

GLOBAL INITIATIVE TO GALVANISE POLITICAL COMMITMENT TO INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

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BACKGROUND

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is a robust body of law. With the adoption of the Geneva Conventions 75 years ago, States committed to a detailed set of rules protecting people in armed conflicts. Over time, the Geneva Conventions have been universally ratified and IHL has become even more comprehensive through the development of customary and treaty law.

However, despite the global consensus underpinning the Geneva Conventions, compliance with even the most basic norms is shockingly insufficient in warzones across the world today. Today's conflicts show, in appalling and devastating ways, that IHL faces enormous challenges to provide effective and meaningful protection for people in armed conflicts.

At the same time, the number of armed conflicts is increasing. Today, there are more than 120 conflicts recorded by the ICRC, many of which have stretched on for decades with ever more devastating human, social, environmental and economic costs and with no peaceful resolution in sight.

It is the ICRC's conviction that this trend can and must be reversed. We know from working on frontlines for decades that when IHL is respected, lives are saved and human dignity preserved. Compliance with the rules of war is possible, if there is political will to put into practice what is outlined in the Geneva Conventions.

In many conflicts, warring parties have chosen to respect IHL, have shown that respect for IHL is possible, that military and civilian victims of war can be protected. These instances of respect are far too few, but they can inspire and guide us in persevering in our work towards better respect for IHL by all parties in all conflicts.

Today, IHL is at a crossroads.

The global initiative to galvanize political commitment to international humanitarian law, launched by Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan, South Africa and the ICRC, seeks to make a contribution on the path towards reversing the downward spiral of disrespect for IHL and despair. It seeks to overcome political divides and stalemates, if only for the sake of restoring a minimum of humanity in war. IHL is a body of law that not only contains the most basic obligations that all States have agreed to, but it also provides practical guidance on how even in the extreme circumstances of conflict, the life, physical integrity and dignity of those not or no longer fighting can be preserved.

The objectives of this initiative are, first, to make IHL a political priority, at global, regional and domestic levels; secondly to re-centre the debate about armed conflicts on the urgent need to set higher expectations by the international community to parties to conflict for the universal, uniform and faithful application of IHL; and third, to start a process to discuss challenges on specific IHL topics, such as prevention of violations or conduct of hostilities rules, in order to make clear recommendations to address them. The initiative will produce concrete and practical recommendations to meet these challenges; and will culminate in a landmark meeting to uphold humanity in war by the end of 2026.

We call on all High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions to join this initiative to solidify sustained political will to ensure respect for, compliance with and implementation of IHL. We are driven by a unified goal: to use IHL as a guiding framework to reduce suffering and help steer armed conflicts toward peaceful resolution.

OVERARCHING GOAL: GALVANIZING POLITICAL WILL

The initiative is based on the acknowledgment that better respect for IHL cannot be achieved without strong political commitment. Led by the President of the ICRC, the institution will engage with all States to garner support for better implementation of and respect for IHL.

In order to achieve this, the 6 States that have launched the initiative together with the ICRC – Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan and South Africa – will work with the ICRC on ensuring that there is global support for the initiative, gathering political will across all continents, and supporting the ICRC in building the pathway to a successful meeting to uphold humanity in war in 2026.

During the next two years, a series of briefings for all States, in particular through Permanent Missions in Geneva and in New York, will be organized to share regular updates on the different workstreams, and maintain global support for the initiative. These moments will also serve to discuss the planning of the 2026 meeting.

In addition, an advisory board will be created to support the ICRC in shaping the strategy of the overall initiative and its different workstreams, and on navigating potential challenges. It is envisaged that the advisory board will be composed of high-level representatives from States, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and academia joining in their personal capacity.

SEVEN WORKSTREAMS TO TACKLE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO IHL

The initiative will be composed of seven workstreams running in parallel and will involve consultations with States, military audiences, national societies, academic experts and others, producing concrete and practical recommendations to meet these challenges.

The workstreams, described in greater detail below, will proceed around two clusters. The first cluster will encompass three workstreams dedicated to better prevent IHL violations: 1) collecting and promoting good practices in prevention work, 2) strengthening national committees and similar entities on IHL, and 3) leveraging the links between IHL and peace. The second cluster will revolve around some select legal issues concerning the most devastating effects of today's conflicts and of those to come, with four additional workstreams aimed at building shared understanding for effective protection during armed conflict: 4) the protection of civilian infrastructure, 5) the protection of hospitals and medical facilities, 6) the use of information and communication technologies in armed conflict, 7) naval warfare.

This is far from a comprehensive list of challenges to IHL in contemporary armed conflicts. In this sense, the initiative is not a comprehensive revision of IHL, nor does it have the ambition to create new international rules. It is a joint effort to strengthen IHL and complements a renewed global focus on advancing an agenda for peace, reinforcing civilian protection, and strengthening global governance systems, thereby ensuring more effective international cooperation and protection for those affected by armed conflict.

Each workstream will have its own planning and milestones, and different ways of consulting with States and other actors where relevant (National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, international organizations including the United Nations, academics, civil society, etc.). It is envisaged that each workstream will be supported by 2 or 3 States acting as co-chairs. All discussions and consultations during this global initiative will strive to remain completely depoliticized and non-contextual. While all workstreams will collect existing good practices around the globe, they will not be context-specific.

All workstreams will have an outcome product contributing to the initiative's overall objective of reinforcing respect for IHL, providing concrete and practical measures for States, and where relevant, other actors.

All workstreams will be open to all States, as this global initiative aims to have a universal reach, with dedicated efforts to ensure cross-regional participation. It is envisaged that States will express interest to act as co-chairs of the workstreams.

Where relevant, the ICRC will partner with academic institutions or other partners to lead the substance of the work. Partners will be selected on the basis of their specialized expertise and will come from different continents to ensure that different perspectives are integrated throughout the initiative.

CLUSTER 1

STRENGTHENING PREVENTION OF IHL VIOLATIONS

1. PREVENTION GOOD PRACTICES

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

The very philosophy of many of the rules contained in the Geneva Conventions is aimed, first and foremost, at preventing IHL violations from being committed in the first place. Building an environment conducive to respect for IHL is a continuous process, built step by step, day by day, and it starts before conflict breaks out. With every treaty ratified, every piece of legislation, every training carried out for military and civilians, the framework and good practices that anchor compliance as a standard operating procedure are reinforced, making them better able to resist a breakdown of respect for IHL when conflict occurs.

The ICRC has worked for many decades to support States in the ratification of treaties and implementation of IHL into domestic legislation, practice and policy, structures and training. Based on its constant collection of good practices across the globe, the ICRC has a wealth of information and established an expertise on what works and what doesn't in preventing IHL violations. Significant advancements have been made in the field of prevention, including in other areas and other bodies of law, both in terms of substance and methodology. For instance, academic research has flourished on structural prevention, and there has been substantial progress in understanding behavioral influences that can support prevention efforts. Key among them is the Roots of Restraints in War Study, published by the ICRC in 2018. In parallel, an increasing number of organizations have engaged in prevention work, bringing fresh insights and diverse methodologies to the field.

Some of this data has already been harvested, leading to clear recommendations to prevent IHL violations. For instance, implementing international obligations into domestic laws, policies and practices is the foundation for enabling compliance with IHL. Other aspects continue to be researched, such as the relationship between the quantity and quality of IHL training and respect for IHL.

OBJECTIVE

This workstream will build on the experience accumulated across the globe on preventing violations of IHL and explore novel avenues to do so. It will focus on identifying good practices, successful strategies and methodologies in the prevention of IHL violations, leading to actionable, evidence-based guidance on building an environment conducive to the respect for IHL.

PROCESS

The process will bring together experts from diverse disciplines (academia, civil society, military, practitioners) to exchange knowledge, learn from experiences, and foster the identification of effective strategies to prevent violations of IHL. On the basis of background research aimed at identifying current challenges to the prevention of IHL violations, a series of meetings will review current methodologies for preventing violations, review successful examples of respect for IHL, and formulate recommendations for effective preventive policies. A public document will be prepared to consolidate the discussions, findings and practical recommendations of the three expert meetings.

DELIVERABLE

- Concrete and practical recommendations on preventing violations of IHL.

2. NATIONAL IHL COMMITTEES

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

National committees and similar entities on IHL are advisory bodies established by governments to promote and implement IHL at the domestic level. They are typically composed of representatives from various government ministries, usually from foreign affairs, defense, and justice, in some cases additional ministries (education, interior), as well as members from the judiciary, from the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society, and in fewer cases from academia. Their composition and specific functions vary from country to country, depending on national priorities and legal frameworks.

Today, there are 119 such committees established across the globe. However, only around half of them function effectively. Among the national IHL committees that are active, mandates and functions vary greatly, from being a simple coordination mechanism among governmental agencies to having an advisory role on a wide range of issues related to domestic implementation. Where they have broader mandates, national IHL committees have proven to be powerful tools to bring about domestic changes: initiating legislative reform, advocating for treaty ratification, establishing comprehensive training programs for domestic audiences (military, diplomats, youth, etc.) and leading the publication of voluntary reports on the domestic implementation of IHL.

Today, the potential remains high for national IHL committees to be even more efficient in promoting respect for IHL. The identification of good practices that lead to effective and outcome-oriented strategies, as well as positive emulation among national IHL committees to continuously progress in the domestic implementation of IHL, would help in this direction.

OBJECTIVE

This workstream will foster exchange among States on good practices that currently exist across the globe on the mandate, composition, roles and duties of national IHL committees. It may result in the formulation of a Universal Charter for National Committees and Similar Entities on IHL. Without being binding, the Charter could offer guidance to support national IHL committees in having a clear impact on domestic implementation of IHL and ultimately on its respect. Depending on the discussions with national IHL committees over the course of the two-year process, an additional outcome could include the creation of a Universal Alliance, a global community of national IHL committees.

PROCESS

In the first part of 2025, an online conference of national IHL committees and similar entities will be organized to present the process, invite committees to join and start outlining different areas which the outcome document could cover. The workstream will then consist of regional meetings of national IHL committees and similar entities, organized throughout 2025 in all regions. States that do not have a national IHL committee but are interested in creating one will also be invited. These regional meetings will offer a space to identify concrete standards which national IHL committees should strive to follow. In a second phase, all recommendations made during the regional meetings will then be shared with all existing committees for further feedback. A first draft of a possible charter will be presented during the universal meeting of national IHL committees, envisaged to be held in the first half of 2026.

DELIVERABLE

- Concrete and practical recommendations (possibly in the form of a Universal Charter for national IHL committees) on the mandate, composition, roles and duties of national IHL committees.
- Possibly the creation of a Universal Alliance of national IHL committees.

3. IHL AND PEACE

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

There are currently more than 120 active armed conflicts around the world, which involve over 60 States and 120 non-State armed groups. The increase in the number of armed conflicts is mainly happening in countries already affected by other armed conflicts, and generations of people live in such protracted conflict situations for decades. This sharp increase in conflicts has resulted in catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences that last for years and decades after the cessation of hostilities. In parallel, disregard for IHL creates further obstacles to peace.

As States and peoples aspire to lasting peace and security, it stands to reason that by reducing the human, societal, environmental, economic cost of war, compliance with IHL fosters an environment conducive to peace that has the power to break the never-ending cycles of violence.

OBJECTIVE

This workstream will identify some of the links between respect for IHL and peace, demonstrating in particular that, when respected, IHL is an efficient tool for de-escalation, creating the space for negotiations towards peace, and maintaining it on the longer term. It will focus on IHL and peace in three phases: before armed conflict (during peace time); during armed conflict; and post-conflict.

PROCESS

This workstream will consist of a series of meetings bringing together experts and States. The first meeting will look into how respect for IHL obligations in peace time contributes to ensuring stability, looking in particular at domestic implementation and disarmament. The second meeting will delve into questions related to how respect for IHL can contribute to de-escalation, mediation and peace negotiation during armed conflict. It will include discussions on areas such as how IHL violations contribute to radicalization and extremism, in turn resulting in further violence, and on how IHL can be factored in, and support, negotiations towards peace. The third expert meeting will explore respect for IHL in the aftermath of conflict as an element of long-term stability. Many IHL obligations continue to apply even after hostilities cease, including but not limited to the repatriation of prisoners of war and civilian internees and or the repression of war crimes. These IHL obligations can contribute to a measure of closure that allows communities to move on and to an environment conducive to lasting peace.

DELIVERABLE

- Concrete and practical recommendations on leveraging IHL's contribution to peace.

CLUSTER 2

BUILDING SHARED UNDERSTANDING FOR EFFECTIVE PROTECTION IN ARMED CONFLICT

4. PROTECTING CIVILIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Today's armed conflicts, especially in urban settings, are characterized by widespread destruction of private and public civilian property and infrastructure.

Under IHL's principles of distinction and proportionality, civilian objects are protected against attack and against excessive damage; under the principle of precaution, parties to conflicts must take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize damage to civilian objects.

The discrepancy between the basic tenet that civilian property must be spared the effects of warfare and the reality we witness today raises questions about how the rules are interpreted and applied. In particular, the specific contours of IHL's definition of "military objective" would benefit from clarification and practical guidance. The definition of military objective is the linchpin of IHL's aim and capacity to regulate hostilities with a view to protect the civilian population.

For example, contemporary armed conflicts raise serious concerns about targeting of objects used simultaneously by civilians and militaries (so-called "dual-use objects"), and objects that do not have a direct link with an adversary's war-fighting capacities but sustain the enemy's war effort.

Challenges also arise in terms of the precautions to be taken to ensure that the principle of distinction is respected during hostilities, in particular in terms of target identification and verification and when infrastructure is used simultaneously by civilians and militaries.

OBJECTIVE

This workstream will aim to clarify the notions of civilian objects and military objectives and contribute to strengthening the protection of civilian infrastructure during armed conflict.

PROCESS

This workstream will consist of at least two expert meetings, including military, governmental, academic and other experts, along with representatives from international and non-governmental organizations, from all regions of the world. In preparation for these meetings, a questionnaire will be sent to experts and background documents will be prepared.

DELIVERABLE

- Concrete and practical recommendations on the protection of civilian infrastructure during hostilities.

5. HOSPITALS: ACHIEVING MEANINGFUL PROTECTION IN ARMED CONFLICT

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Hospitals and other medical facilities perform a life-saving function for wounded and sick people, be they friend or foe. Since its origin in 1864, IHL treaties have included the specific protection of medical facilities aimed at ensuring the performance of medical functions without attacks or other military interference. Despite the comprehensive codification of these rules in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and 1977 Additional Protocols, attacks against and misuses of medical facilities have been a hallmark of armed conflicts over the past decades. The ICRC responded to the extremely concerning phenomenon already in 2011 with a landmark initiative on Healthcare in Danger. Building on this momentum, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2286 in 2016 on the protection of the wounded and sick, medical personnel, facilities and transports in armed conflict.

Taking stock in 2024, it is clear that the protection of hospitals and other medical facilities remains highly problematic, with the World Health Organization's Surveillance System for Attacks on Healthcare reporting hundreds of attacks in the first months of 2024, in countries in armed conflicts. The destruction of hospitals and medical facilities has a devastating immediate and long-term impact.

Under IHL, specific protection is the rule, loss of that protection is the exception, in that hospitals can lose their protection if they are used to commit acts harmful to the enemy. Such acts will often amount to specific IHL violations. But this does not mean that reacting to such acts is free from any constraints. IHL provides that in such circumstances, warnings must be given, and the rules of distinction, proportionality, and precautions apply and should serve to limit the harm done. Over the past years, parties to armed conflicts have asserted with alarming frequency that hospitals are being used in a manner that entails a loss of protection from attack. The ensuing attacks often cause enormous destruction and leave facilities unable to function. It would be helpful to clarify how parties to armed conflicts interpret and implement the stringent conditions that must be met before an attack or other military operation against a medical facility that has lost its protection can be taken.

OBJECTIVE

This workstream will seek to reassert the strength of the protection of hospitals in IHL by clarifying some of the concepts at the core of the specific protection of medical facilities under IHL. This will be done with a view to influencing the behaviour of belligerents to avoid or minimize attacks on hospitals, to minimize interference with their medical functions, and avoid misuses of such facilities. It may also explore procedural avenues to better protect hospitals.

PROCESS

This workstream will consist of a series of consultations with States, UN agencies, humanitarian organizations and academics. Consultations will aim to discuss existing recommendations on the protection of hospitals, clarify existing law and develop a shared understanding of key concepts.

DELIVERABLE

- Concrete and practical recommendations on the protection of hospitals in armed conflict.

6. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Our increasingly digitalized and connected world provides immense opportunities in the social, economic, development, humanitarian, and information and communication spheres. In times of armed conflict, connectivity and access to information can help save and improve lives. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are today indispensable for the delivery of essential goods and services to civilian populations, and for civilians to seek and receive information about where to find safety, assistance, and to maintain family links.

At the same time, the use of ICTs as means and methods of warfare can have a devastating impact on people and societies. Recent conflicts have seen an unprecedented number of cyber operations by State and non-State actors targeting civilian critical infrastructure (such as electricity or water); harmful information causing or instigating IHL violations; and ICT activities undermining medical and humanitarian work. What we observe today risks foreshadowing the future: as societies digitalize, malicious ICT activities during armed conflicts will become a growing concern for civilians.

While it is today widely agreed that IHL applies to the use of ICTs in the context of an armed conflict, common understandings on how existing IHL rules limit cyber operations and other malicious ICT activities during armed conflict are yet to be found, developed or deepened.

OBJECTIVE

This workstream will aim to foster agreement among States on how IHL imposes limits on ICT activities during armed conflicts to safeguard civilian populations from harm. It will focus on key legal issues, including the limits that IHL imposes on ICT activities that disable civilian objects, damage or disrupt civilian data, and interfere with medical as well as humanitarian work. It will also aim to build common understandings on IHL-based limits on the spread of harmful information, and how IHL addresses the involvement of private actors in cyber operations during armed conflicts.

PROCESS

This workstream will consist of a series of consultations. It would be centered around a number of in-persons meetings in Geneva where all Permanent Missions would be invited, complemented as needed by informal, virtual meetings geared towards capital-level experts, expert consultations, and regional or bilateral engagement. In 2025, the focus will be to facilitate an exchange of views among States, as well as input by stakeholders, on limits that IHL imposes on ICT activities during armed conflict, in order to identify the desired output. In a second step, and building on this exchange, the workstream will turn towards designing the desired output.

DELIVERABLE

- Concrete and practical recommendations on upholding the protection that IHL affords to civilian populations and other protected persons and objects against the danger arising from the use of ICTs during armed conflicts.

7. UPDATING NAVAL WARFARE

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Maritime operations have played significant roles in numerous contemporary armed conflicts. In addition, rapid technological advancements have transformed how naval warfare is conducted, introducing new tactics, capabilities, and complexities. As a result, many States are increasingly reflecting on their legal obligations to ensure robust protections for civilians and civilian infrastructure across all domains of warfare. This includes considerations for safeguarding civilian seafarers and merchant shipping, preserving the marine environment, and mitigating the impact of modern, large-scale military operations at sea on civilian populations and resources.

OBJECTIVE

This workstream will aim to address and emphasize several critical humanitarian issues emerging from modern naval conflicts, such as protection of critical civilian infrastructure and civilians across all domains, protection of the wounded, sick, shipwrecked and dead military personnel at sea, environmental impact, and the safety of merchant shipping. It will reflect the pressing need to reaffirm, clarify – even reinforce – the international rules governing contemporary armed conflicts at sea.

PROCESS

Following the drafting of background documents on some of the relevant concepts in the law of naval warfare, and the collection of existing State practice, a series of consultations with States and experts will be organized. The purpose will be to discuss and reassert the importance that the rules governing contemporary armed conflicts at sea adequately protect persons and objects against the danger arising from naval warfare. The results of the consultations will be gathered in a guidance document elaborating the parameters to reduce the human costs of naval warfare.

The guidance document will aim to inform any reaffirmation and clarification process related to the law of naval warfare. This includes notably the on-going process to update the 1994 San Remo Manual on Armed Conflicts at Sea, which will continue in parallel to the Global Initiative and benefit from such guidance while supporting the identification of critical humanitarian issues emerging from modern naval conflicts.

DELIVERABLE

- Concrete and practical recommendations on upholding the protection of persons and objects from dangers arising from modern naval warfare, with a view to avoiding its human cost.

STATE ENGAGEMENT ON THE INITIATIVE

All workstreams will be open to all States, as this global initiative aims to have a universal reach, with dedicated efforts to ensure cross-regional participation.

Concretely, any State that expresses an interest to join the initiative and contribute to the common objective of reinforcing respect for IHL and for the protection of persons and objects during armed conflict will be invited to join. There will be no formal process to integrate States: integration into the initiative will be based on the decision of a State to participate actively and constructively in one or more of the workstreams, depending on such State's interest and capacity.

States interested to join the initiative should therefore express their interest to the ICRC, including which workstream(s) they are particularly interested in. Joining the initiative can then be done through an official declaration reaffirming the State's political commitment to reinforce respect for IHL, by offering to co-chair a workstream, by offering to host consultations, or by supporting the initiative in any other relevant manner.

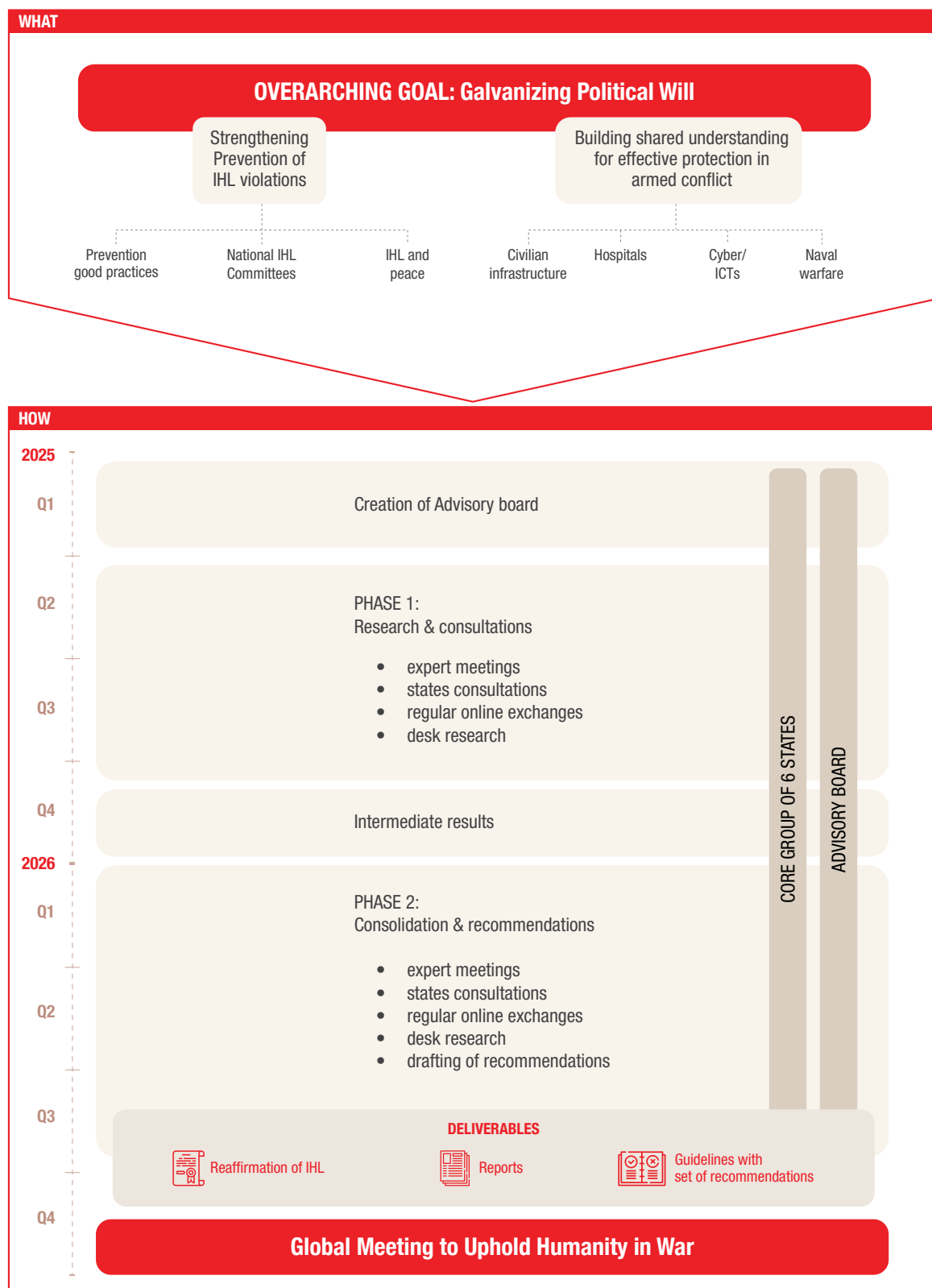
CONTACT

For more information or for any questions, please contact the ICRC at ihlinitiative@icrc.org.

ANNEX I

VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

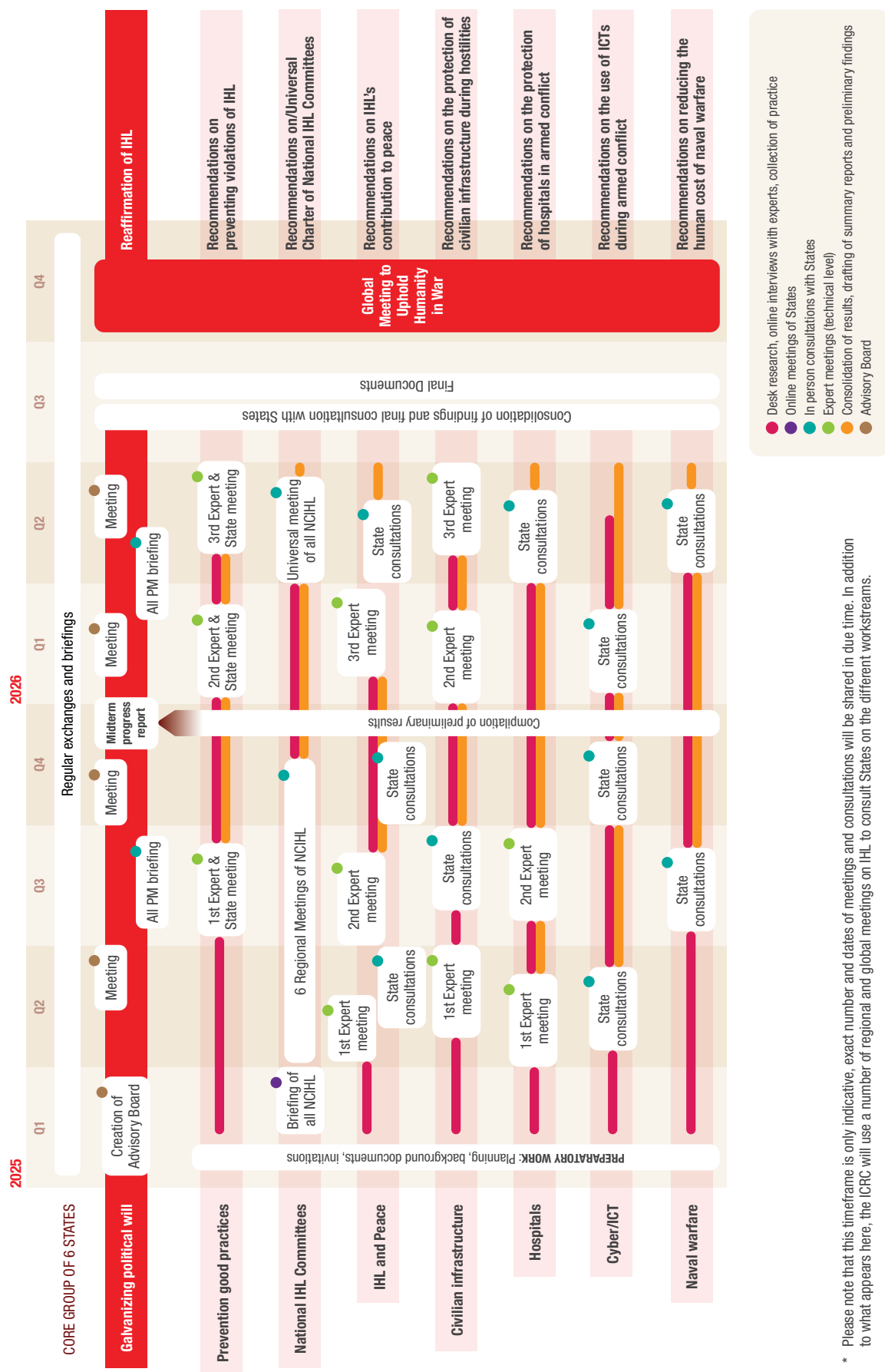
Global initiative to galvanise political commitment to international humanitarian law



ANNEX II

TIMELINE

GLOBAL INITIATIVE TO GALVANISE POLITICAL COMMITMENT TO INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW






* Please note that this timeframe is only indicative, exact number and dates of meetings and consultations will be shared in due time. In addition to what appears here, the ICRC will use a number of regional and global meetings on IHL to consult States on the different workstreams.

The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.



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