



Minab: When the world's most precise missile chose a classroom

Targeting a school and the mass killing of children are war crimes, and those responsible need to be held to account.



Fragments of a missile displayed on a table [Courtesy of Ali Bahreini]



By **Ali Bahreini**

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It is often said that the worst evils are committed not by monsters or sadists, but by people who are terrifyingly ordinary.

United States “Secretary of War” Pete Hegseth recently remarked with disarming composure in a media interview: “The only ones that need to be worried right now are Iranians who think they’re going to live.” Words spoken without hesitation, as if the prospect of death for millions were merely a strategic calculation.

In southern Iran, before the sun rises over the coast, a familiar sound travels quietly through the villages: the sound of lenj boats preparing for the sea. Their weathered wooden hulls creak against the tide, sails unfold slowly, and fishermen pull their ropes in the stillness of the early morning. In the south, there is a saying: “A lenj that does not know the sea, will be broken by the first wave.” For the people of our coast, the lenj is more than a vessel. It is a symbol of life itself — of perseverance against the sea, against the storm, against a fate that has rarely been gentle.

I am a son of that same south, where the sea has long taught its people how to stand against the waves. Yet on the morning of February 28, an unexpected wave reached the south.

It was 10:45 in the morning. The classrooms of Shajareh-Tayyebah Girls’ Primary School in the city of Minab were filled with children. Girls between the ages of seven and 12 sat behind their desks with notebooks open before them. The rhythm of recitation and the quiet voices of learning drifted through the corridors.

At that very moment, thousands of kilometres away, inside a control room filled with digital screens, a button was pressed.

A Tomahawk cruise missile — one of the most precise guided weapons in the world — rose from a US naval vessel. Such a missile is designed to strike with extraordinary accuracy. It can select a specific structure among many buildings and hit its target within a few metres.

On that morning, its target was not a military installation.

Its target was a girls’ elementary school.

The first missile tore through the roof of the classrooms, and the structure collapsed upon itself. Seconds later, a second missile struck the courtyard, where children who had escaped the falling debris were struggling to breathe beneath clouds of dust. A third explosion followed, and the noise of life gave way to an unbearable silence.



A screenshot of a video showing a missile dropping on the school in Manib, Iran [Courtesy of Ali Bahreini]

When the smoke finally lifted, what remained were burned textbooks scattered among broken desks, small shoes lying across the ground, and the cries of mothers calling the names of their daughters amid the rubble.

About 170 people were killed, most of them schoolgirls, and some 100 were wounded. These numbers cannot convey the human reality they represent.

This was not an accident. The timing alone speaks with unmistakable clarity: 10:45 on a Saturday morning, precisely when the classrooms were full of children, in the very first hours of war. A missile capable of striking within five metres does not mistake a classroom for a military facility. Satellite imagery taken before and after the strike, remnants of US munitions, and verified video recordings all point to the same conclusion.

This was not an error. It was a message delivered on the first day of war that even the most remote communities of southern Iran could be turned into sites of devastation. Its purpose was to instil terror at the outset, to break the resolve of a people, and to normalise the idea that nowhere — not even a classroom — is safe.

The repeated targeting of the school clearly demonstrates deliberateness and evidences the requisite intent.

Minab did not remain an isolated tragedy. Across the country, the pattern has repeated itself. Civilians have been killed in large numbers, residential neighbourhoods reduced to rubble, commercial centres destroyed, medical facilities struck, and schools damaged or obliterated. Even buildings of the Red Crescent, an institution that stands as a universal symbol of humanitarian protection, have not been spared.

These repeated attacks reveal not a series of unfortunate mistakes but a discernible pattern. The targets are not armies on the battlefield but the structures of ordinary life itself: homes, hospitals, and schools. When such places are repeatedly struck, the intention becomes impossible to ignore.

This pattern of criminal conduct was explicitly affirmed by US President Donald Trump on March 10, when he publicly threatened the Iranian nation and its civilian infrastructure, declaring that “we will take out easily destroyable targets that will make it virtually impossible for Iran to ever be built back, as a Nation, again — Death, Fire, and Fury will reign upon them.”

From the perspective of international law, what has occurred cannot be understood as a simple breach of the laws of war. It falls squarely within a body of grave violations that international criminal justice has defined and condemned for decades. War, even in its most violent form, is not lawless. The rules governing armed conflict exist precisely to protect civilians from the horrors of it, and when those rules are violated, responsibility does not disappear within the fog of battle.



Fragments of a missile displayed on a table [Courtesy of Ali Bahreini]

The foundations of modern international criminal law were laid after World War II in the International Military Tribunals at Nuremberg and Tokyo. There, the international community affirmed a principle that has since become a cornerstone of justice: those who command military power cannot evade responsibility by claiming that they merely followed orders. Authority carries with it a corresponding duty of accountability.

This principle has been reaffirmed repeatedly in subsequent international tribunals. At the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, in the case of *Prosecutor v Tihomir Blaskic*, the judges held that the deliberate destruction of educational and religious institutions during armed conflict constitutes a war crime.

In examining the atrocities committed in the village of Ahmici, the tribunal concluded that the destruction of the village's mosque and school was not the result of battlefield confusion but part of a calculated campaign designed to terrorise the civilian population. The commander was held responsible because he had ordered the crimes or failed to prevent them.

Similarly, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda demonstrated in cases such as *Prosecutor v Jean-Paul Akayesu*, that attacks against places where civilians seek refuge, including schools and churches, constitute grave violations of international humanitarian law. Those who

shelter in such places, particularly children, are hors de combat, outside the sphere of combat and entitled to absolute protection.

These principles are codified in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Article 8(2)(b)(ix) defines as a war crime the intentional directing of attacks against buildings dedicated to education, provided that they are not military objectives. This rule reflects the fundamental principles of distinction and proportionality embedded in the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols: war is fought against combatants, not against classrooms, hospitals, or homes.

In the case of Shajareh-Tayyebah School in Minab, the legal question is tragically clear. A missile engineered for precision struck a school building at the precise moment when children were present. The result was not collateral damage but a human catastrophe — more than 100 children whose voices will never again be heard in their classrooms.

International law, however, does not stop at identifying the physical act. It also examines the chain of command through which such acts become possible. In the structure of the US armed forces, ultimate authority over military operations rests with the president as commander-in-chief. Trump stands at the apex of that chain of command and bears ultimate political and military responsibility for the initiation and conduct of military operations.

Immediately beneath him in that structure stands Hegseth, who, as “secretary of war”, is the highest civilian authority within the “Department of War”, responsible for the planning and execution of military operations through the armed forces’ command hierarchy.

His own public remarks reflect an unapologetic posture towards violations, including his statement that there will be no “stupid rules of engagement” and no “politically correct” wars.

In international criminal law, these offices are not merely political positions; they carry legal obligations. The doctrine of command responsibility establishes that commanders may be held criminally responsible when they order crimes and when they know, or should have known, that such crimes are being committed and fail to prevent them.

The experience of international criminal justice reveals a recurring truth. When schools, homes, and hospitals are repeatedly struck, such attacks rarely represent isolated incidents. They form part of a broader strategy — an attack on the fabric of everyday life designed to break the spirit of a people.

History remembers such patterns just as it remembers the names of those who suffered them.

In southern Iran, there is a saying: “No lenj broken in a storm is ever truly lost; the sea eventually returns its fragments to the shore.” The memory of justice works in much the same way. The names of the children of Minab, too, will one day reach that shore.

The Iranian nation will not falter in defending its country or in seeking justice for the blood of its people.

The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial stance.



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