




# “I SAW MY CITY DIE”

**VOICES FROM THE FRONT LINES OF URBAN CONFLICT  
IN IRAQ, SYRIA AND YEMEN**



**THIS SPECIAL REPORT BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (ICRC) EXAMINES THE DEVASTATING HUMAN TOLL OF MODERN URBAN WARFARE IN THREE MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRIES.**





*I saw my city die; I saw my people perish; I saw myself break. I don't know if I'll ever be okay, but I want that.*

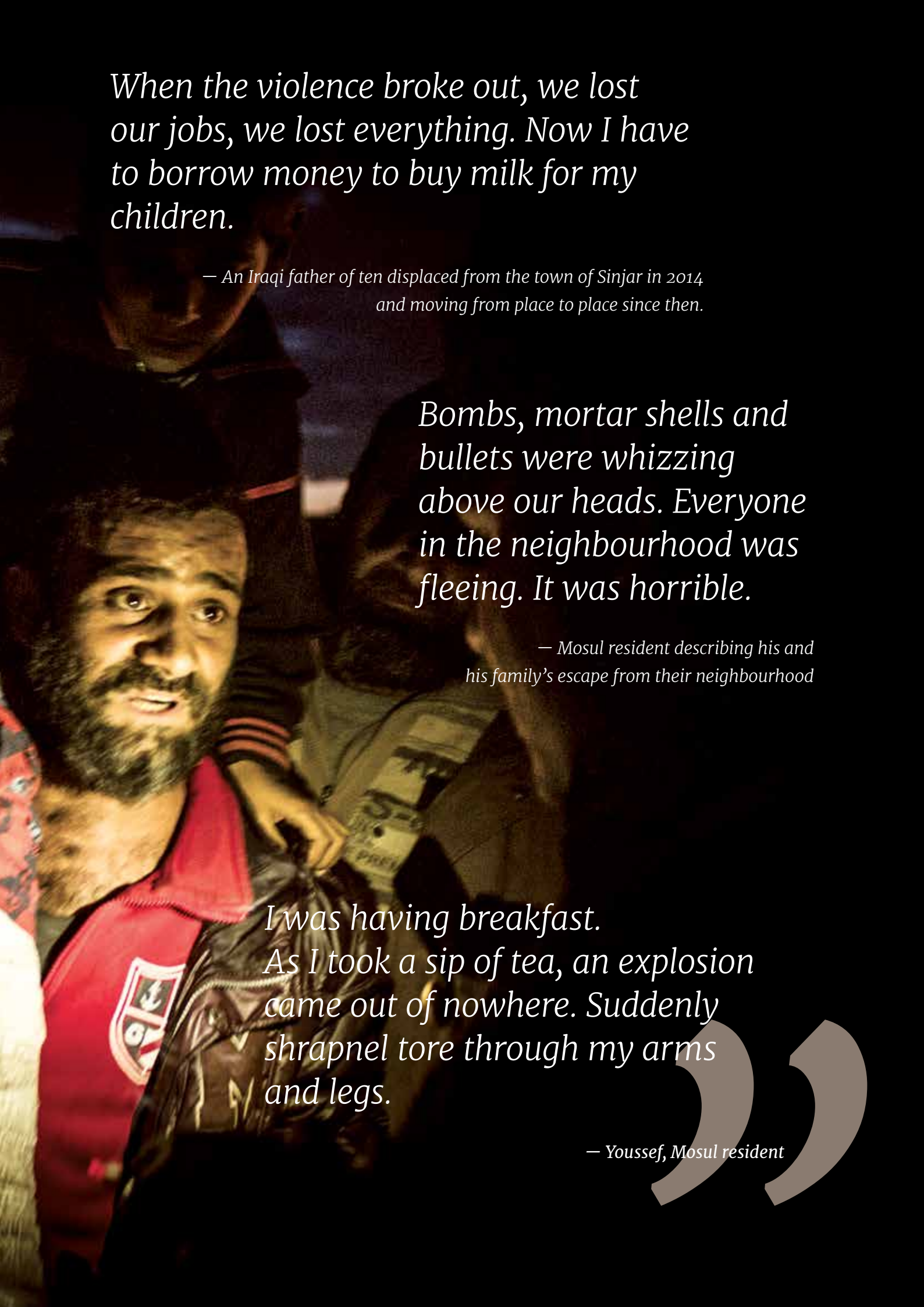
— Sami, a 29-year-old who fled Aleppo for Damascus and then Beirut

*One of the commanders told me that sometimes the fighting gets so bad, he'll be in the kitchen shooting at his enemy, who'll be in the living room shooting at him, while there are civilians – families – upstairs.*

— Joshua Baker, director and producer of *Battle for Mosul*, a documentary by PBS and The Guardian

*People are eating from the garbage because they can't get food. We've seen women boiling tree leaves just to give children some hot soup.*

— Nancy Hamad, head of the ICRC's sub-delegation in Taiz, Yemen



*When the violence broke out, we lost our jobs, we lost everything. Now I have to borrow money to buy milk for my children.*

*— An Iraqi father of ten displaced from the town of Sinjar in 2014 and moving from place to place since then.*

*Bombs, mortar shells and bullets were whizzing above our heads. Everyone in the neighbourhood was fleeing. It was horrible.*

*— Mosul resident describing his and his family's escape from their neighbourhood*

*I was having breakfast. As I took a sip of tea, an explosion came out of nowhere. Suddenly shrapnel tore through my arms and legs.*

*— Youssef, Mosul resident*



# PREFACE

War is back in cities. This new report from the ICRC vividly shows how we are witnessing a profound change in the history of armed conflict which sees towns and cities locked in entrenched patterns of urban warfare for years at a time. Government forces and non-State armed groups are fighting street-to-street in a mix of aerial bombardment, artillery, smart weapons, infantry assault, suicide bombing, car bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Civilians are in the middle of it all.

Since ancient times, the storming and sack of a city has brought mortal terror to its inhabitants. In history, if the commander of the defending force refused surrender terms, then the civilian population faced plunder, rape, murder, mutilation and slavery. Many preferred suicide.

During much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, it seemed that old-fashioned sieges and city fighting had become a thing of the past. Generals much preferred the “art of war” to be performed in open spaces. They feared desertion, ill-discipline and drunkenness if their men fought in cities. Tactics and training, with almost no initiative allowed to junior ranks, meant that they were in any case ill-equipped for urban warfare.

In the early nineteenth century, most conscripts were from rural communities and had hardly seen a big city. By 1914, the rapidly rising population in the capitals of Europe, swollen from the internal migrations of the late nineteenth century provided a large share of “disposable sons” – a phrase of American academic Edward Luttwak. Yet, an interesting aspect of the First World War is how there was still very little urban combat. The first major modern example was the Rape of Nanjing in 1937 with scenes of unspeakable cruelty. The Imperial Japanese Army instinctively used a policy of terror to make up for its comparative numerical weakness but Chinese resistance did not collapse.

At the start of the Second World War, in 1939 and 1940, cities like Warsaw and Rotterdam were bombed, often savagely. But, in the western European theatre, towns were declared open and abandoned to the enemy. On 11 June 1940, at the Château du Muguet, Winston Churchill urged the French general staff to defend Paris with house-to-house fighting. This idea was greeted with horror by General Weygand and by Marshal Pétain who had been ambassador in Spain and knew about revolutionary street-fighting.

In the Second World War, famous for the Wehrmacht’s so-called blitzkrieg, the war of movement was eventually ground down in city fighting – Sebastopol, Voronezh and then Stalingrad – even though Hitler had wanted to keep his armies out of cities. At Stalingrad, where the Red Army turned the tide of war, the fighting was pitiless. Of the approximately 10,000 civilians who had against all odds survived the fighting in the ruins, a thousand were orphans. An aid worker just after the battle described them as either completely feral or catatonic.

As the war turned against him, Hitler refused to abandon cities for reasons of prestige. As the Red Army and their western Allies reached the border of the Reich, he ordered each city to become a Festung (fortress) – especially Königsburg, Breslau, and Berlin. The fate of civilians trapped there as each city was stormed was sometimes reminiscent of the dark ages.

Berlin was the last great urban battle in Europe fought between vast conscripted forces. In 1945 the Germans and Japanese were totally crushed after a long war. Their cities were laid waste on a scale never imaginable before by the aerial bombing and land forces of the Allies. Civilians and soldiers alike were reduced to zombies through several years of exhaustion, hunger and battle shock. There were an estimated 12 million unaccompanied children wandering Europe among an even greater number of displaced people. Hunger, poverty, homelessness, disease, bereavement and family separation were the experience of millions of urban people across Europe, Asia and the Soviet Union.

Today, civilians in cities are in the middle of war once again – trapped, wounded, hungry, impoverished, held as hostages, used as human shields and often prevented from fleeing. Essential urban services like water, health care, electricity and schools are damaged, degraded and sometimes deliberately attacked. The ancient strategy of siege has returned. Tunnels, booby traps and snipers meet drones and digital warfare in the new form of protracted urban conflict which looks set to be the new normal in the years ahead.

These new urban wars can prove indecisive for years at a time as armed groups now hide under cover of the city rather than the bush, and guerrilla warfare becomes profoundly urban. Victory eludes each side and urban conflict becomes a chronic part of life for millions of people.

We have reached another turning point in the history of warfare – described so well in the civilian voices in this report. As the fighting in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya already indicates, the principal battlegrounds of the future are not going to be in open terrain. They are going to be in towns and cities.

— *Sir Antony Beevor*

Military historian and author of *Stalingrad* and *Berlin: The Downfall 1945*

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Two children play in a bullet-riddled car in Taiz, Yemen. December 2016.

## INTRODUCTION

# SAVING OUR CITIES: AN URGENT CALL

**By Robert Mardini, the ICRC's director of Near and Middle East operations**

A mother of a young child loses her husband to a sniper's bullet while he is out getting food for his family.

A father of four sees his wife and baby die when a rocket lands in the courtyard of their home. A commander describes how his men had to fight house-to-house while families hid inside.

These are just some of the stories that characterize urban warfare today. They form the core of this special ICRC report exploring the long-term and cumulative impact of conflict in cities of the Middle East from the perspectives of those living through them.

Ordinary people living through extraordinary hardship – a dental assistant, a sports instructor, a woodworker, a student turned fighter and others – help us understand a defining challenge of our age: the urbanization of armed conflict. Their words, along with insights from military officers, water engineers, relief workers, ICRC delegates, political scientists and historians, give us some idea of the horrors that urban warfare inflicts on people every day.

The cities we see on the news – Aleppo, Homs, Mosul, Fallujah, Ramadi, Taiz – all have important stories to tell. The Syrian city of Aleppo was a centre of learning, music and trade for more than a thousand years, and the heart of the country's economy before the war. Now its historic centre is largely destroyed, its population reduced and its intellectual, cultural and economic life in ruins. "I saw my city die" – the title of this report – is how a young musician described the transformation of his beloved hometown. He fled the city because of the constant bombing and because he endured regular arrests and abuse by fighters on all sides.

The Iraqi city of Mosul was once known for its tolerance and mix of religions and cultures. Taiz, in south-western Yemen, was a centre of industry, coffee production and scholarship before the 15-month siege.<sup>1</sup> The lives of the people in these cities have been – or are still being – shattered by fighting, often in the streets before their homes and businesses.

The people of many other cities across Iraq, Syria and Yemen have similar stories to tell.



In Ramadi, Iraq, 80 per cent of the buildings had been destroyed by the end of 2015.

### A NEW LEVEL OF URBAN SUFFERING

Around half of all war-related casualties worldwide between 2010 and 2015 were in Iraq, Syria and Yemen,<sup>2</sup> where fighting in towns and cities has been relentless. While urban warfare and the suffering that comes with it is nothing new, the kind of fighting we see in cities today has become all too commonplace and destructive. It creates deep grievances with the potential for perpetrating cycles of violence. Civilian casualty rates are notably high: according to some estimates, they represent 92% of the deaths and injuries caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, compared to 34% when these are used in other areas.<sup>3</sup>

Why is the human toll so high? One fundamental reason is the general lack of respect for international humanitarian law (IHL) – also known as the law of armed conflict. This body of law protects people who are not or no longer participating in hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare. It seeks,

in essence, to limit the effects of armed conflict and preserve some humanity in war. But the law is being violated. Civilians and civilian buildings such as hospitals and schools are being targeted. Ordinary people are being trapped in sieges. Constant care is not being taken to protect the civilian population. The consequences are devastating.

Another reason is the choice of weapons and how they are used in densely populated areas. While the large-scale carpet-bombing used in certain 20th century conflicts is less frequent in the 21st century, aerial bombardment and heavy-artillery shelling of civilian areas are still standard features of modern warfare.

In addition, for numerous reasons, political solutions to modern urban conflicts are not being found, meaning people fall victim to entrenched violence time and again, over many years.

Today's urban conflicts in the Middle East are also characterized by the number of different armed forces and groups involved and the support they receive from a wide array of States. This complicates efforts to build peace and to assist the population.

At the same time, one ancient form of warfare – the siege – has made a comeback. Armed forces and groups, unwilling to risk their lives fighting in densely populated areas, are now resorting to siege. Both the besieged and the besieging parties are putting civilians at risk – jeopardizing their lives, well-being and dignity. Civilians are suffering extreme deprivation, and some have endured sieges longer than those of Leningrad or Sarajevo. In light of this, siege as it is practised in the Middle East today is unconscionable and often unlawful.

Finally, the human toll is high because the injured or sick often cannot get the health care they need. Hospitals have been attacked and many lack the staff, supplies and medicines they need just to function properly, let alone meet overwhelming demands.

*“I can still visualize my grandson under the rubble. We managed to get him out. He was alive. But with no clinics or hospitals around, he died an hour later.”*

Abdulrahman stands next to the rubble where four members of his family died in early December 2016. Abdulrahman had been caring for 260 elderly and vulnerable adults in eastern Aleppo when fighting intensified and the front lines closed in around them. His relatives died two days before the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the ICRC were able to reach the area and evacuate the ill, the elderly and other civilians.



## URBAN EXODUS

It's no wonder then that millions of people have fled their cities. By the end of 2015, some 65 million people were estimated to have been displaced by conflict or persecution.<sup>4</sup> The majority remain within their country's borders, where the need for humanitarian assistance is greatest. Recent estimates suggest that the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen account for nearly a quarter of these displaced people,<sup>5</sup> and the war in Syria alone accounts for a sixth. More than six million Syrians are living with relatives or in ad hoc shelters or host communities within Syria, and more than five million have left the country.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, more than eight per cent of Yemenis<sup>7</sup> and Iraqis<sup>8</sup> are still displaced within their countries.



People fleeing the fighting in Mosul cross through Gogjali, a Kurdish village on the way to al-Khazer, a camp for displaced people. November 2016.

## THE UNSEEN IMPACT

The devastating effects of attacks in urban environments are one reason why so many people have no choice but to leave their homes and cities. If a water or sewer line is damaged by a bomb, thousands of people might lose access to clean water, which in turn leads to sanitation problems and a far greater risk of infectious diseases. If a hospital is bombed, the impact goes well beyond the tragic deaths of the health-care workers and patients and the destruction of the health-care facility. Over time, thousands more people may die of easily treatable diseases and infections because the health-care facility and its workers were not there to help them.

Meanwhile, relentless day-and-night fighting and bombardment force people to live in constant fear, shock and grief. This can lead to traumatic stress that makes it extremely hard for people to rebuild their lives, hold down jobs or break out of cycles of violence.

Then there is the long-term task of reconstruction, which is complicated not only by the complete destruction of infrastructure, but also by millions of unexploded shells and other ordnance hidden in the rubble.

Perhaps the greatest costs of urban warfare cannot even be measured. Children deprived of an education and their childhood. Entire generations with no hope for the future. Communities fractured by trauma, distrust and hatred. The departure of skilled personnel. So many young people who've been caught up in violence.

These are the realities of armed conflict in urban areas and the reasons why many people are forced to flee.

Scene of destruction after Aleppo National Hospital came under fire. January 2017.



S. Tarabishy/ICRC



T. Glass/ICFIC

Sana'a, Yemen. This young man was injured, suffering major facial fractures, during the fighting in Fajj Attan. April 2015.



*“There is too much to lose and so much to gain. But we need to act now, with determination and humanity, so that someday, people like the young musician from Aleppo will be able to say, ‘I saw my city reborn’.”*

### **A COST TOO HIGH**

What do the stories of the people living through urban warfare tell us? That the human toll of urban warfare is far too high. Everyone involved in these egregious, protracted conflicts, either politically or militarily, must take stock of all the potential costs – short- and long-term – and take immediate action to eliminate or reduce them.

First and foremost, they must work harder to find political solutions to their grievances. Beyond that, warring sides must come to terms with the full impact the fighting has on the people they ultimately hope to govern. Otherwise, what will be left for them to control, after people have lost so much and suffered so deeply, and the services that keep them alive are heavily damaged or lie in ruins? Will the victors be able to keep the peace if people feel they have respected neither the law nor the basic humanity of local citizens?

Outside support has helped spawn myriad armed groups, exacerbating the effects of conflict and making peaceful settlements even more elusive. The States that support parties to the armed conflict – be they State forces or non-State armed groups – must bring their influence to bear for the benefit of the victims of armed conflict. They must not encourage or assist with violations of IHL and they must do everything reasonably in their power to ensure respect for IHL.

Lessons must also be drawn from the past and steps must be taken quickly to rebuild urban communities – ensuring that access to education is uninterrupted and support is provided to displaced people – and to engage in comprehensive reconciliation efforts. These are just a few of the calls for action – based on the statements of people interviewed by the ICRC – that we have put forward in this report’s recommendations. See pages 18-19.

With determined and concerted action, cities and their communities will be able to recover and rebuild, and the neighbourhoods that have been laid to waste will more rapidly come back to life.

Taiz, for example, may again be remembered for its distinctive architecture and its fine, aromatic coffees, not the stench of garbage in the streets. Mosul, the scene of intense street fighting, may again thrive as a regional hub of learning, medicine and oil production. And Aleppo may once again be known for its food and its music, not the thunder of bombs and collapsing buildings.

There is too much to lose and so much to gain. But we need to act now, with determination and humanity, so that someday, people like the young musician from Aleppo will be able to say, “I saw my city reborn.”

# REDUCING THE COST

The scale and scope of urban conflict today is impossible to ignore: urgent and long-term commitment is needed from everyone – warring parties and the States that support them, the international community, humanitarians, donors and ordinary citizens around the world.

In all armed conflicts, whether they unfold in urban or other areas, international humanitarian law governs the conduct of the Parties. IHL obliges the parties to distinguish at all times between military objectives and civilians and civilian objects. It prohibits chemical weapons and attacks against civilians and hospitals. It requires that the parties ensure the humane and dignified treatment of detainees; that they

search for, collect and evacuate the wounded and sick; that they treat human remains properly; that they take all feasible measures to account for missing people, and much more.

Strict adherence to IHL is the first step to improving the situation of the victims of armed conflict. Urgent action is particularly needed in the ten areas below. These recommendations are intended to limit the impact of urban warfare in the Middle East by reducing the suffering it causes and addressing the urgent needs of the people.

## THE ICRC URGES:

1. **warring parties to respect IHL at all times.** The enemy's actions never justify violations.
2. **States supporting parties to armed conflict to make sure that the parties they support respect IHL.** They are in a unique and privileged position to do so.
3. **warring parties to stop trapping civilians in sieges, to ensure there is rapid, continuous and unimpeded humanitarian access to all urban communities in need, and to ensure people are able to leave these areas safely if they choose to.** The hardships caused by these sieges are having consequences for the population that will last generations.
4. **warring parties to avoid the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area in densely populated areas.** Aside from causing death and destruction within their immediate impact zone, these weapons have long-term effects on city infrastructure and services that are extremely dangerous for people's health and survival.
5. **warring parties to respect and protect complex urban life-support systems.** The complex, interconnected systems that provide water, electrical and sanitation services essential to urban health are often among the first to fall victim to urban warfare. Everyone must take all necessary steps to ensure such systems are never attacked or disrupted.



During an evaluation of the damage caused by fighting in the Yemeni city of Sana'a, an ICRC employee listens to a resident describe his situation. April 2015.

6. parties to the conflict and the international community to refrain from displacing people and to respect the rights and address the needs of those displaced within their countries.
7. authorities and the international community to protect and assist refugees from these conflicts.
8. authorities, parties to the conflict and the international community to do much more to ensure that essential service providers and humanitarian workers are protected.
9. authorities, humanitarians and the international community to invest more in ensuring that victims of violence have access to appropriate psychosocial and mental-health support services.
10. authorities, humanitarians and the international community to help rebuild communities, not just infrastructure. Cities are made up of people, not just buildings. The way cities are rebuilt can have a tremendous impact on whether or not they ultimately will heal.

## “MY SON SUFFOCATED”

### The story of Aleppo, Syria’s second-largest city: Under fire and under siege

Once Syria’s largest city, with a population of 2.1 million people, Aleppo is known as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world.

For residents like Yasser, a former sports instructor in his fifties and street vendor from the Boustan al-Qasr neighbourhood, Aleppo was simply a great place to live, a safe city where his business thrived and where he and his wife could raise their five children with peace of mind.

But more than four years of intense conflict changed all that. Aleppo’s densely packed neighbourhoods became the theatre of sustained, systematic bombardment from both air-to-ground munitions and ground-launched artillery shells – all of which caused massive destruction and thousands of casualties. Ultimately, no area of the city was spared the violence.

Yasser’s neighbourhood was one of several that were nearly completely destroyed. Today, most apartment buildings, schools, businesses and shops are bombed-out shells, and the once-bustling streets are almost-empty pathways that wind through scattered piles of rubble.

For Yasser the horror of the fighting was all too real. His building was bombed after an armed opposition group began operating in his neighbourhood. “My son suffocated in the attack,” says Yasser. “The first three floors of the building collapsed. He had no chance.”



The once lively streets of the al-Jadaida neighbourhood in Aleppo, destroyed by war. January 2017.

*“The building collapsed.  
He had no chance.”*



S. Tarabishi/ICRC

## YASSER'S STORY

### **In his own words**

I never wanted to mix with the parties engaged in the war. I was fully aware of the risks if armed people set foot in an area. A military position near where we lived would put us at risk. But it happened anyway – disaster struck when our building came under fire. My son suffocated to death in the attack. The first three floors of the building collapsed. He had no chance.

We were stuck between a rock and a hard place and there was no way out. I would not have wanted anyone to go through the kind of hardships that we did.

After my son's death, my wife became very afraid. We could no longer see some of our children. One had been serving in the military for almost seven years, and I sent my second son to study in Germany, hoping for a better future for him. My daughter had had two operations before the crisis for an injury to a tendon in her leg. She could not receive medical attention throughout the violence.

My youngest son has trouble with numbers and was being taught in a little mosque nearby. When the mosque was heavily shelled, my son's hope for a better education was shattered.

When the siege of east Aleppo started last Ramadan [2016], the situation grew even more difficult as people were stranded for 190 days. The situation there was in a state of paralysis. My son was always hungry as there was nothing to eat or drink. Food was extremely expensive. We were forced to eat different kinds of lentil-based food. As a result, I lost 25 kilos.”

## A NEW LEVEL OF URBAN CONFLICT?

Yasser's story is one that has played out many thousands of times over the last four years, in various parts of Aleppo. While the city was divided between east (controlled by armed opposition groups) and west (under government control), from July 2012 to December 2016, there was intense and almost daily fighting, with massive use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas.

During the course of the conflict, images of the children of Aleppo increasingly shocked the world: their bloodied faces, seen in videos with bewildered, stunned or traumatized expressions, or lifeless in the arms of rescuers as their bodies were pulled from the rubble.

As the violence escalated, humanitarians and essential service providers struggled to respond to people's dramatically increasing needs, especially given that humanitarian access was very limited in certain areas. They described the situation in ever more urgent terms.

## HUMANITY UNDER FIRE

As attacks affecting health-care and humanitarian workers increased in frequency in conflicts around the world, the battle for Aleppo became emblematic of the dangers health-care workers face during urban conflict.

The ICRC and other humanitarian organizations repeatedly raised the alarm over the worsening humanitarian situation. Essential infrastructure such as hospitals, water-supply and electrical networks, and schools continued to come under fire in Aleppo and other urban areas. In 2015 and 2016, a succession of attacks against hospitals and health-care facilities killed doctors and patients, and denied thousands desperately needed health care.

“What we are witnessing is a sustained assault on, and massive disregard for, the provision of health care during times of conflict,” said ICRC President Peter Maurer and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) President Dr Joanne Liu in a co-written editorial for *The Guardian*.<sup>9</sup>

The Syrian conflict is one of the most dangerous conflicts for humanitarian workers in the world. It has claimed the lives of 63 Syrian Arab Red Crescent staff and volunteers,<sup>10</sup> all killed while carrying out their duties, many of them in cities like Aleppo and Homs. Many other emergency workers have also been injured or killed while trying to restore essential services or rescue others.

These attacks on health-care workers and facilities drew attention to the issue and spurred the United Nations Security Council to adopt Resolution 2286 on 3 May 2016. It calls on all warring parties to protect medical facilities and personnel – principles already enshrined in IHL. The resolution strongly condemns acts of violence and threats against the wounded and sick, medical personnel and humanitarian personnel. What is needed now is the political will to put these words into action, and meaningful engagement on all sides.

## HUMANITY ON DISPLAY

The story of Aleppo these past five years is not only one of violence and cruelty. Despite the violence that surrounded them and the daily dangers, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and its volunteers – along with ordinary people and other humanitarian organizations – have shown incredible resilience, dignity and bravery while working to help people survive in ever more dire circumstances.

Despite their best efforts, however, the ICRC's teams were unable to get aid into eastern Aleppo between April and December 2016, and the ICRC could only provide support remotely, such as by paying for water, sanitation materials or cooking gas for the collective kitchen or the salaries of people working there.

The remains of an ambulance in the debris in Aleppo's al-Kallaseh district. February 2017.



## EVACUATING EASTERN ALEPPO

In December 2016, after weeks of terrifying fighting – during which the front lines closed around the last opposition strongholds and trapped civilians within them – the warring parties agreed to a deal allowing civilians and fighters to be evacuated from eastern Aleppo. The fighting finally stopped on 15 December, and between then and 22 December, more than 35,000 people were evacuated to neighbouring rural areas. Hundreds of sick and wounded people were among the evacuees. Teams from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the ICRC stayed on-site day and night throughout the ordeal, offering medical care and transport, and providing what advice and support they could in what was a very painful and confusing situation.

The evacuation was the first time since April 2016 that ICRC teams were able to access certain areas of east Aleppo. “There were burned-out cars. Smoke was rising from nearby buildings,”

says Marianne Gasser, the head of the ICRC’s delegation in Syria, who was on-site during the final weeks of violence and throughout the evacuation. “There was a lot of fear and uncertainty. When we arrived, the scene was heart-breaking. People were faced with an impossible choice. Their eyes were filled with sadness.”

With temperatures below freezing, people were burning whatever they could find, including blankets and clothes, to keep themselves and their children warm while they waited to leave. “Very few families decided to stay,” explains Gasser. “However, the majority had very little choice and felt it was best to leave at that juncture, with their houses turned to rubble, very little food and no water or electricity. Not to mention the violence they had been witnessing for so long. No one could endure such suffering.”



The ICRC and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent assess the living conditions in eastern Aleppo’s Masaken Hanano district if people decide to return there. Late November 2016.



## RETURNING HOME

Even though some already speak of “post-conflict Aleppo”, fighting continues in the nearby countryside. Before there can be talk of recovery, the significant and urgent humanitarian needs in the city must be addressed. An estimated 140,000 people have returned to their homes since the urban violence ended. Thousands more cannot yet return, in part because of the extensive damage to their homes. This remains true in other cities where the violence subsided earlier, such as Homs. What is crucial is that all displaced civilians – from Aleppo and other areas – be allowed and helped to return to their areas of origin and homes, safely, if and when they choose.<sup>11</sup> See *Compounding effects: Displaced people in urban areas*, page 46.

Despite having been divided for several years, Aleppo was always interdependent, and people moved between areas so long as this remained possible. Families had relatives in different areas, and many fled to other neighbourhoods at the height of the violence or left the city completely. The sense of trauma and loss is collective, the extent of the destruction is vast, and there are still significant dangers posed by unexploded ordnance and other remnants of war.

*“I cannot leave my city.  
Here, I can keep my dignity”.*



“Aleppo was heaven, we had everything. And then, in a moment, we had nothing. I never ever thought to leave. However, I don’t blame people who did: they had no choice. Aleppo used to be a safe city. Suddenly it turned from a peaceful place into an extremely dangerous one. I would say that at least 40 per cent of the people left this neighbourhood.”

Mohammad, a 48-year-old father of five, earns his living making furniture in a small shop in Aleppo’s al-Masharqa neighbourhood, which was on the front line between government and opposition forces in eastern Aleppo throughout the hostilities.

# “MEMORIES OF A CITY ONCE FULL OF LIFE”

## An ancient city caught in a forgotten conflict

Located an hour’s drive from the Red Sea in south-western Yemen, the mountainous and ancient city of Taiz was once the country’s industrial base, centre of coffee production and cultural capital.

Today, parts of the city lie in ruins, including a number of the city’s trademark brown-and-white bricked buildings. Streets are littered with burned-out cars and debris.

The city’s inhabitants – more than half a million people<sup>12</sup> – have suffered deeply, enduring shelling, sniper fire, street-to-street combat and aerial bombardment. While hundreds of thousands are thought to have fled the city,<sup>13</sup> around 200,000 remained during the 15 months when the city was almost totally under siege. See *Compounding effects: Cities under siege*, page 40.

The relative stalemate between the opposing forces means the front lines have not moved significantly in months – putting the population in the middle of a protracted, bitter standoff.

Though the siege has been partially lifted, the humanitarian situation in the city today remains catastrophic: there is no food, and public services – including medical care and education – have virtually collapsed. Once-vibrant city streets have become places of fear. See Hanan’s story later in this section.

Women and children collect water from a water truck in a besieged area of Taiz. November 2016.



K. Al-Saeed/ICRC



## CATASTROPHIC HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Like other cities at war, the impact on health care has been catastrophic. In just one 72 hour period in November 2016, the main hospitals in Taiz reported receiving an average of 200 wounded patients per day, many of whom had suffered from blast injuries and had to have limbs amputated.

This overwhelming demand for urgent medical care comes just as public health systems in Taiz have all but collapsed. No public health-care centres remain open, and the city's only two hospitals function with minimal resources and dwindling staff. The remaining health-care workers endure long hours, frequent power outages and shelling owing to their proximity to the front lines.

Given that the hospitals must prioritize people with life-threatening injuries, they rarely have the time or the resources to deal with public-health concerns such as maternal and infant health, chronic or respiratory diseases, routine vaccination or monitoring of infectious diseases. Field hospitals run by armed groups similarly focus mainly on the wounded.

Standard ambulance services are virtually non-existent, and the fighting frequently interferes with medical and humanitarian workers' ability to reach the injured. Any emergency field mission requires multiple negotiations by telephone and at checkpoints in the city. Such negotiations take time, which risks lives.

All this is compounded by the increasingly desperate medical situation throughout the country: with over 160 health-care facilities attacked since 2015<sup>14</sup> and hundreds more forced to close because of a lack of fuel and supplies, only 45 per cent of facilities are currently functional.<sup>15</sup> The dearth of essential medicines and medical supplies entering Yemen – less than 30 per cent of what is needed – and the irregular payment of health-care workers and essential service providers only make matters worse.

An elderly man walks through the damage caused by clashes in his neighbourhood. December 2016.





“That day,  
my life came  
to an end”

— Hanan, a Taiz resident  
who lost her husband,  
holding her young daughter.

## ONE WIDOW’S STORY

### In her own words

My husband was not a fighter. He did not even know how to carry a weapon. He had his own dental clinic, and I worked there as a secretary. We had a newborn baby girl. We were deeply happy until the war broke out in the city. Then everything changed.

We did not want to leave the place where we had spent all our lives, so we decided to stay in our home where my husband’s clinic was, despite intense clashes and random shelling.

All our neighbours left, since our area was full of destruction, blood, fear and loneliness.

I would hug my baby girl close when there were clashes, and take her to another room to shelter her better from the noise.

On one of the difficult days, my husband went out to buy some things for the house. On his way back, he was shot and killed by a sniper from a nearby rooftop.

That day, my life came to an end. I lost my husband, my work and my house. I couldn’t afford the rent and went to live with my family. My father, with his limited income, is supporting my seven siblings and us. There is nothing left for me in this life, except for memories of a city which was, once, full of life.

I wish the war would come to an end and that we could see children go to school. I want to see them playing and having fun, as before. I want a better future for my baby girl, a future that knows no wars or killings.



A. Lohy/CRIC

Children playing in the streets of Mosul. The city has suffered greatly in recent offensives and many of the houses and civilian infrastructure have been destroyed or damaged. March 2017.

## MOSUL, IRAQ

# “EVERYWHERE YOU LOOKED, SOMEONE WAS TRYING TO KILL YOU”

Characterized by intense, street-by-street, house-to-house fighting, the battle for Mosul initially seemed to avoid the large-scale destruction seen in some other urban battles in Iraq. But as casualties keep rising, the costs for civilians are becoming more and more unbearable.

Yousef was having breakfast when the battle for the city came right to his doorstep. “As I took a sip of tea, an explosion came out of nowhere,” he says. “Shrapnel tore through my arms and legs. I stood up, rushed to the car and was taken to the hospital. I have wounds in my legs, head and arms. All my family members were injured in the attack.”

Yousef was fortunate to live. But this terrifying experience is becoming familiar to many as the fighting in Mosul rages on, presenting grave challenges for the city’s 1.5 million inhabitants.

Military operations that run constantly day and night, rapidly shifting front lines, fear for the safety of loved ones and the perceived or real

dangers of going out to get life-saving services such as health care, water, or food are just some key dimensions of the fighting's huge toll on civilians.

Joshua Baker, who directed *Battle for Mosul*, a documentary produced by PBS and The Guardian, says that there was virtually no distance between the fighters and civilians during the fighting in eastern Mosul.

"One of the commanders told me that sometimes the fighting gets so bad, he'll be in the kitchen shooting at his enemy, who'll be in the living room shooting at him, while there are civilians – families – upstairs," says Baker, who was embedded with an Iraqi special operations forces team in Mosul, before he was injured in an attack.

Baker got a sense that the extreme violence he witnessed had become normalized for the traumatized population. He tells the story of when the convoy he was travelling with was ambushed:

"We managed to get out by reversing [our bulletproof Humvee] down the road about 200 metres onto another street. While we sat there, we saw fighters just around the corner. There were children playing just next to us. I got out of the Humvee and walked around to try and take cover, and a [suicide] bomber exploded on the next street. There were other kids playing just next to that area, with their parents nearby. You know that they are aware of what is going on, but the violence just seems to have been normalized somehow."

In addition, the poor handling of human remains, which are often left in the open or are trapped under rubble, adds to the sense of unease and despair, even as people begin to return to a more normal daily life. Many corpses have been left in public areas, including near water sources, deepening the emotional impact on civilians and adding to their fear.<sup>16</sup>

"We only left because of the shelling. If we had stayed, we would have been dead by now."  
In urban conflict, people's homes often become battlegrounds. Khaled and his wife (pictured) sit in one of the heavily damaged rooms inside their home in the al-Tamnīn neighbourhood. February 2017.





Families displaced from western Mosul. March 2017.

Today, eastern Mosul still faces challenges in ensuring the provision of key services such as water, electricity, health care and garbage collection. Markets are functioning again and restaurants are reopening, but many simply cannot afford the food that is available.

“So many key services are missing,” says Dany Merhy, the ICRC’s field coordinator in Erbil. “Some people are uprooting themselves again, to camps or other areas, because services and

food are still lacking. And humanitarian organizations still struggle to get regular, safe access to various parts of the city.”

Many houses, public buildings, hospitals and damaged areas or streets need to be repaired or rebuilt. Meanwhile, the security situation remains tenuous, as public places, such as markets, are still the target of attacks.

## STAY OR LEAVE: A LIFE OR DEATH DECISION

Despite these hardships and dangers, the battle for Mosul also reflects some progress in efforts to prevent displacement and extensive loss of life and damage. It is the latest of several major urban battles in Iraq over the past 14 years, including those in Baghdad, Fallujah and Ramadi.

The recent battle for Ramadi, which was retaken from the Islamic State group by the Iraqi army after four months of fierce fighting, was extremely destructive. Most inhabitants of Ramadi escaped the city at some point during the fighting. But because up to 80 per cent

of the city was destroyed<sup>17</sup> – and littered with explosives – there was little left to which residents could return. By mid-March 2017, more than a year after the battle ended, only around 60 per cent of those who fled had returned.<sup>18</sup>

Nationwide, even before the Iraqi offensive on Mosul began in mid-October 2016, around a tenth of Iraqis had been uprooted from their homes,<sup>19</sup> and around a third required some form of urgent humanitarian assistance. Seemingly to avert another massive and potentially disastrous exodus, the Iraqi army distributed leaflets in Mosul encouraging civilians to stay put.



For civilians, the decision to stay or to uproot themselves is a complex and in many ways impossible one, given the risks either choice entails: Flee and risk being killed on the way, or stay put and risk being caught in the cross-fire? They have no assurance, in either case, that their needs, or their family's needs, will be met. See *Compounding effects: displaced people in urban areas*, page 46.

In the case of Mosul, after three months of fierce street-to-street battles on its eastern side, less than a sixth of residents had fled the city or neighbouring villages by January 2017.<sup>20</sup> This was significantly fewer than had been predicted.

*“Some of the violence just seems to have been normalized.”*

Passing by Iraqi soldiers, a young boy finds a creative way to use his bicycle to bring petrol to his house. March 2017.



## HEAVY FIGHTING, INDISTINCT BATTLE LINES

While western Mosul is a smaller area geographically, its narrow and compact streets and higher population density mean battle lines are even more blurred, increasing the dangers faced by the half a million people who remain there. By the end of March, less than a month and a half after fighting to take western Mosul began, civilian casualties had increased sharply. The rates of displacement had too. By the start of April, more than 300,000 residents remained displaced from Mosul and its outskirts,<sup>21</sup> around 274,000 of them from the city itself.<sup>22</sup> Yet there are few safe routes through which residents can flee. Although the numbers of deaths remain impossible to confirm, hospitals have started to see rising numbers of injured people. As the battle for western Mosul continues, humanitarian workers still struggle to gain safe and unimpeded access to the area to deliver food, water, medical care and other basic and vital services.

Mosul illustrates new trends and presents new challenges for protecting civilians and infrastructure in urban warfare. While the main battle is being fought by fighters on the ground and inside the city, with Iraqi coalition air support and strikes, new technologies have also appeared, such as grenade-launching drones.

In the battle for Mosul, many fighters recognize that the long-term goal is to ensure stability for Iraq. “But as one commander told me,” says Baker, “the short-term goals are getting the job done and winning the next battle. The long-term goals are obviously more important, but the short-term ones will kill you if you get them wrong.”



A family leaves their home after the fighting in their Mosul neighbourhood came to an end. February 2017.

*“Attacks came from everywhere, including bombers, truck bombs, grenades flown from drones, snipers ... Everywhere you looked there was something trying to kill you.”*

— Joshua Baker, director of *Battle for Mosul*,  
a documentary produced by PBS and The  
Guardian



A. Liann/GRC

“People took us in despite their own difficult circumstances.”

— *Mohammed stands in his damaged home with his brother Ibrahim.*

A. Liohn/ICRC

## RETURNING TO RUINS

### **In their own words**

Bombs, mortar shells and bullets were whizzing above our heads. Everyone in our neighbourhood was fleeing. It was horrible. Women, children and disabled people all had to walk through this until we reached a safer area.

[People] took us in despite their own difficult and humble circumstances. We thought we could go back within two days, so we left with nothing but the clothes we were wearing. We ended up staying for 45 days. Then we returned.

We found that our car was just a metal frame and our houses were irreparably damaged. Four fighters had blown themselves up in our home. We took two bodies out to the street.

You might be able to make up for a burned-out car, but not a destroyed house. It is the place you call home, and nothing is dearer to you than your own home.

Today, Mosul is not safe. Destruction is everywhere. It is the residents who have to tackle cleaning up the mess.



Mohammed tells the story of how he and his brother Ibrahim and their families fled their neighbourhood in eastern Mosul when fighting got too intense, expecting to be back within days. When they returned a month and a half later, they found their houses destroyed and the area heavily damaged.



Damaged residential area in eastern Mosul. February 2017.

# WHAT IS IT LIKE TO LIVE IN A CITY AT WAR?

No single story can adequately describe the many horrors of urban warfare. A city at war is like a microcosm of a wider conflict, but with this difference: the consequences of urban warfare are often compounded by the density and diversity of the city's population and by people's reliance on the city's complex and often fragile infrastructure. People in cities on the front lines of conflict must often endure various hardships that are linked and mutually exacerbating.

People living under **siege**, or in siege-like situations, lack even the most basic ingredients of a normal life: food, electricity, water and health care.

Others have had to flee their homes, move from one neighbourhood to another, or from one city to the next – repeatedly, in some instances – or to the countryside. These people, **displaced** within their own country, must also cope with the fact that many of the places they flee to are unsafe and incapable of meeting their needs.

One reason these needs cannot be met is that urban conflict often destroys or disrupts the **complex systems** of services – electricity, water, sanitation, garbage collection, health care – that sustain urban life. A good portion of that disruption is caused by the use of **explosive weapons with a wide impact area**, which not only kill people and destroy buildings but have serious long-term effects on the systems that support urban life and health.

But cities are more than buildings, streets and infrastructure. The constant sound of bombs, the fear of going outside, the death of friends, family and neighbours: all these things have an **emotional and psychological impact** that must be addressed.

In the following sections, we will introduce you to people struggling with all these issues, and illustrate the tremendous impact they have on individuals and on urban populations as a whole.

1

CITIES UNDER SIEGE

2

DISPLACED PEOPLE  
IN URBAN AREAS

3

COMPLEX URBAN SYSTEMS

4

EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN  
POPULATED AREAS, CHEMICAL  
WEAPONS, AND WEAPON  
CONTAMINATION



ICRC staff assess the damage caused by recent fighting in Sawan district, in the Yemeni city of Sana'a. May 2015.

# “LIVING UNDERGROUND”

Cut off from the outside world and clinging to life



Urban warfare in the Middle East today is characterized by the increasing use of an ancient form of urban warfare: the siege.<sup>23</sup> In 2016, eastern Aleppo was subjected to a well-known siege that lasted 190 days; the obstruction of humanitarian assistance caused massive suffering among civilians in many other Middle Eastern towns and cities as well, such as Fallujah, Taiz, Deir Ezzor, Foua, Kefraya and Madaya.

In the Syrian Old City of Homs, which was under siege from May 2012 to May 2014, cart seller Abu Hani says that his family gathered firewood in the streets at night, as there was no diesel or gas to be had and they could not move around during the day because of the fighting.

Because of shortages of food, he adds, people tried to grow their own vegetables but they often had to resort to eating partially rotten lentils and plants growing in the street that, in normal circumstances, were not considered edible. “We lost a lot of weight [during this time],” Hani says. “One does not think about food when one is afraid, one meal is enough.”

In some cases, cities in conflict are virtually under siege because of the extreme difficulty of taking goods in or out. The partial siege imposed on Taiz since the summer of 2015 has brought the local economy to the point of collapse. “Most markets in the city have closed, and in those that still have some food, the prices are so high that people do not have enough money to buy anything,” says Nancy Hamad, who runs the ICRC’s office in Taiz. “Malnutrition cases have gone up very sharply, especially among children.”

“People are eating from the garbage because they can’t get food,” she adds. “We’ve seen women boiling tree leaves just to give children some hot soup.”

Fighting in or around a besieged city can also cause the destruction of harvests in fields within the city or on its outskirts, or make the fields inaccessible. At one camp for internally displaced people, children who had recently left a city under siege recall times of bitter hunger. “I can’t remember the last time I saw a chicken or a sheep,” says one child.



*“Until now my daughters wake up at night, afraid. They want their mother. They miss her. We all do.”*



Abu Hani, who lost his wife and son when two rockets hit his home in the Old City of Homs, standing with his three daughters. After two and a half years being displaced from their homes, they are now back in their original home, which they repaired with the help of charities. January 2017.

In another city under siege, people got by on one very meagre meal a day: usually, a broth made out of water and wheat or barley. People might eat some rice or bulgur, if it was available. Some women told visiting ICRC delegates that their younger children did not know what fruit looked like.

It is exceedingly difficult for humanitarian organizations to get food and other life-saving goods, such as medical supplies, to people living under siege, which is why they continue to make urgent appeals for access to besieged cities.

IHL does not prohibit sieges directed exclusively against an enemy's military installations, but it forbids certain practices, or methods of warfare, commonly associated with sieges, such as deliberately starving the civilian population. Moreover, it requires the parties involved to ensure that the sick and the wounded get the medical care they need. Both the besieged and the besieging parties must take constant care, while carrying out military operations, not to harm civilians.

## MAKING DO IN A DESPERATE SITUATION

At a camp for displaced people, a group of children who had recently left a besieged city in Syria were finally able to play. "I am so happy here," says one. "I can finally run around. Before, we were living underground, we could rarely go outside because of the shelling. Our only toys were pieces of stone."

Often living in shattered cityscapes, people under siege learn to get by without electricity and running water, showing extraordinary resilience. When everyday cleaning supplies are no longer available in local markets, people have been known to use ashes to wash their clothes. Some made their own fuel through a

makeshift process for refining plastic. Small pieces of plastic are boiled in cylinders for about nine hours to yield a liquid known as talqa that can be collected and used to run generators, motorcycles, water pumps and other machines.

Drinking water is also a rare and precious commodity. The boreholes available are for watering crops, so the water has to be boiled before consumption – but some people drink water directly from the boreholes, and risk contracting water-borne diseases. Water from the boreholes is also taken by tractor into some neighbourhoods, but because of the lack of fuel, the generators powering the pumps work for only one to three hours each day.

## HEALTH CARE UNDER SIEGE

For hospitals, the lack of clean water and proper nutrition means more cases of intestinal infection, in addition to their steady caseload of people wounded by gunshots or explosions. Many hospitals also come under fire or suffer acute shortages of essential medical equipment and supplies, including anaesthetics, antibiotics and IV fluids. In addition, the few basic operating supplies that can be found are often extremely expensive at a time when hospitals lack income or reliable funding.

While hospital staff often use generators to guard against frequent power cuts, shortages of petrol mean that certain critical health services are unavailable. The collapse of the local economy or absence of government funds mean that hospitals lack the resources to pay staff salaries; doctors, nurses and support

staff often make heroic efforts to keep facilities running even as they struggle to feed their own families. But like many sectors of society, hospitals under siege are severely understaffed.

In many cases, humanitarian organizations provide equipment, medical supplies and other support, including money to pay staff salaries. But restrictions on access to besieged areas make such help inconsistent, insufficient and in some cases, impossible to sustain.

Moreover, there are often few places outside the urban areas to which people can flee, because only cities have the resources needed to support large numbers of people.



Restrictions on movement of goods into and within Taiz since July 2015 have forced many to undertake difficult and sometimes dangerous journeys through steep mountain roads in order to get food and other basics. Taiz, Sabir mountain, Taloq, July 2016.



## “ ESCAPING FROM A CITY AT WAR AND RETURNING TO IT: SOME TERRIFYING EXPERIENCES

### **In their own words**

#### **Ammar and Ranim’s story**

*Ammar and Ranim have experienced at first hand the terrors of urban warfare. They recount how they first fled the war-torn Syrian city of Homs with their baby daughter in 2012, after which they lived in two nearby cities before finally returning to Homs. Ammar also recalls the first time the family went back to their old home in Homs. Their story is not unlike that of the roughly six million people displaced within Syria. See the section on displaced people, page 46.*

**Ammar:** When we reached an area next to Homs’s old clock square, heavy firing broke out. An opposition group attacked from one side and army soldiers returned fire from the building near which our car was parked. I was standing in front of the car, and my wife and our baby were in the back seat. Bullet casings hit the car’s windows.

**Ranim:** Finally, after some frightening moments, we managed to reach our house safely.

**Ammar:** At that time, checkpoints were being set up in our neighbourhood, and electricity and water were cut off. All the basic amenities of life were gradually disappearing.

*But leaving a city in conflict is neither easy nor safe. Ammar and Ranim recall their harrowing departure for the nearby city of Tartus.*



A. Kambal/ICRC

**Ammar visits his old neighbourhood in Homs, Syria. January 2017.**

**Ammar:** We reached the first checkpoint, where there were many soldiers. An officer came up and asked me what we were doing there. I told him that we were travelling to Tartus. He let us go, but told us to drive as fast as we could. We did what he said, but after a minute we reached another checkpoint. The soldiers there pointed their guns at us immediately. I waved my hand out of the window, my wife was very scared.

An angry-looking officer came up to the car. “Who are you?” he asked.

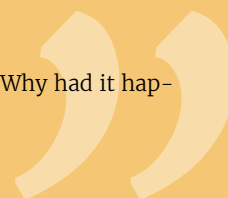
I said that I was travelling to Tartus with my family. He replied that if he hadn’t seen the baby, he would have ordered his soldiers to start shooting at the car. “You were saved by her,” he said. After that, he let us continue on our way.

*Finally, they went to live in another part of Homs so that Ranim could go back to her teaching job. They depended on charities for diapers, clothes and milk for their baby.*

**Ammar:** After two years, the siege was over. I was among the first group that returned to the area. I went directly to find my house. Our street was blocked by barricades, so I had to enter another house and jump from it into another, and so on until I reached our house. I cannot explain my feelings; I was shocked. The furniture was all torn up, one of the walls was destroyed ... I searched for and found some of our most important possessions – things of great sentimental value to us, things that brought back memories.

**Ranim:** I called Ammar. He was talking to me and crying.

**Ammar:** Yes. I was crying because I did not know why this had happened to me. Why had it happened to us?



# “IF WE HAD STAYED, WE WOULD BE DEAD BY NOW”

## Fleeing to, from or within cities at war: Challenges faced by displaced people in urban areas

During armed conflict, people flee their homes for a host of reasons, to protect themselves and their families. Fleeing can be the only means they have to save their lives. In some cases, and often contrary to IHL, they are forcibly displaced. They may leave in haste or after careful planning, with certain essential belongings or just the clothes on their back. Whichever way they flee, their displacement has significant and long-term implications for the individuals and families involved, as well as for the communities that receive them and for their country as a whole, especially when people are displaced for long periods of time.

Some 17.5 million people<sup>24</sup> have fled their homes as a result of ongoing wars in Yemen, Iraq and Syria. Most of them, some 11.9 million, have remained within their own countries. Known as internally displaced persons (IDPs), they are among the most vulnerable civilians. They often remain at risk of attack and may not always be able to reach areas that are entirely safe; and they are often displaced repeatedly, as the areas they flee to become those they flee from.

*“We once had a good and comfortable life. We had a house and I had a job with a stable monthly salary. When the violence broke out, I, like others, lost my job. We lost everything.*

*Now I have to borrow money to buy milk for my children. There is no school here and I cannot afford the transport to take them to school. My son has a skin disease, but I have no car to take him to the clinic to be treated.”*

— An Iraqi father of ten, displaced from the town of Sinjar in 2014 and who has had to move with his family from place to place ever since.



I. Sherkhani/ICRC



S. Tarabishli/ICRC

People displaced by the fighting in Mosul line up for food provided by the ICRC and the Iraq Red Crescent Society in a camp hosting 250,000 people. January 2017.

Marianne Gasser, the ICRC's head of delegation, with two young children displaced from their homes in Aleppo. Their family and many others at this shelter were forced to flee again when fighting affected this area. July 2016.

Displaced people may move to cities in search of safety, food, shelter, health care and work, but there is no guarantee that they will find these things because resources are already stretched or severely curtailed owing to nearby fighting. Aleppo, scene of one of the worst urban battles in recent history, attracted thousands of Syrians from nearby places. Despite the violence, parts of Aleppo still appeared to be relatively safe and may have been attractive because of the city's proximity to people's original homes. But as front lines shifted and some of those previously safe areas were affected, many people had to flee again.

All this demonstrates the extent to which people are suffering. "In some areas I've been to, the devastation is huge and absolute," says Avril Patterson, the ICRC's health coordinator in Syria for the past three years. "You're standing there looking at completely destroyed

buildings or buildings that are completely uninhabitable. And then you go in and find out that there is a field hospital in the basement."

The destructiveness and methods of modern urban warfare help explain why people have to leave their homes and communities. In some cases, the total lack of essential and life-saving services forces entire communities to move quickly just to get urgent medical care. Take Mosul, for example. "Many wounded people struggled to get medical care in Mosul," says Sarah al-Zawqari, the ICRC's communications delegate in Iraq. "I heard about a 13-year-old who was shot while trying to flee. He could not be evacuated for three to four hours. One man told me how his wife went into labour and how it took him between seven and eight hours to leave the city and find a field hospital where she could give birth."

## DISPLACED BUT INVISIBLE

Whatever their reasons for leaving their homes, the plight of people who flee to cities is often made more difficult by the fact that they are usually less visible than people who flee to rural areas or camps set up to host displaced people. In some Syrian cities, for example, abandoned or unfinished buildings have been turned into collective shelters. Some families have set up makeshift shelters in such buildings; many others have gone to stay with relatives.

The mass movement of people in western Aleppo in August 2016 is a vivid example. Thousands fled their homes and found shelter wherever they could, including in public parks, mosques, schools and unfinished buildings. Many of the unfinished buildings had no walls, no toilets and no running water. Structures originally conceived as luxury housing have become unofficial collective shelters for which there are no sewage systems, water infrastructure or roads. Humanitarian organizations had to improvise their response: for instance, they installed insulation to protect people from the cold or the heat, provided privacy partitions, and devised short-term solutions for water delivery.

The needs of displaced people are often very complex and not limited to material assistance. In the chaos of sudden and rushed departures, for example, families are often separated, and people often lose or leave behind the official documents required for gaining access to essential services such as health care and education.

Because people often move without being tracked by authorities or humanitarian organizations, it is often difficult to know where displaced people are, what their needs are and how to respond effectively – particularly to vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the disabled and children separated from their parents. In cities, especially larger ones, the dispersal of displaced people makes identifying and reaching them all the more challenging.

In some cities, systems have been set up to help track displaced people, but they are often unable to keep up. Estimates of displaced people in these cities are therefore likely to be very conservative, and information on their needs incomplete, making it even more challenging to respond fully and effectively.

A family uses an unpaved, muddy and mountainous route to leave the besieged areas of Taiz. November 2016.





## RETURNING HOME

The safety of their places of origin is not the only consideration for people wishing to return to their homes; the loss of official documents can also present a whole raft of problems for them, particularly as governments may impose bureaucratic obstacles to reintegration. Destruction of property is another major issue, as, in most cases, people do not have the money and resources to rebuild their homes.

“People often want to go home as soon as they can. They worry about someone else moving into their apartment, or of losing it,” notes Patterson. “Returning home is a way of restoring their identity. But it depends on how much of their home is left.”

In many conflict-affected cities in the Middle East, there is not much for many displaced people to return to. Take the case of Ramadi, Iraq, where, according to various sources,<sup>25</sup> some 2,000 buildings and 48,000 residential homes were either partially or totally destroyed. In addition, key pieces of infrastructure, such as bridges, the main hospital, the train station and a water-treatment plant serving more than half of Ramadi’s residents, were destroyed.

An elderly man enters his Mosul home, destroyed in recent clashes. Elderly people often suffer extreme hardship when they flee their homes. Very often, they are too frail to leave, even when fighting is severe. March 2017.



## A GRADUAL LOSS

Some people lose everything at once, but gradual losses caused by displacement can be equally devastating. Prolonged and repeated displacement will often deplete the resources of those who manage, initially, to stabilize their situation and recover some assets, often with the help of friends and relatives.

Take Jamal\* and his family. In 2015, heavy air raids and fighting in his native Saqqin, in rural Sa’ada, Yemen, forced him, his wife, and eight children to flee to a suburb of Sana’a, Yemen’s capital. Before the war, Jamal, now 50, had a stable job as a farm hand. But since fleeing his home, he has been unable to find work and has sunk into debt. Two of his children have cancer.

Jamal is desperate to provide for the family, who regularly miss meals because they have no money for food.

“We have nothing left,” he says. “I sold my wife’s gold and everything we owned. I cannot afford to bring my children to the hospital. We live in a house but I have no money to pay the rent anymore. My children didn’t go to school at all last year [in 2016] because of our situation.”



Aleppo. A child drinking water from a borehole repaired by the ICRC. August 2015.

## COMPLEX URBAN SYSTEMS

# “OUR TARGET: ENSURE THE WATER REMAINED NEUTRAL”

War in and around cities disrupts the network of services that urban dwellers need to survive

Hamed,\* a technician at a water plant on the south-eastern outskirts of Aleppo, has experienced many challenges while working to maintain services for people on all sides of the Syrian conflict.

“During the crisis, we had to work in two water stations [and] used to cross the front lines on a weekly basis, in coordination with humanitarian partners and parties on the ground,” says Hamed.

One of the water plants was both taken over by armed groups for periods of time and looted for its copper wire. “Our target was to keep the water facility working, and to ensure the water remained neutral,” says Hamed. “We faced horrible moments; we felt like we were part of a horror movie.” During one high-risk mission – to an area controlled by three different parties to the conflict – clashes broke out and Hamed was shot and had to be taken to hospital.

*\* Not his real name*

## WATER MUST FLOW, EVEN IN WAR

Attacks affecting objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, and other disruptions to their functioning – caused, for instance, by damage to water transfer stations, electrical lines, or underground sewage pipes from powerful explosive weapons – have become all too common in urban warfare today.

In addition to reminding all warring parties of their obligation to respect and do no harm to these vital pieces of infrastructure, the ICRC and its partner National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies work with local water boards and service providers to strengthen existing water, electrical and sanitation services so that they can better withstand the kind of protracted battles going on in Middle Eastern cities today.<sup>26</sup>

“To avoid such crises, we need services which can respond to and absorb the effects of shocks and stresses from conflict – and recover as rapidly as possible when circumstances permit,” says Michael Talhami, the ICRC’s coordinator of water-and-habitat operations for the Near and Middle East.

In many Middle Eastern cities, water sources and pumping stations are often outside city limits or spread out geographically, and

critical water lines cross territories controlled by opposing armed fighters. Detailed risk assessments need to be carried out before expanding the number of water sources, to reduce the risk of any one section of the city being cut off from water if front lines shift or equipment is damaged. In Taiz, for example, the ICRC, working alongside the local water board, fixed old wells and dug new ones, both within and outside the city, that now supply almost 90 per cent of the city’s drinking water.

As fighting began to escalate this year in Yemen’s western Red Sea port city of Hodeida, the ICRC worked with local water boards to increase the number of water holes throughout the city so that if water services were cut, the local population would have a backup. Critical pieces of equipment – which can often be very specialized – were ordered in advance as it can take months to receive and retrofit new components into old systems. Those months would be critical for people in need of clean water and sanitation services. It is crucial to be proactive early on, because expanding the supply of water after fighting takes over a city can be extremely challenging.



An ICRC engineer and local water board member connect the main public water pipeline to a district in the Yemeni city of Sana’a. December 2016.

## A STRESSED ENVIRONMENT

Tragically, these conflicts, and humanitarian efforts to restore services, come after many decades of diminishing water supplies. The entire Middle East is confronted by a broad range of major challenges: aging and leaky infrastructure, drought, shrinking aquifers and lowering water tables, desertification of arable lands and salinization.<sup>27</sup>

Simply drilling more wells and drawing water on an emergency basis is not sustainable, experts say. “The progressive depletion of water levels in these boreholes is already evident and highly alarming,” says Maurizio Peselj, head of the ICRC’s water-and-habitat team in Aleppo.

The response from international humanitarian agencies and organizations must therefore take a range of complex issues into account: the nature of essential urban services, which are multi-faceted and interconnected; the cumulative impact, direct and indirect, of conflict, compounded by recurrent violations of IHL; the security of staff; access to people in need; the politics of a highly securitized working environment; and funding that does not match the duration or scale of the needs.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the complexity of the task, the extent of the damage, and the dangers and hardships, Hamed,\* the Aleppo water board worker, is confident that his investment to keep the water flowing will pay off. “Throughout history, this city has survived many crises and earthquakes, it adapted to very hard situations,” he says. “Aleppo will thrive again, it will be rebuilt.”

\* *Not his real name*

An ICRC engineer checks the motor of a power generator in Hodeida, Al-Thawra Hospital. May 2016.



Local residents fetch water from an ICRC water intake point near Taiz. August 2016.



ICRC

Al-Madinah al-Siyahiyah, Iraq. People fill up their bottles. The ICRC had repaired the water pumping and filtration unit in the city, damaged by the fighting. January 2015.

Cities make enormous contributions to national and regional economies – supporting agriculture, industry and trade – but they are also dependent on external resources. The bulk of the food consumed by their inhabitants comes from farms on their outskirts or much farther away. The fuel needed to keep cars, trucks, electrical generators and heating systems running usually come from wells and refineries at some distance from residential centres. Electrical power plants, supply routes, water- and wastewater-treatment plants are also often outside city limits.

Even distant combat can thus have dramatic effects on urban dwellers. When fighting comes to the city itself, the front lines between opposing sides may cut across the power, water and sewer lines that distribute these services around the city – and numerous interdependent power and water networks might fall under the control of different armed factions. Keeping people alive and healthy during protracted conflict is therefore an extremely complex task.

# SHOCK WAVES

## The devastating effects of using explosive weapons with a wide impact area in urban warfare

Too often in today's conflicts in the Middle East, explosive weapons that have wide-area effects are used in populated areas, with devastating consequences for civilians and civilian infrastructure.

An explosive weapon might affect a wide area because of its large destruction radius, the inaccuracy of the delivery system or because it scatters many munitions over a wide area. Examples of such weapons include large bombs and missiles, including laser-guided "smart" ones; indirect-fire weapon systems such as unguided mortars, rockets and artillery guns; multi-barrel rocket launchers; and certain kinds of improvised explosive devices. These

explosives kill not just with the blast but also by sending fragments of the munition casing or secondary fragments flying through the air in all directions.<sup>29</sup>

In urban warfare, combat takes place in neighbourhoods where fighters are mixed in amongst civilians. Even when aimed at a military target, explosive weapons with a wide impact area are likely to have indiscriminate effects in populated areas. Because legitimate military targets are mingled with civilians, and with their homes, hospitals and schools, these weapons have devastating consequences for the civilian population.





K. Al-Saeed/ICRC

A partly destroyed civilian building in the war-torn city of Taiz. December 2016.

### BEYOND THE IMPACT ZONE

The use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area can have various long-term consequences for a city, beyond the casualties and destruction within the immediate impact zone. When essential civilian infrastructure is damaged or destroyed, essential services are disrupted, resulting in serious, far-reaching harm to civilians, including death and injury.

The destructiveness of sustained and intense bombardment is a key reason that people flee

their cities. The almost complete destruction of some urban neighbourhoods means that many people who have fled cities such as Homs, Ramadi, Aleppo and Taiz have nothing to return to – even if the fighting were to stop.

These are some of the reasons that the ICRC and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement call on parties to armed conflicts to avoid using wide-impact-area explosive weapons in densely populated areas.<sup>30</sup>

# CHEMICAL WEAPONS

## Despite their absolute prohibition, allegations of the use of chemical weapons remain all too frequent

Repeated allegations of the use of chemical warfare agents, and the use of chlorine as a chemical weapon, in Iraq and Syria are extremely worrying. Chemical weapons are absolutely prohibited under IHL and all parties must refrain from using them. ICRC teams follow up these matters closely and remind all parties to the conflict of this absolute prohibition and their obligation to comply with international law.

Toxic chemical agents or biological pathogens are not only potentially harmful or even lethal to the person directly affected; they could also contaminate health workers, ambulances, operating rooms, even entire hospitals, rendering these critical facilities useless just when they are most needed. This concern is not hypothetical, as evidenced recently by the apparent use of a toxic chemical agent in Mosul, where 15 patients – including children – were admitted to hospital showing clinical symptoms consistent with exposure to a blistering chemical agent.<sup>31</sup>

The increasing frequency of urban conflict has also led humanitarian organizations to rethink and improve their methods for helping cities prepare for intense violence and mitigate the risks. In Iraq and Ukraine, one of the steps taken by the ICRC's Weapon Contamination Unit is to identify industrial sites and other places where toxic chemicals or other dangerous materials may be stored. This information could be critical when preparing for the eventuality of mass casualties caused by the accidental or intentional bombardment of industrial facilities near populated urban areas.

Also in Iraq, the ICRC's Weapon Contamination Unit works with hospitals and health centres to help them strengthen their ability to handle mass casualties caused by either the use of conventional explosive weapons or the release of toxic chemical agents. It has also been providing two health facilities near Mosul with training and equipment for dealing with patients contaminated by toxic chemicals and warfare agents.





ICRC weapon contamination experts train the staff of a health centre near Mosul, Iraq, how to safely treat people who have been exposed to chemical or biological agents. November 2016.

# A DEADLY LEGACY

## Unexploded weapons continue to take lives even after the fighting has ended

It's estimated that roughly 10 to 15 per cent of the bombs, rockets, shells and cluster submunitions used in conflict do not explode on impact. Instead, they remain buried in the ground or amid the rubble, gravely endangering the people who live in urban conflict zones.

These unexploded weapons also threaten the safety of people engaged in immediate rescue efforts or in longer-term work to restore services or make roads passable and buildings habitable.

For this reason, the ICRC's Weapon Contamination Unit works, where possible – in Iraq, for instance – to find, remove and destroy unexploded weapons. It also works with local partners including National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to educate the public about the hazardousness of such weapons.

Longer-term reconstruction of urban neighbourhoods contaminated by unexploded weapons is risky and expensive, given the care that must be taken to ensure that all areas are safe before rubble-clearing equipment can be brought in.

An ICRC weapon contamination officer combs the ground for unexploded bombs around a water station near Mosul, Iraq. February 2017.





Two ICRC employees assess the destruction caused by the ongoing conflict in Sa'ada, July 2015.

Heavily contaminated by explosive remnants of war, the Yemeni city of Sada'a has also been badly affected by the use of cluster munitions. The city is representative of the wider and deadly legacy of these weapons in different parts of the country, a legacy which has overwhelmed the capacity of the Yemen's Executive Mine Action Centre (YEMAC) to respond and clear these safely. Several deminers have been killed in related incidents in recent months. Both the number of weapons used and, in many instances, their technological complexity, present significant and long-term challenges which require urgent and concerted action.



A young boy sits in the ruins of his family's home in Yemen. July 2016.

M. Al Qanas/ICRC

## THE EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT

# “I SAW MYSELF BREAK”

### Beyond physical injuries, protracted urban conflict causes very real and lasting psychological scars

The emotional, psychological and psychosocial impact of a traumatic event can be long-lasting, an entire lifetime in some cases. For people trapped within protracted urban conflicts, episodes of horrific violence or brutality may be a reality that they have to endure almost every day, and sometimes for several years.

For many people like Mahmoud\* and Om Ali\*, that trauma is then followed by the ongoing instability and insecurity of long-term displacement. Along with their two children, the couple left their home in the Yemeni city of Taiz after it was destroyed in the fighting.

After relocating to the city of Sana'a, they struggle to provide even the most basic things – nourishment, clothes and education – for their children. “I am affected psychologically,

physically and morally,” says Mahmoud, the husband. “Everything in my life has changed. When my children need anything, and I don't have it, I feel frustrated. I've died many times over.”

Om Ali also sees the impact the war has taken on the psychological well-being of the entire family. “My sons are totally devastated,” she says, adding that her elder son is no longer going to school owing to psychological issues. “My husband used to work but because of the war, he is jobless. Now he is suffering from mental issues [and] he hits his sons.”

When people lose so much, they often feel their sense of self and well-being is being torn away from them. Sami\* is 27 years old and now lives in Beirut, Lebanon where he struggles to find



A young girl at the Debaga camp for people displaced by the fighting in Mosul, Iraq. November 2016.

a sense of normality. “I just want to be alright. It’s hard to be ‘okay’ when you’ve seen so much. I saw my city die. I saw myself break. I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay, but I want that.”

Civilians and communities often demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability to the most testing circumstances. But this is especially difficult amid an ongoing conflict: ceaseless worry about loved ones’ safety and unremitting anxiety about food and other basic necessities exacerbate all the personal difficulties associated with such an obviously traumatizing situation. Some people react with anger or desperation, but others are quietly resigned to their circumstances. Intense grief is common, as is fear.

While most people will be able to continue to function and cope with the distress they have endured, others will suffer incapacitating psychological trauma. There are several factors that make the psychological damage caused by urban warfare distinctive. Because of the proximity of the fighting and the constant sound of explosions, people in densely populated areas are regularly exposed to horrific events in which many people are seriously injured or killed. The lack of “safe” areas where people can relax, the disruption of family and social

life, and an absence of basic services such as health care or education can compound the psychological impact.

At the same time, given the scale of potential needs, local health systems in conflict-affected countries, as well as countries receiving people from the conflict, often do not have the capacity to identify or provide appropriate support to people with related needs. In nearly all the cities undergoing conflict, the collapse of local economies or increasing demands have also affected mental health services. These are normally under-resourced at the best of times, but conflict exacerbates the problem as professionals are among those forced to flee the fighting. A range of State and non-governmental actors are getting involved to help bridge this gap. Humanitarian organizations, including the ICRC and its partner National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, are working to scale up the services they offer. But far more investment in this area is needed.

## GROWING UP IN THE SHADOW OF CRISIS

Children are particularly vulnerable, but there are few services – such as counselling or therapy – to help them process their feelings; and all the elements of a normal childhood, such as school and playing with friends, are either missing or have been badly disrupted. “My 11-year-old girl and 5-year-old boy did not have a real childhood,” says one man from Aleppo. “They went through terrifying experiences. Hamodeh, the boy, suffers from occasional panic attacks. He usually runs and hides whenever he hears loud noises – even if it is a door slamming shut.”

Lack of education, dearth of job opportunities, inaccessibility of cultural and recreational activities, such as sports, unavailability of treatment for troubled young people nearing adulthood: all this creates psychological pressure that can find release in gang membership, sexual and other violence, and other unlawful conduct.

People dealing with multiple losses, or the disappearance, of loved ones have to endure a very particular torment. Maggie Andriotti, a Beirut resident, lost two sons during the Lebanese civil war: one to a rocket blast, the other to a curable illness – he died because the fighting in their neighbourhood prevented her from getting him to a medical facility in time. But the anguish of not knowing what happened to her third son goes beyond the pain she feels at the death of his brothers. He went missing in 1978, during the fighting in Beirut, and never returned. He was only 16 years old.

“A mother of a dead child won’t sleep at first, but eventually she can sleep at night,” she says. “Ask me, I lost two children. But a mother of a missing child, she will never sleep again. Ask me, I lost one.”

A man and his daughter stand in front of damaged homes in a neighbourhood of Sana’a, Yemen. May 2015.



T. Glass/ICRC

Improvements in people's daily life can often provide emotional and psychological relief: for instance, when they get clear answers about the fate of missing loved ones or when certain basic needs – shelter, food, clean water or health care – are met.

Abu Hani, a cart seller from the Old City of Homs, in Syria, was already living with constant anxiety, and coping with the daily struggle to find food in a city under siege, when his worst fear came true: a rocket landed on his family's home and killed his wife and youngest child.

His leg was broken in the blast and Hani is no longer able to work. In addition to dealing with the horror of that day, the grief of losing his wife and infant child, he is now the sole caretaker for his three daughters. "I am not working so we are dependent on charities," he says.

All this has placed severe psychological pressure on Abu Hani. However, when his daughters were finally able to go back to school, for example, he felt a sense of hope. Often, such solutions are only feasible after the fighting ends, when families can feel safe again, and people can really start to rebuild their lives.

"Until now my daughters wake up at night, afraid. They want their mother. They miss her. We all do. However I am so happy to see my daughters growing up, going to school, their lives are being restored. Two of them are taking acting classes. A few days ago, they took part in a play, and for them life is evolving."

\* Not their real names.



*"A mother of a dead child won't sleep at first, but eventually she can sleep at night. Ask me, I lost two children. But a mother of a missing child, she will never sleep again. Ask me, I lost one."*

— Maggie Andriotti, holding a photo of her missing son.

# “I WON’T FORGET, I NEVER CAN. BUT I WILL TRY AND FORGIVE”

The largely urban Lebanese civil war offers many lessons about the costs of conflict in densely populated and extremely diverse urban neighbourhoods. One key lesson: much more than just the buildings must be rebuilt in order to revive urban communities.

*“War transforms society, but rather than promoting development and advancement, countries pay the price: cities are destroyed, neighbourhoods become divided, the economy is ruined, and every action taken during the fighting has a cost ... You cannot talk about optimism right after a war, but about paying this heavy bill. Learning from past experiences like Lebanon’s is crucial to conflicts in Syria, Iraq, or Yemen.”*

— Interview with Professor Fawaz Trabulsi, historian, former Lebanese political leader and author of numerous books on Arab culture, politics and history, including *A History of Modern Lebanon*





Buildings and even neighbourhoods can be rebuilt after a conflict, but the social fabric of a city, its collective memory and the network of relations that made it tick may never fully be restored – because many people will have left or been killed, and relations between various groups will have changed.

The Lebanese civil war, which lasted 15 years and effectively ended with a peace agreement in 1989, did great damage to many populated areas, namely in Beirut. The war also divided and fractured its diverse population in ways that still endure. What can Lebanon teach us about lessening post-conflict suffering and helping rebuild urban communities torn apart by war?

Those who have studied post-war Lebanon say mending the fractures caused by war entails the restoration of social cohesion and the rebuilding of communities; these efforts must be made promptly, even though they are likely to be undermined by new or unresolved tensions and mistrust, and the long-term, traumatizing effects of war.

Such efforts, experts say, must ensure that people who fled feel that it is safe to return and that they are welcome, regardless of their political beliefs, social class, or religious affiliation. Key institutions, such as educational bodies, can help foster social cohesion; of course, they can also perpetuate divisions. The involvement of civil society and local communities is also crucial. The social reintegration of former fighters must be addressed early on.

## THE LEBANESE EXPERIENCE

Because of its duration and intensity, the Lebanese civil war had an enormous impact on the national economy. The country's infrastructure, agricultural production and industrial base<sup>32</sup> were all heavily damaged, and the emigration of hundreds of thousands of educated and skilled Lebanese crippled many key professions.<sup>33</sup>

Figures for the displaced, wounded or dead vary widely,<sup>34</sup> but the massive and enduring demographic, social and psychological impact of the conflict is undisputed. The war affected both cities and the countryside, but Beirut was one of its main theatres. The militarization of society and the proliferation of militias and warring parties, and their proximity to civil-



ian areas or communities – notably in cities – are very similar to what we see today in other Middle Eastern urban wars.

Even now, more than two and half decades after the fighting ended, the violations committed on all sides, the lives lost and the people

unaccounted for, the damage caused to urban infrastructure, the decline of inclusive education, and the absence of concrete measures to address deep divisions in society, continue to trouble Lebanon.

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### DEHUMANIZING THE “OTHER” AND ENTRENCHING DIVISIONS

One of the similarities between the Lebanese experience and modern conflicts – but this is not confined to urban conflicts – is how easily the various sides managed to dehumanize their adversaries on ideological, political, ethnic and religious grounds. This is particularly noticeable in cities, which generally have a much more heterogeneous population than rural areas, and where communities are often mixed and living in close proximity to one another.

“During the Lebanese war, the sides would use sectarian descriptions or religion against each other,” explains Trabulsi. “Communities started being labelled as “Palestinians”, “Sunnis”, “Shias”, “Druze”. The individual became a representative of a group and the group could then be reduced to an individual. There were kidnappings and counter-kidnappings, assassinations, car bombs that targeted civilians rather than military targets... These would demoralize enemy fighters, but did not have any real military gain.”

Throughout the Lebanese war, the displacement of people was closely linked to acts of communal violence, and groups sought control over geographical areas, which they would organize along sectarian or religious lines. Areas were physically divided, checkpoints

erected and fees for entry imposed: the division of the city into east and west Beirut is one clear example. These geographic divisions continued during the post-war years.

Similar trends are at work today in other areas. In Yemen, for instance, tensions between tribal groups, and between groups in the north and the south, are becoming more entrenched through similar patterns of displacement. Before the war, says Trabulsi, a number of northerners used to live in Aden, which is in the south. When violence broke out, they were targeted in an attempt to make them leave. Many went back north; others went abroad.

The conflict in Yemen has undone the coexistence of various groups and eliminated their physical proximity to each other; the cities have acquired new identities because of other population movements. Many Yemeni city-dwellers have left for the countryside where they can still secure food through agriculture and other means. The growing risk of famine, obstructions to the passage of goods, and cities coming under siege: all these developments have given impetus to the flight from cities. Conversely, many other people have fled their villages because of violence and found refuge in cities. See the section on displaced people, page 46.



B. Hubschmid/CRC

As Lebanon's experience vividly illustrates, rebuilding becomes much harder if such geographic divisions are not addressed once the fighting is over. After the peace agreement, these gated communities, so to speak, only became more strongly rooted when political leaders accepted the idea of separated rehabilitation, explains Elizabeth Picard,<sup>35</sup> author and leading Middle East scholar.

"This is a process from which the country has never fully recovered," she says. "The priority was to stop the fighting and accept that each party will regroup on its micro-territory. They just 'froze' a situation rather than address it."

People were encouraged to stay among those who shared their political beliefs and religious identity, rather than to recreate the mixed neighbourhoods that characterized the pre-war years. "There were some attempts to counter this at the start, notably from young activists, who wanted to learn from the civil war and move forward," Dr Picard adds. "But local and international politicians did not heed their call, and the window of opportunity soon closed."

Combined with a lack of political incentives, the war's traumatic experiences help explain why many did not willingly return to their towns afterwards. "There are several places where people will never go back to," says George Kettaneh, now secretary-general of the Lebanese Red Cross, who was a young emergency responder during the war. "It is not a question of time or generations, they have decided to rebuild their lives again elsewhere."

Politicians and the international community should learn from this failure to address and rebuild relations and trust. Future reconciliation initiatives will benefit if they do; it will also be helpful for ensuring that people can return to their places of origin, should they so choose, regardless of their political affiliations or religious beliefs.

"Rebuilding a city involves rebuilding more than its buildings and infrastructure," Picard says. She also notes that cities can be rebuilt with the express intention of helping to repair the social fabric: "Urban planning is fundamental to restoring a city's social make-up. In Lebanon, real urban planning did not hap-

pen after the war. Often, property ownership reflected the financial interests of the wealthy, and reconstruction was carried out to keep neighbourhoods homogenous and communities divided but secure.”

In other cities currently at war, these are not theoretical concerns: the diversity that once made up a city’s strength can quickly turn into fault lines. The Iraqi city of Mosul, for example, was known for its ethnic and religious diversity and was home to the second-largest university in the country.

Since 2003, much of this has changed, and many of those who made up this rich tapestry have left. Amid the prevailing instability in the country, relations between the various ethnic groups have gradually become more complex: persistent violence in different areas and the way hostilities are conducted have clearly taken a toll on social cohesiveness.

According to Dany Merhy, the ICRC’s field coordinator in Erbil, Iraq, a number of cities are becoming more segregated and organizing themselves along ethnic or religious lines. The conduct of military operations in Mosul now, and the efforts made after the fighting has ended, could be crucial for ensuring peaceful coexistence in the future, he says.

In some Middle Eastern cities, conflict and chronically uncertain security conditions have encouraged the creation of numerous armed factions, many of whom are at odds with one another but have aligned themselves against a common enemy. This raises serious questions about what will happen after the larger conflict ends.

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## INVOLVING LOCAL EXPERTS

Whatever solutions are developed, it is critical to listen to and engage with local groups already working to stabilize their communities. Often, local initiatives and movements emerge to fill the vacuum created by the absence of functioning State services. In cities, such local groups are best placed to understand the needs of residents and neighbourhoods.

During the Lebanese civil war, members of civil society took to the streets of Beirut to advocate peace and demand a political resolution to the conflict. A less visible but crucial social development has taken place in Syria: the emergence of local city councils – or tansiqiyat, as they are

known locally – that play a more strategic civic role in ensuring services and help for communities affected by armed conflict.

The tansiqiyat are extremely responsive and have a presence in both opposition and government-controlled areas, where they are helping to organize local assistance and facilitate reconstruction. “These highly entrepreneurial players, as well as other grassroots groups, are absolutely key to the future of these cities: they must be consulted and involved in helping to rebuild the cities afterwards,” Elizabeth Picard explains. “Top-down approaches on their own will not work.”

## DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS: REBUILDING EDUCATION

Recent regional wars have had a huge, and adverse, impact on education. On the one hand, attacks on educational facilities, targeted or indiscriminate, have caused immense damage and large numbers of casualties, and depleted resources. The precarious security conditions and violence have had other consequences as well: irregular school attendance, displacement of students and teachers and reduced incomes (leading families to take children out of school).

Restoring educational opportunities, even during conflict, is crucial, and is also often cited by communities as one of their priorities, together with food, safety and health care. The Lebanese civil war caused a significant “brain drain”, as much of its educated elite emigrated, even after the war had ended.<sup>36</sup> A similar emigration from Iraq has been going on for decades; Syria and Yemen have experienced it more recently.

Education has been a major casualty of the war in Syria. This is yet another way in which young Syrians have been very hard-hit and one of the reasons for the massive emigration of young

people. Before the war, the State provided all but 1% of the funds required to support the educational system. “Today, there is a generation of children who are either uneducated or badly educated,” says Elizabeth Picard. “It is a matter of crucial importance for Syria’s young generations and for its future, and one that requires urgent attention.”

Besides their importance for a country’s future, educational facilities play a vital role in gathering together the various strands of society. The Lebanese University used to bring together students from different religions, sects and regions. “But the war changed that,” says Professor Trabulsi. “The University became divided, and schools and universities privatized. This anchored divisions, rather than bridging them. Post-war educational systems should play a role in ensuring opportunities for exchange and encounters.” This is all the more important in traditionally mixed and diverse cities, to move forward and leave divisions behind.

When the fighting ends, where do the fighters go? Authorities also have to come to terms with another critical question: What should be done to reintegrate those who were involved in the fighting? Many may have joined armed groups, for instance, to defend their neighbourhoods and families. Some of them may have done so when they were very young and they may have grown up amid the violence. After the Lebanese civil war, a large number of fighters were absorbed into the national army, and only very limited rehabilitation and reintegration of fighters took place.

### “WHY WOULDN'T I FIGHT TO PROTECT MYSELF AND MY FAMILY?”

**In his own words**

**Ibrahim\*, who fought in the Lebanese civil war**

“I was 22 and healthy. Why wouldn't I fight to protect myself and my family? We lived near Beirut. All of a sudden, there was danger in every direction. You couldn't move without thinking that you could be going to your death. Going to buy bread felt like a suicide mission. Schools? Forget about it. Everything changes. Everything stops. Except death and misery: those are available in abundance.

“They tell you war is hell. But then you see your comrades dying, you hear that yet another friend has gone missing. How can you prepare yourself for that? You can't. I suppose there are places I should have avoided. If I had, I wouldn't have seen the things I saw.”

**“We're not monsters, we're humans. And so are the other side.”**

“Before the war broke out, no one imagined we'd suddenly be fighting some other group. Training started with the war. The higher up the ranks you went, the more training you got because you were giving orders. I was trained. I knew what a target was and what wasn't. Schools, ambulances, hospitals: obviously, these aren't targets, so we told the lower-ranking soldiers to avoid them at all costs. You know, during a war you can't control every officer, but you can try as much as possible. We had to remind them that we're not monsters, we're humans. And so are the other side.

“Personally, forgiveness has made things easier for me. One day I woke up and I thought: ‘I want to forgive everyone who shot at me. I won't forget, I never can, anyway. But I will try and forgive them and maybe I can break this barrier I built between us’.”

*\* Not his real name*







## ENDNOTES

- 1 Between May 2015 and July 2016.
- 2 Conflict-related deaths in Syria, Iraq and Yemen represented 47% of the global total between 2010 and 2015 (data until the end of 2014, excluding 2015). This statistic is based on data from the Geneva Declaration Secretariat. 2015. *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2015: Every Body Counts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 3 Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) Report, 22 June 2015: *Explosive States: Explosive Violence in Populated Areas in 2014* <https://aoav.org.uk/2015/explosive-states-explosive-violence-populated-areas-2014/>.
- 4 UNHCR, *Global Trends Report, 2016*: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>, all web addresses accessed April 2017.
- 5 According to data and estimates in early April 2017 from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (<http://www.internal-displacement.org/database>), UNHCR (<http://www.refworld.org>) and the UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency <https://www.unrwa.org/>), around 17.4 million people are currently displaced within or outside Iraq, Syria and Yemen.
- 6 UNHCR: [http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php#\\_ga=1.255086920.1950945305.1484762757](http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php#_ga=1.255086920.1950945305.1484762757).
- 7 Yemen has 2.2 million internally displaced people (IDMC Preliminary 2016 data) and a projected population of 27.5 million (<http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=yemen>).
- 8 Iraq has 3.3 million internally displaced people (IDMC Preliminary 2016 data) and a projected population of 37.5 million (<http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=iraq>).
- 9 Joanne Liu and Peter Maurer. "The airstrike on an Aleppo hospital is a wake-up call for the UN. It must act now", *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/29/aleppo-hospital-airstrike-un-syria>.
- 10 Latest casualty rate as at 1 April 2017.
- 11 As per the UNOCHA guiding principles on internal displacement, including section five on return, resettlement and reintegration, and principles 28, 29 and 30: [https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/guiding-principles\[1\]](https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/guiding-principles[1]). For instance, principle 28 states: "(1) Competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence, or to resettle voluntarily in another part of the country. Such authorities shall endeavour to facilitate the reintegration of returned or resettled internally displaced persons. (2) Special efforts should be made to ensure the full participation of internally displaced persons in the planning and management of their return or resettlement and reintegration."
- 12 Some 467,000 according to the last official population census in 2004 (<https://www.citypopulation.de/Yemen.html>). Some projections estimate this number may have more than tripled before fighting broke out.
- 13 Figures from the joint IOM-UNHCR Task Force on Population Movement from January 2017 indicate that more people displaced by conflict come from Taiz governorate (547,000) than any other governorate. TPFM 12th report, January 2017, p. 12: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6owQSRCTIGYQU13MHZMNO1RdEUview?usp=sharing>.
- 14 As reported to the ICRC.
- 15 World Health Organisation, 06/11/17 <http://www.emro.who.int/media/news/survey-reveals-extent-of-damage-to-yemens-health-system.html>.
- 16 Despite the requirements under IHL on the treatment of the dead. See [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1\\_cha\\_chapter35](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_cha_chapter35).
- 17 Anbar Provincial Council spokesman, 31 December 2015: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/iraq-80-percent-ramadi-ruins-fighting-151231114030408.html>.
- 18 By 13 March 2017, around 300,500 people had returned to Ramadi District, out of the more than half a million who had been displaced during the battle for the city. IOM Iraq Displacement Masterlist: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/ReturneeML.aspx> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Ramadi\\_\(2015%E2%80%93316\)#cite\\_note-bombs\\_laid-29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Ramadi_(2015%E2%80%93316)#cite_note-bombs_laid-29).
- 19 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix. In October 2016, around 3.1 million Iraqis were estimated to be displaced across the country: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/IDPsML.aspx>.
- 20 Before the start of the Iraqi offensive on western Mosul on 19 February 2017, the estimated population of Mosul city was 1.2 to 1.5 million, and only 200,000 people were estimated to have fled the city and neighbouring areas by mid-January, after three months of fighting.
- 21 International Organization for Migration (IOM), Iraq Mission Displacement Tracking Matrix: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/EmergencyTracking.aspx>.




- 22 350,000 people were displaced from the city between 17 October 2016 and 23 March 2017, although 76,000 were estimated to have already returned by 23 March 2017: <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/IDUs/20170330-idu-issue-13.pdf>.
- 23 Sieges have occurred during wars in many modern cities, from Leningrad to the Balkans (the siege of Sarajevo lasted almost four years). But what we see today is their increasing use by different sides in armed conflicts in the Middle East. They are taking different forms, from partial to total sieges, but lasting months or years at a time, with often drastic consequences for civilians.
- 24 Including preliminary 2016 data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (<http://www.internal-displacement.org>) and UNHCR and UNRWA figures made available for these countries on 9 April 2017. The total figure includes 400,000 UNRWA Palestinian refugees who have been displaced because of the Syrian crisis.
- 25 Namely, the UN Iraq country team, UNITAR, the mayor of Ramadi and the Iraqi Ministry of Health.
- 26 IHL protects all civilian objects, and in particular those that are indispensable to the survival of the civilian population.
- 27 For more on this topic, see ICRC, *Bled Dry: How War in the Middle East Is Bringing the Region to the Brink of a Water Catastrophe*, March 2015: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/bled-dry-how-war-middle-east-bringing-region-brink-water-catastrophe>.
- 28 For an in-depth analysis of the topic, see ICRC, *Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict: A Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People*, October 2015: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/urban-services-protracted-conflict-report>.
- 29 To find out more, see: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/explosive-weapons-populated-areas-use-effects>.
- 30 ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Geneva, Switzerland, 28 November to 1 December 2011, document prepared by the International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, October 2011, page 42.
- 31 ICRC, “ICRC strongly condemns use of chemical weapons around Mosul”, 3 March 2017: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/iraq-icrc-strongly-condemns-use-chemical-weapons-around-mosul>.
- 32 American University Beirut: <http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/pspa/kisirwani.html>.
- 33 While the reasons for this go beyond the civil war’s legacy, even today a quarter of Lebanese nationals live abroad (about 1.3 million out of 5.2 million), and half of its young nationals migrate overseas after obtaining their degree.
- 34 By the end of the war, up to half a million people were estimated to be displaced within the country, and between 48,000 and 250,000 people had died. An estimated 600,000 to 900,000 people fled the country during the war, though many returned either during or after it. By 2004, the Lebanese Ministry for the Displaced stated that 68,000 people were still displaced within the country, although other agencies estimated the number to be almost ten times that.
- 35 Dr Picard is Director of Research at the *Institut de Recherches et d’Études sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman*, at the Centre National de la Recherche scientifique, Aix-en-Provence.
- 36 Institute of Labor Economics, *Decision to Emigrate amongst the Youth in Lebanon*, Discussion Paper Series IZA DP No. 10493: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp10493.pdf>.

Photo, pages 2–3:  
Children playing in the Old City of Aleppo, January 2017

Photo, pages 72–73:  
People cycling along Beirut’s corniche today.

### **MISSION**

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

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**ICRC**

**International Committee of the Red Cross**  
19, avenue de la Paix  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland  
T +41 22 734 60 01  
[shop.icrc.org](http://shop.icrc.org)  
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