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Responsible Warfare. US-Iran Case

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Abstract

In the conundrum of legality, legitimacy, and morality regarding war and war operations, the concept of responsible warfare could find its place. The operational definition of such a concept or even behavior has its place somewhere between the legitimate and moral sides, since an ethical component is present in the idea of responsible warfare, not only in the legitimate access to force and use of military power, but also in the legal component associated with it. In this article, we aim to identify specific pieces of concrete behaviour in times of war that would substantiate this concept and could be a basis for responsible behavior. Our major test case is the recent attack by the US on Iranian nuclear facilities and the counter-reaction from the regime of Ayatollahs to retaliate proportionally and avoid escalation. The link between promoting a responsible warfare and the effectiveness of reaching the objectives in war could be, however, instrumental to challenge as well as advocating to any extension of such a practice.

Keywords:

Responsible Warfare; Legal; Legitimate; Moral Actions in War;
Military Retaliation; Escalation.

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Introduction and Methodology

The article aims to identify the nuances between legal, legitimate, and moral in terms of warfare operations, and the place of a concept of responsible war/warfare in this conundrum. Moreover, through a heuristic approach, we are aiming at identifying behaviour that could fit into the understanding of a responsible war definition and could lead us to promote it, when taking into consideration the big struggle between means and ends, costs and benefits in times of war, all related to the effectiveness of chivalrous behaviour in war times.

We have done an encyclopaedic assessment of the domains, criteria, indicators, and schools of thinking related to legal, legitimate, and moral approaches towards the war, in general. This would indicate the real place of responsible war as a concept and the need and place of such a concept, as well as the epistemological use of such a concept. After establishing the content and operational definition based of the previous studies about responsibility in war and previous attempts to create such a perspective, we are making a poli-heuristic study on concrete cases of behaviour involving responsibility in war that would show us that the concept has a concrete practical part and consequences that need to be explored so that this concept could be welcomed in the theory related to war.

Responsible warfare involves legal, legitimate, and moral components of military action.

1. Legality and war

The war changed dramatically in form, shape and participants ([Chifu and Simons 2023](#)), and the mix in the space of hybrid components, and full spectrum warfare ([Chifu and Grigore 2025](#)) has altered also the understanding of the war and the legislation about the way of conducting wars, criminal acts in war, civilians, and their involvement and responsibilities in wartimes. We have covered a big part of the conundrum about legality, legitimacy, and morality in war ([Chifu 2024c](#)) that could stay in the fundamentals of our debate here. We have identified that the boundaries between war and peace nowadays are very blurred. The relativization of war and combat and the hybridization of confrontations ([Chifu and Simons 2023](#)) require an increasing number of criteria to decipher ambiguities and interpretations.

First, the most important part of the legal debate comes from the distinction between civilians and militaries, and then about the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. The debate about proportionality in war came naturally since war no longer justifies the excessive number of civilian casualties ([Chifu 2024b](#)). Armies do not fight against civilians, so the killing of civilians is generally prohibited during war according to the laws of war. The Geneva Conventions' fundamental provision is not to directly target civilians who are not participating in the war ([United Nations 1949](#)).

But real operations come with side effects, unintentionality, collateral damage, and civilian victims, even if we have planning and clear rules of engagement, minimizing the civilian victims, when fighting in crowded areas or where military targets are hidden or embedded in civilian communities.

Discussing responsible warfare leads us also to look at the theory of a just war: A war is considered just, right, only if the good it brings outweighs the bad it causes on that occasion ([Hurka 2005](#)). An effect of war achieved by unfair methods or exceeding the expected benefits of the operation can lead to responsibilities ([Fabre 2009](#)). Here we can include, of course, the legal grounds for military intervention, ranging from self-defense to combating terrorism, genocide, nuclear non-proliferation, and the responsibility to protect, all UN grounds for legitimate intervention ([Simons și Chifu 2017](#)).

The legal basis for intervention, the grounds set out in the UN Charter, and the previous conventions on combating terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, and genocide are clear ([United Nations 2001](#); [1951](#); [1968](#)). In the humanitarian law, the 2005 resolution on the responsibility to protect (R2P) ([United Nations 2005](#)), respectively the 2005 World Summit document (A/RES/60/1) and the 2007 letter from the UN Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council (S/2007/721), which highlighted the need to operationalize the principle of the responsibility to protect ([United Nations 2007](#)) could be less clearer and acceptable, but making the way to legitimacy of war. Security Council resolution on Libya ([United Nations 2011a](#); [2011b](#)) may serve as validation at the UN level of this principle and associated provisions ([Chifu 2011](#)). The relationship between the responsibility to protect and the equal national sovereignty of UN member states, and the right to interfere on the territory of a member state of the organization ([Glanville 2014](#)) is still to be settled legally.

2. Legitimacy and war

The objectives of the war could require, when planning, the necessity of the action that creates side effects on civilians, but the legitimacy of such a step should include that the actions taken against civilians do not constitute punitive acts, but ones strictly related to the logic and planning of the war ([Fabre 2009](#)). In the criteria and indicators related to legitimacy, we could include the number of casualties of combatants and civilians compared with the objectives and achievements, when there's a legitimate military strategy of the party concerned ([Fabre 2015](#)). The expressed desire and consecutive actions taken to end the war are part of the legitimacy, as well as attempts to avoid sliding towards wars of attrition ([May 2012](#)).

The debate on proportionality in war also includes efforts to stop and end the war ([Chifu 2024c](#)), which constitutes a basis for legitimacy. The link between the just or unjust nature of a war and the conclusion of a just or unjust war is made through two principles clearly derived from the legal component of the law of

war: a belligerent waging a just war may be obliged to fight to end the war before fully achieving the objectives of its just war; on the other hand, a belligerent who has entered into an unjust war may obtain legal justification for continuing the war based on the behaviour and observance of the rules of war by its counterpart (Chifu 2024c). Hence, the importance of constantly seeking ways to end the war, but also of ensuring the legitimacy and legality of continuing it until its conclusion, even if the initial objectives have not been achieved.

We found references to criteria related to legitimacy at war linked to a legitimate authority to declare the war, as well as the ultimate goal of a just peace, pursued from the beginning of the conflict (Christopher 2004). The criteria for assessing whether it is right, fair, and just (from a legal point of view) to engage in combat would also be fivefold: the seriousness of the threat justifying the use of military action; the motivation or primary objective of the military action; the last option: if there are no reasonable peaceful alternatives available; the proportionality of the military response (particularly in terms of the number of casualties and destruction); the balance of consequences (the result brings more good than pain and costs through the intervention carried out) (Contratto 2012).

Here is also the place to discuss the difference between exiting a war and ending a war. Exiting a war has rarely been done through peace agreements/treaties, at least since 1994 (Chifu and Voicu 2015). Ending a war is still determined by clear, legally binding documents. But even if legal documents or guarantees are present, there are numerous cases when the war re-emerges in the same conditions – see the Budapest memorandum 1994 for Ukraine (CSCE 1994), ignored 20 years later by the annexation of Crimea, and the Chechen peace Treaty 1996, broken three years after (UN Peacemaker 1996) with a new devastating war. That underlines the limits of the legitimacy criteria in war times, since legitimacy enshrines also the sustainable respect for existing engagements – *bona fides* (Kotzur 2009) – or respect in good faith of the signed international documents.

So, the legitimacy component refers to refraining from and avoiding launching an attack that could incidentally result in the loss of civilian lives, injury to civilians, and destruction of civilian objects that would be excessive in relation to the anticipated direct military advantage (ICRC 1977, art.57, para.2). Legitimacy requires that the criterion of just cause be balanced by those of last resort, the immunity of non-combatants, and the principle of proportionality.

3. Morality and war ethics

We are not going to make a full theory of morality and war. Professional armies today increasingly rely on civilians as a source of combatants and military resources, weapons, and components that can only be used in war, a situation which, from the point of view of legitimacy, qualifies them to assume responsibility in war and forfeit the general rights of civilians in war (Fabre 2009).

There are two big schools of thinking: the one based on the theory of just war and discrimination against non-combatant civilians that are claiming, however, the due responsibility of civilians, and the one that rejects such distinction and considers that the immunity of non-combatants must be absolute according to the humanitarian law, claiming that the profound morality of war is what defines and governs these principles, which are not found in the laws of war (Shue 2008); (Roberts 2008). The same with the issue of global/national responsibility (Nuremberg type) or of global indiscriminate sanctions for all citizens or groups and communities versus distributive justice – judging each one according to its own direct acts – which is deeply controversial in the case of war and civilian responsibility (Cohen 2008; Miller 2008; Williams 1998; Kymlicka 2002).

The same tensions come when assessing what's proportional and what's disproportionate, predictable but unintended in terms of killing and injuring non-combatants (Lango 2014), with high moral ground claiming a larger impunity for such military to civilian attacks and larger immunity for civilians and non-combatants, and a lot of caveats, limitations and extra rules at any point, from planning to execution, in the case of professional armies. Not talking about other operations when parts of morality and war ethics would interdict in full operations like political assassination, the right to legally kill in revenge, the punishment of treason, and repression, which we've studied (Chifu 2024a). The same applies to using nuclear rhetoric in any context, the nuclear rhetoric, or even the possible use of nuclear weapons (Chifu 2023).

Cases of the use of responsible actions in times of war

The responsible actions are rated in the niche between legitimate and moral behaviour, even though critics from the human rights organisations often debate this issue. It refers to actions that avoid secondary loss of life at the expense of the effectiveness of the military operation. It involves both warning about and abstaining from military action, or creating conditions for limiting the human secondary casualties, both civilian and military. In this space, we've discovered and studied three types of classical conventional actions in military operations: roof knocking, phone calls, and leaflets, as well as the use of loudspeakers. It is true that, in some cases, those warnings had a side effect on psychological operations that can't be denied. However, they are worth mentioning and studying since they represent a good step forward in the right direction, using them to avoid human casualties in war.

1. Roof knocking

This is a characteristic of the IDF, the Israeli Army, and refers to a military strategy created in 2009 by the Israeli Air Force to alert the Gazan population to evacuate structures it had identified as housing Hamas's command posts, rocket caches, or ammunition storage facilities. It has subsequently been applied in a number of conflicts (Magramo, et al. 2023). Before a major hit is carried out, IDF soldiers will

drop a tiny, non-explosive munition on the top of a building to warn the occupants that the building is the target of an airstrike (Withnall 2014). By permitting evacuation in structures where militant organizations store rockets or munitions, it seeks to reduce the number of civilian casualties (Lister and Abdelaziz 2014). The attack came some 15 minutes after the warning.

However, human rights organizations have challenged this contentious approach (Magramo, et al. 2023). First, because there were errors of judgment recorded. Second, because in such a heavily populated neighborhood, the damage of missiles cannot be limited to a single house – see the attack on a building near al Batsj mosque struck by shrapnel, or individuals that stayed too close to a building that has been targeted for attack, being hit by flying metal, wood, and concrete. UN estimates that 70% of those hits are civilians (Magramo, et al. 2023).

“There is no way that firing a missile at a civilian home can constitute an effective ‘warning’”, stated Philip Luther of Amnesty International, in condemnation of the so-called ‘knock on the roof’ tactic (Withnall 2014). Another criticism is that despite the warning, there aren’t many secure locations for civilians to find in a blockaded area. Moreover, in the recent Gaza war, Israel appears to have given up on the “knock on the roof”. IDF spokesperson Lt. Col. Richard Hecht stated on October 11, 2023, that “ Hamas didn’t knock on the roof when they entered and threw explosives at our ambulances. It’s war. It’s a different scale”, with reference to the October 7 attacks (Magramo, et al. 2023).

2. Phone calls and leaflets

Phone calls and leaflets were used in multiple cases by the IDF and the American Army. Both the 2008-09 and 2012 Israeli-Palestinian conflicts in Gaza made use of leaflets and phone messaging. They were partially an attempt to clear areas where Israeli troops planned to concentrate strikes, and they were partially political in nature, accusing Hamas of causing the violence. Leaflets cautioning people not to approach the border within 300 meters were distributed during both battles. Leaflets alerted locals in 2012 that terrorist groups were lurking among them and posed a direct threat to their safety. An IDF report states that around 2.5 million leaflets were distributed in 2008–09. About 165,000 phone messages sent the same message (Lister and Abdelaziz 2014). The Israeli military has also used radio and television broadcasts to broadcast warnings during previous operations against Hamas.

In the case of the American Army, in the 2003 Iraq campaign, leaflets dropped from US planes were asking villagers in southern Iraq to tune into radio stations run by “Coalition forces”. Hundreds of thousands of leaflets warning soldiers to stay away from damaged installations that are likely to be hit again have also been sent to them. Messages were specific - “repairing the facilities puts Iraqi military lives at risk and that the Coalition has targeted fiber optic cables for destruction”; “To ensure your safety, avoid areas occupied by military personnel”; “targeting Coalition aircraft or

tracking them with radar could result in Coalition air strikes” – or part of a psyops campaign - “Coalition forces do not wish to harm the noble people of Iraq”; “The Coalition does not wish to destroy your landmarks” - were dropped also to civilian or to Iraqi air defense forces ([Moss 2003](#)).

3. The use of loudspeakers

For sure, in all those cases, critics are referring to psyops rather than warning or responsible warfare aimed at avoiding casualties. But one cannot ignore that perspective, the fact that the side effect is, however, spearing civilian lives. It is true, on the other hand, that in some cases it is very difficult to separate those two objectives. Moreover, when it is about the use of loudspeakers, it's impossible not to consider that the first aim is psychological operations, even though the secondary one can mean a responsible warfare behaviour. The use of psychological operations during the Second Gulf War also led to minor successes, when 20 Fedayeen fighters in Nasiriyah were persuaded to surrender by mobile PsyOps teams in Humvees equipped with loudspeakers. In some cases, they were used for promoting revolt ([Taylor 2007](#)).

Responsible war concept. An operational definition

Taking on from the previous cases, we've conducted an encyclopaedic research in the literature about the roots of a responsible war concept that would be needed in the evolution of just war theory, situated between legitimate and moral action in the triad legal-legitimate-moral ([Chifu 2024c](#)). We traced responsibility concerns at the level of debates about the first use of a nuclear weapon in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in fighting insurgency wars, in the campaign in Kosovo and NATO's commitment to zero casualties, but specially now, in the modern age, discussing drones, cyber attacks and the conventional military reaction to them, the use of automated weapons system and the a.i. driven decision-making in lethal weapons use.

The Declaration of St. Petersburg of 1868 proclaimed that the only legitimate object of war was to weaken the military forces of the enemy and that, for this purpose, it was sufficient to disable the greatest possible number of men ([ICRC 1868](#)). The Geneva Protocol I of 1977 introduces the duty, before carrying out an attack, to “do everything feasible to verify that the objectives to be attacked are (...) military objectives” ([ICRC 1977](#), art.57, para 2(a)(i)). Feasible precautions may be defined as those which are “practicable or practically possible, taking into account all circumstances ruling at the time, including humanitarian and military considerations”. The Conventional Weapons Convention of 1981 contains similar language in the Amended Mines Protocol of 1 May 1996, Art. 3, para. 10 ([ICRC 1996](#)).

The documents, mandatory for the signatories, also introduce the rule of doubt: in case of doubt whether a person is a civilian or whether an object is normally dedicated to civilian purposes, the Protocol lays down a presumption of civilian status

(ICRC 1977, Art.50, para1; Art.52, para.3). The political and military planners of the NATO air campaign in the Kosovo conflict of 1999 were determined that it should be carried out strictly in accordance with the law of armed conflict. “The targets were exclusively military — every effort was made to avoid collateral damage — planes only fire at targets when we are confident that we can strike accurately — some aircraft in the first operation returned without dropping ordnance. Targets are carefully selected and continuously assessed to avoid collateral damage” (Shea 1999). Even in this case, there were, inevitably, some instances of collateral damage, as it was on 14 April 1999, an attack on what was defined as the lead vehicle of a column of military vehicles, which proved to be a refugee column near Djakovica (Rogers 2000).

Responsible warfare is also linked to the legitimacy of the use of military force and individuation of responsibilities in such operations in order to justify the use of military force. This is also linked to the use of force involved in military detention or targeted killing (Issacharoff and Pildes 2013). This also needs a greater judicial role in assessing wartime judgements and separating the state of war and the rules associated with it, and the judgements and guarantees for accused individuals in peacetime. These changes are not yet directly reflected in the formal laws of war, but are important in the legitimate and moral debate. As is the very idea of eliminating through direct action and killing of a direct enemy, commander, or political decision-making in times of war or peace (Chifu 2024a).

1. Guerrilla warfare and civilian casualties

Guerrilla warfare, in which fighters merge with the civilian population, tends to increase civilian casualties. In post-1945 conflicts, guerrillas prefer to launch attacks out of civilian anonymity at the enemy’s weak points, often using tactics such as ambush very successfully. The situation is exacerbated when guerrillas, partisans, freedom fighters, or other armed factions are engaged in combat in towns or populated areas (Trooboff 1975). The result of these trends has been an increase in civilian casualties in armed conflicts: according to the Swiss Federal Office for Civilian Protection, the ratio of the First World War was 200 military: 1 civilian; in the Second World War, nearly 1:1, and in the Vietnam War, 1 military: 20 civilians (Sassoli and Bouvier 1999).

The big clash is, however, between the need for effectiveness in war operations, the ambition of military commanders not to expose militaries to unnecessary risks, and the need to avoid secondary unnecessary casualties, especially civilians (Nafziger 1976). Reducing military casualties to a minimum and maintaining the public support for a war are also very important in an era with “the CNN effect”, a reference to the embedded television reporters with the troops, in the Iraq war, and the media reports, often broadcast at the same time as events unfold in a campaign. But even more so nowadays, when anybody with a cell phone could become a reporter and reference to any event in the field.

A full debate is launched regarding weak states and responsibilities for the attacks coming from their territories. It refers to Afghanistan and the 9.11 attacks, but also to the threat to a neighbouring state coming from a separatist regime or an irregular actor out of the reach and control of the sovereign state (see debates about threats coming from separatist Transnistria from the Republic of Moldova and Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine) (Chifu 2022). Sovereign states have a responsibility not only to protect their own citizens but also to protect the rights and fundamental security interests of other states within their own territory (Deng, et al. 1996). However, many states around the world lack the resources to do so. The problem is not always the state's inability but rather its unwillingness to prevent irregular activity on its territory (Reinold 2011).

Safe havens have been defined as “ungoverned, under-governed, or ill-governed areas of a country where terrorists ... can organize, plan, raise funds, communicate, recruit, train, and operate in relative security because of inadequate governance capacity, political will, or both.” (US Department of State 2009) The responsibility for the conduct of irregular forces who use their territory as a launching pad for attacks against other states is a debate about attribution that challenges the restrictive standard that prevailed in international law, which largely absolved states with irregular forces in their territories from responsibility and military responses for acts of those autonomous actors. The global fight against terrorism, however, has strengthened the notion of responsibility even in those cases.

2. Cyber war and legitimate self-defense

In the case of cyber-attacks, two are the most important issues, related to the relevance of ethics to cyberwarfare, assessed by George Lucas in a case-based approach involving the Russian distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack against Estonia for the latter's relocation of a Russian war memorial (2007), the Stuxnet attack on Iranian centrifuges, likely perpetuated by a collaboration of United States and Israeli intelligence (2010), the Guardians of the Peace – likely a North Korean group – hack of Sony Pictures, apparently in protest of Sony's then-soon-to-be-released *The Interview*, a parody assassination attempt of Kim Jong-il (2014) and the Chinese data breach of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), which compromised over 21 million employee records (2015) (Lucas 2017).

The number and diversity of those cases allow covering a wide range of responsible warfare operations, aiming at identifying cyberattacks against civilian or military targets, but also involvement in democratic internal processes like the Russian meddling in the United States' presidential election (2016). But the most important part of the debate is *casus belli*: when does a cyberattack legitimize the self-defense with conventional means, meaning the use of force? Could a cyber attack be considered an armed attack? (Balendra 2008; Ruys 2010)

Responsible warfare is prompted by legitimate and clear arguments in legal terms, but also a suitable, robust self-defense that maintains the support of the population for

the government and the military. Here, the commensurability problem, meaning the dimension of the harm, is at stake in order to decide the proportionality that could refer to a kinetic attack as a reply. A big debate also refers to the physical damages (Stuxnet) and human casualties created after a cyber attack. Lucas sticks to the idea that the need for reaction comes only if a cyber attack causes physical damage to people or objects in the real world. In some other cases, Singer and Friedman consider the need for “sufficiently serious” consequences to open the door to retaliatory kinetic response against a non-kinetic attack ([Singer and Friedman 2013](#)).

We could also have a grave attack on the financial sector, or supplies of essential goods and services, by blocking state internet, inaccessible sites, bank disturbances, elections, attacks non physical that are, however, more damaging on rules and freedoms of numerous individuals and, therefore, could make the case for a kinetic attack in response ([Fritz, Henschke and Strawser 2016](#)). The debate comes down to figuring out the magnitude of the least harm that would activate the right to self-defense for settling the threshold for a conventional response.

3. Automated warfare, drones, a.i.

Maybe the most prominent debates related to responsible warfare are coming from the new technologies and their use in wartime. And for a reason, once they change the full spectrum of rules, and since the current legislation doesn't cover this blooming evolution of technology and its implications in the military operations or associated. In all those cases, the most important principle for responsible warfare is that someone must be held responsible for all actions taken in a military conflict ([Sparrow 2007](#)). But how could this responsibility play a role in the cases of automated systems, a.i., or the use of autonomous drones?

What Champagne and Tonkens call the responsibility gap ([Champagne and Tonkens 2015](#)) is about someone filling a “blank check” for the actions of autonomous robotic devices, a person of sufficiently high standing that could accept responsibility even if that person could not be causally linked to those actions besides this prior agreement. Occupying a decision posture in an office could come, though, with the responsibility involving personal freedom and wealth for the deeds of an automated system under the person's surveillance. Matthias has dubbed “the responsibility gap” ([Matthias 2004](#)) since one's freedoms could not be linked to an unpredictable future guided by technical choice.

Robots cannot make decisions on the basis of their own initiative, but rather on preprogrammed commands. But military weaponry is somehow capable of making programmed choices and decisions in ways that are unpredictable and not in line with pursuing that end in a morally acceptable manner. The full debate is very extensive ([Asaro 2008](#); [Krishnan 2009](#); ([Singer 2010](#))) and engages themes like how the responsibility in warfare could be engaged? “If there are recognizable war crimes, there must be recognizable criminals.” It is natural to want to carry this principle

over to automated warfare (Walzer 1977). Arkin suggested “a responsibility advisor” that autonomous lethal robotic systems will be equipped with, which “makes explicit to the robot’s commander the responsibilities and choices she is confronted with when deploying autonomous systems capable of lethality” (Arkin 2009).

Autonomous weapon systems could erode humans’ decision-making power or alter their decisions when doing face recognition or suggesting targets, even though the human decides and acts by issuing the order to shut down a human target. The situation could be complicated once such weapons have been deployed, and humans will not be able to change or abort their targets. Although autonomous weapons have significant decision-making power, currently, they are not able to make ethical choices. As Robillard and Persons are assessing, in order for Just War Theory to be fully adequate, it must both recognize the unique set of battlefield harms caused by structures as well as account for them by means of a notion of structural responsibility (Robillard 2011). Ethical implications of AI integration in the military decision-making process and how the characteristics of AI systems with machine learning (ML) capabilities (Nalin and Tripodi 2023) might interact with human decision-making protocols are at stake. It’s up to the humans to assess a machine’s ethics and employ it in its specific and limited sector when built for a particular purpose, like a tracking and triage system designed for disaster relief operations (Etzioni and Etzioni 2017).

Sauer and Schornig are concerned about the nexus between democracy and the military use of unmanned systems, the drones. The debate is about the democratic distinctiveness: the ways in which democracies are distinct from other regime types. Democratic Peace Theory does not make space for that distinction in the use of drones for surveillance, and they support the idea that such use of armed and eventually autonomous systems could thwart democracies in the long run and render themselves only more war-prone and even slide toward authoritarian regimes (Sauer and Schörnig 2012).

Effectiveness constitutes the other reference in responsible warfare, related to the protection of life and minimum risk for soldiers. Machines can operate in hazardous environments; they require no minimum hygienic standards; they do not need training; and they can be sent from the factory straight to the frontline. There are numerous advantages to the military, especially in relation to dangerous tasks. They are used in dangerous situations such as forward reconnaissance, bomb disposal, or the suppression of enemy air defences, being exposed to the enemy in the first place, before humans are. We need to use them. Therefore, the complexity of the debate about responsible warfare.

Operational definition

Based on previous debates about responsible warfare and the applied cases underlined above, we have extracted the characteristics necessary and have presented

the following definition of responsible warfare/war (we prefer to go deeper than war for obvious reasons, since a number of debated activities are rather in the hybrid and non-military part of the defense and security).

Responsible warfare is a behaviour and conduct of warfare operations that is designed to prove restraint and avoid escalation of any kind, aims at minimum or zero human casualties and no harm to human life or way of life, even though that behaviour has to sacrifice efficiency, but not the safety of soldiers or raising the risk of man in uniform, not talking about civilians.

That type of activity is different from legal, legitimate, moral approach to war and warfare operations since responsible warfare/war should be legal, in the context of existing legislation, should be legitimate, in order to maintain the support of the public and should aim at maintaining a high moral ground if possible, even though conflicts of value could distort the ideal responsible behaviour from a purely moral one. The balance between effectiveness and no harm should always privilege the second, and any breach of the (moral) rules should have a very clear argument in the realm of the effort to achieve the aims of the operation and, at the same time, avoid victims and costs of any kind.

The US-Iran case: avoiding nuclear catastrophe, due retaliation, and terminating a military confrontation

The case that we are proposing to discuss in the framework of responsible warfare is the attack of the US on the nuclear sites of Iran on the 22nd of June 2025, and the consecutive attack of Iran on the al-Udeid American military base in Kuwait two days later ([Chifu 2025a](#)). The case is consecutive to Israel's 12-day bombing attack on the nuclear facilities, command and control, leadership, and experts on nuclear military issues developed beginning with the 13th of June 2025, which cleared the way for the American intervention with bunker-buster bombs (we do not discuss here Israeli operations). The United States attacked the Iranian nuclear sites, destroying them irrevocably, according to a statement to the nation made by US President Donald Trump ([The White House 2025a](#)).

In the case of the US, it was a unique intervention, with aircraft taking off from the United States and returning to their bases in the US, without any intermediate landings in the Middle East, without a declaration of war, and with the clear objective of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The original Israeli attack began on June 13, the night after the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN institution responsible for supervising and monitoring the nuclear area, issued a very clear and harsh report ([IAEA 2025](#)) stating that Iran was not complying with the JCPOA (Department of State 2015) – which remains in force for the three European states and the organization, even though the US has withdrawn from the agreement. The reason: blocking the inspectors' access to monitoring facilities, avoiding or silencing the communication of activities related to the nuclear program

with the claim of being civilian, and hiding military nuclear facilities revealed by Israeli and American intelligence services.

In all, Iran breached both the nuclear non-proliferation rules and its own commitment in the JCPOA. There are claims that military nuclear use of enriched Uranium for a bomb is not an option, especially since the fatwa issued in October 2003 by the Supreme Leader Khamenei is active and forbids Muslims from producing nuclear weapons ([Sirjani 2013](#)). But it is a weak argument in the debate since the enrichment at 60% and more could never be explained by medical, energy supply, or research needs. There is a discussion about responsible warfare linked to preemptive strikes, as we have to consider also if that attack could happen under Article 51 of the Charter on self-defense, or would have needed a Security Council resolution. But that's rather a juridical and political debate.

Israel was able to destroy only the group of scientists responsible for the nuclear program, the military leadership, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the accessible surface or shallow nuclear sites, along with Iranian air defenses and missile production. Israel “knew in advance” the strikes would not destroy the uranium ([I24 News 2025](#)). So the United States had to intervene to prevent the destruction of deeply buried nuclear sites. The result was the destruction of this program, with a grand part of the nuclear product covered deep *in situ*, under some hundred tons of debris, and some of it being extrait in advance from those sites in order to avoid that the bombing could risk a nuclear contamination: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Israeli media on August 12 that Iran still holds about 400 kilograms of enriched uranium, though Iran may still be unable to access this stockpile ([I24 News 2025](#)), a quantity consistent with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)’s estimate in June 2025 that Iran retained about 408.6 kilograms of 60 percent enriched uranium ([Borens, et al. 2025](#)), less than what is needed for a nuclear weapon. Mario Grossi confirmed repeatedly that no radiation or incident was associated with those military operations ([Newsonair 2025](#)).

The goal of destroying the Iranian nuclear program was achieved ([The White House 2025b; 2025c](#)), as the attack has hit some 3 to 6 hours after the warning was launched by the US forces, enough time for the Iranians to retreat the personnel and nuclear-enriched uranium, but not being able to extract all its centrifuges and other elements of technological nuclear facilities. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that Israel continues to monitor Iran’s nuclear weapons program in coordination with the United States and will act with or without US approval ([I24 News 2025](#)). Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian acknowledged on August 10 that Israeli strikes had damaged nuclear capabilities and warned that rebuilding them could prompt further attacks ([Borens, et al. 2025](#)).

As a reply, Iran launched 13 missiles against the US military base, but also after a warning that allowed the movement of the aircraft and personnel from the

base (Seddon and Pomeroy 2025). As in the case of Iran, the level of destruction was enormous, but no casualties; in the case of the US, only one missile reached the target. Both parties achieved their aim; the US destroyed the nuclear facilities, and Iran formally retaliated by hitting the US base in the Gulf. Both avoided any escalation, as well as significant human casualties, as the US avoided any secondary nuclear crisis (Chifu 2025b).

The responsible warfare definition applies here, in spite of the more debatable issues related to the legality of the strike – the Security Council approval versus interpretation of self-defense, non-proliferation versus preemptive strike, JCPOA broken agreement, and US military intervention. And it goes both ways: the US avoided Iranian casualties in the nuclear direct operation, as Iran avoided American ones. It proved restrained, observance of a plan designed to avoid escalation or human casualties.

How definitive is this intervention? How quickly will Iran rebuild its nuclear military program? These are issues that bring us into the realm of eternal war and the imposition of peace by force, with the ultimate objective of leading to a just and lasting peace. All are debatable in the framework of responsible warfare through the long-term consequences of a military operation. But the first layer of any analysis will consider that exchange of actions as being an example of a responsible war.

Conclusion

Is this exchange of US and Iran military intervention, observing the perspectives of avoiding escalation and human casualties, going to create a trend? It is difficult to know at this point. But the needs of both power politics, self-defense, and public support for military operations could lead to those behaviours being reproduced, and even could lead to a trend in legitimate interventionism with a huge regard for the consequences and respect of ethics, in a responsible warfare.

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