



## Analysts say US threat of ‘no quarter’ for Iran violates international law

*Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said there would be ‘no quarter, no mercy’ as US continues to pummel Iran.*



Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth salutes during the transfer of US soldiers' remains on March 9 [Kylie Cooper/Reuters]



By [Brian Osgood](#)

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Rights groups have slammed United States Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth for saying that “no quarter” will be shown to Iran, as the US and Israel continue their military

campaign against the country.

“We will keep pressing. We will keep pushing, keep advancing. No quarter, no mercy for our enemies,” Hegseth told reporters on Friday.

Under the Hague Convention and other international treaties, it is illegal to threaten that no quarter will be given.

Domestic laws, such as the 1996 War Crimes Act, also prohibit such policies. US military manuals likewise warn that threats of “no quarter” are illegal.

Brian Finucane, a senior adviser at the International Crisis Group, a think tank, said Hegseth’s comments appear to run afoul of those standards.

“These comments are very striking,” Finucane told Al Jazeera over a phone call. “It raises questions about whether this belligerent, lawless rhetoric is being translated into how the war is being conducted on the battlefield.”

But Hegseth has publicly dismissed concerns about international law, claiming he would abide no “stupid rules of engagement” and no “politically correct wars”.

His rhetoric has provoked concern among some experts that measures designed to prevent civilian harm are being ignored in favour of a campaign of “maximum lethality”.

Hegseth’s remarks also come after a US strike on a girls’ school in southern Iran that killed more than 170 people, most of them children. The war has left at least 1,444 Iranians dead and millions more displaced.

## **‘Inhumane and counterproductive’**

Prohibitions against declaring “no quarter” go back more than a century, part of an effort to impose restraints on conduct during war.

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The Nuremberg trials after World War II upheld that legal standard, as Nazi officials

were prosecuted, in some cases, for denying quarter to enemy forces.

“The basic idea is that it’s both inhumane and counterproductive to execute people who have laid down their arms,” said Finucane.

He added that the “mere announcement” of “no quarter” from a government official can itself be a war crime.

The US and Israel have already faced allegations of violating international law during their war against Iran. Experts have condemned their initial strike on February 28 as “unprovoked”, deeming the conflict an illegal war of aggression.

Iranian officials also protested after a US submarine sank a military vessel, the IRIS Dena, off the coast of Sri Lanka, as it returned from a ceremonial naval exercise in India. That attack killed at least 84 people.

While warships are considered legal military targets, Iran has said that the ship was not fully armed, raising questions about whether it could have been interdicted rather than sunk.

US forces also purportedly declined to help rescue sailors from the Dena, even though the Geneva Convention largely requires aid to the shipwrecked. The Sri Lankan navy ultimately helped collect survivors from the wreckage.

Responding to the attack, Hegseth described the sinking of the ship as a “quiet death”. He also told reporters, “We are fighting to win.”

US President Donald Trump himself remarked that he asked why the ship had been sunk, not captured.

“One of my generals said, ‘Sir, it’s a lot more fun doing it this way,’” Trump said.

### **‘Serious red flag’**

The US military has faced criticism for killing civilians in military operations for decades.

That includes during the so-called “global war on terror”, when airstrikes resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, including a 2008 attack on a wedding party in Afghanistan.

Even before the war with Iran, the Trump administration had faced accusations that it violated international law by attacking alleged drug-trafficking vessels in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean.

At least 157 people have been killed in those attacks since they started on September 2.

The Trump administration, however, has never identified the victims nor presented evidence against them. Scholars have condemned the attacks as a campaign of extrajudicial killings.

Analysts say that the Pentagon’s policies of emphasising lethality at the expense of human rights concerns has carried over into its war against Iran.

“Death and destruction from the sky all day long. We’re playing for keeps. Our warfighters have maximum authorities granted personally by the president and yours truly,” Hegseth said during a briefing on March 4.

“Our rules of engagement are bold, precise and designed to unleash American power, not shackle it.”

Sarah Yager, the Washington director at Human Rights Watch, called such rhetoric alarming.

“I’ve been engaging with the US military for two decades, and I’m shocked by this language. Rhetoric from senior leaders matters because it helps shape the command environment in which US forces operate,” Yager said.

“From an atrocity-prevention perspective, language that dismisses legal restraints is a serious red flag.”

While the impact of Hegseth’s rhetoric on combat operations is not certain, a recent report from the watchdog group Airwars found that the pace of the US and Israeli assault on Iran has far outstripped other military operations in modern history.

Reports indicate that the US dropped nearly \$5.6bn worth of munitions in the first two days of the war alone. Airwars says the US and Israel hit more targets in the first 100 hours of the Iran war than in the first six months of the US campaign against ISIL (ISIS).

Following Hegseth's remarks on Friday, Senator Jeff Merkley condemned the Pentagon chief as a "dangerous amateur". He cited the attack on the Iranian girls' school as an example of the consequences.

"His 'no hesitation' engagement rules set the stage for failing to distinguish a civilian school from a military target," Merkley wrote in a social media post.

"The result, more than 150 dead schoolgirls and teachers from an American missile."



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