



Negative Consequences Stemming from Initiation of the Iran War Without a Legal Basis and the Threats of Unlawful Actions

In the weeks since the onset of the Iran war, international law experts have consistently outlined the illegality of the conflict's initiation and the host of negative consequences stemming from this. Launched in the absence of a mandate from the UN Security Council, the war has undermined the global rules-based order, alienated key allies and partners, damaged the United States' reputational standing on the world stage, and set a dangerous precedent for potential future illegal military actions and wars of aggression. This has prompted observers to label the conflict as a "war of choice" which in addition to its troubling death toll has also paralyzed global markets, decimated regional economies, and weakened the international structures designed to prevent such destructive escalations. On top of the lack of legality surrounding its initiation, many have voiced alarm at the dangerous rhetoric and threats of unlawful actions – from U.S. President Donald Trump in particular. Trump has issued a series of unsettling and disturbing threats against Iran that legal experts, international organizations, and others have warned would constitute war crimes and violate international law. These have included ones involving the deliberate targeting of Iranian civilian targets and infrastructure.

Standards of international law require parties at war to distinguish between military and civilian targets. Thus, Trump's blanket threats against infrastructure such as bridges and power plants ignore this principle. Furthermore, locations that are deemed indispensable to the survival of a civilian population – like water plants and installations – are granted special protection under Article 54 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions. Human rights experts have therefore noted that threatening to destroy these types of sites suggest an intent to carry out indiscriminate attacks, which are prohibited. There is also the issue of "recklessness," which itself is considered a war crime under international law. For example, many have applied this to the case of the U.S.-led airstrike that struck a primary school in Minab and killed over 100 children – if not intentional, then it is a reckless act at best, which is unlawful as well. Even in circumstances where a location has "dual usage" (both military and civilian), the principle of proportionality forbids attacks where the expected incidental loss of civilian life or damage to civilian objects would be excessive in relation to any anticipated military advantage. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter also prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state. Since impartial observers have noted that Iran did not pose an imminent threat, the right of self-defense – one of the rare exceptions to this – does not apply.

Without clear evidence of an imminent threat to prompt the type of unsolicited attacks that sparked the outbreak of the war, the strikes which initiated the conflict to begin with cannot be justified as actions of self-defense.

The manner in which the war has been conducted as well as that of its initiation in the first place have alienated key allies, hurt the United States' global standing, and set a dangerous precedent for potential future illegal military actions. The conflict has been widely criticized by international law experts and diplomats for bypassing established multilateral frameworks. U.S. allies in Europe, the Gulf, and East Asia have refused to join the war efforts, with Gulf partners in particular being placed in precarious positions and becoming targets of Iranian retaliatory strikes. Additionally, the lack of clear objectives and an exit strategy have led to widespread opposition to the war – both globally and domestically within the United States. Analysts have warned that the conflict has risked being used as a standard for state-led military intervention moving forward, paving the way for others to initiate future wars of aggression.

All told, the consequences of the Trump administration's actions in Iran could have lasting negative impacts. There has already been an evident rift created between the United States and many of its traditional partners over the conflict, which might make it harder in the future to collaborate on wide-reaching initiatives and deter behavior that threatens global stability. Given this, it is not at all surprising that the war efforts have raised concerns regarding how they actively undermine and degrade the norms of international law, eroding trust amongst U.S. allies and increasing the chances of more commonplace and prolonged conflict.