



fecha de presentación: 25/03/2026, fecha de aceptación: 20/04/2026, fecha de publicación: 01/05/2026

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Cita sugerida (APA, séptima edición)

Saad, T. (2026). The Israel–Iran conflict and the limits of international law: legal challenges in contemporary armed conflicts. *Revista Sociedad & Tecnología*, 9(S2), 862-872, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51247/st.v9iS2.792>

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The Israel–Iran conflict and the limits of international law: legal challenges in contemporary armed conflicts

ABSTRACT

This study examined the Israel–Iran conflict through the framework of international law, with the objective of analyzing the legal challenges generated by contemporary armed confrontations involving anticipatory self-defense, proxy warfare, cyber operations, and humanitarian obligations. The methodology adopted a qualitative approach based on doctrinal and documentary legal research. Primary sources included the United Nations Charter, international judicial decisions, humanitarian treaties, and rules on state responsibility, while secondary sources were obtained from indexed academic databases. The analytical process employed comparative legal reasoning to assess the compatibility of state practices with established international norms. The results showed that significant ambiguities persist regarding the lawful threshold of preemptive force, the interpretation of imminence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, and the attribution of responsibility for actions conducted through non-state actors. The findings also indicated that cyber operations have exposed important gaps concerning the classification of digital attacks, evidentiary standards, and proportional legal responses. Furthermore, institutional paralysis within the United Nations Security Council was identified as a factor that weakens enforcement and encourages unilateral legal narratives. The study concluded that international law continues to provide an essential normative framework for regulating armed conflict, but its effectiveness is increasingly challenged by hybrid warfare methods and geopolitical fragmentation. Stronger interpretative standards, improved accountability mechanisms, and institutional reforms are necessary to preserve legal certainty and collective security in modern conflicts.

Keywords: Israel–Iran conflict; international law; self-defense; cyber operations.

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El conflicto Israel-Irán y los límites del derecho internacional: desafíos legales en los conflictos armados contemporáneos

RESUMEN

Este estudio examinó el conflicto entre Israel e Irán desde el marco del derecho internacional, con el objetivo de analizar los desafíos jurídicos generados por las confrontaciones armadas contemporáneas vinculadas con la defensa anticipatoria, la guerra por intermedio de terceros, las operaciones cibernéticas y las obligaciones humanitarias. La metodología adoptó un enfoque cualitativo sustentado en investigación jurídica doctrinal y documental. Las fuentes primarias incluyeron la Carta de las Naciones Unidas, decisiones judiciales internacionales, tratados humanitarios y normas sobre responsabilidad estatal, mientras que las fuentes secundarias fueron obtenidas de bases de datos académicas indexadas. El proceso analítico

utilizó razonamiento jurídico comparado para valorar la compatibilidad de las prácticas estatales con las normas internacionales vigentes. Los resultados evidenciaron ambigüedades significativas respecto al umbral lícito del uso preventivo de la fuerza, la interpretación de la inminencia conforme al artículo 51 de la Carta de las Naciones Unidas y la atribución de responsabilidad por actos ejecutados mediante actores no estatales. Asimismo, los hallazgos indicaron que las operaciones cibernéticas han expuesto vacíos relevantes sobre la clasificación de ataques digitales, estándares probatorios y respuestas proporcionales. Además, la parálisis institucional del Consejo de Seguridad fue identificada como un factor que debilita la aplicación del derecho y favorece narrativas unilaterales. Se concluyó que el derecho internacional sigue siendo un marco normativo esencial, aunque su eficacia enfrenta crecientes desafíos derivados de la guerra híbrida y la fragmentación geopolítica.

Palabras clave: conflicto Israel–Irán; derecho internacional; legítima defensa; operaciones cibernéticas.

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O conflito Israel–Irã e os limites do direito internacional: desafios jurídicos nos conflitos armados contemporâneos

RESUMO

Este estudo examinou o conflito entre Israel e Irã sob a perspectiva do direito internacional, com o objetivo de analisar os desafios jurídicos gerados pelos confrontos armados contemporâneos relacionados à legítima defesa antecipada, guerra por procuração, operações cibernéticas e obrigações humanitárias. A metodologia adotou uma abordagem qualitativa baseada em pesquisa jurídica doutrinária e documental. As fontes primárias incluíram a Carta das Nações Unidas, decisões judiciais internacionais, tratados humanitários e normas sobre responsabilidade estatal, enquanto as fontes secundárias foram obtidas em bases acadêmicas indexadas. O processo analítico utilizou raciocínio jurídico comparado para avaliar a compatibilidade das práticas estatais com as normas internacionais vigentes. Os resultados demonstraram ambigüedades significativas quanto ao limite lícito do uso preventivo da força, à interpretação da iminência conforme o artigo 51 da Carta das Nações Unidas e à atribuição de responsabilidade por atos praticados por atores não estatais. Os achados também indicaram que as operações cibernéticas revelaram lacunas importantes relativas à classificação de ataques digitais, padrões probatórios e respostas proporcionais. Além disso, a paralisia institucional do Conselho de Segurança foi identificada como fator que enfraquece a aplicação do direito e incentiva narrativas unilaterais. Concluiu-se que o direito internacional continua sendo um marco normativo essencial, embora sua eficácia enfrente desafios crescentes decorrentes da guerra híbrida e da fragmentação geopolítica.

Palavras-chave: conflito Israel–Irã; direito internacional; legítima defesa; operações cibernéticas.

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INTRODUCTION

The confrontation between Israel and Iran has become one of the most sensitive and persistent tensions in contemporary international relations, influencing not only Middle Eastern stability but also the broader architecture of global security. Unlike conventional interstate wars of the twentieth century, this rivalry unfolds through a combination of direct strikes, covert intelligence actions, proxy hostilities, and cyber operations. Such multidimensional conflict patterns challenge traditional legal categories and reveal the growing difficulty of applying established norms to new strategic realities. As noted by Shaw (2017), international law was primarily developed to regulate state behavior in more conventional forms of armed conflict, which complicates its adaptation to hybrid warfare dynamics. Likewise, Wallace and Martin-Ortega (2020) emphasize that evolving security threats often outpace the legal mechanisms designed to restrain them.

The legal foundation governing the use of force remains centered on the Charter of the United Nations, particularly the prohibition contained in Article 2(4), which forbids threats or force against the territorial integrity or political independence of states. Nevertheless, the Charter also recognizes limited exceptions, especially self-defense under Article 51 and actions authorized by the Security Council. In practice, these principles have generated significant controversy when states invoke preventive or anticipatory measures against perceived threats. Gray (2018) explains that contemporary disputes increasingly revolve around whether imminence must be interpreted strictly or flexibly in response to modern risks. Dinstein (2017) similarly argues that self-defense remains one of the most contested doctrines in international legal scholarship, especially when intelligence assessments rather than actual attacks are used as justification.

Within this framework, Israeli actions directed against Iranian military assets or allied groups in Syria and elsewhere have often been defended as necessary measures to neutralize emerging dangers. However, critics contend that repeated reliance on anticipatory logic may weaken the prohibition on unilateral force and encourage expansive interpretations of legality. Rodin (2004) observes that the concept of self-defense loses normative clarity when future threats are treated as equivalent to armed attacks already underway. McMahan (2004) also notes that moral and legal reasoning about preemption must distinguish genuine necessity from strategic convenience. Consequently, the Israel–Iran confrontation illustrates the tension between state survival claims and the preservation of collective legal order.

Another central issue concerns the use of non-state actors and proxy organizations operating across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Iran has frequently been accused of supporting armed groups that engage in hostilities against Israeli interests, while Israel has responded through targeted operations against such networks. Under the law of state responsibility, determining whether a state can be held accountable for proxy conduct depends largely on standards of control, direction, or substantial support. Crawford (2014) explains that attribution is one of the most difficult aspects of international responsibility because indirect influence does not always meet the threshold of legal control. Nollkaemper (2003) further argues that overlapping responsibility between states and non-state actors creates evidentiary and procedural uncertainty.

Cyber conflict adds another layer of complexity to the legal debate. Both Israel and Iran have been associated with sophisticated cyber campaigns targeting infrastructure, surveillance systems, and strategic institutions. These operations may produce serious disruption without conventional battlefield violence, raising unresolved questions about whether they constitute a use of force or even an armed attack. Schmitt (2017) argues that existing international law can apply to cyberspace, but interpretation remains inconsistent among states. Tsagourias and Farrell (2020) add that attribution in cyberspace is especially problematic because technical evidence is often uncertain, concealed, or politically disputed. As a result, cyber operations expose substantial gaps between technological capabilities and legal enforcement mechanisms.

Beyond doctrinal debates, institutional limitations further weaken the effectiveness of international law in the Israel–Iran conflict. The United Nations Security Council has repeatedly struggled to adopt unified responses due to geopolitical rivalries among permanent members and conflicting regional interests. When enforcement bodies remain divided, states are more likely to rely on unilateral legal narratives to justify coercive measures. Chesterman (2007) argues that selective enforcement undermines the credibility of collective security institutions and erodes confidence in universal norms. Thakur (2016) likewise stresses that global peace and security depend not only on legal rules but also on political willingness to implement them consistently.

For these reasons, the Israel–Iran confrontation offers an important case study for evaluating the limits and adaptability of international law in modern warfare. It reveals how classical doctrines on sovereignty, self-defense, attribution, and humanitarian protection are increasingly strained by proxy violence, covert action, and cyber confrontation. This study therefore examines the extent to which existing legal principles remain effective in regulating

such hostilities, identifying normative gaps and possible pathways for reform. Through this analysis, the article seeks to contribute to current debates on how international law can remain relevant amid rapidly changing forms of armed conflict.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative methodological approach, appropriate for examining complex legal phenomena through interpretation, contextualization, and critical analysis of normative sources. Qualitative research was considered suitable because it allows an in-depth understanding of legal principles, institutional practices, and doctrinal debates surrounding the Israel–Iran conflict. As noted by Espinoza Freire (2020), qualitative inquiry is particularly valuable when the objective is to interpret realities shaped by social, political, and normative interactions rather than to measure numerical variables. Therefore, this design facilitated a comprehensive legal assessment of contemporary armed conflict dynamics.

The research was developed through a documentary and doctrinal method focused on the systematic examination of primary and secondary legal materials. Primary sources included the Charter of the United Nations, judgments of the International Court of Justice, humanitarian law treaties, and legal instruments concerning state responsibility. Secondary sources consisted of academic books, indexed journal articles, and specialized studies on cyber operations, proxy warfare, and self-defense. According to Espinoza Freire (2020), documentary review enables the identification, classification, and critical use of reliable scientific information for rigorous academic inquiry.

The search process was conducted using recognized academic databases, including Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, HeinOnline, and JSTOR. Keywords such as *Israel–Iran conflict*, *international law*, *self-defense*, *use of force*, *state responsibility*, and *cyber operations* were combined through Boolean operators to refine results. Espinoza-Freire (2025) emphasizes that structured search strategies improve precision, relevance, and transparency in evidence collection. Consequently, only peer-reviewed publications, authoritative legal texts, and academically credible materials were selected for analysis.

To organize the review process, criteria inspired by PRISMA guidelines were applied for identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion of sources. Duplicate records were removed, irrelevant texts were excluded, and selected materials were evaluated according to thematic relevance, academic quality, and direct relation to the research objective. Espinoza-Freire (2025) explains that PRISMA-based procedures strengthen methodological transparency and reduce bias in literature selection, especially in systematic or semi-systematic reviews.

Finally, ethical principles guided the entire investigation. Proper citation, faithful interpretation of sources, intellectual honesty, and respect for academic integrity were observed throughout the study. Espinoza Freire and Calva Nagua (2020) affirm that ethics is an essential component of all scholarly research because it guarantees credibility and responsibility in knowledge production. Likewise, Espinoza Freire and Rad Camayd (2020) highlight that ethical rigor reinforces trustworthiness in qualitative studies. These principles ensured the validity and academic seriousness of the present research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Framework of the Prohibition of the Use of Force (*Jus ad Bellum*)

The prohibition of the use of force constitutes one of the central pillars of contemporary international law and remains the primary normative basis for assessing interstate confrontations such as the Israel–Iran conflict. Since the adoption of the United Nations Charter in 1945, states have been legally required to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state. This principle transformed earlier permissive approaches to war and established peace as the default condition of international relations. Cassese (2005) explains that the Charter system represented a decisive historical shift by limiting unilateral recourse to armed violence and

subordinating coercive action to collective security mechanisms. Klabbers (2020) similarly notes that the prohibition of force is not merely contractual but has acquired constitutional significance within the international legal order.

However, despite its normative clarity, the practical application of this rule remains contested in modern crises. The Israel–Iran confrontation demonstrates how states frequently interpret threats, deterrence, and strategic necessity in divergent ways. Wood (2013) argues that state practice often reveals a gap between formal legal commitments and operational realities, especially when national security is invoked. Gray (2002), examining the Iraq controversy, showed how political polarization can weaken consensus on the lawful use of force. In the Middle East, where security dilemmas are acute and mistrust is persistent, the prohibition of force often competes with unilateral claims of preventive necessity. Consequently, the *jus ad bellum* framework remains authoritative in theory but challenged in implementation.

2. Self-Defense and the Problem of Imminence

One of the recognized exceptions to the prohibition of force is self-defense, a doctrine that has generated intense scholarly debate in the context of contemporary security threats. Traditionally, lawful self-defense requires the existence of an armed attack and compliance with the principles of necessity and proportionality. Yet modern threats involving missiles, covert operations, proxy networks, or cyber sabotage have complicated the temporal dimension of attack and response. Cassese (2005) observes that classical interpretations were developed in an era of conventional military aggression and therefore struggle to address anticipatory scenarios.

The concept of imminence is especially relevant to Israeli arguments that military action may be necessary before hostile capabilities are fully deployed. Crawford (2012), in his discussion of the *Nicaragua* case, emphasized that judicial interpretation has historically favored restrictive readings of self-defense. Papastavridis (2016) likewise notes that the International Court of Justice reinforced the need for objective evidence rather than speculative threat perceptions. Nonetheless, some contemporary scholarship accepts that waiting for an actual strike may be unrealistic in cases involving weapons of mass destruction or clandestine networks. This tension creates a legal grey area in which the Israel–Iran conflict is frequently situated, as both deterrence and preemption are justified through competing narratives of imminent danger.

3. Just War Theory and Humanitarian Intervention

Although the Israel–Iran conflict is generally analyzed through positive international law, theoretical perspectives derived from Just War theory remain influential in evaluating legitimacy. Just War thinking explores when war may be morally justified and how force must be conducted ethically. Mednicoff (2006) explains that modern humanitarian interventions revived classical debates regarding just cause, right authority, and proportionality, linking moral reasoning with legal doctrine. Even when military action may lack clear authorization, states often employ moral language to defend operations framed as preventing greater harm.

Davenport (2011) argues that Just War theory continues to shape contemporary discussions because legal norms alone do not always resolve ethical dilemmas surrounding intervention or resistance. In the Israel–Iran context, narratives of existential threat, regional protection, and civilian defense are often used alongside legal claims. Ahmad (2021) further expands this discussion by comparing Islamic and modern conceptions of just war, demonstrating that multiple normative traditions may influence state rhetoric in the Middle East. Therefore, while positive law remains decisive in formal adjudication, moral frameworks help explain why states and societies perceive the same military acts differently. The theoretical value of Just War analysis lies in exposing the ethical assumptions that often accompany legal argumentation.

4. State Responsibility and Proxy Engagements

A major challenge in the Israel–Iran confrontation concerns the growing role of proxy actors. Armed groups operating in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, or Yemen may receive varying degrees of

financial, military, or logistical support from states while retaining operational autonomy. This structure complicates the application of responsibility rules because direct attribution is often difficult to establish. Milanović (2006) notes that international responsibility increasingly confronts situations in which harmful acts are mediated through decentralized networks rather than formal state organs.

Under classical doctrine, a state may be responsible when it exercises effective control over the conduct of non-state actors. Yet proving such control requires reliable evidence, which is often unavailable in covert regional conflicts. Klabbers (2020) explains that attribution standards are necessary to prevent abuse, but excessively rigid thresholds may also allow states to evade accountability through indirect methods. In the Israel–Iran setting, accusations regarding support for Hezbollah or other groups illustrate this dilemma. If proxy attacks cannot be legally attributed, the injured state may face obstacles in invoking responsibility. Conversely, broad presumptions of attribution risk escalating conflict through legally unsupported retaliation. Hence, proxy warfare exposes a structural weakness in traditional state-centered legal models.

5. International Humanitarian Law and Non-State Actors

Even when the legality of resorting to force remains disputed, once hostilities occur international humanitarian law regulates the conduct of parties. The principles of distinction, proportionality, military necessity, and precaution are designed to reduce civilian suffering regardless of who initiated the conflict. Schmitt (2019) highlights that these rules increasingly apply in contexts involving non-state intelligence personnel, irregular groups, and hybrid operational environments. Modern warfare often blurs the line between civilian and military roles, creating uncertainty about lawful targeting.

The Israel–Iran confrontation, particularly through proxy theatres such as Syria or Lebanon, demonstrates these complications. Armed groups may operate in populated urban areas, integrate political and military functions, or conceal assets among civilian infrastructure. Cassese (2005) warned that humanitarian protections become especially vulnerable when legal categories are manipulated by belligerents. In such circumstances, even precision operations may generate collateral damage or controversy regarding proportionality assessments. International humanitarian law therefore remains essential but difficult to enforce consistently where front lines are unclear and actors are fragmented. The theoretical relevance of this field lies in balancing security objectives with the protection of human dignity during conflict.

6. Cyber Operations and Emerging Legal Challenges

Cyber operations represent one of the most dynamic areas of legal uncertainty relevant to Israel–Iran tensions. Alleged cyber incidents involving industrial systems, communications networks, and strategic infrastructure have demonstrated that states can inflict serious disruption without conventional weapons. However, the classification of cyber actions under existing international law remains unsettled. Tanodomdej (2019) explains that the Tallinn Manuals sought to interpret how traditional norms apply in cyberspace, but they do not constitute binding law. Their importance lies in offering expert guidance where treaty rules are limited.

A central controversy concerns the legal threshold at which a cyber operation becomes a prohibited use of force or an armed attack under the United Nations Charter. Some operations may disable electricity grids, water systems, banking networks, or military command structures without causing immediate physical destruction, yet their strategic consequences can be severe. Schmitt (2017) argues that scale and effects should guide legal qualification, meaning that cyber actions producing consequences comparable to kinetic attacks may trigger the right of self-defense. Nevertheless, there is no universal state consensus on this interpretation, which allows divergent legal positions to persist.

Another major challenge is attribution. Unlike conventional military attacks, cyber operations can be routed through multiple jurisdictions, anonymous servers, or private infrastructures,

making it difficult to identify the responsible actor with certainty. Tsagourias and Farrell (2020) note that attribution involves both technical and legal dimensions, since identifying the source of malicious code does not automatically prove state responsibility. In the Israel–Iran context, where cyber incidents are often accompanied by political denial or strategic ambiguity, this problem significantly limits accountability mechanisms.

Theoretical debates also address the relationship between sovereignty and cyber intrusion. Unauthorized penetration of digital systems, espionage activities, or manipulation of data may violate territorial sovereignty even when they do not amount to force. Shaw (2017) emphasizes that sovereignty remains a foundational principle of international law, and its application to digital environments is increasingly relevant. As states depend more heavily on technological infrastructure, cyber interference becomes not merely a technical matter but a direct challenge to sovereign authority.

Finally, cyber operations expose the need to modernize legal governance without abandoning core principles. Existing norms regarding necessity, proportionality, due diligence, and state responsibility remain useful, but they require clearer interpretation in technologically complex settings. The Israel–Iran rivalry demonstrates how cyberspace has become an operational theatre where deterrence, covert action, and legal ambiguity intersect. Therefore, the study of cyber conflict is essential for understanding how international law must evolve to remain effective in regulating contemporary hostilities.

DISCUSIONES

Los resultados evidencian que el conflicto entre Israel e Irán constituye un ejemplo paradigmático de la tensión entre los principios clásicos del derecho internacional y las nuevas modalidades de confrontación estratégica. Aunque la Carta de las Naciones Unidas mantiene la prohibición general del uso de la fuerza, la práctica estatal demuestra interpretaciones cada vez más flexibles cuando los Estados alegan amenazas futuras o riesgos existenciales. En este sentido, Gray (2018) sostiene que la principal controversia contemporánea no radica en la existencia de la norma, sino en la amplitud con la que los Estados interpretan las excepciones vinculadas a la legítima defensa. Esto confirma que, en escenarios de alta inseguridad regional, la norma jurídica suele competir con percepciones políticas y estratégicas de supervivencia estatal.

Uno de los hallazgos más relevantes del estudio es la ambigüedad jurídica de la defensa anticipatoria. Las operaciones preventivas atribuidas a Israel se justifican con base en la necesidad de neutralizar amenazas inminentes; sin embargo, esa noción de inminencia carece de una definición uniforme en el derecho positivo actual. Dinstein (2017) advierte que la legítima defensa sigue siendo una de las doctrinas más debatidas del derecho internacional precisamente porque debe equilibrar seguridad y restricción del uso unilateral de la fuerza. De igual forma, Rodin (2004) cuestiona que amenazas futuras sean equiparadas automáticamente a ataques armados ya iniciados. Desde esta perspectiva, el conflicto analizado demuestra que ampliar excesivamente la defensa preventiva puede erosionar el principio de prohibición del uso de la fuerza.

Asimismo, la investigación confirma que la guerra por intermedio de actores no estatales representa uno de los mayores desafíos para la responsabilidad internacional. Las acusaciones sobre apoyo iraní a grupos armados regionales muestran la dificultad de probar jurídicamente estándares de control efectivo. Crawford (2014) explica que la atribución exige demostrar dirección o control suficiente sobre la conducta del actor no estatal, requisito que rara vez resulta sencillo en operaciones encubiertas. En la misma línea, Nollkaemper (2003) destaca que la concurrencia entre responsabilidad estatal e individual genera incertidumbre procesal y probatoria. En consecuencia, el uso de proxies permite proyectar influencia militar reduciendo costos políticos y legales, lo que revela una debilidad estructural del modelo clásico centrado exclusivamente en el Estado.

Otro aspecto central es la creciente relevancia de las operaciones cibernéticas. Los resultados muestran que los ataques digitales pueden producir daños estratégicos significativos sin

recurrir a medios cinéticos tradicionales, lo cual complica su clasificación jurídica. Schmitt (2017) sostiene que el derecho internacional vigente puede aplicarse al ciberespacio, aunque persisten divergencias interpretativas entre los Estados. A su vez, Tsagourias y Farrell (2020) subrayan que la atribución técnica de estos ataques continúa siendo uno de los principales obstáculos para exigir responsabilidad. Esto implica que el conflicto Israel–Irán no solo desafía categorías tradicionales de guerra, sino que también impulsa la necesidad de adaptar normas existentes a nuevas tecnologías ofensivas.

En relación con el derecho internacional humanitario, el estudio demuestra que incluso cuando los Estados invoquen fundamentos de legítima defensa, sus operaciones continúan sujetas a los principios de distinción, proporcionalidad y precaución. Cassese (2005) advierte que la protección humanitaria se debilita cuando los beligerantes manipulan categorías jurídicas o integran objetivos militares dentro de zonas civiles. Esto resulta particularmente relevante en escenarios como Siria o Líbano, donde actores estatales y no estatales operan en espacios densamente poblados. Por tanto, la licitud inicial del uso de la fuerza no exime del cumplimiento estricto de obligaciones humanitarias durante las hostilidades.

Finalmente, la investigación confirma que las limitaciones institucionales del sistema internacional reducen la eficacia del derecho. La incapacidad recurrente del Consejo de Seguridad para adoptar respuestas uniformes fortalece la tendencia de los Estados a construir narrativas jurídicas unilaterales. Chesterman (2007) sostiene que la aplicación selectiva de las normas debilita la legitimidad del orden colectivo, mientras Thakur (2016) recuerda que la paz internacional depende tanto de reglas jurídicas como de voluntad política para ejecutarlas. En consecuencia, el conflicto estudiado revela que el principal límite del derecho internacional no es únicamente normativo, sino también institucional. Sin mecanismos eficaces de cumplimiento, incluso las reglas más consolidadas enfrentan serias dificultades para contener conflictos contemporáneos complejos.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Israel–Iran conflict demonstrates that contemporary armed confrontations increasingly challenge the capacity of international law to regulate the use of force effectively. Although the United Nations Charter continues to provide the central normative framework through the prohibition established in Article 2(4) and the exception of self-defense under Article 51, the study confirms that modern conflicts often unfold through indirect, hybrid, and technologically advanced methods that strain traditional legal categories. As a result, the gap between established norms and contemporary strategic realities has become more visible.

One of the principal conclusions is that anticipatory and preemptive self-defense remains one of the most controversial issues in current legal doctrine. While states may invoke imminent threats to justify military action, the absence of a universally accepted definition of imminence creates uncertainty and facilitates competing interpretations. This ambiguity risks weakening the general prohibition on unilateral force if preventive logic is expanded without clear legal limits. Therefore, necessity, proportionality, and immediacy remain essential safeguards for preserving the integrity of the *jus ad bellum* system.

The study also concludes that proxy warfare significantly complicates the application of state responsibility. The increasing reliance on non-state armed groups allows states to project influence while reducing direct accountability. However, proving effective control or direction over such actors remains evidentially difficult, limiting the practical enforcement of international responsibility rules. Similarly, cyber operations reveal substantial legal gaps regarding attribution, thresholds of force, and lawful responses, demonstrating that technological developments continue to outpace normative clarification.

Another important conclusion is that international humanitarian law retains full relevance regardless of the legality of resorting to force. Civilian protection, distinction, proportionality, and precaution remain indispensable obligations in all forms of hostilities, including hybrid and digital conflicts. Yet implementation becomes more difficult when military and civilian infrastructures are intertwined.

Finally, the research confirms that the principal limitation of international law is not only doctrinal but institutional. Political divisions within the United Nations Security Council and inconsistent enforcement mechanisms weaken collective security and encourage unilateral legal narratives. Consequently, the Israel–Iran conflict illustrates both the enduring importance of international law and the urgent need for clearer interpretations, stronger institutions, and adaptive legal responses capable of addressing the realities of modern warfare.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was limited by its doctrinal and documentary nature, as it relied primarily on legal texts, academic literature, and secondary sources rather than empirical field data or direct interviews with policymakers and military actors. In addition, the dynamic evolution of the Israel–Iran conflict means that new political, military, or cyber developments may emerge after the completion of this research, potentially influencing the legal analysis presented.

FUTURE STUDIES

Future research should incorporate comparative case studies involving other contemporary interstate rivalries characterized by proxy warfare, cyber operations, and anticipatory self-defense claims. Likewise, interdisciplinary approaches combining international law, security studies, political science, and digital forensics would be valuable for understanding how emerging technologies and regional geopolitics continue to reshape the legal regulation of armed conflict.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the academic specialists in international law, humanitarian law, and global security studies whose publications and reflections contributed substantially to the development of this research. Appreciation is also extended to colleague researchers, peer reviewers, and university professionals whose observations, recommendations, and scholarly support helped strengthen the quality and rigor of this work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there are no financial, institutional, professional, or personal conflicts of interest related to the preparation, development, or publication of this study.

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