

Civilian Deaths - Double Standards or Collateral Damage

Chadwick Bennett

Dept. of English, Old Dominion University

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Professor Lee Knight

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Introduction

In modern warfare, civilians are protected by international humanitarian laws and standard rules of engagement. Governments are prohibited from targeting civilians or civilian infrastructure and are required to take precautions to avoid such harm, as violations may constitute war crimes.

In December 2025, Iranian government forces killed more than 200 children during a nationwide protest. President Trump and other world leaders strongly condemned the act. Three months later, in March 2026, the United States and Israel conducted an airstrike on Iran. Approximately 165 primary schoolgirls, between the ages of 7 and 12, and another 100 other civilians were reported killed. (Associated Press, 2026).

On March 4, 2026, the Associated Press (Frankel & Biesecker, 2026) reports that the airstrike on the Iranian Shajareh Tayyebbeh girls' elementary school killed more than 165 people, most of whom were children. It further stated that satellite imagery and expert analysis suggest that U.S. airstrikes were the likely cause of the attack. Many countries have called for an investigation into whether the attack violated international humanitarian law.

The bombing that killed the Iranian schoolgirls demonstrates how the United States responds to civilian deaths, resulting in a double standard in how such actions are condemned.

This inconsistency weakens global accountability and raises concerns about the selective application of international law.

Understanding this issue is important because it questions whether international law applies equally to all countries without exception, or to a lesser degree, to powerful countries like the United States. It is also important to consider how or whether the international community holds accountable countries it deems have caused war crimes against humanity. This paper argues that the United States response to the deaths of the Iranian schoolgirls challenges consistency with international humanitarian law against civilian casualties, resulting in weakening global accountability and a double standard in how civilian deaths are condemned.

The International Humanitarian Law (IHL) governs the code of conduct and rules of engagement regarding protecting civilians from unnecessary harm, placing them in harm's way, or defining them as collateral damage. The International Committee of the Red Cross (2019) discusses how children are more vulnerable than any other civilians. It states, "Children affected by armed conflict are entitled to special respect and protection under international humanitarian law." "States have a responsibility to ensure that national laws reflect international humanitarian law protecting children during armed conflict." This holds all countries to the same standards, expectations, and accountabilities. Attacks on children are not only legal violations, but also moral ones.

The two guiding basic principles of humanitarian law that all military commanders must follow are the Principle of Distinction and the Rules of Proportionality. According to Barber (2010, pp. 474-475), the Principle of Distinction requires that "military commanders must distinguish between military objectives and civilian persons or objects," describing it as one of the "intransgressible principles of international customary law" that "must be observed by all States." The Rule of Proportionality is the "prohibition of indiscriminate attacks, including

attacks which may be expected to cause disproportionate harm to civilians, causing incidental loss of civilian life, injury, or damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof.”

It also establishes that certain groups, particularly children, receive special protections under international humanitarian law due to their vulnerability. This is critical because it places direct responsibility on military decision-makers when planning operations in areas where children are present. When these protections are not upheld, it not only represents a legal failure but also raises questions about whether such standards are being applied consistently across different nations and conflicts. Barber (2010, p. 475) further explains that military leaders must weigh expected military advantages against potential civilian harm before conducting an attack. She states attacks are unlawful if they are expected to cause excessive civilian harm or loss relative to the anticipated benefit. These calculations must be considered in advance of any attack. “Military leaders must refrain from deciding to launch an attack which is expected to cause excessive loss of civilian life or damage and shall cancel or suspend the attack.” It reinforces that even though Iran built a girls' primary school near Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) military base, it doesn't relieve the military leaders who were planning the airstrikes of balancing their military objectives with the protection of civilian lives during the conflict. The article also discusses international humanitarian law in military operations in Afghanistan, focusing on United States airstrikes that had high numbers of civilian casualties, drawing attention to the fact that this is not the only time the United States has violated international humanitarian law. The cause of this inconsistency is due to the selective enforcement of the application of international law, which has undermined and weakened global accountability.

Applying these standards to the Iranian school airstrike raises serious concerns about whether proportionality was even considered. Even if a legitimate military target was located

nearby, the presence of an elementary school filled with children should have significantly influenced the decision-making process. Military planners are required to anticipate civilian presence and adjust accordingly, including selecting alternative timing or methods of attack. For instance, conducting the strike at night, when children would not be present, could have reduced or eliminated civilian casualties. The failure to take these types of precautions suggests either poor judgment or a disregard for established legal obligations. This reinforces the argument that when similar actions are carried out by the United States, they are more readily justified rather than condemned, suggesting a potential double standard.

These actions are significant because they directly compare the United States' condemnation of Iran's actions with its potential involvement in similar civilian harm, both of which caused international outrage and accusations of war crimes. This comparison shows the inconsistency of accountability depending on the nation-states that are involved. If civilian deaths are condemned in one instance and not in another, but rationalized away, then that suggests that the power of the country on the world stage determines the response rather than legal principle.

Women and children have always been viewed as requiring special moral and legal protections. Carpenter (2005) argues, "Women and children are frequently invoked as symbols of civilian innocence in discussions of war and humanitarian protection." He further examines how international organizations discuss civilian protection issues, especially focusing on women and children, because they are vulnerable, and how these groups symbolize innocence and vulnerability. This helps draw international attention to humanitarian crises during armed conflicts. However, the level of attention or action to humanitarian crises during military conflicts depends on who is responsible for the harm. The way the international community

reacts differently creates the perception that not all civilian deaths are treated equally and that not all nations are held to the same level of accountability.

Counterargument

One possible counterargument is that the Iranian school bombing represented collateral damage that was an unavoidable consequence of war. Another possible cause is faulty or incomplete intelligence, which may have led military planners to miscalculate the presence of civilians. Supporters would argue that if a military is present, civilian casualties may occur despite precautions. While this may be true, it does not eliminate the responsibility to take precautions, such as timing the attack for nighttime or when the likelihood that civilians would be present would be low. As Barber (2010) states, proportionality would still apply. Excessive civilian harm is not allowed, balanced against achieving military objectives. International humanitarian law emphasizes and dictates that even in cases of collateral damage, the principle of proportionality remains binding and cannot be disregarded.

Conclusion

International Law is clear, during military conflicts, countries must take precautions to guard against harm to civilians, otherwise it would be considered a violation of International Humanitarian Law and possibly considered a war crime. If the United States airstrike was deemed responsible for the deaths of the Iranian schoolgirls and other civilians, then it cannot have selective applications of legal and moral standards. Without consistent accountability, violations of international humanitarian law risk becoming ineffective, particularly when powerful nations are not held to the same standards as others in protecting civilians, and their most vulnerable populations, women and children. It weakens the credibility of the laws, endangers civilians in future conflicts, and reveals that international humanitarian law is not applied equally, but instead influenced by the power and position of the nations involved.

References

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