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The Humanitarian Cost of the 2026 US-Iran Conflict

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by

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Introduction

US and Iran have a shared history of conflicts starting from 1953 to 2026, including sanctions and multiple crises. The conflict escalated into a full-scale war on 28 February 2026 when the US launched Operation Epic Fury on Iran because the US considered Iran a serious threat for regional and global security. It accused Iran of having nuclear capabilities and a uranium enrichment program resulting in serious devastation. This war affected not only political, economic, humanitarian and military aspects of Iran while also creating regional consequences for multiple countries.

It was humanity that suffered the most because all political, military and economic issues affected humans in multiple ways including their lives, mental and physical health and education.

But as the military and political perspectives are important at the same time, it is extremely important to analyze the conflict through the humanitarian perspective. It doesn't matter which side wins or loses it is the common people that suffer the most.

This policy brief aims to analyze why the humanitarian perspective is important when it comes to studying wars or conflicts and what has been the humanitarian cost of the US-Iran conflict. It also presents policy recommendations to overcome these challenges.

Humanitarian Assistance

UNOCHA defines humanitarian assistance as aid that aims to save lives, relieve suffering and maintain human dignity (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], n.d.). ICRC following the humanitarian perspective

define humanitarian assistance as humanity, neutrality and impartiality which refers to impartial relief to victims of armed conflict and other situation of violence (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], n.d.). OECD defines humanitarian assistance which is life-saving and helps in disaster prevention or disaster preparedness. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], n.d.)

There are two types of humanitarian assistance. The first type is natural disasters which includes earthquakes, floods, droughts, cyclones and wildfire. The second type is human-made emergencies which consists of armed conflicts, wars, terrorism, forced displacement and refugee crisis. This policy brief focuses on US-Iran conflict explaining humanitarian assistance during armed conflicts as it impacted civilian lives and affected their safety.

Humanitarian cost means the loss, pain and suffering people face because of crises such as war, natural disasters, conflicts or pandemics. It includes loss of lives, loss of security, displacement loss of businesses, effects on mental health, damage to healthcare system and disruption of education.

Historical Background of US-Iran Conflict

Iran and the US share a long-term history of conflicts. There are multiple events that led to the 2026 conflict between the US and Iran. It started in 1953 when elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was removed from power by the UK and the US. He decided to gain control of Iran's industry and as a result, with the support of a military coup Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi came to power.

Then came the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Shah Muhammad Raza Pahlavi was removed when protests occurred nationwide led by the Supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. Iran was declared an Islamic Republic. Relations became more tense between the US and Iran during the hostage crisis when a group of Iranian students seized the US embassy in Tehran. The students took 52 diplomats and held them for 444 days. The US began imposing sanctions on Iran targeting Iran's banking sector, oil exports, shipping and foreign investments.

In 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed between Iran and the other six countries including the US. Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program and, as a result sanctions were lifted from Iran but this diplomatic effort failed in 2018

under President Donald Trump. Iran again faced sanctions from the US under a policy known as Maximum Pressure Policy. Iran maintained its uranium enrichment program for peaceful purposes while the US viewed it as a potential nuclear weapons threat.

In January 2020, the killing of Qasem Soleimani further intensified situation. The conflict escalated into a full-scale war on 28 February 2026 when the US launched a joint military operation with Israel. Under Operation Epic Fury, both countries attacked Iran with hundreds of missiles which resulted in the killing of Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei along with other key officials of Iran. Despite diplomatic efforts, the ceasefire failed and hostilities resumed, prolonging the conflict.

Humanitarian Impacts of Conflict on Citizen Life

The US-Iran war affects the people of Iran in multiple ways creating fear and making them unable to meet their basic needs. It involves civilian protection, healthcare, displacement, food security and livelihoods, education, mental health and psychological well-being.

- **Civilian Protection**

Civilian protection is necessary so that there can be less civilian harm, to prevent hunger and to protect vulnerable groups. It ensures that safe places are provided to people working in humanitarian activities and helps prevent forced displacement. However, this conflict affects all these aspects of civilian protection. (ICRC, 2017)

At least 3,468 people have been killed since the war started on 28 February (Al Jazeera Staff, 2026). They were from Bandar Abbas, Minab, Iranshahr, Bandar Khamir and Ahvaz. This highlights the silent suffering of many more people because those 3,468 victims also had families who were not killed physically but were deeply affected emotionally after losing their loved ones in such a devastating way. Additionally, 125,000 civilian buildings and 102,000 residential units were also damaged pushing 30 million people into poverty (Al Jazeera, 2026).

Those affected included infants, children and women who were continuously exposed to airstrikes and missile attacks, creating fear among them and affecting their daily routines. Due to constant fear, people cannot move freely in markets, cannot sleep peacefully in their own homes, and cannot work efficiently at their workplaces, which shows how fragile civilian protection becomes during war.

- **Healthcare**

Healthcare is the most important sector during the conflict. It highlights the need for extra care of injured people and those suffering from diseases or illnesses. Special assistance is required for pregnant women or women who recently gave birth and newborn babies. The US strikes near cities like Ahvaz forced the evacuation of pediatric cancer hospitals which illustrates that children who were already fighting for their lives were brought closer to death (WHO, 2026; ICRC, 2026).

For a country like Iran that had already faced sanctions for years war made the situation worse. The pharmaceutical industries faced serious disruption because there was inadequate supply of medicines. Additionally, the medicines available and packaging required for them became extremely expensive. Heart patients who needed medicine for a lifetime could no longer afford it because of its high cost. Moreover, people suffering from diabetes were unable to take their insulin because of the shortage and patients with chronic illnesses were left with medicine for only a few days losing hope.

Furthermore, some people relied on their relatives outside the country to send them medicines but during the war communication channels were disrupted affecting their health. Emergency sectors of the hospitals which were already full could not provide proper care to all the patients during war. Due to the large number of patients, in some cases one doctor had to attend to 300 patients in a single day which exceeded a doctor's capacity. Hospitals became understaffed. Scheduled surgeries and childhood vaccination programs were postponed, exposing children to unsafe conditions.

During this war, there were 339 attacks on healthcare facilities and 24 health-care workers died and 114 were injured. Power outages caused by strikes shut refrigeration systems causing temperature-sensitive medicines like insulin to spoil before they could reach patients (Al Jazeera, 2026).

Pregnant women were unable to deliver their babies in a safe environment, affecting not only the mother's health but also creating risks for newborns. These deteriorating healthcare conditions show the normalization of human suffering during war and demonstrate how the healthcare sector, which is needed most during crises, suffers the greatest impact (WHO, 2026).

- **Displacement**

Displacement is a major issue during humanitarian crises or armed conflicts affecting all aspects of human life. Whether it is within a country as Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) or it occurs across international borders, it creates major risks undermining the lives of citizens as they face a lack of healthcare, food and other basic necessities.

During this conflict, almost 3.2 million people were internally displaced which corresponded to one million households. It indicates that these people were forced to move away from their relatives, neighborhood, and friends to places where they knew nobody. However, displacement compromised their education, work, and social life. Instead of making their lives better, they fell behind in their lives unable to meet their basic needs. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2026)

People made large movements from Tehran and other urban cities towards rural areas which showed security issues in big cities (UNHCR, 2026). Afghan refugees who already went through poor living conditions were burdened more because of the conflict (UNHCR, 2026). People went to Turkey and other countries for safer conditions but the host countries and places became overcrowded, creating health issues, food insecurity, and poverty among people.

- **Food Security and Livelihood**

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz was a major issue that caused food insecurity and impacted livelihoods (World Food Programme [WFP], 2026). As Iran depended on food imports from other countries and the war caused trade disruption which directly influenced both dimensions. 15 fuel storage tanks and oil refineries were damaged which led to global inflation (Tasnim News Agency, 2026).

It was ordinary families that suffered the most. People who were already experiencing poverty had to skip meals, creating malnutrition in children and increasing hunger. People faced severe job losses as the conflict affected 23,500 factories and businesses. Additionally, two million people lost their jobs.

Rent and transportation costs increased by 40% to 100% percent. All this demonstrated the life of an ordinary person having no job, unable to meet the requirements of their family which included sick people, children and pregnant women and besides that they did not even have proper food to eat.

- **Children and Education**

The war affected children along with their education, safety and development. One of the most heart-wrenching events of this conflict was the strike on a girl's school in Shajareh Tayyebbeh in the city of Minab in southern Iran. At least 170 people were killed, most of whom were girls between the ages of seven and twelve. (UNICEF, 2026)

Overall, 30 Iranian universities and 850 schools were attacked during the conflict. The loss of students also meant the loss of education, scientific development and future human capital. (Al Jazeera, 2026)

This conflict led to the closure of schools and universities for a long period of time, resulting in learning loss, academic challenges and psychological trauma for students and their families.

- **Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being**

During this conflict people faced various mental health issues. These included post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression among civilians and humanitarian aid workers. The Iranian Red Crescent Society received at least 67,000 calls for psychological support helpline because people were continuously exposed to airstrikes, weapon attacks, and witnessing their loved ones being injured or killed within minutes (ICRC, 2026).

Children also faced fear and stress at school which affected their education. Working women who had to balance household responsibilities and work faced severe trauma in managing these tasks. Thus, along with the injuries and loss of civilian lives there were also some unseen consequences which create long-term effects on people.

- **Humanitarian Response**

The importance of humanitarian response during war and conflicts cannot be denied. Humanitarian aid is necessary for people who need immediate help when affected by conflict for their safety and long-term protection. Such assistance should be provided to everyone affected by crises regardless of political, economic and social factors. It includes providing healthcare services, food, cash assistance, shelter, education and mental health support during conflict.

In Iran, there were organizations and government emergency measures to provide assistance to people during the conflict. The Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) played a vital role during the 2026 conflict (International Federation of Red Cross

and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC], 2026). Thousands of trained volunteers were hired to carry out search operations, conduct rescue missions and provide emergency response. Special medical care was provided to those in need and temporary support shelters were established. Vehicles and logistical support were deployed nationwide for delivering aid and field operations. Psychological support teams were also established to support the mental health of affected people. Some other organizations like The Imam Khomeini relief foundation also played an important humanitarian role. The response was not just limited to Iran but also included international organizations.

UNICEF Iran provided special support to children, including vaccination programs and nutritious food (UNICEF, 2026). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provided special assistance to displaced populations including Afghan refugees, by providing healthcare and financial assistance. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) provided humanitarian protection particularly to displaced people by ensuring access to basic necessities for survival and WFP food also provided assistance to vulnerable refugees.

Despite support from national and international organizations, there were some challenges that made it difficult for organizations to work more efficiently. Damage to Jabel Ali Port and disruption of air and sea routes, including the Strait of Hormuz, delayed the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Iran.

The aid workers were also killed by air strikes and while rescuing survivors from the rubble. Almost 24 healthcare workers were killed and 114 were injured which had a direct effect on providing assistance to vulnerable communities as the number of affected people was very high and required many more humanitarian workers for their support. These challenges reduced the effectiveness and timely delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are needed addressing the humanitarian consequences of the 2026 US-Iran conflict which requires coordinated actions among key sectors.

Civilians must be educated about how to respond during war and emergencies. Civilians should have knowledge of first-aid which prevents minor injuries from becoming life-threatening. There must be scenario-based planning because each conflict affects people differently such as how to respond when more health workers become injured or if hospitals were attacked. Local clinics with emergency units should be established in areas where displaced and conflict-affected population have limited access to hospitals. Hospitals should have uninterrupted medical supplies, adequate emergency staff and sufficient ICU capacity to manage a large number of critically injured patients during conflicts.

Humanitarian organizations must coordinate with each other and also with the government to ensure the fastest delivery of food and medicine. Specialized teams should be deployed to provide counselling and mental health support especially for children and displaced families. There must be joint humanitarian planning among different countries which should include protection of civilians and the delivery of humanitarian aid when global chokepoints are blocked during conflicts.

To minimize disruption during armed conflict planning of temporary learning spaces and online learning system is essential for schools and universities. Humanitarian organizations should use digital applications to track real-time data on affected people and identify urgent needs for food, water, hygiene kits and essential assistance.

US\$ 19.2 billion is essential from June-November 2026 to meet urgent food needs. Additionally, OCHA and UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) allocated US\$12 million to support life-saving humanitarian assistance, including healthcare, food security, water, sanitation and protection services (United Nations, 2026). The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) launched a financial appeal of 40 million Swiss francs to support humanitarian operations (IFRC, 2026). For reconstruction and long-term economic development of Iran US\$300 billion is required. This highlights the importance of financial support to address immediate humanitarian needs and long-term recovery.

All countries must follow International Humanitarian Law because it protects civilians during armed conflicts. There must also be a strong enforcement mechanism and accountability for violations of international humanitarian law (ICRC, n.d.). Furthermore, countries should not go to war immediately, but should resolve disputes through dialogue and diplomacy before military escalation, as the world today is interconnected and one conflict affects multiple countries creating widespread regional and global consequences.

Conclusion

US-Iran conflict shows that it is the civilians that suffer the most along with political and military losses. The conflict affects every dimension including civilian protection, healthcare, displacement, food security and livelihoods, education and psychological well-being. Strengthening humanitarian assistance, international cooperation and respect for international humanitarian law is essential to reduce human suffering.

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