters" below). It is not necessarily harmless, either, "simply" to dehumanize others in thought: anyone with such conceptions is less likely to change established practices that insidiously or overtly dehumanize people and more prone to tacitly encouraging others' dehumanizing words and deeds. Especially for those in power, inaction is also powerful.

58 Distinct from methods for such exploitation, such as propaganda: see "Overt Efforts, including Language" below.

59 ICRC, "*I Saw My City Die*": *Voices from the Front Lines of Urban Conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen*, Geneva, 2017, p. 67, available at: www.icrc.org/en/publication/i-saw-my-city-die-voices-front-lines-urban-conflict-iraq-syria-and-yemen.

60 H. C. Kelman, above note 52, pp. 48–52; S. Opotow, above note 51, p. 13.

61 The authorities may still be accountable out of a duty of care, if people under their charge are denied their individuality, importance in the community and/or moral standing; the below section on "Tacit Encouragement" touches on this.

62 Latent dehumanization (undiscernible beliefs), expressive dehumanization (thoughts into words), activist dehumanization (trying to convince others of one's belief) and finally actualized dehumanization (all treatment of others grounded in their being "not (fully) human"). Marie-Luisa Frick, "Dehumanization and Human Rights", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, pp. 188–189.

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It works both ways: Victims dehumanize aggressors[63]

Actions by one group influence another. Victims of aggression, including civilians threatened in conflict, will almost certainly re-evaluate their perception of the moral standing of aggressors and anyone supporting them, possibly to the point of further dehumanization. Research carried out by the ICRC more than twenty years ago bears this out: "In Bosnia-Herzegovina, those who support a side in this conflict – 75 per cent – are much more likely than those who did not to accept attacks on non-combatants."[64] And research in 2019 "showed that the terrorist threat against the ingroup raises the support for … retributive procedures through the dehumanization of the outgroup".[65] Peacemaking just got harder.

Overt efforts, including language

There are far too many examples of overtly dehumanizing efforts by authorities. Genocides are an extreme case, seeking to end the human existence of entire groups.[66] While legally distinct from armed conflict, genocide and conflict are often linked, be it the case of Armenians during World War I, the Holocaust and extermination of other groups during World War II, the Cambodian genocide of 1975–79 during a civil war, the Rwandan genocide of 1994 in the context of a civil war begun in 1990, the 1995 massacres of Bosnian Muslims during wars around the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, or the massacres of Yazidis and other ethnic minorities perpetrated by IS in Iraq within the 2013–17 armed conflict. Religion, ethnicity and power contributed variously as drivers, too.[67]

63 This paper does not explore self-dehumanization, either as discussed in the literature or from the less rigorous perspective that human existence is inherently relational, as exemplified by Desmond Tutu's statement: "I am human because you are human. My humanity is caught up in yours. And if you are dehumanized, I am dehumanized." "'My Humanity Is Caught Up in Yours': How Desmond Tutu Dedicated His Life to Greater Good", *News Hour*, PBS, 27 December 2021, 3:41, available at: www.pbs.org/newshour/show/my-humanity-is-caught-up-in-yours-how-desmond-tutu-dedicated-his-life-to-greater-good. Curious readers may consult Stéphanie Demoulin, Pierre Maurage and Florence Stinglhamber, "Exploring Metadehumanization and Self-Dehumanization from a Target Perspective", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2.

64 Greenberg Research, *Country Report Bosnia-Herzegovina: ICRC Worldwide Consultation on the Rules of War*, 1999, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/bosnia.pdf.

65 Khalil da Costa Silva, José Luis Álvaro, Ana Raquel Rosas Torres and Alicia Garrido, "Terrorist Threat, Dehumanization, and Right-Wing Authoritarianism as Predictors of Discrimination", *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 60, No. 6, 2019, available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12574.

66 Dehumanization is identified as a core element contributing to genocide; see Gregory H. Stanton, "Ten Stages of Genocide", 1996, available at: www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages. Indeed, modern studies of dehumanization began in reaction to the Holocaust and other atrocities of World War II, including those committed by Japanese and US forces: M. Kronfeldner, above note 28, p. 3. See also Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 78 UNTS 277, 9 December 1948 (entered into force 12 January 1951), available at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1951/01/19510112%2008-12%20PM/Ch_IV_1p.pdf.

67 Among many other examples of colonial and post-colonial dynamics, which are not the main focus of this paper, State demands for natural resources and economic expansion alone motivated the genocide of the

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Creating the enemy

Prior to genocides but also in other circumstances, people might be overtly dehumanized precisely to promote or facilitate violence. Humans have a deep-seated aversion to killing other humans which, if not addressed, can harm the killers' mental health or ethical sense.[68] A common approach is to create distance between the aggressors and the future victims, either psychologically or physically or both.[69] Such efforts can self-perpetuate, with dehumanization of victims as "both the effect of and the justification for acts of humiliation, degradation and instrumentalization".[70] Language and administrative and legal frameworks can also overtly contribute to creating psychological distance – vectors we will explore in their own right (see "Language Matters" and "Legal and Administrative Frameworks" below).

Psychological distance

Psychological distance is at work when ethnic identity or strong religious conviction drive dehumanization,[71] but we can use a more prosaic example to illustrate its importance. Armed forces and groups are unusual in being given (in the case of States) or taking upon themselves the use of force. Military training teaches arms carriers to overcome their natural instincts: exhaustion, fear, hunger, cold or heat, but also their natural inhibition against killing.[72] Training instils the discipline required to apply force selectively – even to kill the enemy, when ordered, in combat situations – and to stop such force when it is no longer required or no longer legal. Armed forces and groups also have an interest in the well-being of

Aché indigenous group in Paraguay from the 1950 into the 1970s. See Patrick Breslin, "For Those Who Will Never Again Be Human", *Washington Post*, 30 January 1977, available at: www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1977/01/30/for-those-who-will-never-again-be-human/9eeeb8ef-224a-4532-adc4-786249b02c50/; Survival International, "South American Tribe Sues over Historic Genocide", 1 July 2014, available at: www.survivalinternational.org/news/10264.

68 Brandon J. Griffin *et al.*, "Moral Injury: An Integrative Review", *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2019, available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22362.

69 Paul Roscoe, "Intelligence, Coalitional Killing, and the Antecedents of War", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 109, No. 3, 2007, pp. 489–490. See also Dave Grossman, *On Killing*, Back Bay Books, Boston, MA, 1995, pp 97–137, 156–170; Peter Watson, "War on the Mind: The Military Uses and Abuses of Psychology", Hutchinson & Co., London, 1978, pp. 36–39.

70 S. Oliver, above note 15, p 89.

71 Wiktor Pastucha and Aleksandra Spychalska, "How Islamic State Uses Propaganda in the Service of Genocide", 4 April 2016, available at: https://think.iafor.org/islamic-state-use-propaganda-service-genocide/; Hester Maria Greyvenstein, "Q&A: German Journalist on Surviving ISIL", Al Jazeera, 15 January 2015, available at: www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/1/15/qa-german-journalist-on-surviving-isil.

72 This paper will not discuss the disturbing possibility that fighters are themselves dehumanized through training and in or after combat. The individual person is certainly suppressed, becoming part of a larger unit and her life given over to the orders of superior officers (see "The Soldier's Heart", *Frontline*, PBS, 1 March 2005, available at: www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/showsheart/), at worst as "cannon fodder". Efforts to guard against post-traumatic stress disorder might create an ultimately unhealthy distance from acts of violence: see Héloïse Goodley, "The Dangers of Dehumanizing Warfare", in *Pharmacological Performance Enhancement and the Military: Exploring an Ethical and Legal Framework for "Supersoldiers"*, research paper, Chatham House, 11 November 2020, available at: www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/pharmacological-performance-enhancement-and-military/04-dangers-dehumanizing-warfare.

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their personnel, who will be more effective if not disabled by moral injury through unlawful killing, or the "mere" prospect of killing.

Examples abound where military training or practices, particularly drills, seek to address these concerns[73] through the dehumanization of prospective targets. Even without employing any derogatory terminology, "the enemy" is already an abstract term far from any single person or even any group of recognizable humans; it is closer to an object. Target practice and other exercises that (generally) use objects instead of real people reinforce this idea.[74] To be clear, militaries are not bad *per se* because they drill troops to dehumanize targets, and individual soldiers should not be blamed for protecting themselves from moral injury. Any framework that permits killing, even of civilians, under certain conditions is morally complex to say the least.

Sometimes, however, this permissiveness is clearly taken too far. Japanese military training during the 1930s normalized violence against the less powerful; indoctrinated troops never to question orders, however awful; and reinforced prevailing attitudes: "On the battlefield, we never really considered the Chinese humans."[75] US Vietnam War veterans reported being told in basic training to "'Never call them Vietnamese ….' Anything to take away their humanity, to dehumanize them and make it easy to see any Vietnamese – all Vietnamese – as the enemy."[76] At least in 2022, Russian army conscripts reportedly watched "informational television programs" six days a week that dehumanized Ukrainians as "Nazis".[77] IS fighters' views of the Yazidi as "idolators" prepared the way for slavery, massacres and mass rapes.[78]

> I never felt guilty about killing people who deserved to die. In my eyes they deserve to die because they are the enemy. I am trained to think that way.[79]

Physical distance

Long-range weapons also create distance, this time physical, that "shields the aggressor from the sights, sounds, and smells that would spark perpetrator abhorrence"[80] and reinforces the conception of "the enemy" as an object or

73 D. Grossman, above note 69, pp. 1–39.
74 The dehumanizing effect is even more striking, and might be even greater, the more realistic the targets.
75 Mark Felton, "The Perfect Storm: Japanese Military Brutality during World War Two", in Cathie Carmichael and Richard C. Maguire (eds), *The Routledge History of Genocide*, 1st ed., Routledge, London, 2015, p. 112.
76 "'Anything That Moves': Civilians and the Vietnam War", *Fresh Air*, NPR, 28 January 2013, available at: www.npr.org/2013/01/28/169076259/anything-that-moves-civilians-and-the-vietnam-war.
77 Anton Troianovski, "Atrocities in Ukraine War Have Deep Roots in Russian Military", *New York Times*, 22 April 2022, available at: www.nytimes.com/2022/04/17/world/europe/ukraine-war-russia-atrocities.html.
78 See e.g. "Islamic State Seeks to Justify Enslaving Yazidi Women and Girls in Iraq", *Newsweek*, 13 October 2014, available at: www.newsweek.com/islamic-state-seeks-justify-enslaving-yazidi-women-and-girls-iraq-277100. The IS example is peculiar, however, in that the group rejects current IHL.
79 Anonymous soldier, quoted in Herlinde Koelbl, "The Images Used to Teach Soldiers to Kill", *BBC News*, 2 January 2015, available at: www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30573936.
80 D.L. Smith, *Making Monsters*, above note 24, p. 221.

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otherwise not human. Long-range weapons have been used for centuries; the missiles and drones common today are just the latest versions.

Even at close range, it is possible to create a barrier that shields a key part of the enemy's persistent humanity and makes it easier to (continue to) reduce the person to a mere target, an object. Considering humans' attraction to human faces, especially the eyes, doing harm can be made easier by hiding the victim's face, whether with a hood or blindfold, as has been the practice with many State-sanctioned executions, or inflicting harm from behind, with the victim's face turned away.[81]

Language matters

> Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures which were imposed on them in a million repetitions.[82]

Words are how ideas are often formed and certainly communicated, and they are powerful. They influence how we perceive and, ultimately, act towards people, as the examples above from military training show. Language equating human beings with objects that have no human worth, or, especially, with creatures that disgust or frighten, is present in all clear examples of dehumanization. While the causal caveat remains, such language is at least a warning of further harm to come, especially when the non-human object or creature is something to be fought and/or destroyed.

Examples are rife from across the globe. A medical professional and regional governor of Diyarbekir in 1915 said that "the Armenians had become dangerous microbes in the body of this country. And surely it is a doctor's duty to kill bacteria?"[83] Under the Nazi regime, Jews, Roma and others were depicted as "dangerous, disease-carrying rats" in propaganda and school education.[84] The Khmer Rouge in Cambodia depicted suspected or confirmed accomplices of the previous government as "worms" and "parasites".[85] The Tutsi minority were infamously called "cockroaches" and "snakes" in the lead-up to the Rwandan genocide. Bosnian Muslims were seen as "genetically deformed material that

81 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

82 Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, trans. Martin Brady, Bloomsbury, London, 1975, p. 15.

83 Salâhattin Güngör, "Bir Canlı Tarih Konu uyor", *Resimli Tarih Mecmuası*, Vol. 4, No. 43, 1953, pp. 2444–2445. Also quoted in Uğur Ümit Üngör, "The Armenian Genocide, 1915", in Barbara Boender and Wichert ten Have (eds), *The Holocaust and Other Genocides: An Introduction*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2012.

84 Imperial War Museums, "Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Failure In The Soviet Union", available at: www.iwm.org.uk/history/operation-barbarossa-and-germanys-failure-in-the-soviet-union; Stewart Gabel, "The Role of Dehumanization in the Nazi Era in Activating the Death Drive Resulting in Genocide", PhD. diss., University of Denver, 2021, available at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/1929/; V. Klemperer, above note 82.

85 Kosal Path and Angeliki Kanavou, "Converts, not Ideologues? The Khmer Rouge Practice of Thought Reform in Cambodia, 1975–1978", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2015, pp. 308, 313, 325, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2015.1075266.

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embraced Islam", and as traitors, filth and vermin that needed to be annihilated.[86] In the United States since the start of the so-called "war on terror", and notably following the 2016 elections, Muslims have been called racist obscenities that further evoke the past dehumanization of enslaved people and persistent systemic racism.[87] Muslims from Rakhine have been called dogs, pigs and maggots.[88]

Playing on people's fears, dehumanizing narratives are powerful and can thus be attractive to leaders seeking to promote support or dismiss opposition. This explains the seeming paradox of attributing extraordinary abilities to dehumanized people:[89] by doing so, "they are transformed into entities that are even more terrifying to their persecutors, who then implement more and more extreme methods against them in an ascending spiral of violence".[90]

The draw to dehumanize is even stronger in conflict, where there is necessarily an enemy and the threat stakes are even higher: "Heightened war rhetoric … leads to greater civilian suffering."[91]

While the term "enemy" originally describes neither an animal nor an object, it becomes a shortcut for the objectified opponent in battle and carries those overtones into more common use. Similar terms like "infidel", "illegal migrant" or more recently again "Nazi" and especially "terrorist" have come to signify beings who are automatically and necessarily excluded from the human family.

Propaganda and misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech

Propaganda has long accompanied armed conflict and violence, with "information operations" often being seen as an important complement to or even foundation for fighting in other arenas.[92] The ICRC is explicitly concerned about

86 Biljana Plavšić, quoted in Michael A. Sells, "The Construction of Islam in Serbian Religious Mythology and Its Consequences", in Maya Shatzmiller (ed.), *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2002, p. 58; see also Refik Hodžić, "Dehumanisation of Muslims Made Karadzic an Icon of Far-Right Extremism", *IBJ JusticeHub*, 22 March 2019, web archive.

87 Todd H. Green, "The Mainstreaming of Islamophobia in United States Politics", in Naved Bakali and Farid Havez (eds), *The Rise of Global Islamophobia in the War on Terror*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2022, pp. 58–62; Southern Poverty Law Center, "Ten Days After: Harassment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election", 29 November 2016, available at: www.splcenter.org/20161129/ten-days-after-harassment-and-intimidation-aftermath-election#antimuslim.

88 Steve Stecklow, "Hatebook: Inside Facebook's Myanmar operation", *Reuters*, 15 August 2015, available at: www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/.

89 For example, non-Black residents of the United States "have a bias to perceive young Black men as bigger … and more physically threatening … than young White [*sic*] men". John Paul Wilson, Kurt Hugenberg and Nicholas Rule, "Racial Bias in Judgments of Physical Size and Formidability: From Size to Threat", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 113, No. 1, 2017, p. 59, available at: www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/psp-pspi0000092.pdf.

90 D. L. Smith, *Making Monsters*, above note 24, pp. 268–269.

91 ICRC, above note 39.

92 ICRC, *Harmful Information: Misinformation, Disinformation and Hate Speech in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence*, Geneva, 2021, available at: www.icrc.org/en/publication/4556-harmful-information-misinformation-disinformation-and-hate-speech-armed-conflict. See also Tilman Rodenhäuser and Samit D'Cunha, "Foghorns of War: IHL and Information Operations during Armed Conflict", *Humanitarian Law and Policy Blog*, 12 October 2023, available at: https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2023/10/12/foghorns-of-war-ihl-and-information-operations-during-armed-conflict/.

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misinformation, disinformation and hate speech (MDH) precisely because of how they risk undermining the humanity of people affected by conflict and violence.[93]

Hate speech seems particularly likely to dehumanize by creating an enemy in everyday life, usually exploiting built-in or even long-dormant perceptions and biases in the cultural context and finding fertile ground in communities under stress.[94] The message will inevitably carry weight when coming from official channels, and more so if authorities exert control over communication to block alternate narratives, for example through internet shut-downs.

The examples cited above bear this out, preparing the ground for violence and often, at the same time or later, actually calling for it. During Argentina's "Dirty War", leaders portrayed a range of political opponents as "subversives" and "enemies" whose elimination would resolve the country's "national security" concerns.[95] The Rwandan radio station RTLM, privately founded but dedicated to anti-Tutsi propaganda, urged listeners to "exterminate the cockroaches" and "cut down the tall trees" a month before the massacres started. Thirty-five years earlier, the leader of a Hutu political party called for doing away with Tutsi "vermin"; anti-Tutsi pogroms erupted the same year.[96]

And again, the resulting dehumanizing perceptions make healing and recovery from conflict and violence far more challenging. While not always dehumanizing, populist narratives today create or reinforce divisions – against various minorities, political opponents, immigrants – and are worrying because of how quickly violence can flare up, even outside authorities' control (see "Tacit Encouragement" below).

Digital communication platforms

With the rapid development of digital information and communication technologies, dehumanizing content is amplified, propagates more quickly, reaches a wider audience, encounters less resistance and is harder to trace than in

93 As well as for the margin of manoeuvre and safety of the humanitarians trying to respond. More generally, Waldron argues that hate speech is dually concerning: "First, it aims to dispel the sense of assurance that … constitutes the social upholding of individual dignity. … Second, … the hate-speaker is trying to construct an alternative public good" where harmful beliefs about others, including their dehumanization, are given stature and credence. See Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2012, pp. 166–167. This paper uses the ICRC's definitions: "Misinformation: False information that is spread by individuals who believe the information to be true or who have not taken the time to verify it." "Disinformation: False information that is fabricated or disseminated with malicious intent." "Hate speech: All forms of expression (text, images, audio) that spread, incite, promote or justify hatred and violence based on intolerance, usually against identity traits (gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.)." ICRC, above note 92, pp. 18–19.

94 D. L. Smith, *Making Monsters*, above note 24, pp. 190–191.

95 Ilana Dutton, *Argentina's Dirty War: Memory, Repression and Long-Term Consequences*, Summer Research No. 308, University of Puget Sound, 2018, available at: https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research/308.

96 Kennedy Ndahiro, "In Rwanda, We Know All About Dehumanizing Language", *The Atlantic*, 13 April 2019, available at: www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/rwanda-shows-how-hateful-speech-leads-violence/587041/.

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the past.[97] The role of social media platforms in the amplification of and incitement to hatred and violence has been highlighted in contexts like Myanmar, Ethiopia and Ukraine.

People are also more likely to engage further when they feel more comfortable, which may be more likely in a "community" that shares and validates one's views. A 2020 case study of an Israeli Facebook page propagating hate speech highlighted the role of social media in delegitimizing and dehumanizing the out-group, as shown partly through epithets like "filthy dogs", "leftist cockroaches" and "stinking worms". The same users' reactions to views different from their own align with a theory, put forward by various authors, of identity contributing to intractable conflict.[98]

Legal and administrative frameworks

"[D]eliberately withholding or violating juridical personhood is a form of dehumanization"[99] – that is, not acknowledging that someone has rights or not agreeing that her rights must be respected. Dehumanization necessarily involves creating at least one division within the species *Homo sapiens*, and laws can be a good way to do this. South Africa's twentieth-century Apartheid regime is a clear example of a legislated classification system.[100] Whether you were white, "native" or "coloured" determined what legal protections you would enjoy – or effectively, to what levels of repression and violence you could legally be subjected.[101]

Arbitrary detention and collective punishment are similarly dehumanizing: they ground the deprivation of liberty or other retribution on someone's association with a group rather than her actions.[102] Both can take place within a nominally functional legal and/or administrative system, and may even, within that system, follow some kind of procedure. But the system may not allow the person to

97 Outrage and fear are more likely to draw people's attention, and algorithms that try to maximize user engagement with the platform suggest homogenous content, creating echo chambers. Text, as opposed to oral, communication appears to more readily dehumanize, making social media platforms especially fruitful ground. See Jordan Carpenter, William Brady, Molly Crockett, Rene Weber and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Political Polarization and Moral Outrage on Social Media", *Connecticut Law Review*, Vol. 52, No. 3, 2021, available at: https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/law_review/454/.

98 Tal Orian Harel, Jessica Katz Jameson and Ifat Maoz, "The Normalization of Hatred: Identity, Affective Polarization, and Dehumanization on Facebook in the Context of Intractable Political Conflict", *Social Media and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2020, available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120913983. For the theoretical basis, which also touches on dehumanization, see Terrell A. Northrup, "The Dynamic of Identity in Personal and Social Conflict", in Louis Kriesberg, Terrell A. Northrup and Stuart J. Thorson (eds), *Intractable Conflicts and Their Transformation*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY, 1989, esp. pp. 72–75. See also J. Waldron, above note 93, on the causal danger of hate speech. States, alongside international and regional organizations, civil society and tech companies, are putting more resources into curbing MDH, some policy frameworks and good practices are emerging, and there is more awareness of the additional dangers in conflict, but the effects have yet to be felt in practice.

99 L. Corrias, above note 18, p. 205.

100 Others include the Nazi regime and the Spanish colonies in Latin America.

101 *Ibid*., p. 207.

102 This is arguably the case for people in the Al Hol and Roj camps in northeast Syria; recall the discussion in "Understanding Dehumanization" above.

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dispute the detention or the punishment, since "there is simply no legal agent left who can be addressed by law".[103]

Dehumanizing legal frameworks carry over into administrative systems, as with segregated living arrangements and matters such as recognition of marriage, passing citizenship to children, or access to jobs. From the 1930s, Rwandans' identity cards listed their assigned ethnic category; new rules around adoption, previously fluid with respect to ethnicity, helped cement the classifications.[104] Rules of any kind are useful in effecting dehumanization because people can be sanctioned or even criminally convicted for breaking them, thus raising the cost of resistance.

Deliberate (mis)interpretation of otherwise sound frameworks can also dehumanize people. Lawyers for the US Department of Justice notoriously argued that national security justified virtually any interrogation method, despite the explicit non-derogation clause in the Convention Against Torture.[105] Similarly, military frameworks may be deliberately exploited to justify IHL violations. Implying that they have been taught to see such behaviour as lawful, "[v]eterans often use techno-strategic language to describe torture during interrogations, corpse desecration, forced displacement and small-group civilian killings in free-fire zones". When rules of engagement are interpreted in ways that at least blur combatant–civilian distinctions and justify acts that clearly violate IHL, "military policies can produce atrocities".[106]

Tacit encouragement

Even without acting in ways that dehumanize or overtly encourage others to do so, those in authority may allow dehumanization to persist, or even flourish, for various reasons. If leaders do not counter others' dehumanizing efforts – whether because they underestimate the danger or because they perceive political risk in response or gain from inaction – they convey that those efforts are acceptable, even correct.

Firstly, again, words and systems matter. Authorities do not initiate alternative forms of MDH such as "ampliganda" (or "people-made algorithm-amplified propaganda"), but those forms tend to be stronger in places where

103 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

104 Jean Mukimbiri, "The Seven Stages of the Rwandan Genocide", *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2005, pp. 828–829, available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqi070.

105 Jay Bybee and John Yoo, "Standards of Conduct for Interrogation under 18 U.S.C. §§ 2340–2340A", Memorandum, Assistant Attorney General, Office of Legal Counsel, U.S. Department of Justice, to Counsel to the President, 1 August 2002, available at: https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB127/02.08.01.pdf. See also L. Corrias, above note 18, pp. 209–210.

106 Mia Martin Hobbs, "Why Soldiers Commit War Crimes – and What We Can Do about It", *The Conversation*, 30 June 2022, available at: https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-why-soldiers-commit-war-crimes-and-what-we-can-do-about-it-185391. See also Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2006, pp. 50–51; *Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry Report*, 19 November 2020, p. 524 (Brereton Report), available at: www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/IGADF-Afghanistan-Inquiry-Public-Release-Version.pdf.

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internal political, religious or ethnic tensions are high. And everywhere, powerful and influential individuals play a critical role in spreading MDH: increasingly, bottom-up and top-down efforts meet and reinforce each other.

Authorities' neglect of or deliberate indecision on what potentially criminal acts to legislate against and prosecute can have similarly significant consequences. Political considerations may influence nominally independent judicial systems. Even if there is no improper influence, prosecutors often have broad discretion over what to pursue, and judges over what sentences to hand down.

Secondly, authorities might distance themselves from responsibility by acting through proxies, in relationships that provide plausible deniability or at least more moral or legal ambiguity over the partner's actions.[107] The intent and framing of the relationship matter: what is not said can be as important as what is. Because of the actual and potential harm arising from this issue, some of it reflecting dehumanization, the ICRC has issued extensive guidance to States on how to undertake support relationships in armed conflict[108] and has responded in several contexts to the conduct of self-defence groups.

Thirdly, authorities may tacitly encourage dehumanization through "informal subcultures" in militaries that dehumanize the enemy to the point where IHL violations are tolerated or even encouraged (as alluded to above: see "Creating the Enemy" and "Legal and Administrative Frameworks"). Delving into the behaviour of Australian Special Air Service troops in Afghanistan revealed that informal subcultures were allowed to incubate and spread, resulting in a presumption that all Afghans were hostile – *everyone* was the enemy – and a general disbelief when faced with alleged abuses. Not only did clear violations go unpunished, but they become established practice. Known perpetrators were even rewarded for gallantry and valour.[109]

Lastly, states of emergency and other heightened security measures may also support dehumanization: they encourage whole groups to be treated as threats and not as people, creating an enemy from society itself. This can cause direct harm, for example if law enforcement officers use unnecessary or excessive force in response to demonstrations.[110] Civilians' subsequent experience of fear, injury, detention or even death may in turn make an enemy of the State, raising the risk of violence in future.

107 See e.g. Sarah Malik, "Spy Agency Asio 'Acquiesced in the Use of Torture' When Detaining Egyptian Refugee, Court Told", *The Guardian*, 12 October 2022, available at: www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/oct/13/spy-agency-asio-acquiesced-in-the-use-of-torture-when-detaining-egyptian-refugee-court-told.

108 ICRC, *Allies, Partners and Proxies: Managing Support Relationships in Armed Conflict to Reduce the Human Cost of War*, Geneva, 2021, available at: www.icrc.org/en/publication/4498-allies-partners-and-proxies-managing-support-relationships-armed-conflict-reduce.

109 Brereton Report, above note 106, pp. 29, 334, 516; Samantha Crompvoets, "Special Operations Command (SOCOMOD) Culture and Interactions: Insights and Reflection", Australian Government Defence, January 2016, available at: www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/SOCOMD-Culture-and-Interactions-Insights-and-Reflection-Jan-16_0.pdf.

110 ICRC, "ICRC Statement on Latest Developments in Myanmar", 28 March 2021, available at: www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-statement-developments-myanmar-28-march.

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Curbing dehumanization

Restating the obvious, "all forms of dehumanization involve either humanity or humanness [in this paper, an element of humanity] … being attributed or used in a differential manner with respect to different people".[111] There is a good chance that this will hurt people, in particular by increasing the likelihood, severity and length of violence and armed conflict.

The solution is simple: treat people as people, heal their wounds and restore their dignity – in short, act as the principle of humanity enjoins. This is a long and hard but not hopeless task. Many harmful practices that were once widely accepted have lost favour: slavery, including as the fate of enemy captives, is now considered abhorrent, as is torture.[112] The law and the work of the ICRC and others in the Movement continue these efforts.

Legal frameworks

IHL exists to make the violence and horror of war less violent and horrible – to defuse the causal chains that dehumanization sets off and which can fuel it further.[113] "Humanity" is clearly central to IHL – indeed, in its very name – while IHL is a bulwark of humanity. Humanity in IHL reflects reality, affirming our fundamental similarities and common interests. It also recognizes that we have not yet achieved our vision of and for humanity, and requires us to do better.

There is a historical dialectic, often slow but sometimes fast, between harm caused and the setting of norms and formal standards to restrain that harm and call violators to account. It is no accident that conflict has seen the fastest progress in this regard: in armed conflict, violence is explicit, at the behest of the authorities in charge, and human suffering proliferates in chilling diversity, much of it linked to dehumanization: thus, international humanitarian law.[114]

Long before today's universally adopted conventions, diverse cultures spanning millennia have promoted behaviours in war that uphold at least some aspects of humanity, as many including the ICRC have shown: see Figure 5.[115] More recently, the Lieber Code of 1863 made explicit reference to "principles of justice, honor, and humanity" when carrying out martial law, and the 1868

111 M. Kronfeldner, above note 28, p. 18.

112 The examples of egregious harm in Figure 2 that can indicate dehumanization are almost all illegal under international law.

113 "The primary aim of IHL is to protect the victims of armed conflict and to regulate the conduct of hostilities based on a balance between military necessity and humanity." Nils Melzer, *Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law*, ICRC, Geneva, 2009, p. 11, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc-002-0990.pdf.

114 Which, in its first modern form, is twice as old as international human rights law.

115 Certainly by today's even wider human rights standards but even "just" considering conflict, these examples do not imply that the societies they come from were perfectly humane. Again, understandings of humanity have evolved, e.g. from rulers with life-and-death power over subjects or caste systems.

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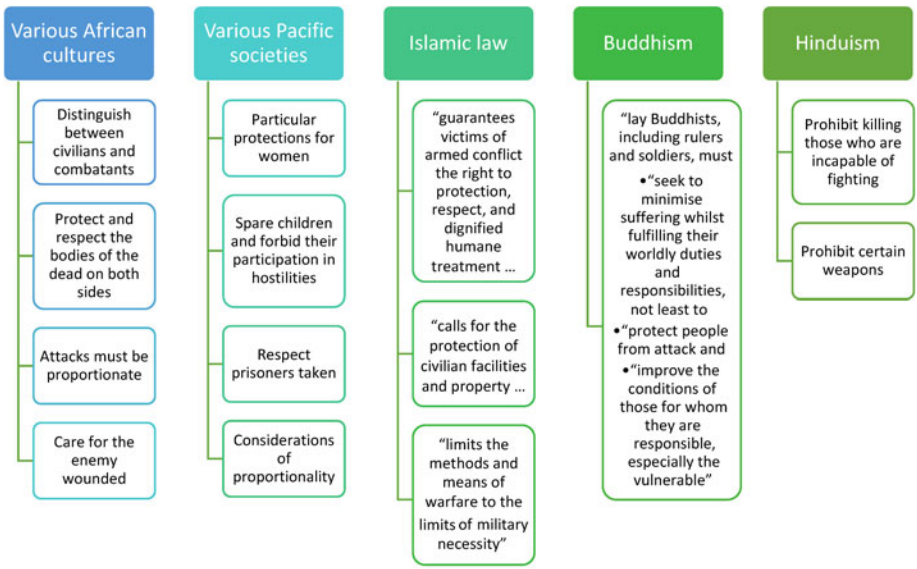


Figure 5. Non-Western examples of IHL-like precepts that reflect a concern for humanity and pre-date current codes (admittedly without the Americas). Source: author's elaboration based on ICRC, "African Values in War: A Tool on Traditional Customs and IHL", 2021, available at: www.icrc.org/en/document/african-customs-tool-traditional-customs-and-ihl; ICRC, *Under the Protection of the Palm: Wars of Dignity in the Pacific*, Geneva, 2009, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/wars-of-dignity-pacific-2009.pdf; ICRC, "Islamic Law and International Humanitarian Law: Common Principles of the Two Legal Systems", 2020, available at: www.icrc.org/en/document/islamic-law-international-humanitarian-law; Andrew Bartles-Smith *et al.*, "Reducing Suffering during Conflict: The Interface between Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law", *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol. 21, No. 1–2, 2020, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2021.1976016; Kjetil Mujezinović Larsen, Camilla Guldahl Cooper and Gro Nystuen, "Introduction by the Editors: Is there a 'Principle of Humanity' in International Humanitarian Law?", in Kjetil Mujezinović Larsen, Camilla Guldahl Cooper and Gro Nystuen (eds), *Searching for a "Principle of Humanity" in International Humanitarian Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 3. Further, "[p]rinciples of a humanitarian character could also be found, e.g., in the Code of Hammurabi King of Babylon, the teachings of Sun Tzu, [and] the practices of the Roman Empire".

St. Petersburg Declaration cites the "laws of humanity" to restrict acceptable action.[116]

At the turn of the twentieth century the Martens Clause appeared in Hague Conventions II and IV, outlining protections for civilians and combatants drawn

116 Francis Lieber, *Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field*, General Order No. 100, War Department, Washington, DC, 24 April 1863 (Lieber Code), Art. 4, available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/liebercode-1863/article-4?activeTab=undefined; Declaration Renouncing the Use, in Time of War, of Explosive Projectiles Under 400 Grammes Weight, Saint Petersburg, 29 November/11 December 1868 (entered into force 11 December 1868), available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/st-petersburg-decl-1868. Both references originally sourced from Dietrich Schindler and Jirí Toman, *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, 3rd ed., Martinus Nijhoff, Leiden, 1988, pp. 3–23, 102.

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"from the usages established between civilized nations, from the laws of humanity, and the requirements of the public conscience".[117] The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 specifically reference "laws of humanity",[118] while the preamble to Additional Protocol II asserts that "the human person remains under the protection of the principles of humanity and the dictates of the public conscience".[119] Several other treaties also use variants of the Martens Clause.[120]

Considerations of humanity in IHL motivate well-defined IHL principles such as distinction, proportionality and the prevention of unnecessary suffering. Those principles and other more specific protections describe how to avert many dehumanizing harms that conflict has thrown up – aligning with the first two elements in each of Figures 1 and 2. For example, the rules on treatment of prisoners of war address the dignity and respect due to the physical human being as well as the prisoner of war as a person with family ties.[121]

But the overarching references to humanity transcend those rules and make sure of the third aspect shown in Figure 1: reflecting the underlying spirit of the law, they affirm recognition of the human by default, closing off any loopholes for those who might wish to follow only its letter. This paper has already discussed how military training constructs a dehumanized enemy – but this does not fundamentally alter the humanity of the people fighting, or absolve individual fighters "from making … an assessment [of military necessity and humanity]" when they have to decide on the kind and degree of force to be used.[122]

117 Rupert Ticehurst, "The Martens Clause and the Laws of Armed Conflict", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 37, No. 317, 30 April 1997, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/article/other/57jnhy.htm.

118 Geneva Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field of 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 31 (entered into force 21 October 1950), Art. 63; Geneva Convention (II) for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea of 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 85 (entered into force 21 October 1950), Art. 62; Geneva Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 135 (entered into force 21 October 1950), Art. 142; Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 287 (entered into force 21 October 1950), Art. 158. All four Geneva Conventions are available at: www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions.

119 Protocol Additional (II) to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts, 1125 UNTS 609, 8 June 1977 (entered into force 7 December 1978), preambular para. 4, available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/apii-1977.

120 Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects, 1342 UNTS 137, 10 October 1980 (entered into force 2 December 1983), Preamble, available at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1983/12/19831202%2001-19%20AM/XXVI-2-revised.pdf; Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction, 2056 UNTS 211, 18 September 1997 (entered into force 1 March 1999), Preamble, available at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1997/09/19970918%2007-53%20AM/Ch_XXVI_05p.pdf; Cluster Munitions Convention, 2688 UNTS 39, 30 May 2008 (entered into force 1 August 2010), Preamble, available at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/CTC/26-6.pdf.

121 Among many other specific protections; see Geneva Convention III.

122 Nils Melzer, "Keeping the Balance between Military Necessity and Humanity: A Response to Four Critiques of the ICRC's Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities",

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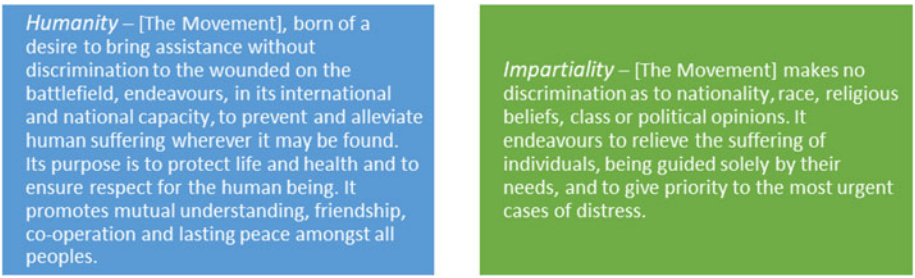


Figure 6. The Fundamental Principles of humanity and impartiality. Source: ICRC, "The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement", 1986, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/red-cross-crescent-movement/fundamental-principles-movement-1986-10-31.htm.

While some have disputed the existence or emergence of a "principle of humanity" within IHL,[123] it is alive and well throughout the project, delimiting action in conflict and giving the compass direction in case of doubt to counter dehumanization in war.

The Fundamental Principles

Humanity is at the core of the Movement's Fundamental Principles,[124] spurring action to realize the idea of intrinsically valuable, unique and formally recognized human beings. Closely linked[125] is **impartiality**, reinforcing that only suffering and need can possibly justify treating a person or group differently from any other. These two Fundamental Principles are given in Figure 6. From them, humane treatment will result – necessarily the opposite of dehumanization. While my focus will continue to be on conflict and thus on the ICRC's work under these principles, the discussion will briefly widen with respect to other Movement components.[126]

The ICRC

The ICRC, with its conflict-oriented mandate and mission, enacts the principle of humanity in particular ways to counter dehumanization. First, the ICRC is an independent observer for the application of IHL, helping weapons bearers to

International Law and Politics, Vol. 42, 2010, pp 908–909, available at: https://nyujilp.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/42.3-Melzer.pdf.

123 Kjetil Mujezinović Larsen, Camilla Guldahl Cooper and Gro Nystuen, "Introduction by the Editors: Is there a 'Principle of Humanity' in International Humanitarian Law?", in Kjetil Mujezinović Larsen, Camilla Guldahl Cooper and Gro Nystuen (eds), *Searching for a "Principle of Humanity" in International Humanitarian Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 1.

124 "[H]umanity, has a special place because it is the expression of the profound motivation of the Red Cross, from which all the other principles are derived." J. Pictet, above note 7, p. 135.

125 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

126 The obvious opportunities for other humanitarian actors are not the focus here.

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understand it and checking whether it is being applied to every person who falls under its protections.

In case of violations, the ICRC approaches the authorities, who acted to establish the rules and are ultimately responsible for their enforcement, including accountability. Violations might be the result of an oversight, but if authorities have been tacitly complicit, the knowledge that someone is watching is hoped to induce better behaviour in future. Hardest to address, of course, are deliberate violations – this makes it all the more important to counter overtly dehumanizing tendencies early, or to make sure they don't go too far, for example by encouraging military training scenarios that also instil a radical change of mindset if an enemy is suddenly wounded or surrenders.

In its protection and assistance activities, the ICRC daily affirms humanity, treating individuals as whole people not defined by any one aspect of their complex identity.[127] The ICRC's core areas of work align with the first two elements of Figure 1, countering the corresponding violations shown in Figure 2. To name just a few, war surgeons and emergency field hospitals treat human bodies wounded in fighting; delegates visit prisoners of war, guarding against ill-treatment and arguing for dignity in daily life; and the Central Tracing Agency keeps family ties alive across front lines, guarding against people going missing or having their names lost in death.

Aligning with the third element of Figure 1, the ICRC has long seen the increasingly administrative aspect of humanity and has responded accordingly. Red Cross Messages can exchange identity documents alongside family news. The ICRC can also issue emergency travel documents for certain vulnerable people in very specific circumstances – for example, to help a refugee child return to her family – where the person can't otherwise prove her identity for travel. But throughout, nobody seeking the ICRC's help need prove their identity beyond that of a human being in need.

Finally, based on what it sees, the ICRC has encouraged and continues to encourage acts that go beyond the law if they will forestall (further) suffering and dehumanization. So it was with better protections for civilians after World War II; today the ICRC is still anticipating developments in conflict and pushing for regulations, for example on the development and use of autonomous weapons,[128] or new laws, like the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, that should safeguard humanity in the future.

127 Unless focusing on that aspect could help, e.g. by paying special attention to children or ensuring that prisoners of war are recognized as such.

128 ICRC, "ICRC Position on Autonomous Weapon Systems", 12 May 2021, available at: www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-position-autonomous-weapon-systems. Several characteristics of autonomous weapon systems are already or potentially dehumanizing, including (disproportionate) civilian casualties, abstraction of human targets, and algorithms, not people, making life-and-death decisions. Richard Jordan, "Lessons from Game Theory about Humanizing Next-Generation Weapons", *Penn State Journal of Law and International Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2020, available at: https://elibrary.law.psu.edu/jlia/vol7/iss3/1.

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Efforts elsewhere in the Movement

National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) also play an important role in upholding humanity in conflict, especially when the violence is at their front door[129] but even if it only seems hypothetical.[130] Moreover, rooted in their local communities, National Societies – and their coordinating body, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) – also have the opportunity to use the principles of humanity and impartiality against insidious dehumanization that can occur "in the everyday structures of social, political and economic marginalization".[131] This recalls Figure 3 as well as Figure 4, with labour and gender as possible drivers of dehumanization.

Slavery is the quintessential example of dehumanization by treating people as economic commodities. It has been considered a grave offence for a century, though modern variants do exist, including human trafficking. In response, several National Societies, with support from the IFRC, have made it a priority to assist and support human beings who have been treated as goods.[132]

Women and girls in many cultures and across millennia have been dehumanized in various ways, including being seen as underdeveloped or inherently imperfect human beings,[133] treated as sexual objects, and/or commodified more or less overtly[134] including through arranged marriages, dowry or bride price, and by undervaluing the "labour of caring" in the home. Men who associate women with animals or objects are more likely to sexually harass and commit violence against women.[135] Some National Societies have

129 Founded as neutral relief actors in wartime, National Society staff and volunteers still sometimes pay the ultimate price: see International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), "Five IFRC Network Members Killed. Civilians and Healthcare Workers must Be Respected and Protected", 11 October 2023, available at: www.ifrc.org/press-release/five-ifrc-network-members-killed-civilians-and-healthcare-workers-must-be-respected.

130 See e.g. 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, "Bringing IHL Home: A Road Map for Better National Implementation of International Humanitarian Law", Res. 33IC/19/R1, 2019, available at: https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2019/12/33IC-R1-Bringing-IHL-home_CLEAN_ADOPTED_FINAL-171219.pdf.

131 S. Oliver, above note 15, pp. 86, 87. Per Haslam, "dehumanization becomes an everyday social phenomenon, rooted in ordinary social–cognitive processes": Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An Integrative Review", *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2006, p. 252.

132 IFRC and European Red Cross Action for Trafficked Persons Network, *Action to Assist and Protect Trafficked Persons*, 2017, noting definitions on p. 7, available at: https://pgi.ifrc.org/resources/guidance-european-red-cross-national-societies-assistance-and-protection-victims-human.

133 See e.g. a seventh-century BCE poetic taxonomy of women's mainly animal origins: Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Females of the Species: Semonides on Women*, Gerald Duckworth & Co., London, 1975, pp. 35–54. Discussing Aristotle and then Aquinas's (somewhat tempered) perspective, see Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution: 750 BC–AD 1250*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, pp. 385–386. Think also, including recently, of female infanticide and sex-selective abortions.

134 ICRC, *"My Father and Cows Will Go to Court, Not Me": Male Perceptions of Sexual Violence in South Sudan and the Central African Republic*, Geneva, 2022, p. 24, available at: https://shop.icrc.org/male-perceptions-of-sexual-violence-in-south-sudan-and-the-central-african-republic-pdf-en.html.

135 Laurie A. Rudman and Kris Mescher, "Of Animals and Objects: Men's Implicit Dehumanization of Women and Likelihood of Sexual Aggression", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 38, No. 6, 2012.

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made countering such violence in their communities a priority and are responding to it in various ways.[136]

Sexual and gender minorities face discrimination and have even been targeted for extermination.[137] Many face barriers to self-actualization, for example through laws that forbid certain sexual acts or access to family life, in societies that consider them as aberrant or even defective human beings. Many are targets of violence. The Movement's attention to preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence also reinforces these people's humanity.[138]

People with disabilities, physical or intellectual, have been dehumanized in diverse ways, exhibited like animals in circuses, targeted for extermination by eugenicists,[139] seen as a burden on society and regularly excluded from public spaces that are not accessible. In addition to the ICRC's physical rehabilitation centres for people disabled through conflict, the Movement has called its components to action in this area, recognizing the potential affront to human dignity.[140]

Last but certainly not least, systemic racism pervades history and society today, even if it is not called by that name. Being foreign,[141] coming from a different religious community[142] or having a certain arbitrarily defined appearance[143] have all contributed to some degree of dehumanization that millions have to live with on a daily basis – for example, in simply trying to stay healthy.[144] Migrants, including refugees, may be blamed for systemic local

136 Red Cross EU Office, "It's Time to End Violence against Women and Girls", 25 November 2020, available at: https://redcross.eu/latest-news/it-s-time-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls; ICRC, above note 134, pp. 8, 9, 14, 29, 37. See also ICRC, *Domestic Implementation of International Humanitarian Law Prohibiting Sexual Violence: A Checklist for States and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, Geneva, 2020, available at: www.icrc.org/en/document/checklist-domestic-implementation-international-humanitarian-law-prohibiting-sexual.

137 Officially, as under the Nazi regime, but also by private citizens: Mead Gruver, "Matthew Shepard's Murder Still Haunts Wyoming after 20 Years", *AP News*, 13 October 2018, available at: https://apnews.com/article/10235168c63041a0909ae6c0303cece7.

138 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, "Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Joint Action on Prevention and Response", Res. 32IC/15/R3, 2015, available at: https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2015/04/32IC-AR-on-Sexual-and-gender-based-violence_EN.pdf. See also Jihane Latrous and May Maloney, "Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence – the Challenges of a Global Pandemic", *Red Cross and Red Crescent Statutory Meetings Blog*, December 2020, available at: https://rcrcconference.org/blog/addressing-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-the-challenges-of-a-global-pandemic/.

139 Robert A. Wilson, "Dehumanization, Disability, and Eugenics", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, p. 178.

140 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, "Promoting Disability Inclusion in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement", Res. CD/13/R9, November 2013, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/red-cross-crescent-movement/council-delegates-2013/cod13-r9--people-with-disabilities-adopted-eng.pdf.

141 Malcolm Heath, "Aristotle on Natural Slavery", *Phronesis: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2008, p. 245; Siep Stuurman, "Dehumanization before the Columbian Exchange", in M. Kronfeldner (ed.), above note 2, pp. 43–44.

142 S. Stuurman, above note 141, p. 46.

143 For example, recent controversies over policing and custody practices in the United States and Australia have raised the question of whether the lives of people of colour or Aboriginal people are implicitly less valued.

144 See e.g. Canadian Nurses Association, "Racism in Health Care", 2024, available at: www.cna-aiic.ca/en/policy-advocacy/advocacy-priorities/racism-in-health-care.

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problems.[145] National Societies and the IFRC have deployed the principle of humanity on behalf of migrants, from actions in specific countries[146] to a coordinated Movement response.[147] "Illegal" migrants are not a "flood" or a "wave" – they are human beings.

Does dehumanization challenge the Fundamental Principles?

Dehumanization, so pervasive for so long, doesn't undermine humanity and impartiality as much as reinforce the need for them. Indeed, these principles challenge dehumanization, through law and the practice of humanitarian actors like the ICRC and the wider Movement.

That is not to say that it's easy. Working on behalf of people who others see as less than human, the ICRC may have to try harder and be more creative to get those people the care and attention they deserve. The initial objective may be something smaller and more attainable, such as issuing a single emergency travel document, restoring the mortal remains of a single person to her family or explaining patiently again to a distraught survivor why the ICRC also needs to keep talking with the authorities who destroyed his home. But the ICRC's job is precisely to work tirelessly for those people's humanity. Even if dehumanization temporarily limits what we are able to achieve, it doesn't censor what we say: on the contrary, some of the most powerful arguments are those that invoke a shared humanity and the possibility of relating to another human being's experience.

Yet dehumanization is a risk for humanitarians, too. Despite our best intentions, humanitarians may inadvertently act in ways that risk dehumanizing the very people whose suffering concerns us most. We all come from and work in societies with varying forms and degrees of insidious racism and sexism,[148] and it is easier to engage with the people already in power than to find, let alone listen to, the quieter voice in a community.[149]

145 See e.g. "South African Xenophobes Run Amok", *The Economist*, 9 June 2022, available at: www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/06/09/south-african-xenophobes-run-amok.

146 South African Red Cross Society, "Red Cross Aids Victims of Xenophobia", 23 April 2015, available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/south-africa/red-cross-aids-victims-xenophobia; IFRC, "South Africa IFRC Country Office Appeal Number MAA63001", 2021, available at: www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/South_Africa_Plan_2021.pdf.

147 The IFRC has the Movement lead on migration: see IFRC, "Migration and Displacement", available at: www.ifrc.org/our-work/disasters-climate-and-crises/migration-and-displacement; IFRC, "Central Mediterranean Population Movement: Humanitarian Service Point at Sea", available at: www.ifrc.org/emergency/central-mediterranean-population-movement-humanitarian-service-point-sea. Calls and messages through the ICRC-coordinated global Family Links Network are among the most common services, helping people to keep their family identity – see the Restoring Family Links website, available at: https://familylinks.icrc.org/.

148 Ariana Lopes Morey, "What Does 'Back To Basics' Mean for Gender and the Fundamental Principles?", *Humanitarian Law and Policy Blog*, 1 September 2022, available at: https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2022/09/01/gender-fundamental-principles/.

149 As can be done in many ways that contribute to community-based protection. ICRC, *Community-Based Protection: A Guide for National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*, Geneva, 2022, available at: www.

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To prevent themselves from being overwhelmed by the depth and scale of suffering, or because security restricts access, humanitarians may also be psychologically or physically distanced from the people they serve. Round-number casualty figures may be more compelling when drawing attention to a crisis, and it is common to label people with administrative codes (even if the goal is to protect personal data in the digital age) or certain words: "female-headed household", "victim".[150]

Indeed, Esmeir argues that the very project of humanitarian action risks perpetuating dehumanization. In a discussion about human rights recognition that could apply equally to IHL, especially if seen as directed more to the "people of the [global] south", she notes that "[a] person [subject of rights] is … at once a human and a yet-to-be human, a member of universal humankind and its dehumanized figure".[151]

Fassin raises further red flags. One danger is that of humanitarian response being further politicized and even co-opted, excising the humanity that must be at its core: witness the dangerous ambiguity of armed forces with "humanitarian" mandates, and the justification of decisions to limit or halt government support for basic needs on "humanitarian" grounds.[152] Even closer to the present topic, Fassin presents humanitarian action as a "politics of life" involving power differentials and value judgements in the saving of lives – between humanitarians and "beneficiaries" and between international and local humanitarian workers – as well as the curation of life stories whose plight will most compellingly rouse public support for the action.[153]

In addition to the real risk of insidious dehumanization, the spectre of dehumanization in humanitarian action lurks in the reduction of any person to only one part of their being or experience. It thus challenges humanitarians daily to review our actions, practicing the principle of humanity as far as possible, in all its facets, with each person we encounter.

We can do this in several ways (recall the various efforts, by all Movement components, discussed above), first by staunchly reaffirming that humanity can ever truly be taken away. Parts or all of it may be rejected or denied by some people, but each person remains human, always. The Fundamental Principle reasserts this on behalf of us all, and again, it enjoins us to see the entirety of someone's humanity: even if the work calls us to focus on one or another facet, we must

icrc.org/en/publication/4599-community-based-protection-guide-national-red-cross-and-red-crescent-societies.

150 "By wrongly portraying targets of dehumanization as merely passive victims, scholars can contribute to a culture of memory and to ways of telling the history of inhumanity that reiterates what it meant to study in an objective manner, contributing to cycles of metadehumanization and selfdehumanization." M. Kronfeldner, above note 28, p. 13.

151 Samera Esmeir, "On Making Dehumanization Possible", *PMLA*, Vol. 121, No. 5, 2006, p. 1546.

152 Referencing the 1999 NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo and the French government's closure of the Sangatte reception centre for migrants in Calais. Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2012, pp. 134, 223.

153 D. Fassin, above note 152, p. 226 and more generally Ch. 9, "Hierarchies of Humanity". Another interesting point is Fassin's discussion of a "shift in legitimacy from social life to biological life" (pp. 15, 142) that again risks diminishing one aspect of humanity per Figure 1, though in a way that the ICRC rarely sees.

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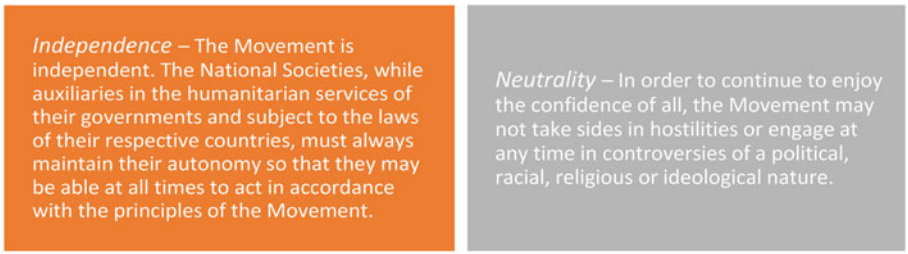


Figure 7. The Fundamental Principles of independence and neutrality. Source: ICRC, "The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement", 1986, available at: www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/red-cross-crescent-movement/fundamental-principles-movement-1986-10-31.htm.

constantly remind ourselves of the whole person behind that action – behind the label, number or screen.

We must also be attentive to the power we have when people trust us with their names, their stories, or even pieces of themselves. Power and value differentials will never disappear entirely from human interactions, so humanitarians must be vigilant, taking active steps to limit them and keep dehumanization from creeping in.[154]

Humanitarian have always had to navigate external politics. Bolstering the fundamental principles of humanity and impartiality, those of independence and neutrality (see Figure 7) help maintain focus on the lives and well-being of people under threat.[155] Again, this is not easy, and the ethically fraught decisions that humanitarians must make might not always be the right ones in retrospect, but it helps to have such guiding principles. The ICRC's confidential approach also acts to shield people from becoming political bargaining chips in public discourse.

Ultimately, we humanitarians are there and must remain there for the humans, in all their frequently frustrating complexity.

154 While there is still a long way to go, improved working conditions and general treatment of local humanitarian workers and actively listening to and involving people in responses to their needs is a start. Esmeir proposes "the forging of concrete alliances with human beings who await not our recognition but our *participation* in their struggles": S. Esmeir, above note 151, p. 1545 (emphasis added). See also e.g. John Bryant, "Digital Tools Deepen the Power Imbalance in Aid. Here's How to Fix That", *The New Humanitarian*, 4 July 2022, available at: www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/07/04/Digital-tech-tools-deepen-the-power-imbalance-in-aid; ICRC, *Inclusive Programming Policy*, 2022, available at: https://library.icrc.org/library/docs/DOC/icrc-4646-002.pdf; ICRC, *Accountability to Affected People Institutional Framework*, 2020, available at: www.icrc.org/en/publication/accountability-affected-people-institutional-framework. While this paper focuses on authorities' responsibility in promoting or combating dehumanization, I would also hope that the discussion will inspire humanitarian actors, especially but not only the Movement, to reflect on how their practices may still contribute to dehumanization, to change those practices, and to redouble efforts that promote humanity. This could eventually include using tactics identified through current and future research that might be effective against particular subcategories of dehumanization – for example, animal- as compared to object-focused.

155 On the principle of neutrality, much criticized recently in the ICRC's work, see e.g. ICRC, "Why Does the International Committee of the Red Cross Stay Neutral in Conflict Zones?", 2023, available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPEWQEAlSZ8.

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Conclusion

Dehumanization is ugly and easily normalized "in the undramatic episodes of the day-to-day".[156] Gender and economic drivers of dehumanization, often at least tacitly supported by people in power and further influenced by race, are alive, well, and deeply intertwined.

The work of countering dehumanization has not got easier since the start of the twenty-first century. Outside of but also during crises, people often have no choice but to "pay" for life's essentials with very personal information.[157] Meanwhile, digital platforms magnify disinformation and hate speech to pandemic proportions[158] even as they cloud authorities' responsibility; opaque and emotionally inert algorithms might decide who lives and dies. If dehumanization boils over into conflict, horrific suffering can echo through the generations: look no further than Israel and Palestine.

Yet all is not lost. Even if dehumanization sits within an evolved, innate mechanism in a person's brain, it does not inevitably break out into action. It is shaped by history, culture, social norms and psychology, making it changeable over time and in different locations.[159] People are resilient: as individuals and communities we can learn, reconcile and begin to heal, as did Germany after the Holocaust or South Africa after Apartheid. After a decade of conflict that has had at least its share of dehumanizing elements, the optimism of Syrian youth is striking, and heartening.[160] And we can all avert harm in the first place, if given the chance and encouraged by authority figures to take it.

Today's challenges don't mean that the principle of humanity is outdated or ineffective: on the contrary. Bolstered by impartiality, independence and neutrality, humanity guides the ICRC, the rest of the Movement, and other humanitarians in contesting and refuting dehumanization on many fronts. As always, the main responsibility lies with those in power – States, and armed actors in situations of conflict and violence – to "respect and ensure respect for" the international laws and standards they themselves have set. Authorities' practice has already improved how human beings treat each other. Reinforcing that practice can keep dehumanization at bay: this is the true power of humanity.

156 S. Oliver, above note 15, p. 88.

157 International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, "Humanitarian Crises, Digital Dilemmas", 5 August 2021, available at: www.icrc.org/en/resource/digital-dilemmas-experience.

158 Dehumanization itself has become lucrative: see Global Disinformation Index, "Tracking US$235 Million in Ads on Disinformation Domains", 20 August 2019, available at: www.disinformationindex.org/blog/2019-8-20-tracking-us235-million-in-ads-on-disinformation-domains/.

159 M. Kronfeldner, above note 28, p. 13.

160 ICRC, *A Decade of Loss: Syria's Youth after Ten Years of Crisis*, Geneva, 2021, p. 21, available at: www.icrc.org/en/download/file/157792/icrc_report-syria_a_decade_of_loss_en.pdf.

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