



Red Cross Violates Mission of Impartial Humanitarian Assistance

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*In the over 70 days since Hamas took more than 240 hostages from Israel on October 7, the International Committee of the Red Cross has yet to visit the hostages. Also troubling, the Red Cross has issued only limited criticism of Hamas's hostage-taking—an explicit violation of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions—while repeatedly criticizing, either explicitly or implicitly, Israel's conduct in the war. The Red Cross's criticisms of Israel not only violate the organization's own [policy](#) of remaining “impartial, neutral and independent,” but also run counter to the organization's *raison d'être*—described in the Geneva Convention—of providing neutral care in warzones.*

To hold the Red Cross accountable and ensure its impartiality, the United States—which gives large sums to the Red Cross annually in the form of grants, typically in the tens of millions of dollars and in some years exceeding \$100 million—should conduct greater oversight of the Red Cross and inform it that its inability to carry out its obligations impartially during the conflict could jeopardize potential future grants.

What Happened?

- On December 15, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) President Mirjana Spoljaric Egger traveled to Israel and [met](#) with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli President Isaac Herzog. Egger separately [met](#) with Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen, Israeli Health Minister Uriel Busso, Israeli Health Ministry Director-General Moshe Bar Siman Tov, and representatives from the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.
 - » During the visit, Prime Minister Netanyahu [demanded](#) the ICRC “fulfill its purpose” by providing medical care to hostages, and said that Egger has “every right and every expectation to place public pressure on Hamas.” When Egger responded that “it’s not going to work because the more public pressure we seemingly would do, the more they would shut the door,” Netanyahu stated, “I’m not sure about that. Why don’t you try?”
 - » Foreign Minister Cohen [criticized](#) the ICRC after the meeting, saying, “the Red Cross’s number-one priority must be to bring medical help and medications to the hostages. For 67 days, the ICRC has failed in its responsibility to reach the hostages, give their families a sign of life, check their condition, and give them medications. Every day that passes is another failure for the Red Cross.”

Why Is It Important?

- Not only has the ICRC yet to fulfill its responsibility to visit the hostages in Hamas captivity, a number of whom are in [need](#) of medical attention, but it has also failed in its mission to serve as a neutral intermediary. It has repeatedly criticized Israel throughout the war and, at least publicly, rarely rebuked Hamas for its continued detention of hostages in clear violation of international law.
- Under international humanitarian law, the ICRC has a special responsibility not only to visit hostages and provide them with medical care, but to remain impartial while doing so.
 - » The Geneva Convention's Common Article 3 explicitly [states](#) that the "taking of hostages" is prohibited, that "the wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for," and that "**an impartial humanitarian body, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross**" (emphasis added) may need to offer its services to ensure that Common Article 3's provisions are abided by.
 - » In addition, in a conflict without a designated "Protecting Party" such as the Israel-Hamas war, Article 5 of the Geneva Convention's Additional Protocol I [states](#) that "the International Committee of the Red Cross, without prejudice to the right of any other **impartial humanitarian organization** to do likewise, shall offer its good offices" (emphasis added) to ensure the Geneva Convention's implementation.
- The ICRC's own [guidelines](#) on hostages state that the ICRC should, "in its capacity as a neutral intermediary, provide the hostages with medical, psychological and moral support" wherever possible. The ICRC also has a stated [policy](#) of remaining "impartial, neutral and independent."
- However, the ICRC has repeatedly criticized Israel and issued greater condemnations of Israel than Hamas during the war, in violation of its mission.
 - » On December 8, Israel's *Kan* network reported that an ICRC representative [reprimanded](#) Simona Steinbrecher, the mother of hostage Doron Steinbrecher, during a meeting with hostages' family members. According to the report, the ICRC representative told Steinbrecher to "think about the Palestinian side. It's hard for the Palestinians, they're being bombed."
 - » On December 4, Egger visited the Gaza Strip and [released](#) a statement saying, "the level of human suffering is intolerable. It is unacceptable that civilians have no safe place to go in Gaza, and with a military siege in place there is also no adequate humanitarian response currently possible." She did not mention the hostages or ICRC efforts to visit them.
 - » Egger previously [visited](#) Hamas leaders, including Ismail Haniyeh, in Qatar on November 20. After the visit, the ICRC said in a statement that "the ICRC does not participate in negotiations leading to the release of hostages" and [added](#) that Egger's visit was to "advance humanitarian issues" and was part of a discussion to improve Hamas's adherence to international humanitarian law.
 - » Switzerland-based NGO UN Watch [released](#) a report on December 11 that found that of 187 tweets posted on main ICRC accounts since the war began, 14 tweets criticized Hamas, 29 criticized both sides, and 144 tweets either explicitly or implicitly criticized Israel. Only 19 of the 144 tweets used the word "hostages."

- The ICRC posts often implied a moral equivalence between Israel and Hamas, such as an October 10 [tweet](#) issued by the ICRC president’s account stating, “we urge the parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law.” In another tweet, the ICRC [accused](#) Israel of perpetrating “relentless bombardment” of Gaza.
- » ICRC regional director for the Middle East Fabrizio Carboni [said](#) just days after the October 7 attack, in response to Israeli airstrikes on targets in Gaza, that the “human misery caused by this escalation is abhorrent” without mentioning or condemning the October 7 attack.
- The ICRC’s chapter in Gaza, the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS), has also damagingly accused Israel of bombing its ambulances during the war, without providing the context that Hamas uses PRCS hospitals and ambulances to transport its operatives and weaponry.
 - » On November 3, the PRCS [stated](#) that Israel launched an airstrike on a PRCS ambulance convoy without noting that Hamas fighters were [killed](#) in the strike and without contextualizing the strike with Hamas’s own recent [admission](#) that “ambulances are used, among other things, to evacuate fighters.”
 - » On November 13, Hamas terrorists [launched](#) rocket-propelled grenades from inside the [PRCS-operated](#) Al-Quds Hospital in Gaza City at IDF soldiers nearby. Over 20 terrorists were found to be operating from within the hospital.
 - » As JINSA has previously [noted](#), in 2002, a PRCS medical staffer presented PRCS credentials at Israeli checkpoints en route to carrying out a suicide bombing in Jerusalem that injured 127 people. Two other PRCS employees were implicated in the plot. In another 2002 incident, a PRCS ambulance was found to be [carrying](#) an explosive device.
- The United States is a major benefactor of the ICRC through government grants, which typically range into the hundreds of millions of dollars annually.
 - » According to Department of Defense budgetary documents, the ICRC [received](#) approximately \$25 million in grants in FY2023.
 - » In FY2020, the ICRC and its affiliated Red Cross organizations [received](#) over \$600 million in U.S. funding, including over \$410 million in State Department funds and an additional \$95 million for emergency COVID-19 relief efforts.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Congress should conduct rigorous oversight of the ICRC and inform it that future U.S. grants to the ICRC for rebuilding Gaza are being jeopardized by its failure to uphold its mission.
- Congress should also be fully cognizant of the partners that the State Department and USAID provide funding to address the cleanup effort in Gaza and ensure that they do not harbor a blatant bias towards Israel which would exacerbate conditions on the ground or otherwise impede relief efforts.