

# Explainer: Safe Zones

*This document is part of a series of explainers that aim to strengthen understanding of specific mechanisms used to advance the protection of civilians (PoC) and improve humanitarian access in situations of active conflict. They are designed primarily to inform NRC strategic decision-making and advocacy and are not intended to serve as an exhaustive operational guide.*

*While the explainers are informed by international legal frameworks, the way certain terms are used in practice is often distinct from how they were originally set out in international law. The explainers highlight these points of distinction where relevant, and they further recognize that these PoC and access mechanisms continue to vary and evolve from context to context. With that in mind, the explainers offer some general considerations for their use, without seeking to make a definitive judgment on when, where, and how a specific mechanism should be implemented.*

## What is a safe zone?

Where civilians are present in an area of active conflict, there are sometimes calls for the establishment of designated locations where they can be protected from the effects of the hostilities. These areas have been assigned different names across contexts, including “safe zones,” “safe areas,” and “humanitarian zones.” For the purpose of this explainer, **“safe zone” is used generically to refer to a temporary area that aims to keep civilians safe, protected, and spared from the effects of hostilities.**<sup>1</sup>

The term “safe zone” does not appear in International Humanitarian Law or relevant treaties. **IHL does, however, include provisions for various types of “protected zones.”** These include hospital and safety zones, neutralized zones, and demilitarized zones, each with slightly different characteristics and obligations associated with them. Most of the safe zones that have emerged in recent decades were not established as foreseen by IHL, notably because they have not been established by agreement between relevant parties to a conflict. Familiarity with the arrangements outlined in IHL is nevertheless important to inform advocacy efforts when future safe zones are being proposed. Protected zones are thus also discussed in this explainer.

**The UN Security Council can also adopt resolutions establishing safe areas** and, under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, require it to be protected by UN peacekeepers or international forces. The provisions and requirements included in these resolutions are highly context specific so are not covered in detail here, but the explainer does offer operational considerations that can affect whether these safe zones are successful.

## When and where might they be used?

From NRC’s perspective, **the establishment of a safe zone should always be treated as a measure of last resort.** As later sections of this explainer will describe, the term “safe zone” is often a misnomer: safe zones are often anything but safe and can expose civilians both within and outside them to heightened risks.

NRC’s primary focus should always be on calling for parties to a conflict to **uphold their obligation to respect and protect civilians during hostilities**, wherever those civilians are

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<sup>1</sup> This definition was also used in a recent IASC statement, available [here](#).

located, rather than supporting the establishment of a safe zone. As one legal expert notes, however, “it is precisely because belligerents are not complying with this obligation, but are instead targeting civilians, conducting hostilities in an indiscriminate manner or forcibly displacing civilians, that the creation of such zones is considered.”<sup>2</sup>

There is limited operational guidance on when, where, and how safe zones may be set up, as humanitarian actors rarely call for them or facilitate their establishment. **Where parties to a conflict are proposing the establishment of a safe area** though, they **should be encouraged to do so within the parameters set out for protected zones under IHL**. Humanitarians should therefore familiarize themselves with arrangements foreseen by IHL. These include the following:

- With regard to location:
  - The Geneva Conventions and customary IHL set out that parties to a conflict are entitled to establish **in their own territory** and, if the need arises, **in occupied areas**, hospital and safety zones and localities so organized as to protect civilians<sup>3</sup> from the effects of war (see [GCIV Art. 14](#) and [CIHL Rule 35](#)). Hospital and safety zones are intended to be **far removed from the areas of hostilities** (see 1958 [commentary on Art. 14](#)).
  - The Geneva conventions and customary law also state that any Party to the conflict may, either directly or through a neutral State or a humanitarian organization, propose to the adverse Party to **establish, in the regions where fighting is taking place, neutralized zones** intended to shelter civilians from the effects of war (see [GCIV Art. 15](#) and [CIHL Rule 35](#)).
- With regard to timing:
  - Hospital and safety zones are generally of a **permanent** character.
  - Neutralized zones are generally of a **temporary** character.

Additional Protocol I and customary law also set out the possibility of creating **demilitarized zones** that cannot be occupied or used for military purposes (See [API Art. 60](#) and [CIHL Rule 36](#)). The location and duration of these must be expressly agreed by all relevant parties to a conflict.

All of the **protected zones outlined under IHL require the agreement by relevant parties to the conflict**, including the host state, in order for the zone to be considered to benefit from special protection (though civilians will continue to be entitled to protection regardless of whether the zone has been mutually recognized).

Where a state and/or parties to a conflict have not given consent for a safe zone to be established, **a UN Security Council resolution can establish a safe zone** and, under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, require it to be protected by UN peacekeepers or third country forces.

In some cases, **safe zones may also emerge spontaneously** if civilians request or force their way into premises that are under the control or protection of international actors – for example,

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<sup>2</sup> See Emanuela-Chiara Gillard, “[Safe areas: The international legal framework](#),” International Review of the Red Cross, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Note that GCIV Art. 14 specifies that these sites can provide refuge to “aged persons, children under fifteen, expectant mothers and mothers of children under seven,” but as Gillard [explains](#), “it seems safe to assume that all civilians may seek shelter in such zones and localities, provided they do not pose [a threat to the enemy].”

UN peacekeeping bases or embassies. Recognizing this possibility, the UN Department of Peace Operations' 2023 [Policy on the Protection of Civilians](#) says that “all bases (however temporary) of UN peacekeeping missions must have contingency plans in place to provide physical protection [to civilians seeking direct physical protection of a peacekeeping mission by gathering outside or seeking entry to UN premises].” While the establishment of long-term safe zones may not be originally envisioned or formally mandated in such cases, they have, in some instances, morphed into protracted settlements that have later been recognized and assigned with protection in later Security Council resolutions – as was the case, for example, with the Protection of Civilians Sites in the UN peacekeeping bases in South Sudan.

## What are the drawbacks and risks?

While safe zones are intended to protect civilians from the effects of hostilities, in practice safe zones carry significant risks.

- Most fundamentally, **many safe zones are not actually safe** and their establishment can create a **false sense of security** for civilians who choose to relocate to them. This is particularly true where parties to the conflict have not all agreed to the safe zone's creation or to respecting its civilian character. The risks are also acute if military actors or infrastructure remain in proximity to the zone. Where peacekeepers or third national forces are tasked with protecting the zones, they often have limited willingness and/or capacity to take action when the zones come under attack.
- The creation of safe zones **may contribute to a misconception or narrative** that parties to the conflict have fulfilled their protection obligations under IHL and are absolved of their responsibility to ensure the protection of civilians who remain in other locations. Parties to the conflict may argue (unlawfully) that those who do not relocate to the zone are combatants and are not entitled to protection.
- Safe zones may be proposed and **instrumentalized as a political or military tactic**, and civilians may be **forced to relocate to a safe zone** or do so under duress. Parties to conflict may call for a safe zone's establishment in order to clear and occupy territory they seek to control, for example. In its most extreme form, this can amount to ethnic cleansing. In other cases, neighboring states may call for them to prevent civilians from crossing the border to seek refuge in their country, or to return refugees to an area they can classify as “safe.” This can also affect asylum and refugee resettlement prospects.
- If **parties to the conflict do not respect the civilian character of the zone** and instead seek to hide combatants or weapons within the it or use it as a rest and recuperation point, it creates further risks for the civilian population seeking refuge.

## What is required to establish a successful safe zone?

If safe zones are established, **humanitarians should push for the following conditions to be met** to mitigate the risks outlined above:

- **The safe zone should be established with the consent of all parties to a conflict**, following the terms set out under IHL. An agreement should preferably be formalized in writing (a draft agreement is annexed to Geneva Convention IV, available [here](#)). The agreement should include details such as where the site will be located, for how long it will be maintained, how the civilians will be supported to access assistance and services,

how its civilian character will be ensured, how law and order will be maintained within the site, if and how the site will be defended, and any supervisory arrangements.

- **In the absence of agreement, if a safe zone is established it should be done with UN Security Council approval** (or recognition, if it emerges spontaneously) and assigned appropriate protection. The actors charged with protecting the sites must have adequate personnel, resources, and internal authorization to protect the civilians and act as a credible deterrent.
- **Safe zones must retain an exclusively civilian character.** Protocols and arrangements must be in place to screen and demobilize any person wishing to enter the site. Responsibility for who does this is not specifically outlined under IHL, but for safe zones established by a UN Security Council resolution, it is normally tasked to the actor responsible for ensuring the zone's protection (e.g. peacekeepers or a multinational force). Screening is notably *not* usually the responsibility of humanitarian actors.
- **Movement to safe zones must be voluntary**, and continued pressure must be exerted on all parties to the conflict to ensure that civilians both inside and outside the zone are protected and that they can access humanitarian assistance and basic necessities. Ordering the population to relocate to the zone may amount to forced transfer (See GC IV [Art. 49](#) for more detail). Under no circumstances should parties to a conflict be allowed to claim that all persons outside a safe zone are combatants. People seeking refuge in the safe zones should also be allowed to return to their place of origin voluntarily.
- **The safe zone must be able to safely accommodate the civilians and meet their basic needs.** The size of the safe zone needs to correspond to the size of the population in need of protection, and the location of the zone needs to ensure that civilians are, and will be, protected from the effects of hostilities. Services either need to be already available at the site or be feasible to quickly put in place.
- **The role of humanitarians needs to be agreed within the humanitarian community.** This is particularly the case if humanitarians will be expected to provide basic assistance and services to make the site functional. In such cases, humanitarians must be allowed to set the terms of what they can and cannot (or will not) do. Humanitarians also must continue to be able to provide assistance and protection to civilians outside the safe zone.

## What other considerations should be taken into account?

For all types of safe zones:

- Have all other options and measures been exhausted to maintain or improve the protection of civilians where they are currently located?
- Have all parties to the conflict agreed to the establishment of the safe zone and any relevant terms associated with it (e.g. who will be responsible for ensuring the site retains its civilian character, who will be responsible for the maintenance of law and order within the site, and whether any supervisory arrangements will be expected)? Has this agreement been formalized?
- Do the parties to the conflict have a good track record of complying with these types of agreements?

- Do civilians want to move to the safe zone and do they have enough information to make an informed choice? Do they have enough time and have safe travel routes to reach the safe zone? (See also the evacuations and humanitarian corridors explainer for further considerations in this regard).
- Is the proposed safe zone of an appropriate size for the population that would seek protection within it? Would they be able to access essentials such as water, food, health care and shelter?
- Has the role of humanitarian actors been discussed and agreed with the humanitarian community? Have humanitarian actors been guaranteed unhindered access of personnel and supplies both within and outside the safe zone?
- Do we have reason to believe that the safe zone is being established for political or military reasons, e.g. to avoid civilians crossing an international border to seek protection or to clear civilians from an area as a strategy of combat?
- Will the establishment of a safe zone negatively impact the protection of civilians in other areas outside this zone?

For safe zones established without the consent of the parties to a conflict:

- Is there a UN Security Council resolution authorizing the safe zone's establishment or recognizing it if it emerged spontaneously?
- Has the UN Security Council authorized peacekeepers or third country forces to protect the safe area, maintain its civilian character, and maintain law and order within the zone?
- Do the actors protecting the sites have the necessary personnel, assets, and directives to be able to deliver on this mandate and provide a credible deterrent?
- Are the actors protecting the sites recognized as neutral? Are they likely to be the target of attacks?

## How are safe zones reflected in international law?

- According to IHL, **parties to conflicts must respect and protect the civilian population at all times**, regardless of where they are located. As one tool to help give effect to these obligations, and as outlined throughout this explainer, IHL establishes the possibility (but not the requirement) for parties to a conflict to form various types of "protected zones," including:
  - **Hospital and safety zones**, located in their own territory or in occupied areas, and generally of a permanent character (see [GCIV Art. 14](#))
  - **Neutralized zones**, located in areas of active hostilities, generally of a temporary character (see [GCIV Art. 15](#))
  - **Demilitarized zones**, located in areas that are "fenced off" from military operations (see further explanation by [Gillard](#), and [API Art. 60](#) and [Rule 36](#))
- Under IHL, zones established by one party to a conflict will only benefit from protection if they are also recognized by the other party or parties to the conflict. However, civilians within and outside the zone remain entitled to protection regardless of whether the physical zone has been given recognized protected status.
  - Similarly, if a protected zone loses its protected status (e.g. if it is used for military purposes), **civilians within the zone nevertheless retain their right to be protected.**

- GCIV includes a detailed [draft agreement for the establishment of protected zones](#). Parties seeking to establish a protected zone are not required to use that template, but it offers helpful operational considerations (even for safe zones established outside the terms set out under IHL – notably, where a site is being established through a UN Security Council resolution).
- Parties to a conflict are **entitled to request a “supervisory body”** to ensure the protected zone retains the character outlined in the initial agreement (notably, that it retains its exclusively civilian character).

As mentioned in the risks section, it is important to be aware that parties to a conflict or other states sometimes unilaterally call for the establishment of a protected zone for political or military reasons that have little to do with the protection of the civilian population. If civilians are ordered to relocate to a safe zone without the obligations for an evacuation or protected zone having been met, then the order may constitute a violation of the prohibition of forced transfers (See GC IV [Art. 49](#) for more detail).

### Do we have examples of safe zones we can learn from?

- **Bosnia:** In 1993, the [UNSC Res 819](#) and [836](#) designated Srebrenica a safe zone to ensure the protection of civilians caught in the Bosnian war by “all necessary means.” A few hundred Dutch peacekeepers were deployed to guard the city, where ethnic Bosnian Muslims were seeking refuge. However, in July 1995, the Bosnian Serb army overran the city and the peacekeepers were unable to protect the city and its civilian population. Ultimately between 7000-8000 Bosnian Muslims were killed in the Srebrenica massacre.
- **South Sudan:** In 2013, civil war broke out in South Sudan. Across the country, civilians found themselves caught in fighting and, in some cases, directly targeted on the basis of their ethnicity or perceived political affiliations. Thousands of civilians fled to the bases of the UN peacekeeping mission to South Sudan (UNMISS) for protection. Eventually, these bases turned into Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites, providing physical protection to several hundred thousand civilians. The UN Security Council eventually included protection of civilians in the sites as a specific task of UNMISS (see [UNSC Res. 2155](#)). While the PoC sites arguably saved the lives of many people faced with imminent violence, the sites were also repeatedly attacked and overrun, at times so egregiously that humanitarians questioned whether they provided a false sense of security to people sheltering inside them. UNMISS also argued that the PoC sites were draining their resources and reducing their ability to provide protection to civilians living in other areas.

### What steps should be taken if safe zones are being considered?

If the protection or access environment has deteriorated significantly and safe zones are either already being discussed or may soon be considered, it will be important for the NRC CO to **consult internally** and **coordinate with key actors in the humanitarian system at country level**. Where humanitarians are involved with a safe zone it is almost always an interagency endeavor (agreed by the Humanitarian Country Team), and advocacy for or against the establishment of a safe zone will be far stronger when carried out jointly with other actors. For that reason, internal and external coordination is essential.



Detailed guidance on steps that should be followed can be found in NRC's internal note on [Promoting the Protection of Civilians in Situations of Conflict](#), and is summarized here:

- Identify who, at CO or field level, has information or expertise relevant to safe zones or to protection and access more broadly, and convene them as an informal strategy group.
  - At minimum, this should include someone from: PfV; H2R/Access; ICLA; Advocacy; and Health, Safety and Security (HSS) teams.
  - Where these positions don't exist, are vacant at CO level, or the relevant individuals are less familiar with this topic, consult relevant colleagues at regional or global level.
- With the abovementioned internal group of colleagues, carry out a light touch analysis of the protection risks civilian populations face and the access barriers, and what measures would be most effective in addressing them.
  - As part of this, assess whether broader protection and access tools have been tried and exhausted – this is essential in determining whether we have reached the point of last resort.
- Validate this analysis with the above-mentioned individuals, as well as with relevant external counterparts. This could include the Protection Cluster, OCHA, ICRC, or other peer organizations.
- Consult NRC regional and head office colleagues, including (at minimum) the global policy, access, and PfV leads. If the approach is endorsed by NRC regional and head offices, coordinate next steps with other actors (internal and external) at country level before proceeding.

In parallel with any advocacy efforts on safe zones, **NRC should always consider what we can do to strengthen protection and access through our operational and coordination work.** The abovementioned [internal guidance note](#) outlines options for addressing threats, reducing vulnerabilities, and supporting communities' coping capacities through NRC's core competency programming, access work, and coordination engagement.

## Where can I find more resources?

- Emanuela Chiara Gillard, "[Safe areas': The international legal framework](#)," IRRC (2017)
- [ICRC Hospital zones and safety zones and localities](#)
- [ICRC Neutralized zones](#)
- [ICRC Demilitarized zones](#)
- UNHCR Toolkit on Protection in Armed Conflict, [Chapter 4: Protected zones](#), (2019)
- [IASC Principals statement on Gaza 2023](#)
- [ICRC Q&A and lexicon on humanitarian access](#)

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