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Middle East Conflict: Rhetoric, Actions Flout Laws of War

World Leaders Should Unite to Defend Fundamental Protections for Civilians



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Statements by top officials from the [United States](#), [Israel](#), and [Iran](#) demonstrate a willingness to violate fundamental protections of [international humanitarian law](#), reveal callous disregard for civilian life and property, and signal that those in power do not consider themselves bound by the law. All world leaders should urgently speak out in defense of the rules that protect civilians everywhere, strongly condemn violations, and demand accountability.

“As the Middle East conflict has spread and intensified, so too has the dangerous rhetoric by leaders on all sides, including open threats to commit [war crimes](#),” said [Philippe Bolo](#), executive director of Human Rights Watch. “This explosive combination, building on world leaders’ longstanding failure to hold those responsible for serious violations of international law to account, is threatening the rules-based order that has long sought to protect civilians.”

Since the United States and Israel began their assault on Iran on February 28, 2026, and as Iran responded and Israel escalated attacks in [Lebanon](#), all parties to the conflict have been responsible for serious violations of the [laws of war](#), including possible [war crimes](#). Officials’ inflammatory public statements have included open threats to kill civilians and destroy critical civilian infrastructure, suggestions that abuses by one side justify abuses by the other, and dismissal of international law and rules of engagement.

US President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth have in the past month alone made numerous public statements showing disregard for [international humanitarian law](#), also called the [laws of war](#).

Hegseth [stated](#) on March 13 that “no quarter” would be given to “our enemies” in Iran. Declaring no quarter—the refusal to spare enemy combatants’ lives by accepting their surrender—is a war crime.

On March 21, President Trump warned in a [social media post](#) that, if Iran didn’t “FULLY OPEN, WITHOUT THREAT, the Strait of Hormuz, within 48 HOURS,” the United States “will hit and

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energy infrastructure, and information technology systems of the Zionist regime in the region will be struck on a wide scale... all similar infrastructure which have American shareholders will be fully destroyed... [and] all electricity power plants in countries in the region that host American bases will be legitimate targets.”

Iranian officials have also claimed that all of a country’s companies, banks, and commercial ships are military objectives, which violates the presumption under the laws of war that they are protected civilian objects.

Iranian authorities have also threatened to commit further human rights violations against their own population, as they have done repeatedly, including in January, when security forces carried out [countrywide massacres](#) of protesters and bystanders.

Ahmad-Reza Radan, the commander of the Iranian police force, told state television in a program [aired](#) on March 10 that if people take to the streets “at the will of the enemy,” then “we will not see them as a protester or something else; we will see them as the enemy and do with them what we do with the enemy. ... All of our guys are ready with their fingers on the triggers to safeguard their revolution, to back their people and country.” The next day, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Intelligence Organization issued a [statement](#) warning that any protests would be faced “with [even] a harsher blow than that of January 8.”

Senior Israeli officials and military leaders have also made numerous problematic statements, including threats to carry out unlawful attacks in Iran and Lebanon. The Israeli military’s Arabic spokesperson issued a [statement](#) on X on March 3 calling for representatives of the Iranian government to leave Lebanon before they would be targeted.

Attacks targeting political leaders or government officials are prohibited unless the leader is a [member of the armed forces](#) or a civilian [directly participating in hostilities](#). Deliberately attacking a civilian

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- Israel's [use](#) of white phosphorus over homes and targeting of [financial institutions](#) in Lebanon;
- Iranian [attacks](#) on hotels, residential buildings, financial centers, and airports in the Gulf;
- Iranian [attacks](#) on commercial ships in the Strait of Hormuz;
- Israeli and Iranian [attacks](#) on oil and gas infrastructure; and
- Iran's use of internationally banned [cluster munitions](#) in attacks on Israel.

The attacks, as well as the threat of attacks, on [commercial ships](#) in the Strait of Hormuz and on [oil and natural gas facilities](#) in Iran and the Gulf states also appear to have contributed to significant global cost increases in energy and may also result in cost increases in food, fertilizer essential for agriculture, and transportation worldwide, as well as significant environmental damage.

This could cause economic catastrophe and food insecurity to civilians in Iran and across the Gulf and economically marginalized people across the globe. The World Food Programme [estimates](#) that almost 45 million more people could fall into acute food insecurity or worse should the conflict continue through the middle of the year and if oil prices remain above US\$100 per barrel.

The toll of the conflict on civilians so far, and the extent of violations and potential [war crimes](#), remains unknown, in part due to censorship by involved governments. In Iran, the government has imposed an unlawful blanket [internet shutdown](#) and arrested [hundreds](#) of people for alleged contact with media outlets outside Iran, taking footage of strike sites, and sending such footage to the media.

In the United States, Trump and Hegseth have [attacked](#) the media for its Iran coverage, and Federal Communications Commission Chair Brendan Carr accused media outlets of publishing “fake news” and [threatened](#) their broadcasting licenses.

Israeli officials have banned [live broadcasts](#) of city skylines, [prohibited the reporting](#) of precise

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and humanitarian law, strongly condemn violations, insist on accountability, and ensure that they are not complicit in serious violations by the warring parties.

[Common Article 1](#) of the 1949 Geneva Conventions provides that states “undertake to respect and to ensure respect” for the conventions “in all circumstances.” This obligation binds the parties to the conflict in the Middle East to respect the conventions and ensure their respect by their armed forces at all times, regardless of the conduct of other parties.

The International Committee of the Red Cross’ authoritative [commentary](#) on the Geneva Conventions states that to “ensure respect” requires all states parties to the conventions “take proactive steps” to stop violations of the conventions and to “bring an erring Party to a conflict back to an attitude of respect for the Conventions, in particular by using their influence on that Party.” It [includes](#) the obligation “to prevent violations when there is a foreseeable risk that they will be committed.” Customary [international humanitarian law](#) also [provides](#) that states must exert their influence, to the degree possible, to stop violations of [international humanitarian law](#).

The current Middle East conflict is occurring in the context of ongoing [war crimes](#), [crimes against humanity](#) and [acts of genocide](#) in Gaza—committed by Israel with significant [support from the United States](#) since October 7, 2023—and [Iran’s crimes against humanity](#) against its own population. Impunity for these crimes and states failing to consistently apply [international humanitarian law](#) elsewhere, including in Sudan and Ukraine, have contributed to the dangerous disregard of the rules designed to protect civilians in war occurring today.

“The words of leaders are especially consequential during wartime,” Bolopion said. “Rhetoric that mocks or dismisses the [laws of war](#) is dangerously corrosive and can be seen to encourage grave violations that inevitably prove harmful to civilians. It’s increasingly clear that other governments urgently need to weigh in and press for greater protection of civilians.”

Additional concerning statements by US officials, some of which threaten to violate

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- On March 13, Trump [stated](#) that the United States had “demolished” Kharg Island, a small island critical for Iran’s oil export infrastructure, but may strike “a few more times just for fun.”
- Also on March 13, Trump [said](#) that while the United States had “so far... chosen not to,” it could strike “power plants that create the electricity, that [create\[KA1\]](#) the water. ... We could do things that would be so bad they could literally never rebuild as a nation again.”

Additional concerning statements by Iranian officials, some of which threaten to violate international humanitarian law, include:

- A spokesman from Iran’s Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters [said](#) on March 8 that “every point that serves as the origin of aggression against Iran is a legitimate target.”
- On March 14, a media outlet affiliated with Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [stated](#) that American “companies will be the legitimate targets for Iran’s Armed Forces,” listing a number of US management consulting and investment firms.
- Also on March 14, an IRGC spokesperson [posted](#): “The attack on American bank branches was in response to the enemy’s attack on 2 Iranian banks. If the enemy repeats this action, all branches of American banks in the region will be our legitimate target.”
- On March 16, Brig. Gen. Ali Mohammad Naini, an IRGC spokesman who was [reportedly killed](#) in an Israeli attack on March 20, [stated](#) that Iranian forces had targeted all vessels owned by a US or Israeli entity, regardless of their flag country.

Additional concerning statements by Israeli officials, some of which threaten to violate international humanitarian law, include:

- Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz [said](#) on March 16 that “hundreds of thousands of Shiite residents of southern Lebanon ... will not return to their homes south of the Litani [River] area

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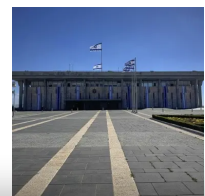
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