



Human Rights Violations in Armed Conflicts and the Role of International Law

Parisa Ahmadzadeh^{1*}, Anita Yousefi²

¹PhD student in Public International Law, Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch, Alborz, Iran

²PhD student in Public International Law, Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Armed conflicts, both international and non-international, have historically been associated with extensive human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, forced displacement, and attacks on civilian infrastructure. Such violations not only inflict immediate physical and psychological suffering on affected populations but also undermine long-term socio-economic development and political stability. International law provides a critical framework for the protection of human rights during armed conflicts, primarily through International Humanitarian Law (IHL), human rights treaties, and the mandates of international bodies such as the United Nations. Instruments such as the Geneva Conventions, their Additional Protocols, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court define obligations for state and non-state actors, establish standards for the treatment of civilians and combatants, and prescribe mechanisms for accountability. Despite these frameworks, enforcement challenges remain significant due to issues such as state sovereignty, lack of political will, insufficient monitoring, and difficulties in prosecuting non-state actors. This article examines the nature and scope of human rights violations in contemporary armed conflicts, highlighting case studies to demonstrate patterns of abuse and systemic challenges in protection. It also explores the role of international law in both preventing violations and ensuring accountability, emphasizing the importance of universal jurisdiction, international tribunals, and the complementarity principle of the International Criminal Court. The paper concludes by arguing that strengthening international legal mechanisms, enhancing compliance through domestic incorporation of treaties, and promoting robust civil society participation are essential to mitigating human rights violations during armed conflicts. The findings underscore that while international law provides vital protections, its effectiveness relies on a combination of legal, political, and humanitarian efforts.

Introduction

Armed conflicts, whether international or non-international, have remained a persistent feature of global politics throughout human history [1]. From ancient battles to contemporary civil wars, conflicts have invariably resulted in significant human suffering and widespread violations of fundamental human rights. Human rights, broadly defined as inherent rights to life, liberty, security, and dignity, are recognized universally as essential to human existence and societal stability [2].

However, in the context of armed conflicts, these rights are frequently disregarded, with civilians often bearing the brunt of violence [3].

The escalation of modern warfare, particularly with the proliferation of non-state actors, asymmetric warfare, and technological advancements in weaponry, has compounded the vulnerability of civilian populations, raising urgent questions about the adequacy and effectiveness of international legal frameworks designed to protect human rights. Historical experiences demonstrate that human

*Corresponding Author: **Parisa Ahmadzadeh** (parisaahmadzadeh1993@gmail.com)

¹ Email: mrsyousefi77@gmail.com

rights violations during armed conflicts are neither incidental nor occasional but often systemic [4].

Classical examples include the atrocities committed during World War II, which prompted the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, marking the formal codification of international human rights standards. Subsequent conflicts, including those in Rwanda, Bosnia, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, have further underscored the persistent gap between normative legal frameworks and on-ground realities. Violations in these conflicts encompass a spectrum of abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, forced displacement, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and targeting of humanitarian workers. Such violations not only cause immediate human suffering but also have long-term consequences, destabilizing societies, undermining rule of law, and impeding post-conflict reconstruction [5].

International law serves as the primary mechanism for addressing these violations, providing normative standards, preventive measures, and accountability frameworks. International Humanitarian Law (IHL), particularly the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, constitutes the cornerstone of legal protection for civilians and combatants during armed conflicts. IHL establishes clear prohibitions against acts such as targeting civilians, torture, and use of prohibited weapons, while also setting standards for the treatment of prisoners of war. Complementing IHL, international human rights law articulated in instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) extends protection during peacetime and conflict, emphasizing the universality, inalienability, and indivisibility of human rights. Together, these bodies of law form a complex but essential framework for safeguarding human dignity in the context of armed hostilities [6]. The enforcement of these legal norms, however, faces significant challenges. State sovereignty, political considerations, lack of access to conflict zones, and the activities of non-state armed groups often undermine effective compliance. International criminal tribunals, including the International Criminal Court (ICC) and ad hoc tribunals such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Rwanda (ICTR), have been established to prosecute individuals responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. These institutions have contributed to the development of legal jurisprudence and the promotion of accountability; yet, their limited jurisdiction, reliance on state cooperation, and occasional political interference highlight the ongoing gaps in the protection of human rights during conflicts [7].

Research in the field has increasingly focused on understanding the patterns and determinants of human rights violations in armed conflicts. Scholars argue that violations are often influenced by factors such as the nature of the conflict (interstate versus intrastate), the presence of non-state actors, the intensity and duration of hostilities, and the capacity of domestic institutions to protect civilians. Empirical studies also suggest that international legal frameworks can deter violations when coupled with robust monitoring mechanisms, sanctions, and advocacy by civil society organizations. Nonetheless, the gap between legal norms and enforcement realities remains a persistent challenge, necessitating continued scholarly inquiry and practical interventions to enhance compliance and accountability [8].

Furthermore, contemporary conflicts are characterized by complex dynamics that exacerbate human rights risks. Asymmetric warfare, involving state forces confronting insurgent or terrorist groups, often blurs the distinction between combatants and civilians, complicating the application of international legal norms. Technological innovations, such as drones and cyber warfare, have introduced new modalities of violence, raising legal and ethical questions regarding proportionality, distinction, and responsibility. Additionally, the involvement of multinational coalitions, private military contractors, and transnational actors introduces jurisdictional and regulatory challenges, complicating efforts to hold perpetrators accountable under existing international legal frameworks [9].

The historical evolution of international legal norms reveals a gradual but significant development in the protection of human rights during armed conflicts. The 1949 Geneva Conventions, together with the 1977 Additional Protocols, codified fundamental principles of humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians, the treatment of prisoners of war, and restrictions on certain weapons. The establishment of the ICC in 2002 further signaled a commitment to international accountability, emphasizing the principle of complementarity whereby the ICC acts when national jurisdictions are unwilling or unable to prosecute serious crimes. These instruments reflect an enduring recognition that human dignity must be preserved even amidst the chaos of armed conflict, representing the normative aspirations of the international community [10].

Despite these advances, significant gaps persist between law and practice. Enforcement is frequently selective and influenced by geopolitical considerations, resulting in uneven protection for affected populations. Many non-state armed groups operate outside the bounds of formal legal constraints, while states themselves may engage in violations under the guise of national security or

counterterrorism operations. Humanitarian interventions, sanctions, and international monitoring mechanisms, while critical, are often constrained by resource limitations, political negotiations, and logistical challenges in conflict zones. These realities underscore the necessity of strengthening international cooperation, enhancing the capacity of domestic legal systems, and fostering global normative consensus to mitigate human rights abuses during armed conflicts [11].

In conclusion, armed conflicts continue to pose profound threats to human rights, highlighting the critical role of international law in providing both normative guidance and mechanisms for accountability. While significant progress has been made in codifying and institutionalizing protections through IHL, human rights treaties, and international tribunals, challenges in enforcement, compliance, and adaptation to contemporary conflict dynamics remain. Understanding the interplay between legal norms, political realities, and conflict dynamics is essential for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to mitigate human suffering and promote accountability. This study contributes to this understanding by examining the nature and extent of human rights violations in armed conflicts and assessing the role and effectiveness of international law in preventing and responding to such violations. The findings underscore the importance of a multifaceted approach that integrates legal, political, and humanitarian strategies to safeguard human rights in the most challenging of circumstances.

Literature Review

The literature on human rights violations in armed conflicts has expanded significantly over the past several decades, reflecting both empirical investigations and normative legal analysis. Scholars have consistently highlighted that armed conflicts are among the most dangerous contexts for human rights, with civilians disproportionately affected. Research distinguishes between international armed conflicts (IACs), involving states, and non-international armed conflicts (NIACs), involving non-state actors or civil wars, noting that patterns and scale of violations differ between these categories [12].

Empirical studies emphasize that violations often follow predictable patterns. For instance, sexual violence is frequently employed as a weapon of war to terrorize civilian populations and destabilize communities. Forced displacement and targeting of civilian infrastructure are also common, with scholars linking these violations to strategic objectives of armed actors. In addition, the literature highlights the complicating role of non-state armed groups, whose adherence to international norms is often inconsistent, exacerbating risks to civilians [13].

From a legal perspective, researchers have examined the evolution and efficacy of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights law. The Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols provide clear obligations regarding the treatment of civilians and combatants, yet enforcement gaps persist, particularly in intrastate conflicts [14]. International tribunals and the International Criminal Court have been analyzed as mechanisms for accountability, though scholars note challenges including political interference, selective prosecution, and lack of universal jurisdiction [15]. Recent studies also explore the interplay between international law and state behavior, highlighting that legal frameworks can deter violations when combined with monitoring, sanctions, and civil society engagement [16]. Despite these insights, the literature continues to underscore a significant gap between normative legal standards and the realities on the ground, particularly in protracted conflicts with weak institutional oversight. This study builds upon these scholarly foundations by integrating legal analysis with empirical observations from contemporary conflicts to assess the role of international law in protecting human rights.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and case-based approach to analyze human rights violations in armed conflicts and the role of international law in addressing them. The methodology combines three complementary components:

✓ Documentary and Doctrinal Analysis:

- Primary sources, including the Geneva Conventions, their Additional Protocols, the ICC Rome Statute, and major human rights treaties, are examined to outline the legal framework governing armed conflicts.
- Secondary sources, including scholarly books, journal articles, and reports from international organizations (e.g., UN, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International), are reviewed to provide theoretical and empirical context.

✓ Case Study Analysis:

- Two contemporary conflicts the Syrian Civil War (2011–present) and the Yemen conflict (2014–present) are selected as illustrative case studies.
- These conflicts are chosen for their complexity, scale of human rights violations, and involvement of both state and non-state actors, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of legal enforcement challenges.

✓ Comparative Analysis:

- Patterns of human rights violations across the selected conflicts are identified and compared.
- The study assesses the extent to which international legal frameworks (IHL and human rights law) were invoked, the effectiveness of

accountability mechanisms, and the role of international institutions in mitigating abuses. The qualitative approach enables a nuanced understanding of both the normative legal frameworks and the practical realities of human rights protection during armed conflicts, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Case Studies

Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, represents one of the most devastating contemporary conflicts in terms of human rights violations. Civilians have been subjected to extrajudicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, chemical attacks, and forced displacement (UN Human Rights Council, 2020). The conflict involves multiple state and non-state actors, including the Syrian

government, opposition forces, and foreign coalitions, complicating the application of international law.

International legal responses have included UN investigations, sanctions, and referrals to the International Criminal Court; however, enforcement has been limited by political vetoes in the UN Security Council and challenges in accessing conflict zones. Despite clear violations of IHL and human rights law, perpetrators have largely evaded accountability, highlighting the limitations of international legal mechanisms in complex, multi-party conflicts [16].

Table (1) illustrates the summarizing human rights violations in the Syrian Civil War based on documented studies and reports. The table will categorize the types of violations, perpetrators, affected populations, legal frameworks violated, and sources.

Table 1. Academic-style table

Type of Violation	Perpetrators	Affected Population	Legal Framework Violated
Extrajudicial killings	Syrian government forces, opposition groups	Civilians, political activists	International Humanitarian Law (IHL), ICCPR
Torture & inhumane detention	Syrian government forces, ISIS	Detainees, prisoners of war	Geneva Conventions, CAT
Chemical weapons attacks	Syrian government forces	Civilians, opposition-held areas	Chemical Weapons Convention, IHL
Sexual violence & rape	All armed groups (government, opposition, ISIS)	Women, children	IHL, CEDAW, Rome Statute
Forced displacement / population transfers	Syrian government forces, opposition	Internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees	IHL, International Refugee Law
Targeting of hospitals, schools & humanitarian workers	Syrian government forces, foreign coalitions	Civilians, humanitarian personnel	IHL, Geneva Conventions
Recruitment of child soldiers	Non-state armed groups (ISIS, opposition factions)	Children	Optional Protocol to CRC, IHL
Enforced disappearances	Syrian government forces	Civilians, political dissidents	ICCPR, IHL

- The table highlights systematic violations widely documented in the literature.
- It links specific perpetrators to violations and cites relevant international legal frameworks.
- Sources combine UN reports, human rights NGOs, and academic studies for credibility.

Yemen Conflict

The conflict in Yemen, ongoing since 2014, has similarly demonstrated widespread human rights abuses. Both state and non-state actors have conducted indiscriminate attacks on civilian populations, including bombings of hospitals,

schools, and marketplaces. Reports document arbitrary detention, torture, and recruitment of child soldiers [17].

International law has been invoked through UN resolutions and humanitarian monitoring; however, enforcement remains constrained by political alignments, limited access, and the presence of transnational actors. The Yemeni conflict exemplifies how protracted, asymmetric warfare complicates the application of international law, particularly in protecting civilians from violations. Table (2) shows the academic-style table summarizing human rights violations in the Yemen Conflict (2014 present) based on documented studies and reports [18].

Table 2. Academic-style table summarizing human rights violations in the Yemen Conflict (2014-present) based on documented studies and reports.

Type of Violation	Perpetrators	Affected Population	Legal Framework Violated
Indiscriminate airstrikes / bombings	Saudi-led coalition, Houthi forces	Civilians, schools, hospitals	International Humanitarian Law (IHL), Geneva Conventions
Extrajudicial killings	Houthi forces, pro-government militias	Civilians, suspected opposition members	IHL, ICCPR
Torture & arbitrary detention	Houthi forces, pro-government forces	Prisoners, detainees	CAT, Geneva Conventions
Child recruitment	Houthi forces, pro-government forces	Children under 18	Optional Protocol to CRC, IHL
Blockade & denial of humanitarian aid	Saudi-led coalition, Houthi forces	Civilians, particularly in conflict zones	IHL, Right to Food, Right to Health
Forced displacement / refugee crisis	All armed actors	Internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees	IHL, International Refugee Law
Attacks on civilian infrastructure	Saudi-led coalition, Houthi forces	Civilians, marketplaces, hospitals	IHL, Geneva Conventions
Sexual violence & gender-based violence	Houthi forces, pro-government forces	Women, girls	IHL, CEDAW, Rome Statute

- Shows the range of violations by both state and non-state actors in Yemen.
- Links each violation to the legal framework breached, demonstrating international law relevance.
- Sources include UN, NGOs, and academic studies for reliability.

Analysis

Both cases reveal systemic challenges in ensuring compliance with international legal norms. Violations are often deliberate and strategic, while accountability mechanisms are hindered by sovereignty, political interference, and operational constraints. These case studies illustrate the critical need for strengthened international cooperation, enhanced monitoring, and the adaptation of legal frameworks to contemporary conflict realities [18].

Discussion and Analysis

Human rights violations in armed conflicts are among the most pressing challenges facing the international community. The results from case studies of the Syrian Civil War and the Yemen Conflict, combined with prior research, reveal several key patterns and implications regarding the effectiveness of international law.

Patterns of Violations: Both conflicts demonstrate that civilians bear the overwhelming burden of armed conflicts, experiencing extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, forced displacement, and attacks on civilian infrastructure. The Syrian case shows that chemical weapons and deliberate targeting of hospitals and schools have become systematic tools of warfare, reflecting both strategic

objectives and a blatant disregard for international norms. Similarly, the Yemen conflict illustrates the consequences of prolonged warfare, where blockades, indiscriminate airstrikes, and denial of humanitarian aid exacerbate civilian suffering [19]. These patterns align with previous studies highlighting that human rights violations often occur predictably in contexts of weak governance, asymmetrical warfare, and prolonged conflicts (Kaldor,2013; Bassiouni,2011). Non-state actors, including opposition groups and insurgents, often pose significant challenges to enforcement, as their adherence to international law is inconsistent, and accountability mechanisms are limited (Hampson & Malik,2020).

Role of International Law: International law, primarily through International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights treaties, establishes clear obligations to protect civilians and regulate conduct during armed conflicts. The Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocols, and the Rome Statute of the ICC provide legal frameworks that prohibit extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, and the targeting of civilians. Case studies demonstrate, however, that while these norms are well-defined, enforcement is often weak or selective. For example, UN Security Council vetoes and political constraints have hindered accountability for Syrian government forces despite evidence of violations, while in Yemen, enforcement is challenged by the multiplicity of actors and ongoing hostilities [21].

Effectiveness and Limitations: The effectiveness of international law is significantly influenced by political will, institutional capacity, and access to conflict zones. Empirical evidence suggests that

legal frameworks alone cannot prevent violations; monitoring, sanctions, and active international engagement are essential for compliance. Furthermore, enforcement mechanisms such as the ICC or ad hoc tribunals face practical limitations, including selective prosecution, delayed proceedings, and limited jurisdiction over non-state actors.

Comparative Insights: Comparing Syria and Yemen highlights that while both conflicts feature widespread violations, the nature of the violations differs in intensity, scope, and methodology. Syria demonstrates systematic state-led violations, including chemical attacks and sieges, whereas Yemen shows the compounded impact of foreign intervention, blockade, and non-state actor involvement. This comparative perspective underscores the importance of contextualized legal strategies and the adaptation of international law to asymmetric and multi-party conflicts.

Policy and Legal Implications: The findings suggest several implications for strengthening human rights protection in armed conflicts:

- ✓ Enhanced monitoring and documentation: Independent investigations are crucial to build credible evidence for accountability.
- ✓ Strengthening international cooperation: Multilateral engagement can enhance enforcement of sanctions and legal obligations.
- ✓ Focus on non-state actors: Expanding legal frameworks to effectively regulate non-state armed groups is essential.
- ✓ Integration of humanitarian and legal strategies: Coordinating legal enforcement with humanitarian action can mitigate civilian suffering.

In conclusion, the discussion reveals a persistent gap between normative legal standards and the realities on the ground. While international law provides a critical normative and moral framework, its effectiveness depends on enforcement mechanisms, political support, and international coordination. The Syrian and Yemeni case studies demonstrate that violations are often deliberate, systematic, and strategically motivated, which requires both legal and operational responses. Strengthening the synergy between law, diplomacy, and humanitarian action remains essential to reduce human suffering and promote accountability in armed conflicts [22].

Conclusion

Human rights violations in armed conflicts remain a pervasive and complex global challenge. Civilians continue to bear the heaviest burden, experiencing extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, forced displacement, and attacks on essential infrastructure. International law, through IHL, human rights treaties, and international tribunals, provides a normative framework designed to mitigate these

violations and promote accountability. However, enforcement gaps, selective compliance, and the rise of non-state actors have limited the effectiveness of these mechanisms.

The Syrian and Yemeni conflicts illustrate that while legal norms establish clear standards of conduct, practical enforcement is often constrained by political, logistical, and institutional factors. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes stronger international cooperation, domestic incorporation of legal norms, active civil society engagement, and innovative strategies to monitor and deter violations.

Future research should focus on improving compliance mechanisms, understanding the behavior of non-state actors in conflict zones, and developing adaptive legal frameworks that address technological and asymmetrical warfare. Ultimately, the protection of human rights in armed conflicts is both a moral imperative and a legal obligation, requiring sustained commitment from states, international institutions, and the global community. Strengthening the synergy between law, policy, and humanitarian action is essential to mitigating human suffering and fostering post-conflict peace and stability.

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Authors' Contributions

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