

People On War

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A little more than a half-century ago, 63 countries established the modern Geneva Conventions to strengthen the protections afforded to combatants and civilians in times of armed conflict. In the midst of global war—one in which systematic extermination, indiscriminate bombing and mass deprivation led to millions of civilian deaths—these nations knew all too well that such rules were needed as never before.

As we enter a new century, that need is more urgent than ever and is brought into stark relief virtually every day. Around the world conventional wars, involving clashes between regular armed forces of opposing nations, take a terrible toll. At the same time, wars between those who share a country or a region have become a catastrophic way of life. These wars are less a collision of armies than a struggle to assert control over areas or populations. Divided by religion, ethnicity, traditions or territorial claims, combatants compete to hold onto power or to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of state authority. As these conflicts stretch on—sometimes for decades—cultural norms dissolve, chaos prevails, and civilians find themselves unable to escape the cycle of violence.

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To give voice to the victims of modern warfare and mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, in 1999 the International Committee of the Red Cross undertook a groundbreaking research project called “People on War.” The program, commissioned by the ICRC and conducted

by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQR) of Washington, DC, set out to survey civilian populations and combatants in 12 countries that have endured modern forms of war. The purpose was to explore people’s understanding and attitudes about the rules and limits of what is permissible in war.

From the Field Fielding a Survey on War

The scope of the “People on War” project was unprecedented in its geography, methodology and diversity. The International Committee of the Red Cross set out to explore wars on five continents, with countries whose citizens had been at war for anywhere from just a few years to more than three decades. The ICRC chose a diverse group of countries and regions, each of which offered unique logistical and political challenges. In some nations, simply negotiating the right to conduct research took many months, and authorities allowed only ICRC staff into their countries. In others, negotiations failed. In still others, such as Afghanistan and Somalia, the constant state of war itself had prevented researchers from collecting data for 20 years or more.

“People on War” required a wholly original approach to multinational research in developing nations. For financial and practical political reasons, the ICRC and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQR) determined from the beginning that staff members and volunteers from national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies would conduct the face-to-face surveys. GQR staff held two-day training sessions with ICRC staff in each area on conducting survey interviews and recruiting focus groups.

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