

NOT DEAD YET

International Law in an Age of Uncertainty

International Law Report 2025

Lead author

Federica Du Pasquier (Lex International; Yale University)

Contributing authors

Beatrice Fihn, Magnus Løvold (Lex International)

Research Assistance

Alaa Hajyahia (Yale University)

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Professor Oona Hathaway and the Yale Law School's Center for Global Legal Challenges for their generous support, and to Alaa Hajyahia for her valuable research assistance. They also thank the participants of the *Roundtable on the Future of International Law: the Laws of War and Peace*, held in Geneva in June 2025, for their insights and guidance.

How to cite this report

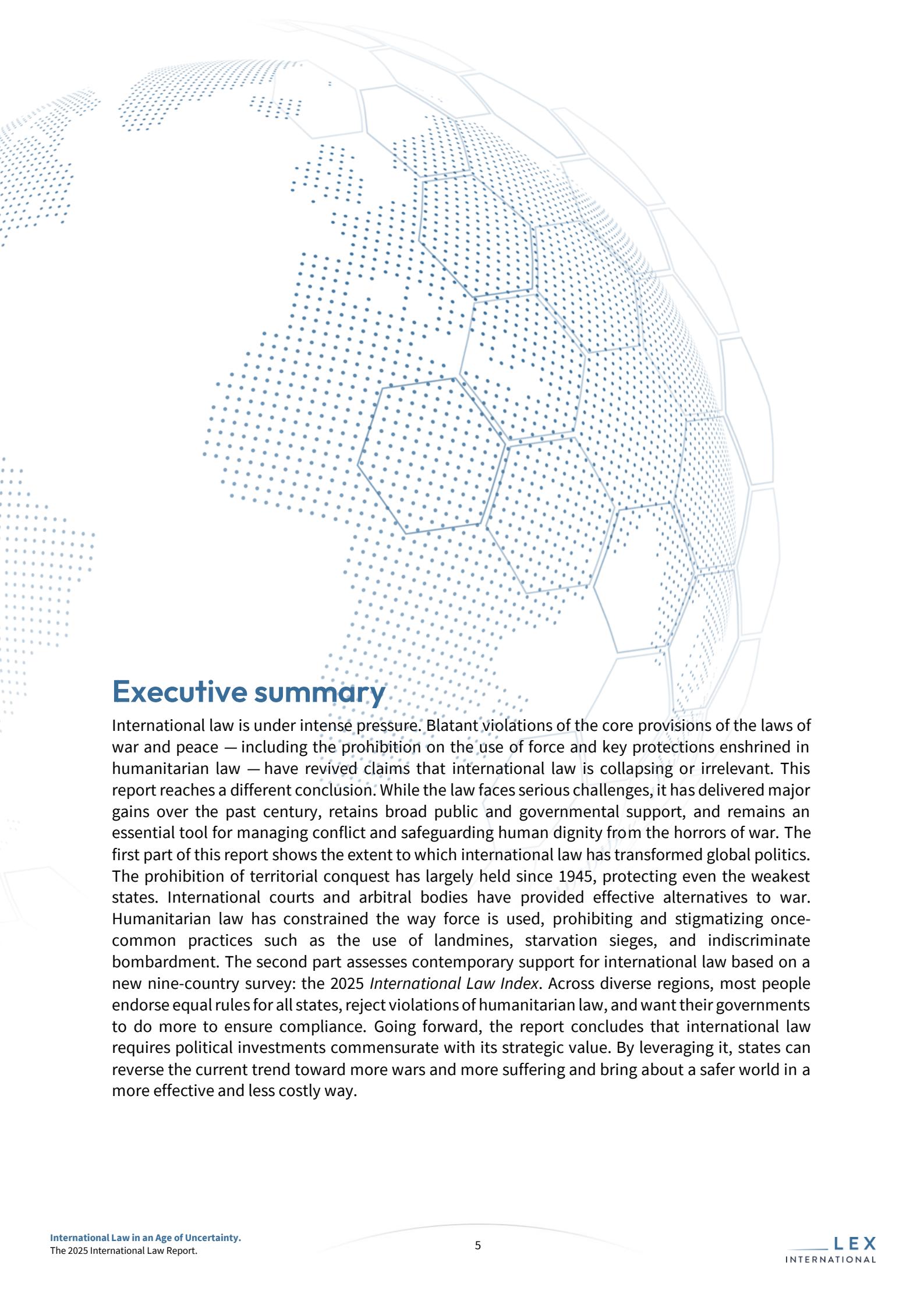
Lex International. NOT DEAD YET — International Law in an Age of Uncertainty: The 2025 International Law Report. Geneva: Lex International, 2025.

About Lex International Fund

Lex International Fund is a philanthropic fund dedicated to strengthening international law. At Lex, we seek to help reverse the trend toward a worsening global security situation and breakdown of trust in frameworks and institutions by helping shift the narrative around international law and supporting new coalitions of actors. We work with civil society movements, international organizations, governments, media, businesses and scientists to shape global norms and create bold, innovative solutions to global challenges. Lex International Fund is hosted by the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation and founded by Beatrice Fihn, former Executive Director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons and who accepted the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the campaign.

Table of Contents

Executive summary	5
The bonds that hold the world together	6
A world remade by international law.....	8
Banning war and reductions in territorial conquest.....	9
Was this change really brought about by international law?	12
International courts as alternatives to war.....	12
Examples of dispute resolution at the International Court of Justice.....	13
Protecting people from the horrors of war	15
Military action: how effective is the alternative?.....	19
Diplomacy v. military action: the Iranian nuclear program as a case in point	21
Taking the pulse on international law	22
The 2025 International Law Index	22
Key findings overview	22
Findings – and why they matter	23
A window into state positions on the laws of war	32
International law as a strategic security and foreign policy project	34
Annex: Explaining the International Law Index 2025	37



Executive summary

International law is under intense pressure. Blatant violations of the core provisions of the laws of war and peace — including the prohibition on the use of force and key protections enshrined in humanitarian law — have revived claims that international law is collapsing or irrelevant. This report reaches a different conclusion. While the law faces serious challenges, it has delivered major gains over the past century, retains broad public and governmental support, and remains an essential tool for managing conflict and safeguarding human dignity from the horrors of war. The first part of this report shows the extent to which international law has transformed global politics. The prohibition of territorial conquest has largely held since 1945, protecting even the weakest states. International courts and arbitral bodies have provided effective alternatives to war. Humanitarian law has constrained the way force is used, prohibiting and stigmatizing once-common practices such as the use of landmines, starvation sieges, and indiscriminate bombardment. The second part assesses contemporary support for international law based on a new nine-country survey: the 2025 *International Law Index*. Across diverse regions, most people endorse equal rules for all states, reject violations of humanitarian law, and want their governments to do more to ensure compliance. Going forward, the report concludes that international law requires political investments commensurate with its strategic value. By leveraging it, states can reverse the current trend toward more wars and more suffering and bring about a safer world in a more effective and less costly way.

The bonds that hold the world together

To those who view international law as ineffective, selective, or obsolete, recent headlines offer seemingly decisive evidence: wars are waged in defiance of the basic rules of war¹, civilian casualties climb with every passing day², and states repeatedly breach treaty obligations with seeming impunity.³ It is not surprising, then, that Oona Hathaway, President-elect of the American Society of International Law and a leading professor of international law, calls our current juncture ‘a scary moment’ – stressing that the protection of civilians under international humanitarian law is being “eroded to the point of threatening to lose all meaning”.⁴

Hathaway is right: willing states must join forces and do more to protect the international legal order. International law does not fade by nature, but by the failure to apply it. As a tool, the law retains strategic value precisely to the extent that states choose to leverage, defend, and invest in it. It can be used – and is regularly used – as a strategic asset: to prevent conflict, enable cooperation, and constrain the power of the strong. Throughout history, the law has been shaped not only by great powers, but also by individuals, civil society actors, and smaller states – many of whom have seen in international law a hedge against geopolitical volatility and a safeguard for their autonomy. In so doing, they have secured important gains for their security, economic development, and ability to participate in decisions on global challenges.

At this inflection point – marked by deep uncertainty and risk, but also possibility – determining how to design and build what comes next requires an examination of the evidence on the achievements and shortcomings of the current international legal order. It also requires assessing the level of support for the key protections enshrined in international law.

In November, Lex International ran the [2025 International Law Index](#), a nine-country survey of 8,509 adults in South Africa, the United States, Brazil, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and Egypt to take the pulse of international law. Leaders from Washington to Moscow increasingly act as if we have entered a new era in which power, not rules, decides outcomes. But where does public opinion stand on the assertion that ‘might makes right’? Are most people content with the way in which wars are being fought globally? Is there an expectation for governments to do more to ensure that international law is respected?

The results are notable given the current climate: first, most respondents believe that international rules should apply to all states equally, and that all states should be able to participate in decisions on global challenges like conflict, climate change, and pandemics. Second, there is very strong global endorsement of the core provisions of international law geared toward protecting people from war – whether or not people like the ‘international law’ label. And third, people globally want their governments to do more to ensure that all states comply with international law.

Similarly, recent statements in the frame of the ICRC’s *Upholding Humanity in War* initiative show that many states reject both the way wars are fought today and the legal arguments that are being

¹ International Committee of the Red Cross. International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts: 2024 Report. Geneva: ICRC, 2024 <https://www.icrc.org/en/report/2024-icrc-report-ihl-challenges>.

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. oPt Situation Reports. <https://www.ochaopt.org/publications/situation-reports>.

³ Cordula Droege. “War and What We Make of the Law.” ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog, July 18, 2024. <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2024/07/18/war-and-what-we-make-of-the-law/>.

⁴ Patrick Wintour. “Willing States Must Act to Save International Legal Order, Warns Top Academic.” The Guardian, November 11, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2025/nov/11/willing-states-must-act-to-save-international-legal-order-warns-top-academic>.

used to justify them. Yet how do these positions square with the deteriorating reality of armed conflicts today? And what has international law achieved on the ground?

This report sets out to do three things. The first is to investigate the evidence around international law's effectiveness and relevance: what has it delivered over the past century? The second, drawing both on the survey results and key statements drawn from the *Upholding Humanity in War* initiative, is to take stock of where both public opinion and governments stand on international law and the key protections it enshrines: how alive is the support? The third is to draw some lessons for the way forward – seeking to equip government representatives, politicians and concerned citizens with facts, figures and examples to make strategic decisions.

To this end, what follows is structured in three parts. The first part, *A world remade by international law*, looks into what international law has delivered – from restraining violence and enabling cooperation to institutionalizing shared norms – and its continued relevance in a world of escalating geopolitical risk. The second part, *Taking the pulse on international law*, details the findings of the survey, and why they matter today. It also triangulates these results with a preliminary analysis of State positions shared within the Humanity in War initiative. The conclusion, *International law as a strategic security and foreign policy project*, turns to the future, considering how states, civil society, and other actors can counter these threats and make the promotion of international law into a strategic foreign policy project.

A world remade by international law

“Gaza is becoming the graveyard of international humanitarian law,” warned UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini in a widely cited September interview, lamenting that the Geneva Conventions are approaching near-irrelevance amid unconstrained violence and impunity.⁵ The crisis extends well beyond Palestine: in Ukraine, large countries contemplate legitimizing vast territorial conquests, while in conflicts across Myanmar, Sudan, and elsewhere, breaches of basic norms have become alarmingly routine.⁶ The scale of civilian suffering is staggering: the past four years have been the deadliest since the Rwandan genocide in 1994. In 2024 alone, over 150,000 civilians died in armed conflicts worldwide, a grim testament to both the limits of current international law and the urgent need for stronger implementation mechanisms.⁷

At the same time, frustration is growing among both states and citizens globally about the selective enforcement and weaponization of international law by powerful governments and their allies. In many contexts, the law is increasingly used as political cover for violence rather than as a shield for the vulnerable. Perhaps most dangerously, the normalization of atrocities today threatens a fundamental shift in what is considered acceptable conduct in war – recalibrating international expectations for all future conflicts. This has led some analysts and politicians to declare that international law is “dead” or fatally compromised. Harold Koh, a diplomat and prominent law professor, calls it “a broken-down car that somehow keeps moving”.

Yet dismissing international law altogether risks missing its deeper significance. While the failings are glaring, the gains are fundamental and often overlooked. Rejecting the international legal order in its entirety because of current enforcement challenges would ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’, discarding the foundational achievements that have made enduring stability and radical progress possible in the past century. Just as the demand for legal frameworks to address global crises, from mass atrocities to pandemics, is higher than ever, learning from the past is key to building a better future.

At this perilous juncture, it is worth remembering that as a strategic foreign policy project, international law remains a continuing work in progress. The international legal order did not emerge fully formed – it was built, contested, and reshaped over time, often against the odds. Specifically, states developed international law in response to historical shocks, such as the first and second World Wars, or the Rwandan genocide. What will emerge from the current moment? Whether the future leads to more erosion or a new, stronger system depends on the steps taken in the months and years to come. Getting the facts and history right is key to guiding that path.

⁵ Lazzarini, P. (2025, September 1). 'Gaza is becoming the graveyard of international humanitarian law.' *El País*. <https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-09-01/unrwa-chief-gaza-is-becoming-the-graveyard-of-international-humanitarian-law.html>

⁶ Security Council Report. (2025, April 29). Protection of Civilians, May 2025 Monthly Forecast. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-05/protection-of-civilians-8.php>.

⁷ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2024, June 30). GHO 2025 launch in Geneva: "Upholding International Humanitarian Law in Armed Conflict." <https://www.unocha.org/gho-2025-launch-geneva-upholding-international-humanitarian-law-armed-conflict>.

Banning war and reductions in territorial conquest

The violence of World War I and World War II catalyzed a fundamental transformation in international law's treatment of conquest. The 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact⁸ – commonly derided as “meaningless”, including by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger – was groundbreaking in that its signatories renounced war as an instrument of policy. Many skeptics then and since have argued that international law cannot hold against power politics, military necessity, or nuclear deterrence.⁹

But the evidence suggests otherwise. The Pact and its successor, the UN Charter, made what had been routine for centuries, the conquest and annexation of territory by force, illegal. The principle of territorial integrity displaced expansion as a core norm of the international order.¹⁰ Since then, even states without significant military power have been able to rely on international legal protections that make their borders more secure than in any previous era.

The principle of territorial integrity displaced expansion as a core norm of the international order.

This is not a story of linear progress. Attempts to take territory have continued: Russia seized parts of Georgia and Ukraine, and Israel annexed the Golan Heights and parts of the West Bank. So-called non-international armed conflicts have proliferated. Permanent members of the Security Council routinely use their veto to shield themselves or their allies from accountability,¹¹ and the narrow self-defense exception to the ban on the use of force has been stretched: between 2021 and 2025, states invoked ‘self-defense’ 78 times to justify using military force. The prohibition of aggression is under serious strain. With Ukraine’s future hanging in the balance, what is at stake is whether the hard-won prohibition on conquest endures. A review of what international law has achieved since 1928 shows three core gains are at stake.

First, since the UN Charter banned territorial conquest, not a single UN member state has permanently disappeared because of conquest.¹² Before 1945, no political entity – no matter how powerful – had any guarantee of survival: the Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian empires disappeared or were carved up. Smaller states like the Kingdom of Hawaii were annexed outright. Today, by contrast, state extinction through conquest has essentially ended.

⁸ Treaty Providing for Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy, Aug. 27, 1928, 46 Stat. 2343, 94 L.N.T.S. 57; Oona A. Hathaway & Scott J. Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (Simon & Schuster, 2017). [henceforth Hathaway & Shapiro] 137-58.

⁹ Max Boot, “When the Governments of the World Agree to Banish War,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/21/books/review/the-internationalists-oona-hathaway-scott-shapiro.html>

¹⁰ U.N. Charter art. 2, para. 4 (“All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”). The UN Charter foresees two exceptions: individual or collective self-defense under Article 51, and collective action authorized by the Security Council under Chapter VII arts. 39-51. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>.

¹¹ All vetoes issued since 2014 were cast by the United States, Russia and/or China, and over 90% of these related to just three contexts: Syria, Ukraine, and Israel/Palestine. See Oxfam International. *Vetoing Humanity: How a Few Powerful Nations Hijacked the UN Security Council*. Oxford: Oxfam International, September 2024. <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/621621/14/bp-vetoing-humanity-190924-en.pdf>

¹² Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 228 (arguing that “the emergence and strengthening of the norm against conquest accounts for the virtual cessation of violent state death after 1945.”)

Second, both the frequency and the volume of territorial conquest have collapsed. Between 1816 and 1928, the average amount of land seized by force each year was equivalent to roughly *eleven* Crimeas (about 295,000 square kilometers). After 1948, that figure fell by about 95 per cent.¹³ The average state's chance of being conquered has gone from roughly once in a human lifetime prior to 1928 to once or twice per millennium – an 87 per cent decrease.¹⁴

Third, the nature and lethality of wars between states have changed. World War I involved repeated dismemberment of states, mass annexations and forced population transfers affecting tens of millions. Since 1945, even after major conflicts – wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and beyond – international borders have remained remarkably stable by historical standards.¹⁵ The number of interstate wars and battle deaths has increased again in the past decade, with 2022 marking a thirty-year high, but even this spike remains well below mid-twentieth-century levels.¹⁶ And there have been no direct major wars between the world's leading military and economic powers in eighty years.

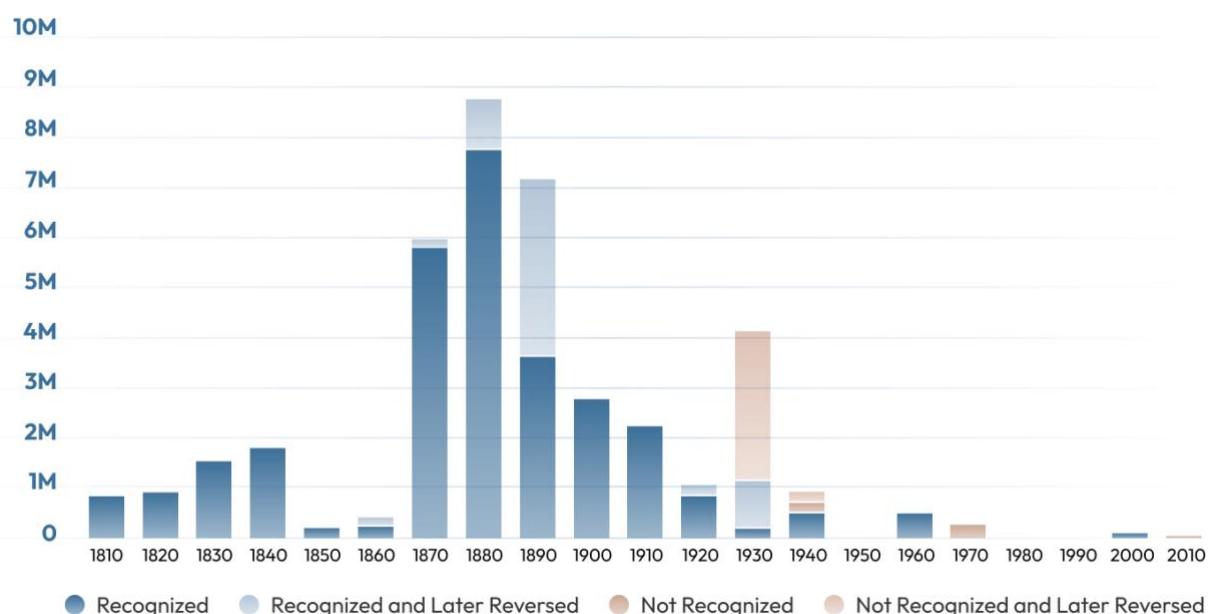


Figure 1: Territory Conquered Per Decade (in square km). Source: *The Internationalists*, p. 317.

¹³ Hathaway & Shapiro, 314 (average territory conquered dropped from 295,486 square km p.a. in 1928, to 14,950 square kilometers p.a. after 1948).

¹⁴ Ibid (calculating that the average state's chance of suffering conquest fell from 1.33% annually before 1928 to 0.17% annually after 1948).

¹⁵ Hathaway & Shapiro, 324.

¹⁶ See correlates of war, <https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/>; Uppsala Conflict Data Program, UCDP/PRI Armed Conflict Dataset (v.23.1), <https://ucdp.uu.se/>

These changes benefit all states, including the most powerful. Without the current legal order banning conquest, Germany, for example, would need to defend itself militarily against potential threats from France, Poland, Russia, the Czech Republic, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg – all at the same time and forever. The cost would be enormous, the security incomplete. For smaller states, the prohibition on conquest has made their survival the norm rather than the exception: Singapore, Palau or Switzerland (which respondents to a Lex International survey identified as the safest country from war, see below), might not even exist without international law. In the words of Singapore's foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan, “to ensure our best chance for survival, [...] we have to advocate for a rules-based order and full respect for international law. This is not an ideological position; this is a practical response. It is the only way that small states will have a chance to live in peace without the constant spectre of invasion from bigger neighbours.”¹⁷

“to ensure our best chance for survival, [...] we have to advocate for a rules-based order and full respect for international law. This is not an ideological position; this is a practical response. It is the only way that small states will have a chance to live in peace without the constant spectre of invasion from bigger neighbours.”

– Vivian Balakrishnan,
Foreign minister of Singapore.

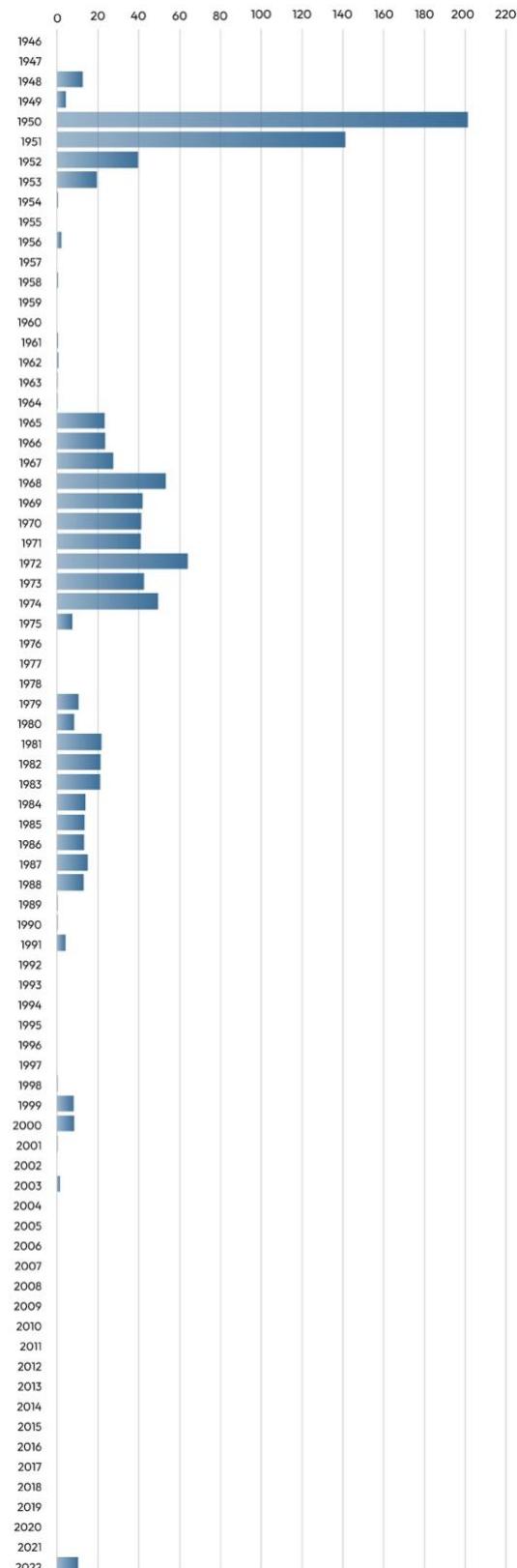


Figure 2: Deadliness of Interstate Conflict, 1945 – 2022

¹⁷ Vivian Balakrishnan, “Committee of Supply Debate 2024 – Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, February 2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2024/02/FM-COS-2024-Speech>.

Was this change really brought about by international law?

Many dynamics contributed to the unprecedented decline in territorial conquest after 1945, and no single factor can fully explain it. Yet when we examine the leading alternatives, none provides a convincing account on its own.

If *power balances* were the decisive explanation, then militarily stronger states would still be redrawing borders at will and weaker states would still be periodically absorbed. Instead, the data shows the opposite: even very weak states today benefit from a strong presumption of territorial integrity, and outright annexation has become rare and widely contested.

If *mutual assured destruction* were the key deterrent, peace would be concentrated among nuclear-armed states. But most of the world's 185-plus non-nuclear-armed states have *also* avoided war since 1945, and nuclear-armed states have been proportionally *more* likely to fight –sometimes even against each other, as India and Pakistan have repeatedly shown.

If *economic interdependence* were sufficient, dense trade networks in 1914 or Russia's deep integration into European energy markets in 2022 should have prevented major war; they did not. Trade raises the cost of conflict, but it does not explain why the practice of territorial conquest has collapsed so dramatically compared to historical norms.

By contrast, international law directly targeted conquest, removed the legal rewards of annexation by refusing recognition, and created mechanisms for collective response. After World War II, borders were reset to their 1928 lines, not to the military situation of 1939, signaling that the Kellogg-Briand Pact's renunciation of war was the baseline.¹⁸ Since then, territorial transfers by force have almost never been recognized, making conquest a much less attractive strategy. In both Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the international community has to date refused to accept annexation, upheld internationally recognized borders, and organized collective measures to reverse or punish aggression.¹⁹ This is precisely why proposals requiring Ukraine to cede Crimea and the Donbas, acquired through force, are viewed by many as so dangerous: legitimizing territorial acquisition by force in one context risks weakening a prohibition that protects states everywhere.

International courts as alternatives to war

International courts, arbitration, and legal frameworks have been remarkably effective at offering avenues for peaceful settlement and providing alternatives to war. Since its creation in 1946, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has been asked to consider 201 cases. Over 100 UN member states have brought disputes to the Court as applicants, respondents, or parties to contentious proceedings. The ICJ has increasingly recognized that certain fundamental obligations create legal interests for all states, known as *erga omnes partes* obligations, opening avenues for states to bring cases when they are not directly injured by a violation.²⁰ This for example allowed it to accept a 2023 case by the Netherlands and Canada against Syria for alleged violations of the Convention Against Torture.

¹⁸ For example, Germany lost territory it had gained throughout Europe since 1928, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. Japan's seizures of Manchuria in 1932 and other parts of mainland China were undone. Hungary's seizures from Czechoslovakia between 1938 and 1939 were returned.

¹⁹ S.C. [Res. 662, U.N. Doc. S/RES/662](#) (Aug. 9, 1990) (declaring Iraq's annexation of Kuwait "null and void"); G.A. [Res. ES-11/1, U.N. Doc. A/RES/ES-11/1](#) (Mar. 18, 2022) (deploring Russian aggression against Ukraine and reaffirming Ukraine's territorial integrity).

²⁰ See for example Alaa Hachem, Oona A. Hathaway & Justin Cole, *A New Tool for Enforcing Human Rights: Erga Omnes Partes Standing*, 62 COLUM. J. TRANSNAT'L L. 259 (2024), available [here](#). On Syria: [Application of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (Canada & Netherlands v. Syria), [Order on Provisional Measures](#) (2023).

Examples of dispute resolution at the International Court of Justice

Nicaragua v. United States (1986): When the United States (US) mined Nicaraguan harbors and supported Contra forces during the Cold War, Nicaragua took its case to the ICJ rather than escalating militarily. The ICJ ruled in Nicaragua's favor, finding that the US had violated international law. The US ultimately withdrew support for the Contras, and an important legal precedent was established. This legal avenue provided an exit ramp from potential escalation during a tense period of the Cold War.

Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia-Thailand, 1962 and 2013): A territorial dispute over an ancient temple on the Cambodia-Thailand border led to military skirmishes. Rather than allowing the dispute to escalate, both countries agreed to submit to ICJ jurisdiction. The Court ruled in Cambodia's favor, and both countries accepted the ruling despite significant domestic nationalist opposition. When tensions flared again in 2008, the countries again returned to the ICJ rather than going to war. As a result, two nationalist disputes that easily could have become costly wars were instead resolved through law at minimal cost to either side.

Land and Maritime Boundary (Cameroon v. Nigeria, 2002): When Cameroon and Nigeria disputed the oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula, tensions escalated into armed clashes. The ICJ ruled in Cameroon's favor. Nigeria initially resisted but ultimately withdrew its forces and accepted the ruling. A potential major regional war was avoided, and an important legal precedent was established in Africa that border disputes should be settled through courts rather than force.

The ICJ has saved countless lives. It is also remarkably cost-effective. In 2024, its entire yearly budget was approximately US \$34.5 million.²¹ By contrast, just five days of flare-ups in Thailand-Cambodia tensions were estimated to have cost more than US \$300 million in evacuations and damaged property to Thailand alone.²²

Five days of a military flare-up cost about ten times more than the Court's entire annual budget.

The past decade shows a mixed picture for the peaceful resolution of disputes. On the one hand, the steady rise in new filings speaks to the ICJ's relevance: states are increasingly turning to the Court, rather than to force, to affirm their legal rights.²³ Between 2013-2023, for example, the Court indicated provisional measures — its emergency tool for ordering parties to act or refrain from acting while it decides the merits — in eleven cases, compared with ten in the first fifty years of its existence.

²¹ United Nations. "Emphasizing Contribution of International Court of Justice to International Peace," UN Press, October 23, 2024. <https://press.un.org/en/2024/ga12647.doc.htm>.

²² "Thailand estimates over \$300 million in economic damage from border conflict with Cambodia." — Reuters, July 29, 2025 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailand-estimates-over-300-mln-economic-damage-border-conflict-with-cambodia-2025-07-29/>.

²³ Chatham House. (2024). More and More Cases on War and Genocide Are Being Litigated at the ICJ. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/09/more-and-more-cases-war-and-genocide-are-being-litigated-icj>.

On the other hand, compliance with these measures has fallen from around 80 per cent to roughly 50 per cent of cases.²⁴ Russia has ignored the Court's 2022 order to 'immediately suspend' its military operations in Ukraine, and Myanmar has at most partially implemented measures to protect the Rohingya. In 2024, Israel likewise failed to give effect to key provisional measures requiring it to prevent acts under the Genocide Convention and enable humanitarian aid into Gaza. The Court's increasingly assertive posture has been a source of legitimacy and perceived relevance. Yet these cases also highlight an underlying tension: the more the ICJ is asked to intervene in high-stakes crises at the centre of global politics, the greater the risk that some governments will resist or ignore its orders.

Zooming out, however, today's picture is a far cry from the situation preceding World War II. As Philippe Sands, acclaimed author and lead counsel for the State of Palestine in the 2024 ICJ advisory proceedings, puts it, "don't forget that before 1945, there was literally nothing. There was no accountability."²⁶

Compliance with the Court's final judgments remains strong, roughly 75 per cent, despite the Court's lack of coercive enforcement capacity.²⁵ ICJ judges themselves stress that "the vast majority" of rulings are implemented and recognised, with outright non-compliance remaining exceptional.²⁶

What is under question, then, is not the value of the Court's work, but the willingness of states to enforce the rules they have signed up for. When governments respond to growing defiance by disinvesting from the ICJ or treating its orders as optional, they contribute to dismantling one of the most effective and least costly alternatives to war the international system has ever produced.

Every period in which states have chosen law over force has begun with a conscious decision to defend, not abandon, the institutions that make rules real.

Don't forget that before 1945, there was literally nothing. There was no accountability.

– Philippe Sands, acclaimed author and lead counsel for the State of Palestine in the 2024 ICJ advisory proceedings

Compliance with the Court's final judgments remains strong, roughly 75 per cent, despite the Court's lack of coercive enforcement capacity.

Every period in which states have chosen law over force has begun with a conscious decision to defend, not abandon, the institutions that make rules real.

²⁴ Matei Alexianu, "Provisional, but Not (Always) Pointless: Compliance with ICJ Provisional Measures," *EJIL: Talk!* (blog), November 3, 2023, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/provisional-but-not-always-pointless-compliance-with-icj-provisional-measures/>.

²⁵ Joan E. Donoghue, The Effectiveness of the International Court of Justice, 108 *PROC. ANN. MEETING (AM. SOC'Y INT'L L.)* 114, 114 (2014).

²⁶ Juan Manuel Gómez-Robledo, The International Court of Justice: A Bright Light in Dark Times, *JUST SECURITY* (Oct. 24, 2022), <https://www.justsecurity.org/83723/the-international-court-of-justice-a-bright-light-in-dark-times/>.

Protecting people from the horrors of war

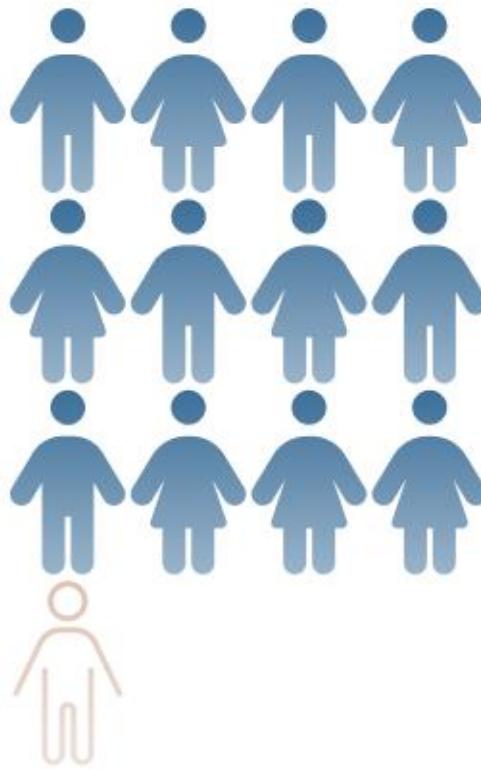
If the Paris Peace Pact and then the UN Charter radically reshaped when states could go to war, the Geneva Conventions and other international humanitarian law (IHL) treaties have transformed acceptable behavior *in war*. This may be hard to reconcile with what we witness today. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres warns that “the state of protection of civilians is grim and the trends are alarming.”²⁷ Mirjana Spoljaric, the ICRC President, likewise sounds the alarm: “As wars multiply, respect for IHL is in crisis, threatening the core of our existence... Humanity is failing under our collective watch.”²⁸ Conflict levels, displacement and lethality have increased in the past decade, driven especially by wars in Ethiopia, Ukraine, Sudan, and Palestine; 2022 was the deadliest year of the century so far. In this context, it can feel almost offensive to claim that IHL is effective.

Yet the relevant question is not whether the law has eliminated suffering — it plainly has not — but what today’s wars would look like without these rules. To appreciate the scale of transformation international law has achieved, it is important to contextualize current casualty figures against the backdrop of twentieth-century warfare.

World War II alone killed an estimated 50-55 million civilians, or 12 to 14 times more than all armed conflicts have killed since the end of the Cold War.²⁹

If all of today’s wars were fought with the norms, weapons, and targeting practices of the 1940s, we would very likely be counting civilian deaths in the tens of millions. Gaza is a brutal sign of how far we have slid back toward that edge: it shows what happens when rules are ignored or stretched until almost anything can be justified. Rather than proving that law makes no difference, Gaza illustrates the path we are on if these limits continue to erode — a path that leads back toward the kinds of industrialised violence the post-1945 order was built to prevent.

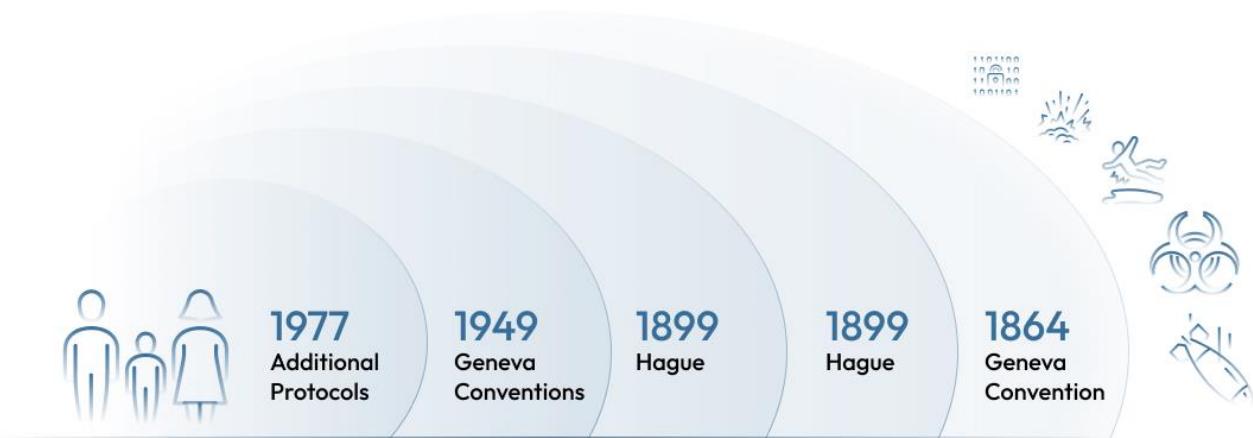
Yet the relevant question is not whether the law has eliminated suffering — it plainly has not — but what today’s wars would look like without these rules.



²⁷ Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, UN Doc. S/2025/271 (15 May 2025), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n25/095/59/pdf/n2509559.pdf>.

²⁸ Mirjana Spoljaric, “ICRC President: Humanity Is Failing Under Our Collective Watch,” International Committee of the Red Cross, August 6, 2025, <https://www.icrc.org/en/statement/icrc-president-humanity-failing-under-our-collective-watch>.

The international legal protections at the heart of this system were built step by step. The 1864 Geneva Convention protected wounded soldiers and medical personnel; the 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions regulated means and methods of warfare; the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 expanded protections for wounded combatants, prisoners of war and civilians; and the 1977 Additional Protocols strengthened civilian protections and restricted weapons and tactics. Each layer tightened the circle around what is deemed acceptable in war.



Practices once considered lawful — area bombing of cities, siege-starvation, widespread use of chemical weapons, unregulated landmines, and cluster munitions — have been stigmatized, criminalized, and in many cases eliminated from regular state practice.

Crucially, these norms are not just elite inventions; they reflect widely shared expectations. The ICRC's 2016 survey, *People on War*, found that 82% of respondents globally agreed that attacking hospitals, ambulances, and healthcare workers to weaken an enemy is wrong, with people in conflict-affected countries expressing some of the strongest support for limits on warfare.²⁹

Lex International's 2025 International Law Index found overwhelming global support (80-95% on average) for core protections anchored in international humanitarian law — even when violations were framed as serving national security interests. Strikingly, even respondents who were unsure about "international law" as such strongly opposed flagrant violations such as starving civilians, torturing prisoners, or targeting hospitals. These are not marginal lawyerly preferences; they reflect a broad, cross-regional moral consensus about how wars should not be fought.

Quantifying the effects of compliance with IHL will always be difficult, because what the law prevents is by definition less visible than what it fails to stop. But in some domains, its impact is unmistakable. Treaties banning or restricting specific inhumane weapons, such as chemical weapons, landmines, and nuclear weapons, have achieved extraordinary security benefits.

²⁹ Helen Durham, "ICRC 2016 People on War Survey," ICRC Law and Policy Blog, December 5, 2016. <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2016/12/05/icrc-2016-people-on-war-survey/>.



Chemical weapons are amongst the most horrific weapons ever deployed in warfare – indiscriminate by nature, impacting children the most, and causing unimaginable suffering. During World War I they led to over 1 million casualties. The Chemical Weapons Convention (1993) eliminated declared chemical weapons by 2023 — a 100% internationally verified destruction of approximately 72,304 metric tons of chemical agents.³⁰ Chemical weapons were used during the Syrian civil war (2011-2024), and caused thousands of deaths. Conservative estimates suggest that the destroyed stockpiles, if used in warfare or released through accidents or terrorism, could have caused millions of casualties.³¹ Estimates situate the harm from a *single* chemical attack at about 180 times the budget of the international body responsible for implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention, the OPCW.³²



Anti-personnel landmines had a devastating impact throughout the twentieth century due to their indiscriminate and persistent nature. They overwhelmingly kill and maim civilians (80-85% of victims), many of whom are children (40% of victims) for decades after the conflict ended. The Mine Ban Convention (1999) has been staggeringly effective.³³ It led to the destruction of 55 million stockpiled Mines; reduced casualties by 80% from 25,000 in 1999 to fewer than 5,000 by the 2020s; and prevented roughly half a million casualties over 25 years — or 21,000 lives saved yearly.³⁴ For example, between 2000 and 2023, landmine casualties decreased by 96% in Cambodia and by 91% in Colombia.

The evolution of state practice around landmines illustrates the power of norms, even beyond treaty adhesion. In the 1991 Gulf War, coalition forces used approximately 118,000 landmines in Iraq and Kuwait. Twelve years later, during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, they did not use any: the United Kingdom and Australia had joined the Mine Ban Treaty. The United States also refrained from using them, despite not being a party to the Treaty.³⁵

The evolution of state practice around landmines illustrates the power of norms, even beyond treaty adhesion.

³⁰ Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, *OPCW Confirms: All Declared Chemical Weapons Stockpiles Verified as Irreversibly Destroyed* (July 7, 2023), <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2023/07/opcw-confirms-all-declared-chemical-weapons-stockpiles-verified>.

³¹ Historical analysis shows that materials capable of producing approximately 50 tons of chemical weapons agents could, under optimal conditions, kill as many as 4.2 million people. See Lord Lyell, *Chemical and Biological Weapons: The Poor Man's Bomb*, Draft General Report, North Atlantic Assembly, AN 253 STC (96) 8 (October 4, 1996), <https://irp.fas.org/threat/an253stc.htm>.

³² The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' (OPCW) 2025 budget is about \$100million, see OPCW. “Note by the Director-General: Draft Revised Programme and Budget of the OPCW for 2025 (EC-107/DG.4).” 2 July 2024. The 1988 Halabja Massacre, in which approximately 5,000 civilians were killed by chemical weapons, represents an economic loss of roughly \$18 billion.

³³ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, *25 Years of Global Efforts to Eradicate Landmines and Empower Lives* (Mar. 1, 2024), <https://icblcmc.org/our-impact/25-years-of-global-efforts-to-eradicate-landmines-and-empower-lives>.

³⁴ If casualties had remained at 1999 levels, approximately 650,000 additional casualties would have occurred between 1999 and 2024. The actual number this period was about 125,000, meaning the treaty prevented approximately 525,000 casualties over 25 years. *Ibid.*

³⁵ Wade Boese, “U.S. Military Did Not Use Landmines in Iraq War,” Arms Control Today, July 2003, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2003-07/press-releases/us-military-did-not-use-landmines-iraq-war>.



Nuclear weapons represent humanity's most destructive creations. There are over 12,000 nuclear warheads in the world, most of which are many times more powerful than the nuclear weapon dropped on Hiroshima. Detonating one of these weapons over New York City would cause an estimated 583,160 fatalities.³⁶ While nuclear weapons have not yet been comprehensively prohibited by international law, several treaties have limited their spread and testing.

- The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons banned the spread of nuclear weapons in 1968. Despite predictions in the 1960s that dozens of states would acquire nuclear weapons, only four states have done so since.
- The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty reduced nuclear tests from over 2,000 globally to less than 10 (all by North Korea) since it opened for signature in 1996.
- Bilateral arms reduction treaties between the United States and the Soviet Union reduced nuclear arsenals by about 80%: from Cold War peaks of approximately 70,000 warheads to approximately 12,000 today.³⁷
- The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons finally put nuclear weapons on the same legal footing as biological and chemical weapons and is developing a new legal norm – increasing political costs for the possession of nuclear weapons and providing a foundation for divestment efforts.

These treaties are as efficient as they are effective. The human and economic costs of these weapons far exceed the modest contributions states make to the treaties intended to prevent such harm. Take the budget of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is central to verification around non-proliferation: its 2025 regular budget is about *half a percent* of global nuclear weapons spending.³⁸

Legal and diplomatic agreements of this kind build trust over time by enabling verification, creating lasting constraints that shape cost-benefit calculations, and providing a scaffold on which bolder steps can be built. Austria concluded in 2025 that “the Mine Ban Convention, the Cluster Munitions Convention, the Biological and the Chemical Weapons Convention as well as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons [...] are essential for our collective security.”³⁹

“the Mine Ban Convention, the Cluster Munitions Convention, the Biological and the Chemical Weapons Convention as well as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons [...] are essential for our collective security.”

They are right: these rules are a bulwark against drifting back toward the worst chapters of our past.

³⁶ International Coalition to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, *Nuclear Arsenals*, https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_arsenals.

³⁷ See Arms Control Association, *U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Agreements at a Glance*, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/USRussiaNuclearAgreements> (last visited Oct. 10, 2025).

³⁸ IAEA 2025 budget is roughly \$514 million, while the latest authoritative, globally aggregated nuclear weapons spending data puts it at \$100 billion (2023). See the IAEA’s Draft Budget Update for 2025 (GC(68)/5). 2024. <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc68-5.pdf> and International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. “Global Nuclear Weapons Spending Surges to \$91.4 Billion.” June 17, 2024. https://www.icanw.org/global_nuclear_weapons_spending_surges_to_91_4_billion.

³⁹ Statement by H.E. Ms. Désirée Schweitzer at the First State Consultation on Prevention Good Practices, Geneva, 13 May 2025 (Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law, WS1) available at: <https://www.upholdhumanityinwar.org/documentation>. See also this Interview with Austrian Ambassador Alexander Kmentt, pointing to the security benefits of the TPNW: <https://sgi-peace.org/resources/interview-with-alexander-kmentt-1msp-tpnw>.

Military action: how effective is the alternative?

Given the horrors of today's battlefields and the pressure on core legal principles and institutions, it is only natural to scrutinize international law's continued relevance. The evidence reviewed above shows that, despite enormous challenges, international law has profoundly reshaped international relations for the better, in ways that are often taken for granted.

What is often missing from this debate is a critical and honest assessment of the alternative. At a time of tightening budgets, the costs and performance of military force deserve far more scrutiny. World military spending rose by 9.4 per cent in 2024 — the highest level since the end of the Cold War — yet it is unclear whether these investments have translated or will translate into greater security. Is the return worth the cost?

The empirical record of recent large-scale interventions is sobering. Unilateral military campaigns sometimes deliver short-term tactical gains, but they often fail to achieve their strategic aims and can, in many cases, worsen the very threats they set out to address.

The United States invaded Afghanistan to dismantle Al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban; two decades, trillions of dollars, and staggering human costs later, the Taliban once again govern Kabul and Al Qaeda affiliates remain active. The 2003 Iraq war, launched to eliminate alleged weapons of mass destruction, produced neither those weapons nor lasting stability, instead destabilizing the whole region and paving the way for the rise of the Islamic State. The Soviet war in Afghanistan did not maintain a communist government in place, but contributed to the USSR's political and economic unraveling. From Vietnam to Libya to Yemen, major interventions have repeatedly produced outcomes far from those promised at the outset.

The human and financial costs are exorbitant. "Post-9/11" conflicts killed an estimated 940,000 people directly, including 432,000 civilians. Indirect deaths as a result of wars' destruction of economies, healthcare systems, infrastructure, and the environment are estimated at 3.6-3.8 million.⁴⁰ Their projected cost to the United States alone is \$8 trillion by 2050. Globally, the economic impact of violence in 2024 reached \$19.97 trillion — 11.6 per cent of world economic activity, or \$2,446 per person.⁴¹ These are not just security costs; they are development costs, climate costs, and governance costs. Crucially, they are also opportunity costs.

⁴⁰ Costs of War Project. "Human Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones." Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University. <https://costsofwar.watson.brown.edu/costs/human>.

⁴¹ In purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. Military and internal security expenditure accounts for over 74 per cent of the figure, with the impact of military spending alone accounting for \$9 trillion in PPP terms the past year. Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Peace Index 2025: Identifying and Measuring the Factors that Drive Peace*. Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, June 2025. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Global-Peace-Index-2025-web.pdf>.

The \$19.97 trillion burden of violence is more than 2,000 times the combined annual budgets of the UN's regular operations and peacekeeping missions. Redirecting even a small share of global military expenditure could close the entire climate adaptation financing gap for developing countries, estimated at \$310–365 billion annually, or substantially advance other public priorities such as global public health or economic development.⁴²

In regions already grappling with inequality and political discontent — including parts of Europe — reallocating funds away from social investment toward defense risks reinforcing the very grievances that fuel instability. When governments allocate resources between military spending and diplomatic capacity, they make concrete choices about how to pursue security. Given the mixed record and immense costs of recent wars, it is time for those choices to rest on evidence about what actually works, rather than on unexamined assumptions and political symbolism.

At the very minimum, this begs the question of why investments in preventing conflict and protecting people from the harms of war have not evolved in step with unprecedented increases in military spending.

At the very minimum, this begs the question of why investments in preventing conflict and protecting people from the harms of war have not evolved in step with unprecedented increases in military spending.



⁴² According to a 2025 Pew Research Center survey across 25 countries, the most pressing perceived threats are: (1) The spread of false information online (72%); (2) The condition of the global economy (70%); (3) Terrorism (69); (4) Global climate change (67%); (5) The spread of infectious diseases (60%). Pew Research Center. *International Opinion on Global Threats*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/08/19/international-opinion-on-global-threats/>.

Diplomacy v. military action: the Iranian nuclear program as a case in point

Diplomacy: The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iran nuclear deal, was negotiated between Iran and the P5+1 (United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany) to restrict Iran's nuclear program to civilian uses. It achieved important nonproliferation gains:

- Iran reduced its uranium enrichment capacity by two-thirds, from approximately 19,000 centrifuges to 6,104, with only 5,060 allowed to enrich uranium.
- Iran reduced its stockpile of enriched uranium from approximately 10,000 kg to 300 kg — a 98% reduction.
- US intelligence concluded that the JCPOA extended Iran's "breakout time" — the time required to produce enough fissile material for one nuclear weapon — from approximately 2-3 months before the deal to over 12 months. With core nuclear restrictions designed to last 10-15 years, the breakout time could have been extended much longer.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) implemented the most intrusive inspection regime ever negotiated, continuously monitoring Iranian nuclear facilities.
- The direct costs were limited to negotiation expenses and IAEA verification activities. The cost to the IAEA of verifying and monitoring Iran's nuclear-related commitments in the JCPOA was estimated at €9.2 million in 2016.

These gains, however, proved reversible. After the United States withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, stockpiles were reconstituted to almost 10,000 kg by June 2025 (including 440.9 kg of near weapons-grade uranium).

(Unlawful) military strikes: Between June 13-24, 2025, Israel launched military operations against multiple Iranian nuclear facilities, with the United States later joining the attacks on June 22. Without a Security Council mandate or imminent armed attack in the strict sense required by the UN Charter, and because alternative measures short of force were available, legal commentators conclude that the operations amounted to unilateral, preventive uses of force against another state's territory, in violation of international law.⁴³

- How much stockpile elimination was achieved through these measures is unclear. Although strikes damaged Iran's main enrichment facilities, some sources indicate that Iran likely moved nuclear material to undisclosed locations before the strikes, and the IAEA reported it could not determine the whereabouts of Iran's enriched uranium stockpile.
- A leaked preliminary U.S. intelligence report estimates the strikes added only "a few months" to Iran's breakout time. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi stated Iran could resume uranium enrichment "in a matter of months."
- The strikes caused Iran to formally suspend cooperation with the IAEA in June. As of November 2025, inspections have not fully resumed.
- Many analysts concluded that military strikes increased Iran's incentive to pursue nuclear weapons as deterrence against future attacks.
 - Based on an analysis using Pentagon briefing data and official budget documents, a rough conservative estimate for the U.S. June 2025 Iran nuclear operations is between \$100-132.5 million in one evening for identifiable weapons alone, with the likely total cost reaching hundreds of millions of dollars when accounting aircraft and support operations.⁴⁴

⁴³ Art. 2(4) of the UN Charter bans the "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state". Art 51 establishes self-defense as an exception "if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security." See Adil Haque, "Indefensible: Israel's Unlawful Attack on Iran," Just Security, June 19, 2025. <https://www.justsecurity.org/115010/israel-unlawful-attack-iran-charter/>.

⁴⁴ According to Pentagon officials, the operation employed 75 precision-guided weapons, including 14 30,000-pound GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator bombs and over two dozen Tomahawk cruise missiles. Using historical contract data, the MOPs cost approximately \$3.5-5 million each (based on a 2011 contract adjusted for inflation), and Tomahawks cost \$1.2-2.5 million per unit according to Navy budget justification books. However, the costs of additional unspecified weapons and the extensive air support

- Israel's direct military expenses during the 12-day war (June 13-24, 2025) averaged roughly \$725 million per day, according to a former senior defense official.⁴⁵ Over 12 days, this amounts to approximately \$8.7 billion. These costs include airstrikes on Iranian targets, costing around \$593 million in the first two days alone, covering flight hours and munitions. Beyond direct military costs, Israel suffered approximately \$1.4 billion in infrastructure damage from Iranian missile strikes, affecting residential areas and public facilities across multiple cities.⁴⁶

In a nutshell, direct military action to curb the weaponization of Iran's nuclear program was *hundreds* of times more than the diplomatic track – and achieved less.

Taking the pulse on international law

In November, Lex International ran the [2025 International Law Index](#), a nine-country survey of 8,509 adults in South Africa, the United States, Brazil, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and Egypt to take the pulse of international law. Where does public opinion stand on the assertion that 'might makes right'? Are most people content with the way in which wars are being fought globally? Is there an expectation for governments to do more to ensure that international law is respected? In a nutshell, how alive is the consensus around key protections enshrined in international law? The first part of this section looks at the findings of the survey, and why they matter today. The survey questions and methodology can be found in the Annex. The second part of this section compares this information with statements by governments as part of the first round of consultations of the ICRC's *Upholding Humanity in War* initiative.

The 2025 International Law Index

Key findings overview

Across nine countries, the 2025 International Law Index finds a robust global consensus in favour of inclusive multilateralism, equal rules, and core protections in war. An overwhelming majority (around 87%) think all states — not just powerful ones — should participate in decisions on major global challenges, and only about a fifth do not believe rules should apply equally to all states. Public backing for core IHL protections is even stronger: across demographics and countries, 80–95% of respondents reject torture, starvation as a means of war, or attacks on hospitals, even when framed as serving national security. At the same time, people globally are dissatisfied with current enforcement: about 71% want their governments to do more to ensure all states obey international law, with particularly strong support in surveyed Global South countries. Taken together, the ten key findings suggest that while institutions and narratives are under strain, the underlying social consensus around key protections — and around the idea that "might" should not trump law — remains remarkably alive.

operations involving more than 125 aircraft remain unaccounted for in this estimate. See Taxpayers for Common Sense, "Prolonged War with Iran Would Cost Taxpayers Dearly," <https://www.taxpayer.net/national-security/prolonged-war-with-iran-would-cost-taxpayers-dearly/>. See also U.S. Department of Defense, "Hegseth, Caine Brief Media," Pentagon Press Briefing, June 22, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Videos/videoId/967677/> (timestamps approximately 8:27 and 10:07) and CBS News, "Pentagon reveals how B-2 bombers struck Iran nuclear sites in mission dubbed 'Operation Midnight Hammer,'" June 23, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pentagon-briefing-us-strikes-iran-nuclear-sites/>.

⁴⁵ According to Brig. Gen. (res.) Re'em Aminach, a former senior defense official and financial adviser to the IDF chief of staff. See Ynetnews, "War with Iran costs Israel nearly \$1 billion daily, ex-defense official says," June 15, 2025, available at <https://www.ynetnews.com/business/article/h14zqenqlg>. These costs also include the deployment of missile defense systems like Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow, alongside reserve mobilization.

⁴⁶ See "Cost of damages from Iran war forecast at double October 7 and ensuing attacks", *The Times of Israel*, June 24, 2025, available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/cost-of-damages-from-iran-war-forecast-at-double-october-7-and-ensuing-attacks/>.

Findings – and why they matter

1. **There is a strong consensus in favour of inclusive decision-making on global challenges.** Across all surveyed countries, an average of 86.7% of respondents believe that all states, regardless of power, should participate in decisions related to conflict, climate change, and pandemics. National-level support ranges narrowly from 78.4 % (India) to 91.4 % (Indonesia).

This finding illustrates how deeply the post-1945 international legal order has shaped public expectations about global governance. The principle that all states are juridically equal, enshrined in Article 2(1) of the UN Charter, is a widely internalized global norm. Before 1945, international law recognized only a narrow club of “civilized nations,” largely excluding non-European states. For example, the 1815 Congress of Vienna recognized just 39 sovereign states, and international law applied selectively: non-European and unrecognized states were denied both status and protection under emerging norms. Even in the League of Nations era, unequal rights and “mandate” hierarchies persisted.⁴⁷ The UN Charter fundamentally transformed that structure by codifying sovereign equality as universal. The fact that respondents today overwhelmingly support equal participation, from Tuvalu to China, shows that this once-radical idea has become a shared baseline of global political morality.

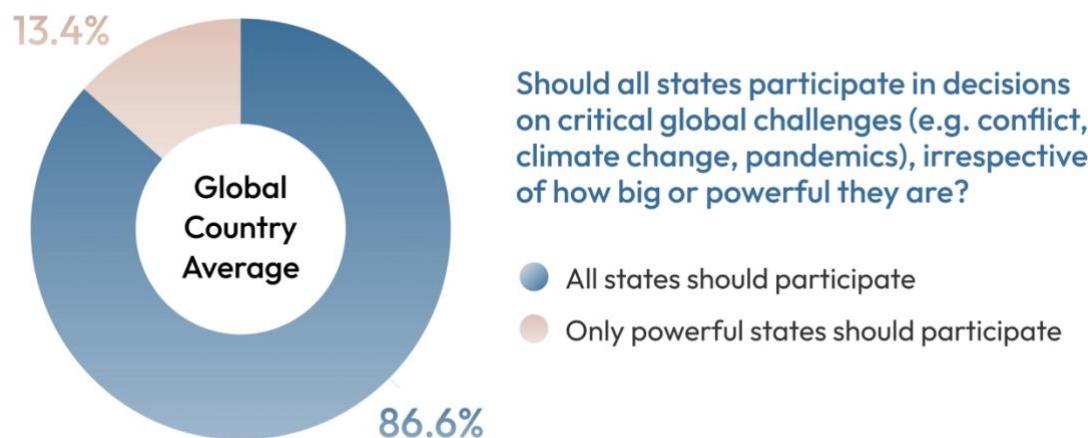


Figure 3: Inclusive decision-making on global challenges (Global)

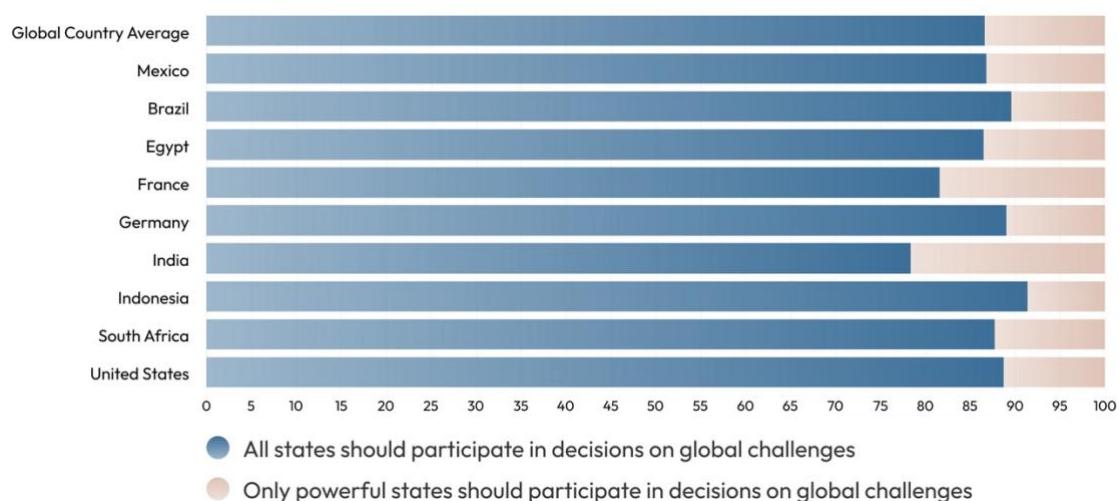


Figure 4: Inclusive decision-making on global challenges (Country by country)

⁴⁷ Gerry Simpson. "The Great Powers, Sovereign Equality and the Making of the United Nations Charter." Australian Year Book of International Law 18 (2000): 133-164. <https://classic.austlii.edu.au/journals/AUYrBkIntLaw/2000/8.html>.

It also directly challenges the notion that “might makes right.” Publics are signaling a preference for shared decision-making over unilateralism and for legal equality over dominance. As Indonesia put it in the *Upholding Humanity in War* Initiative, “it is international law, and not power, that should dictate governance.”⁴⁸

2. Respondents were twice as likely to favor equal application of international rules (43.8%) as to reject it outright (21.8%), with a further 34 per cent saying equal rules should “sometimes” apply.

Despite geopolitical fragmentation, a substantial share of the public still believes that states should be bound by the same rules. Equal rules are not seen as mere procedure; they remain the normative core of the international legal system. Even in comparatively skeptical countries such as the United States and France, outright rejection is a minority view. This suggests that politically, leaders may face greater costs for applying rules inconsistently than for defending equal treatment. The large number of respondents in the conditional category indicates broad latent support that could be strengthened with clearer communication and better institutional performance.

At the same time, this result highlights a growing fault line: perceptions of selective application have become a major source of public frustration globally. Legal principles invoked forcefully in some contexts, such as territorial integrity, proportionality, or the protection of civilians, are downplayed or reinterpreted in others. The result is a growing sense for many that international law is applied *à la carte*: enforced vigorously against adversaries, but selectively or symbolically when it comes to allies. When legal commitments are seen as contingent on power relationships, their legitimacy erodes, and with it, the incentive to comply. If unaddressed, this perception risks turning international law into a contested rather than shared framework, eroding compliance incentives. As Palau’s President Surangel Whipps Jr. warned, abandoning consistent application risks granting powerful states “a license to colonize” the global commons.

Should the world be governed by international rules that are applied to all states equally?

Global Country Average

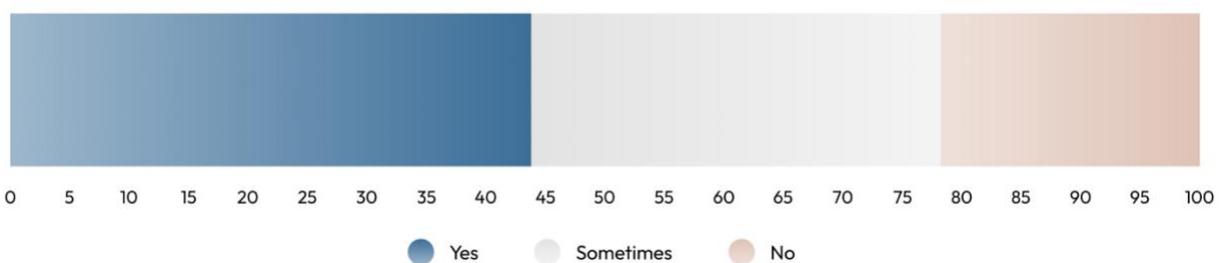


Figure 5: Support for equal international rules (Global)

3. Support for equal international rules is robust across countries, with particularly strong endorsement in the Global South. Respondents in Indonesia, Egypt, India, South Africa, Mexico, and Brazil exhibit the highest support for equal rules, with Indonesia at 69% in unconditional support. Global North countries tend to show higher shares of conditional rather than full endorsement.

⁴⁸ Indonesia (WS7) (in the context of ocean governance).

For many Global South states, equal application of rules is not aspirational; it is vital. International law provides these states with what raw power does not: a voice, stability, dispute-resolution mechanisms, and leverage in global fora. Institutions such as the ICJ, WTO, and UNCLOS give smaller or less militarily powerful states legal avenues to assert rights, challenge coercion, and protect their interests.

This moment also represents a geopolitical opportunity. As the world moves toward multipolarity, Global South states are exercising greater influence through coalitions and issue-based groupings. Their strong societal backing for equal rules suggests significant public legitimacy for a renewed push for consistency and fairness in global governance. This is aligned with prior polling, such as the 2023 Munich Security Index, which found higher support for equal rules in China, India, Brazil, and South Africa than in any G7 country.⁴⁹

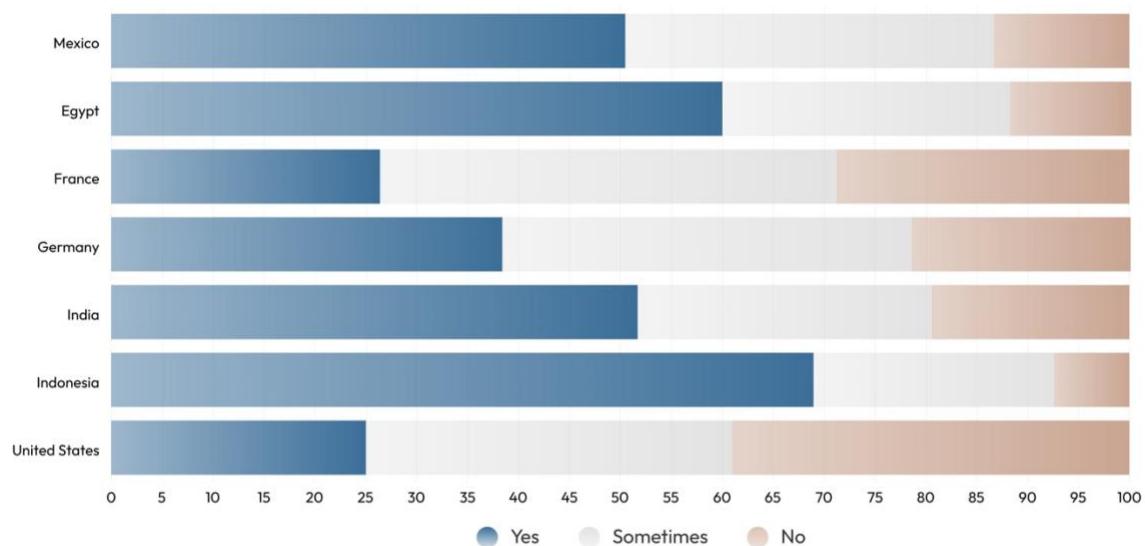


Figure 6: Support for equal international rules (Country by country)

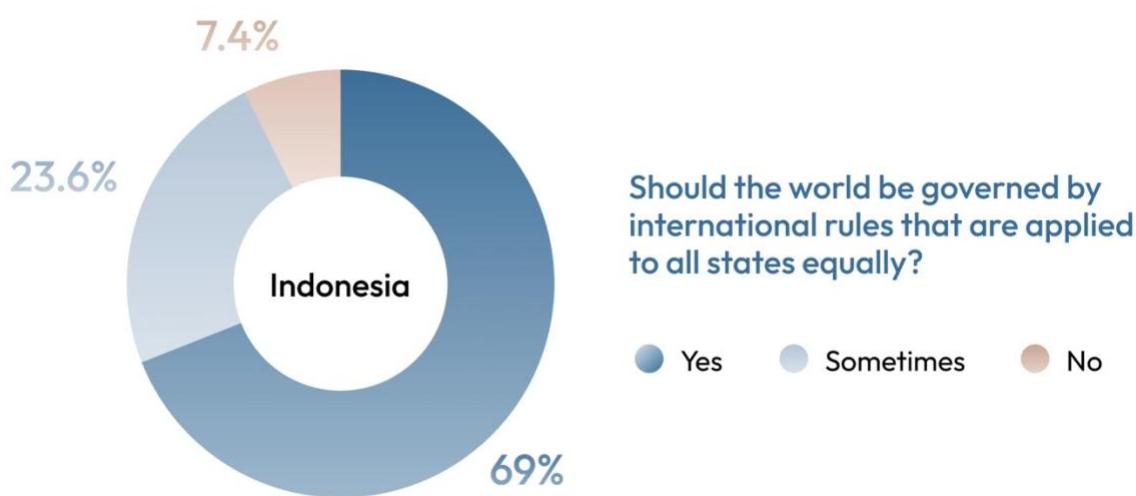


Figure 7: Support for equal international rules (Indonesia)

⁴⁹ Maglia, C. (2025). Peace and security ad hoc coalitions: engagement of the Global South and the Global North. *Third World Quarterly*, 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2432493>.

4. Younger respondents consistently express stronger alignment with core international-law norms. Under-35s show higher support for equal rules (46.8%) compared to those aged 50–74 (35.5%). Younger respondents also demonstrate stronger backing for inclusive decision-making, humanitarian protections, and enforcement of international law.

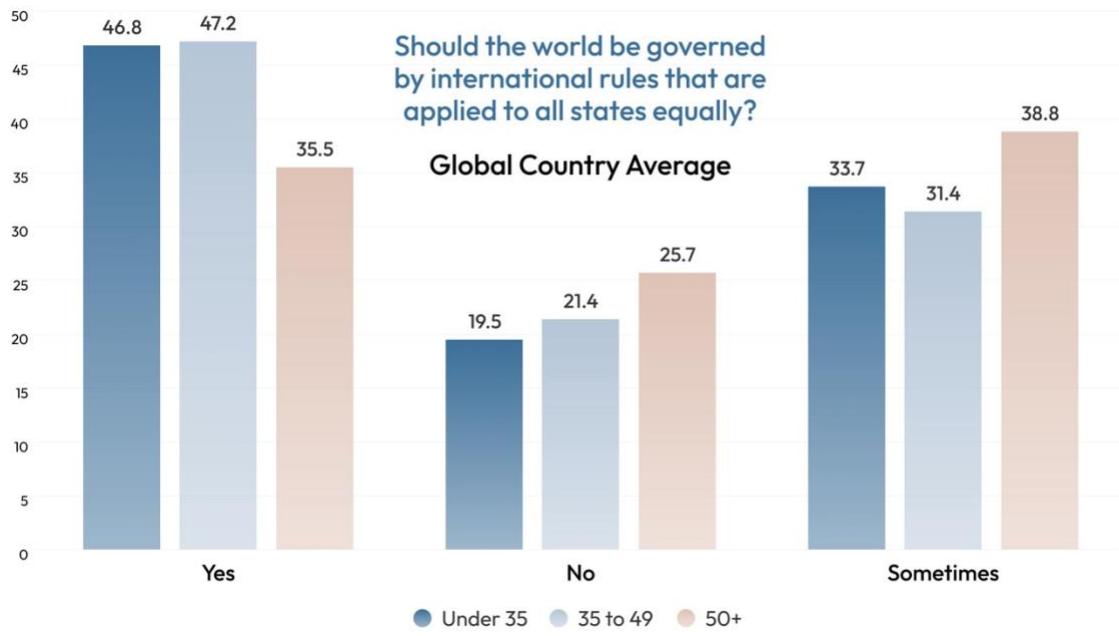


Figure 8: Support for equal international rules (Younger voters)

Younger generations favor a rule-governed international order over one shaped by unchecked power. Their comparatively high support spans all core areas of international law — from stronger support for equal rules, to inclusive decision-making, humanitarian protections, and enforcement. Overall, the generational pattern suggests that the normative foundations of the international system are likely to strengthen further as demographic weight shifts.

5. **Business owners are 1.5 times more likely to support the equal application of international rules.** 60.1% of business owners endorse equal rules compared with 39.5% of non-owners. This is the largest demographic gap in the survey — and is consistent across all surveyed countries.

This result speaks to the economic stakes of legal consistency. The private sector is highly dependent on predictable, stable, and universally applied international rules. Since 1945, the expansion of international law, through the UN system, GATT, the WTO, and many treaties, has underpinned decades of rapid trade growth and poverty reduction. Global poverty fell sharply between 1950 and 1990, and even more rapidly after 1990 as more countries joined multilateral trade regimes.⁵⁰

While these benefits have not been distributed evenly and major issues of inequality remain, the costs of uncertainty are universal. They are on ample display today. According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 *Chief Economists' Outlook*, 82% of chief economists consider current levels of uncertainty "very high," with expected negative impacts on trade, GDP, and foreign investment.⁵¹

⁵⁰ World Bank, "Estimates of Global Poverty from WWII to the Fall of the Berlin Wall," last modified November 23, 2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/estimates-global-poverty-wwii-fall-berlin-wall>.

⁵¹ World Economic Forum, "Chief Economists Outlook: May 2025," accessed November 21, 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/chief-economists-outlook-may-2025/>.

As UAE trade minister Al Zeyoudi warned: “The main issue for the businesses is the unpredictability... no one can stick to a business plan... no one can have a long-term plan.”⁵² International law offers a precious tool for long-term planning.

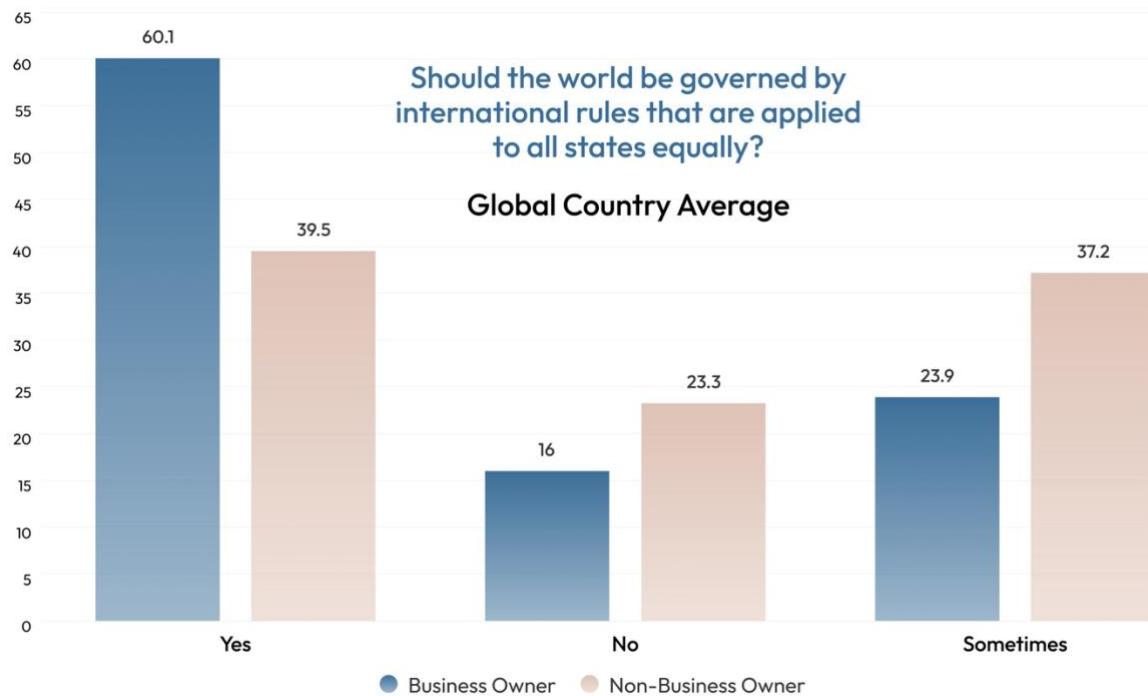


Figure 9: Business owners’ support for equal application of international rules (Global)

6. Most respondents globally believed their own country to be safest from war. The most popular choice after that was Switzerland — a small, neutral country for whom the promotion of international law is a central foreign policy objective.

This challenges assumptions that higher military spending reliably translates into a sense of safety. Switzerland’s modest military-to-diplomacy ratio (roughly 1.6 : 1)⁵³ contrasts starkly with countries like the United States or China, which spend up to *thirty* times more on defense than they do on diplomacy.⁵⁴ Yet Switzerland is globally perceived as safe largely due to its neutrality and long-standing identity tied to international law. For example, French respondents were about three times more likely to say Switzerland was safest from war than to name their own country — although France is a nuclear-armed state and a NATO member. While French officials routinely present nuclear deterrence as a central guarantee of national safety, the French public still considers neutral Switzerland to be a safer bet. This is striking.

⁵² World Economic Forum. "Taming Trade." Annual Meetings of the Global Future Councils and Cybersecurity 2025. Accessed November 21, 2025. <https://www.weforum.org/meetings/annual-meetings-of-the-global-future-councils-and-cybersecurity-2025/sessions/taming-trade/>.

⁵³ Switzerland’s 2026 budget includes CHF 3,829 Mio for ‘International Relations’ and CHF 7,770 Mio for security, of which 80% are military spending. See Swiss Federal Finance Administration (FFA), “Expenditure” (June 30, 2025). Available at: https://www.efv.admin.ch/efv/en/home/finanzberichterstattung/bundeshaushalt_ueb/ausgaben.html.

⁵⁴ For the fiscal year 2026, the United States government requested \$961.6 billion for defense and \$31.2 billion for diplomacy. This is a ratio of 31:1. Fiscal Year 2026 Discretionary Budget Request, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Fiscal-Year-2026-Discretionary-Budget-Request.pdf>. In 2025, China’s national defense budget was set at \$249 billion (likely lower than actual defense expenditure) and that for “diplomatic endeavours” was about \$8.87 billion, bringing the ratio to 28:1. See *China to increase defense spending by 7.2 percent in 2025, marking single-digit growth for 10th year*, Xinhua (Mar. 5, 2025), available [here](#) and *China’s bigger diplomatic budget underlines global push, unlike Trump’s ‘America first’*, S. China Morning Post (Mar. 5, 2025), available [here](#).

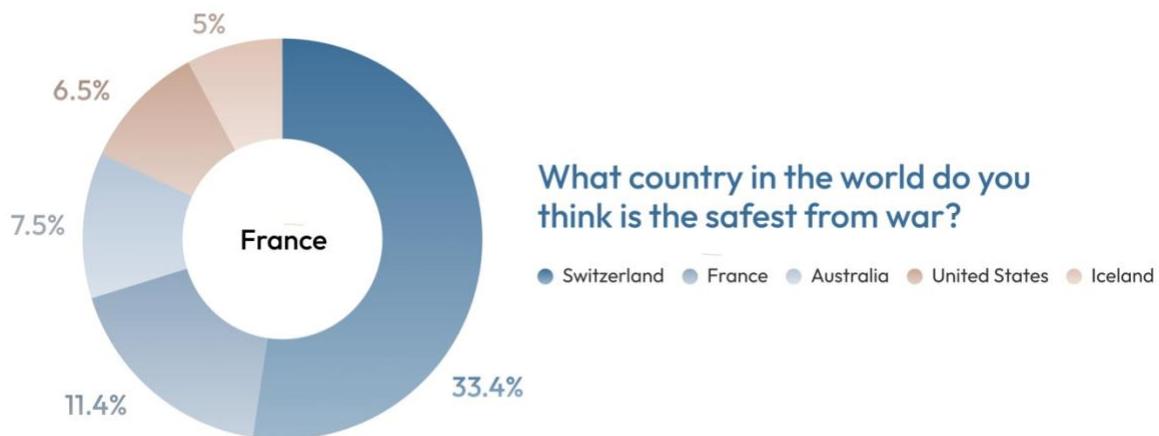


Figure 10: Safest country from war (France)

The broader comparative evidence supports this: Nordic countries, Singapore, Ghana, and Oman similarly achieve high levels of safety with modest military budgets, relying on diplomacy, governance, and international law rather than sheer military might. Costa Rica, which abolished its military in 1948 after its last civil war, has become the only Central American country not to experience further civil conflict or military rule after that date.

This finding also suggests that people globally instinctively grasp that real security comes from more than military strength. At a time of tightening budgets, it speaks for reassessing how governments invest in security.

7. **People globally overwhelmingly reject violations of humanitarian law.** Across scenarios involving killing civilians, starving populations, using indiscriminate weapons, committing rape, or targeting hospitals, 80–95 % of respondents globally express clear opposition. This high support is remarkably stable across gender, age, education, income, and region.

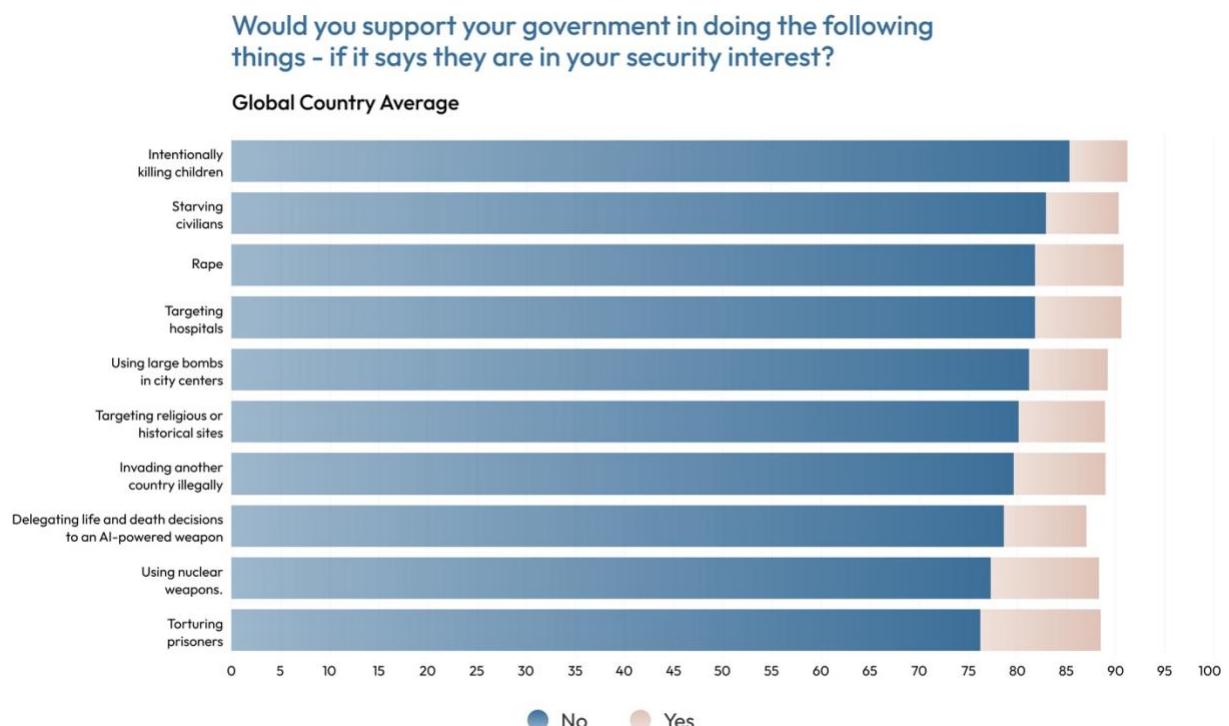


Figure 11: Opposition to violations of core international law provisions (Global)

These findings reveal an exceptionally deep social consensus around core protections from war and in war. Whether these protections emerge from longstanding moral intuitions or have been strengthened and universalized through decades of legal norms, the result is the same: the rules enshrined in the Geneva Conventions now command near-universal public endorsement across genders, ages, regions, and income levels. This widespread rejection of torture, starvation of civilians, and attacks on hospitals confirms the continued relevance and necessity of IHL provisions. It also signals clear expectations that governments comply with these norms even under pressure. Strong public opposition to the use of nuclear weapons (77.3%) and to AI-enabled lethal autonomy (78.6%) reinforces a broad preference for human judgment, restraint, and legality in extreme scenarios. The opposition to invading other countries remains extremely strong (79.6%). Together, these patterns are a powerful counter-narrative to claims that “modern warfare” requires norm erosion or that the laws of war no longer reflect public values.

8. **There is no public constituency in favor of violating international law.** Approval of humanitarian law violations never rises above low single digits for any demographic group or country. Crucially, even respondents skeptical about equal rules — such as some U.S. respondents — still overwhelmingly reject violations.

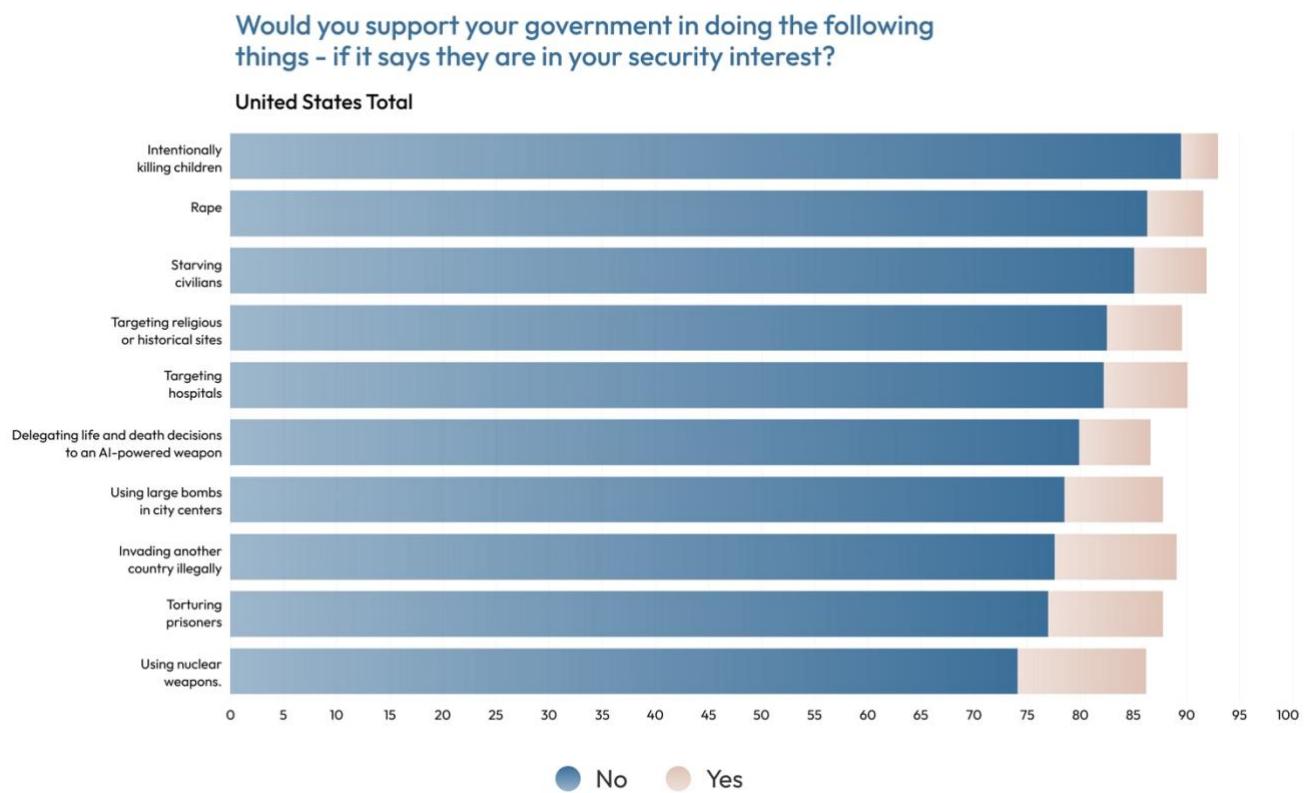


Figure 12: Opposition to violations of core international law provisions (Country by country)

This again suggests that support for international law is not simply procedural or institutional: it is anchored in a deep, cross-demographic moral intuition about human dignity and civilian protection. Even respondents in countries expressing skepticism about equal rules (such as the United States) overwhelmingly reject violations. This disconnect also highlights a communication gap: publics may see “international law” as abstract or ineffective, but they strongly support the concrete protections it provides. This creates an opportunity for policymakers and advocates to

strategically reframe the issue, connecting specific protections people value to the broader legal architecture that sustains them.

9. **The global public is not satisfied with the current enforcement of international law.** 71% want their government to do more to ensure compliance with international rules; 40% strongly support this, while only 5.2% strongly oppose.

Would you support your government doing more to ensure that all states comply with international?

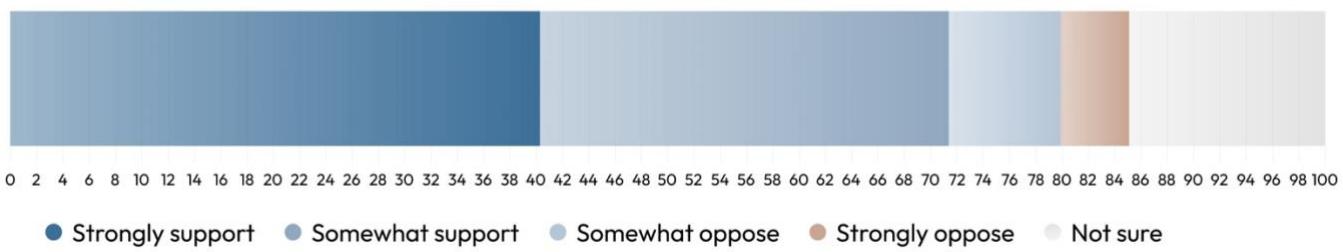


Figure 13: Support for stronger international law enforcement (Global)

People do not want fewer rules or weaker enforcement. They want better enforcement. This aligns with states' obligations under Common Article 1 to the Geneva Conventions ("to respect and to ensure respect" for IHL). As Germany emphasized in the *Upholding Humanity in War* initiative, this obligation is foundational.⁵⁵ Public demand for stronger enforcement thus presents governments with a mandate to strengthen compliance mechanisms and close accountability gaps.

10. **Support for stronger enforcement is highest in the Global South, but remains a majority view everywhere.** It is highest in Indonesia, Egypt, South Africa, India, Mexico, and Brazil. Even in the United States, 53% want their government to do more.

Would you support your government doing more to ensure that all states comply with international?

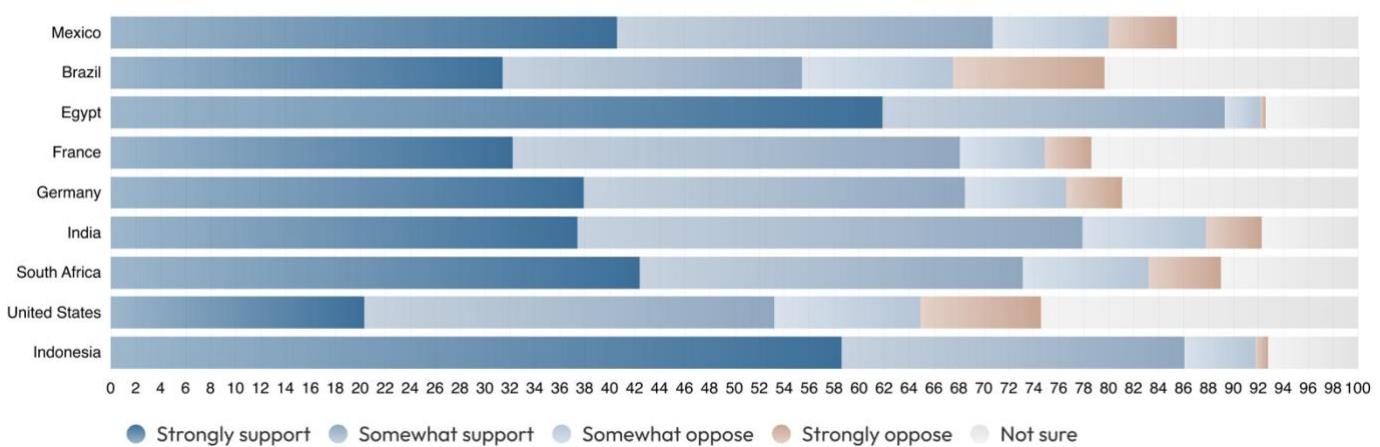


Figure 14: Support for stronger international law enforcement (Country by country)

⁵⁵ Germany (WS6).

Historically, Global South states have used international law as a strategic tool to reshape global order, from transforming self-determination into a concrete legal right⁵⁶; to coining the right to development, which serves as the foundation for climate justice movements today⁵⁷; and redistributing ocean wealth and access in favor of developing countries through UNCLOS negotiations.⁵⁸ Their publics' strong support for enforcement reflects this long-standing investment in the system. At a moment of global institutional strain, this demand signals that strengthening the rule of law remains a priority outside traditional centers of power. It suggests that future coalitions for renewing international order may be driven not from the North, but from societies and governments in the Global South who view international law as essential infrastructure for fairness, representation, and opportunity. This matches research on expanding Global South coalitions.

⁵⁶ Adom Getachew, [Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination](#) (Princeton University Press, 2019), 2-3. He defines worldmaking as “the creation of new political institutions and the renegotiation of old ones” to secure an egalitarian international order.

⁵⁷ See Third World Network, “Climate Change, Technology Transfer and Intellectual Property Rights” (2008); Balakrishnan Rajagopal, [“Right to Development and Global Governance: Old and New Challenges Twenty-Five Years On”](#) (2013) 4:4 *Humanity* 427. Rajagopal analyzes how climate justice movements have invoked the right to development to argue that developed countries must provide financial and technological support without requiring developing countries to forgo economic growth, echoing NIEO-era arguments about addressing structural inequalities rather than imposing uniform rules.

⁵⁸ Douglas Guilfoyle, *Small States and Law of the Sea Litigation Against Greater Powers*, ANZSIL Perspective (2023), available [here](#).

A window into state positions on the laws of war

These findings, in particular the staunch support for core IHL protections, are mirrored in how states themselves are talking about the laws of war in the *Upholding Humanity in War* initiative.⁵⁹ In 2024, seven states and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) launched this initiative to ‘revive political commitment’ to IHL. Between April and June 2025, consultations across seven workstreams, co-chaired by 27 and attended by around 130 states, generated roughly 250 formal statements on contemporary IHL.⁶⁰ By September 2025, 93 states had joined, representing about 58 per cent of the world’s population. Although not all submissions are public, those available show that **many states reject both the way wars are being fought and the legal arguments used to justify them.**

Governments underline the gap between law and practice, and explicitly contest the logic that ‘might makes right’: Guatemala, for example, welcomes the initiative as a way to ‘reduce the gap between the normative framework of IHL and its practical implementation’⁶¹, while Indonesia insists in the maritime context that ‘it is international law, and not power, that should dictate governance.’⁶² States are also pushing back against more specific dangerous trends — from targeting practices to the legal interpretations justifying these practices — that are eroding people’s protections from war. A preliminary analysis of these statements reveals at least seven recurring themes of pushback.

1. **IHL is protective, not permissive:** States stress that the law cannot be twisted into a license to harm. Switzerland emphasizes that “IHL is not a permissive body of law, but a protective one”, and warns of “the misuse of IHL to justify violations of its own rules” through “overly permissive or outdated interpretation.”⁶³ France echoes this concern, cautioning that such interpretations “deprive these rules of their protective effect.”⁶⁴ Belgium captures what is at stake: IHL “injects a crucial measure of humanity” into warfare and prevents “a descent into barbarity,” whereas violations lead to “unconstrained violence, indiscriminate suffering and the erosion of legal and ethical boundaries meant to protect civilians.”⁶⁵
2. **A strong presumption of civilian status:** Several states reaffirm that the burden of proof lies with those who wish to treat an object as a military target. France stresses that, “outside of military objectives by nature, objects normally dedicated to civilian use must be presumed as such and not be targeted,” calling for a “rigorous targeting process” and “cross-checking of intelligence” to achieve “reasonable certainty” that an object qualifies as a military objective⁶⁶. Belgium adds that, “in case of doubt” whether infrastructure contributes effectively to military action, “a presumption in favor of its civilian status will apply” for objects normally used for civilian purposes, “such as a school or a hospital.”⁶⁷

⁵⁹ Uphold Humanity in War, <https://www.upholdhumanityinwar.org/> (official website of the Global Initiative, where all statements referenced below can be found. The workstreams are indicated below for ease).

⁶⁰ The seven workstreams address: (WS1) prevention of violations of international humanitarian law; (WS2) national implementation mechanisms; (WS3) the relationship between IHL and peace; (WS4) protection of civilian infrastructure; (WS5) protection of hospitals and other medical facilities; (WS6) the use of information and communication technologies in armed conflict; and (WS7) naval warfare. For more information on workstreams, see *Uphold Humanity in War*. See also International Committee of the Red Cross, *Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law: Progress Report* (2025) available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/global-initiative-galvanize-political-commitment-international-humanitarian-law>.

⁶¹ Guatemala (WS5)

⁶² Indonesia (WS7)

⁶³ Switzerland (WS5)

⁶⁴ France (WS5)

⁶⁵ Belgium (WS5)

⁶⁶ France (WS5)

⁶⁷ Belgium (WS5)

3. **Certain weapons should not be used in cities:** States also signal that some means of warfare are effectively incompatible with dense urban environments. Guatemala, for example, states that “the use of explosive weapons in urban areas near medical facilities must be strictly limited, in line with the obligation to adopt all feasible precautions.”⁶⁸
 4. **Protections on medical services are absolute.** Many stress that medical facilities and personnel enjoy special protections and must not be attacked. Belgium affirms that “[u]nits of the medical service of a party to the conflict may in no circumstances be attacked and must be respected and protected at all times.”⁶⁹ Indonesia reminds that “[h]ospitals and medical facilities are not just buildings; they are sanctuaries of humanity, providing care amidst the darkness of conflict,” and concludes that “regardless of existing legal gaps or differing interpretations, any military use of or attack against medical establishments is simply against the principle of humanity and human conscience.”⁷⁰
-

“regardless of existing legal gaps or differing interpretations, any military use of or attack against medical establishments is simply against the principle of humanity and human conscience.”

5. **Indirect and long-term civilian harm must be considered.** Several statements insist that downstream effects on critical services cannot be ignored. Slovenia notes that civilians are “too often exposed to death by dehydration, malnutrition, starvation, disease, disability, and forced displacement due to the interconnectedness of [critical civilian] services and their domino effect,” and calls on states to “consider indirect effects when planning military operations”.⁷¹ Austria similarly emphasizes that destroying civilian infrastructure has “massive, widespread and long-lasting consequences,” disrupting essential services and ruining “hard-won socioeconomic and development gains.” New Zealand highlights “second and third order impacts” of naval warfare on civilian populations.
6. **The law is a floor, not the ceiling.** A number of states argue that genuine protection requires going beyond the bare legal minimum. France stresses that “parties to the conflict should consider, whenever possible, raising the standards set by law to limit the effects of operations on civilians and promote sustainable return to peace.”⁷² The United Kingdom concurs that “[s]paring the civilian population [...] go[es] beyond the type of incidental harm considered in proportionality assessments,” and that these broader harms “must be taken into account in all decision making relating to military operations.”⁷³
7. **Environmental protection remains paramount, even in war.** Finally, states reaffirm that the natural environment is not expendable. Indonesia stresses that “the importance of environmental protection...should not be undermined, especially during the war”, and that

⁶⁸ Guatemala (WS5)

⁶⁹ Belgium (WS5)

⁷⁰ Indonesia (WS5)

⁷¹ Slovenia (WS4)

⁷² France (WS4)

⁷³ United Kingdom (WS6)

armed conflict at sea “must never become a pretext for irreversible environmental destruction.”

⁷⁴

Taken together, they send a clear message:

IHL must be interpreted and applied in good faith, with the objective of maximising protection for civilians and the environment, not of retrofitting legal justifications to military plans.

These statements matter because they offer a rare and important window into how the majority of states — those not currently engaged in major wars — view unacceptable conduct in war. Articulating detailed positions on contested IHL questions consumes diplomatic time, institutional attention, and political capital, yet offers little immediate payoff to governments whose own populations are not directly affected by the conflicts in question. By contrast, states waging war usually dominate the interpretive field. They have strong incentives to develop, defend, and publicise permissive readings of IHL that enable and legitimise their operations. As the ICRC Chief Legal Officer has cautioned, legal ambiguity is too often exploited not to shield civilians, but to facilitate operations that would otherwise be politically or morally untenable: the law is turned on its head, deployed to justify the very outcomes it was designed to prevent.⁷⁵ This gradual drift hollows the law out from within — preserving its form while undermining its function.

Against that backdrop, the *Upholding Humanity in War* statements register a clear and explicit opposition to how wars are currently being fought and justified in places such as Palestine, Ukraine, and Sudan. Their practical impact will depend on sustained follow-through, but they already re-anchor the debate in a simple proposition: the law of war exists to restrain violence, not to excuse it.

International law as a strategic security and foreign policy project

We are living through a period of fracture. Some states are actively hollowing out legal norms and undermining institutions. Yet as this report has shown, moments of deep uncertainty can also open space for renewal. At this inflection point, the task ahead is not only to defend the international legal order of the past, but to imagine and build what must come next. That requires a clear view of what the law has achieved, where it has faltered, and how strong the support behind its core protections remains.

The first part of this report demonstrated that international law has delivered far more than it is usually given credit for. It helped end the long practice of territorial conquest, created pathways for peaceful dispute resolution, and introduced constraints that have drastically reduced the frequency and lethality of interstate war. The alternative, which relies on large-scale military intervention, has a poor record and a staggering cost. From Afghanistan to Iraq to Yemen, major interventions have repeatedly failed to achieve their goals while costing millions of lives and trillions of dollars.

⁷⁴ Indonesia (WS7)

⁷⁵ Cordula Droege, “War and What We Make of the Law,” Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog (ICRC), July 18, 2024, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2024/07/18/war-and-what-we-make-of-the-law/>.

Diplomacy, legal frameworks, and cooperative security have consistently produced better results at far lower cost. None of these achievements were automatic. They reflect deliberate choices by states, institutions, and civil society.

The second part showed that the social and political foundations of this system remain stronger than the current discourse suggests. Across nine countries, the majority supports equal application of international rules, inclusive decision-making, and the humanitarian protections at the center of the Geneva Conventions. People across regions and political traditions reject torture, starvation, sexual violence, indiscriminate weapons, and attacks on hospitals by overwhelming margins. States are also pushing back against permissive interpretations of the laws of war, as seen in the ICRC initiative *Upholding Humanity in War*. Together, these positions reveal a surprisingly solid consensus around the idea that power alone cannot determine what is lawful in war.

These achievements do not mean the system is safe. Today, atrocities committed by a minority of states and non-state actors threaten to shift the baseline of what is considered acceptable conduct – lowering the bar risks impacting every future conflict. The prohibition on the use of force faces similar danger. If territorial acquisition by force is allowed to stand in one case, it weakens protection for all states. The risks are unfolding now in Ukraine, where annexation is at stake, in Palestine, where civilian protections are under severe strain, and in Sudan and Myanmar.

The instinct to treat international law as uniquely weak misses an essential point. The strength of any legal system, whether national or international, depends on shared norms, institutional courage, and collective willingness to enforce rules. When leaders instruct domestic authorities to ignore court orders, enforcement pressures resemble those seen internationally. Authoritarian tactics are similar at both levels: politicizing enforcement, delegitimizing institutions, and normalizing impunity.

History shows that earlier progress did not emerge from a gentler age. It was driven by states, civil society movements, and individuals who used international law strategically to advance their aims. The right to development, norms around self-determination, and major disarmament efforts were built through legal argument, coalition building, and creative use of institutional fora. Successful transformations have required new narratives, new actors, and new arenas for decision-making.

The challenges ahead are significant. Technology is advancing faster than institutions can adapt. Nuclear weapons give humanity the ability to destroy itself. Artificial intelligence accelerates the speed of conflict, increases opacity, and raises the risk of miscalculation. Developments in neuroscience, synthetic biology, and quantum technologies pose further dangers to the conduct of warfare without appropriate regulatory frameworks. At the same time, disinformation and polarization undermine the shared facts we rely on for collective action. Communities may agree on values but disagree on whether those values were violated, making cooperation harder precisely when it is most necessary.

For the international legal system to endure and evolve, states, civil society, and citizens must take on five central tasks. *First*, recognize that no single power will steward global order. This moment creates space for a wider range of actors to shape the next generation of rules. *Second*, build new coalitions among states that share an interest in preventing territorial conquest and a baseline shift of acceptable behavior in war, from Mexico to Ukraine to Lebanon and Palau. *Third*, shift the narrative. The most permissive interpretations come from those waging war. Others must articulate their own legal positions and engage with the public to uphold the protective nature of the law. *Fourth*, practice consistency. Nothing erodes credibility faster than double standards. *Fifth*, reject

cynicism. Past crises produced breakthroughs from the United Nations to the Geneva Conventions to major disarmament efforts. This moment has similar potential.

The correct response to the limits and distortions of current practice is not resignation or withdrawal. It is strategy. International law must be used as a tool to defend people, build coalitions, and shape the conditions for peace and security. It should be understood not as a neutral set of rules, but as a field in which legitimacy and purpose are actively contested. When used deliberately and collectively, it becomes a source of political agency. What the world needs now is a rediscovery of the emancipatory power of law and a commitment to use it as a tool for progress rather than a shield for privilege.

International law represents humanity's effort to find ways to live together. There is no real alternative. As one leading scholar noted, nearly all of its rules work remarkably well. "We occupy a single tiny space in the planetary systems and we need to find ways to get on."⁷⁶ What comes next depends on choices that are still within reach, choices about norms, institutions, solidarity, and the world we want to shape. People across the globe want a system in which states are equal before the law, civilians are protected, and power does not decide everything. The challenge now is whether governments and institutions will act with enough resolve to protect and renew the extraordinary architecture that has enabled peace, stability, and dignity for so many.

⁷⁶ Alona Ferber, "Philippe Sands on America: 'How Courageous Are We Going to Be?'" *Prospect*, April 10, 2025, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/united-states/69715/philippe-sands-on-america-how-courageous-are-we-going-to-be>.

Annex: Explaining the International Law Index 2025

The survey was conducted in nine countries by Ipsos on its Global Advisor online platform between Friday, October 24, and Friday, November 7, 2025. For this survey, Ipsos interviewed a total of 8,509 adults aged 18 years and older in South Africa and the United States, 21-74 in Indonesia, and 16-74 in all other countries. The sample consists of approximately 1,000 individuals each in [Brazil](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), [India](#), [Indonesia](#), [Mexico](#), [South Africa](#), and the [U.S.](#) – and 500 individuals in [Egypt](#).

Samples in France, Germany, the U.S. can be considered representative of their general adult populations under the age of 75. Samples in Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa are more urban, more educated, and/or more affluent than the general population. The results for these countries should be viewed as reflecting the views of the more “connected” segment of their population.

The data is weighted so that the composition of each country’s sample best reflects the demographic profile of the adult population according to the most recent census data. “The Global Country Average” reflects the average result for all the countries and markets in which the survey was conducted. It has not been adjusted to the population size of each country or market. The precision of Ipsos online polls is calculated using a credibility interval with a poll where $N=1,000$ being accurate to $+/ - 3.5$ percentage points and of where $N=500$ being accurate to $+/ - 5.0$ percentage points. For more information on Ipsos' use of credibility intervals, please visit the Ipsos website.

Survey questions

1. Should the world be governed by international rules that are applied to all states equally?
2. Should all states participate in decisions on critical global challenges (e.g. conflict, climate change, pandemics), irrespective of how big or powerful they are?
3. What country in the world do you think is the safest from war?
4. Would you support your government in doing the following things - if it says they are in your security interest?
 - Invading another country illegally
 - Torturing prisoners
 - Intentionally killing children
 - Targeting hospitals
 - Targeting religious or historical sites
 - Using large bombs in city centers
 - Rape
 - Starving civilians
 - Delegating life and death decisions to an AI-powered weapon
 - Using nuclear weapons.
5. Would you support your government doing more to ensure that all states comply with international law?

Key findings overview

1. There is a strong consensus in favor of inclusive decision-making on global challenges. Across all surveyed countries, an average of 86.7% of respondents believe that all states, regardless of power, should participate in decisions related to conflict, climate change, and pandemics. National-level support ranges narrowly from 78.4 % (India) to 91.4 % (Indonesia).
2. Respondents were twice as likely to favor equal application of international rules (43.8%) as to reject it outright (21.8%), with a further 34 per cent saying equal rules should “sometimes” apply.
3. Support for equal international rules is robust across countries, with particularly strong endorsement in the Global South. Respondents in Indonesia, Egypt, India and Mexico, exhibit the highest support for equal rules, with Indonesia exceeding two-thirds “Yes” responses. Global North countries tend to show higher shares of conditional rather than full endorsement.
4. Younger respondents consistently express stronger alignment with core international-law norms. Under-35s show higher support for equal rules (46.8%) compared to those aged 50–74 (35.5%). Younger respondents also demonstrate stronger backing for inclusive decision-making, humanitarian protections, and enforcement of international law.
5. Business owners are 1.5 times more likely to support the equal application of international rules. 60.1% of business owners endorse equal rules compared with 39.5% of non-owners. This is the largest demographic gap in the survey – and is consistent across all surveyed countries.
6. Most respondents believe their own country is the safest from war. The most popular choice after that was Switzerland, a small neutral country for whom the promotion of international law is a central foreign policy objective.
7. People globally overwhelmingly reject violations of humanitarian law. Across scenarios involving killing civilians, starving populations, using indiscriminate weapons, committing rape, or targeting hospitals, 80–95 % of respondents globally express clear opposition. This high support is remarkably stable across gender, age, education, income, and region.
8. There is no public constituency in favor of violating international law. Approval of humanitarian-law violations never rises above low single digits for any demographic group or country. Crucially, even respondents skeptical about equal rules—such as some U.S. respondents—still overwhelmingly reject violations.
9. The global public is not satisfied with the current enforcement of international law. Across all surveyed countries, majorities want their governments to take stronger action to ensure compliance with international rules. Globally, 71% support increased enforcement, including 40% who “strongly” support it. A small minority (5.2%) strongly oppose it.
10. Support for stronger enforcement is highest in the Global South, but remains a majority view everywhere. It is highest in Indonesia, Egypt, South Africa, India, Mexico, and Brazil. Even in the United States, 53% want their government to do more.