



Factors of IHL Compliance in Ukraine

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Introduction

Geneva Call (GC), a neutral, impartial, and independent international humanitarian organization, endeavors to strengthen adherence to humanitarian norms and principles in order to increase the protection of civilian populations during conflict and post-conflict situations.

Following previous research efforts in 2023 and 2024, GC launched this latest study to better understand what factors ensure or hinder Ukrainian combatants' compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) during frontline military hostilities in the Russo-Ukrainian war. This study explores combatants' IHL knowledge and attitudes, pedagogical challenges in teaching IHL, combatants' technical capacity to implement IHL on the battlefield, challenges in applying IHL theory to the realities of combat, and institutional and governmental frameworks encouraging or adhering IHL compliance. The research aims to review and then build the evidence-base regarding the factors that explain IHL compliance in times of war. Ultimately, the research will inform GC and other IHL practitioners' future programming and approaches to civilian protection.

Methodology

As part of this study, GC conducted 454 surveys with active Ukrainian combatants and 62 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) from December 2024 to February 2025, in partnership with the Kyiv-based Center for Applied Research. The margin of error for the overall survey sample is $\pm 4.6\%$ with a confidence interval of 95%. Any disaggregated results cannot be viewed as statistically significant because the samples are too small. Furthermore, GC could only survey those combatants who were willing and able to participate, and this sampling bias must be taken into account when assessing the study's results. Finally, comparisons throughout this report that are made between results from the survey conducted in early 2025 and GC's previous KAP survey conducted in early 2024 – in a bid to assess changing trends – cannot be considered definitive as the two survey samples were not identical.

As part of the qualitative research, 28 KIIs were conducted with Ukrainian soldiers or commanders, 16 with Ukrainian policymakers or IHL practitioners working in Ukraine, 10 with frontline journalists, and 8 with IHL academics or IHL practitioners working internationally. A large literature review was also completed. "Do No Harm" principles were strictly followed, including asking all respondents for their informed consent. Data remains confidential and anonymous, as well as protected and secured.

93% of surveyed combatants were men, while 7% were women. Most combatants were between the ages of 25 and 54 years old. 70.5% have been in the military for three years or less – in other words since the beginning of the full-scale international armed conflict in 2022. The average time in the military for the whole sample is 5 years. 58% of surveyed combatants have spent more than 6 months total at the front since they joined the military, with an average of 1 year spent at the front. GC purposefully sought out combatants with substantial experience at the front, as, among combatants, these individuals are the most likely to face IHL-related situations and are most critical to consider when it comes to IHL compliance. 51.8% of respondents had experience commanding other soldiers for a period of at least one month, compared to 46% who did not. Finally, among all

respondents surveyed as part of this study, 61% had received IHL training in the past – whether by the AFU, MoD, GC, or other entities – and 39% had not.

IHL Knowledge

When determining the factors that impact IHL compliance on the battlefield, combatants' knowledge and understanding of the relevant norms and principles comes to mind first and foremost. GC's 2024 KAP study had determined that combatants know about IHL in general terms but are less familiar when it comes to what to do in specific combat situations. This study confirms that finding, while adding substantial detail.

As in its 2024 KAP study, GC asked respondents a series of IHL knowledge test questions in its 2025 survey. On these 6 questions, respondents answered 3.4 correctly on average, and 45.6% of respondents answered more than half the questions correctly. The right-most column in the table below displays the percentage of respondents who answered each question correctly in the 2025 survey. Respondents struggled the most on questions related to the conditions in which an ambulance carrying munitions could be targeted (41% answered correctly), and whether combatants could displace civilians who they do not trust (38.8% answered correctly). **The questions that posed greater challenges to respondents tended to be those including situational or conditional scenarios, demonstrating that applying general norms to specific combat realities is a significant challenge.**

Question	2024 (% correct)	2025 (% correct)
Name three specific LOAC/IHL principles	52.3	60.1
According to LOAC/IHL, can civilians who directly take part in hostilities be attacked?	64.3	66.3
An ambulance is confirmed to be used to carry munitions. According to LOAC, can it be lawfully targeted?	Question not posed	41 ¹
After a battle is over, can combatants (soldiers) remove civilians who do not support them from a village so they can get better control of the area?	38.8	38.8
A combatant commits a war crime under the orders of his/her commander. According to LOAC/IHL and criminal law, who will be held responsible for this?	86.5	64.3 ²
Troops identify a bridge that the enemy is using to transport ammunition but that civilians also use to transport goods. According to LOAC/IHL, is the bridge a legitimate target for attack?	Question not posed	66.7 ³

¹ The answer choices were: a. Yes, always, b. No, never, c. Yes, but only after a warning has been given

² The answer choices were: a. The combatant, b. The commander, c. Both

³ The answer choices were: a. Always, b. Only if the military objective outweighs the collateral damage, c. Never

Results show that combatants who have been in the military longer have greater IHL knowledge, as calculated by the survey test questions – 53.8% of combatants who have been in the AFU for more than three years answered more than half the test questions correctly, compared to only 42.7% of more recently-mobilized combatants. While this may seem natural, it is a major area of concern because the number of combatants who have joined the AFU since the full-scale international armed conflict in 2022 dwarfs the number of personnel who have been there for a longer period of time. **In other words, IHL knowledge within the AFU has not quite kept up with its enormous growth over the last three years.**

Similarly noteworthy, commanders did not significantly outperform regular soldiers on these test questions. 48% of commanders answered more than half the questions correctly, against 42% of regular soldiers. **Given commanders’ greater responsibilities in making targeting and tactical decisions on the battlefield, and given their roles as leaders and enforcers of codes of conduct, the fact that they do not have much greater IHL knowledge than their subordinates is an issue that should be addressed.**

In a bid to assess trends of IHL knowledge among combatants, results for some of these same test questions from GC’s 2024 KAP survey are also displayed in the above table. Comparing results from 2025 and 2024 shows that knowledge gaps have not substantially been addressed over the last year, and in fact there has been a concerning decline in combatants’ understanding of command responsibility and who will be made liable if IHL is violated. On this question, there is sometimes a clash between IHL provisions and internal military dynamics related to authority and disciplinary measures, leading to confusion as to what is the proper way to act. Firstly, as a key informant explained, even though there is a provision in the Criminal Code of Ukraine which says that combatants are not “obliged to comply with a manifestly criminal order,”⁴ the challenge is that regular soldiers are rarely in a position to understand whether a targeting order might be illegal – they do not have access to the necessary information. Secondly, as a Military Advisor in an INGO added, accounts from the battlefield flow from the unit commander up to his superiors via daily reports, detailing actions that were taken and any incidents that may have occurred. In other words, the commander controls the narrative, and this pushes regular soldiers to follow their orders, even if they may have doubts about those orders. Of course, such hierarchies are important for the military to maintain discipline and operate effectively, but it can complicate regular soldiers’ ability to disobey an illegal order. It is evident that IHL knowledge, therefore, is not sufficient in ensuring compliance – internal military dynamics must be in alignment with such IHL principles otherwise combatants will receive mixed messages.

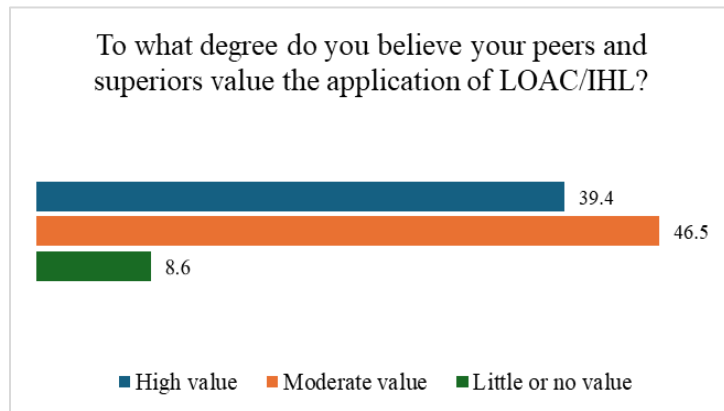
IHL Attitudes

Another critical factor contributing to IHL compliance is combatants’ attitudes towards it, regardless of how much knowledge they might possess. In Ukraine, there is generally positive attitudes towards IHL, and it is difficult to find individuals who completely disregard its relevance. Only 8.6%⁵ of survey respondents said their peers attribute little to no value to IHL in general

⁴ Interview with a key informant.

⁵ All numbers included in graphs and tables in this report represent percentages.

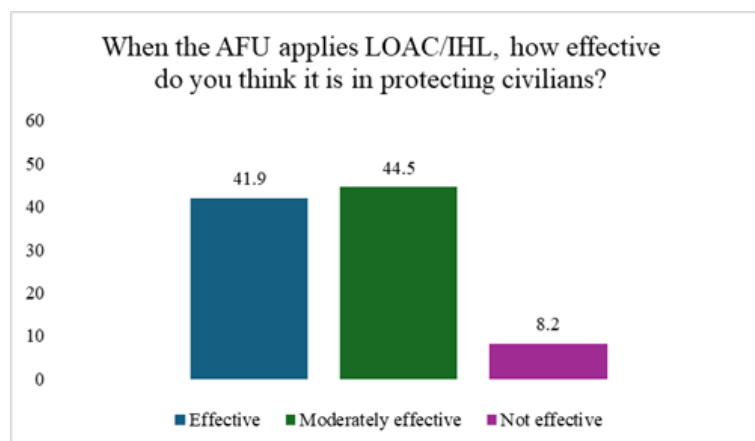
terms.⁶ Furthermore, only 8.2% believed IHL is not effective in protecting civilians in practice. **However, the graphics below, while displaying that there is a low degree of negative attitudes towards IHL, also show that many combatants do not view it with great enthusiasm either.** Only 39.4% value IHL highly and only 41.9% think it is effective in practice.



In-depth discussions with combatants reveal that, overall, their attitudes differ depending on the IHL principle at hand. Referring to Andrew Bell’s “Combatant’s Trilemma,” soldiers who seek to comply with IHL and protect civilians face two additional important considerations regulating their behavior on the battlefield.⁷ First, they must achieve their military objectives and take actions that give them a military advantage. Second, they must

make decisions that protect their lives and the lives of their peers (“force protection”). **It appears that combatants in Ukraine subscribe to IHL even if they perceive it as limiting their ability to fulfill military imperatives, but they tend to be more skeptical of IHL if its application could put their own safety and that of their peers in danger.**

As a result, the principles of distinction and proportionality are seen positively – avoiding civilian harm may be perceived to complicate military operations but it generally does not put combatants at overdue risk themselves. For example, 66.7% of combatants stated that it was not acceptable to significantly damage civilian buildings to gain a small military advantage (principle of proportionality) – an increase from 35.1% in 2024. A combatant shared



an example: “I didn’t drop the drone because a civilian woman came into the yard. I had to spend more time on the task. But I saved her life.” Even though halting the strike made it more difficult to meet the military objective, this combatant preferred to ensure that there would be no collateral damage. Survey and interview participants also explained that dual-use infrastructure is often not targeted, or only targeted at night, in order to limit civilian casualties and civilian suffering. A combatant shared an anecdote: “There was a wooden bridge over the river a few kilometers from our position, and for us it was a threat from the DRG (sabotage and reconnaissance groups). If it

⁶ In order to obtain more objective answers not influenced by social desirability bias, GC asked combatants how much their peers valued IHL rather than how much they valued it themselves.

⁷ “Combatant Socialization and Norms of Restraint,” Bell.

was broken, two villages would be left without food. So we just controlled it [and did not target it].”

Many other factors encourage the AFU to view these two principles positively. Generally-speaking, because Ukraine is facing a shortage of munitions, it is incentivized to make sure its strikes count, by focusing on high-value military targets. It is also in its interest not to misuse Western-donated weapons for fear that foreign assistance would be halted – a journalist even explained that strikes using these sorts of weapons are monitored and recorded. **Measures are also in place to largely prevent errant strikes from occurring in the first place.** For example, according to a key informant, protocol demands that the military unit’s Legal Advisor approve targets from a legal standpoint before any strike.

All these factors push the AFU to generally view the principles of distinction and proportionality positively and to endeavor to comply with them. Still, risks are still very much there. Alleged use of certain anti-personnel mines (APMs) by Ukrainian combatants, despite being a party to the 1997 Ottawa Convention,⁸ was hotly debated by various respondents: some argue that they are critical for slowing advances by opposing forces, others say they put civilians in danger for years to come. **Several respondents allege that mines are not always mapped, and mined areas are not systematically demarcated for civilians’ safety in frontline areas because that information is classified.** According to a key informant, the AFU has a policy in which military engineers within each battalion are responsible for mapping where mines are placed on an application called “Kropyva,” and even removing them when they are no longer needed. However, the policy is not always enforced, engineers often do not have the time for this, and some mines are scattered around from drones and it is not possible to know where exactly they have landed. Some respondents stated that Ukraine is fighting an existential war and faces regular munitions and manpower shortages that may push it to accept higher levels of collateral damage and risks to civilians in some instances.

There is less enthusiasm for other IHL norms like the obligation to accept surrender and the principle of precaution, however (although this does not mean that these tenets are regularly violated). **This is not so much because of the principles in and of themselves, but rather because there is a perception that their application on the battlefield might require combatants to take unnecessary risks.** For example, combatants allege that Russian soldiers often fake surrenders, and are taught to fight to the death, making the detention of POWs a risky affair. Many respondents said that drones from the opposing forces regularly neutralize their own wounded soldiers so that they cannot be captured by Ukrainian combatants. A Military Advisor from an INGO explained:

“[The opponent sometimes] commits suicide on the battlefield after being injured or wounded because of their fear of being taken prisoners of war, because they are also indoctrinated...that they will be handled in a bad way while being taken prisoners...so if a person is ready to commit suicide...this person may also respond with fire without any fear of their life [rather than surrender].”

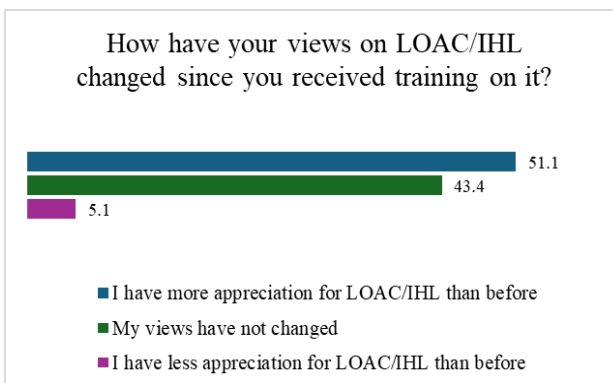
⁸ In July 2025, Ukraine suspended its membership to the Ottawa Convention.

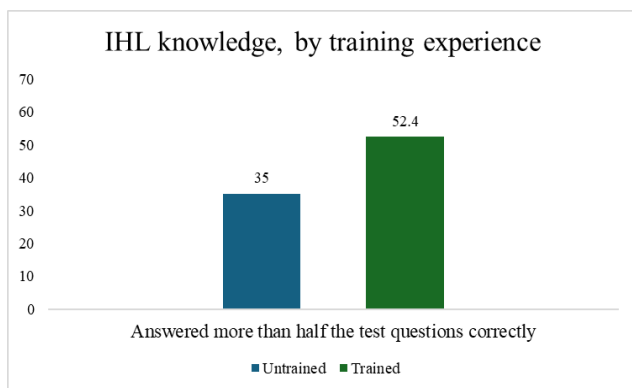
Another combatant shared an anecdote in which his unit’s medic was treating a wounded opponent who had surrendered, only for other opposing troops to target and kill them both. An opponent may surrender, therefore, but his fellow troops, or even a fellow drone operator, may still be active and pose a threat to those trying to detain him. A combatant shared his frustration: “It is impossible to adhere to the principles of IHL in practice...the enemy is insidious and spares no one.” Even if an opposing soldier genuinely surrenders, their detention and transfer to the appropriate authorities can put combatants in danger. A combatant shared an anecdote in which efforts to properly transfer a POW led to a casualty within his unit: “We captured a prisoner on the right bank of Kherson, transported him and handed him over to the competent authorities. One of our soldiers was killed during the crossing of the Dnipro. This compliance had negative consequences.” In sum, the application of some IHL principles may give the perception of bringing increased personal risk, especially if proper security protocols are not put in place, given the battlefield challenges described above.

In some instances, some interviewees shared that the principle of precaution can also put combatants at risk, requiring them to have a high degree of certainty with regards to the legitimacy of their target before striking, an exercise which can take hours – sometimes days – to achieve. A combatant shared an example related to unclear perfidy or unclear direct participation in hostilities by civilians: “We were at our positions and civilians came out, [and] although we were [almost] sure that they were enemies in disguise, we did not touch them. And then we were shelled.” In this case, following IHL and not targeting individuals whose identities and actions could not be confirmed or determined in time led this combatant and his unit to come under fire. Here again, if this was indeed perfidy, the opposing force’s behavior makes it more difficult for Ukrainian combatants to view certain IHL norms positively. Although many combatants still comply with IHL despite the above circumstances, their own survival will often be prioritized over IHL considerations. As one combatant concluded: “Sometimes you need to act more harshly so that more of our people don't get hurt.” The examples shared above also clearly show that at times military protocol to determine what is permissible and what is not need to be better followed and implemented, through training, repetition and clear rules of engagement.

IHL Training

In order to increase knowledge and improve attitudes, so as to enhance compliance on the battlefield, IHL training is critical. Survey results show that combatants who received training had more knowledge and better attitudes related to IHL than combatants who had not received any training. 52.4% of trained combatants answered more than half the scenario-based knowledge test questions correctly, compared to only 35% of untrained combatants, with the former scoring an average of 3.6 correct responses out of 6 and the latter scoring an average of only 3. Furthermore,





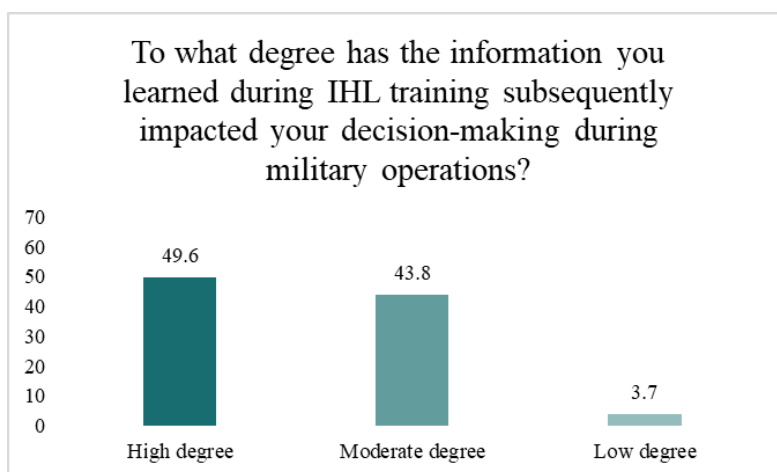
51.1% of trained combatants said that the training gave them more appreciation for IHL than before.

For example, 49.6% of trained combatants stated that the information they learned during IHL training impacted their decision-making on the battlefield to a high degree. When disaggregated by military rank, 57% of commanders stated that IHL training influenced their decision-making to a high

degree, compared to 39.6% of regular soldiers. This shows that IHL training for commanders is even more relevant – because of their seniority and responsibilities – and impactful, and it can have an exponentially positive effect within the AFU as its leaders can then socialize IHL within the ranks, both formally and informally.⁹ **Following training, commanders should be prodded to then pass on their knowledge to their subordinates, monitor their behavior in relation to IHL, and include IHL components in operations’ after action reviews.** As Jenks states, commanders play an important role in IHL socialization because of their authority: “Prioritizing unit leaders as trainers also reinforces the linkage between compliance with the law of war, good order, and discipline and mission accomplishment.”¹⁰

While training improves the likelihood of compliance with IHL, the reality in Ukraine today is that too many combatants have not received any. With the backing of Commander-in-Chief Syrskiy,¹¹ the Ministry of Defense provides a two-hour IHL course as part of basic training for all new conscripts, and a ten-hour course for cadets. However, there is often no time for this training, and tactical courses are instead prioritized. As stated previously, the constant mobilization of enormous numbers of new forces requires a large investment in continuous IHL training, whether in an in-person, online, or training-of-trainers format, and thus far these needs have not been fully met.

On top of a greater quantity of trainings, the type and methodology of those trainings is a crucial consideration for maximizing knowledge increase and IHL socialization. As described in GC’s 2024 KAP study, a classroom lecture outlining various IHL principles will not come close to recreating the conditions combatants will likely find themselves in on the battlefield. Combatants will often



⁹ “The Roots of Restraint in War,” ICRC.

¹⁰ “The Efficacy of the US Army’s Law of War Training Program,” Jenks.

¹¹ “Ukraine Amends Basic Military Training Curriculum,” The New Voice of Ukraine.

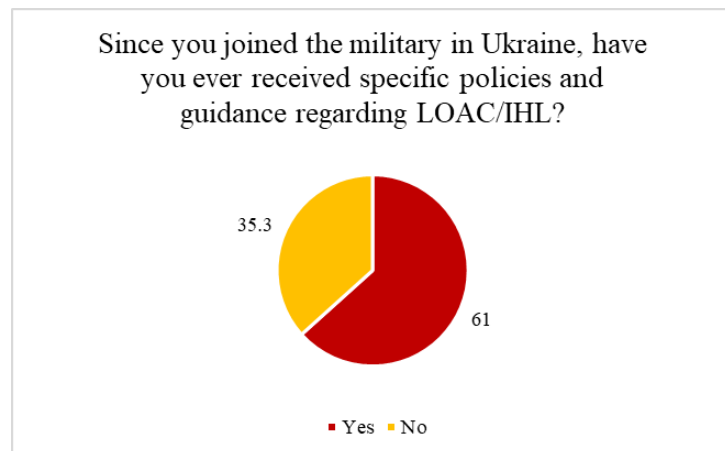
not have time to recall most of the information from that lecture and they will not know how to apply it in life-or-death situations. As Bates says, teaching “legal norms will not result, in itself, in a change in attitude or behavior.”¹² **Thus, training with role-playing simulations, war gaming, vignettes, virtual reality, even video games, is more suited to creating those sense memories that will be required of combatants to apply IHL on the battlefield in precarious situations.** On the battlefield, combatants will not need to recite IHL norms; rather they will need to take action. Training, therefore, should require them to practice those actions. This is important because, as an IHL expert shared: “Under that level of stress [on the battlefield]...your actual recall is different and your ability to intellectually process is different. So you're going to rely more instinctually in that type of an environment.” Combatants need to be able to think on their feet and that is the skill that IHL training must help them develop, rather than provide them with legal treatises to memorize. Only in that manner will they be able to quickly apply what they have learned to any number of scenarios they might encounter, even if they have never found themselves in that situation before. As an added benefit, this will also make trainings more engaging for combatants who are often exhausted and skeptical of the topic at hand.

For this reason, academics recommend that IHL considerations be integrated into other, pre-existing tactical trainings that already make use of simulation exercises, rather than be taught as a standalone course. This not only saves time, it also better reflects combatants’ simultaneous responsibilities on the battlefield. Tactical training focuses on accomplishing various military tasks, while IHL courses focus on aspects of *how* to conduct those tasks – it is not beneficial, therefore, to separate these sessions. So, for example, a tactical course could first show trainees how to shoot a rifle, and then teach them about the principle of distinction and how to apply it. This also helps to incorporate IHL into basic military operations, thereby making it more enforceable, instead of having it as an ideal wholly separate from the rest of combatants’ duties. It also prevents trainees from potentially feeling like they are receiving mixed or contradictory messages from two separate trainings. As a tactical instructor explained: “Our training is always like kill the enemy, do this, eliminate that, take this, raid that, defend against this and then all of a sudden there's this sudden shift [with IHL training] to show compassion, and then that creates that little internal struggle in someone's psychology.”

Trainings should acknowledge that IHL is not applied in a vacuum, but rather in a complex situation in which there are many considerations, including, as described previously, **how the opponent’s behavior can constrain combatants’ actions and choices.** A frontline journalist shared an anecdote in which a video was circulated online of a Ukrainian combatant allegedly killing off a wounded opposing fighter: viewers on social media were morally outraged and called it a war crime, but from a combatant’s perspective there was a plethora of factors to consider that led to that action. Whether it was ultimately a war crime or not, the point is that it is easy to judge without knowing all the facts, and **IHL educators must not teach from a black-and-white, moral high ground that is disconnected from combatants’ lived experiences.** In summary, as shared by a Military Advisor to an INGO, **trainers must have the mentality that they are there to learn too – from combatants – and therefore they must find ways to engage them and allow them to express themselves freely,** although there will always be challenges with this due to the closed nature of the military.

¹² “Towards Effective Military Training in IHL,” Elizabeth Stubbins Bates.

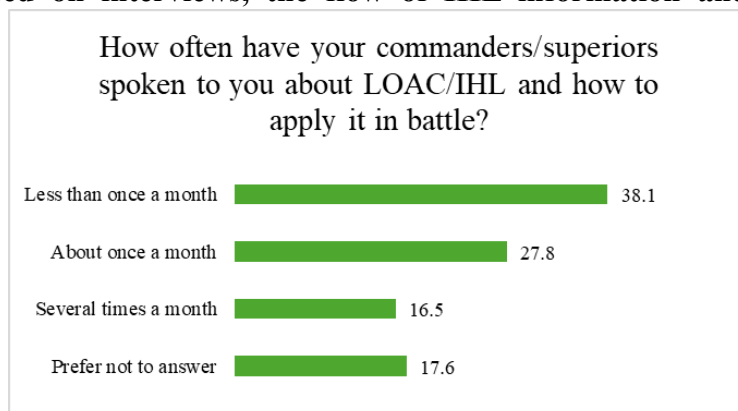
Policies and Guidance



Ukraine's political and legal framework also dictates the degree to which combatants comply with IHL. Most IHL norms are integrated into the Criminal Code of Ukraine, as there is significant political support for IHL as a way to differentiate Ukraine from the opponent and to ensure continued Western support. In addition, the MoD's Order 164 outlines combatants' IHL responsibilities in broad terms, and the previously-mentioned "soldier card" lists basic principles to maintain

in combat. **However, there are some gaps in translating high-level principles into concrete, practical guidance for combatants and disseminating it to them.** As a NATO Advisor stated: "There is often a disconnect between this political intent, nice statements, and the reality of people having to implement them." Brassil adds that this operationalization of IHL rules and norms is critical, however: "Combatants should not be left to apply the law without guidance. The law should be interpreted into operationally useful rules...the main effort to influence the behavior of combatants has to proceed from...the incorporation of norms of IHL into military orders, policies and instruction."¹³

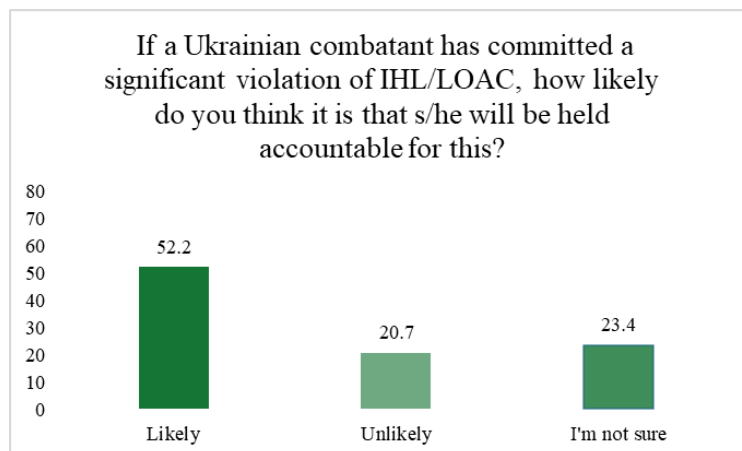
Legal Advisors would ordinarily be key in helping to make this happen, but several interviewees stated that many battalions do not have one, or they have not received sufficient IHL training. In this context, it is unsurprising, therefore, that 35.3% of surveyed combatants said they had never received specific policies and guidance related to IHL. Furthermore, 38.1% of combatants said that their commander spoke to them about IHL in any capacity less than once a month on average. When asking combatants from what sources¹⁴ of information they had heard of IHL before, only 27.4% said that they had ever heard of IHL from their commander, 20.3% from their military peers, and 24.5% as part of military policies and rules shared with them. 10.6% responded that they had not heard of IHL before at all. **Based on interviews, the flow of IHL information and responsibilities from the top down – from both state institutions (MoD, General Staff, Ministry of Justice) and from unit commanders – could be improved and codified substantially.** Greater dissemination of IHL through training, policies, guidance, and discussions with one's commander could socialize IHL within the ranks over time and as a consequence enhance compliance.



¹³ "Increasing Compliance with IHL through Dissemination," Brassil.

¹⁴ The question allowed for the possibility of selecting multiple responses.

Indeed, as DCAF states, “it is necessary to integrate IHL training into standard operating procedures...in order to inculcate IHL compliance as a positive military value.”¹⁵



Finally, a large part of what should make IHL policies and laws more effective is their enforcement. However, the war has strained the state's ability to consistently investigate allegations of violations. While the MoD has established a reporting mechanism for alleged IHL violations, 44.1% of survey respondents stated that if a Ukrainian combatant committed a significant violation, that combatant would be unlikely to be held accountable or

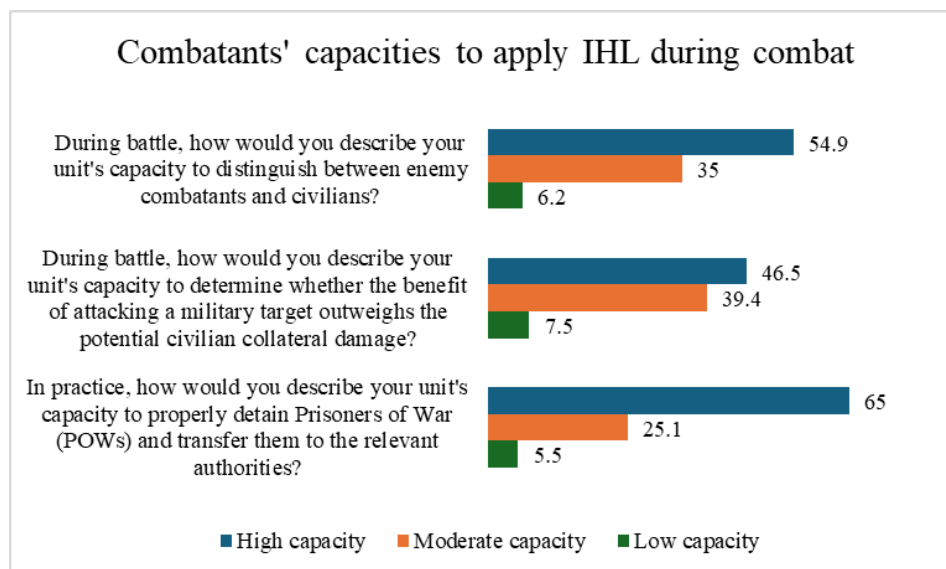
they were unsure whether they would. Disaggregated by rank, 47.9% of regular soldiers said that an individual was likely to face consequences for their action, against 56.2% of commanders. Several respondents speculated that, for commanders in particular, there may be a reticence to report violations by subordinates because it could harm their own credibility or reputation. **Greater legal and military enforcement is an essential element for IHL socialization within the AFU – in a military culture guided by hierarchy and discipline, IHL will not be more substantially internalized if accountability measures for IHL violations are not strengthened.** As a key informant stated, an IHL-compliant military is “characterized not by mistakes, but by reactions to mistakes.”

IHL Capacities

As explored in GC's 2024 KAP study, IHL education and socialization are not sufficient in ensuring full compliance on the battlefield. **There are certain situations which require that combatants have the proper equipment, weaponry, intelligence, and technical skills to be able to follow IHL completely and effectively.** And without more scenario-based training and specific guidance on how to respect IHL, gaps will remain in combatants' ability to fully comply with IHL in all situations, even if they strongly believe in, and understand, its principles.

In its survey, GC focused primarily on three IHL norms: the principle of distinction, the principle of proportionality, and humane treatment of *hors de combat* individuals, including POWs. The graphic to the left demonstrates that a plurality or small majority of combatants feel that they and their military unit have a high capacity to implement each norm in practice. 54.9% of combatants believe they have high capacity to respect the principle of distinction, while 46.5% and 65% of combatants feel the same with regards to the principle of proportionality and proper detention of POWs, respectively. However, a significant proportion of combatants believe they only have moderate capacity to follow these norms in practice. **This incomplete capacity can, in part, be due to the rapidly-evolving nature of the conflict in Ukraine, with new weapons systems and drones being used that have never been deployed before.** One combatant shared: “Our unit is

¹⁵ “Parameters of Effective Military Training in IHL,” DCAF.



actively and successfully using the latest types of weapons, and IHL does not always take into account the specifics of these technologies, so it is necessary to improve and revise these provisions.” The MoD is currently developing a system by which to review the IHL implications of the use of all

weapons present in Ukraine today.¹⁶

As highlighted in GC’s KAP report from 2024, combatants learn and build their capacities best in actual combat, whether with regards to IHL or any tactical skills. **And with many newly-mobilized combatants being sent to the front on a constant basis, violations – even if unintentional – are a real risk because of how inexperienced these individuals are.** As already mentioned, IHL education is most impactful, therefore, when it tries to simulate battlefield realities, or recreate them as best as possible through role-playing and scenario-driven trainings. **Perhaps more importantly, IHL education should not end once combatants are sent to the front – it should be an ongoing learning process, in which combatants participate in after action reviews and commanders provide real-time case-by-case advice and monitoring on how best to apply IHL in any given scenario.** As a Military Advisor from an INGO explained, results from those after action reviews can then be used to inform upcoming battle plans or to modify standard operating procedures to better ensure IHL compliance. In Ukraine, however, battalions at the front often lack the time and resources to conduct such reviews.

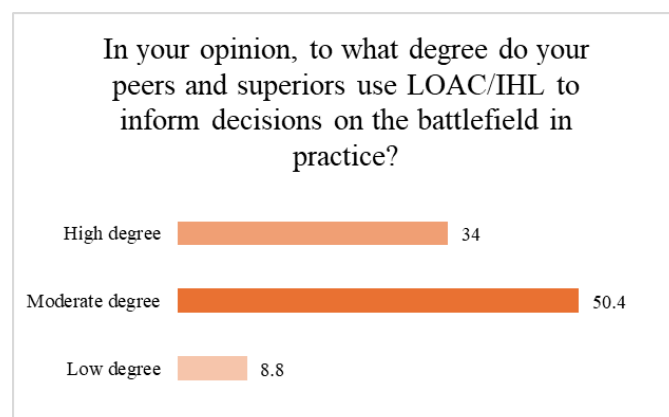
Developing these skills and capacities is critically important particularly because data suggests that combatants feel less confident in their ability to apply IHL today compared to 2024. **On all three principles mentioned above, combatants stated that they had high capacity to follow them in practice to a lesser degree today than a year ago.** Over the last year, the proliferation of drones at and near the frontline has likely made it much more difficult and riskier for combatants to properly detain POWs and treat injured opposing fighters, while reduced and delayed deliveries of high-precision weaponry from the US and others could contribute to more difficulty in identifying military targets and striking with limited collateral damage.

Finally, strongly linked to military units’ capacities to comply with IHL in practice is the structure of the military as a whole. The AFU has rapidly evolved over the last three years, quadrupling in size and integrating many battalions and volunteer armed groups that emerged in 2022. **Implementation and oversight of policies, standard operating procedures, and recruitment**

¹⁶ “Voluntary Report on Implementation of IHL,” Ministry of Defense of Ukraine.

processes has been challenging at times, and this can have a negative effect on unit cohesion, learning, and standardizing expectations in many areas, including IHL compliance. In Ukraine, these structural and coordination issues are at times apparent, making it more difficult to apply IHL good practices like mine mapping, for example.

IHL Compliance



These factors – knowledge, attitudes, training, guidance, capacities – all impact the degree to which Ukrainian combatants can fully comply with IHL on the battlefield. Generally-speaking, survey results show that Ukrainian combatants have a good degree of knowledge, willingness, and ability to comply with IHL, but more can be done to enhance respect for IHL. To the question “To what degree do your peers and superiors use IHL to inform decisions on the battlefield,”¹⁷

34% of combatants selected “high degree” and 50.4% selected “moderate degree.” Fortunately, perceptions of compliance are trending upwards: today only 8.8% of combatants said that their peers used IHL to a low degree in informing battlefield decisions, compared to 24.9% in 2024. Of particular note, testimony from civilians from Russia’s Kursk oblast, part of which Ukraine occupied from 2024 to early 2025, demonstrates that Ukrainian combatants treated them well. A woman shared that “Ukrainian soldiers initially brought her bread, water and insulin for her diabetes after occupying her village of Novoivanovka. The soldiers stopped occasionally to chat over a cup of tea.”¹⁸ After a missile destroyed a building, another woman said that Ukrainian combatants “came and helped dig people from the rubble, and saved our people.”¹⁹ Ukraine’s Ministry of the Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories even “launched a 24-hour hotline for promoting humanitarian aid...for residents of the Kursk region” and actually organized “a humanitarian corridor for Russian civilians’ evacuation from the Kursk region due to the inaction of the local Russian administration.”²⁰ As in Kursk Ukrainian combatants were on the land of opposing forces and were directly in contact with civilians, it is especially uplifting that no grave IHL violations have been reported. **Overall, based on data collected by GC as part of this study, allegations of non-compliance by Ukrainian combatants focus on opponent POWs being forced to make pro-Ukrainian statements, combatants using civilian housing in frontline areas, and use and inconsistent tracking of APMs, cluster munitions, and unexploded ordnance. Some combatants also show resistance to the idea of having to warn opposing forces before striking protected infrastructure like hospitals that they are occupying. Finally, there is a lack of understanding among many combatants about the proper action to take with regards to wounded opponents who are no longer fighting but are**

¹⁷ Again, in order to obtain more objective answers not influenced by social desirability bias, GC asked combatants how much their peers valued IHL rather than how much they valued it themselves.

¹⁸ “The Fiercest Fighting of the Ukraine War May Be in Russia,” The New York Times.

¹⁹ “The Fiercest Fighting of the Ukraine War May Be in Russia,” The New York Times.

²⁰ “Analytical Review,” Ministry of Defense of Ukraine.

too weak to clearly demonstrate their surrender, and for which it may be risky to get closer and try to secure that surrender.

Including and beyond those already mentioned above, what are the factors that influence Ukrainian combatants to comply with IHL, and how prevalent are those factors? To answer this, surveyed combatants were asked to select from a list those factors that pushed them to comply with IHL, and, in a second question, those factors that pulled them away from complying with IHL.²¹ With regards to factors positively influencing IHL compliance, 45.2% of respondents cited “it’s the right thing to do,” 39.2% “it shows that Ukraine is more civilized than the enemy,” 25.1% that IHL allows them “to exchange enemy POWs for our own POWs,” and 24% said IHL “protects civilians at the frontline.”

In your opinion, what are reasons Ukrainian combatants may comply with LOAC/IHL principles?	%
It’s the right thing to do	45.2
It shows that Ukraine is more civilized than the enemy	39.2
To exchange enemy POWs for our own POWs	25.1
To protect civilians at the frontline	24
To incite the enemy to also respect LOAC/IHL	13.2
Combatants have sufficient knowledge of LOAC/IHL	12.8
There is capacity/specific guidance/tools to apply IHL	12.6
Other reason	11.9
To have a good reputation	9.5
To avoid prosecution	9.3
To continue to obtain foreign assistance	8
To avoid dismissal from the military	5.5
To avoid psychological distress	5.3

These were the reasons most commonly cited by combatants, although the full results in the table above show that there are a multitude of factors that impact compliance with IHL. **Still, it appears that moral, reputational, and practical concerns drive combatants’ desire and ability to follow the law.** IHL dissemination must, therefore, appeal to all three of these considerations to be most impactful, by demonstrating to combatants that it is in their interest to apply IHL in order to exchange POWs, receive foreign assistance, and differentiate themselves from the opponent, for instance. **Although, as stated previously, it is important to avoid moralizing at combatants without taking into account the complexities of the situations that they face – a combination of arguments, therefore, is most effective.**

With regards to factors negatively influencing IHL compliance, 39.4% of respondents cited “stress, desperation, and exhaustion,” 31.3% “there is no time to think about the law in the heat of combat,” and 25.1% “revenge.”

²¹ Both questions allowed for the possibility of selecting multiple responses.

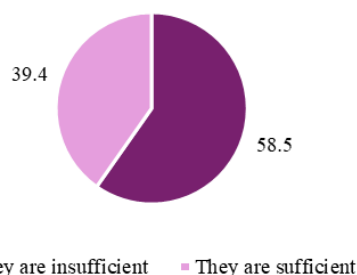
In your opinion, what are reasons Ukrainian combatants may not comply with LOAC/IHL principles?	%
Stress/Desperation/Exhaustion	39.4
There is no time to think about the law in the heat of combat	31.3
Revenge	25.1
Combatants do not have sufficient knowledge of LOAC/IHL	15.2
The enemy doesn't comply so why should we	14.8
Other reason	12.3
LOAC/IHL is theoretical and difficult to apply in practice	11.7
The enemy doesn't deserve such protections	10.4
There is no capacity/specific guidance/tools to apply IHL	8.6
Ukraine is defending itself against an aggressor, so all actions are permitted	7.5
IHL limits military effectiveness	7.3
There is no accountability for not following LOAC/IHL	2.9

While all three of these most cited factors are interrelated, they point to distinct concerns. “Stress, desperation, and exhaustion” and “revenge” point to combatants’ mental state and how the dangers of war, insufficient rest, and psychological distress can affect the decisions that they make on the battlefield. Indeed, 39.4% of combatants shared that the length of breaks and rotations away

from the front are insufficient. The longer combatants are at the front, the more they begin to feel that the breaks they are given are not enough: only 30.7% of combatants who have spent more than 6 months at the front stated that these breaks were sufficient compared with 52.4% of those who had spent less than 6 months at the front. Furthermore, in GC’s KAP study from 2024, only 31.9% of combatants noted that they were satisfied with the availability of

psychological assistance. On paper, each battalion should have a psychologist, but this is not always the case. As DCAF states, “Medical data from surveys of combat troops suggest that as units sustain losses, the emotions that could lead to violations of IHL can become more pronounced.”²² Indeed, trauma may lead some individuals to lose their moral compass, and the longer the war endures, the more risk there is of this happening. Newly-mobilized combatants who are swiftly sent to the frontline can also be vulnerable to committing grave mistakes, as they are under heightened levels of stress due to their inexperience: “When they encounter a potential prisoner on the battlefield, they might, out of fear that they themselves might die, not comply with the norms.”

How do you feel about the amount and length of breaks and rotations away from the front that you have been given?



²² “Parameters of Effective Military Training in IHL,” DCAF.

“There is no time to think about the law in the heat of combat” identifies a different issue: combatants do not have time to evaluate which course of action is most IHL-compliant when their survival is on the line and they may only have seconds to make a decision. A combatant explained: “Under fire, there is no time to remember norms and conventions, you act intuitively and quickly to save your life and your comrades.” Another added: “You don't think about using IHL during combat when your life is under immediate threat, when you can't think about rules or regulations.” Here it is important to differentiate between the planning of military operations and reactions in the moment when those plans break down. Commanders regularly take the time to plan military operations in advance and try to ensure that those plans are compliant with IHL, by identifying nearby civilian areas, cultural objects or medical facilities to avoid, in consultation with legal advisors. **Regular soldiers, meanwhile, are more liable to find themselves in situations in which unexpected circumstances arise on the battlefield, and in which there is no possibility or time to consult a legal advisor.** In both situations IHL must be respected, but the conditions in which decisions are being made can be vastly different. As previously mentioned, a classroom lecture on IHL will not be effective because it will not account for “the heat of combat.” Regular after action reviews, as well as specific guidance, are paramount to ensure combatants can quickly react in an IHL-compliant manner in these moments.

As the war evolves, the push and pull factors for compliance change and practitioners in charge of IHL dissemination must adapt. Indeed, the war in Ukraine has changed over the last year – there are more drones, and there is less experienced personnel due to battlefield losses. A journalist explained the ramifications of this on combatants’ morale:

“If you're a new recruit, you want to be looking to the experienced guy in your squad to tell you, okay, we'll be fine. The guy that's been shelled before, the guy that's dealt with FPVs before, the guys that, you know, that's been through multiple Russian assaults, and he looked to him for like kind of a sense of stability, a sense of, okay, he's not panicking, so I'm fine.”

While this applies to combat in general, it is relevant for IHL compliance as well – **less seasoned leadership can lead to panic, poor judgement, and rash acts.**

Drones and IHL

Any considerations for combatants’ willingness and ability to comply with IHL must finally account for the ways in which battlefield tactics and weaponry may evolve over time. In the Russo-Ukraine war, this is particularly relevant given the significant growth in the use of ever more sophisticated drones over the last year. There are two main implications for IHL with regards to the proliferation of drones at the front. First, as stated previously, the saturation in the sky of drones from opposing forces limits the manner in which Ukrainian combatants can apply certain IHL principles. Being out in the open at the frontline – and two to five kilometers behind it – can be a death sentence. As a frontline journalist shared, in this zone “anything that moves is likely to be targeted by a Russian drone.” **In these circumstances, it is very difficult – and sometimes impossible – for Ukrainian combatants to move to the frontline and back to safety, let alone to take the time and risk to treat an opponent who is wounded, or to detain and transfer them to the appropriate authorities.** It also encourages combatants to make much more use of civilian infrastructure as hiding spots, to get out of view of these drones from opposing forces.

Secondly, of course, the way in which the AFU makes use of new and developing drone technology must comply with IHL principles. However, as Krebs states: “Current laws may lack specificity for drone usage in conflict, as traditional IHL frameworks don’t fully address technological advances in surveillance and targeted strikes.”²³ **Indeed, weapons and technology often innovate at a faster pace than IHL guidance and regulations can.** There is a need for strategic thinking around how to limit the potential of drones to be used in ways that violate IHL. **Of particular concern is the dragon drone, which drops molten thermite at between 2000 to 2500 degrees Celsius.** Although a legal scholar explained that this is considered an incendiary weapon and is therefore legal as long as it is used in accordance with the principle of proportionality, more guidance is needed for its application on a case-by-case basis. **Furthermore, as Krebs explains, hitting a target from a drone is different than hitting it using a rifle, and this therefore requires specialized courses:** “Training should include information about the limits of the aerial view, its technical scope and blind spots, the potential dehumanizing effects of aerial vision, and the cognitive biases it may trigger.”²⁴ This “dehumanizing effect” is of particular concern. Sassòli states: “The ability to kill people from afar makes it easier to kill without remorse.”²⁵

Drones powered by artificial intelligence (AI) are becoming increasingly valuable on the battlefield, in part because they are impervious to the opponent’s anti-drone jammers. **However, where AI is used to identify targets and determine whether to strike, the use of drones can “weaken restraint...and dilute responsibility for battlefield conduct.”**²⁶ As a key informant explained: “If they’re using [drones] for target identification, there comes a question of mechanization bias, where the pilot may rely too much on the decision made by the machine without checking properly.” In a context in which opposing forces regularly use civilian clothing and vehicles at the frontline, and there can be confusion as to who is a legitimate target and who is not, more restraint is needed, not less. It is therefore imperative that procedures exist for proper human vetting of AI-determined targets before any strike is conducted.²⁷

Conclusions and Recommendations

IHL Knowledge

Combatants display good knowledge of general IHL concepts but demonstrate gaps when it comes to reacting to more specific situational or conditional battlefield scenarios. Applying IHL norms to combat realities is therefore a significant challenge.

Although commanders have greater military and leadership responsibilities, they do not display much greater IHL knowledge than infantry combatants.

Recommendation: Prioritize IHL trainings for more senior commanders.

²³ “Above the Law: Drones, Aerial Vision and the Law of Armed Conflict – a Socio-Technical Approach,” Krebs.

²⁴ “Above the Law: Drones, Aerial Vision and the Law of Armed Conflict – a Socio-Technical Approach,” Krebs.

²⁵ “IHL: Rules, Controversies, and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare,” Sassòli.

²⁶ “Introduction: Promoting Restraint in War,” McQuinn et al.

²⁷ “Autonomous Weapon Systems and AI-enabled Decision Support Systems in Military Targeting,” SIPRI.

Recommendation: Encourage commanders to pass on their IHL knowledge to their subordinates, monitor their behavior in relation to IHL, and include IHL components in operations' after action reviews. IHL education should not end once combatants are sent to the front.

IHL Attitudes

Combatants have moderate attitudes towards IHL. They display a low degree of negative attitudes but many do not view it with great enthusiasm either.

Combatants in Ukraine subscribe to IHL even if they perceive it as limiting their ability to fulfill military imperatives, but they tend to be more skeptical of IHL if its application is perceived to potentially put their own safety and that of their peers in danger.

As a result, combatants view the principles of distinction and proportionality positively. Combatants demonstrate less enthusiasm for other IHL norms like the principle of precaution and the detention of POWs, however, because there is a perception that its application on the battlefield might require combatants to take unnecessary risks.

Recommendation: Focus in trainings on these norms that are seen less positively and emphasize that combatants do not need to take unnecessary risks to respect IHL on the battlefield. This will allow combatants to more fully embrace IHL as it will be seen as more practical and in line with battlefield realities.

Recommendation: Deconstruct and combat specific misconceptions on IHL head on through online campaigns and educational materials.

IHL Training

As the AFU has grown significantly over the last three years and new combatants have been mobilized on a constant basis, IHL training needs have not fully been met.

Recommendation: Disseminate IHL training through online tools to reach a wider audience, ensuring these are used and promoted by the MoD which has access to combatants and the authority to have them complete such courses.

IHL educators must not teach from a black-and-white, moral high ground that is disconnected from combatants' lived experiences. Trainers must have the mentality that they are there to learn too – from combatants.

- For example, the opponent's disregard for IHL can at times constrain Ukrainian combatants' ability to implement humanitarian norms.
- With the significant increase in drone activity, it is very difficult for Ukrainian combatants to move to the frontline and back to safety, let alone to take the time and risk to detain and transfer POWs to the appropriate authorities.

- Finally, a distinction should be made in designing IHL-compliant battle plans and managing to respect IHL when those plans break down and there is little time to think.

Recommendation: Train combatants on IHL using role-playing simulations, war gaming, vignettes, virtual reality, even video games, to account for these battlefield realities and create those sense memories that will enable combatants to apply IHL in practice.

Recommendation: Keep training simple in order to promote norm internalization – account for the complexity of the battlefield but keep guidelines straightforward.

Recommendation: Integrate IHL considerations into other, pre-existing tactical trainings that already make use of simulation exercises, rather than have it be taught as a standalone, disconnected course.

IHL Policies and Guidance

Implementation and oversight of policies, standard operating procedures, and recruitment processes has been difficult to streamline within the AFU, and this can pose a challenge to unit cohesion, learning, and standardizing expectations in many areas, including IHL compliance.

Recommendation: Translate high-level IHL principles into concrete, practical guidance and standard operating procedures for combatants and disseminate it to them.

Recommendation: Enforce legal and military aspects of IHL to further socialization within the AFU – in a military culture guided by hierarchy and discipline, IHL will not be substantially internalized if accountability measures for IHL violations are not strengthened.

IHL Compliance

Overall, allegations of potential violations on the Ukrainian side focus on:

- POWs being forced to make pro-Ukrainian statements.
- Combatants using civilian housing in frontline areas.
- Inconsistent tracking of APMs, cluster munitions, and unexploded ordnance.
- Irregular warnings to opposing forces before civilian infrastructure like hospitals they are occupying is struck.
- “Finishing off” wounded opponents who are too incapacitated to surrender.

Recommendation: Engage combatants on these specific concerns head on through online campaigns and educational materials.

Moral, reputational, and practical concerns drive combatants’ desire and ability to follow the IHL. Stress, desperation, exhaustion, feelings of revenge, and “the heat of combat” are factors that may push combatants to commit IHL violations.

Recommendation: Promote these “push” factors and combat these “pull” factors in IHL trainings.

Weapons and technology often innovate at a faster pace than IHL guidance and regulations can.

Recommendation: Set up policies and specialized courses regarding drones, new weapons and technological innovations emerging on the battlefield.