

Study Guide - Week 20

UNSC - Humanitarian and Economic Crises in the Middle East

1) TLDR:

On February 28th 2026 the United States of America and Israel started a joint air-strike operation in the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran targeting a number of military and civilian targets. As one of the primary objectives of those attacks, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, has been killed. In retaliation Iran has launched airstrikes against the state of Israel and the US allies in the region, which included: United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Iraq and Bahrain. Iran has also closed off the Strait of Hormuz and effectively stopped 20% of the daily global supply of oil from reaching its recipients.

The attacks followed a continuous stream of reports announced by the US and Israeli officials alleging that Iran was developing nuclear weapons with the intention of using them against the US. Conflict in the region resulted in major economic losses due to tourism, destruction of oil extraction and refining infrastructure and military spendings. Shortages of supply, sky-rocketing prices, suffering of civilian population, exploding instability in the region and threat of another unresolved conflict that will plague us for decades in the future are looming over the UN once again.

2) Background:

The United States of America has been involved in the internal affairs of Iran at least since 1953. The Americans backed a UK-backed coup d'état aimed at deposing the Prime Minister and strengthening the near-authoritarian power of the Shah. Following the events of the coup in 1979, the Iranian population, who have grown tired of the oppressiveness of the Shah regime and its favoritism towards the western powers, brought forward a revolution that overthrew the Shah and instituted the Islamic Republic.

In the Iran-Iraq conflict in the 1980s, the US provided aid and intelligence to Iraq provoking Iran to start involving itself in proxy wars in the region, challenging the American influence. Iran started funding organisations like Hezbollah and militias in Iraq to start conflicts with Israel and US backed governments. Involving itself in conflicts without official ties. The conflict became more direct following the October 7th attacks in 2023 within Israel. This led to the 12-day war during which the US alongside Israel officially struck a number of targets in Iran eliminating key military commanders and allegedly destroying facilities which were being used for the purposes of the Iranian nuclear weapons programme.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] there has been no evidence of Iran developing nuclear weapons. Following the airstrikes of 2025 the IAEA informed that Iran retained stockpiles of highly enriched uranium in its facilities and reiterated that there is no evidence of an organised nuclear weapons programme. The investigators could not confirm that the nuclear programme was maintained for entirely peaceful purposes as they were denied entry to some of the facilities.

In December of 2025 Iran was marked by an overwhelming number of anti-government protests. The protestors stood against the collapsing economy, plummeting position of the national currency, rising prices and spoke up in favor of a regime change. The government of Iran responded brutally to the protests, instituting mass arrests as well as allowing for usage of sharp ammunition against the protestors resulting in thousands of deaths. In January of 2026, the US communicated to Iran that they are ready to intervene in the situation in the country if the government persists in harming the peaceful protestors. This was followed by the deployment of 2 US aircraft carriers with their supporting fleets to the region.

In February 2026, US and Iran entered into negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme. The first round of negotiations took place in Muscat, Oman. The United States called for Iran to immediately stop enriching uranium and get rid of all the currently held stockpiles. Second round of negotiations followed in Geneva during which Oman's Foreign Affairs Minister announced that there has been a breakthrough with Iran agreeing to concessions.

Regardless of the negotiations on 28th of February 2026 US and Israel launched airstrikes on the territory of Iran. As a result of those strikes thousands of people involved in Iran's Students News Agency and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps have been reported dead. One among those who were targeted was the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei. In retaliation Iran attacked targets in Israel as well as neighbouring countries with US military bases involving at least 9 countries of the region in the conflict and started openly attacking ships trying to cross the Strait of Hormuz. The blockade put forward by Iran effectively stopped the exports of oil from the Persian Gulf which constituted 20% of global daily supply. Those actions resulted in prices per barrel reaching over 110\$ and experts predict that if the war lasts 2 more months the prices might start reaching 200\$ per barrel.

United States and Israel have continued their attacks onto the Iranian territory. Despite the bold claims put forward by both states about the near-complete destruction of the Iranian air defence capabilities the conflict seems far from over. Most recently Iran managed to strike several of US aircrafts over its territory including one F-15 fighter jet whose pilot had to land on Iranian territory forcing US to perform a costly land-extraction operation. United States repeatedly called onto its NATO allies to aid in the war. European countries remained reserved to the situation especially due to recently fractured relations with the US. Calls of President Trump for EU states to engage in a naval operation of re-taking the Strait of Hormuz and securing the passage for oil ships received a negative response from most of European naval powers and no allied nations decided to dedicate troops to the operation.

Of the latest developments, still to be decided for the time of writing this study guide, President Trump issued another ultimatum to Iran which elapses on Tuesday 7th at 8 p.m [GMT-4]. If Iran doesn't open the Strait of Hormuz US is supposed to destroy the power plants and bridges in Iran which could result in major complications and wide-spread suffering of the civilian population.

3) Key Issues:

3.1) Self defence or Violation of Sovereignty?

The United States claims they initiated the 'major combat operation' against Iran as a form of preemptive self-defence. The US administration has consequently released reports and claims that Iran was developing nuclear weapons in its secret facilities and that they were planning to use them to attack the US. The IAEA has repeatedly reported that there is no evidence of Iran using its nuclear programme for purposes other than civilian, noting that since the escalations in recent years they have been denied entry to part of the facilities. Iran and its allies claim that the US-Israeli operation is a violation of Iranian sovereignty as a nation and a violation of the inherent rights of the country under article 2 of the UN Charter. They argue that their retaliatory attacks were supported by the right to self-defence. Is the US-Israeli operation justifiable as self-defence? Is the sovereignty of Iran violated by the actions of the US and Israel? Is Iran's response justifiable under art. 51 of the UN Charter?

3.2) Economical and resource instability

Iran is one of the major oil exporters, providing for around 3% of the world's daily supply. Disruption of deliveries not only from Iran but from the entire Gulf resulted in sky-rocketing prices that forced some countries to limit the access to fuel for its citizens. Apart from the oil industry the Persian Gulf is suffering due to loss of tourism and lucrative investments which stay away from conflict zones. Prices crossing 100\$ per barrel, destabilisation of supply chains and in some regions, wide-spread shortages are becoming a shattering reality. How can an oil crisis be resolved? How can shipping routes be secured to prevent supply shortages? What can be done to secure investment stability in the region post conflict?

3.3) UNSC Effectiveness and decision making

The United Nations Security Council is tasked with maintaining international peace and stability. Over the years it was proven that the Security Council's decision-making capabilities in regards to conflicts have greatly decreased, especially if one of the P5 is involved. In situations as with Syria, Ukraine, Gaza Strip, etc. we have seen potential resolutions of the UN Security Council being vetoed or never being formally introduced due to a threat of a veto. The Security Council has to consider whether a model in which states involved in the conflict, even the ones which are members of the Permanent 5, are allowed to block potential solutions can persist. Should the UNSC start executing art. 27(3) towards all of its members? How can UNSC ensure that its primary function of maintaining peace is not hindered by political differences? What can the UN do to adapt to a reality with a growing number of conflicts around the world?

3.4) Humanitarian Crisis

One of the most prevailing aspects of the Iranian War, especially in the context of the latest ultimatum issued by Washington, is the humanitarian situation in the country. Although in the attacks coordinated by the US and Israel, the civilian facilities are not the main targets, there have been a number of reports of such buildings being destroyed. Iranian population is suffering not only due to continues attacks on their country and infrastructure but also due to limited access to humanitarian aid, healthcare and collapsing economy in the eye of continues destruction of key industry regions. With the promises of absolute destruction of necessary civilian infrastructure such as power plants and bridges the situation of common people may deteriorate even further. How can UNSC secure humanitarian aid for Iranian people? What can be done to limit the effect conflict has on civilians? Do actions of US and Israel break the Geneva Conventions?

4. What can the UNSC actually do?

The Security Council is the UN body tasked with the upkeep of international peace and security. Its role as an arbiter and ultimate judge in conflicts threatening international peace and stability has been clearly laid out in the UN Charter. It is also the only UN body whose decisions are legally binding upon all Member States (Art. 25 and 48. UN Charter) and have to be followed under threat of penalties from the Council including the use of force. In practice, the Security Council can do the following:

- Approve and mandate collective action (including military or technical missions) under Chapter VII
- Impose binding sanctions, resource obligations, or coordination mechanisms
- Deploy peacekeeping missions to crisis areas to help stabilize situations (in this scenario it can deploy peacekeepers to aid evacuation efforts)
- Resolve disputes between nations and propose binding compromises
- Etc.

5. Major Stakeholders

5.1) United States of America

The United States of America puts the destruction of the Iranian Nuclear Programme as one of its primary objectives. The US Administration frequently stated that the current Iranian regime is an enemy of the United States and is an active threat to the safety of US citizens. In the debate, the US would defend its actions as being based on the principle of self-defence and support the position that its actions are aimed at defending the civilian population of Iran, suffering from the oppression of the Supreme Leader's regime as well as securing global economical stability threatened by Iran's actions.

5.2) Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran opposes the US-Israeli operation naming it a violation of its national and territorial sovereignty. Iran defends its right to develop a civilian oriented nuclear programme and reserves all rights to self defence as a response to the attacks from the US and Israel using their bases in allied states in the region. In the debate, Iran would call on the condemnation of the US attacks and reaffirming the national sovereignty of Iran. It would likely also pursue a UNSC order to Israel and the US to immediately stop all hostilities against Iran.

5.3) Israel

Israel also argues that self-defence is the justification of its repeated strikes against Iran. History of consecutive missile strikes between two countries, as well as Israel's war with Hezbollah, which is being funded by the government of Iran, lead to Israel naming Iran an 'existential threat'. In the debate Israel would defend its right to self-defence and argue that actions in Iran were provoked by the threat Iran posed to Israeli national security. Additionally Israel would likely condemn the Iranian regime as undemocratic and oppressive to its civilian population.

5.4) Countries of the Gulf [UAE, Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman]

Countries of the Persian Gulf are mostly allied with the United States. They have become targets of Iranian missile and drone strikes in the past few days as well as victims of the economical consequences of the war. Housing US, UK or French military bases on their territory which have been used as part of the US operations in the strikes since 28th of February they remain potential targets for Iran. In the debate, the countries would state that they have been unjustly attacked by Iran and invoke their right to retaliatory self-defence. Additionally, they would moderately support the US operation and argue for a quick resolution of the conflict and/or stabilisation of the sea shipment routes to minimize the effects of the export disruptions on their economies.

5.5) European States

The majority of the European States initially moderately supported US actions in Iran. Recently due to the length of the conflict as well as inconsistent signals from the US, mixed with aggressive language towards NATO allies, European nations remain as active observers of the matter. Majority of significant militaries in Europe, including France, UK, Italy and Poland, declared that they will not be deploying their militaries to aid the US operations and they respond to requests at lending their Patriot systems to the countries of the Gulf. In the debate, most European states would likely call for quick resolution of the conflict, securing safe passage of oil ships through the Strait of Hormuz and a mechanism for humanitarian aid to be delivered to civilian population through neutral third parties.

6. Sources And Further Reading

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