



The NSAG handbook: helping non-State armed groups reduce civilian harm during urban warfare

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Today, more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas. As the number of people living in cities increases, so does the prevalence of urban warfare, which inevitably entails devastating humanitarian consequences for civilians.

In this post, ICRC Adviser Ruben Stewart and ICRC Associate Celia Edeline share some of the key findings of a new report they will launch on the 4th of April 2023, 'Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Handbook for Armed Groups', as part of the organization's broader efforts to reduce the civilian suffering caused by hostilities occurring in urban environments.

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Fighting in urban areas is considered the most dangerous form of warfare; the concentration of the population, the proximity of intense fighting to civilians and the interdependency of essential services all exacerbate the range and scale of civilian harm that can occur during conflict.

Such harm includes not only a higher number of civilian deaths, injuries and psychological trauma, but also lasting damage to critical infrastructure (such as power plants, water treatment plants and health care facilities) which disrupts the provision of essential services. Urban warfare also results in the destruction of civilian homes, leaving people exposed to the elements and acts of violence and generating large-scale displacement.

New strategies for an age-old problem

A contemporary crisis affecting more than 50 million people, the resurgence of urban conflict has prompted the ICRC to think of new strategies to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare on civilians. Drawing upon its *past experiences during urban warfare*, the organization embraced an integrated approach by combining prevention, protection and assistance activities. This directly translates into the ICRC's efforts to promote a common and protective understanding of international humanitarian law (IHL), respond to the needs of the affected population through a multidisciplinary approach, and influence the behavior of State armed forces and non-State armed groups (NSAGs) [1].

Echoing this, in 2019 the ICRC initiated a project on urban warfare with the intention of examining existing military practices, first by focusing on State armed forces and with plans to turn attention to NSAGs at a later stage. This project led to the release of '*Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Commander's Handbook*'. Intended for officers in command and for staff at brigade and battalion level of State armed forces likely to be involved in urban warfare, this handbook assembles recommendations around urban warfare doctrine and training, planning of urban operations, means and methods in the conduct of operations and partnered operations.

If State armed forces tend to avoid combat operations in urban environments, NSAGs, on the other hand, can sometimes choose to engage in cities for strategic, tactical and logistical reasons. Cities have a strategic importance in terms of political, economic or military value. The built-up environment allows fighters to conceal their movements and evade the intelligence gathering systems of their opponents, primarily through their proximity with the civilian population and objects. As NSAGs generally lack the structure and support functions of conventional armed forces, urban areas provide them with recruits, funding, services and supplies.

The range of NSAG activities – which vary from large-scale operations such as besieging or capturing a city to small-scale attacks on security forces and civilians – illustrate the diversity of the means and methods they use during urban warfare. While NSAGs generally employ irregular methods of warfare, with small and dispersed groups undertaking attacks, ambushes and raids, they can also conduct conventional operations, mainly to seize and hold urban areas, sometimes shifting between both methods as the situation evolves.

ICRC engagement with NSAGs

The pervasive presence of NSAGs in urban warfare and the resulting humanitarian consequences has compelled the ICRC to actively engage with them. Such engagement is foreseen in *Common Article 3* of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which explicitly mentions that '[a]n impartial humanitarian body, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, may offer its services to the Parties to the conflict', including NSAGs. This enables the ICRC to engage with NSAGs to, on one hand, provide assistance and protection to affected populations and, on the other hand, promote and strengthen the respect of IHL and other relevant bodies of law also applicable to NSAGs.

To provide assistance and protection to the affected population, the ICRC continuously seeks access to territories in which NSAGs operate or exercise control. This access is essential to have a good grasp of the context, needs and capabilities of the affected, thus ensuring the implementation of a meaningful humanitarian response. However, this can only be achieved if the fighters understand and accept the ICRC as an independent, neutral and impartial organization.

Responding to urban warfare

Through the dissemination of IHL and the use of *different sources of influence*, the organization aims to establish a common understanding of the standards that should regulate the conduct of NSAGs in order to reduce the human cost of warfare. Grounded in an acknowledgment of the importance of non-State armed groups in urban warfare, the ICRC's urban warfare project focused on enhancing understanding of NSAG patterns and practices during urban operations, the challenges they face, and examining the factors that influence NSAG behavior in protecting civilians by looking at their interpretation of IHL and other frames of reference. The project also sought to collate examples of the means and methods that NSAGs employed to prevent or minimize civilian harm and reinforce the dialogue with them to achieve better respect for IHL and reduce civilian suffering.

The first stage of this project was an extensive literature review, which analyzed over 270 articles and books through the lens of NSAG doctrine, training, planning and conduct of operations. It captured the experiences of more than 70 NSAGs, which was then complemented by a series of bilateral consultations with a variety of NSAG commanders and fighters, including foreign fighters. The literature review and consultations found that NSAGs can and do adopt good practices to reduce civilian harm and comply with IHL.

In fact, there are many reasons, in addition to the principle of precautions in attack laid out in *Rule 15 of customary international humanitarian law*, for an armed group to avoid hurting civilians during its operations. Some NSAGs may adhere to certain moral and ethical codes that prohibit the harming of innocent civilians, whether it be for religious, cultural or ideological principles. Fighters may also fear the legal consequences for harming civilians, such as prosecution by national or international courts, in addition to mechanisms of investigation and sanctions within the armed group. Protecting civilians can generate respect and support from the group's own fighters, the local populations and all the other actors present in the area, which can generate more legitimacy to the group and highlight the professionalism some of them crave. Finally, indiscriminate attacks against civilians or non-military objectives represent a waste of resources.

Through the numerous examples the project gathered, the review and consultations highlighted the fact that the ability to reduce civilian harm is not solely based on the capacity of the armed group, which is often used as an excuse, but largely on the intent of the NSAGs and their commander. For example, NSAGs are often in a better position to protect civilians because they possess a deep understanding of the human environment amongst which they operate, as opposed to State armed forces, who can be isolated from and have little to no information on the civilians surrounding them.

A handbook for armed groups

The good practices that reduced civilian harm identified in the literature review, consultations and further research were finally compiled into the handbook for armed groups on urban warfare. This handbook is divided into four main sections, on command, planning, conduct and training, and equipment, covering a large range of topics such as command responsibilities, the planning of operations and attacks, indirect effects, warnings and

evacuations, treatment of civilians and weapon training, to name just a few. Each chapter contains a set of recommendations based on the good practices that reduce civilian harm identified throughout the urban warfare project.

This handbook, combined with the pertinent dialogue and activities (disseminations, trainings, courses and so on) will assist NSAGs in their efforts to respect IHL and reduce civilian harm.

[1] Some of the ICRC's activities includes studies on *Explosive Remnants of War*, on *Explosive Weapons with Wide Area Effects in Populated Areas*, *Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict*, or on the need to *Secure Water and Sanitation in protracted crises*.

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