

Symposium on The Islamic Revolutionary regime and Challenges to International Law in the Grey Zone

Convened by The Hague Initiative for International Cooperation (*thinc.*) at The Hague on 6 May 2026.

Fifteen expert speakers examined the interface between the international legal system and the multi-layered threat environment in which it operates, particularly in grey zones of international law being exploited by the Islamic revolutionary regime in Iran and other Islamist actors. The threat posed by Islamism includes: nuclear proliferation; ballistic missile and armed drone capabilities; restriction of freedom of navigation; and systematic use of proxy armed forces such as Hezbollah and Hamas to carry out terror attacks.

The Symposium issued the following Concluding Statement:

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The revolutionary regime in Tehran and other Islamist movements pose a clear and present danger to Western pluralist democracies. Through grey-zone warfare strategies and lawfare in national and international institutions, they are conducting a coordinated global campaign to undermine Western democracies.

The post-WWII rules-based international law system - including international tribunals like the ICC and ICJ - is increasingly insufficient to address this multi-layered threat. The Symposium calls upon Western leaders urgently to take measures at national and international levels to address this problem.

Political Islam Presents a Clear and Present Danger to Global Security

1. Islamist regimes, including the revolutionary regime in Iran, pose a clear and present danger to Western liberal democracies. Driven by an apocalyptic worldview, they seek to erode pluralist and liberal democratic systems through both violent and non-violent means. Iran must be seen within a wider pattern of political Islam, including Sunni Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, whose use of democratic language and civil-society engagement may serve long-term illiberal objectives.
2. Although the Islamic Republic uses violent revolutionary means, it has been weakened by internal rejection, economic deterioration and regional isolation, so that real power in Iran now rests increasingly with the IRGC. Its Quds Force and Basij sit at the centre of a coercive structure that connects domestic repression with the projection of violence abroad. This makes the regime both a threat to its own population and a continuing source of insecurity beyond Iran's borders. Its collapse would represent a major gain for Iranian society and international security.
3. Western debate too often treats Iran as in a condition of peace disturbed by external action. That framing overlooks the regime's long record of repression and its lack of genuine legitimacy among large parts of the Iranian population. Many Iranians understand external



pressure on the regime as a challenge to the state apparatus that governs through repression. Survey data, digital traces and activist discourse indicate substantial popular internal support for regime change, including openness to external pressure where it is directed at the regime rather than the nation.

Laws of Armed Conflict are Inadequate and Require Recalibration

4. Iran and its aligned actors have developed a coordinated campaign that turns armed conflict into legal, informational and diplomatic pressure against Israel. Contested images, rapid allegations and emotionally charged narratives are attached to claims of unlawful conduct, amplified through media and digital networks, and reinforced by institutional actors before careful fact-finding can occur. Hamas's information manoeuvre forms part of this strategy, treating perception as an element of the battlefield and using legal accusation to weaken Western support for Israel.
5. This dynamic distorts legal discourse by advancing grave legal labels before the relevant evidentiary thresholds have been tested. Allegations of genocide and war crimes require disciplined analysis of intent, attribution, proportionality and proof. When those standards are displaced by virality, repetition and institutional momentum, lawfare acquires the authority of international law while abandoning its methodological rigour. Western governments, courts, media organisations and legal institutions must respond with speed, transparency and evidentiary precision, resisting the conversion of propaganda effects into legal judgment. Deniable attribution remains central to Iran's proxy warfare.
6. The law of state responsibility imposes demanding thresholds before the conduct of organised armed groups can be imputed to a state, but those thresholds must be assessed against the reality of Iran's repeated proxy attacks, longstanding operational linkages and broader conflict dynamics. Iran's legal responsibility cannot be evaluated as though each proxy attack were isolated from the strategic system that sustains it.
7. In relation to self-defence, the Charter must be read as a whole. Article 2(4) prohibits the threat and use of force, while Article 51 preserves an inherent right rooted in customary international law. No plausible interpretation requires states to surrender the capacity to protect their populations from sustained threats and repeated attacks. Contemporary criticism of American and Israeli action against the revolutionary regime in Iran is too narrowly focused on Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter. That approach neglects the wider framework of continuing threats, proxy warfare, Iran's active hostility, and Article 2(3)'s requirement that disputes be settled peacefully. Iran's direct attacks on Israel in April and October 2024 occurred within an already developed conflict relationship. Israel's subsequent operations are justified as ongoing self-defence against Iranian proxy warfare and the strategic implications of Iran's nuclear programme.
8. Proportionality in international law is tied to ending or decisively weakening the threat, while ceasefires and diplomacy do not extinguish self-defence where hostile capacity and intention remain. Cyber operations and last-window-of-opportunity scenarios also require a new



approach to anticipatory self-defence, consistent with the logic reflected in the Tallinn Manual on cyber warfare.

9. The liberal international order has failed to respond adequately to a regime designed to survive internal dissent while shielding atrocity behind non- intervention. Iran's mass violence against its own population, support for armed proxies and coercive external conduct make sovereignty-based objections incomplete and incoherent. In such circumstances, the principle of Responsibility to Protect should justify proportionate intervention. International law is distorted when it restrains states confronting persistent armed threats while insulating heavily armed proxies and their state sponsors from effective response.

Islamist Grey Zone Warfare Exposes Structural Weaknesses in International Law

10. Grey-zone conflict exposes structural weaknesses in international law because coercive conduct can remain below the threshold of conventional armed attack while still producing strategic harm. Iran exploits that space by turning proxy violence, maritime disruption, cyber operations and information campaigns into a lawfare method directed against rule-bound adversaries. This is the logic of compliance-leverage: actors willing to disregard legal and moral restraints can make an opponent's adherence to those restraints a battlefield disadvantage. By manipulating legal procedures, institutional expectations and evidentiary habits, Iran has developed lawfare into a coherent and strategically integrated instrument. Iran's grey-zone model blends immediate coercion with long-term influence.
11. The IRGC and Quds Force externalise violence through criminal intermediaries and deniable operatives in Europe, including plots against dissidents and other targets, while aligned religious, educational and cultural institutions cultivate durable networks of loyalty, ideological affinity and political influence. These methods connect intimidation with influence, allowing the same strategic project to adapt to local conditions. Legal systems must respond by strengthening attribution frameworks, tightening responses to foreign influence networks, and integrating intelligence and criminal-justice capacities so that deniable operations produce identifiable responsibility and enforceable consequences.
12. The same grey-zone logic shapes the legal and informational contest over Gaza. Much commentary is analytically defective because it myopically sees destruction, civilian harm and legal responsibility without incorporating Hamas's methods, incentives and reciprocal role in hostilities. Dense urban warfare is inherently destructive even where attacking forces seek to comply with the law, and Hamas exploits that environment by embedding military activity within civilian space, using protected sites for operational purposes and shaping casualty narratives. Those narratives then move through media, NGOs and international institutions with inadequate scrutiny. The corrective must be both military and epistemic: civilians should be removed from combat zones wherever possible, and public debate must rest on evidentiary foundations capable of distinguishing propaganda effects from legally and factually grounded analysis.

Politicization of Academia and Legal Institutions Feeds Antisemitism



13. Antisemitism signals wider civic, moral and institutional breakdown. Contemporary antisemitism moves through education, digital spaces and professional cultures, where anti-Zionist discourse normalizes dehumanisation, delegitimation and double standards. The 7 October 2023 attacks were an assault on shared civilisational norms, and the IHRA working definition remains essential for identifying the modern forms of anti-Jewish hostility.
14. The pattern appears in academia, where anti-Israel legal rhetoric against Israel is treated as settled before proper fact-finding occurs, while calls for de-escalation are used to silence Jewish voices challenging pro-Hamas narratives. This institutional failure is reinforced by functional inversion: legal doctrines are emptied of their purpose while legal vocabulary survives.
15. The same inversion shapes genocide discourse. Genocide requires specific intent. Where that element is diluted or inferred without evidentiary basis, the Genocide Convention is converted into a tool for misclassifying armed conflict. In *South Africa v Israel*, grave accusations are advanced through institutional momentum, adverse political framing and lowered evidentiary discipline instead of rigorous application of the Genocide Convention's requirements. This forms part of a deliberate strategy to internationalise the conflict through legal institutions. It can be traced through Mahmoud Abbas's 2011 appeal for UN recognition of Palestine, the use of non-member observer state status to widen the legal battlefield, and a longer history of anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist mobilisation. Manipulation of current genocide litigation, including *The Gambia v Myanmar*, is being instrumentalized to build doctrinal and procedural pathways for claims against Israel. Once legal institutions become receptive to this convergence of ideology, advocacy and selective evidentiary practice, they risk becoming vehicles for the politicisation of international law itself.

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