

The ICRC, a Geneva institution with a universal vocation

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The International Committee of the Red Cross is a legal and institutional singularity. An association under Swiss private law, whose members are exclusively of Swiss nationality and are co-opted, it exercises a mandate entrusted to it by the Geneva Conventions and their protocols, and it enjoys a status recognised by states and headquarters agreements comparable to those of intergovernmental organisations.¹ This combination of a private, Geneva-based foundation and a universal vocation makes it the archetype of International Geneva.

The ICRC employs thousands of people around the world, several hundred of them at its Geneva headquarters, and has a budget financed by contributions from states, national societies and private donors.² In recent years it has itself passed through a financial crisis that led it to cut staff and operations, as a result of falling contributions from major donors.³ This crisis, which preceded the turbulence of 2025, illustrates the dependence of humanitarian Geneva on funding it does not control.

For the financial centre, the ICRC is a client, a philanthropic partner and a symbol. Its assets are managed prudently, its private donors are often clients of Geneva banks, and its name is associated with that of the city throughout the world. Relations between the institution and the financial centre are nonetheless governed by a requirement of distance: the ICRC guards its independence and its neutrality, since it cannot be perceived as tied to Geneva's financial interests.

1 Notes

1. Els Debuf, "Tools to do the job: The ICRC's legal status, privileges and immunities", *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 97, 2015: the ICRC, "created in 1863 under the form of a private association governed

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by Swiss law” (p. 204), “enjoys international legal personality” (p. 208); headquarters agreement with Switzerland (agreement of 19 March 1993 between the Federal Council and the ICRC, SR 0.192.122.50, in force in 1994) conferring on it the status of an international organisation in Switzerland; 95 bilateral status agreements (p. 216); Wikipedia (en), “International Committee of the Red Cross”. ↩

2. Wikipedia (en), “International Committee of the Red Cross”: around 18,000 staff worldwide, including some 1,000 at the Geneva headquarters; 2023 budget of “2.5 billion Swiss francs”, financed mainly by states; ICRC, “An update on ICRC’s financial situation” (icrc.org, 4 April 2023): initial appeal of CHF 2.8 billion reduced to CHF 2.4 billion. ↩
3. ICRC, “An update on ICRC’s financial situation” (icrc.org, 4 April 2023): reduction of “430 million CHF in global costs over 2023 and early 2024” decided by the Assembly on 30 March 2023, “Approximately 1,800 people worldwide will lose their jobs in the coming months”, closure of three delegations (Mauritania, Malaysia, Greece) and downsizing of 26 of the 350 sites; ICRC, press release of 11 September 2023: some 270 of 1,400 posts cut at the Geneva headquarters, 2024 budget of CHF 2.1 billion (–13 per cent); Al Jazeera, 21 November 2025: 2,900 posts cut, about 15 per cent of the 18,500 staff, owing to the fall in contributions from the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. ↩

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