

The U.S./Israeli Bombing of Iran Violates International Law

Statement of the International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms¹
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The United States/Israeli bombing of Iran clearly violates fundamental rules of international law. It violates the sovereignty of Iran, contrary to Article 2(4) of the UN Charter which prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. There is no plausible case that the U.S. and Israel are acting in self-defense against an imminent attack. Nor is regime change an acceptable justification for use of force, as it runs directly counter to the injunction to respect the political independence of states.

It is true that the Iranian regime has been guilty of massive violations of human rights over the years, including the killing of thousands or tens of thousands of protesters in January 2026. However, humanitarian intervention, which itself may involve the infliction of violence harming civilians, can be justified, if at all, only to stop ongoing or imminent mass slaughter.² That is not the current situation in Iran, nor are the U.S./Israeli strikes limited to the aim of preventing massive human rights violations or in any way condoned by the UN Security Council or by the international community on that basis. The strikes therefore are not consistent, in letter or in spirit, with the responsibility to protect principle articulated by the UN General Assembly in its 2005 resolution on the World Summit Outcome.³

It is striking that the Trump administration has made no real effort to use multilateral mechanisms or to invoke international law. In particular, no efforts have been made by the United States and Israel to bring the situation to the attention of the Security Council. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the Security Council has the power to take measures, including the use of force, in case there exists a threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or an act of aggression.

Both by its action and by its contempt for international law, the Trump administration is accelerating the erosion of basic rules relating to use of force that has been underway for nearly three decades following the end of the Cold War.

The erosion of the legal framework formally limiting the use of armed force has been a long process, punctuated in the 21st century by increasingly frequent shocks of large-scale wars launched by major powers with less and less regard for international law and institutions. The first of these was the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Unlike the Trump administration, the George W. Bush administration at least gestured toward providing an international law rationale for the invasion of Iraq—but built its

¹ This statement is based upon a [statement](#) made by IALANA affiliate Western States Legal Foundation, “The U.S./Israeli Bombing of Iran: A Case Study in Contempt for International Law,” 3 March 2026.

² See [statement](#) of Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy, the UN Office of IALANA, “Military strikes conducted by the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic of Iran: Dangerous Implications for International Law,” 4 March 2026.

³ A/RES/60/1, ¶¶ 138-139, 16 September 2005.

justifications for war on a foundation of lies. Then came the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which both lacked any serious international law justification. There have been other instances of aggression in this century, such as the recent U.S. military operation to abduct the president of Venezuela. But U.S. actions in relation to Iraq, those of Russia in Ukraine, and the U.S./Israel bombing of Iran stand out as major developments in the erosion of rules on use of force.

Concerning Iran's nuclear program, prior to the bombing it was not at a stage of development that provided any basis for a claim of self-defense. In general, it has appeared for many years that Iran has a uranium enrichment capability in part in order to preserve the option of acquiring nuclear weapons at some point in the future, but has not made the acquisition decision. And it was the United States, during the first Trump administration, that unilaterally withdrew from the painstakingly negotiated 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, an international agreement that placed effective and verifiable restraints on Iran's nuclear program.

Discussions of Iran's program generally do not address the fact that Israel has a robust nuclear arsenal. In the long run it is not practical to allow some states to have nuclear weapons and to deny them to others. The most straightforward way to deal with problems posed by the actual proliferation of nuclear weapons, as in the case of North Korea, or their potential proliferation, as in the case of Iran, is to move expeditiously toward the global abolition of nuclear arms. That would fulfill the universal obligation to achieve nuclear disarmament the International Court of Justice recognized in its 1996 advisory opinion based upon Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and other international law.⁴

Another at least partial way is to build new regional nuclear weapons free zones, which now exist in Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Central Asia. That approach has indeed been tried in the case of the Middle East. In the context of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and of the United Nations, there have been serious efforts to get negotiation of a Middle East zone underway, with Iran's willing participation. However, Israel and the United States have boycotted these efforts. This severely undercuts the legitimacy of their position as they claim to act to stop a menacing Iranian nuclear program.

What should be the response to these developments? First, the bombing of Iran should be condemned as unlawful aggression, and the basic UN Charter rules should be defended, with the aim of at least preserving them for the future. Second, it should be recognized that the world is undergoing a major transformation marked by the resurgence of authoritarian nationalism, with authoritarian ethno-nationalist factions in power or constituting significant political forces in many countries, including most if not all of the nuclear-armed states. There is a need for realism about the nature of the challenge, and for new thinking and innovative forms of advocacy and politics for a more fair, democratic, peaceful, and post-nationalist world.

⁴ *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, Advisory Opinion, 1996 I.C.J. 226, ¶¶ 98-103 (July 8).