



The ICRC's approach to peace: Interview with Eva Svoboda

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Discussions on “peace” and humanitarian action are not new to the humanitarian sector. Why is the ICRC reflecting more deliberately at this point in time on how its work may contribute to an environment conducive to peace?

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Put simply, we see geopolitical shifts and dynamics that signal increased global tensions – and we see the number of armed conflicts trending upward,¹ with these conflicts becoming more prolonged and more fragmented, causing untold devastation and extreme suffering. In many cases, despite the best efforts of States, UN or private mediation, there is limited progress on finding a sustainable resolution. In others, there seems to be an absence of political will even to try and resolve long-running disputes. All the while, the pressure on humanitarians to manage the impacts of these conflicts – many of them long-term – continues to grow. To be clear, humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political solutions. The work of humanitarian organizations and humanitarian issues should never be instrumentalized or politicized by parties to conflict, including during peace negotiations. But we do believe that progress on humanitarian issues can sometimes represent one step on the road to peace, and that to ignore humanitarian issues can make peace more difficult to achieve. It's therefore an important moment to take stock of how exactly we, as the ICRC, can contribute to an environment more conducive to peace, and what we can – or cannot – offer as part of our purely humanitarian mission.

The overarching reason why we firmly believe it is relevant to consider how our work as humanitarians intersects with peace is our commitment to humanity: the ICRC's core desire, the reason we exist, is to alleviate suffering and promote human dignity in times of armed conflict and other situations of violence. The most effective way to address the suffering that armed conflict inflicts on people is to prevent or end conflicts themselves. This is the role of States and peacebuilding organizations. That said, while this may not mean that the ICRC does or will ever take peacebuilding as an operational objective, we have a duty to understand the direct and indirect impacts of our work, and to ensure that these are more likely to support peace than prolong war.

The ICRC's new Institutional Strategy 2024–2027 acknowledges that, as a humanitarian organization which witnesses the destruction and suffering caused by conflict, the ICRC has a responsibility to speak up for peace and remind all of us that war is not inevitable.² The Strategy reaffirms the links between international humanitarian law [IHL], humanitarian principles and peace, and the ability of the ICRC to offer its services as a neutral intermediary in order to promote humanitarian aspects of conflict prevention and resolution.³ Here we need to make an important caveat – even with the acknowledgement that the ICRC can contribute to creating the conditions for peace, call for political solutions and speak up for peace, this does not imply that the ICRC will weigh in on the political dimensions of specific conflicts or peace processes. Our neutrality, which

1 ICRC, *How is the Term "Armed Conflict" Defined in International Humanitarian Law?*, Geneva, 2024, available at: www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-opinion-paper-how-term-armed-conflict-defined-international-humanitarian-law (all internet references were accessed in January 2025).

2 ICRC, *Strategy 2024–2027*, Geneva, November 2023, p. 3, available at: <https://shop.icrc.org/icrc-strategy-2024-2027-en-pdf.html>.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

is what enables our contributions, fixes clear limits;⁴ it is not contradictory to call for peace as a neutral humanitarian actor, but taking sides, speaking to *how* political solutions can be achieved in specific contexts, or going beyond proposals of a humanitarian nature prior to or in the context of peace talks, would be contrary to our mission and mandate.

So what does peace mean to the ICRC?

Our focus on humanity and respect for human dignity underpins the ICRC's understanding of peace as a process which aims to promote cooperation among peoples, even while our aim remains to alleviate the suffering of those affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. It is a conception that goes beyond defining peace as “the absence of violence, absence of war”.⁵ Working in contexts which are experiencing armed conflict, transitioning out of it or seeing its re-emergence means we know well the challenges of cleanly delineating where conflict ends and peace begins.

The definition of peace adopted by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement [the Movement] – of which the ICRC, along with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [National Societies] and their International Federation, is one component – also points to this broader understanding, stating that

by its humanitarian work and the dissemination of its ideals, the Movement promotes a lasting peace, which is not simply the absence of war, but is a dynamic process of cooperation among all States and peoples, cooperation founded on respect for freedom, independence, national sovereignty, equality, human rights, as well as on a fair and equitable distribution of resources to meet the needs of peoples.⁶

How has the ICRC reflected on this historically?

The founders of the Red Cross considered that “the ultimate objective of the work they set in motion and the Convention they inspired was none other than that of universal peace”, with the idea that once people put into practice the message of humanity, the Red Cross would no longer need to exist.⁷ The two mottos of the

4 Jean Pictet, “Les principes fondamentaux de la Croix-Rouge et la paix: Signification des principes pour l'esprit de paix”, *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 66, No. 746, 1984, pp. 87–88.

5 Johan Galtung, “An Editorial”, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1964, p. 2, available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/002234336400100101>.

6 Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, 1986 (amended 1995 and 2006) (Red Cross Statutes), Preamble, available at: www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/statutes-en-a5.pdf.

7 Jean Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1979, p. 18, available at: <https://volunteeringredcross.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Fundamental-Principles-Pictet-Commentary.pdf>; J. Pictet, above note 4, p. 76.

Movement, “Per humanitatem ad pacem” [“Through humanity, towards peace”] and “Inter arma caritas” [“In war, charity”], reflect these ideals, demonstrating the consciousness that in carrying out its humanitarian mission, the ICRC can contribute to prospects for peace.⁸ Moreover, in taking actions which call attention to the horrors of war and centre on our shared humanity even during times of great polarization, the ICRC considers that it can contribute to a “spirit of peace”, or an environment more conducive to rapprochement and reconciliation.⁹

This is clearly articulated in the definition of the Fundamental Principle of humanity. The seven Fundamental Principles are the ethical and operational framework that underpins and guides the work of the Movement. Describing the principle of humanity, the Movement states:

The [Movement], born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours – in its international and national capacities – to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.¹⁰

This principle stands first out of the seven.¹¹ It is the one from which all the others derive, considered as “the expression of the profound motivation of the Red Cross”,¹² providing “its ideal, its motivation and its objective the spark which ignites the powder, the line of force for all its action”.¹³

The ICRC has long reflected on how or whether it can *concretely* contribute to efforts to build and sustain peace, while adhering to its humanitarian mandate and respecting the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Daniel Palmieri’s article in this issue of the *Review*¹⁴ is well worth a read in this regard. It lays out some of the history of the ICRC’s internal debates on the extent to which it is possible or appropriate for the organization to be involved in contributing to peace. Palmieri looks from the organization’s very founding and interactions with the pacifist movement, to the progressive development of its thinking – including through discussions within the Movement in the middle and latter decades of the twentieth century – and its operational practice as a neutral intermediary.

All this is to say that discussions on peace are not new to the ICRC, as they aren’t to the sector.

8 Red Cross Statutes, above note 6, Preamble.

9 J. Pictet, above note 4, pp. 73, 75.

10 ICRC, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, Geneva, August 2015, p. 2, available at: www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file_plus_list/4046-the_fundamental_principles_of_the_international_red_cross_and_red_crescent_movement.pdf.

11 Followed by impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality: see *ibid*.

12 J. Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles*, above note 7, p. 8.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 14. See also ICRC, *The ICRC: Its Mission and Work*, Geneva, March 2009, p. 10, available at: <https://library.icrc.org/library/docs/DOC/icrc-0963-002.pdf>.

14 Daniel Palmieri, “‘Si vis Pacem, Impera Bellum’: The ICRC, International Humanitarian Law and Peace”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 106, No. 927, 2024.

In what ways does the ICRC contribute to peace?

The ICRC has a solely humanitarian mandate, but it makes intuitive sense that in certain circumstances, its work may contribute to peace efforts – for example, through facilitating safe passage for parties to participate in peace talks, organizing releases of detainees, transmitting messages to enable a ceasefire, or facilitating dialogue on other humanitarian issues, both at a very local level and at the national, regional and global ones. And these are only the most obvious and direct examples; much could also be discussed about the possible indirect contributions to peace of more traditional humanitarian assistance when it is delivered in a conflict-sensitive way.

Beyond examples of these types of action, we have identified the need to more systematically understand how, as a responsible humanitarian organization, our work may intersect with or complement peacebuilding efforts, and where the limits may lie. To inform this, we're in the process of carrying out research that takes stock of policy developments and the impact of our own operational practice in order to shed light on how aspects of our work may contribute to building an environment conducive to peace. The primary focus is on drawing lessons from examples of effective contributions, but we also acknowledge the possibility of negative impacts of our work. And if I can make a small detour here, the question of negative impacts of humanitarian work has also been historically important in the sector, with the aim to do no harm and to avoid inadvertently fuelling conflict and war economies through humanitarian assistance.

We are aware of the challenges of concretely assessing or measuring the impacts of the ICRC's contributions to peace. Rather than attempting to lay out direct causal relationships, we are seeking to draw out lessons grounded in context-specific operational practice. While the research is still under way, we can share some initial impressions.

Our working assumption is that our work intersects with efforts to build and sustain peace in three main ways: at the community level through work contributing to social cohesion; at the dialogue level through our neutral intermediary role; and through our work to strengthen and promote respect for norms.

Can you elaborate on this?

Let me start with the ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary. There are different bases for the ICRC to offer its services as a neutral intermediary in armed conflict or other situations of violence. These include the Statutes of the Movement – which authorize the ICRC to “take any humanitarian initiative which comes within its role as a specifically neutral and independent institution and intermediary”¹⁵ – and relevant articles of the Geneva Conventions and their

15 Red Cross Statutes, above note 6, Art 5(3) (previous versions of the Statutes dating back to 1928 also recognized the ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary).

Additional Protocols.¹⁶ And where parties agree to arrangements not explicitly provided for in IHL, for example through special agreements, the ICRC can act as an intermediary so long as the arrangements are true to the spirit of IHL and humanitarian principles.

The majority of the ICRC's neutral intermediary work focuses on resolving humanitarian issues *during* armed conflict or in other situations of violence through its good offices or mediation, including in the context of peace processes. The ICRC's efforts in these roles are dependent on the agreement of the parties concerned, and are limited to facilitating the opening or resumption of negotiations, or to providing recommendations in its areas of expertise. It does not take a substantive position on the political content of negotiations.

However, the ICRC can, in exceptional circumstance and under strict conditions, also work on the prevention or settlement of armed conflict.¹⁷ Generally, it can lend its good offices to help to create a framework for dialogue between the parties in conflict or dispute. With regard to *prevention* efforts specifically, the ICRC can only lend its good offices; in relation to *settlement* of conflicts, it can either offer its good offices, or act as a mediator on strictly humanitarian issues. It can also work with National Societies of States at, or on the brink of, armed conflict to explore possible contributions of the Red Cross – as an intermediary focused on humanitarian issues, and with the agreement of the governments concerned – to preventing or settling armed conflict.¹⁸ In practice, these latter situations have rarely materialized – Palmieri's article in this issue outlines the exceptional circumstances leading to the adoption of specific resolutions covering such situations at various International Conferences of the Movement – but the possibility is there, reflecting an understanding that duty to the primary principle of humanity may, at times, require the ICRC to adapt to circumstances and take actions that, while mandated, go beyond traditional views of its role.

16 Article 9/9/9/10 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 authorizes the ICRC to undertake any humanitarian activity with the agreement of the parties to the conflict concerned. Common Article 6/6/6/7 gives examples of what the ICRC can propose to the parties to a conflict. Article 23 of Geneva Convention I, Article 14 of Geneva Convention IV and Article 60(2) of Additional Protocol I explicitly refer to the ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary (good offices). Common Article 3, covering non-international armed conflicts, requests the parties to endeavour to bring into force, by means of special agreements, all or part of the other provisions of the Conventions and enables the ICRC to offer its services to the parties to the conflict.

17 See e.g. 20th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Vienna, 1965, Res. X, which "encourages the International Committee of the Red Cross to undertake, in constant liaison with the United Nations and within the framework of its humanitarian mission, every effort likely to contribute to the prevention or settlement of possible armed conflicts, and to be associated, in agreement with the States concerned, with any appropriate measures to this end".

18 21st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Istanbul, 1969, Res. XXI: "[The Conference] recommends that in cases of armed conflicts or of situations which are a threat to peace the ICRC shall, if necessary, ask the representatives of the National Societies of the countries concerned to meet together or separately with the ICRC to study the resolution of humanitarian problems involved and in agreement with the Governments concerned to examine what contribution the Red Cross could make to preventing the outbreak of the conflict or achieving a cease-fire or cessation of hostilities."

So how do you see the neutral intermediary role contributing to an environment conducive to peace?

Before conflict erupts and after it has broken out, dialogue between parties is essential to reduce tensions, avoid miscalculations, minimize the humanitarian impacts on people, and ultimately restore peace. The ICRC can help establish or maintain lines of communication between warring parties, including where none otherwise exist, on humanitarian matters such as prisoner releases and repatriations, dignified management and return of human remains, and the missing. Along with positive humanitarian outcomes, this can make dialogue on other political issues possible. Successful humanitarian initiatives within the context of implementation of a peace agreement can also help build confidence in the agreement's overall viability, or help build confidence in the value of dialogue itself. And improving respect for human dignity by focusing on humanitarian issues can help to combat dehumanization and promote the possibility of restoring peace.

The trust that our strict adherence to the Fundamental Principle of neutrality engenders is often bolstered by the ICRC's operational work and legal expertise. This was the case in Colombia during negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP which led to the 2016 peace agreement. Along with transferring representatives of the non-State armed group to Cuba, as a third-party facilitator the ICRC was able to both foster greater understanding between the parties and help them appreciate the humanitarian impact of specific forms of violence, such as enforced disappearances, in order to ensure that impact was addressed through the peace process. It also supported the implementation of humanitarian elements of the accord, either directly or through support to entities established by the accord itself. The ICRC was able to play this role due to its long-standing and country-wide presence in Colombia – which allowed it to obtain the trust of the parties, knowledge of how the conflict was affecting communities, and direct dialogue with the armed groups – and its IHL expertise, which was highly valued.¹⁹

It's important to note that there may be cases where the ICRC is asked to play a neutral role but declines because it determines that its engagement would not produce the desired humanitarian outcomes, which is the primary consideration, or could be detrimental to its ability to continue its humanitarian operations. Further, the ICRC does not claim that actions such as detainee releases or work on the missing lead *directly* to peace – rather, the idea is that, by demonstrating concrete progress, preventing communication breakdown and facilitating dialogue, they contribute to an alleviation of tensions and to confidence-building that can lay the ground for parties to make progress on other issues, or to preserve peace when it is threatened. In our view, this work also reaffirms the humanity of the

19 For an introduction to part of the ICRC's involvement in the Colombian peace process, primarily through the promotion and interpretation of IHL with parties to the talks, see César Rojas-Orozco, "The Role of International Humanitarian Law in the Search for Peace: Lessons from Colombia", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 102, No. 914, 2021.

“other” in a conflict, which is itself a contribution to the “spirit” of peace as already mentioned.

You also referred to contributing to social cohesion between communities...

The ICRC integrates a conflict sensitivity lens into its operations – this is a minimum requirement to avoid its programming contributing to conflict dynamics. Our commitment to analyzing and understanding power dynamics, conflict drivers and impacts on people and systems means we are also able to design programmes in a way that implicitly or explicitly fosters social cohesion. In this case, we are speaking of programmes undertaken in places where divisions exist at the community level, whether mirroring larger conflict dynamics or focused on other issues, but exacerbated by the impacts of conflict on daily life – for example, where a local community may become host to a camp for internally displaced persons, or scarce natural resources lead to tensions between communities. In these cases, community-based programmes may be designed to focus on practical shared objectives, such as better shared resource management, or establishing mechanisms for dialogue. The ICRC's ability to act as a neutral intermediary between communities, which presupposes a certain level of trust, is essential to such work.

Working in this way at the local level, including with National Societies, can help reduce tensions and increase the possibility of rapprochement among communities. The idea is that strengthening conditions conducive to dialogue is a factor in the consolidation of peace, and that in certain cases, the ICRC is well placed to carry out such work.

This is especially the case in situations of transition, where unresolved issues between communities mean that the resort to violence, or even conflict re-emerging, is a real possibility. The ICRC's work in post-conflict Northern Ireland provides an interesting example. The 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement is considered a landmark success in bringing the conflict in Northern Ireland to an end, and yet, in such situations, even with the signing of a formal peace agreement, comprehensive peace takes longer to build, and the legacy of conflict – including socioeconomic deprivation or the resort to political violence – continues to impact communities. In this context, the ICRC has supported community-based protection and mediation work on humanitarian issues, complementing this by engaging with authorities to ensure that issues of humanitarian concern are addressed while also engaging with armed groups to prevent violence. Several relevant stakeholders in the context consider that this work has had clear humanitarian value, particularly in reducing the recourse to violence, but also in making a positive contribution to embedding peace.

This was principally achieved in two ways. The first was by helping community organizations to use an alternate, purely humanitarian framing to address difficult issues – one that put the focus on the suffering that the violence created for individuals and communities. This was seen to directly provide, or indirectly enable, alternatives to violence by “removing the heat” from often

polarized conversations and allowing new solutions to be developed. The second was in facilitating and creating protected spaces for neutral dialogue between community groups to address common issues. This meant that when intra- or inter-communal tensions or threats arose, community mediators or representatives were able to work to find non-violent resolutions, both creating protective impacts for communities and contributing to cohesion. The ICRC was able to do this because it was accepted as a neutral humanitarian actor with expertise developed over many years of working in armed conflicts around the world, and with a deep understanding of the humanitarian impacts remaining in Northern Ireland which was informed by its other work there, notably in detention.

Lastly, can you speak to the strengthening of norms?

The ICRC works to develop, promote and disseminate IHL and humanitarian principles. IHL is a part of the international legal architecture which has peace at its centre. While IHL is commonly known as the law of war, it is important to recall that in adopting Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, States proclaimed “their earnest wish to see peace prevail among peoples”,²⁰ emphasizing that nothing in the Protocol or the Conventions themselves could be construed as legitimizing or authorizing acts of aggression or the use of force inconsistent with the UN Charter, whose primary concern is the maintenance of international peace and security.

I’ve outlined what IHL specifically has to say about peace, and some of the ways that respect for IHL can contribute to an environment more conducive to peace: essentially, helping to remove the obstacles to peace by preventing the cruelty and destruction that pose practical challenges to negotiating settlements and make reconciliation more difficult, while also providing specific mechanisms to support and facilitate dialogue.

Normatively, IHL centres respect for human dignity in war, complementing other elements of the international legal architecture, including international human rights law and international refugee law. The ICRC’s development and dissemination of IHL and promotion of humanitarian principles serves to remind parties to armed conflict, and their supporters, of the humanity of those perceived as the enemy. The ICRC does its utmost to influence States and others to respect and support protective norms and standards that limit the suffering caused by conflict and violence. This goes beyond the promotion of IHL, and has included work for nuclear disarmament, in light of the suffering that such weapons would cause, as well as the ongoing efforts to strengthen and develop sectoral standards of humanitarian protection work, provide guidance on aligning national law with international legal obligations, develop guidelines for mediators on humanitarian issues,²¹ and more. These efforts

20 Protocol Additional (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, 1125 UNTS 3, 8 June 1977 (entered into force 7 December 1978), Preamble.

21 ICRC, *Guidance for Mediators on Addressing the Fate of Missing Persons*, Geneva, 2024, available at: <https://missingpersons.icrc.org/index.php/library/guidance-mediators-addressing-fate-missing-persons>.

can help make peace negotiations more cognizant of the needs of affected people, which can strengthen the acceptance of any final agreement; more broadly, by emphasizing our shared humanity and focusing on reducing suffering, these efforts can contribute to an environment more conducive to peace.

These are some initial reflections, and we are continuing to refine them. We do believe that different aspects of the ICRC's work can contribute to prospects for peace. In all cases, the exact parameters of our engagement will be driven by consideration of those affected by armed conflict, the specific dynamics of the context, and a careful weighing of our ability to add value versus the risks that such action may pose to our humanitarian mandate and operational capacity to deliver.