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Common Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions and the Obligation to Ensure Respect

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Abstract

The obligation to respect and ensure respect is codified by common Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions and in Article 1(1) of Additional Protocol I. The following research essay shall consider the second portion of this obligation, that is the obligation to ensure respect, and in particular the responsibilities of third States observing conflicts to which they are not a party. There are two competing interpretations of this obligation. One interpretation, favoured by the International Committee of the Red Cross in their 2016 Updated Commentary, requires that States are required to adopt all appropriate measures to ensure that International Humanitarian Law is observed universally. An alternate interpretation promotes a far more restricted interpretation of this obligation. This research essay concludes that the obligation to take measures to put an end to ongoing violations and to actively prevent their occurrence is not supported by the initial intention of the High contracting Parties or the subsequent practice of States. Rather common Article 1 call for a more narrow interpretation whereby States have an obligation to avoid encouraging international humanitarian law violations and to ensure respect of international humanitarian law within their respective jurisdiction.

Key Words

International Humanitarian Law – Common Article 1 – Geneva Conventions – Obligation to Ensure Respect

Table of Contents

Part I – Introduction

Part II – International Humanitarian Law and the ICRC
  1. International Humanitarian Law, the Geneva Conventions and Common Article 1
  2. The 2016 Updated ICRC Commentary

Part III – The Initial Intention of the High Contracting Parties
  1. Interpreting a Treaty
  2. The Initial Intention of the High Contracting Parties
     2.1. The Original Commentary
     2.2. The Actual Initial Intention of the High Contracting Parties

Part IV – A Changing Interpretation
  1. Evolution of a Treaty
     1.1. State Practice and Opinio Juris
  2. Evidence of State Practice and Opinio Juris
     2.1. 1968 Tehran Conference
     2.2. The Jurisprudence of the ICJ
     2.3. UN Resolutions
     2.4. The Responsibility to Protect Doctrine

Part V – Humanitarian Crises and Intervention
  1. Intervention and Common Article 1
     1.1. Pre 1990
     1.2. Post 1990
     1.3. The 21st Century
  2. Serious Violations

Part VI – Conclusion
Part I – Introduction

War is one of the most ancient and primal forms of human interaction. It has been described as inevitable, invading the minds of statespersons like “penetrating cosmic dust”\(^1\). It has also been described as an illogical phenomenon, a paradox as put by Tolstoy:\(^2\)

That is to say, an event took place in diametrical opposition to all laws, human and divine… These millions of humans rushed into the perpetration of very hideous crime: Murder, pillage, theft, fraud, forgery, treachery, incendiarism – the judicial annuals of the whole world could not furnish so long or so black a list in the course of many centuries – and yet those who committed them did not think themselves as criminals!

Currently there are approximately 25 conflicts and a further 20 humanitarian crises, many of which that are ongoing, that represent immediate challenges for the international community. These conflicts and crises – as epitomised by the current situations in Syria and Yemen – are characterised by enormous human suffering and violations of International Humanitarian Law. These conflicts illustrate the most significant challenge faced IHL is not the content or number of rules in this area, but rather how to enforce those rules.

One of the primary obligations that promotes compliance with IHL is the general principle of humanitarian law that States are obliged to respect and ensure respect for IHL\(^3\). This principle has been codified by both Common Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions and Article 1(1) of the Additional Protocol I.

Written in the context of the 2016 Updated ICRC Commentary of the 1949 Geneva Convention I and the on-going debate this research essay shall address the scope of the obligation under CA1, particularly as regards the obligations of third States. This paper argues that the interpretation adopted by the ICRC in the 2016 Updated Commentary is unduly broad. In contrast, the initial intention of the High

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\(^1\) I.S. Bloch Modern Weapons and Modern War (Grant Richards, London, 1900) at 1 xiii.
\(^2\) Leo Tolstoy War and Peace translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude (David Campbell, London, 1992) at Book 9, Chapter LX.
\(^3\) Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States of America) (Merits) [1986] ICJ Rep 14 at 220.
Contracting Parties, and the subsequent practice of states, requires a much narrower interpretation of the obligation under CA1.

This research essay shall first consider the initial intention of the High Contracting Parties. It will then examine whether a broader interpretation is supported by the subsequent conduct of States, specifically in the context of third state responses to humanitarian crises. Finally, this essay shall conclude with an interpretation of CA1 that is grounded in the initial intention of the High Contracting Parties and subsequent practice of States.

Part II – International Humanitarian Law and the ICRC

1. International Humanitarian Law, the Geneva Conventions and Common Article 1

IHL has been described as a branch of law that has been ‘contaminated’ by ethics and idealism⁴. As identified by J Pictet, IHL also constitutes, “that considerable portion of international public law which owes its inspiration to a feeling for humanity and which is centred on the protection of the individual [which] appears to combine two ideas of a different character, one legal, the other moral”⁵. Be this as it may, IHL is significant in its enunciation of clear limitations on the force used against combatants and civilians in times of conflict and pronounces the humanitarian principles that are intended to offer protection to those caught in areas of conflict and crisis⁶.

The Geneva Conventions are currently the major IHL conventions, and having been ratified by 196 States, are universal in their scope and application⁷. These conventions have given expression to the “elementary considerations of humanity”⁸, and establish the humanitarian principles by which the signatory countries are to treat an enemy’s military and civilian nationals in times of war.

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⁵ J Pictet Humanitarian Law and the Protection of War Victims (Leyden, Geneva, 1975) at 11.
CA1 provides one of the core obligations of the Geneva Conventions, specifically regarding the enforcement of IHL.9

The High Contracting Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for the present Convention in all circumstances.

CA1 contains both an obligation to respect and an obligation to ensure respect. The first part of this obligation, the obligation to respect in all circumstances, is uncontentious, and is derived directly from the two 1929 Geneva Conventions: “The provisions of the present Convention shall be respect by the High Contracting Parties in all circumstances”10. It imposes an obligation that a State must do everything it can to guarantee that its own organs abide by the rules in question11. This provision, in essence, represents a reaffirmation of the principle pacta sunt servanda, codified by Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties12. The principle of pacta sunt servanda gives expression to the binding force of treaties in international law, establishing the legal relationship and good faith performance obligations between parties13.

In contrast the obligation to ensure respect, absent from the earlier 1864 and 1906 Geneva Conventions, goes a step further. While not initially contentious the scope of this obligation has come under increasing scrutiny, specifically regarding the obligations of third states. This obligation is now subject to two competing interpretations.

One interpretation holds that States are not only required to ensure that IHL is respected not only by their own organs and subjects within their respective jurisdictions, but universally by all. This would require that third States not involved in a given armed conflict have a duty to take measures in order to ensure compliance with the Geneva conventions. An alternate and far narrower

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interpretation holds that the obligation to ensure respect applies only in respect to the State’s own population and groups under the effective control of the state. In accordance with this view, there is no legal obligation to ensure respect for IHL by other States or by foreign non-State actors, only a moral obligation to do so.

2. The 2016 Updated ICRC Commentary

The International Committee of the Red Cross is an impartial, neutral and independent organisation whose humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence. Under Article 5 of the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement the ICRC is mandated to work for the faithful application of IHL, to take cognisance of any complaints based on alleged breaches of that law, to work for the understanding and dissemination of knowledge of this body of rules and to prepare any development thereof. A necessary corollary of this mission is the vital task of strengthening IHL. It is from this broad mandate that the ICRC derives its task of ensuring that knowledge of IHL is disseminated. A key component of this dissemination is the publication of comprehensive commentaries of the Geneva Conventions, that while not binding have at times been influential in ascertaining the scope of rights and obligations that exist under IHL.

In the Updated 2016 Commentary the ICRC contends that the scope, CA1 of the Geneva Conventions, in particular the obligation to ensure respect for humanitarian law, has expanded significantly since the 1950s. The ICRC maintains that the current practice in this area indicates that the obligation to ensure respect extends to both international and non-international armed conflicts and entails a much broader range of negative and positive duties.

The ICRC Commentary defines CA1 as having both an internal and external elements. The internal aspect covers states obligation to respect and ensure respect for the Conventions by their own armed forces and other persons or groups whose conduct is attributable to them, as well as the whole population over which they

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14 Frits Kalshoven “The Undertaking to Respect and Ensure Respect in All Circumstances: from Tiny Seed to Ripening Fruit” (1999) 2 Y.B. Int’l Human L. 3 at 60.
exercise authority. The external, and far more controversial, aspect relates to
ensuring respect by others, in particular other parties to a conflict regardless of
whether the State itself is a party to that conflict. The ICRC provides that the duty
to ensure respect sets a clear standard, as ensuring means “to make certain that
something will occur of be so” or inversely ‘make sure that (a violation) does not
occur”16. This requires States to take appropriate, even pre-emptive, measures to
prevent violations from occurring during both war and peacetime17.

This obligation imposes duties that are both negative and positive in their
application18. Under the negative obligation States must abstain from encouraging,
aiding or assisting in violations of the conventions. The High Contracting Parties
may neither encourage, nor aid or assist in violations of the Conventions by parties
to a conflict. The positive obligations require states to take proactive steps to bring
violations of the Conventions to an end and bring the erring party back to an
attitude of respect for the Conventions. States must do everything reasonably in
their power to prevent and bring such violations to an end19. It should be noted that
such an obligation would take the form of an obligation of means rather than
result, whereby States would be required to take reasonable measures rather than
achieve a specific outcome20. In this way the external dimension of the obligation
to ensure respect for the conventions goes well beyond the principle of pacta sunt
servanda.

The Commentaries of the ICRC to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and to the
Additional Protocol I unequivocally support this broader interpretation and while
not binding have enormously influenced the doctrinal debate21. However, the
commentary of the ICRC exhibits a clear tendency towards an interpretation of
IHL that is conducive to its purpose “to work for the faithful application of IHL
applicable to armed conflict”. In this way the commentary can be subjected to the
critique that it is not in entirely objective is an instrument through which the ICRC
can promote an interpretation of IHL that accords with the organisations own

20 Riccardo Pisillo-Mazzeschi “The Due Diligence Rule and the Nature of the International Responsibility of
at 127.
mission and objective for stricter compliance with IHL. Consequently, it has become necessary to consider whether the ICRC’s commentary is in fact based in either the initial intention of the High Contracting Parties or the subsequent developments and state practice in this area.

Part III – Initial Intention of the High Contracting Parties

1. Interpreting a Treaty

Interpretation, the process of establishing the true meaning of a treaty, is indispensable in the understanding the scope and application of a treaty provision. The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties sets out the rules and elements to be taken into account during the process of interpretation. Rather than a set of prescriptive rules the Vienna Convention lays down a single general rule accompanied by principles on the elements and means of treaty interpretation that are generally accepted and drawn from relevant international practice. In this way the process of interpreting a treaty is a unity, a single combined operation, whereby the various elements enumerated in the paragraphs of the Article are placed on the same footing.

The general rule is set out by Article 31(1) of the Vienna Convention which provides that interpretation must be based on the ordinary meaning to be given to the terms of the treaty in their context and in light of the object and purpose of the treaty. As expressed by the ICJ this is because the wording of a treaty is presumed to be the authentic expression of the intention of the Parties. As provided by Article 32 in ascertaining the initial intention of the parties information and material outside the text of a treaty can also be referred to. Primarily, recourse may be had to the preparatory materials and the circumstances of its conclusion. While these preparatory materials, commonly referred to in its French version as “travaux préparatoires”, are deemed to be only a supplementary means of

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22 F. Bugnion The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims (Macmillan, Oxford, 2003) at 914.
26 Territorial Dispute (Libya v Chad) (Merits) [1994] ICJ Rep 6 at 41; Legality of the Use of Force (Serbia and Montenegro v Belgium) (Preliminary Objections) [2004] ICJ Rep 279 at 100.
interpretation, they are still significant and often examined in order to ascertain the true intention of the parties. As Gardiner puts it, courts and tribunals tend to seize on anything that looks helpful\(^\text{27}\).

### 2. Initial Intention of the High Contracting Parties

In the context of CA1 at one time the broad interpretation of the obligation to ensure respect was partially based on the initial intention of High Contracting Parties to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and to the Additional Protocol I, that they “fully understood and wished to impose a duty on each Party to the Conventions” to ensure universal compliance with IHL\(^\text{28}\). This interpretation was supported by the initial 1952 Commentary to the Geneva Conventions.

#### 2.1. The Original Commentary

The Commentaries published by the ICRC in the 1950s favour an interpretation of CA1 that includes an obligation to ensure respect of the conventions by others. As unequivocally enunciated by their author Jean Pictet:\(^\text{29}\)

> In the event of a Power failing to fulfil its obligations, the other Contracting Parties (neutral, allied or enemy) may, and should, endeavour to bring it back to an attitude of respect for the Conventions.

Pictet places an external element of the obligation in CA1 as central to the system of protection underpinning the Geneva Conventions. Pictet maintains that in order to ensure a proper working system of protection, as envisaged by the Geneva Conventions, the Contracting Parties should not be content to merely apply the provisions themselves, but “should do everything in their power to ensure that the humanitarian principles underlying the Conventions are universally applied”\(^\text{30}\). It should be noted, in contrast to the updated commentary, the original commentary is not clear whether CA1 manifests itself as an entitlement to act or an obligation to do so. The diction adopted by Pictet, “should” and may”, has the immediate

connotations of an entitlement, whereby CA1 merely empowers or encourages States to take action rather than obliges them to do so. Interestingly, the French version of the original commentaries is more unequivocal in differentiating between an entitlement to act (pouvoir) and an obligation (devoir), referring only to an obligation to act\textsuperscript{31}. Such an interpretation, whereby Parties are merely obliged to act, was initially held by some to be inconsistent with the term “undertake”. As noted by Frédéric Siordet who declared that “the private right of belligerents was substituted [for] the general interest of humanity, which demanded scrutiny, no longer as a question of right, but of duty”\textsuperscript{32}. Here, undertake is clearly interpreted as manifesting a duty to take positive and proactive measures when faced with violations of IHL and is consistent with the updated commentary which clearly provides for an obligation under CA1 rather than an entitlement to act\textsuperscript{33}.

2.2. The Actual Initial Intention

However, the position adopted by the initial commentary is no longer as unassailable as it once was. As pointed out by Fritz Kalshoven “there is nothing in the published records of the Conference that supports [the ICRC’s] contention”\textsuperscript{34}. Kalshoven’s interpretation is supported by others who have concluded that when it was adopted CA1 was not intended to create a wide external obligation\textsuperscript{35}.

The phrase “shall be respected by the High Contracting Parties in all circumstances” appears in both the 1929 Geneva Conventions for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick and Armies in the Field and the Treatment of Prisoners of War\textsuperscript{36}. These provisions have been consistently and unanimously interpreted as imposing, for the first time, the obligation to abide by

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\textsuperscript{34} Frits Kalshoven “The Undertaking to Respect and to Ensure Respect in all Circumstances: from a Tiny Seed to Ripening Fruit” (1999) 2 Y.B. Int’l Human L. 3 at 54.


\textsuperscript{36} Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field (signed 27 July 1929, no longer in force) art 25; and Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (signed 27 July 1929, no longer in force) art 82.
the rules of the Conventions regardless of the behaviour of the other contracting parties. CA1 of the four 1949 Geneva Conventions took the additional step asserting that “the High Contracting Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for the [Geneva Conventions] in all circumstances”. As noted by the ICJ, this wording, and the position at the forefront of the Convention, are clearly indicative of an intent to strengthen the formula already found in the 1929 Conventions, through placing an obligation to ensure respect of IHL by those within the jurisdiction and control of the state, not just the organs of the state. As regards the scope of this obligation, it was the understanding of the High Contracting parties that the obligation to ensure respect for the conventions referred specifically to their respective populations and jurisdictions.

Interestingly, the Final Record of the diplomatic Geneva Conference of 1949 offers little illumination as to the understanding or scope of CA1. But what was discussed reflects a more limited understanding of the obligation to ensure respect that what was contended by the ICRC. In regards to CA1 it was stated that the obligation was along the lines of Articles 25 and 82 of the 1929 Conventions. Mr. Maseca, representing Italy, noted that the term “ensure respect” was “either redundant or introduced a new concept into international law”. These words are taken to suggest the significance of CA1, as if the phrase were merely redundant it would have resulted in a deletion. More significant are the words of Mr. Pilloud speaking on behalf of the ICRC:

In submitting its proposals to the Stockholm Conference, the International Committee of the Red Cross emphasised that the Contracting Parties should not confine themselves to applying the Conventions themselves, but should

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37 Frits Kalshoven “The Undertaking to Respect and to Ensure Respect in all Circumstances: from a Tiny Seed to Ripening Fruit” (1999) 2 Y.B. Int’l Human L. 3 at 7-10.
40 Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Advisory Opinion) [2004] ICJ Rep 136 separate opinion if Judge Higgins at 39.
do all in their power to see that the basic humanitarian principles of the
Conventions were universally applied.

None of the delegates opposed this statement, nor did it arouse any debate.
Consequently, the absence of discord has been interpreted by some as
acquiescence to a broader interpretation of CA1, whereby universal application of
the 1949 Geneva Conventions should not be restricted to the domestic level.44
However such an interpretation appears isolated and conflicts with the 1949
Diplomatic Conference records which do not suggest an awareness on the part of
government delegates, or indeed ICRC participants, that the phrase to ensure
respect implied anything beyond internal observance.45 Kalshoven’s investigation
of the drafting and negotiating history of the 1949 Conventions and the 1977
Additional Protocols reveals that “no-one at the Conference of 1949 or 1977 ever
discussed the text of the Article in terms even remotely resembling the ICRC’s
interpretation, let alone… qualified it as an obligation”46. At no point was the
possibility that the expression “ensure respect” could mean an undertaking that
each state had to take measures against other states to ensure compliance
mentioned or even discussed. What can be inferred from this is that the scope of
article 1, was not intended to be universal, in these circumstances universally was
taken to mean, “by all concerned” or “the whole population”.47 In this context, the
words to ensure respect take on another meaning: “to ensure that the whole
population of a country which was party to the conventions would respect the law
in all circumstances, even perhaps in the case of civil war”.48

This analysis of the available evidence suggests that the inclusion of the
expression “ensure respect” in CA 1 was not meant to go beyond the commitment
taken by State Parties to guarantee the respect of the Geneva Conventions
internally. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that CA1 when it was adopted did

46 Frits Kalshoven, “The Undertaking to Respect and to Ensure Respect in all Circumstances: from a Tiny Seed
to Ripening Fruit” (1999) 2 Y.B. Int’l Human L. 3 at 52.
47 Condorelli and Boisson de Chazournes, “Common Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions Revisited: Protecting
Civilian Interests” (2000) 82(837) IRRC 67 at 69.
not mean to confer an external dimension to the obligation for State Parties to ensure respect of the Conventions by other states.\(^49\)

Part IV – A Changing Interpretation

1. Evolution of a Treaty

The presumption established through an examination of the original text of a treaty, and the corresponding intention of the contracting parties, is not final.\(^50\) As provided by Article 31(3) of the Vienna Convention attention must also be cast towards the subsequent developments and the current consensus and understanding of the parties at the time of interpretation.\(^51\) For current purposes the provision of significance is Article 31(3)(b) which provides that in interpreting a treaty account must be taken of “any subsequent practice in the application of the treaty which establishes the agreement of the parties regarding its interpretation.”\(^52\)

The particular value of subsequent practice is long established, and is now well developed in the practice of international courts and tribunals.\(^53\)

The subsequent practice of the parties in implementing the treaty constitutes objective evidence of their understanding as to the meaning of the treaty and their obligations. Such a provision is significant because it allows for the meaning of a treaty provision to be informed by changing circumstances in both the reality in which it is applied and the corresponding understanding of the contracting parties.

This is particularly relevant to the interpretation of the Geneva Conventions as the reality in which they are applied has changed significantly since 1949. Armed conflicts have become increasingly complex, with the cycles of hostilities being sparked by political, ethnic, national or religious grievances and the struggle for

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53 For the jurisprudence of the ICJ see the references provided by the Court in Kasikili/Sedudu Island (Botswana v Namibia) [1999] ICJ Rep 1045 at para 50.
critical resources. These changes represent a difficult challenge for IHL to overcome. While some of these difficulties, can be attributed to the difficulty that law has keeping pace with an evolving reality, which has become more and more complex, many more can be attributed to the specific weaknesses of IHL. It is these deficiencies, the egregious violations of IHL by both state and non-state actors, and the need to afford to provide basic protections of IHL to combatants and civilians that has created an appetite to expand to scope of CA1 so as to fill any current gaps in IHL and thus uphold the core objectives of IHL of protecting human life, physical integrity and dignity.

1.1. State Practice and Opinio Juris

However, these subsequent developments must also be supported by state practice, that illustrates a consensus amongst states supporting the development of the new rule. Whether in the interpretation of treaties or development of customary international law, evidence of state practice is essential. As noted by Lord Alverstone, “the mere opinions of jurists, however, eminent or learned, that it out to be so recognised, are not in themselves sufficient”. In order to establish that a rule is binding what is required is a combination of state practice and opinio juris. State practice is what is said and done by states, while opinio juris represents the belief, on the part of governments, that their conduct is obliged by international law. These requirements are well established in the jurisprudence of the ICJ. As enunciated by the Court in the North Sea Continental Shelf Case:

Not only must the acts concerned amount to a settled practice, but they must also be such, or be carried out in such a way, as to be evidence of a belief that this practice is rendered obligatory by the existence of a rule requiring it. The need for such a belief, i.e. the existence of a subjective element, is implicit in the very notion of the opinio juris sive necessitatis. The States

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54 Martin Van Creveld On Future War (Brassey’s, London, 1991) at 192.
concerned must therefore feel that they are conforming to what amounts to a legal obligation.

This statement was subsequently affirmed by decisions such as the Continental Shelf (Libya v Malta) case, where it was provided that, “it is of course axiomatic that the material of customary international law is to be looked for primarily in the actual practice and opinio juris of States.”

Therefore, whether the broad interpretation is an accepted part of IHL requires analysis of relevant state practice and opinio juris in this area.

2. Evidence of State Practice and Opinio Juris.

It is perhaps surprising that given the strong assertions by the ICRC of the existence of the broad scope of CA1 there is very little evidence of State practice that can be adduced to support the broad interpretation of CA1. As concluded by Hans-Peter Gasser:

A brief look at the behaviour of governments leaves no doubt that they do not feel themselves under a legal obligation to act if humanitarian law is being flouted by a party to an armed conflict. If third parties actually do act, they do so if and when they feel that a demarche is also in their own interest or if public pressure at home is such that to act seems wiser than to run counter to public opinion.

This apparent paucity of state practice is difficult to reconcile with what some have contended as an undeniable external component of the obligation to ensure respect. This is supported by the comments of Cornelio Sommaruga, who was of the view that states only had a moral obligation to act if other states violated IHL. While some scholars point to an ever growing tendency over the last two decades and some contextual state practice that illustrates the existence and

59 Continental Shelf (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya/Malta) (Merits) [1985] ICJ rep 13 at 27.
63 Frits Kalshoven “The Undertaking to Respect and Ensure Respect in All Circumstances: from Tiny Seed to Ripening Fruit” (1999) 2 Y.B. Int’l Human L. 3 at 60
acceptance of a positive duty\textsuperscript{64}, examination of several relevant humanitarian crises and interventions illustrates that the broad interpretation is far from being universally accepted by states.

The proponents of the broader interpretation rely on evidence ranging from the ICRC resolutions, the 1968 Tehran Conference, the adoption of Article 1(1) of Additional Protocol I in 1977, the ICJ’s jurisprudence as well as a number of interventions following violations of IHL. The following section will consider whether such reliance is justified.

2.1. 1968 Tehran Conference

The first example of state practice that may be used to support a broader interpretation of CA1 occurs in 1968 in Tehran at the United Nations International Conference on Human Rights, which is often cited as one of the stronger example supporting a broader interpretation. The preamble of the Resolution XXIII on “Human Rights in Armed Conflicts”, adopted at the 1968 Tehran Conference on Human Rights explicitly mentioned the obligation to ensure respect for IHL “by other States”\textsuperscript{65}. The Preamble served to remind States of their responsibility to “take steps to ensure respect of these humanitarian rules in all circumstances by other States, even if they are not themselves directly involved in an armed conflict”. However, in spite of the resolution being adopted by sixty seven votes to none, with two abstentions, it is not clear whether the term “responsibility” was understood by the states to impose a legal obligation or merely a moral one\textsuperscript{66}.

Once more, Kalshoven disputes the significance of the Resolution XXIII, expressing doubts on construing the resolution as an implicit acceptance of the legal obligation said to be enshrined in CA1\textsuperscript{67}. Analogous to the 1949 diplomatic conference in Geneva and the adoption of CA1, at the Tehran Conference there


\textsuperscript{66} Frits Kalshoven “The Undertaking to Respect and to Ensure Respect in all Circumstances: from a Tiny Seed to Ripening Fruit” (1999) 2 Y.B. Int’l Human L. 3 at 43.

\textsuperscript{67} Frits Kalshoven “The Undertaking to Respect and to Ensure Respect in all Circumstances: from a Tiny Seed to Ripening Fruit” (1999) 2 Y.B. Int’l Human L. 3 at 43.}
was a clear absence of debate around the adoption of Resolution XXIII. Notably, while the resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority a number of countries, including Tanzania and Mexico amongst several western states, expressed caution that too extensive a right would be too difficult and expensive for many countries to implement. The absence of debate, when appraised in conjunction with these statements, allows for the inference that “the participants at the Conference may not all have been aware of the various possible interpretations.” Subsequent conferences appear to affirm this point with, similar wording being explicitly rejected by the human Rights Council in 2008 regarding the resolution for the “Protection of the human rights of civilians in armed conflict.” The final text of this resolution, in contrast to a draft which reproduced the wording of the 1968 resolution, merely emphasised that “State parties to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 have undertaken to respect and ensure respect for these conventions in all circumstances.”

There are other conferences of significance, such as the Diplomatic Conference of Geneva of 1974-77, the International Conference for the Protection of War Victims, the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent of 1995. For the purposes of this essay it is sufficient not to note that while these conferences accomplished much in terms of normative developments and the enhancement of enforcement mechanisms, none go as far as to illustrate a consensus amongst states of the existence of an external duty to ensure respect.

2.2. The Jurisprudence of the ICJ

The jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice is significant in determining the scope of CA1. In several instances, the ICJ has confirmed the external

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69 Frits Kalshoven, “The Undertaking to Respect and to Ensure Respect in all Circumstances: from a Tiny Seed to Ripening Fruit” (1999) 2 Y.B. Int’l Human L. 3 at 44.
dimension of the obligation to ensure respect as well as its customary international law status\textsuperscript{72}.

In the \textit{Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua} case the court maintained that although the United States was not a party to the non-international armed conflict (NIAC) that was occurring in Nicaragua, it remained subject to an obligation to ensure respect for the Geneva Conventions in all circumstances\textsuperscript{73}. The Court further examined the nature of the obligation not to encourage violations of IHL, out of virtue of the duty to ensure respect for IHL, stating that: \textsuperscript{74}

There is an obligation on the United States Government, in the terms of Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions, to “respect” the Conventions and even “to ensure respect” for them “in all circumstances”, since such an obligation does not derive only from the Conventions themselves, but from the general principles of humanitarian law to which the Conventions merely give specific expression. The United States is thus under an obligation not to encourage persons or groups engaged in the conflict in Nicaragua to act in violation of the provisions of Article 3 common to the four 1949 Geneva Conventions.

It is important to note that the diction adopted by the ICJ, expresses the view that the duties flowing from the obligation to ensure respect are negative in their application. In other words, the only obligation on the United States was not to encourage violations of IHL\textsuperscript{75}. This is particularly interesting when considering the facts of the case. As identified by the ICJ, was the United States “well aware of, at the least, the allegations that the behaviour of the contras in the field was not consistent with humanitarian law”\textsuperscript{76}. Furthermore, the ICJ recognised that United States by virtue of its support of the \textit{contras}, exercised a degree of influence over them that would have allowed it to do far more than merely refrain from

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States of America) (Merits)} [1986] ICJ Rep 14.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States of America) (Merits)} [1986] ICJ Rep 14 at 220.
\textsuperscript{75} Tomasz Zych “Respect and Ensuring Respect for International Humanitarian Law” (2009) 27 Windsor Y.B. Access Just. 251 at 266.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States of America) (Merits)} [1986] ICJ Rep 14 at 121.
encouraging violations of IHL. It is in this context of the influence and knowledge attributed to the United States that the ICJ refrains from suggesting that the United States was required to take any positive steps or to exert its influence over the contras. Rather, the ICJ preferred to impose the single negative obligation to simply not encourage such violations.

The ICJ reached a similar conclusion in its *Advisory Opinion on the Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*. This opinion is significant because the ICJ found that the legal consequences Israel’s violations of obligations included *erga omnes* obligations. As these obligations are by their very nature the concern of all states. Consequently, the ICJ held that all States are under an obligation to ensure compliance with IHL. The ICJ enunciated that “every State party to [the Fourth Geneva Convention], whether or not it is a party to a specific conflict, in under an obligation to ensure that the requirements of the instruments in question are complied with”\(^{78}\). The importance of this statement is that it clearly enunciates that the scope of the obligation to ensure respect encompasses every party to the Conventions, regardless of whether they are parties to a conflict\(^{79}\).

However, once again, and consistent with the prior jurisprudence, the Court framed these obligations in negative terms, articulating that “all States are under an obligation not to recognise the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall and not to render aid or assistance in maintaining the situation creating by such construction”\(^{80}\). The Court did not specify what this duty entailed beyond negative obligations not to recognise or assist. There is no indication that can be elicited from the judgment that the Court considered the duty to manifest positive duties. This aspect of the Courts judgment has been subject to some critique from those who prefer a broader interpretation, articulating that in regard of the consequences for third States, the Courts opinion is “devoid of any discernible

\(^{77}\) *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States of America) (Merits) [1986] ICJ Rep 14 at 256.

\(^{78}\) *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Advisory Opinion) [2004] ICJ Rep 136 at 158.

\(^{79}\) *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Advisory Opinion) [2004] ICJ Rep 136 at 159.

\(^{80}\) *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Advisory Opinion) [2004] ICJ Rep 136 at 159.*
elaboration of the rules and principles of international law at instance”\textsuperscript{81}. Some go further by extrapolating upon the ICJ’s advisory opinion, attempting to construe the words and reasoning of the Courts as to entail positive, not just negative obligations\textsuperscript{82}. However, such views are at odd with the submissions of the States participating in the case, which reveal that the proponents of the broad interpretation were representative of a mere minority\textsuperscript{83}. Consequently, while the ICJ is explicit in its emphasis that the obligation to ensure respect is universal in its character, the Court does not venture to articulate that there are positive duties which flow from the obligation.

Therefore, in summary, while the ICJ has recognised the universal character of the obligation to ensure respect, the court defines the duties flowing from the obligation as being negative, rather than positive. Such an interpretation of the ICJ’s jurisprudence is at odds with the ICRC commentary which seeks to impose obligations that are not only universal, but also require positive measure in order to be fulfilled.

2.3. UN Resolutions

The judgments of the ICJ are supplemented by a number of United Nations resolutions that support the recognition of an external dimension and third state obligations. There are a number examples over the last half century where the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly have in part relied on the obligation to ensure respect to call on third states to take measures in response to IHL violations. Examples include the UN Security Council Resolution 681 where the UN called upon third States to react to the Israeli violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention\textsuperscript{84}. This is supported by resolution 45/69 of December 1990, in which the General Assembly requested the Occupying Power to abide by the Fourth Geneva Convention and called upon all States party to that convention “ensure respect by Israel… for the Convention is all circumstances, in conformity...

\textsuperscript{81} Iain Scobbie “Smoke, Mirrors and Killer Whales: the International Court’s Opinion on the Israeli Barrier Wall” (2004) 5 German Law Journal 1107 at 1114 and 1124-1125
\textsuperscript{83} Of the eight interveners that addressed the issue only the Arab States and Egypt suggested that third parties had a positive duty; see Written Statements submitted by Palestine, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Republic of Indonesia, the Swiss Confederation and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.
\textsuperscript{84} Territories Occupied by Israel SC Res 681 S/RES/681 (1990) at operative para 5.
with their obligation under article 1 thereof”85. Similar examples exist with regard to, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Rwanda where the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly called for third States to ensure compliance with IHL86. As noted by Condorelli and Boisson de Chazournes “common Article 1 has in the last ten years [1990-2000] almost become a basic norm of behaviour… within the framework of the United Nations”87.

However, the State compliance with these resolutions must be viewed in the context of Article 25 of the UN Charter. Article 25 sets out the core obligation of UN member states to, “accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the Present Charter”88. The obligations assumed by members of the United Nations under Article 25 are the direct consequence of the authority conferred on the Security Council under Article 24. If members agree that the Security Council, in discharging its “primary responsibility” for the maintenance of peace and security, acts on their behalf, it is logical that they should also agree to accept and carry out the decisions taken by the Council in the discharge of that responsibility89. While the Resolutions themselves can be interpreted as indicative of greater recognition within the UN of the need to ensure greater compliance with IHL, actual state compliance with these resolutions cannot be construed as manifesting acceptance of a broader interpretation of CA1 as such compliance is required under Article 2590.

2.4. The Responsibility to Protect Doctrine

One of the more significant developments, that supports far wider obligations to be placed on third states, occurred in 2005 where a UN summit of State leaders endorsed the principle of R2P. Where a state causes or allows genocide, crimes against humanity, major war crimes, or ethnic cleansing R2P provides an obligation whereby States have a duty to respond in accordance with international

This principle is supportive not just on wider obligations of third states, but also reflects the ideal that state sovereignty can no longer be used as a shield to permit the implementation of national policies that permit gross violations of human rights.\footnote{2005 World Summit Outcome GA Res 60/1 A/Res/60/1 (2005) at paras 138 and 139.}

This doctrine developed on basic principles of state responsibility and intervention in extreme situations, has been described as a new security and human rights norm to address the international community’s failure to prevent and stop egregious violations of IHL.\footnote{Gareth Evans The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and for All (Brookings Institute Press, Washington D.C., 2008) at 37.} Based on the three pillars, referred to as the responsibility to prevent, the responsibility to react, and the responsibility to rebuild, the doctrine further develops the existing legal principles regarding the prevention of IHL violations.\footnote{ICISS The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (IDRC, Ottawa, 2001) at 69.} The Responsibility to Protect doctrine significantly expands the scope of intervention where states fail in their duty to protect human rights and expresses the shared responsibility of all states under international law to protect populations from violations of IHL.\footnote{Susan C. Breau “The Impact of the Responsibility to Protect on Peacekeeping” (2006) 11(3) JC&SL 429 at 431.}

Part V – Humanitarian Crisis and Intervention

1. Intervention and Common Article 1

Humanitarian intervention, that is, military intervention in response to gross violations of IHL, was seen as inherently incompatible with the prohibition on the use of force codified by Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. This prohibition has been gradually undermined by a number of precedents that are indicative of wider obligations on third states to intervene and take positive measures where states violate IHL. However, as shall be illustrated below, these examples lack the requisite \textit{opinio juris} to support an external obligation to ensure respect under CA1.

1.1. Pre 1990

During the Cold War, humanitarian intervention was considered beyond the pale\textsuperscript{96}. Although a number of states had justified their actions on humanitarian grounds, only three military conflicts prior to 1990 can only qualify as humanitarian interventions given that they put an end to egregious violations of IHL. These include India’s intervention in East Pakistan, Vietnam’s overthrow of the Khmer Rouge and Uganda’s intervention in Tanzania.

An examination of these conflicts reveals that while in some instances humanitarian arguments were advanced, in most cases these arguments were either quickly abandoned or ignored altogether. India’s intervention into East Pakistan is an interesting example that is emblematic of how states responded to crises prior to 1990.

While being described as an almost perfect example of humanitarian intervention, India never justified its intervention on humanitarian grounds\textsuperscript{97}. India’s government advanced a legal argument of self-defence, with India’s representative to the Security Council explaining, “We decided to silence their guns, to save our civilians”\textsuperscript{98}. Additionally, any humanitarian justification for India’s intervention was strongly opposed by other countries. The views of these countries are given expression through statements of the representatives of Sweden and the United States. Sweden’s representative emphasised that “the Charter of the United Nations forbids the use of force except in self-defence. No other purpose can justify the use of force by States”\textsuperscript{99}. These comments were supported by the United States representative who said: “The fact that the use of force in East Pakistan in March can be characterised as a tragic mistake does not, however, justify the actions of India in intervening militarily and placing in jeopardy the territorial integrity and political independent of its neighbour Pakistan”\textsuperscript{100}.

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\textsuperscript{97} Thomas Franck and Nigel Rodley “After Bangladesh: The Law of Humanitarian Intervention by Military Force” (1973) 67 AJIL 275 at 277-278.
\textsuperscript{98} Security Council Official Record (S/PV. 1696, 15 March 1973) at para 155.
\textsuperscript{99} Michael Byers \textit{War Law: Understanding International Law and Armed Conflict} (Grove Press, New York, 2005) at 94.
\textsuperscript{100} Security Council Official Record (S/PV.1611, 12 December 1971) at para 19 (US).
While India’s intervention did stop a horrific campaign of repression India adopted positive measures only after nine months of IHL violations in East Pakistan and after Pakistan bombed a number of Indian air fields. Furthermore, India did not justify its intervention on humanitarian grounds and most countries were in fact opposed to the war. Not one country supported the claim that India’s intervention could be justified on humanitarian grounds or the IHL violations of Pakistan. Therefore, India’s intervention, as well as those interventions in Cambodia and Tanzania, are deprived of the *opinio juris* that is required to change international law so to accommodate a much broader scope for the obligation to ensure respect.

1.2. Post 1990


NATO’s operation in Kosovo and Serbia controversial because of the absence of UN endorsement but also due to the measures adopted, which led to hundreds of civilian deaths, more intense ethnic cleansing, thousands of refugees, considerable destruction of infrastructure and environmental pollution. This debate sparked by this intervention was neatly summarised by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who stated: “On the one hand is it legitimate for a regional organisation to use force without a UN mandate? On the other is it permissible to let gross systematic violations of human rights, with grave humanitarian consequences continue unchecked?”

The question therefore becomes whether the state practice and *opinio juris* associated with the intervention in Kosovo constitute the broad consensus necessary to accept the broader interpretation of the obligation to ensure respect. Only two of the NATO countries, the United States and Belgium, sought to justify the Kosovo intervention of humanitarian grounds. Russia, China and India spoke out strongly against the intervention, as did Namibia, Belarus,

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Ukraine, Iran, Thailand, Indonesia and South Africa. While the NATO intervention is contrary to international law, it has been argued that such intervention is legitimate and in fact justified from an ethical viewpoint\textsuperscript{103}. This argument is aided by the contention that “only a thin red line separates NATO’s action in Kosovo from international legality”\textsuperscript{104}. This gives scope for the argument that while NATO’s intervention was illegal it may give rise to a precedent allowing States to take countermeasures in order to impede a State from committing large-scale atrocities\textsuperscript{105}.

The intervention in Kosovo illustrates that intervention, while not always expeditious, can be effective in halting humanitarian atrocities\textsuperscript{106}. However, there is a clear absence of \textit{opinio juris} or any belief that the intervention was justified as a matter of international law. Therefore, the Kosovo War was neither consistent with international law nor is it truly effective in changing international law. What is also illustrated is a reluctance on the part of outside states to place their own military at risk to protect the human rights of others. As noted by Sadako Ogata “the international response to humanitarian crisis situations is largely determined by the degree of strategic interests held by the major states”\textsuperscript{107}.

1.3. The 21st Century

Whether the Kosovo War gave rise to a new precedent in international law allowing for States to respond to atrocities can violations of IHL can only be determined through an examination of States responses to contemporary armed conflicts and IHL violations. From 1999 much has changed in international relations. However the dynamics of international responses to atrocities have not. This is illustrated by the responses to middle eastern crises that have arisen out of the Arab Spring. These conflicts because of the actors involves, the reasons they

\textsuperscript{103} Antonio Cassese “ex iniuria ius oritur: Are we Moving towards International Legitimation of Forcible Humanitarian Countermeasures in the World Community?” 10 EJIL 1999 23 at 25.
\textsuperscript{104} Bruno Simma “NATO, the UN and the Use of Force: Legal Aspects” 10 EJIL 1999 1 at 22.
\textsuperscript{105} Antonio Cassese “ex iniuria ius oritur: Are we Moving towards International Legitimation of Forcible Humanitarian Countermeasures in the World Community?” 10 EJIL 1999 23 at 27.
\textsuperscript{107} Sadako Ogata \textit{The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the Refugee Crises of the 1990s} (WW Norton & Co Inc, New York, 2005) at 318.
are fighting and the humanitarian consequences of these conflicts are very much emblematic of the difficulties currently when attempting to enforce IHL.

In response to the crisis and armed conflict in Libya many countries condemned the indiscriminate attacks resulting in the civilian deaths and urged the Libyan government to respect IHL, with the EU imposing sanctions against Libyan leaders, including an arms embargo and travel ban. Britain and France, proposed full intervention, with the US agreeing and China and Russia lending their diplomatic support in the UN Security Council for the protection of civilians. Consequently, in contrast to NATO’s intervention in Kosovo the NATO led operation in Libya in 2011 was authorised by the UN Security Council through resolutions 1970 and 1973. However, the intervention, while in response to the atrocities and violations of IHL, reflected a desire of nation states to minimise their own costs. Consequently, following the removal of the Kaddafi regime the region has remained highly fragmented and fragile. Any intervention to stabilise the region would require a much more intrusive and lengthy involvement than the intervening states desired.

Similarly the current armed conflict in Syria – from its beginning in anti-government protests in 2011 to its descent into a war that has drawn in regional and world powers – is emblematic of many of the challenges facing IHL and humanitarian action today. The features of the Syrian conflict, while complex, are not unusual amongst the protracted armed conflicts such as those in Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and Central Africa. These conflicts are characterised by complex webs of fragmented and multiplying non state asymmetric parties and armed groups, widespread disregard for the rules of IHL, and the absence of any solution to bring these crises to an end. The armed conflict in Syria has given rise to a number of situations where third states have endeavoured to ensure respect of IHL by the belligerents. Examples include the expulsion of Syrian diplomats as a

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means of protest following the killing of civilians in the Syrian city of Houla and the various diplomatic démarches to put an end to the violations of IHL. However, the legality of intervening in Syria to ensure respect of IHL remains contentious. While the British government released a document on August 29th, 2013, outlining its reasoning that exceptional measures are permitted in order to “alleviate the scale of the overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe in Syria”, the rest of the international community has been hesitant in accepting such a justification.

Therefore, an examination of the intervention in Libya or Syria does not lend itself to an optimistic evaluation of third state responses to violations of IHL. These conflicts illustrate that while intervention does at times place to prevent further humanitarian violations that intervention take the form of an entitlement not a duty, whereby states may intervene in response to violations of IHL and egregious atrocities.

2. Serious Violations

While there are a number of situations in which third states have adopted positive measures in an endeavour to ensure respect of IHL by the parties engaged in a conflict, these examples are not sufficient to change the law in favour of duty on third states to adopt positive measures to ensure respect of IHL by other states. As indicated by the ICJ in the Nicaragua Case:

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\text{In order to deduce the existence of customary rules, the Court deems it sufficient that the conduct of States should, in general, be consistent with such rules, and that instances of State conduct inconsistent with a given rule should generally be treated as breaches of that rule, not as indications of a new rule.}
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\[113\] EU Statement, with alignment of Iceland, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process, United Nations General Assembly: Humanitarian Situation in Syria, 35th February 2014


In other words, merely because there are instances that can be pointed towards of certain states in particular circumstances adopting limited measures to induce compliance with IHL by other states does not expand the scope of the obligation to ensure respect by other State. In order for this to occur much more state practice and *opinio juris* would be required for such an interpretation to acquire legal force.

Such examples of third state intervention are not aided by the existence of several instances whereby the UN Nations has called upon parties to a conflict to respect IHL, and in which UN member States have contributed troops to UN authorised interventions. Examples where the UN Security Council exercised powers to authorise force in response to violations of IHL include the UN Security Council Resolutions adopted with regard to conflicts in Rhodesia, Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina and more recently Somalia and Sudan\(^\text{116}\).

Such practice, where the UN has called upon states to respect IHL or authorised third states to intervene, is more consistent with the obligation for States, under Article 89 of Additional Protocol I, to address serious violations of IHL in cooperation with the UN, rather than a broad interpretation of CAI. This is consistent with the examples discussed above whereby intervention only occurred following continuous egregious violations of IHL. Article 89 of Additional Protocol I provides that:

> In situations of serious violations of the Conventions or of this Protocol, the High Contracting Parties undertake to act, jointly or individually, in cooperation with the United Nations and in conformity with the United Nations Charter.

This provision only applies in respect of serious violations of IHL and only authorises collective sanctions or actions. The United Nations actions to which Article 89 refers consist of issuing an appeal to respect IHL, setting up enquiries on compliance with IHL, and where appropriate coercive actions which may include the use of force\(^\text{117}\). In addition, the General Assembly, in its Resolution 377 (V) of 1950 ("Uniting for Peace"), confirmed its competence to recommend collective measures, including the use of armed force when necessary, if the Security Council because of lack of unanimity fails to act where there appears to


\(^{117}\) Charter of the United Nations, arts 10, 11(2) and (3), 12, 14, 15(b), 24 and 39-51.
be a threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression. Furthermore, the obligation under Article 89 only refers to serious violations of IHL that have already occurred, whereas a broad interpretation of the obligation to ensure respect under CA 1 would require states to take pre-emptive measures to prevent all violations.\textsuperscript{118} It is worthwhile mentioning that the threshold of serious violations adopted by Article 89 is consistent not only with R2P but also the state practice discussed above where intervention only took place following serious IHL violations. In contrast, the broad interpretation of CA1 would enforce a much wider, and perhaps unrealistic, duty to intervene wherever there is a violation or the potential for a violation of IHL.

\textbf{Part VI Conclusion}

In conclusion the interpretation of the ICRC is not supported either by the initial intention of the High Contracting Parties or the subsequent practice by states. Any obligation under CA1 for third states to take measures in response to violations of IHL does not go beyond an entitlement for third states to ensure respect for IHL. As noted by the ICJ, third states have a right to act \textit{vis-à-vis} the breach of \textit{erga omnes} violations.\textsuperscript{119} To hold that third states have an international legal obligation to take positive measures to ensure compliance with IHL, that includes pre-emptive action, runs contrary to the current international frameworks, in Article 89 of Additional Protocol I and Chapter VII of the UN Charter, that emphasise not only the importance of collective unified action but also the necessity of serious IHL violations.

Under Article 1 states are required to respect and ensure respect for IHL internally. This obligation applies only those within the states jurisdiction. When it comes to violations that occur outside the jurisdiction of the state, while it is certain that states are under a negative obligation not to encourage such violations, it could also be argued that states possess an entitlement to adopt measures that promote compliance with IHL. However, to argue otherwise would not only be in contravention with the initial intention of the High Contracting Parties, and the

\textsuperscript{118} K. Dörmann and J Serralvo “Common Article 1 to the Geneva Conventions and the obligation to prevent IHL violations” (2015) 83(896) IRRC 707 at 728-729
\textsuperscript{119} Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Advisory Opinion) [2004] ICJ Rep 136 at 158-159.
current *opinio juris* or understanding of states, but also potentially the current IHL mechanisms concerning third party intervention.
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