



# The History and Politics of Human Shields

## Reporting

### Project Information

#### HPHS

Grant agreement ID: 701891

[Project website](#)

#### DOI

[10.3030/701891](https://doi.org/10.3030/701891)

Project closed

#### EC signature date

14 December 2016

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EXCELLENT SCIENCE - Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

#### Total cost


€ 195 454,80

#### EU contribution

€ 195 454,80

#### Coordinated by

QUEEN MARY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

 United Kingdom

## Periodic Reporting for period 1 - HPHS (The History and Politics of Human Shields)

Reporting period: 2018-01-01 to 2019-12-31

### Summary of the context and overall objectives of the project

The objective of HPHS was to provide the first historical account of human shielding, to analyse the different types of shields, to use this marginal and controversial legal figure to interrogate the development of the international laws of war and through this analysis to discuss the ethics of humane violence. I was particularly interested in the people who were forced to serve as shields, who they

were, why they were chosen rather than others, as well as the different types of shielding practices that have been adopted over the years, how they were portrayed by different political actors as well as in the media, and the kind of political and legal work human shields do.

The project's significance to society is that it not only provides a plethora of evidence about the use of human shields in an array of situations over the past 150 years and analyses the different uses of human shielding, but also reveals how human shields serve to produce the ethics of humane violence.

One of the significant findings is that the accusation of human shielding is intricately connected to the erosion of the civilian in conflict zones, since once a person is framed as a human shield, then the protections bestowed upon him or her by international law are relaxed. Another interesting finding is that the human shielding practice also reflect social relations. The dual connotation whereby human shields create a buffer to protect a target and simultaneously expose structures of power sustaining a particular social reality is captured by the phrase "human screens," which is the name given to human shields during the First World War. In the literal sense, human shields serve as a screen to protect a target, but they can also serve as a screen in the sense of projecting and rendering something visible. They help uncover, in other words, social relations of power and violence. Finally, the analysis of the history of human shielding helped me expose certain operations of power and ideology within the law. Accordingly, an interrogation of human shields can, for instance, help us trace the changing status of civilians—namely, those who can become shields—both in war and within the laws of armed conflict. In certain periods non-whites simply could not be deployed as human shields because they were not considered civilians, while in other periods almost all the people who were forced to become shields were non-whites. The changes in the political significance of "the human" who can serve as a shields are as intriguing and disturbing as the ethical implications of these changes.

## Work performed from the beginning of the project to the end of the period covered by the report and main results achieved so far

Following extensive archival research and media analysis as well as an overview of the secondary literature, I managed to reconstruct a history of human shielding that spans 150 years and scores of countries and conflicts. During this process, I produced an open source web-platform that hosts a human shields archive, which includes both important theoretical work by other academics as well as my own, and archival and news documents. I also organized two inter-sectoral workshops, with people from the International Committee of the Red Cross, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Médecins Sans Frontières, and Airwars, about the erosion of the civilian in conflict zones. As a way of disseminating the results, over the two-year period I delivered talks at the European International Studies Association, (Prague, September 12-16, 2018) and The British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (June 24, 2019), wrote 2 academic articles, a book chapter, several opeds in mainstream media and blog articles, and made considerable headway on the book manuscript which is scheduled to appear in the fall of 2020.

## Progress beyond the state of the art and expected potential impact (including the socio-economic impact and the wider societal implications of the project so far)



By producing the first robust historical investigation of human shields as it has manifested itself in the Global North and Global South over the past 150 years, I have managed to show that this is an ever-growing societal phenomenon relating to civilians within theatres of violence as well as to civilian protestors. I have traced how international law has dealt with human shielding overtime, but I have also used the marginal and controversial figure of the human shield to reveal some of the biases and underlying ideologies informing the laws of war. This has allowed me to excavate the ethics of humane violence that the laws of war produce, and to show how this ethics often fails to protect civilians trapped in conflict zones.



Prime Minister Netanyahu at the UN blaming Palestinians of using human shields



Neve Gordon talking about human shields at Northwestern University



The deployment of human shields in computer games

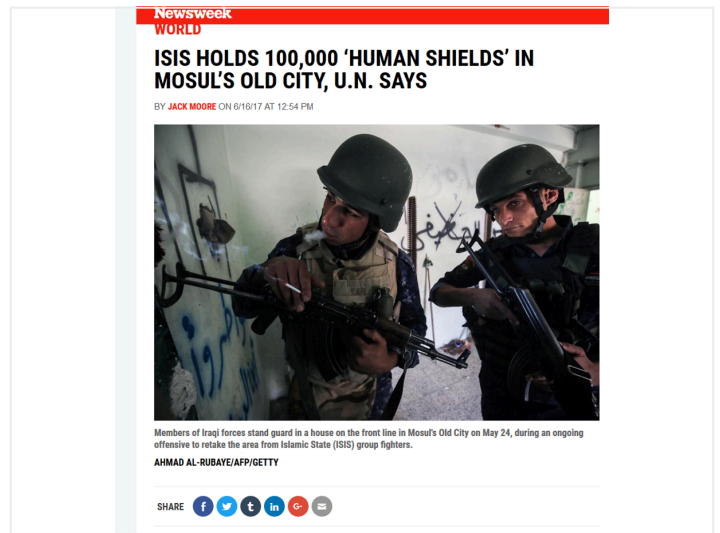


Image of Red Cross Emblem being used at a shield in Ehtiopia





T-shirt supporting the use of human shields in Kashmir



Newsweek article blaming ISIS of using 100,000 civilians as human shields



Peacekeeper being held as human shield in Bosnia



Indian civilian used as human shield in Kashmir



Infographic produced by Israel blaming Hamas of using human shields

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