

## PRACTICE REPORT

# The Future of Humanitarian Work and Political Representation in Lebanon: The Role of the Lebanese Red Cross and the Limitations of Humanitarian Actors<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*In a world full of injustice and tragedy, humanity relies on those who insist on offering a glimmer of hope; those who have not lost faith in the supremacy and necessity of International Humanitarian Law, even in the face of repeated failures by the international community to establish peace, preserve human dignity, and uphold the ethics of war. In a country like Lebanon, humanitarian action is not a luxury. It is a daily struggle to uphold human rights where traditional governance and political representation are under severe strain. In this sense, understanding Lebanon's context is crucial to appreciating the importance of humanitarian actors' work there. Lebanon is a multi-crisis state, with crises that are not sequential but overlapping and mutually exacerbating. The most recent protracted economic and financial collapse has broken the already tenuous social contract between the state and its citizens, creating a massive crisis in service delivery and prompting a United Nations reporter to describe Lebanon as a "failing state" (Chahine, 2021). In this political vacuum, where the state fails to protect the most basic rights of its citizens, humanitarian actors, from large international bodies to local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), were left to fill the gap. However, this aid, while essential for survival, cannot solve the fundamental political problems. The challenge is deepened by the "politicization of aid," in which assistance is often tied to geopolitical motives and allocated along sectarian lines, reinforcing domestic divisions and stalling structural reforms. In this context, there is no more catastrophic example than the Beirut Port Blast on August 4, 2020. This explosion was not merely a tragic accident; it was a profound crisis of governance and accountability, as the state failed to fulfil its duty to protect citizens' right to life and safety, leaving humanitarian actors to fill the void (Riebl, 2020). Among all NGOs, the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) is leading the humanitarian action, playing an essential role in upholding those ideals, not in theory, but on the ground, in the midst of compounding crises. This is why a closer examination of the Lebanese Red*

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*Cross' challenges will yield a clearer understanding of the future of humanitarian work in Lebanon.*

### **Key Words:**

*Lebanese Red Cross, auxiliary role, disaster risk reduction, international humanitarian law, protection*

## **1 The Legal and Political Mandate of the Lebanese Red Cross**

The Lebanese Red Cross plays a unique and critical role, unlike that of any other NGO in the country. Founded in 1945 and comprised of more than 12,000 volunteers delivering life-saving assistance across Lebanon, the LRC has a unique legal mandate as “auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field”. This status is rooted in international law, specifically in Article 26 of the First Geneva Convention (1949), and reinforced by the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IFRC, 2025a). This auxiliary role defines a specific and distinctive partnership with the state, establishing the National Society as both a private institution and an organization mandated to perform public services. This means that while the LRC has a duty to cooperate with the authorities, it must maintain sufficient autonomy to act solely in accordance with the Movement’s Fundamental Principles of Impartiality and Neutrality. This role allows the LRC to support the official state authority and grants it a “seat at the table” to co-design and implement national policies and the national plan of action. This partnership is built on a foundation of large-scale, trusted service delivery: the LRC operates nearly 300 ambulances at zero cost to affected people and provides more than 35% of the national blood needs (LRC, 2025b; Riebl, 2020).

The LRC’s role evolved in response to crises. From merely providing life-saving medical services through Emergency Medical Services (EMS) teams and Blood Transfusion Services to addressing disaster consequences through the Disaster Management (DM) unit, which was created in 2013 to lead preparedness, response, and recovery, and which played a significant role in conducting the massive service needs during the Syrian refugee crisis (LRC, 2025b). As the understanding of the disaster cycle evolved, the specialized Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Unit was established to focus on proactive community-level resilience and national-level coordination.

## **2 The Auxiliary Role Form**

This auxiliary role depends entirely on the crisis. In the last few years, three distinct operational models have been witnessed.

### **2.1 First Model: The Proactive Technical Partner (COVID-19 & Cholera)**

In protracted crises, the LRC acts as a proactive technical partner, helping to build the state’s response. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the LRC’s Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Unit was formally mandated by the national consortium to lead the Strategic Objective: Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE). It worked directly with the Ministry of Education to develop the “Back-to-School” health guides (DRR, 2021) and with the Ministry of Interior on “Municipal Response and Action Plans”. Similarly, during the 2022-2023 Cholera outbreak, at the Ministry of Public Health’s request, the LRC led the high-priority, high-risk prison vaccination campaign. More importantly, the LRC served as a technical expert, jointly developing the national unified digital reporting

platform with the government's central Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Unit to ensure that all NGOs reported into a single system (DRR, 2023).

This is the best-case scenario: a resilient system that supports and enhances the state's capacity.

## 2.2 Second Model: The 2024 Armed Conflict and IHL Imperatives

The armed conflict in 2024, particularly the significant escalation in September, has presented the Lebanese Red Cross with its most severe operational test in recent history, as detailed in the LRC's 2024 Annual Report. The DRR Unit deployed technical personnel inside key ministries and 20 Emergency Operations Rooms (EORs) to provide real-time technical support on managing internally displaced person (IDP) movements and coordinating the response. The conflict has resulted in a devastating human toll; Lebanon has suffered more than 17,000 casualties, of which at least 3,300 were killed, as recorded by late October 2024 (LRC, 2025a). Hence, an immediate, massive response was required: 43,000 Urgent & Search & Rescue missions were conducted, and nearly 15,000 blood units were delivered in the initial months (LRC, 2025a). Furthermore, the conflict has forcibly displaced more than 1,000,000 people (LRC, 2025a), overwhelming over 1,000 collective shelters. At the same time, efforts were intensively focused on safeguarding personnel during a brutal conflict marked by grave violations of international humanitarian law, including direct attacks on humanitarian teams, medical facilities, and civilians (LRC, 2025b). Thus, coordination with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and other stakeholders remained vital to ensuring the safety of LRC personnel and maintaining effective operations (DRR, 2025). This dire situation prompted the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to issue an urgent statement, reiterating that civilians, the wounded, and healthcare workers and facilities, including ambulances, must be respected and protected under international humanitarian law (IHL) (IFRC, 2024). Moreover, the complexity of operations demands continuous vigilance in applying IHL principles such as distinction and proportionality (ICRC, 2024). This reality underscores that humanitarian action is always taking place at the fragile intersection of law and war.

## 2.3 Third Model: The Reactive Operational Replacement (The Beirut Blast)

The Beirut Blast was different. This was not a proactive partnership nor a reactive operation governed by the IHL. It was a reactive, emergency substitution that occurred in the absence of any internal or international legal framework. As mentioned, the political vacuum in Lebanon automatically made the Lebanese Red Cross the "prime civilian actor trusted by the local population". Its operational response was, by all accounts, "truly world-class" (Riebl, 2020).

Within the first 48 hours, 75 ambulances were dispatched to the scene, 4,000 patients were treated and/or transported, and more than 1,500 blood units were collected immediately (although the blast destroyed one EMS centre).

In the following months, the EMS conducted over 44,000 missions, and the Blood Transfusion Services collected 11,000 units of blood.

So, what happens when the social contract breaks and formal political representation fails? The answer is that humanitarian actors are forced to fill the gap. Their actions, guided by foundational principles, especially neutrality and impartiality, become a de facto

representation of human dignity. They are upholding the right to life when the formal system has failed. But this is an emergency measure. It is not a sustainable model for protecting human rights. Operational heroism, as witnessed, cannot overcome systemic and legal chaos.

### **3 The Problem: The Limits of Heroism**

The key lesson from the Beirut Blast is that a humanitarian-led response, no matter how heroic, cannot replace a functional, accountable state. While the operational response of the LRC was “world-class”, the subsequent Real-Time Evaluation (RTE) documented the profound strategic failures that arise in a legal vacuum. The RTE found that, in the initial chaos, the LRC refused to share its beneficiary registration list with other major humanitarian actors, including the World Food Program (WFP) and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), for de-duplication purposes. This refusal, rooted in the absence of pre-established data-sharing protocols, led to a system-wide impediment by the response’s “prime actor” (Riebl, 2020). The consequences were severe: WFP and UNICEF were forced to physically verify the lists themselves, four months after the blast. Furthermore, the international response was hindered by “regulatory barriers,” “delays in the clearance of relief goods,” “parallel coordination mechanisms,” and a “lack of cooperation and coordination between players on the ground” (Riebl, 2020). This proves that data-sharing protocols, coordination mechanisms, and role clarification cannot be improvised within 48 hours of a catastrophe. They must be legally mandated and pre-established.

The Beirut Blast was a stark reminder that Disaster Risk Reduction should not remain “optional”. In fact, Lebanon has national strategies, but their implementation is “hindered” by “resource constraints and competing priorities,” with attention always focused on response rather than prevention. This is why a binding national law is the first step to fixing this (IFRC, 2026).

### **4 The Future: From Response to Resilience**

So, how can we shape a better future? It is the transition from response to resilience. And that future is built with law.

#### **4.1 The National Level**

At the national level, the LRC’s Disaster Risk Reduction Unit is currently represented in key ministries at all levels to identify policy gaps, deploy trained volunteers and staff, and use digital tools to share vital data for vulnerable areas, thereby strengthening institutional readiness. Trusted for its national coverage and humanitarian expertise, it actively contributes to the planning and implementation of national strategies, thereby helping the government meet its international commitments by assessing and reducing risks.

Furthermore, the Lebanese Red Cross is a key advocate for a national legal framework for disaster management. In this context, the LRC, with the assistance of its partners, has prepared a draft law on disasters. This action is not a political act; it is a humanitarian imperative since this framework aims to:

- Define clear roles and responsibilities (for the government, the army, the LRC, and civil society).
- Ensure the rapid and fair distribution of aid (a rights-based approach).

- And establish mechanisms for accountability, which is the only way to rebuild trust with the Lebanese political system eventually.

### 3.2 The International Level

Disasters are not just Lebanon's problem. Both natural and man-made, disasters are increasing globally. This is why the LRC's work, alongside all components of the Red Cross Red Crescent movement, has expanded internationally. Today, we are at a critical inflection point. The United Nations General Assembly, through its adoption of Resolution 79/128 on December 4, 2024, has initiated a formal negotiation process to conclude a legally binding instrument on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters (PPED) (UN, 2024). This proposed treaty is designed to fill the exact gaps experienced in Beirut:

- It would “fill this gap by aligning all relevant frameworks and codifying a universal standard” (Azrafil, 2025), shifting DRR from an “optional” policy to a binding international legal obligation.
- It would “help address regulatory barriers” by “requir[ing] States to establish clear and predictable rules for facilitating international relief” such as fast-tracking customs and visa procedures (IFRC, 2025c).
- It would mandate the very coordination lacking in Beirut, creating an anchor for better coordination between government authorities, the United Nations, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (draft article 7).

Notably, this treaty respects the legal firewall between disaster and conflict. Draft Article 18 of the proposed convention explicitly states: “The present draft articles do not apply to the extent that the response to a disaster is governed by the rules of international humanitarian law” (UN, 2016). The existence of a robust body of law on war (IHL) only underscores the dangerous absence of a binding framework for disasters.

## 5 Ambiguous Future, Unwavering Actors

The “Future of Humanitarian Work and Political Representation” in Lebanon is not about humanitarians becoming politicians. It is the opposite. It is an argument for a future where ‘representation’ is embedded not in the failures of day-to-day politics, but in law and resilient systems. This is a neutral, non-partisan, humanitarian imperative. The Beirut Blast showed the tragic limits of humanitarian heroism in a political and legal vacuum. The future of humanitarian work, in Lebanon and globally, is not just about delivering aid. It is about building a resilient legal and political framework that guarantees human rights, ensures accountability, and reduces the necessity of massive, chaotic aid interventions. This brings us to a crucial, often invisible, element of this work: finance (IFRC, 2025b). People see the volunteers in red vests, the food parcels, and the emergency shelters. What they don't see is the invisible engine of humanitarian action. Finance is not a back-office function; it is a core humanitarian action. It is the bridge that enables cash transfers, giving survivors dignity and choice. It is the guardian against waste and the map from a budget line to real-world impact. Most importantly, finance is not just administrative work; it is a contract of trust, trust with donors, partners, and the communities that humanitarians serve. This entire system is built on speed and accountability. Delays in finance are delays in food, water, and medicine. Therefore, building resilient legal frameworks also means building resilient, fast, and trusted financial systems. But this future itself is threatened. We are facing a growing “donor fatigue” and significant funding

cuts. As international funding decreases, local NGOs, which are the first responders and have deep-rooted community trust, face a sustainability crisis, often exacerbated by reliance on short-term, externally driven project funding. A binding legal framework helps create the stability and predictability that local actors need to survive.

To conclude, the UN has set a deadline of 31 December 2025 for governments to submit proposals for amendments to this new disaster treaty. Since then, two working groups were convened: the first from 6 to 10 April 2026, and the second from 31 August to 4 September 2026, to discuss proposals and refine the drafting. A final conference was scheduled to take place between 25 January and 12 February 2027 to finalize the draft convention before its adoption by the General Assembly in August 2027. A small window to use the hard-won, tragic lessons from Lebanon to ensure this new international law is strong, practical, and truly protects human dignity in the face of catastrophe. The future of humanitarian work is indeed threatened by new, compounding challenges, mainly the increase in conflicts and the accelerating effects of climate change (RCRC, 2025). Climate change acts as a risk multiplier, increasing the frequency of disasters, conflict, and instability, particularly in low-income countries. These exacerbating challenges require a fundamental commitment to new global preparedness, focusing on scaled-up financing, universal early warning systems, and the mobilization of greater solidarity (UN, 2026) through reliable funding mechanisms.

The future of humanitarian work may be uncertain, yet the efforts undertaken by humanitarian actors to preserve it are real: The new convention now taking shape stands as a decisive first milestone

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