

VIEWPOINT

Schools Under Fire: Armed Conflict and the Vulnerability of Childhood

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The attack on a girls' school in Minab

On February 28, 2026, during coordinated US–Israeli air strikes against Iran, a girls' school in Minab, southern Iran, was struck with guided weapons alongside 12 structures in an adjacent Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps compound; Iranian authorities reported 156 deaths in the school attack, including students, teachers, and civilians.¹ The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack condemned the strike, emphasizing that military operations must adhere to proportionality, distinction, and precaution to safeguard the right to education.² A subsequent legal analysis in *Just Security* noted that reports of a preliminary US military inquiry attributed the strike to a targeting error based on outdated intelligence, raising concerns about verification, precaution, and accountability under international humanitarian law (IHL).³ The attack also drew attention at the 61st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, where the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack stated that schools are civilian objects and that attacks on education may violate IHL and international human rights law (IHRL).⁴ Beyond immediate casualties, attacks on educational spaces threaten children's rights to education, protection, and physical and mental health.

Iranian authorities blamed the strike on US and Israeli forces, while US and Israeli officials denied deliberately targeting the school and stated that reports of civilian harm were under investigation.⁵ These differing accounts reinforce the need for independent investigation and accountability under IHL, given questions about target selection, outdated intelligence, and verification.⁶ They also reflect a broader pattern in contemporary conflicts, where disputes unfold alongside military operations while children remain exposed to risks to their safety, well-being, and development.

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Furthermore, the attack raises gendered implications, showing how armed conflict can intersect with inequalities and expose girls to specific vulnerabilities. In many conflict settings, girls' access to education is already fragile. When girls' schools become targets or are rendered unsafe, consequences may extend beyond casualties, reinforcing educational exclusion, early marriage, and socioeconomic marginalization, while undermining conditions necessary for physical, psychological, and social well-being.

Humanitarian consequences

This attack occurred amid a regional escalation marked by rising child casualties, disrupted education, displacement, damaged infrastructure, and immediate and long-term impacts on women and girls.⁷ Reports and literature show that, in armed conflict, children, women, and girls face higher risks of death, injury, malnutrition, displacement, and physical and mental illness, affecting their rights to health, protection, and development.⁸

When military operations, including aerial attacks and explosive weapons, occur near civilian areas, they can disproportionately harm civilians and damage essential infrastructure, including schools, homes, and health facilities.⁹ Children are particularly vulnerable because of their developmental stage, dependence on adult protection, and exposure to both the direct and indirect effects of hostilities.¹⁰ As a result, children face increased risks of death, injury, long-term psychological trauma, educational disruption, and adverse developmental outcomes, with lasting implications for their physical and mental health.¹¹

Attacking civilians and civilian objects, including schools, may constitute a violation of IHL and IHRL and may amount to a war crime when attacks are intentionally directed at buildings dedicated to education that are not military objectives.¹² Such attacks also engage states' obligations to protect children's rights to health, education, and development under IHRL. Beyond the immediate loss of life and injury, attacks on educational spaces and the destruction or military use of schools

produce sustained disruption to learning and dismantle education systems, leaving children without access to safe schooling.¹³

This compromises not only physical safety but also children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, since conflict-related trauma, displacement, and unsafe learning environments undermine social-emotional development and cognitive functioning and weaken educational outcomes.¹⁴ In addition, when education is denied through violence, it is not merely an interruption of a service: it becomes an assault on children's human dignity and on the conditions needed for holistic development and recovery during and after conflict, including their long-term well-being.¹⁵

An ethical debate

The effects of prolonged exposure to violence can produce intergenerational consequences, since unprocessed trauma, successive grief, and structural deprivations may compromise children's development and reverberate in cycles of social vulnerability and psychological suffering across generations.¹⁶

This vulnerability is not only personal or psychological; it is also political and structural. Human geography scholarship understands childhood and youth not as fixed biological stages but as dynamic social processes shaped by global political and economic conditions, including neoliberal agendas that shift risks and weaken public support for social reproduction.¹⁷ Children's lives, bodies, and everyday micro-histories are therefore "folded into" broader transformations of power, land, resources, and material conditions, producing vulnerabilities that are social, bodily, and environmental.¹⁸ When schools are bombed and children become direct victims of military offensives, the rupture between ethical rationality and the strategic logic guiding political decisions becomes evident.

From a human rights perspective, attacks on schools raise an ethical question that goes beyond military justification: whether children can ever be treated as acceptable collateral harm in political or strategic disputes. A human dignity-centered

approach rejects this logic and emphasizes that attacks on education are not merely legal breaches but assaults on children's dignity, psychosocial well-being, and future potential.¹⁹

Ultimately, the attack on the girls' school in Minab illustrates how contemporary armed conflicts continue to erode the moral and legal boundaries that should protect civilian life. When educational spaces, associated with safety, learning, and the future, become targets of military violence, consequences extend beyond immediate casualties. Such acts undermine not only IHL but also children's rights to health, education, and dignity and the broader social commitment to protect childhood. Protecting children and educational institutions must remain a nonnegotiable legal, ethical, and human rights priority. Failing to uphold these principles risks normalizing warfare in which children, especially girls, bear the deepest costs.

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