



SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER
OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM OF RHODES AND OF MALTA

PERMANENT OBSERVER MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE
AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN GENEVA

**ICRC – 4th Consultation with States on International Humanitarian Law
Working Group on Civilian Infrastructure
Statement by Ambassador Michel Veuthey,
Ambassador to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons
Deputy Permanent Observer
Geneva, 4 May 2026**

Excellencies,

The protection of civilian infrastructure in armed conflict lies at the heart of human dignity and the foundations of lasting peace. Hospitals, humanitarian and healthcare facilities, schools, cultural property, and places of worship already enjoy special protection under international humanitarian law, a framework hard-won through centuries of conflict and conscience. Yet that protection must not only be reaffirmed; it must be more precisely defined and more rigorously enforced.

The Sovereign Order of Malta, drawing on its thousand-year tradition of humanitarian service and its unique dual religious and humanitarian character, stands firmly committed to these principles. It calls with particular urgency for the strengthened protection of hospitals, humanitarian facilities, and places of worship, institutions that serve the most vulnerable precisely when they are most at risk.

Places of Worship

The protection of places of worship is firmly anchored in international humanitarian law, most notably through the legal framework governing cultural property. This protection finds its clearest expression in the near-universal ratification of the 1954 Hague Convention and in both 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions, instruments that impose binding obligations on States parties to do everything in their power to safeguard and respect cultural property, including places of worship. The protection of religious sites has deep roots in the laws of war, predating modern treaty law. The concept of "**sanctuary**" afforded religious sites a degree of inviolability recognized across cultures and legal traditions.

These obligations are unambiguous: States must ensure the immunity of such sites, refrain from using them for military purposes, and abstain from targeting them. Violations of these norms are not merely breaches of treaty law, they may constitute war crimes under international law.



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The protection of cultural property, and of places of worship in particular, serves purposes far greater than the preservation of stone and mortar. It shields civilians, prevents the escalation of conflict, and lays the groundwork for a durable peace. Restorative justice cannot succeed where the identity of a people has been erased: to destroy a place of worship is to deny something fundamental about our shared humanity.

This truth has been recognized at the highest levels of moral authority. Pope Francis, and now Pope Leo XIV, have repeatedly called for the protection of these sites as an essential condition for rebuilding trust between communities torn apart by war.

And yet the evidence of our times tells a different story. In Gaza, Myanmar, and across sub-Saharan Africa, places of worship have been attacked, desecrated, and reduced to rubble, not as the incidental cost of conflict, but in many cases as deliberate acts aimed at the very soul of a people. The core prohibition on intentional destruction is non-derogable and may even constitute a **jus cogens**, a peremptory norm.

Hospitals and Humanitarian Facilities

Hospitals and humanitarian facilities represent a second pillar of the Order of Malta's enduring mission. Like places of worship, their protection is firmly grounded in international humanitarian law. The Geneva Conventions enshrine the principle of distinction, prohibit the use of such facilities for military purposes, and forbid attacks against them in all but the most exceptional circumstances. Wounded combatants and civilians alike are entitled to enhanced protection and the right to receive medical care, obligations that, when upheld, affirm human dignity and lay the first foundations of a lasting peace.

Yet legal frameworks alone are insufficient without the practical capacity to implement them. Several concrete measures deserve renewed attention and commitment:

- **Enhanced training** of military personnel on the definition of military objectives and the specific protections afforded to medical and humanitarian facilities;
- **Disaggregation of civilian infrastructure** in the assessment and updating of military doctrine, to reduce the risk of misclassification;
- **Strengthened verification procedures** for the identification of military targets, including through systematic mapping and real-time geolocation of protected sites.

Thank you.