

ANNUAL REVIEW 2023

ICRC ACTIVITIES IN THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COUNTRIES



Former detainees held in relation to the conflict in Yemen were repatriated to Yemen and Saudi Arabia by the ICRC in April 2023.

Background

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has an exclusively humanitarian mission to protect the lives and dignity of people affected by armed conflict and other violence, often working closely with other members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The organization also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the ICRC works to promote and ensure respect for the rules of war and facilitates its operations worldwide through dialogue with government, civil society, and military and diplomatic officials. It works in places of detention, helps determine what happened to missing people, reunites families separated by armed conflict and migration, and works closely with the National Red Crescent Societies of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and with other partner organizations.

The ICRC first established a presence in the GCC countries in Kuwait during the 1990–1991 Gulf War, with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The organization signed country host agreements with the ministries of foreign affairs of the UAE and Qatar in In July 2022 and March 2023 respectively. The ICRC has also maintained a presence in Oman since 2015, and in Saudi Arabia since 2017, with activities across all six GCC countries. This report provides an overview of the ICRC's activities in the region in 2023, as well as its key achievements.

Humanitarian Diplomacy, Influence and Public Outreach

Throughout the GCC countries, the ICRC uses humanitarian diplomacy to influence and engage with decision makers and policymakers. This is done with the aim of raising awareness about the needs of affected people, promoting international humanitarian law (IHL) and contributing to debate on important humanitarian issues. The ICRC's position on humanitarian issues is based on its operational experience and, in 2023, the organization participated in a number of forums and high-level meetings and events to address the most pressing humanitarian issues.



Balthasar Staehelin, ICRC Special Envoy for Foresight and Techplomacy, talks about the importance of data protection at the Riyadh International Humanitarian Forum 2023.



The ICRC and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation co-organized a high-level regional brainstorming round table entitled “Missing Persons During Conflicts and Disasters: Strengthening the Response”.



More than **130** events, workshops or training sessions involved the ICRC (either participation or hosting) and its partners with the aim of influencing, engaging and raising awareness in the GCC countries.



More than **50** events where ICRC contributed as a guest speaker or provided expertise and perspectives on pressing humanitarian issues.

Raising Awareness of Humanitarian Issues

There are more than 120 ongoing armed conflicts in the world today. These conflicts, coupled with climate shocks and soaring food and energy prices, made 2023 a year in which people's humanitarian needs grew and became more acute. Against this backdrop, the ICRC recognizes the importance of collaborating with the media as a way to mobilize support, influence policy, and ensure that affected people receive protection and assistance.

The Gulf region, with its extensive network of pan-Arab and international media bureaux and robust local outlets, plays a pivotal role in the ICRC's communication efforts. Throughout 2023, the region witnessed a significant surge in media coverage, propelled by major humanitarian crises such as the conflict in the Gaza Strip, floods in Libya, the ongoing violence in Sudan, the earthquake in Syria, and the repatriation of former detainees held in relation to the conflict in Yemen. The ICRC engaged actively with the media, conducting more than 500 interviews and featuring in more than 1,000 articles across outlets based in GCC countries. These publications highlighted the organization's key role in protecting civilians, supporting migrants and displaced people, addressing the plight of missing people, providing health-care services, and upholding IHL in conflict zones throughout the region and beyond.

In 2023, the ICRC also took significant steps to build the media's understanding of IHL, including by providing specialized training to hundreds of professionals from the Al Jazeera and Al Araby networks in Doha, Qatar. This initiative aims to foster more informed and accurate media coverage of legal and judicial developments. Moreover, by continuing to strengthen its relationships with leading pan-Arab outlets based in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the ICRC not only expanded its reach within the GCC countries, but also played a pivotal role in supporting global humanitarian efforts and in combating misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, helping to keep the plight of affected people at the forefront of regional and international discourse.

Digital platforms played a crucial role in amplifying the ICRC's messages and content, demonstrating the power of social media in contemporary humanitarian communication. One notable example of this strategy in action was the ICRC's series of video explainers on IHL as it relates to the crisis in the Gaza Strip, which garnered large numbers of views and drew significant attention on Instagram, YouTube and X.



Arab news

Promoting Respect for IHL and Engaging with Armed Forces

As part of its mission to protect and assist victims of armed conflict and other violence, the ICRC seeks to ensure that their rights are respected – including by reminding authorities and others of their legal obligations under IHL and international human rights law.

In 2023, the ICRC further strengthened its position as the leading authority on IHL in the region. The organization delivered two courses on the subject for students on the Master of Arts in Humanitarian Action and Development programme at Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, which is geared towards future decision makers in the UAE.



The ICRC conducted a series of trainings on IHL for the Joint Forces Command of the Saudi-led coalition in Saudi Arabia.

Also in 2023, the 12th Regional Meeting of Arab National Committees on International Humanitarian Law (NCIHLs) was held in Doha, Qatar. The event, organized in conjunction with the Arab League, resulted in a credible and responsive two-year action plan for 2023–2025, in which Arab states pledged their commitments towards specific IHL-related themes and obligations. [Read more about this meeting on the ICRC Law and Policy blog.](#) The year also saw the ICRC's first IHL-related engagement with the GCC General Secretariat, involving a number of co-organized meetings and training sessions on the subject for General Secretariat staff and for government officials from across the GCC region.



The 12th Regional Meeting of Arab National Committees on International Humanitarian Law (NCIHLs) organised by the ICRC, the Arab League and the Qatar NCIHL in Doha.

In Saudi Arabia, the ICRC continued its dialogue with the Joint Forces Command of the Saudi-led coalition on respect for IHL during the conduct of hostilities in connection with the conflict in Yemen. More broadly, the organization continued to promote and integrate IHL through awareness-raising and training sessions for military parties from various ministries of defence, armed forces and staff colleges in Oman, Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries. In Kuwait, for instance, an IHL event was held for staff from the Fatwa and Legislation Department, as well as for civilian participants from ministries of foreign affairs, ministries of justice, NCIHLs, the Qatari Diplomatic Institute and academia across the region. The ICRC was also credited with integrating the IHL module into curricula at the Kuwaiti Diplomatic Institute.



The ICRC organised an IHL training course in cooperation with the Kuwait Military Justice Authority addressing participants from the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defence and the National Guard.

Local Engagement: Working with the Red Crescent Societies

Globally, the ICRC works with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to ensure a concerted, efficient and rapid response to conflict and violence.

Throughout 2023, the ICRC and National Societies in the GCC countries expanded their cooperation through exchanges on humanitarian diplomacy and a series of technical training sessions on humanitarian-related programmes. These initiatives were undertaken to support conflict-affected people in the Gaza Strip, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, as well as Afghan refugees in Qatar. The ICRC and the National Societies in the GCC countries remain focused on complementary action, from a local to international level, in order to achieve effective humanitarian action.



A safer access simulation exercise at the Qatar Red Crescent Society's disaster management camp.



Volunteer integration programme for Bahrain Red Crescent Society staff and volunteers.



80 participants from National Societies took part in IHL-related activities.



200 new National Society volunteers in the GCC countries received training.



70 National Society participants jointly implemented Restoring Family Links activities with the ICRC.



40 National Society participants completed a training course on regional humanitarian negotiation.

One key achievement in 2023 was the Qatar Red Crescent Society becoming the first Arab National Society to join the Global Rapid Deployment programme with the ICRC. It is a collaboration that aims to strengthen humanitarian operational response during acute crises and ensure that affected populations receive timely and effective assistance. In addition, the first-ever training course on ordnance disposal in the GCC countries, was delivered to the Saudi Red Crescent Authority staff and specialized volunteers in Assir, southern Saudi Arabia.

Also in 2023, the ICRC participated in the Saudi Emergency Medical Services (SEMS) Conference, organized by the Saudi Red Crescent Authority in Riyadh under the patronage of H.E. Fahd bin Abdulrahman Al-Jalajel, Minister of Health and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Saudi Arabian Red Crescent. The conference focused on three main tracks: emergency medical services (EMS), first-aid skills, and volunteering. The specialized workshops, training sessions and in-depth side discussions gave experts and health-care professionals an opportunity to discuss the latest local and global developments, scientific research, and best practices in the field of EMS.

The ICRC also took part in the SEMS exhibition, where the organization's Prehospital Emergency Care and First Aid Programme Coordinator presented the ICRC's perspective on first aid and prehospital care in low-resource, conflict-affected settings.

Engaging with Partners in the GCC Region to Support those Most in Need

By engaging with the private sector, the ICRC aims to secure the sustainable sources of funds it needs to fulfil its operational mission. In late 2023, the ICRC partnered with key foundations and private-sector organizations in the Near and Middle East region, including in the GCC countries, to mobilize support for those most in need in the Gaza Strip, Libya, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere. This support funded a range of activities including providing vital emergency aid, strengthening economic resilience, distributing food, and improving medical care and sanitary conditions.

FURTHERING SUSTAINABLE HUMANITARIAN IMPACT WITH DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

In 2023, the ICRC strengthened its existing partnerships with the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and the Qatar Fund For Development (QFFD) on matters relating to operational collaboration, humanitarian diplomacy and capacity-building, and knowledge transfer. A number of projects were implemented under these partnerships, focused on building the resilience of affected communities in Libya and Yemen – with a particular emphasis on food security and economic development. The IsDB also contributed to the ICRC's emergency response following the outbreak of violence in Sudan, which triggered a regional refugee crisis with spill-over effects in neighbouring countries.

In February 2023, the IsDB and the ICRC launched an 18-month secondment programme under which an ICRC humanitarian affairs adviser is embedded within the IsDB's Fragility and Resilience Department to support the bank in increasing its operational and policy readiness to work in countries affected by conflict and violence.

The leaders of the partner organizations also met on various occasions in 2023. The ICRC Director General met with the President of the IsDB at the Riyadh International Humanitarian Forum in February, and again at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai in December. Meanwhile, in March, the ICRC President met with the QFFD Director General in Doha. These meetings were an opportunity to share views on the global humanitarian situation, to discuss the protracted crises that are hampering economic development in some Organisation of Islamic Cooperation member countries, and to strengthen collaboration between the partner organizations.

Tracing Missing People and Restoring Contact Between Family Members

Every year, countless families are torn apart by armed conflict and violence, natural disasters and migration. When people remain unaccounted for, they are considered missing, and this uncertainty has a devastating effect on their families. People suffer terribly when they lose contact with their loved ones, not knowing where they are or if they are safe. Families must learn to cope with this uncertainty, but they often have pressing humanitarian needs too.

For more than 150 years, the ICRC has carried out a wide range of activities to help reconnect separated relatives and address the issue of missing people. In 2023, the ICRC worked closely with the National Societies of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to help reconnect separated family members through phone calls, written messages and oral

greetings (salamats), and it opened tracing requests for missing people.

In February 2023, the ICRC and the Red Crescent Society of the United Arab Emirates organized a capacity-building session in Abu Dhabi for National Society branch staff involved in delivering Restoring Family Links (RFL) services.

In May 2023, the Saudi Red Crescent Authority held its first workshop on strengthening and protecting family links in Saudi Arabia, where there are high numbers of foreign and migrant workers. This event, which was supported by the ICRC and hosted by the Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Organization, was attended by representatives from the embassies of states with high numbers of nationals working in Saudi Arabia. The participants heard about the Movement's RFL activities.



The ICRC led a training session on restoring contact between family members for staff of the Red Crescent Society of the United Arab Emirates.

In December 2023, the ICRC and the International Centre for Forensic Sciences (ICFS) of the Dubai Police ran an inaugural course on forensic humanitarian action. The course attracted around 40 participants from nine countries, including police experts in disaster victim identification, forensic professionals, academics and students. The course was delivered under a memorandum of understanding signed by the ICRC and the ICFS in 2023.



571 messages exchanged.



60 phone and video calls facilitated between detainees in the US Guantanamo Bay detention facility and their family members in the GCC countries.



105 travel documents issued.

The Kuwait and Qatar Red Crescent Societies successfully incorporated RFL services in their national emergency response plans. In Saudi Arabia, the ICRC and the Saudi Arabian Red Crescent continued to facilitate video calls between people deprived of their liberty at the US detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and their families in Saudi Arabia. Find out more about the [ICRC's RFL services](#).

MISSING PEOPLE

Following the end of the 1990–1991 Gulf War, the ICRC, Iraq, Kuwait and coalition members – France, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America – established the Tripartite Commission to search for missing people. The ICRC chairs both the commission and its technical subcommittee, with the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq attending as an observer. This mechanism aims to ascertain the fate of people missing in connection with the war and provide answers to their families. In 2023, the ICRC and the Tripartite Commission achieved the following:



For more than 150 years, the ICRC has been helping people separated from their loved ones as a result of armed conflict, migration or natural disasters.



1,457 active tracing cases.



5 tracing cases solved.



5 technical subcommittee meetings.



2 Tripartite Commission meetings.

Visiting Places of Detention

Through its confidential dialogue with detaining authorities, the ICRC aims to secure humane treatment and living conditions for all detainees, regardless of the reason for their arrest and detention. It also seeks to alleviate the distress caused by detention by re-establishing contact between detainees and their loved ones.



11 detention visits to four places of detention in two GCC countries holding more than 4,500 detainees in total.



529 detainees visited individually.



341 detainees released in 2023.

ICRC teams visited places of detention in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in accordance with the organization's standard working procedures. The teams monitored the treatment and living conditions of detainees, and confidentially communicated the findings and recommendations from these visits to the authorities. This work ensures that detainees are treated with dignity and that their living conditions, including access to health care, are of an acceptable standard.

In March 2023, the ICRC trained 39 Joint Forces Command officers – who are not regularly involved in the arrest and detention of individuals in civilian settings – on the international legal frameworks and standards applicable to such operations. At the event, entitled “People Deprived of Their Liberty and Humanitarian Considerations”, participants learned about the obligations, standards and safeguards provided under international law for ensuring respect for the rights and dignity of detainees.

In April 2023, the ICRC facilitated the repatriation of 341 detainees from Saudi Arabia to Yemen following a request from the Joint Forces Command of the international military coalition. Following this repatriation, the ICRC visited Yemeni detainees who remained in the custody of the Joint Forces Command at the Khamis Mushait detention facility, in order to continue monitoring their treatment and conditions, and to facilitate communication with their loved ones through Red Cross messages – brief messages containing family news. Read more about the successful repatriation of the detainees, which was part of a larger operation, [on the ICRC website](#).



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Families reunited as former detainees held in relation to the conflict in Yemen were repatriated to Yemen and Saudi Arabia by the ICRC in April 2023.

Field Operations Appeal

For its operations in 2024, the ICRC has [appealed](#) for 2.1 billion Swiss francs in total – covering both field operations (CHF 1.9 billion) and headquarters operations (CHF 244 million) – to help it meet the humanitarian needs of people affected by armed conflict and other violence around the world.

Support the Work of the ICRC

The humanitarian needs of thousands of people in dozens of countries are rising – a pattern the ICRC expects to continue in the coming year. For the millions of people in these countries who are reliant on humanitarian assistance, greater support is desperately needed to save lives and prevent further suffering. The civilian suffering caused by these conflicts, combined with a worsening climate emergency and rising food and energy prices, will make 2024 a year of vast humanitarian need.

The global community must ensure that no one is left behind and that no conflict is forgotten; many crises are at risk of fading into obscurity at great cost to human life.


The ICRC offers hope to those whose lives have been shattered by war. If you would like to support our work, the regional delegation has a dedicated team who would be very happy to hear from you.

You can support the ICRC through a one-off or regular donation or by becoming a friend of the ICRC. Friends of the ICRC is a committed group of people working together to help the ICRC help victims of armed conflict and violence.

Alternatively, you may wish to partner with us. The ICRC works with businesses, governments and philanthropic organizations to support the needs of people affected by armed conflict and other violence.

To learn more about how you can support the ICRC please visit us online at <https://www.icrc.org/en/support-us>

We help people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything we can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. We also seek to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

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