



# Debunkering Acceptance: a view from the ICRC

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## Introduction: the relationship between acceptance and security

**The first pillar of the ICRC's security model is 'acceptance' (Brugger 2009), a concept embedded in the ICRC's DNA that goes beyond concerns about security. Bestowed with an official mandate by states and enshrined in international humanitarian law (IHL), the ICRC's standard operating procedure is to gain approval for its presence and actions from both state and non-state parties to armed conflict. This formal agreement of the ICRC's role and presence is intended to accord security and safety to its staff and integrity to its premises, and to provide the legitimacy that is essential to the ICRC's efforts to persuade the parties to armed conflict to conduct hostilities in accordance with IHL.**

The notion of 'acceptance' also underpins three of the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement: neutrality, impartiality and independence. 'Neutrality' is often incorrectly misunderstood as a moral position. Instead it is an operational posture that aims to foster acceptance of the ICRC in even the most highly politicised contexts of armed conflict. As the principle explicitly states, the Red Cross does not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies for a reason – 'to enjoy the confidence of all' (ICRC 2015:4). Acceptance is fostered by adhering to the principles of impartiality (not making any adverse distinction regarding who receives humanitarian assistance, giving priority to those most in need) and of independence (acting without interference from extraneous political, military, economic or other influences). To be effective, these principles must be explained and applied consistently.

The principles are further operationalised through several working modalities that also seek to enhance

acceptance. By treating any observed breaches of IHL with strict confidentiality so they can be discussed in bilateral dialogue with the assumed perpetrators, the ICRC aims to gain acceptance of the need to respect humanitarian norms. Being transparent about what the ICRC does and why helps to allay suspicions of hidden agendas and considerable effort is placed on disseminating knowledge of the ICRC and broader Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Acting consistently across contexts so as to be predictable and coherent is important in promoting acceptance at all levels.

Whilst this framework never provided guarantees of either access nor security – to which the tragic deaths of ICRC delegates and blocked access attests – it has allowed the ICRC to save lives and alleviate suffering in conflict zones throughout the world for more than a century. Certain trends in armed conflict over the last decade, however, challenge some fundamental ideas underpinning this approach and warrant more attention. This article takes a closer look at the ICRC's security incident data before unpacking some of these new challenges, such as the proliferation of armed groups in contexts around the world. It then describes some of the ICRC's security concepts and practices intended to address these challenges before concluding with thoughts on moving forward.

## Has humanitarian action become more dangerous?

The last few years has seen lively debates over whether the contexts in which humanitarians operate have become more dangerous.<sup>1</sup> Much of this debate is centered around the use and interpretation of data on security incidents against humanitarian actors. Data from monitoring organisations show a global trend suggesting that

<sup>1</sup> For a summary of the issues see Stoddard, Harmer & Harver 2016.

serious security incidents involving aid workers have gradually increased year-on-year. The number of recorded attacks on aid workers in 2019 exceeded the number in each of the years previously recorded by the Aid Worker Security Database (Stoddard et al. 2020).<sup>2</sup>

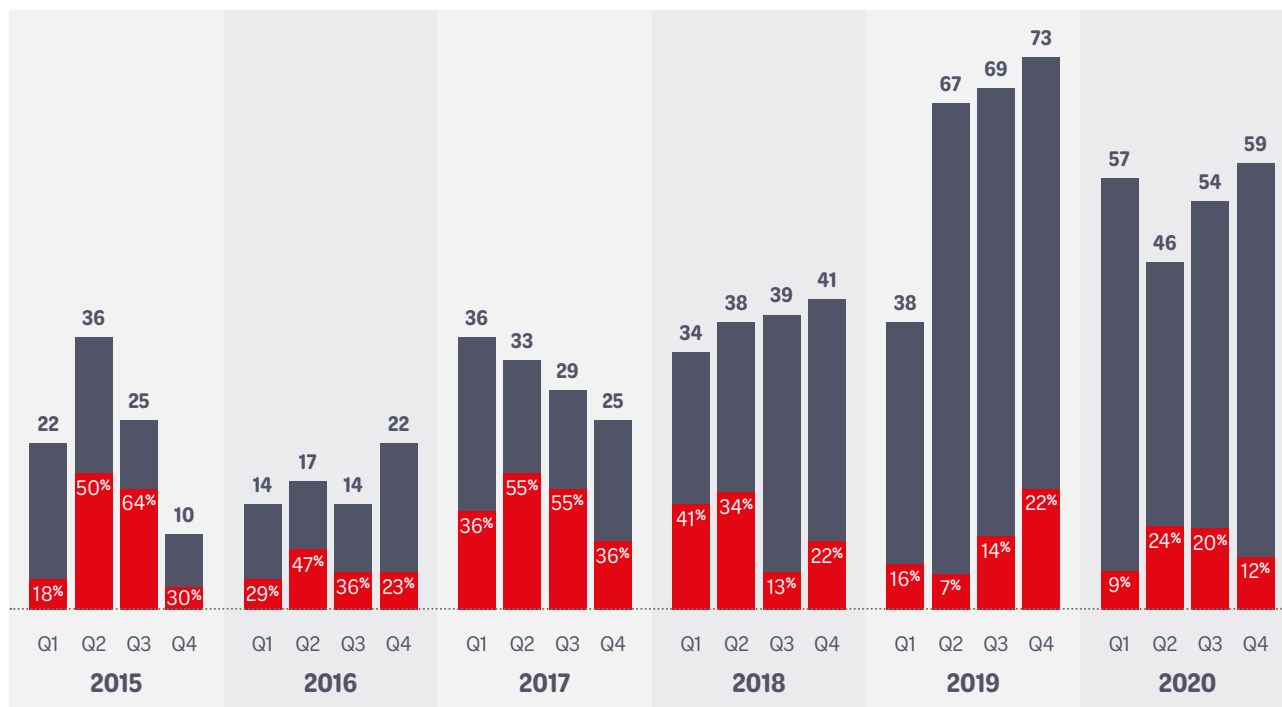
The ICRC's own data does not mirror this trend.<sup>3</sup> While there has been an increase in security incidents reported in recent years, this largely reflects the organisation-wide adoption of a custom-built internal reporting system, the *Security Management Information Platform (SMIP)*, which was specifically designed to enable more comprehensive and integrated reporting of all security incidents. For each security incident report, ICRC staff record whether the evidence suggests that the ICRC was deliberately targeted or not, or whether this factor is unknown. Importantly, data from the last three years shows that the proportion of incidents targeting the ICRC has remained stable at around 20 percent, irrespective of the overall quantity of incidents. Furthermore, taking account of the growth in the ICRC's operational footprint over the last five years – from around 14,000 staff and 290 structures worldwide in 2015 to some

20,000 staff and 318 structures today – we see that proportionally the *rate of harm* for ICRC staff has steadily decreased and in 2020 stood at around one third of what it was in 2015.

Of course, there is much that the data does not say: it would be foolish to draw conclusions about the ICRC's level of acceptance on the basis of these numbers alone. The data does not show the number of places where it is too unsafe to work, such as much of south-central Somalia, or in which an armed group or authoritarian government has rejected the presence of humanitarians outright. Nevertheless, tracking security incidents – from seemingly innocuous stone throwing at cars by young children to direct threats against the lives of ICRC staff – enables us to monitor the local mood, review the context analysis and security strategy as required, and address misconceptions or errors on our part before they fester. Improvements to the ICRC's ability to monitor security are described further below.

In fact, one unexpected finding in the data is the rise in the number of incidents attributed to civilians. Those attributed to military forces, armed groups

**Figure 1: Evolution of recorded security incidents since 2015 by quarter, showing the proportion of incidents (in red) deemed to have involved deliberate targeting.**



<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, data on attacks against aid workers from 2020 is still being collated.

<sup>3</sup> The ICRC has been collecting data on security incidents for decades although it cannot be relied upon to be complete, accurate and reliable in all instances. The definitions of key terms, the data capture and validation processes, the challenges around the subjectivity of reporting, the structure of the data models and other factors all represent limitations in the utility of the data. Hence while every effort is made to ensure a reliable dataset, there may be impediments to drawing solid conclusions from it.

**Figure 2:** Graph depicting the types of security incident<sup>5</sup> caused by different perpetrators recorded in the year 2020. A large proportion of incidents (%) are caused by civilians and criminal actors. (Null values removed).

	Incidents without operational consequences	Important incidents	Serious incidents
Civilians	45 (30%)	26 (29%)	1 (10%)
Criminals / Bandits / Organised crime	33 (22%)	17 (19%)	3 (30%)
Non-state armed groups	17 (11%)	22 (24%)	4 (40%)
Military	18 (12%)	13 (14%)	1 (10%)
Unknown	17 (11%)	7 (8%)	1 (10%)
Police	11 (7%)	3 (3%)	

and criminal actors have remained proportionally stable or declined over the last three years, while incidents caused by civilians – for example, disgruntled employees, communities not included in aid distributions, religious fundamentalists, ultra-nationalist or protest groups – have increased by 50 percent or more, predominantly in Asia and the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Although carrying less severe operational consequences than incidents involving fighting forces or criminals, the increase in harm by civilians warrants deeper analysis, particularly to see whether this is more prevalent in protracted conflicts where aid has become an important stake in local economies, given that a large proportion of these threats have an economic motive. We shall return to this point below.

So, whilst the ICRC has not seen an overall increase in harm, some of this is due to a scaling back of exposure. The aspiration for acceptance everywhere has had to be tempered with the realisation that in many contexts our level of acceptance sits on a spectrum with acceptance at one end and rejection at the other. The mid-point is ‘tolerance’ of the ICRC.

The spectrum is dynamic, shifting in accordance with internal and external events, and needs to be assessed for every relevant source of authority: the ICRC might have full acceptance from some and little from others. Identifying indicators of where to place the cursor on our level of acceptance along this spectrum is tricky.

## Challenges to acceptance

Expanding our gaze beyond security statistics, the ICRC’s observations on the ground highlight three developments of particular note that challenge the ICRC’s capacity to foster acceptance.

First, the proliferation of armed groups – the vast majority of which have decentralised organisational structures (having either splintered from a larger group, as in Colombia, or emerged from communities as in Libya) – hinders the possibility of relying on a hierarchical chain of command to authorise access and give security assurances. The number of non-international armed conflicts has more than

<sup>4</sup> Different types of perpetrators such as ‘armed groups’ or ‘civilians’ are not precisely defined but security specialists who review each incident apply their expertise to classify the main elements of each incident as consistently as possible. That said, there are many incidents where complex factors and unique combinations of elements defy simple classification, for instance when civilians and armed groups combine to perpetrate an incident.

<sup>5</sup> The ICRC classifies security incidents under three categories: 1) A *serious* incident is an event that causes major harm to the physical or mental integrity of ICRC staff members and/or has a significant impact on operations. 2) An *important* incident is an event that constitutes a danger to the physical or mental integrity of ICRC staff members and may affect operations; 3) Incidents are designated as *without operational consequences* when the event constitutes a danger to the physical or mental integrity of staff members but did not affect operations.

trebled over the last two decades from around 30 at the end of the 1990s to around 100 today, and more than one-third of them involve three or more parties to the conflict (Nikolic, Ferraro & de Saint Maurice 2020). Furthermore, there is an increased regionalisation and globalisation of armed groups and their support networks. While contact with field level leadership is generally possible, communication with regional and global leadership is far more difficult. The fluidity of the environment and the speed at which alliances form and change hinders our ability to foster mutual understanding between aid organisations and armed groups. Moreover, we see an increase in the number of states intervening in armed conflicts beyond their territory, notably as part of coalitions, in partnerships or in direct support. Many of these states are 'middle powers' and may be assertive, and/or have had limited engagement with the international humanitarian sector in operational theatres, and thus have a different interpretation of humanitarian action. Throughout its history, humanitarian action has been manipulated and instrumentalised in the service of political interests (Terry 2002) but this tendency seems to be on the rise. The post-Cold War celebration of humanitarian ideals began to wane with the 'war on terror' of the early 2000s and has suffered an accelerated demise as dedicated aid departments are absorbed into bodies which reorient aid towards serving political and economic interests.

Second, the relationships between aid organisations, the communities they seek to help, and the authorities in charge have become increasingly transactional, part of what Alex de Waal (2018) terms the 'political marketplace' in which political services and loyalties are exchanged for material resources.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned above, in many protracted conflicts, humanitarian aid is part of the fabric of war economies. Where once humanitarians assumed they were safe by helping the people for which the armed group or government professed to fight, the 'capture' of aid resources by a group (local warlord, government authority, business community or other gatekeepers) for economic gain or as a tool of patronage is a growing phenomenon. Having a vested interest in keeping the aid enterprise spending money that can be tapped or directed to 'client' groups, those practicing 'aid capture' apply

pressure to humanitarian organisations to act in a way that can undermine humanitarian principles, and can pose security threats to aid agencies that wish to address this issue. The rise in identity politics – political attitudes that promote the interests of a group based on racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity – further complicates attempts to explain the principle of impartiality, especially if needs are greater on one side.

The transactional nature of humanitarian assistance is not new: acceptance and access have long been premised on an unspoken understanding of the indirect benefit of providing vital social services to the population under the control of an armed group. It alleviates some of the responsibilities of governing. But this quid pro quo presupposes an affinity between the population and the armed group, which is not always the case: the Khmer Rouge-controlled IDP camps along the Thai-Cambodian border were off-limits to aid agencies in the 1980s. Over the last decade no access has been possible to regions of Afghanistan with high concentrations of foreign fighters because they have no local constituency to care for (Terry 2011). In some contexts, the regionalisation and globalisation of networks of armed groups exacerbates this trend, creating greater distance between populations and those who control them.

Another related challenge to establishing mutual trust with armed groups is the restrictive measures states impose on humanitarian actors interacting with certain groups, including under counter-terrorism legislation. Impediments to responding to humanitarian needs because of such legislation undermines the principles and purposes of humanitarian action, to the detriment of those in need of assistance and the reputations of humanitarian agencies.

The third potential challenge to acceptance comes from the spread of new technologies and social media. Whilst there are many positive aspects of making armed groups and communities more accessible through internet platforms and telecommunications, there are also risks to this 'digital proximity'.<sup>7</sup> Many armed groups are deeply suspicious of new technologies' potential for spying: this is certainly the case of Al Shabaab in Somalia which lost several senior members including its

<sup>6</sup> For excellent research around this theme see LSE 2021.

<sup>7</sup> See ICRC blog series beginning with Marelli 2020.

leader, Ahmed Godane, in targeted missile attacks (Martinez & Hughes 2014), which led to tight restrictions on who could access the territory they control, and limiting communication equipment. Another potential threat stems from the speed at which misinformation spreads and the risk that a malicious rumor about an aid agency could spread rapidly and rally an aggressive crowd. Misinformation might help to explain the rise in incidents perpetrated by civilians, highlighted above.

## Adapting the ICRC's security management system to contemporary challenges

The ICRC's security management system has evolved over time to reflect these growing challenges. Its decentralised nature has not changed, based on the conviction that those closest to the field are best placed to understand the context (see Krähenbühl 2004). This approach emphasises understanding the ICRC's mandate, humanitarian principles and the application of the 'pillars of security'. But more recent emphasis has been placed on developing a systemic approach to security management across the whole organisation that aims to improve the quality and circulation of information and analysis to support the definition of acceptance strategies and overall decision-making. This has required maintaining a balance between a 'heuristic' approach to security based on experience, and a structured and inclusive process based on professional standards, procedures and institutional learning.

The ICRC has invested in its capacity to gather and analyse information on security incidents and potential threats and established a digital reporting system to help ICRC staff monitor trends. Looking at trends over time can help pinpoint incident triggers and better understand the 'weak signals' of impending risk and supports our acceptance approach. There is still work to be done to harmonise definitions and identify objective indicators to help mitigate factors such as 'confirmation bias' (whereby people tend to interpret data as confirming pre-existing assumptions rather than challenging them), and in collecting, processing and analysing data on cross-border armed conflicts and humanitarian operations. The ICRC has invested more time and

resources in producing political analyses of conflict-affected settings, with a dedicated research stream on the role of aid in the political economy of conflict and its consequences. This research stream might help to make sense of the increase in violence by civilians against the ICRC as we dig deeper into identifying the winners and losers of the economic windfalls injected by the aid sector and its impact on acceptance.

Managing and analysing information in a 20,000 strong workforce is a challenge in itself, particularly one organised along professional sectors (health, economic security, water and habitat, protection, communication, law.) The Security Unit at HQ has been working to embed principles of security management into each sector in the field and at HQ, including the obligation to apply 'minimum security requirements' across all ICRC sites. Its purpose is to systematise, through training and on-site support, a security risk management process that capitalises on the different knowledge, experiences and opinions of staff with very different profiles and functions, including different perceptions of acceptance. A thorough analysis of the ICRC's operational ambitions and footprint within the local political context is key because it helps us define the right balance between acceptance and other mitigation measures: on the one hand, privileging acceptance-only might expose staff to unforeseen dangers, but on the other, resorting to armored vehicles, armed escorts, or heavily guarded compounds can undermine efforts to gain acceptance. Such measures may also bring other risks, for instance paying for security services potentially fuels violence and associates aid organisations with those providing the services. A sound security risk management process, undertaken with an inclusive and participatory approach, takes all these factors into account and helps define the best approach.

A dedicated security forum operates both at HQ and in field structures to help ensure access to security information updates and procedures, as well as to flag and address emerging threats or challenges. On a quarterly basis, the Security Unit provides an overall view of the most exposed delegations' security risk exposure. This reporting is combined with initiatives led by other sectors of the ICRC, such as the annual mapping of the ICRC's relationships with non-state armed groups, to enable a broader

understanding of where successes and impediments lie in efforts to be understood and accepted.<sup>8</sup> Stakeholder mapping and analysis includes security management issues, such as notifications made to local authorities of ICRC's plans in an area and green lights obtained from them to proceed. Other indicators of the ICRC's acceptance include the quality of the ICRC's dialogue with an armed group (what subjects we can broach); with whom are we permitted to speak; and the number and type of interactions allowed. Having a strong security risk management system in place helps us identify risks and opportunities holistically, assess the solidity of our network and avoid a siloed approach to acceptance.

## Conclusions and implications

This article has sought to connect an ideal – acceptance – to one of its roles in preserving the security and safety of humanitarian staff. In doing so, the article has explained some of the practical ways that the ICRC has sought to better understand and mitigate risk. But there are some higher-level considerations linked to the challenges identified that need deeper consideration.

One major area of further work is to consider whether the current structure of the ICRC – reflecting its historical past – is capable of addressing the new challenges highlighted above. The ICRC remains quite state-centric and is structured and staffed to respond to the bureaucracy of states. The proliferation of non-state armed groups and their regionalisation and globalisation suggest that the ICRC might need to adapt its set-up to be better equipped to deal with such transnational entities. Recent research has helped us understand sources of influence on the behaviour of members of state armed forces and armed groups, based on their organisational structure, and demonstrated the need to engage with a greater array of potential influences if we are to make inroads into promoting restraint on the battlefield (ICRC 2018). We now need to improve our ability to work in the borderlands and

across borders. To do this we need to reinforce regional hubs so they can play a more central role in networking with and reaching out to groups that increasingly join transnational networks and support systems, with a view to increasing engagement opportunities and thereby acceptance of the ICRC.

The rise in security incidents committed against ICRC staff by civilians also warrants greater attention, particularly with regard to how it affects our acceptance. We need to dig more deeply to understand the circumstances of these events, whether they are connected to something the ICRC did, or failed to do, and how to reverse this rising trend. We also need to link this observation to ongoing research into misinformation, disinformation and hate speech in armed conflicts and its influence on the attitudes and behaviour of civilians (see Tiller, Devidal & van Solinge 2021).

The proliferation of armed groups, the growth of identity politics, and the increasingly transactional nature of relationships between humanitarians and state and non-state entities is likely to make it harder to gain acceptance as a neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian organisation. But it is difficult to envisage another means of gaining acceptance to reach those in need, regardless of who they are or what they may have done, other than to put these principles into practice and demonstrate the purely humanitarian intention of our aid. The expanded access to the internet and hence to information across all corners of the world make acting in a consistent and coherent manner across different contexts all the more important. The principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence provide a vital thread through which to consider how different groups might perceive ICRC actions and communications. Acceptance from communities and political authorities of the ICRC's presence and operations is best promoted through proximity to the people most in need, and here the specificity of humanitarian security management is precisely to support acceptance-related efforts holistically, from context analysis to programme designing, and not to force a security-driven bunkerisation of humanitarian action.

<sup>8</sup> In 2020, the ICRC was in contact with 465 armed groups worldwide. Although this number fluctuates each year, it represents thousands of direct and indirect interactions with armed groups across hundreds of sites and at all levels of an armed group's hierarchy.

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