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IRRC

EDITORIAL

UPHOLDING HUMANITY IN WAR

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In December 2024, when the *Review* issued its call for papers under the title "Upholding Humanity in War", it essentially posed a question that refuses to age: what does it take to keep humanity alive in today's conflicts? This issue of the *Review* comprises contributions from legal scholars, military practitioners, diplomats, civil society actors and colleagues from around the world. Together, they provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of international humanitarian law (IHL) – what is holding, what is fraying and where the most urgent academic and political work is needed.

The issue is organized around the seven workstreams of the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law (Global IHL Initiative), each addressing distinct yet deeply interconnected dimensions of the rules of war. Substantial contributions were received in areas that are also among the most relevant on today's battlefields, such as the protection of critical infrastructure delivering essential services to civilians, the protection of hospitals, the regulation of cyber and ICT operations, and the law of naval warfare. All these topics reflect rules which trigger very lively debates on both how they should be interpreted and how they have been applied in recent conflicts.

Recent attacks against critical civilian infrastructure and hospitals, the increased use of new technologies in targeting operations and the growing impact of naval warfare all demonstrate how significant these rules are – but that significance is easily undermined when the rules are stripped of their protective purpose,

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or simply disregarded. This is why it is essential to continue working on maintaining domestic structures and institutions that can withstand the pressures of armed conflict and ensure that IHL is respected in all circumstances. Preventing violations of IHL is not only about training armed forces but is also about building identities and cultures that value humanity – even the humanity of one's enemy. Strong domestic mechanisms such as national IHL committees play a central role in this regard, coordinating and advising States on their IHL obligations. Overall, the Global IHL Initiative also adds a strong call: every war must be fought with a plan to go back to peace. This issue of the *Review* therefore builds on the "IHL and Peace" workstream and explores how the way in which a war is fought influences whether and how it can end.

Reading across all seven workstreams, what strikes me most is not disagreement – though there is serious and productive debate here – but vitality. IHL is alive. It is used every day by armed forces planning and carrying out military operations, by practitioners working on its domestic application, by scholars debating the meaning of certain rules and arguing on the legality of real-life operations. Many of these individuals and institutions continue to look up to this body of law as providing both the legal and the moral limits of what is right and what is wrong in war.

These reflections emerge at a time of renewed multilateral engagement with IHL. Through the Global IHL Initiative, more than 100 countries have now come together to reaffirm the continued relevance of the rules of war. Regional consultations and thematic discussions have helped to identify persistent gaps in compliance and practical ways to strengthen implementation. The seven workstreams have produced outcome documents that provide guidance on how the existing rules of IHL can be implemented in a manner consistent with their protective purpose. The next step is crucial: translating this momentum into genuine behavioural change on the battlefield and making a difference for people caught up in war. We must not lose sight of what is at stake: behind every legal threshold debated in these pages are real people, civilians sheltering in damaged buildings, medical workers trying to do their jobs under fire, families waiting for news of the missing. The law exists to protect them.

Despite the renewed global engagement with IHL, you are reading this issue of the *Review* at a time when the political will to uphold IHL is under immense strain. The debates on these pages, about when a hospital loses its protected status, whether sea drones are warships or weapons, how autonomous cyber operations can be constrained within the bounds of IHL and how national systems can move towards genuine compliance, are not confined to seminar rooms. They are being played out in operational planning cells, in the decisions of commanders on active battlefields and in diplomatic forums. I have sat in rooms where these issues are debated by people who know the law and choose to set it aside.

The problem has never been the rules. The rules exist. They are clear. The Geneva Conventions, ratified by every State, remain one of the most powerful expressions of our shared commitment to limiting suffering, even in the worst human circumstances. The question before us is thus not whether the law is adequate, but whether political leaders are willing to reaffirm and uphold it.

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I am grateful to the authors, reviewers and interviewees who have contributed their expertise and trust to this project, and to the Editorial Team of the *Review* for their vital assistance in shaping it. I am also grateful to you, the reader, for engaging seriously with these issues.

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