

The Act of Aggression against Iran exposes a blind spot in international law

Protecting civilians requires more than protecting individual objects. International law must also account for the systems that make civilian life possible.

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The Act of Aggression by the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic of Iran, which began on 28 February 2026, has exposed a structural weakness in the way international law often describes civilian harm. The law contains extensive protections for civilians and civilian objects, yet the legal analysis of an attack can become artificially fragmented when each school, hospital, power plant, bridge, railway, airport, pharmaceutical facility or fishing vessel is examined as though it existed in isolation. Modern civilian life does not function that way. It depends on interconnected systems.

Official Iranian documentation compiled by 8 April recorded 125,630 civilian units as severely damaged or destroyed, including 100,000 residential and 23,500 commercial units; 857 schools, 339 health-care centres and 32 universities were reported damaged, alongside Red Crescent facilities, airports, civilian aircraft and other critical infrastructure. United Nations special-procedure mandate holders later documented a substantial part of the broader pattern, including extensive harm to education, health, scientific research, cultural and religious sites, residential areas, transport, water and electricity infrastructure, and civilian livelihoods. The figures differ across sources and dates, but the underlying picture is consistent: the damage was not confined to one sector of civilian life.

This article advances two related legal arguments. First, the legality and civilian consequences of attacks on the infrastructure of a modern society cannot always be adequately assessed by looking only at the physical object struck. Where an attack disables interconnected systems indispensable to civilian life, reasonably foreseeable direct and reverberating effects must be taken seriously within the applicable rules of international humanitarian law. I therefore propose a “Right to Civilian Continuity” not as a new autonomous right already crystallised in *lex lata*, but as an interpretative

framework that brings together existing protections under international humanitarian law, international human rights law and the right to development around a common protected interest: preserving the minimum material, human, institutional and social conditions necessary for civilian society to continue functioning during and after armed conflict.

Second, the same framework has implications for accountability. If the consequences of an attack must be traced outward—from the object struck to the civilian systems and human lives that depended upon it—responsibility must also be capable of being traced upward: from the strike to the operational unit, from execution to approval and order, and from the order to the decision-maker. In the Iranian case, this inquiry is sharpened by repeated public statements by President Donald Trump threatening power plants, bridges, desalination facilities and other infrastructure; his description of returning Iran to the “Stone Age”; his later acknowledgement of the societal consequences of destroying Iran’s bridges and power plants; and, in relation to at least one bridge strike, his statement: “I gave the order.” None of this substitutes for proof of the elements of an international crime. It does, however, create a serious basis for investigating policy, knowledge, foreseeability, decision-making and individual criminal responsibility in relation to specific attacks.

A further distinction is essential. The characterization of the resort to force as an Act of Aggression is a *jus ad bellum* question. The legality of each individual strike is a separate *jus in bello* question. Even where the resort to force is unlawful, an individual attack constitutes a war crime only if the relevant elements of the specific offence are established. The analysis below therefore does not infer the criminality of particular strikes from the characterization of the wider use of force.

1. An Assault on a Society, Not Merely on a Collection of Targets

A defining feature of the Act of Aggression against Iran cannot be understood solely through the number of strikes carried out. Equally significant is the range of civilian functions affected from the outset of the attacks.

The residential record also shows that civilian harm unfolded over time rather than in a single episode. Official Iranian documentation records strikes on residential areas on 13 March in Karaj; 14 March in Eyvan, where six members of one family, including a six-month-old infant, were killed; 15 March in Shiraz; 16 March in Narenjestan and Amirabad in Arak, where a four-day-old infant was among those killed, and in Mahallat and Tehran; 17 March on Malek-ol-Shoara Bahar Street in Tehran; 19 March in

Majidieh; 20 March in Mehrvila, Karaj; 21 March in Dizaj Amir-Madar, Ramsar and Dastak; 23 March in Tehran, Tabriz, Qeytariyeh, Velanjak, Khorramabad and Urmia; 24 March in Tabriz; 26 March in Zibashahr, Shiraz; 28 March in Saboonchi; 30 March in Bandar Abbas and Zanzan; 6 April in Qom; and 7 April in Shahriar and Pardis. These incidents are not invoked here to presume the unlawfulness of every individual strike. Their relevance is to the factual scale of disruption and to the need for attack-specific legal assessment rather than aggregate assertion.

One of the earliest and gravest incidents was the attack of 28 February on Shajareh Tayebbeh Primary School in Minab. Official Iranian figures record the deaths of 168 children between the ages of seven and twelve, both girls and boys. A subsequent communication by United Nations special procedure mandate holders recorded a lower figure, but confirmed several essential facts: children were present at the school at the time of the attack; the mandate holders had received no information indicating that the school was being used for military purposes; and the school building was separated from neighbouring facilities by a wall and had its own entrance. The incident was also identified as requiring an independent investigation into possible serious violations of international humanitarian law.

The impact on education was not confined to Minab. Official Iranian records document extensive damage to hundreds of schools and educational facilities across the country. Higher education was also affected. Several universities sustained damage, including Shahid Beheshti University, parts of which, together with its research facilities, were struck on 3 April, and Sharif University of Technology, whose faculties, research institutes and scientific infrastructure were damaged in the following days. The impact on universities was not merely structural. At Sharif University, information-technology infrastructure providing computational and digital services to thousands of academic and institutional users, as well as knowledge-based enterprises, ceased functioning.

The health system likewise came under sustained pressure. Hospitals, emergency centres, Red Crescent facilities, ambulances, pharmaceutical facilities and laboratories sustained damage. On 31 March, facilities belonging to Toufigh Darou Research and Engineering Company, which produced active pharmaceutical ingredients used in treatments for cancer, cardiovascular diseases and certain specialised conditions, were attacked. Facilities of Soha Pharmaceutical Company were also damaged on 1 and 2 April, disrupting parts of its production and packaging lines.

On 2 April, the Pasteur Institute of Iran was also attacked. The Institute, with more than a century of activity in vaccine production, infectious-disease diagnosis, medical

research and public health, hosted thirteen national reference laboratories, research centres, biobanks and World Health Organization collaborating centres. The consequences therefore extended beyond physical damage to buildings and affected part of the country's diagnostic, research and disease-surveillance capacity.

At the same time, water and energy networks sustained damage. By late March, hundreds of incidents affecting electricity transmission and distribution equipment had been recorded in different parts of Iran, while electricity-sector personnel were killed or injured. Two power plants with generating capacities of 914 MW and 250 MW were destroyed in Mobarakeh County. In the water sector, damage to infrastructure in Jask disrupted drinking-water supplies to 20 villages and more than 10,000 people in one documented case.

Food production and livelihoods were also affected. Grain-storage facilities, food cold-storage facilities, agricultural infrastructure, livestock and poultry facilities, bottled-water storage and agricultural-fertiliser depots were among the objects damaged. In one case, a cold-storage facility containing approximately 1,250 tonnes of protein products at the time of the attack was struck.

Taken together, the damage sustained during this period cannot adequately be described through isolated categories such as “school”, “hospital”, “factory” or “power plant”. What came under pressure were multiple essential functions of civilian society simultaneously.

2. Attacking Connectivity: Roads, Railways and Civil Aviation

One of the most consequential dimensions of the Act of Aggression against Iran was the damage inflicted upon the country's networks of connectivity.

On 2 April, Bridge B1 was attacked. According to the available documentation, thirteen people were killed and several others injured. A further strike occurred while rescue personnel were present at the site. On 7 April, attacks on bridges and transport links intensified. Targets included Bayat Bridge on the Payambar-e Azam Freeway, sections of the Tehran–Karaj Freeway and Shahid Modarres Bridge, bridges west of Qom, the Alborz–Zanjan railway bridge, railway lines in Karaj, and the Yahyaabad railway bridge in Kashan. The strike on the Alborz–Zanjan railway bridge killed one person and injured eleven others, while other railway attacks also caused casualties.

Ground transportation, however, represented only one part of the picture. Civil aviation infrastructure was repeatedly attacked.

Official Iranian documentation records attacks on airports and civilian aviation facilities in several cities. At Kish Airport, the runway, radar equipment and passenger aircraft sustained damage. Bushehr Airport was attacked and a civilian passenger aircraft was destroyed. Parts of Kharg Airport were damaged, while several passenger aircraft were destroyed at Mehrabad Airport.

The chronology of civil-aviation damage is equally important. Official Iranian records describe strikes on Bam Airport on 25 and 28 March; the radar at Imam Khomeini International Airport on 25 March; Kermanshah and Tabas airport facilities on 26 March; Mehriz Airport and the control tower and runway at Tabriz Shahid Madani International Airport on 28 March; and Kashan Airport on 1 and 7 April, including damage to the passenger waiting hall. On 4 April, the control tower at Kermanshah Airport was hit and its cabin destroyed. These incidents must be assessed individually, including the status and use of the relevant facilities at the time of attack, but taken together they demonstrate the breadth of disruption to civilian connectivity.

Subsequent attacks were recorded against Bandar Abbas and Bandar Lengeh airports, the control tower and runway at Tabriz Airport, Kashan Airport, the control tower at Kermanshah Airport, the control tower at Tabas Airport, Bam Airport and its passenger terminal, Mehriz Airport, and the radar installation at Imam Khomeini International Airport.

This dimension is particularly relevant to civilian continuity. Airports, bridges and railways are not merely transport infrastructure; they are channels through which civilian society remains connected. Patients, doctors, humanitarian personnel, medicines, goods, students, workers, families and commercial activity depend upon these networks. The destruction of connectivity may therefore impair civilian services and functions that have not themselves been directly attacked.

3. Ports, Fishing Vessels and Livelihoods

In southern Iran, the consequences of the attacks reached directly into the means by which local communities sustain themselves.

Official documentation records attacks against ports, shipbuilding companies, commercial vessels and fishing boats. An attack on Bandar Pol pier on 29 March killed five people and injured four others. On 31 March, an attack on a cargo vessel in the Ramchah area of Qeshm killed eight people. On 1 April, shipbuilding facilities and local fishing vessels in Qeshm were attacked, while on the following day warehouses and facilities at Bahman Port and Doha fishing pier on Qeshm Island sustained damage.

This pattern did not fully end with the ceasefire, whose first day was 8 April. Sporadic strikes were reported during the ceasefire; hostilities resumed on 8 June and continued until a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on 14 June. A further wave of attacks was recorded on 8–9 July.

During attacks on 8 and 9 July, at least 30 fishing vessels at Panj-Pelleh pier in Bandar Abbas and 10 additional fishing vessels at Banoud pier in Asaluyeh were destroyed or caught fire, directly affecting the livelihoods of fishing communities dependent upon those vessels.

During the same period, the Aq-Tappeh-Khan railway bridge in northern Iran was damaged by a cruise-missile strike. Its significance extended beyond the connection of two geographic points; the route formed part of Iran's rail and commercial connectivity with its northern neighbours and Central Asia.

These incidents demonstrate an important point: even where a ceasefire temporarily interrupts large-scale hostilities, it does not automatically restore civilian continuity. Damaged systems require reconstruction, and renewed attacks may interrupt the process through which society attempts to return to ordinary civilian life.

4. Sport, Culture and Social Life

Civilian life cannot be reduced to physical survival.

On 28 February in Lamerd, a sports hall and nearby residential buildings were struck. Available documentation records the deaths of children and adolescents who were present inside the sports facility. Other sports facilities were also damaged during the Act of Aggression, including facilities within Tehran's Azadi Sports Complex and numerous school sports facilities.

Cultural heritage and public spaces likewise sustained damage. Golestan Palace in Tehran and historical buildings in several provinces were affected; libraries, museums and cultural centres were also among the damaged sites. In one case, a library containing more than 35,000 books was destroyed.

These forms of harm should not be relegated to the margins of the analysis. Education, sport, culture, social interaction, recreation and participation in public life are components of a functioning civilian society. A society whose hospitals remain operational but whose schools, universities, libraries, sports facilities and public spaces have ceased to function may remain physically alive, but its civilian life has nevertheless been profoundly impaired.

5. Bushehr and Risks That Do Not Stop at the Point of Impact

Attacks on nuclear facilities raise distinct legal concerns because their potential consequences may be long-term and transboundary.

Article 56 of Additional Protocol I of 1977 provides a treaty regime of special protection for “works and installations containing dangerous forces”, expressly including dams, dykes and nuclear electrical generating stations, subject to the conditions and exceptions set out in that provision. The United States is not a party to Additional Protocol I, so Article 56 should not simply be presented as a treaty obligation binding it as such. The provision nevertheless identifies the distinctive civilian danger posed by attacks on nuclear electrical generating stations, while customary international humanitarian law separately requires particular care where attacks on works or installations containing dangerous forces may cause severe civilian losses. This special regime should not be indiscriminately extended to every nuclear facility.

This distinction is particularly relevant to the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant.

Iranian documentation records that the plant’s premises were struck on 17 March and again on 24 and 27 March. According to preliminary assessments, those three incidents did not result in technical damage or casualties. On the morning of 4 April, however, a projectile exploded near the plant’s security perimeter; the blast wave and fragments damaged an ancillary building and killed a member of the facility’s physical-protection personnel. The plant’s principal structures remained undamaged and no operational disruption was reported.

The absence of a radioactive release does not eliminate the legal significance of attacks against such an installation. The assessment must take account of the risk reasonably foreseeable at the time the attack was planned or decided upon, rather than relying solely on the fact that the most serious possible consequence did not ultimately materialise.

6. From the Protection of Objects to the Protection of Civilian Continuity

International law does not currently recognise an autonomous right entitled the Right to Civilian Continuity. To claim otherwise would go beyond the present state of *lex lata*.

The constituent elements of the concept, however, are already protected under international law.

International humanitarian law protects civilians and civilian objects, restricts attacks to military objectives, prohibits disproportionate attacks and requires feasible precautions to avoid or minimise civilian harm. Special protections also exist for medical units and

personnel, objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, and certain works and installations containing dangerous forces.

International human rights law, in parallel, protects the rights to life, health, water, food, housing, education and other conditions essential to human existence. The right to development adds another dimension by placing the human person at the centre of the development process and protecting participation in, contribution to and enjoyment of development.

The concept of civilian continuity does not create these protections; it brings them into analytical relationship with one another.

In contemporary societies, a hospital does not operate independently of electricity and water networks; a pharmaceutical factory does not function independently of laboratories and transportation; a school is not independent of families, teachers and safe access routes; and food production depends upon energy, storage and transport.

For the purposes of this article, civilian continuity may therefore be defined as:

the preservation of the minimum material, human, institutional and social conditions necessary for a civilian population to continue its individual and collective life during and after armed conflict, including access to health care, water, food, housing, education, mobility, communications, livelihoods and other fundamental functions of civilian society.

This is proposed as an interpretative legal framework, not as a declaration that a new rule of international law has already crystallised.

Its principal contribution lies in shifting the unit of analysis from the object to its function, and from the function to its human consequences.

7. Reverberating Effects and Foreseeability

This shift in perspective has direct implications for the application of the principles of proportionality and precautions in attack.

The harm caused by an attack on a power plant is not necessarily confined to physical damage to the plant and its equipment. If the resulting electricity outage disables water pumps, hospital equipment, pharmaceutical or food cold-storage facilities, communications systems or productive capacity, those consequences are real for the civilian population.

Such consequences are commonly described as reverberating effects.

Where these effects are reasonably foreseeable at the time an attack is planned or decided upon, they cannot simply be excluded from the legal assessment because they materialise hours or days after the initial strike.

Foreseeability is not static. Extensive experience from urban warfare, advanced intelligence and surveillance capabilities, geospatial data, infrastructure-network modelling and collateral-damage estimation methodologies have increased the ability of modern armed forces to understand the civilian environment in which attacks are conducted. As the capacity to identify systemic consequences increases, claims that known and foreseeable civilian effects could not reasonably have been anticipated require correspondingly closer scrutiny.

The legal assessment of an attack against infrastructure should therefore examine not only the nature of the object concerned, but also which civilian function would be lost, which other systems depended upon it, and to what extent the resulting harm was reasonably foreseeable to those who planned, approved or ordered the attack.

8. Destruction Has a Second Price: Reconstruction and the Loss of Future Development

The consequences of infrastructure destruction do not end when an essential service is restored. Destruction imposes a second, less visible cost: resources that would otherwise have financed future development must be diverted to reconstruct what already existed. A bridge that must be rebuilt, a university whose laboratories must be reconstructed, a damaged hospital, power plant, water network, airport or pharmaceutical facility does not represent only the loss of an existing asset. Reconstruction consumes financial, technical and human resources that could otherwise have expanded health care, education, housing, scientific research, employment, transport or new infrastructure.

This opportunity cost gives infrastructure destruction an inherently developmental dimension. Conflict can therefore generate three temporally distinct forms of loss: it destroys accumulated investment from the past; it disrupts civilian life in the present; and it may absorb resources otherwise available for future development. A society emerging from conflict may be compelled to spend years restoring yesterday's capacity instead of building tomorrow's.

The right to development is relevant to this dimension because development is not simply a stock of physical assets. It is a continuing process directed towards improving the well-being of the population and enabling participation in economic, social, cultural and political life. Large-scale destruction of civilian and developmental infrastructure

can impair that process twice: first, by destroying accumulated development gains; and second, by redirecting future public and private resources towards reconstruction. The legal consequences of particular reconstruction costs, including questions of causation, remoteness and reparation, require separate analysis. But as a matter of assessing civilian harm and the developmental consequences of armed conflict, the opportunity cost cannot be ignored. This developmental opportunity cost should not be confused with an automatic head of legally recoverable damage: any claim for reparation would still require a demonstrated causal nexus, legal attribution and an applicable remedial framework.

The destruction of civilian infrastructure therefore has a temporal dimension: it destroys past investment, disrupts present civilian life, and may consume resources otherwise available for future development.

9. The “Stone Age”: When Infrastructure Destruction Becomes an Articulated Policy

In the Iranian case, foreseeability arises not only from the objective characteristics of the infrastructure involved. Public statements by the President of the United States directly addressed both infrastructure and the consequences of its destruction.

On 1 April, President Trump stated in an official address concerning military operations against Iran that the United States would conduct heavier attacks in the weeks ahead and spoke of returning Iran to the “Stone Ages.”

On 5 April, he publicly described 7 April as “Power Plant Day and Bridge Day.”

The temporal connection is important. Trump’s 5 April statement did not refer to bridges in the abstract: it identified Tuesday, 7 April, in advance as “Power Plant Day and Bridge Day.” On 7 April, official Iranian documentation records a concentrated series of attacks against precisely this category of infrastructure. The Bayat Bridge on the Payambar-e Azam Freeway was struck; the Tehran–Karaj Freeway was attacked near Hemmat Highway and the Shahid Modarres Bridge sustained damage; ground-transport bridges in western Qom were hit; and, at midday, the Alborz–Zanjan railway bridge at Chaharbagh was struck, killing one person and injuring eleven. The same day, railway tracks in Karaj and the Yahya-Abad railway bridge in Kashan were also attacked, with two civilians killed and three injured. The sequence therefore matters evidentially: a specific category of civilian-connected infrastructure was publicly identified by the President for attack on a specified date, and multiple objects within that category were in fact attacked on that date. This temporal correspondence does not by itself establish the legal status of each target, the identity of the force responsible for every strike, or

the President's personal order for each individual attack. It does, however, strengthen the basis for investigating whether the 7 April strikes formed part of a targeting policy articulated at the highest political level and, if so, how that policy was translated into target selection and operational orders.

His remarks on 6 April were of even greater significance.

A journalist asked whether, in light of his statements concerning bridges and power plants, civilian targets such as schools and hospitals would remain off limits. President Trump replied:

“Very little is off limits.”

He then described a plan under which all of Iran's bridges could be destroyed by the following evening and all of its power plants disabled within hours, again stating that after the expiry of the deadline Iran would have neither bridges nor power plants and would be reduced to the “Stone Ages.”

These statements are legally significant. A political or strategic objective of reducing a society to a state of infrastructural collapse cannot, by itself, transform a civilian object into a lawful military objective. The legal status of each bridge, power plant, hospital or other installation must be assessed independently under the applicable rules of international humanitarian law.

The most significant part of the 6 April press conference, however, concerned a separate evidentiary link: a bridge strike that President Trump personally attributed to his own order. He did not identify the bridge by name in that statement, and this article therefore does not infer its identity from the available public record. What matters for present purposes is the President's account of the decision itself.

“I gave the order to knock out their biggest bridge.”

He then repeated:

“I gave the order.”

According to his own account, the bridge was destroyed within ten minutes of the order. Read together with the 5 April advance designation of 7 April as “Bridge Day” and the documented attacks on multiple bridges and rail links on 7 April, the statement supplies a concrete reason to reconstruct the attack-specific chain of decision: which bridge he ordered struck, what targeting information was presented to him, who transmitted and approved the order, which unit executed it, and what assessment was made of civilian use, expected military advantage, incidental harm and feasible precautions.

This statement is of considerable evidentiary significance.

With respect to at least one attack, the connection between the highest political authority of the United States and the issuance of an operational order is not based solely on inference from the formal chain of command. The President publicly attributed the order to himself.

That fact does not, by itself, establish that the attack constituted a war crime. The legal status of the bridge, any alleged military use, the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, reasonably foreseeable civilian harm, proportionality, precautions taken and the requisite mental element must all be independently assessed.

Nevertheless, one significant link in the evidentiary chain is present:
the order.

10. Knowledge of the Consequences: “91 Million People Without Power and Without Bridges”

Subsequent statements by the President further increase the evidentiary relevance of these remarks.

On 28 July, the White House published excerpts from President Trump’s interview with Fox & Friends. During the interview, he stated that the United States could destroy most of Iran’s bridges in less than an hour and all of the country’s power plants within a day.

He then himself described the human consequence of such a scenario: approximately 91 million people would be left without power and without bridges.

He further remarked that people “have to live” and characterised the matter as a “very delicate balance.”

These statements do not, standing alone, establish the mens rea required for any particular war crime. They are, however, directly relevant to an assessment of knowledge of civilian consequences, foreseeability of harm, and the existence and nature of any targeting policy.

Where the principal political decision-maker himself articulates the consequences of destroying energy and transportation networks in terms affecting tens of millions of civilians, his awareness of the relationship between infrastructure destruction and widespread disruption of civilian life becomes a matter that any serious legal investigation must examine.

11. From a Presidential Order to Individual Criminal Responsibility

Official capacity and individual responsibility are distinct legal questions.

Conduct undertaken by a President in an official capacity may be attributable to the State and may engage the international responsibility of that State. At the same time, where an individual satisfies the relevant legal requirements for participation in an international crime, official status does not in itself eliminate the personal character of that conduct.

Crucially, however, an order to attack is not necessarily an order to commit a war crime.

Individual criminal responsibility requires an attack-specific assessment of the legal status of the target, the information available to the decision-maker, anticipated civilian harm, precautions taken, the individual's role in selecting, approving or ordering the target, and the applicable mental element.

Accordingly, the evidentiary chain in the Iranian case must extend beyond public policy statements:

articulated policy → targeting intelligence → target development and nomination → civilian-harm assessment → approval → order → transmission → execution → resulting harm.

With regard to the bridge referred to by President Trump, one of the upper links in that chain is visible in his own public statements. The precise identification of the bridge, correlation of the stated order with operational data and examination of the underlying targeting process are central to any further assessment of individual responsibility.

12. The ICC Precedent: Attacks on Ukraine's Electricity Infrastructure

The practice of the International Criminal Court concerning attacks on Ukraine's electricity infrastructure provides a useful comparative example of how individual criminal responsibility may be examined in relation to attacks on civilian infrastructure.

In March 2024, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Sergei Kobylash, then Commander of the Long-Range Aviation of the Russian Aerospace Force, and Viktor Sokolov, then Commander of the Black Sea Fleet. The Court found reasonable grounds to believe that they bore responsibility, *inter alia*, for the war crime of directing attacks against civilian objects and for attacks causing excessive incidental civilian harm.

In June 2024, arrest warrants were also issued for Sergei Shoigu, then Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, and Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of

the Russian Armed Forces, in connection with the broader campaign of attacks against Ukraine's electricity infrastructure.

These proceedings do not determine the legal character of any attack in Iran, nor the responsibility of any individual in relation to such attacks. Their relevance here is methodological:

where the evidence supports it, an investigation into attacks on civilian infrastructure may extend from operational execution to higher levels of command and decision-making. At each level, responsibility must be established on the basis of the individual's own conduct, contribution and the required mental element.

13. From Documentation of Damage to an Architecture of Accountability

The concept of civilian continuity would have limited value if it remained solely theoretical.

Its principal significance lies in its potential to reshape the methodology of documentation and legal investigation.

In the case of an attack on a power plant, it is not sufficient to record the coordinates of the installation, the weapon used and the physical damage sustained. An investigation should establish which population the facility served, which hospitals and water systems depended upon it, what backup systems existed, how long the disruption lasted, and what information the attacker possessed — or could reasonably have obtained through feasible precautions — concerning those dependencies.

The same approach applies to bridges. Their role in civilian transportation, the availability of alternative routes, the movement of ambulances and essential goods, the dependency of surrounding communities, and the consequences of their destruction for connectivity and livelihoods should form part of the evidentiary record.

Accordingly, two chains must be reconstructed simultaneously.

On one side:

attack → loss of civilian function → direct and reverberating effects → human consequences.

On the other:

policy → information → target selection → civilian-harm assessment → approval → order → execution.

Responsibility becomes susceptible to rigorous legal assessment when these two chains can be connected, in relation to a particular attack, through evidence capable of judicial scrutiny.

Conclusion: International Law Should Follow the Evidence Upwards

The Iranian case exposes a blind spot in international law not because the law lacks rules protecting civilians, but because those rules can be applied too narrowly when the object struck is treated as the end of the analysis. A school is not protected merely for its walls; its significance lies in the children's ability to learn. A hospital is not protected for its building alone; patients depend on the system of electricity, water, medicines, personnel and access that allows it to function. A power plant is not only turbines and transformers; hospitals, water systems, homes, communications and production may depend upon it. A bridge is not only concrete and steel; it carries people, food, medicines, emergency services and economic life. A fishing vessel may be the economic survival of a family.

The proposed Right to Civilian Continuity gives a name to this systemic dimension without pretending to create a new autonomous rule of *lex lata*. Its function is interpretative: to read the existing protections of international humanitarian law, human rights law and the right to development in light of the interconnected conditions that make civilian life possible. It also introduces a temporal perspective. Infrastructure destruction can erase past investment, interrupt present civilian life and divert future development resources into reconstruction.

That framework matters equally for accountability. International law should follow two evidentiary chains. The first runs outward from the strike: object, lost civilian function, reverberating effects and human consequence. The second runs upward from the strike: operational execution, targeting process, approval, order and decision-maker. Neither chain can be replaced by rhetoric. Both must be reconstructed through evidence, attack by attack.

In the Iranian case, the publicly available record already contains significant elements of both chains. There is documented destruction across systems sustaining civilian life. There are repeated presidential threats against power plants, bridges, desalination facilities and other infrastructure. There are statements indicating awareness of the societal consequences of destroying those systems—including President Trump's later reference to approximately 91 million people "without power, without bridges." There is an official CENTCOM record stating that Operation Epic Fury commenced at the

direction of the President of the United States. And, in relation to at least one bridge attack, there is the President's own public statement: "I gave the order."

The chronology is therefore not merely background. On 5 April, bridges and power plants were publicly designated for attack on 7 April; on 6 April, the President described both the capacity to destroy Iran's bridge and power networks and his personal issuance of an order for a bridge strike; and on 7 April, multiple bridges, railway bridges and transport links were struck. The legal task is to test, attack by attack, whether and how those public statements corresponded to operational targeting decisions.

These facts do not amount to a criminal conviction. They do not establish that every threatened object was civilian, that every strike was unlawful, or that an acknowledged order concerning one bridge can be extrapolated to every attack in the campaign. International criminal law requires more. For each attack, the status of the target, the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, expected civilian harm, reasonably foreseeable reverberating effects, precautions taken, information available to the decision-maker, the applicable mental element and the individual mode of responsibility must be established.

But those requirements are reasons to investigate, not reasons to stop the inquiry. Where the categories of infrastructure publicly threatened correspond to categories subsequently attacked; where the consequences of their destruction were themselves publicly articulated; and where the political decision-maker acknowledges issuing an order for a specific strike, the evidentiary trail is sufficiently serious to justify investigation into whether particular decisions crossed the line from the conduct of hostilities into individual criminal responsibility.

The ICC's Ukraine infrastructure cases illustrate this methodological point. The Court's investigation into an alleged campaign against electric-power infrastructure did not stop with those closest to operational execution; subject to the evidence, arrest warrants extended to operational commanders and senior defence leadership, including allegations of ordering and failures of command responsibility. The Ukraine warrants do not determine the legal character of any strike in Iran. They nevertheless demonstrate that international criminal analysis can follow an infrastructure campaign upward through a decision-making structure when the evidence supports doing so.

The central proposition is therefore simple. International law should not stop at the crater. It should ask what civilian system depended upon the object destroyed, what consequences were known or reasonably foreseeable, who selected or approved the target, who issued the order, and on what legal basis. The ultimate object of protection

is not infrastructure as such. It is the possibility of civilian life continuing through war. And where credible evidence leads from the destruction of that possibility to the highest level of political decision-making, accountability must be capable of following the same path.