

27 March 2026

The Iran Conflict of 2026: International Legal Perspectives

On 28 February 2026, the United States of America and Israel launched airstrikes on multiple sites across Iran, targeting military and strategic infrastructure and killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei along with other senior officials; the strikes also resulted in the deaths of civilians, including the schoolchildren in Minab. The so-called “Operation Epic Fury” came amid the latest negotiations between Iran and the US on Iran’s nuclear programme. In response to these attacks, Iran targeted countries in the Gulf region, i.e. Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, that host major US military bases, widening the geographic scope of the conflict. Simultaneously, Iran *de facto* restricted passage through the Strait of Hormuz, stalling oil and gas trade, causing worldwide fluctuation in prices. Iran’s attacks, most notably the ones against civilians, along with its interference with maritime trade and support for proxy groups were condemned by UN Security Council Resolution 2817 (2026).

The legal implications of the Iran war are vast and implicate core questions of public international law. Foremost among them is the legality of the use of force and the threat to use of force. Beyond the initial resort to force, the conflict raises complex issues of international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution in relation to strikes targeting senior political figures and the resulting civilian casualties, especially in a conflict where artificial intelligence is used in various ways. Likewise, the environmental damage caused by the airstrikes is highly concerning as the targets are energy infrastructure and nuclear facilities. Iran’s interference with passage through the Strait of Hormuz and the rights of navigation under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea are also under scrutiny. Further, the involvement of non-state actors and Iran’s support for proxy groups raises questions of attribution and the threshold for invoking the law of self-defence against non-state actors operating from or within third states. Finally, the case also implicates international human rights law, in particular the extraterritorial protection of the right to life.

In this seminar, we aim to address this complex situation from a sound legal perspective. After a brief introduction, we will examine the legality of the use of force, including the

assassination of a head of state and the threat of force in the nuclear context. We will then assess the legality of retaliatory attacks on third states hosting US military bases, as well as Iran's interference with passage through the Strait of Hormuz. The conflict also raises questions under both international human rights law and international humanitarian law, including the use of artificial intelligence in targeting to environmental damage caused by military operations. Finally, we will explore the role of proxy groups, the legality of economic embargoes as coercion, and the contested doctrines of regime change and the Responsibility to Protect, engaging with a range of legal perspectives and critical approaches.

Note:

The seminar will take place on **17–18 July** and will be conducted in English.

A **preliminary meeting** will be held on **16 April, from 17:45 to 19:00** (the room will be announced in due course). This meeting will also address the basic technical aspects of academic writing and the binding guidelines. Topic selection will only be possible after this meeting, with the **deadline for choosing topics set for 20 April at noon**.

The **deadline for submitting exposés** is **17 May**. In addition, individual consultation meetings with supervisors may be scheduled; these will be held during the **week of 25–29 May**. The **final papers must be submitted by 2 July** (*all dates are subject to change*)

Seminar Topics

I. Legal Framework and Background

1. Legal Implications of Iran's Nuclear Program: The Joint Comprehensive Action Plan and the Lack of Compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty
2. Negotiating Amidst the Shadow of War: Peaceful Settlement of Disputes, the Threat of Use of Force, and Obligations of States in Negotiations
3. (Not) Responding to the Iran Conflict: The Role and Limits of the UN Security Council

II. The Use of Force and the Conduct of Hostilities

4. Assessing the Legality of the US-Israeli Airstrikes
5. The Legality of Targeted Killings
6. Wrong Intelligence and the Question of Responsibility: Legal Implications of the US Strike on the School in Minab
7. Algorithms of War: Artificial Intelligence and International Humanitarian Law
8. Threats of Assassination Against US Military Personnel Worldwide: A Lawful Reprisal under International Humanitarian Law?
9. The Legality of Iranian Strikes on Third States Hosting US Military Forces
10. War by Other Means: Proxy Groups, State Responsibility, and the 'Unable or Unwilling' Doctrine

III. Human Rights and Intersecting Legal Frameworks

11. Systematic and Widespread Human Rights Violations Against the Iranian Civilian Population: An International Legal Responsibility to Protect?
12. The Relationship between International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law and the Right to Life of Civilians and Combatants
13. The Strait of Hormuz, Transit Passage, and the Law of the Sea
14. Black Rain, Climate, and Human Rights: An Environmental Law Perspective
15. International Sanctions, Economic Embargoes and the Asymmetries of International Law: A TWAIL Approach