Online report

ICRC

The work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries

More than three decades of humanitarian partnership



For more than 35 years, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have shared a long-standing commitment to alleviating human suffering and strengthening humanitarian principles. Over the years, this historic partnership – built on trust – has grown into close, sustained collaboration across the region.

The ICRC's work in the GCC states reflects a shared dedication to upholding human dignity, promoting respect for international humanitarian law (IHL), and responding to the most pressing humanitarian needs in the region and beyond, guided by the fundamental principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality.

Through partnerships with governments, Red Crescent Societies, national institutions, academic bodies and private sector entities, we translate this commitment into action to strengthen the humanitarian response, provide essential aid and foster the resilience of communities in need.

The ICRC's presence in the GCC region dates back to the 1990–1991 Gulf War. In 1991, we established a regional delegation in Kuwait, covering all GCC countries. Today, the delegation continues to cover Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. ICRC delegations were also established in Qatar in 2023, and in the United Aarab Emirates in 2022. In 2017, the ICRC opened an office in Riyadh, which today works directly with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Through dialogue with government authorities, civil society, military and diplomatic actors – the ICRC seeks to leverage the GCC states' global influence to facilitate our operations worldwide and enhance the protection of people caught up in armed conflicts.

We also visit people in detention, help to establish the fate of missing people, reunite families separated by armed conflict, and work closely with the National Red Crescent Societies in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as humanitarian organizations in Oman and other regional partners, on joint humanitarian initiatives to help people affected by armed conflict or other violence in the region and beyond.

This report highlights the extent of the ICRC's engagement in the GCC countries, illustrating how collaboration, dialogue and sustained commitment can transform lives, provide long-awaited answers to those who have sought the truth for decades, and uphold the shared humanitarian values that unite us all.

Humanitarian diplomacy, influence and public outreach

The ICRC's work across the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) focuses on engaging with governments, armed forces and civil society to promote respect for international humanitarian law (IHL). We seek to improve respect for IHL in order to, ultimately and importantly, advance the protection of people affected by armed conflict.

Through dialogue with decision makers and policy leaders, we raise awareness of the needs of people and communities affected by conflict and violence, contribute to discussions on key humanitarian issues, and work to ensure that humanitarian considerations are effectively integrated into policies and operational frameworks across the region.

Additionally, we actively pursue dialogue with stakeholders and experts in the GCC on issues such as cyber warfare, artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons, the protection of civilians from digital threats, the compounding impact of climate change and conflict, and the resulting humanitarian consequences.

We contribute to regional forums, high-level meetings and strategic dialogue, bringing humanitarian perspectives to the fore in discussions on the world's most pressing global challenges.

ICRC representatives have addressed expert-level audiences at prominent forums, including the Riyadh International Humanitarian Forum, the IISS Manama Dialogue, the Global Security Forum in Doha, the Doha Forum, the Riyadh Global Cybersecurity Forum, the Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development Conference and Exhibition, the World Governments Summit in Dubai, and the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week, on issues affecting millions of people impacted by armed conflicts and violence around the world.



At the 2025 Doha Forum, ICRC Director-General, Pierre Krähenbühl, participated in a high-level panel discussion on upholding international justice and the rule of law. He emphasized the urgent need to uphold IHL in the context of increasingly complex and prolonged conflicts. He warned of the growing human cost of war, including increasing harm to civilians and humanitarian workers.

Protecting civilians by promoting respect for international humanitarian law

The ICRC promotes IHL, namely the rules that strive to limit the impact of armed conflict and protect civilians, the wounded and sick, detainees, medical services and humanitarian workers.

Through confidential dialogue, operational engagement, and global advocacy, including the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law, the ICRC works with states and parties to conflicts to strengthen respect for the rules that limit suffering in war. The six GCC states have joined this initiative, participating in high-level discussions aimed at strengthening political commitment to IHL, addressing contemporary challenges in armed conflict, and promoting improved compliance with humanitarian norms.

Across the region, we engage in dialogue with authorities, government entities, and the National Committees for International Humanitarian Law, advancing discussions on key IHL issues, encouraging accession to relevant treaties, and supporting the integration of IHL into domestic legislation. For example, in 2025, the government of Kuwait adopted new laws regulating the protection of the Red Cross and Red Crescent emblems; the protection of missing persons and their families; and international crimes.

In the many exchanges and debates in which the ICRC participates, we draw attention to the fact that both IHL and Islamic Law emphasize the protection of human dignity, including during armed conflicts. Both legal frameworks share a commitment to safeguarding civilians and ensuring ethical conduct during hostilities.



In 2025, Gilles Carbonnier, then the ICRC Vice-President, opened the third international conference on IHL and Islamic jurisprudence, organized by the College of Sharia Sciences in Oman. The conference explored the intersections between IHL and the principles of Islamic law, with a particular emphasis on armed conflicts and the protection of human rights in times of war.

We promote respect for IHL – in cooperation with the national IHL committees in the GCC, authorities and academic bodies – through a range of programmes, forums, workshops and policy discussions across the region.

We deliver IHL and humanitarian diplomacy courses for Law and International Relations students at renowned institutions, such as the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy in the United Arab Emirates and Dar-Al-Hekma University in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia.
In a significant step toward strengthening national collaboration, the ICRC and the Prince Saud Al-Faisal Institute for Diplomatic Studies at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Saudi Arabia formalized their partnership in 2026 through a cooperation agreement to advance joint training initiatives on IHL. In the same year, the ICRC signed a memorandum of understanding with the Saud Al-Nasser Al-Sabah Diplomatic Institute in Kuwait to establish cooperation in the areas of research and training.



In 2026, in cooperation with the Oman Ministry of Defence and the Omani Committee for International Humanitarian Law, we concluded the final phase of the Training of Trainers Programme on International Humanitarian Law in Muscat, marking a milestone in the two-year initiative to build a sustainable national cadre of Omani trainers, capable of disseminating and promoting IHL within military and other national institutions.

A key pillar of our engagement is our work with the armed forces, ministries of defence and staff colleges across the GCC states to integrate IHL into military training, operational planning and doctrine. Initiatives such as the Senior Workshop on International Rules governing Military Operations (SWIRMO) bring together global military leaders to translate legal principles into operational decision-making, strengthening compliance during armed conflict.



In 2025, over 125 senior military officers from more than 90 countries gathered at the Saudi National Defence University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for the opening of the eighteenth Senior Workshop on International Rules governing Military Operations, co-hosted by the ICRC and the Ministry of Defence.

Our worldwide engagement with the armed forces offers a platform for global military leaders to discuss challenges such as urban warfare, emerging technologies and multinational operations, with the shared goal of reducing civilian harm and ensuring that human dignity remains protected in times of conflict.

Protection work: a core part of our mission

Reuniting families and helping people to find answers

Helping families to stay connected and establish the fate of missing loved ones has always been at the heart of the ICRC's worldwide humanitarian mission.

Through our Restoring Family Links service, we have helped to reestablish contact between relatives separated by conflict in every corner of the world. For many families, a phone call, a message – or simply confirmation that a loved one is alive – can bring enormous relief after months or years of uncertainty.

We work closely with National Red Crescent Societies in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to put separated family members back in touch through phone calls, written notes and verbal messages. Relatives separated by conflict, detention or migration are able to keep in touch through the Restoring Family Links services provided by the ICRC and GCC National Societies.

The Kuwait and Qatar Red Crescent Societies have both successfully incorporated Restoring Family Links services into their national emergency response plans. In Saudi Arabia, the ICRC and the Saudi Red Crescent Authority continue to facilitate video calls between people deprived of their liberty at the United States-operated detention facility in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and their families back in Saudi Arabia.



In November 2024, the Saudi Red Crescent Authority, in cooperation with the ICRC, hosted the Sixth Regional Conference of the Family Links Network for the Near and Middle East, an important forum to exchange knowledge and practices on protecting family links in the region.

Following the 1990–1991 Gulf War, a tripartite commission was established to ascertain the fate of people missing in connection with the conflict and provide answers to their families. It is chaired by the ICRC and composed of representatives of Iraq, Kuwait, and the international coalition comprising the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France and Saudi Arabia.
Despite the progress made, many cases remain unresolved; technical cooperation and long-term humanitarian commitment are needed to provide answers to families.

Visiting detainees and monitoring detention conditions

All detainees have the right to be treated humanely and to live in dignified conditions, irrespective of the reason for their arrest or detention.

Through confidential dialogue with detaining authorities, we aim to ensure humane treatment and living conditions for detainees. We also seek to alleviate their distress by putting them back in touch with their loved ones.

ICRC teams visit places of detention in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in accordance with our standard operating procedures. They monitor the treatment and living conditions of detainees and communicate their findings and recommendations to the authorities on a bilateral and confidential basis. 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 2023, we provided training to officers of the Joint Forces Command of the Saudi-led coalition supporting the Yemeni government on the international legal frameworks and standards applicable to such operations, aiming to raise awareness of obligations, standards and safeguards under international law to ensure respect for the rights and dignity of detainees.

Acting as a neutral intermediary

Alongside these activities, we have continued to act as a neutral and independent intermediary – a role that is often essential to enabling humanitarian action.

In 2025, during talks in Qatar, the ICRC facilitated a milestone detainee release agreement, as part of the peace process in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The agreement was signed by the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Congo River Alliance/March 23 Movement (Alliance du Fleuve Congo/Mouvement du 23 mars), at the ICRC delegation in Doha.

Qatar has also provided a key platform for the ICRC to engage directly with the parties to the conflict in Gaza, call for the protection of all those affected, and seek humanitarian solutions to alleviate the suffering on the ground.

We have also played a critical humanitarian role during the conflict in Yemen, including as a trusted neutral intermediary in the release and transfer of detainees at the request of the parties to the conflict. This work underscores the real-life impact of our neutrality and ability to work together with all sides to bring people home and end years of separation.



Families were reunited when former detainees held in relation to the conflict were repatriated to Yemen and Saudi Arabia by the ICRC in April 2023, at the request of the parties to the conflict.

Work with the Red Crescent Societies

Globally, the ICRC works with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to ensure a concerted, efficient and rapid response to conflict and armed violence. Our work with National Red Crescent Societies in the GCC countries (GCC National Societies) focuses on complementary action, from the local to the international level. In 2025, the Qatar Red Crescent Society made a contribution to the Red Cross Field Hospital in Rafah to help sustain critical medical services for civilians in Gaza. The Kuwait Red Crescent Society has provided generous support to the ICRC's health operations in Sudan. The Saudi Red Crescent Authority has seconded staff to join ICRC operations in the GCC region, contributing to the enhancement of first-aid programmes among the GCC National Societies.

Over the years, we have expanded our cooperation with the GCC National Societies through exchanges on humanitarian diplomacy and a series of technical training sessions on humanitarian-related programmes. Joint initiatives have been undertaken to support people affected by conflict and violence in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Sudan and Yemen, as well as to help Afghan refugees in Qatar.

In collaboration with the GCC National Societies, we organize workshops on IHL, Restoring Family Links, first aid, mental health, safe access for humanitarian aid and relief workers, and other technical training and workshops, to exchange expertise and strengthen the capacity of their respective staff and volunteers. In 2025, in partnership with the Qatar Red Crescent Society, we hosted a high-level round table in Doha to mark World Mental Health Day, bringing together diplomats, government officials, humanitarian organizations and academics to highlight urgent mental health and psychosocial support needs in crisis settings.



In collaboration with the Bahrain Red Crescent Society, the ICRC organized a workshop in 2025 to strengthen volunteers' capacity to provide effective psychological care during crises.

In 2025, the ICRC signed its first partnership agreement with the Saudi Red Crescent Authority, in a step that reflects a shared commitment to enhancing humanitarian coordination, expanding the scope of response, and protecting human dignity. The agreement establishes a clear framework for implementing a range of joint programmes and initiatives, including on first aid and emergency care, restoring family links, dissemination of IHL, and coordinated humanitarian efforts at the national and global levels. Another milestone was the Qatar Red Crescent Society becoming the first Arab National Society to join the ICRC's global rapid deployment programme in 2023. This partnership aims to strengthen humanitarian operational response during acute crises and ensure that affected populations receive timely and effective assistance. In Oman, we look forward to welcoming a new National Society, unveiled in Muscat in March 2026.

Humanitarian partnerships to support those most in need

We work with governments and institutions in the Gulf states to mobilize humanitarian support for populations affected by conflict and crises worldwide. Based on strategic dialogue and operational cooperation, these partnerships reflect a shared commitment to alleviating suffering, supporting essential services and responding to urgent humanitarian needs in the region and beyond.

The fourth high-level strategic dialogue between the ICRC and the State of Kuwait in November 2025 reaffirmed the state's long-standing cooperation and commitment to principled humanitarian action. The dialogue included the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) and the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED), with formal agreements signed to enhance humanitarian response, capacity-building, and support for communities affected by conflict in Somalia, Sudan and Syria.



In 2025, the State of Kuwait and the ICRC held the Fourth High-Level Strategic Dialogue in Kuwait City to strengthen humanitarian partnership.

Over the last few years, we have strengthened our existing partnerships with development partners, including KFAED, the Islamic Development Bank in Saudi Arabia, the Qatar Fund for Development, and UAE Aid, on matters relating to operational collaboration, humanitarian diplomacy, capacity-building and knowledge transfer.

Various projects have been implemented under these partnerships, focusing on sustainable humanitarian impact, to strengthen the resilience of affected communities in Africa and the Middle East.

We have also established partnerships with key foundations and private sector organizations in the Near and Middle East region, including in the GCC countries, to mobilize support for people most in need in conflict zones.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been on the front line for humanity since 1863, working to preserve human dignity and relieve human suffering whenever war or armed violence strikes.

Present in over 90 countries worldwide, we act resolutely to provide humanitarian assistance to whoever needs it most, regardless of race, religion, gender or politics. In collaboration with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners around the world, we do everything we can to deliver life-saving aid across front lines, reconnect families, and locate missing people. We press authorities to give us access to detainees and strive to improve their living conditions.

We actively engage with the authorities and armed forces on all sides, urging them to fulfil their duty under the Geneva Conventions to protect those who don't fight from harm, including in the digital sphere. We hold sensitive discussions, often bilaterally and in confidence, aiming to prevent further harm and help all sides better comply with international humanitarian law.

In the darkest of times, we stand up for our shared humanity by promoting the rules of war and rallying the world to call on those with the authority to do so to enforce them effectively.

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