

MEANS OF PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION



Even in peacetime, means of personal identification – such as national identity cards, passports, birth certificates, driving licences and social security numbers – are crucial for verifying an individual's identity so that they can access services, address legal or administrative matters and more. In times of armed conflict, personal identification plays a vital role in the application of international humanitarian law (IHL). To implement IHL effectively, it is necessary to identify people. Determining the identity and status of distinct categories of people, such as combatants and civilians, is key to applying the protections and obligations that IHL provides, and the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and Additional Protocol I of 8 June 1977 contain provisions to that end. Measures for personal identification provide a means of specifying the status of people involved in or affected by an armed conflict and thus of indicating the protection to which they are entitled. However, the mere fact of possessing an identification document does not entitle the holder to protection (except in the case of military personnel posted to civil defence organizations), since it is the capacity or function of the person that is the determining factor. In the context of armed conflict, identification measures also help to prevent disappearances and facilitate the tracing of missing persons. It is states and parties to the conflict that must implement these measures, which enable the bodies for which IHL makes provision to function properly. (These include national information bureaux and the Central Tracing Agency, whose mission is to inform states on the circumstances of their nationals and inform families on what has become of their missing relatives.)

NATURE AND PURPOSE

Under IHL, measures for identifying people are closely connected with the concept of protection envisaged by the law and give concrete expression to many of its key provisions. Personal identification allows people to prove their status and claim the protection that is their due.

The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocol I of 1977 specify the nature and minimum content of identification measures. They also include annexes with model formats – such as identity cards – which states and parties to a conflict are encouraged to use.

Using the models provided helps to standardize various measures and facilitates the task of states and parties to a conflict in the fulfilment of their treaty-based obligations with regard to identification.

To make identification measures even more effective, parties to a conflict must ensure that they are easy to use. Documents that are issued based on the models will contain the minimum information needed for proper identification. The authorities may, however, provide further information, as long as it does not place the person concerned or their family at risk.

Personal identification is in the mutual interests of all parties to a conflict. If identification measures have been taken and used by one party, the adverse party can more effectively carry out its duty to identify the people who have fallen into its hands, whether captured, wounded or deceased (GC I, Art. 16; GC II, Art. 19). Such measures are essential for preventing people from going missing.

Personal identification is in the mutual interests of all parties to a conflict.

In general, it is recommended that the provisions concerning identification measures should be implemented not only for international armed conflicts but also non-international armed conflicts, where relevant.

In accordance with applicable domestic law, the competent national authorities shall ensure that all people receive a personal identity document or other means of identification upon request. Children shall either have their own personal identity document or be registered on their parents' or primary caregivers' documents. Some international instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (where applicable), require their states parties to ensure that all children are systematically registered immediately after birth. Only once the identity of each child has been ascertained can the parties to a conflict ensure compliance with the IHL rules on means of identification for children.

CATEGORIES

Identity card

Each party to a conflict is required to issue identity cards to all people under its jurisdiction who might become prisoners of war. This identity card provides the same information that a prisoner of war is required to give when questioned (GC III, Art. 17).

Identity cards must contain, at a minimum: the bearer's surname, first names, military rank, date of birth, army regimental, personal or serial number or equivalent information. Such cards may contain other information, such as the bearer's signature and/or fingerprints, height and eye colour, religious denomination (so that the appropriate rites can be performed in case of death), blood type and photograph.

Moreover, the authorities are required to issue specific identity cards for military personnel carrying out certain tasks – such as medical, religious and civil defence tasks – or for certain specifically protected categories of civilians. These cards contain the same basic information, plus information about the bearer’s assignment (such as a distinctive emblem, the person’s training or position, or the stamp and signature of the competent authority).

State authorities are required to issue specific identity cards for military personnel carrying out certain medical, religious or civil defence tasks, as well as for certain categories of civilians.

The categories of people entitled to a specific form of protection are:

- medical and religious personnel attached to the armed forces (GC I, Art. 40; GC II, Art. 42), civilian medical and religious personnel (AP I, Art. 18, para. 3) and the permanent or temporary staff of civilian hospitals (GC IV, Art. 20);
- members of the armed forces specially trained for employment as hospital orderlies, nurses or auxiliary stretcher-bearers in the search for or collection, transport or treatment of the wounded and sick (GC I, Art. 41);
- people who accompany the armed forces (GC III, Art. 4, para. A, no. 4);
- members of the armed forces and military units assigned to civil defence organizations (AP I, Art. 67, para. 1) and civilian civil defence personnel (AP I, Art. 66, para. 3);
- personnel responsible for the duties of control or engaged in the protection of cultural property under the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 14 May 1954 (Art. 17, para. 2), and the Regulations for the Execution of the Convention (Art. 21);
- journalists engaged in dangerous professional assignments, provided that they fulfil the conditions constituting that function (AP I, Art. 79 para. 3).

Identity disc

The Geneva Conventions do not expressly require states and parties to a conflict to issue identity discs, nor do they oblige individuals to wear them. However, identity discs are among the key pieces of information that parties to a conflict must record as soon as possible for each wounded, sick, shipwrecked or deceased person belonging to the opposing party (GC I, Art. 16; GC II, Art. 19). Identity discs are widely used by armed forces around the world and are worn continually around the neck on a chain or strap. They can be a single or double disc made – when possible – of durable, stainless material resistant to battlefield conditions. The inscriptions are similar to those on an identity card and should be indelible and fadeproof.

The International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent has urged all parties to armed conflicts – whether international or non-international – “to take all necessary steps to provide the members of their armed forces with identity discs and to ensure that the discs are worn during service”.¹

¹ Resolution 1 of the 24th International Conference of the Red Cross held in Manila in 1981, reproduced in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 21, No. 225, December 1981, p. 318.

Front

(Space reserved for the name of the country and military authority issuing this card)

IDENTITY CARD

for members of medical and religious personnel attached to the armed forces

Surname

First names

Date of Birth

Rank

Army Number

The bearer of this card is protected by the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field of August 12, 1949, in his capacity as

Date of issue Number of Card

Reverse side

Photo of bearer

Signature of bearer or fingerprints or both

Embossed stamp of military authority issuing card

Height	Eyes	Hair
--------	------	------

Other distinguishing marks

.....

.....

.....

First Geneva Convention of 1949 (wounded and sick in the field), Annex II

Front

(Space reserved for the name of the country and military authority issuing this card)

IDENTITY CARD

for members of medical and religious personnel attached to the armed forces at sea

Surname

First names

Date of Birth

Rank

Army Number

The bearer of this card is protected by the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea of August 12, 1949, in his capacity as

Date of issue Number of Card

Reverse side

Photo of bearer

Signature of bearer or fingerprints or both

Embossed stamp of military authority issuing card

Height	Eyes	Hair
--------	------	------

Other distinguishing marks

.....

.....

.....

Second Geneva Convention of 1949 (wounded, sick and shipwrecked at sea), Annex I

Front

(space reserved for the name of the country and authority issuing this card)

IDENTITY CARD

for **PERMANENT** civilian medical personnel
for **TEMPORARY** civilian religious personnel

Name

Date of birth (or age)

Identity No. (if any)

The holder of this card is protected by the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and by the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) in his capacity as

Date of issue No. of card

Signature of issuing authority

Date of expiry

Reverse side

Height	Eyes	Hair
--------------	------------	------------

Other distinguishing marks or information:

.....

.....

.....

PHOTO OF HOLDER

Stamp	Signature of holder or thumbprint or both
-------	---

Additional Protocol I of 1977 (international armed conflicts), Annex I, Art. 2

Front

Date of issue Signature of bearer	Accompanies the Armed Forces as Date and place of birth First name Name	Photograph of the bearer	(Name of the country and military authority issuing this card) IDENTITY CARD FOR A PERSON WHO ACCOMPANIES THE ARMED FORCES	Hair	Official seal imprint
				Eyes	
				Blood type	NOTICE This identity card is issued to persons who accompany the Armed Forces of but are not part of them. The card must be carried at all times by the person to whom it is issued. If the bearer is taken prisoner, he shall at once hand the card to the Detaining Author- ities, to assist in his identification.
				Religion	
				Fingerprints (optional) (Left forefinger) (Right forefinger)	
				Any other mark of identification	

Reverse side

This card should preferably be made out in two or three languages, of which one is in international use. It should be 13 by 10 centimetres in size and folded along the dotted line.

Third Geneva Convention of 1949 (prisoners of war), Annex IV.A

FRONT

(space reserved for the name of the country and authority issuing this card)	
IDENTITY CARD for civil defence personnel	
Name	
Date of birth (or age)	
Identity No. (if any)	
The holder of this card is protected by the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and by the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) in his capacity as	
Date of issue	No. of card
Signature of issuing authority	
Date of expiry	

REVERSE SIDE

Height	Eyes	Hair
Other distinguishing marks or information:		
Weapons		
PHOTO OF HOLDER		
Stamp	Signature of holder or thumbprint or both	

Additional Protocol I of 1977 (international armed conflicts), Annex I, Art. 15

Front

IDENTITY CARD for personnel engaged in the protection of cultural property	
Surname	
First names	
Date of birth	
Title or rank	
Function	
is the bearer of this card under the terms of the Convention of The Hague, dated 14 May 1954, for the Protection of Cultural Property in the event of Armed Conflict.	
Date of issue	Number of card

Reverse side

Photo of bearer	Signature of bearer or finger-prints or both	
Embossed stamp of authority issuing card		
Height	Eyes	Hair
Other distinguishing marks		

Hague Convention of 1954 (protection of cultural property), Regulations for the Execution of the Convention, Annex

Front

NOTICE This identity card is issued to journalists on dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflicts. The holder is entitled to be treated as a civilian under the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and their Additional Protocol I. The card must be carried at all times by the bearer. If he is detained, he shall at once hand it to the Detaining Authorities, to assist in his identification. ملحوظة تصرف هذه البطاقة الصحفيين المكلفين بمهام مهنية خطيرة في مناطق النزاعات المسلحة وبحسب لصاحبا أن يعامل معاملة الشخص المدني وفقاً لاتفاقيات جنيف للوحدة ١٢ آب / أغسطس ١٩٤٩ ولحقها (بروتوكولها) الإضافي الأول. ويجب أن يحتفظ صاحب البطاقة بها دوماً وإذا اعتقل فيجب أن يسلمها فوراً إلى سلطة الاعتقال لتساعد على تحديد هويته. NOTA La presente tarjeta de identidad se expide a los periodistas en misión profesional peligrosa en zonas de conflictos armados. Su titular tiene derecho a ser tratado como persona civil conforme a los Convenios de Ginebra del 12 de agosto de 1949 y su Protocolo adicional I. El titular debe llevar la tarjeta consigo, en todo momento. En caso de ser detenido, la entregará inmediatamente a las autoridades que lo detengan a fin de facilitar su identificación. AVIS La présente carte d'identité est délivrée aux journalistes en mission professionnelle périlleuse dans des zones de conflit armé. Le porteur a le droit d'être traité comme une personne civile aux termes des Conventions de Genève du 12 août 1949 et de leur Protocole additionnel I. La carte doit être portée en tout temps par son titulaire. Si celui-ci est arrêté, il la remettra immédiatement aux autorités qui le retiennent afin qu'elles puissent l'identifier. ПРИМЕЧАНИЕ Настоящее удостоверение выдается журналистам, находящимся в опасных профессиональных командировках в районах вооруженного конфликта. Его обладатель имеет право на обращение с ним как с гражданским лицом в соответствии с Женевскими Конвенциями от 12 августа 1949 г. и Дополнительным Протоколом I к ним. Владелец настоящего удостоверения должен постоянно иметь его при себе. В случае задержания он немедленно вручает его задерживающим властям для содействия установлению его личности.	(Name of country issuing this card) (اسم القطر المصدر لهذه البطاقة) (Nombre del país que expide esta tarjeta) (Nom du pays qui a délivré cette carte) (Название страны, выдавшей настоящее удостоверение) IDENTITY CARD FOR JOURNALISTS ON DANGEROUS PROFESSIONAL MISSIONS بطاقة الهوية الخاصة بالصحفيين المكلفين بمهام مهنية خطيرة TARJETA DE IDENTIDAD DE PERIODISTA EN MISION PELIGROSA CARTE D'IDENTITÉ DE JOURNALISTE EN MISSION PÉRILLEUSE УДОСТОВЕРЕНИЕ ЖУРНАЛИСТА, НАХОДЯЩЕГОСЯ В ОПАСНОЙ КОМАНДИРОВКЕ
--	--

Reverse side

Issued by (competent authority) مصدر البطاقة (السلطة المختصة) Expedite por (autoridad competente) Délivré par (autorité compétente) Выдано (компетентными властями) Photograph of bearer صورة صاحب البطاقة Fotografia del titular Photographie du porteur Фотография владельца Place Lieu Lugar Mesto Date الوقت Fecha Date Дата (Official seal imprint) (الختم الرسمي) (Sello oficial) (Timbre de l'autorité délivrant la carte) (Официальная печать) (Signature of bearer) (توقيع صاحب البطاقة) (Firma del titular) (Signature du porteur) (Подпись владельца) Name الاسم Apellidos Nom Фамилия First names الأسماء Nombres Prénoms Имя, Отчество Place & date of birth مكان وأربع الميلاد Lugar y fecha de nacimiento Lieu & date de naissance Дата и место рождения Correspondent of مقابل Correspondant de Correspondant de Korrespondent Specific occupation العمل المحدد Categoría profesional Categorie professionnelle Проф. занятие Valid for بانتهي العمل بها في Válido por Date de validité Действительно	Height الطول Estatura Taille Рост Weight الوزن Peso Poids Вес Blood type نوع الدم Grupo sanguíneo Groupe sanguine Группа крови Religion (optional) الديانة (اختياري) Religion (optional) Religion (facultatif) Религия (факультативно) Fingerprints (optional) البصمات (اختياري) Huellas dactilares (optativo) Empreintes digitales (facultatif) Отпечатки пальцев (факультативно) (Left forefinger) (السبابة اليسرى) (Dedo índice izquierdo) (Index gauche) (Палец указательный левый) (Right forefinger) (السبابة اليمنى) (Dedo índice derecho) (Index droit) (Палец указательный правый) Special marks of identification علامات التمييز المحددة هوية Signes particuliers Signes particuliers Особые приметы
--	--

Additional Protocol I of 1977 (international armed conflicts), Annex II

Identification of children

IHL provides specific measures for the identification of children in view of the fact that, depending on their age, children may be unable to take care of themselves and are extremely vulnerable in times of armed conflict. In any case, identification is an essential first step in facilitating the protection, assistance and care of children, in particular by helping to reunite and restore contact within families.

Parties to a conflict shall do everything feasible to ensure that children under 12 years of age are provided with proper identity discs adapted to their status, similar to those described above, or with another means of personal identification, such as identity cards (GC IV, Art. 24, para. 3). Even though parties to a conflict are not bound to provide children older than 11 with means of identification, experts agree that identification should be available to all children affected by armed conflict up to age 18. States, including those not involved in an international armed conflict, should consider establishing an identification system for children starting in peacetime.

In situations of occupation, the occupying power is required to take all necessary steps to facilitate the identification of children and the registration of their parentage (GC IV, Art. 50, para. 2). The authorities may, for instance, provide pertinent information under their control to help administrative services trace children and establish their identities, or provide those services with technical or financial support in developing and maintaining a comprehensive civil registration system, storing and preserving data, and raising public awareness.

Lastly, if children are temporarily evacuated to a foreign country for compelling reasons of health, medical treatment or safety, IHL requires the party that is arranging the evacuation and – as appropriate – the authorities of the receiving country, to create an information card with photographs for each child and send it to the Central Tracing Agency with a view to facilitating the children's return to their families and country (AP I, Art. 78, para. 3).

Availability of means of identification and training

Since means of personal identification should be available at all times, the authorities must make preparatory arrangements in peacetime. It is also their responsibility to ensure that the people in question are carrying their identity documents should an armed conflict break out.

If means of identification are to play their full role, their usefulness and importance should be explained, in particular during training provided to military personnel and other categories of people who are specifically concerned. Special attention should also be devoted to this aspect when IHL is being promoted among the general public.

Other preventive measures of identification

In times of armed conflict, the competent national authorities shall ensure that people at risk, in particular unaccompanied children, older people and people with disabilities, are registered individually and as soon as possible, in compliance with the rules governing the protection of personal data. Proactive identification efforts ensure that the obligations owed to those categories of people under IHL, such as the obligation to take feasible precautions to protect civilians, can be effectively implemented.

THE ICRC'S ROLE

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), through the work of its Advisory Service on IHL, provides legal and technical support to states in enacting legislation and taking other practical measures to implement their IHL obligations, including those related to means of personal identification.

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.



International Committee of the Red Cross

19, avenue de la paix
1202 – Geneva, Switzerland
T +41 22 734 60 01
© ICRC, July 2026



www.icrc.org
facebook.com/icrc
x.com/icrc
instagram.com/icrc