

**"THE SOUND OF EXPLOSIONS
DID NOT STOP:"
CIVILIAN HARM IN IRAN AFTER
ONE MONTH OF WAR**



**CENTER FOR
CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT**
RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.

Airwars

Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRA) is an independent human rights organization founded in 2006 in Iran and specializes in documenting and verifying human rights violations across Iran. Through an extensive network inside and outside the country, HRA produces evidence-based reporting that is regularly used by United Nations mechanisms, governments, and international media. Beyond documentation, HRA focuses on advancing strategic pathways for accountability for serious human rights violations and international crimes, including those perpetrated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Its work connects verified documentation to legal analysis and policy advocacy, supporting efforts such as targeted sanctions, national investigations, and other judicial and quasi-judicial accountability mechanisms. HRA's work is supported by several core initiatives, all feeding into its documentation hub. These include HRANA, its news agency, which has provided daily human rights reporting for more than 20 years, as well as specialized documentation projects that compile open-source evidence alongside network insights into individuals and institutions involved in violations. This includes detailed profiling of perpetrators and mapping of structures such as the IRGC, tracing its evolution, command networks, and links to international crimes. Through this integrated approach, HRA aims to produce reliable, actionable information that can support accountability efforts and inform concrete international responses. Today, HRA is based in Washington, D.C., and The Hague, Netherlands.

Airwars is a not-for-profit transparency watchdog which tracks, assesses, archives, and investigates civilian harm claims in conflict-affected nations. Founded in 2014, Airwars is today a leading authority on conflict violence as it affects civilian communities. Airwars' mission is to reliably and independently document the human cost of war in order to promote a more peaceful world where human lives are acknowledged and taken into account by militaries, policy-makers, and global citizens with dignity and empathy. Airwars endeavors to pressure governments and military actors to acknowledge and take responsibility for the full human toll of their actions; ensure measures to prevent human suffering, particularly amongst civilian populations, are centered in military policy and practice; and give individuals, communities and international actors the tools and evidence to pursue justice and accountability.

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international nongovernmental organization dedicated to the protection of civilians in conflict. CIVIC envisions a world where every civilian is protected from the harms of conflict. Our mission is to keep civilians safer in conflict by working with communities, armed actors, and decision-makers to prevent and respond to harm. CIVIC was established in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a young humanitarian who advocated on behalf of civilians affected by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Honoring Marla's legacy, CIVIC has kept an unflinching focus on the protection of civilians in conflict. Today, CIVIC has a presence in conflict zones and key capitals throughout the world where we work with and alongside communities affected by violence to strengthen their own protection and advocate for their rights. We engage armed actors and decision-makers to prevent and respond to civilian harm, and we influence policies and practices to make civilian protection a global priority. As a humanitarian protection actor, we bridge the gap between people at risk and those with the power and responsibility to protect them. At CIVIC, we believe civilians are not "collateral damage" and civilian harm is not an unavoidable consequence of conflict—civilian harm can and must be prevented.

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OVERVIEW

Civilians have borne the brunt of the US-Israel-Iran war since it began on February 28, 2026. This brief by Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRA), Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), and Airwars assesses key civilian harm trends from the first month of the US and Israeli campaign in Iran and examines how civilian harm has been generated, compounded, and normalized in the current conduct of hostilities.

Key figures and trends explored in this brief include:

- Between February 28 and March 23, HRA recorded at least 1,443 civilian deaths, including at least 217 children, resulting from US and Israeli airstrikes in Iran. These figures represent verified minimums and are expected to rise.
- During the same period, Airwars documented at least 130 separate incidents of civilian harm, including attacks on healthcare, education facilities, and residential areas.
- In the deadliest day so far recorded by HRA, at least 252 civilians were killed on March 9 in a barrage of almost 400 strikes across the country, reflecting a high tempo of operations. That number is almost as many civilians as Airwars recorded killed in the entirety of last year's 52-day US operation on Yemen - at the time, a campaign of unprecedented harm.
- Drivers of civilian harm from US and Israeli operations identified by CIVIC, HRA, and Airwars include targeting errors and misidentification, including as a result of outdated or faulty intelligence; inadequate precautionary warnings for civilians; the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas; and attacks on or impacting civilian and "dual-use" infrastructure, risking long-term reverberating impacts on civilians' well-being.
- As of March 23, HRA found that 37% of confirmed attacks took place in Tehran's urban environments. HRA has verified damage to 60 hospitals or medical centers, 44 schools, and 129 residential buildings, while government estimates indicate more than 16,000 homes were damaged. 543 strikes targeted "dual-use" infrastructure, including energy and transport systems essential to civilian life. The humanitarian impact is significant, with approximately 3.2 million people reportedly displaced according to United Nations figures.
- Moreover, HRA has documented how Iranian civilians have faced intensified domestic repression since February 28, including expanded arbitrary arrests (at least 1,830 as of March 19), restrictive security controls, and inflammatory official rhetoric threatening arrest and even death to perceived opponents, further constraining the ability to seek safety or access information.
- Civilian vulnerability is compounded by restricted access to information and movement. Internet connectivity has dropped to approximately 1% of normal levels, with associated economic losses estimated at \$37 million per day.

INTRODUCTION

The 28 February strike on the Shajareh Tayyebbeh elementary school in Minab, widely known as the Minab girls' school, resulted in one of the highest documented levels of civilian harm from a single incident in recent decades. At least 168 children were killed, and 110 civilians were injured, making the incident the largest civilian death toll of any single US attack since 1991. Occurring on the first day of large-scale United States and Israeli military operations in Iran, the strike signalled an emerging pattern in which Iranian civilian lives are treated as increasingly expendable in the conduct of hostilities.

Between February 28 and March 23, Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRA) recorded at least 1,443 civilian deaths, including at least 217 children, resulting from US and Israeli airstrikes across Iran.

Beyond immediate casualties, the destruction of civilian infrastructure risks generating long-term reverberating impacts on civilians, including public health consequences, displacement, environmental harm, and further economic destabilization.

Iranians are also facing intensified domestic repression, including expanded arbitrary arrests, restrictive security controls, and inflammatory official rhetoric, further constraining their ability to seek safety or access information critical to their safety.

Grounded in documentation and legal analysis by HRA, open-source analysis from Airwars, and trend analysis and protection of civilians expertise from CIVIC, this brief assesses the first month of the US and Israeli campaign in Iran and examines how civilian harm has been generated, compounded, and normalized in the current conduct of hostilities. This brief focuses on the experience of civilians and civilian harm trends inside Iran specifically, and therefore does not analyze patterns of harm in other countries implicated in the conflict across the broader Middle East region¹.

METHODOLOGY

This brief draws from original documentation by HRA, open source analysis by Airwars, and desk research of secondary sources by CIVIC.

HRA relies on two primary, parallel workflows to document civilian harm. First, systematically collecting open source information, which is then cross-checked against credible external reporting and corroborated through its established network inside Iran. Second, HRA receives direct reports from its in-country network, which are independently verified through additional network contacts or matched against open source material. In all cases, inclusion requires corroborating information from at least two independent sources, with consistency in key details such as time, location, and nature of the incident. In parallel, HRA also collects and preserves official narratives and state-reported figures, but these are maintained as a separate documentation stream and are not incorporated into verified casualty counts. HRA's published figures, therefore, represent absolute minimums, reflecting only incidents that have been independently corroborated through multiple sources, including firsthand witness accounts and open source material. They are not intended to capture the full scope of harm. Given the constraints on access and communication in an active conflict environment, figures are expected to rise over time as additional incidents are verified. Throughout this report, multiple witness and victim accounts are included; HRA maintains strict security protocols when engaging with individuals, ensuring that all communications prioritize their safety, confidentiality, and informed consent.

Airwars uses an event-based methodology consistently across a number of conflicts, working through open-source harm claims to compile a publicly accessible archive of civilian harm. Due to the limitations in the information environment in Iran, Airwars is currently compiling a chronological database of events, which will form the basis for further research as new information emerges.

CIVIC's analysis of civilian harm trends and policies stems from over two decades of experience working in conflict around the world; field and desk research into the key drivers of civilian harm in military operations; and significant research, analysis, advocacy, and direct engagement around US Department of Defense policies and frameworks around civilian harm.

¹ For further analysis of attacks by all parties to conflict and resulting civilian harm trends across the Middle East region, see: Center for Civilians in Conflict, "Issue Brief: Protecting Civilians Amid Escalating Regional Conflict in the Middle East," March 10, 2026, <https://civiliansinconflict.org/publications/policy/issue-brief-protecting-civilians-amid-escalating-regional-conflict-in-the-middle-east/>.

US & ISRAELI OPERATIONS AND CIVILIAN HARM TRENDS

The US and Israeli militaries are carrying out a coordinated campaign in Iran, likely sharing intelligence to inform targeting, though each is ultimately responsible for its own target selection and strikes. While Israel and the US have each given sporadic updates on their targeting strategies, there has been no transparent or systematic reporting on which actor is responsible for which strikes. This makes it difficult in many cases to attribute responsibility for civilian harm, especially given that many of the same munitions are used by both parties to the conflict.

As parties to an international armed conflict, all parties, including the US and Israel, have obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL), also known as the law of armed conflict, in their conduct of hostilities. Additionally, even though the strikes themselves may be conducted separately, the joint nature of the overall military operation and security cooperation raises the possibility that each state may bear a degree of responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of the other's actions.

Minimizing civilian harm is a core obligation of IHL. Attacking forces must distinguish at all times between civilians and combatants, refrain from attacks that cause disproportionate civilian harm, and take all feasible precautions to minimize civilian harm, such as verifying targets, selecting appropriate weapons, adjusting the attack timing to align with reduced civilian presence in the attack area, and providing effective advance warnings where possible. Beyond legal obligations, the US military has developed policy guidance and best practices for civilian harm mitigation and response, including Department of Defence (DoD) Instruction 3000.17 on Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response.

Public statements by senior US officials emphasizing operational speed and force suggest that precautionary measures to protect Iranian civilians may not be adequately prioritized in the current campaign. In a widely circulated post, US President Donald Trump threatened to “hit and obliterate” Iranian power plants, a category of infrastructure indispensable to civilian survival. If operationalized, such an attack would likely violate core protections under IHL. In a briefing on US operations against Iran, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth disparaged “stupid rules of engagement” and declared that no mercy or quarter would be given to enemy combatants, which is unlawful under international law and the United States’ interpretations as such according to the US DoD Law of War Manual. Taken together, these comments from US military leadership signal a dangerous sidelining of legal and moral limits on the conduct of warfare.

The scale and tempo of operations reinforce these concerns. In the opening days of hostilities, Airwars found that US and Israeli forces hit significantly more targets per day than any campaign in recent decades. By March 21, the US military reported hitting 8,000 targets over the preceding three-week period. During this period, Airwars documented at least 130 separate incidents of civilian harm, including attacks on healthcare, education facilities, and residential areas. On March 9, the deadliest day so far recorded by HRA, at least 252 civilians were killed in a barrage of almost 400 strikes across the country. That is almost as many civilians as Airwars recorded killed in the entirety of last year’s 52-day US operation on Yemen, which was, at the time, a campaign of unprecedented harm.

Such intensity raises the risk of targeting errors and broader failures in civilian harm mitigation. For example, an extremely high tempo of strikes condenses the time available for positive identification of targets, collateral damage estimation, and subsequent precautions to reduce foreseen civilian harm, consideration of reverberating effects on the civilian environment, and learning lessons to reduce civilian harm in future strikes. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas also results in predictable civilian harm, damage to and destruction of civilian homes and critical infrastructure, and wide-ranging impacts on essential services and civilian wellbeing.

Targeting errors and misidentification

From the outset of the US-Israeli campaign in Iran, evidence emerged indicating that some of the most consequential strikes causing civilian harm resulted from misidentification in the targeting process.

Misidentification, meaning the incorrect assessment of a person or object as a military objective, is a frequent cause of civilian harm in warfare. Research shows that cognitive biases, including confirmation bias, lead military personnel to overlook information indicating protected civilian status. Misidentification can also result from faulty, outdated, or incomplete intelligence. The risks of misidentification are explicitly acknowledged in the US Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan (CHMR-AP), yet the resourcing of US military capabilities designed to minimize these risks has significantly declined since 2025, further reflecting the deprioritization of US civilian harm mitigation. For Iranian civilians, the consequence of these errors is immediate and profound.

Preliminary findings indicate that the strike on the Minab girls' school may have been due to failures in target verification, including reliance on outdated intelligence. Evidence shows that the location had been clearly marked, demarcated, and identifiable as a school since at least 2016. The fact that the strikes occurred on the first day of US operations raises further concerns about US targeting and precautions, given that the pre-planned strikes should have been the culmination of weeks, if not months, of intelligence gathering and deliberate target planning. (The US military initiated an administrative investigation into the strike, which should, among other things, assess what led to this devastating level of harm, whether the operation complied with IHL and applicable rules of engagement, and what can be done to ensure non-repetition.)

On the same day, and overshadowed by the scale of casualties in Minab, a missile struck the Shahid Naemi sports hall in Lamerd County while students were training inside. The attack killed a reported 21 civilians, including 3 children, and injured 110 others. Although the sports hall was located adjacent to an IRGC base, a BBC investigation of satellite imagery found no clear damage to the base itself.

Between February 28 and March 20, Airwars identified at least twelve incidents where upwards of ten civilians were reportedly killed in a single strike. Given the limitations in the information environment, this itself is likely a significant undercount.

Even at a minimum, this would indicate a dangerous trend - in eight years of US bombing over Iraq and Syria, Airwars identified less than 260 such high fatality incidents.

Incidents of this magnitude raise serious concerns regarding compliance with one of the most fundamental principles of IHL: the duty to distinguish at all times between civilian objects and military objectives. In case of doubt, an individual or object should be presumed to be civilian.

The pace and volume of strikes carried out within a compressed timeframe increase the likelihood of further targeting errors and failures to properly distinguish between civilian and military objects. Reports that artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted systems are being used in parts of the targeting process heighten these concerns. While media reporting indicates that AI has been involved in both the US and Israeli targeting processes, its precise role in their campaign in Iran remains unclear. The US military is reportedly using Palantir's Maven Smart System, integrated with Anthropic's large language model Claude. AI tools can replicate and amplify biases embedded in the training data, as well as mistake human beings and civilian objects for military ones. Human operators may also excessively defer to the algorithmic assessments generated by AI, further heightening the risk of cognitive bias among human

decision-makers. Furthermore, AI-driven targeting analysis may outpace the human capacity for confirmation or scrutiny. The US military's use of AI in targeting may not be traceable or retroactively identifiable, according to a US military spokesperson, raising concerns about accountability.

Inadequate Precautionary Warnings and Access to Information

Providing effective advance warning of attacks that may affect civilians is a core precaution under IHL, reflected in treaty law, customary norms, and the US DoD Law of War Manual. Such warnings are intended to give civilians sufficient time and information to take protective measures and reduce their exposure to harm. Importantly, while evacuations can be considered a precautionary measure, they are typically considered a measure of last resort. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, "Evacuations should only proceed when civilians themselves wish to relocate, have enough information to be able to make an informed choice about their options, and when the risks of staying are higher than the risks associated with the evacuation." Evacuations require careful planning, cooperation, and information sharing, and civilians who are unable to evacuate or choose to remain in place must continue to be protected as required under IHL.

In practice, the manner in which advance warnings have been communicated to Iranian civilians significantly limits their protective value. HRA's network inside Iran reports that civilians often do not receive warnings at all due to widespread internet disruptions and restrictions, as well as severely limited access to platforms on which such warnings are disseminated. HRA's documentation further indicates that only a small proportion of attacks are preceded by warnings, and when warnings are issued, they often cover large, densely populated areas with insufficient time for evacuation. The US has historically maintained that warnings need not be specific to time and place. Yet when delivered in such broad and generalized terms, they often leave civilians unable or unsure how to respond.



Screen captures of warnings from US Central Command on X, translated from Farsi.

In other cases, warnings have been based on flawed or outdated data, further undermining their effectiveness. Notably, US and Israeli warnings also appear to contradict each other. In a February 28 video announcing the war, President Trump addressed the Iranian people: "Stay sheltered. Don't leave your home. It's very dangerous outside. Bombs will be dropping everywhere." That same day, an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman urged Iranians near military infrastructure to evacuate. On March 8, US Central Command (CENTCOM) echoed President Trump's blanket warning in a press release and X post: "U.S. forces strongly urge civilians in Iran to stay at home." Setting aside the wholly impractical directive for civilians under attack to stay home indefinitely, the US warnings also directly contradict numerous IDF warnings for civilians to evacuate specific areas throughout this period, including X posts from March 2, 3, 5, 6, 13, and 14.

Particularly problematic is the reliance on social media platforms such as X as the primary channel used by CENTCOM and the IDF to disseminate warnings. Under normal conditions, access to platforms such as X are blocked by domestic censorship. While approximately 70–90 percent of Iranian internet users rely on virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass censorship, usage fluctuates during periods of intensified repression, and a known internet blackout in Iran has reduced connectivity to one percent of normal levels and restricted civilians' ability to receive or act upon such information.

Inadequate and contradictory warnings, information vacuums, and mis- and dis-information undermine civilians' ability to make informed decisions about their safety, isolate civilians from their loved ones, disrupt assistance efforts, and contribute to and amplify harm, including psychological distress.

At the same time, the absence of functioning early-warning systems on the ground, including air-raid sirens or other public alert mechanisms, has further heightened civilian exposure to harm.

**Iranians face the threat of the most severe US
air campaign in decades without any
practical means to respond.**

ارتش دفاعی اسرائیل | IDF Farsi @IDFFarsi · Mar 13

Translated from Persian [Show original](#)

!! Urgent Warning to All Individuals Located in the Following Areas:

- Lia Industrial Zone in Qazvin City
- Villa District in Tehran,
- Monirieh District in Tehran,

Based on the Red-Designated Area on the Attached Map

○ The Israeli Army, having targeted Iran's regime military infrastructure in the Tehran region in recent days, will conduct operations in this area in the coming hours.

○ Dear Citizens, for the sake of your safety and well-being, we kindly urge you to immediately evacuate the designated area indicated on the map.

○ Your presence in these areas puts your life at risk.

ارتش دفاعی اسرائیل | IDF Farsi @IDFFarsi · Mar 14

Translated from Persian [Show original](#)

!! Urgent Warning to All Individuals Stationed in the Industrial Area West of Tabriz Based on the Red-Designated Area on the Attached Map:

○ The Israeli army, as it has done in recent days in the Tehran region by targeting the military infrastructure of the Iranian regime, will conduct operations in this area in the coming hours.

○ Dear citizens, for the sake of your safety and well-being, we kindly request that you immediately evacuate the designated area indicated on the map.

○ Your presence in this area puts your life at risk.

Screen captures of warnings from Israeli Defense Forces on X, translated from Farsi.

Explosive Weapons in Densely Populated Areas

Most of the US-Israeli campaign in Iran has involved the use of air-to-ground, high-explosive munitions. Initial evidence points to reliance on bombs and missiles. This includes some of the largest munitions in the conventional US military arsenal - the MK80 series, which includes 2000lb bombs, as well as JASSM and Tomahawk missiles, which can each hit targets hundreds of miles away with large ‘bunker-buster’ warheads. Available data indicate that the location of US strikes overlaps with areas of highest population density in Iran, inherently raising the foreseeable risk and likelihood of civilian harm. As of March 23, HRA found that at least 37% of confirmed attacks occurred in Tehran's urban areas.

"March 13 [was] the hardest night. In just one minute, at my home in southwest Tehran, I heard eight explosions. Tehran was bombed in a way that felt like they wanted to leave nothing of it behind. I was actually one of the people who supported the war, hoping that in the short term, and with the least damage, the government would change. But this is not what we imagined. Not only is there no sign of a change in government, but all of us are now living in fear of the sound of explosions and planes flying at low altitude. One of my friends was standing at a checkpoint line yesterday when the checkpoint was hit by a drone attack. He was only a few dozen meters away from the explosion and possible death".

Tehran resident

Explosive weapons are among the foremost causes of civilian harm when used in populated areas. In 2024, 95 percent of those killed by explosive weapons in populated areas were civilians. Beyond immediate casualties, their detonation in interconnected urban areas inflicts catastrophic damage to the infrastructure and systems that civilians rely on, resulting in reverberating and cascading impacts on medical care, livelihoods, transport and food systems, education, and other essential services.

While explosive weapons are not prohibited in warfare, their use is subject to constraints meant to balance military necessity with humanity. In densely populated areas, distinguishing between military targets and civilians, many of whom are unable or unwilling to evacuate, poses unique challenges for the protection of civilians. Risks are further elevated when explosive weapons are inherently imprecise or have wide-area effects. The foreseeable potential for civilian death and injury is high, as well as damage to critical civilian infrastructure such as water, electricity, transport networks, and other basic services.

Consequences for civilians can endure for years after bombs fall, extending not just to deaths and life-changing injuries but also to long-term displacement, explosive remnants of war that continue to inflict civilian casualties after initial operations, and extended disruptions of basic services. Women and children often bear the heaviest long-term burden. In recognition of these harms, 90 states, including the United States, endorsed the 2022 Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.

According to investigations conducted by HRA, as of March 23, at least 60 hospitals or medical centers, 44 schools, and 129 residential buildings in Iran have been damaged in air or missile attacks, either resulting from direct strikes or from nearby explosions and blast waves. The true scale of harm is likely much greater, with official government statements estimating more than 16,000 residential homes damaged.

Several of the incidents investigated by HRA affecting schools resulted in the death or injury of students. In an incident on March 5th in Tehran, a nearby attack injured 56 people while they waited in line for bread. Another attack in Eastern Tehran on March 9th killed at least 20 civilians, including a child, as two twenty-unit residential apartment buildings collapsed from a missile strike.

"My children hid under the table. I didn't know what to tell them. You can't explain to a seven-year-old why the sky over their city suddenly lights up, and then you hear an explosion".

Tehran resident, 31 years old, mother of two

The destruction of homes, forced displacement, and resulting humanitarian crisis risks undermining the future social and economic stability of Iranian society as a whole.

Attacks on Civilian and “Dual-Use” Infrastructure

The war in Iran has been characterized by numerous attacks on or impacting critical infrastructure and other objects essential for civilian survival, including the aforementioned 60+ healthcare facilities, as well as energy infrastructure. Damage to critical infrastructure has wide-ranging effects on civilians and civilian life.

In considering whether an attack is proportionate under IHL – that is, whether the expected civilian harm would be excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage – armed actors must consider not only the direct and immediate consequences but also the foreseeable indirect and long-term effects. Indirect, or reverberating, effects can be especially harmful when an attack damages critical civilian infrastructure.

Rules governing armed conflict provide safeguards against attacks on objects or resources that civilians depend on to survive, or that risk causing widespread or long-term environmental harm. Protections extend beyond obvious civilian resources such as food and water supplies and agricultural areas to include infrastructure, such as electricity networks, oil facilities, and transport routes, when their destruction would disrupt access to basic needs and essential services.

As a matter of policy, the US DoD Instruction on Civilian Harm Mitigation defines civilian harm to include “civilian casualties and damage to or destruction of civilian objects” and directs that “other adverse effects on the civilian population and the personnel, organizations, resources, infrastructure, essential services, and systems on which civilian life depends resulting from military operations are also considered in CHMR efforts to the extent practicable.” The US CHMR-AP also recognized that “successes may ultimately end in strategic failure if care is not taken to protect the civilian environment as much as the situation allows—including ... the personnel, organizations, resources, infrastructure, essential services, and systems on which civilian life depends.”

Israel’s military policy, meanwhile, permits the targeting of civilian infrastructure under the so-called Dahiya Doctrine, which experts have described as a policy of collective punishment.

Complicating the protection of objects critical to civilian survival and environmental safety is that many such objects are described as “dual-use”, meaning that by their nature or use, they may serve both civilian and military functions. As of March 23, HRA has recorded at least 543 strikes on locations regarded as “dual-use”, including energy infrastructure, transport routes, airports, sea ports, detention facilities, and other sites embedded within or near densely populated urban environments. The US has historically adopted a particularly expansive interpretation of what constitutes “dual use,” exposing civilians to risk.

However, an object’s “dual use” nature does not remove constraints from attacking it. Even if an object were to be used solely by Iranian armed forces or to directly support military action, attacking it still requires heightened precautions if it would leave civilians with inadequate water or food, or otherwise force their displacement. Attacks that risk severe and long-term damage to the natural environment can have lasting consequences on civilian health and survival and likewise require heightened precaution.

"Since midnight, the sound of explosions did not stop. When we woke up in the morning, the sky was completely dark and the smell of burning was spreading in the air".

Resident of northwestern Tehran

Attacks on Iran's oil refineries, fuel depots, and distribution facilities throughout the air campaign illustrate the risks and complexity. While there may be military necessity in attacking such infrastructure, they are also deeply embedded in daily civilian life. Further, the burning of oil storage tanks has caused severe air pollution in parts of Tehran, including reported 'black rain' laden with oil residues. This poses serious health risks for a population already affected by chronic pollution and particularly for those with underlying health issues. The release of toxic byproducts from the combustion of fossil fuels also threatens to contaminate food and water sources and cause long-term air pollution.

Degradation in water quality has been documented following attacks on energy infrastructure in previous conflicts. Damage to oil infrastructure during the 1991 Gulf War led to documented hydrocarbon contamination of groundwater and threats to regional water supplies. Drone strikes by Turkish armed forces on Kurdish-held areas of northeast Syria between October 5 and 10, 2023, damaged critical infrastructure, disrupting water and electricity access for millions of people, according to Human Rights Watch. Russian strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure have repeatedly disrupted water supply systems and, in some cases, directly polluted water sources, posing acute public health risks.

Strikes on critical energy infrastructure also create cascading effects on basic civilian services.

The attack on the South Pars Gas Field on March 18 is particularly significant as Iran relies on it for 80% of its natural gas, which is heavily used for domestic electricity production.

Disruptions to electricity supply impact the ability of Iranian civilians to heat homes and cook food, and undermine the operation of hospitals, food production, and cold-chain distribution networks.

On March 7, the Qeshm desalination plant was struck, disrupting water supply to thirty villages. Interruptions in access to safe water and sanitation risk causing the outbreak and spread of infectious disease and forced displacement. An estimated 3.2 million people are already temporarily displaced in Iran.

The humanitarian consequences of these attacks will extend far beyond the current moment. Disruption to essential services is particularly problematic and severe for already vulnerable populations. For many Iranian civilians, these strikes result in a gradual erosion of the systems that make daily life possible, with both immediate and generational impact on health, safety, and stability.

THE CONVERGENCE OF HARM BETWEEN WORSENING DOMESTIC REPRESSION AND ARMED CONFLICT

The following assessment of internal repression reflects HRA's continued documentation of the deterioration of human rights in Iran.

The United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (FFMI) on Iran recently warned that Iranian civilians are caught between the harm resulting from external military operations and ongoing domestic rights violations. Evidence indicates that the escalation of hostilities with the US and Israel has coincided with intensified repression by Iran. This follows in the wake of brutal violence against anti-regime protesters in January 2026, which HRA found likely amounted to crimes against humanity.

International human rights law continues to apply during armed conflict, and Iran remains bound by its obligations under core human rights treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as customary international law. At the same time, under international humanitarian law, Iran is obligated to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects under its control from the effects of hostilities. These parallel frameworks operate concurrently, reinforcing the prohibition of arbitrary harm and the duty to protect civilians in all circumstances.

Escalating Repression Amidst Armed Conflict

In line with patterns seen during previous periods of unrest and insecurity, Iranian authorities are using the current conflict to intensify national-security narratives and justify arrests, restrictions on freedom of expression, and violence against civilians.

Between February 28 and March 19, HRA documented at least 1,830 arrests on allegations such as espionage, threats to national security, or communicating or sharing content related to the conflict with foreign media.

Senior officials have publicly framed any protest activity as collaboration with foreign enemies. Mass text messages have been sent warning Iranians not to take to the streets. In a televised statement, the national police chief warned that anyone who took to the streets “at the enemy’s request” would be treated as an enemy and stated that security forces were prepared to use lethal force. The Intelligence Organization of the IRGC similarly threatened that individuals labelled as “rioters” would face the same treatment imposed during recent protest crackdowns.

Notably, during the 12-day war in 2025, Iran's parliament and Guardian Council approved a new, stricter espionage law that explicitly names Israel ("the Zionist regime") and the US, classifying cooperation with them as severe crimes against national security. This legislation makes collaboration with these nations punishable by death.

Public statements by judicial authorities have reinforced that legal action may even be pursued against Iranians living abroad, accused of cooperating with foreign governments, including the potential confiscation of assets. Within Iran, officials have suggested that the financial costs of the war could be offset through the seizure of assets belonging to individuals deemed to have violated national-security laws.

Worsening Situation for Detainees

Conditions inside Iran’s detention facilities have deteriorated since the escalation of hostilities. Reports indicate severe overcrowding, with many prisoners forced to sleep on the floor in cells, corridors, and prayer rooms. Detainees have also faced reduced access to food, clean water, medical care, and basic movement within facilities.

In Khorramabad Prison, one source told HRA that daily meals have been reduced to two limited rations, with both the quantity and quality of food significantly declining since the start of the conflict. In Greater Tehran Prison, the transfer of large numbers of detainees, including individuals arrested during the January nationwide protests, has created acute space shortages, further straining already fragile living conditions.

Detainees face additional risk of torture, ill-treatment, and enforced disappearances alongside the risk of expedited death penalty proceedings, in violation of the right to due process and the right to life, with

even more limited visibility or legal recourse. Since February 28, four executions have taken place, including Mehdi Ghasemi, Saleh Mohammadi, and Saeed Davoudi, who had been arrested during the January 2026 protests in Qom, and Kourosh Keyvani, a dual national, who had been arrested last year on charges of espionage for Israel.

Among the detainees across Iran are students, human rights defenders, and civilians who were arbitrarily detained during recent nationwide protests on a scale that the UN Fact-Finding Mission found may have amounted to a crime against humanity. For thousands of families, the war intensifies the fear and uncertainty for loved ones who have been arbitrarily deprived of physical liberty and are now trapped in facilities with little protection from violence.

I was detained in the holding cell of [Police Station 148] for ten days, along with four other activists. Now it looks like nothing is left of that station but ruins. I can't even recognize where the detention area was. I keep wondering what happened to the people who were being held there during the attack.

Activist, told HRA upon seeing photos of the police station after recent US/Israeli airstrikes.

The fear for those detained is especially acute after Israel's June 2025 targeted strike on Evin prison, during visiting hours, which killed around 80 prisoners, their family members, and prison staff. As of March 23, three civilian prison or detention facilities have been damaged by recent US and Israeli airstrikes.

In addition to officially recognized detention facilities, Iran is known to detain civilians at undisclosed "black sites," in locations such as residential buildings, airports, and hotels. The current armed conflict exacerbates challenges for relatives, lawyers, and monitoring groups to determine their whereabouts. It also increases the risk that airstrikes inadvertently impact these unofficial detention locations and harm arbitrarily detained civilians.

Restricted Access to Information

On March 19, the nationwide internet shutdown imposed since late February became the longest recorded communications blackout in Iran's history. It also became the longest sustained shutdown in a highly connected society globally, based on tracking by the independent internet monitor, NetBlocks. Authorities justify the blackouts as a national security measure, and recently have acknowledged using them to amplify the voice of authorities and consequently silence dissent. It follows a familiar pattern during times of crisis. In January, Iran imposed a lengthy shutdown while it killed at least 7,000 protesters and arrested at least 53,000 more. Based on experience in Iran and globally, blackouts coincide with upticks in repression and violence against civilians.

Amidst the current conflict, the internet shutdown isolates Iranians from one another and heightens their exposure to harm. Civilians are unable to access information about security risks, including airstrike warnings, evacuation options, and where to access humanitarian assistance. First responders and medical personnel are impeded from coordinating emergency relief. Beyond immediate safety concerns, the shutdown carries severe economic consequences. NetBlocks estimates that each day of an internet shutdown in Iran costs the country over \$37 million. This loss results from slowed or lost trade, services, and productivity, with likely long-term impact on investments and livelihoods, which compounds the already dire economic situation of Iran before the start of the conflict.

Some Iranians have attempted to circumvent the internet shutdown through satellite internet systems such as Starlink, but doing so carries significant risk. Iranian authorities have criminalized the possession or use of Starlink systems, and intelligence officials have warned that wartime use warrants the

“harshest punishments,” including execution on espionage-related charges.

Internet shutdowns violate a wide range of protections afforded under international human rights law. In addition to the right to freedom of expression and access to information, access to the internet enables the fulfillment of the rights to freedom of association, assembly, and health, among others. Security-related restrictions on communication must be provided for by law and be strictly necessary and proportionate to the specific security concern being addressed. A blanket shutdown, given the widespread and indiscriminate impact, would fail such a proportionality test and could never be justified under human rights law, according to UN human rights experts.

Finally, the communications blackout increases the risk that civilian harm and domestic repression remain hidden from scrutiny. By restricting the capacity for independent reporting, documentation, and monitoring, prolonged shutdowns create conditions in which atrocities can occur with reduced visibility and accountability.

Restricted Freedom of Movement

Reports of expanded checkpoints, surveillance measures, and threats related to movement have further limited civilians’ ability to reach safer areas during ongoing hostilities. Across Tehran, newly established checkpoints subject residents to vehicle and phone searches, questioning, and the risk of arrest. These controls create severe traffic congestion within the city and on major exit routes, and can effectively trap civilians when they are trying to flee hostilities.

Checkpoint congestion has also created new security risks. According to investigations by HRA, at least 43 checkpoints have been hit by US and Israeli airstrikes, resulting in at least 13 civilian deaths. Video evidence indicates that several strikes occurred in daylight hours while passenger vehicles and pedestrians were clearly present in large numbers. In response, authorities have reportedly relocated some checkpoints beneath pedestrian overpasses or inside road tunnels in an attempt to reduce exposure to drone attacks.

One nurse in Tehran described the dilemma many families now face:

In these conditions, I want to do my job. I just wanted to take my two children somewhere safe, so I could have peace of mind. I tried twice to leave Tehran but had to turn back. The first time was because of a bombing that closed the roads in eastern Tehran. My second attempt was at the same time as the explosions at the oil facilities that led to toxic rain in the air, and I had to turn back. Finally, on the third attempt, after ten days, I finally got my children out of Tehran. I returned to the hospital and now sleep there with other medical staff because it is no longer safe to go home.

Alongside physical restrictions, residents report receiving text messages warning them not to gather or move in public spaces, reinforcing a climate of fear that further limits freedom of movement during an already dangerous period.

While certain security controls may be permissible in emergency situations, international human rights standards require that any restrictions on movement remain strictly necessary, proportionate, and non-discriminatory. Where such measures prevent civilians from leaving high-risk areas or accessing basic safety, they may contribute to avoidable harm.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For civilians in Iran, the current situation is marked by exposure to multiple, overlapping sources of harm. Airstrikes in populated areas have caused sudden loss of life, displacement, and damage to critical infrastructure, while intensified domestic repression has further restricted people's ability to move, communicate, or seek medical care and safety. This is compounded by a dangerous narrative from the US and Israel that frames harm as isolated or justified, obscuring the cumulative impact on civilians. These conditions carry consequences far beyond immediate casualties. Disruptions to education, essential services, and economic activity, alongside severe environmental damage that will carry serious long-term health consequences, are likely to produce lasting social and public health impacts.

We urge all parties to protect civilians and adhere strictly to IHL and international human rights law. In particular:

The US and Israel should:

- Prioritize the protection of civilians and adherence to IHL, including by taking all feasible precautions to minimize civilian harm and ceasing attacks on critical infrastructure;
- Ensure that warnings and other communication with the civilian population are effective, consistent, and account for telecommunication restrictions and the different ways that men, women, people of different ages, and persons with disabilities access information;
- Protect civilian objects and consider the reverberating effects of operations in planning, targeting, and proportionality assessments;
- Cease the use of explosive weapons in populated areas;
- Invest in rigorous civilian harm mitigation and response policies and programs, including full implementation of the US DoD Instruction on Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response;
- Ensure that humans make the decision to use force and remain meaningfully involved in targeting, including taking adequate time and care to assess targets recommended by artificial intelligence systems;
- Ensure transparency and accountability for civilian harm, including thorough investigations into civilian harm reports and possible violations of international humanitarian law;
- Immediately cease hostilities and pursue a diplomatic solution to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Iran should²:

- Uphold IHL and international human rights law, both within Iran and in its strikes across the region;
- End internet blackouts and arbitrary arrests;
- Protect detainees and release all political prisoners;
- Facilitate civilians' freedom of movement; and
- Agree to an immediate cessation of hostilities and return to diplomatic negotiations.

² The recommendations regarding Iran are limited to the scope of this brief.

International actors, including the United Nations Security Council and allies of the US, Israel, and Iran, should:

- Support immediate de-escalation, a cessation of hostilities, and return to diplomacy;
- Press parties to the conflict to protect civilians, adhere to IHL, and ensure thorough investigations and accountability for civilian harm and possible violations of IHL; and
- Mobilize international humanitarian and human rights funding to support urgent civilian needs and documentation of civilian harm.



Image received by HRA

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