

International humanitarian law and humanitarian inaction in Iran

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Article Info	Abstract
Short Paper Main Object: International Law Scope: Iran, US, Israel Received: 19 April 2026 Revised: 02 May 2026 Accepted: 03 May 2026 Published online: 17 May 2026 Keywords: humanitarian, international humanitarian law (IHL), Iran, Israel, United Nations, United States.	The joint US-Israeli attacks and apocalyptic threats on Iran demand urgent global action– especially from the United Nations– to prevent injustices and atrocity crimes. Unlawful attacks on the civilian population and civilian infrastructure, representing serious violations of international humanitarian law, warrant a powerful invocation and should potentially be subjected to universal jurisdiction as a war crime. This brief essay outlines the principles of humanitarian action in sites of conflict and illustrates how the collective international community has failed to fulfill its legal and moral responsibilities to support a population under attack.

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On February 28, 2026, the US and Israel launched a joint military operation in Iran, with thousands of strikes across the country. The Iranian authorities, who launched retaliatory attacks across the region primarily targeting US assets, expanded the armed-conflict into regional hostilities—escalated by Israel’s attacks on Lebanon—resulting in significant loss of civilian life and destruction of civilian infrastructure. As the violence deepens, much of the global concern continues to focus on the broader impacts related to markets and international *politik* triggered by the part-closure of the Strait of Hormuz as the region’s critical trade and shipping corridor. But these talking-points are overshadowing how the devastating conflict is affecting millions of civilians and eroding the fundamental principles that underpin both international humanitarian law (IHL) and humanitarian action.

IHL strictly prohibits— for humanitarian reasons— direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects¹. IHL is clear in terms of the *laws of war* that regulate armed-conflicts, including the behavior of states and other parties to conflict with many of the rules governing the conduct of hostilities being anchored in the cardinal principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution. IHL principles exist to protect the civilian population from the effects of conflict by striking a balance between military necessity and humanity, imposing prohibitions and restrictions on the means and methods of warfare that parties to the conflict may use.

The key *principle of distinction* requires that parties to the conflict must always distinguish between combatants and civilians, and between military objectives and civilian objects, such as homes, civilian infrastructure, and the environment. Parties may only direct their attacks against combatants, *never against civilians* (ICRC 2005, Rule 1);² and they may only target military objectives, *never civilian objects* (ICRC 2005, Rule 7).³ Indiscriminate attacks, namely those attacks that are not directed at specific military objectives as required, are also strictly prohibited. Equally prohibited are acts or threats of violence whereby the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population (ICRC 2005, Rule 2).⁴

Attacks directed against a combatant or military objective must respect the *principle of proportionality* meaning that it is prohibited to launch an attack that may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian

1. See, the Four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols in addition to the UN Charter which clearly defines the circumstances in which member states may intervene, either with UN authority or in self-defense: [The Geneva Conventions and their Commentaries | ICRC](#) and [United Nations Charter \(full text\) | United Nations](#) respectively.

2. The International Committee of the Red Crescent (ICRC), Customary IHL, Rule 1.

3. ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 7.

4. ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 2

life, injury to civilians, and damage to civilian objects that would be deemed excessive (ICRC 2005, Rule 14)¹. In other words, a military objective may be attacked only after an assessment leading to the conclusion that civilian losses and damage are not disproportionate to the military advantage foreseen.

The final *principle of precautions* requires all parties to a conflict to take constant care to spare the civilian population and civilian objects from the effects of military operations (ICRC 2005, Rule 15)². Given the significant risk of harm posed to civilians, IHL imposes detailed obligations to those planning and executing attacks, especially with regard to ensuring all feasible precautions are taken to verify that targets are indeed military objectives; avoid, or in any event minimize, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, and damage to civilian objects; assess whether the attack may be expected to violate the rule of proportionality; cancel or suspend an attack if it becomes apparent that it would violate the principles of distinction or the rule of proportionality; and, give effective advance warning of attacks which may affect the civilian population.

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a complementary international norm emerging in response to the international community's repeated failure to uphold IHL principles, embodies a political commitment to end the worst forms of violence and persecution, including crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide by emphasizing the collective obligation of the international community (with the United Nations (UN) leading the charge) to prevent and mitigate grave violations of human rights (United Nations General Assembly, 2005)³. The international community is called upon to take necessary action – including coercive measures – to maintain order and stability through proactive means. R2P also emphasizes respect for national sovereignty by mandating that any prospective military intervention measures be legal in nature. Thus, the R2P paradigm addresses the fine balance between humanitarian concerns and state sovereignty symbolizing the international community's joint commitment to defend human rights and global security.

Early objectives for *regime* change have led to all-out aggression against Iran prioritizing lethality over legality. Intense airstrikes across several provinces in Iran have caused high numbers of civilian

1. ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 14.

2. ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 15.

3. As articulated in the 2025 World Summit Outcome Document (A/RES/60/1) and in the Secretary General's letter addressed to the President of the UNSC (S/2007/721) in which the need for the UN to further operationalize the R2P principle was recognized. For more on the R2P principle, see the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2021). For broader and critical perspectives on R2P including recent failures, see Roff (2013), Hobson (2022), and Illingworth (2025).

casualties and extensive damage to civilian infrastructure, including homes, schools, and health facilities (MoHME, April 2026; MoFA, April 2026; ICRC, April 2026)¹. Strikes on critical infrastructure and industrial sites have also disrupted basic services, including electricity, telecommunications, and, perhaps most severely, water, leading to increasing immediate and longer-term environmental and health risks. Large-scale waves of population movements have increased as conflict-related insecurity and aerial strikes intensify triggering mass relocations and evacuations across multiple provinces mushrooming humanitarian needs (UNHCR, April 2026; IOM, April 2026)².

The President of the United States (POTUS) has quite deliberately and publicly planned massive and widespread attacks on civilian objects in Iran. Unprecedented threats, regardless of whether mere hyperbole or incendiary rhetoric, amount to premeditated war crimes. The POTUS' threat of extermination and irreparable destruction brazenly shreds fundamental rules of international law, with potentially catastrophic consequences for over 90 million people³. In early April,

1. Iran's Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MoHME) estimates approx. 3,375 civilians have been killed with tens-of-thousands presumed injured based on cross-analysis of limited public data on population and strike locations (i.e., of people living within a 500m-radius of reported impact zones): [US-Israel attacks on Iran: Death toll and injuries live tracker | Conflict News | Al Jazeera](#). The Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) currently estimates over 135,000 civilian units –including residential and commercial– have been either damaged or destroyed. For an overview of the alleged acts of aggression against Iran from the perspective of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), see: [2026042216213579045827631.pdf](#).
2. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates approximately 3.2M people were internally displaced at the height of the attacks, 75% of whom relocated within Tehran: [UNHCR Middle East Situation: Emergency Flash Update #12 as of 14 April 2026 - Iran \(Islamic Republic of\) | ReliefWeb](#). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) claims 250,000 people are directly affected: [Escalation in the Middle East and Beyond Situation Report \(10 April 2026\) - Iran \(Islamic Republic of\) | ReliefWeb](#). It is unclear how the military escalation has impacted the 1.65M Afghan refugees and other third country nationals whom Iran continues to host.
3. The POTUS repeatedly issued escalating threats against Iran's energy and transport infrastructure, warning that unless the Iranian authorities reopen the Strait of Hormuz, the US would carry-out the "complete destruction" of the country's bridges and power plants later threatening to bomb Iran "back to the Stone Age": [Trump says Iran could be 'taken out' on Tuesday, Hegseth says major strikes to come | Reuters](#); on April 5, the POTUS warned that Iran could be "taken out in one night" and set a deadline of 20:00 EST on April 7 for the Iranian authorities to comply later vowing to leave the country "burning, exploding, and never to be used again": [Trump gives Iran until Tuesday night to open Strait of Hormuz, WSJ reports | Reuters](#); on April 7, the Israeli military issued an overly broad warning to civilians in Iran to avoid trains and railway lines nationwide, stating that it would endanger lives: [Donald Trump says 'a whole civilisation will die' if Iran ignores demands | US-Israel war on Iran | The Guardian](#). On April 12, the POTUS would reiterate threats to civilian objects during the ceasefire immediately after the breakdown in talks after bilateral meeting between Iran and the US held in

US-Israeli forces attacked civilian infrastructure (following the illegal precedent of June 2025), including bridges, power plants, steel factories, universities and petrochemical facilities, targeting civilians, condemning the population to years –possibly decades– of deepened socio-economic hardship, inflicting serious harm on civilian health and the environment, and leaving long-lasting damage to civilian lives and livelihoods. Attacks on nuclear installations and sites, specifically, risk radiological release and contravene the status of legitimate military targets under IHL given the acute lack of evidence that Iran has indeed been developing weapons-grade nuclear materials (IAEA, June 2025; ABILA, April 2026)¹.

Intentionally attacking civilian infrastructure constitutes a grave war crime under international law. Even in the limited cases that civilian infrastructure qualifies as legitimate military targets –the so-called dual use principle– a party still cannot attack them if this aggressive action may cause disproportionate harm to civilians. Energy infrastructure, power plants, and water systems are indispensable to civilian life, underpinning access to clean water, medical care, hospital electricity, food supply chains, and basic livelihoods. Simply put, attacking critical infrastructure and industrial sites on such a large and unprecedented scale is unlawful and amounts to a potential war crime with fundamental rules of IHL being violated with disastrous impacts for civilians.²

Prior to the US-Israeli attacks started on February 28, the US Defense Department terminated high-ranking military lawyers without just cause or due process removing legal mechanisms and oversight

Pakistan: [April 12, 2026: US Central Command says it will begin blockade of Iranian ports | AP News](#). During the same period, joint US-Israeli strikes across Iran struck bridges, petrochemical facilities and steel factories, targeting civilians and heightening fears of widespread, unlawful attacks on essential civilian infrastructure. On April 23, the Israeli Defense Minister would comment that Israel was awaiting the “green-light to return Iran to the Stone Age”: [Defense Minister Katz: We’re awaiting US green light to ‘return Iran to Stone Age’ | Arab News](#).

1. Something the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which serves as the autonomous nuclear energy authority within the UN system, has repeatedly stated for the three nuclear enrichment sites of Esfahan, Fordow, and Natanz prior to the US-Israeli attacks that targeted military facilities: [Statement on the situation in Iran | IAEA](#); sentiments echoed by the American Branch of the International Law Association (ABILA): [Statement of the President of the American Branch of the International Law Association Regarding the United States Attack on Iran - ABILA](#).
2. For an illustrative example of illegal attacks on oil and gas infrastructure, see: [‘Worst-case scenario’: 23 oil and gas sites targeted since beginning of Iran conflict, experts say - ABC News](#); on the Israeli attack on the critical South Pars gas field, see: [Israeli Officials Said U.S. Was Told About South Pars Attack - The New York Times](#); on water desalination plant attacks, see: [Vital Water Desalination Plants in Iran and Bahrain Are Attacked - The New York Times](#).

functions to mitigate harm to civilians by placing fewer constraints on military operations. The United States Government specifically lifted restrictions on antipersonnel landmines and agreed to the purchase of cluster munitions –inherently harmful to civilians– from Israel signaling both an embrace of indiscriminate weapons and a flagrant disregard people at risk (HRW, February 2026).¹ The 2026 US National Defense Strategy went further still by omitting civilian harm mitigation as an explicit policy consideration pointing towards a deadly regression (Lawfare, 2026).²

The US-Israeli deadly bombing of Shajareh Tayyebbeh primary school in Minab, Hormozgan province, southern Iran, represents arguably the most grave and stark violation of IHL and international human rights. The harrowing attack which killed over 175 people, mostly children, wounding at least 100 others, took place on the first day of the war.³ Few international organizations or member states voiced their outrage over the massacre despite the aerial attack potentially being a deliberate and intentional act with multiple buildings struck in a coordinated wave of hits by precision munitions.⁴ Calls for the parties to the conflict to distinguish between combatants/military objectives and civilians/civilian objects in the wake of the attack –in addition to respect for the principles of proportionality and precaution (ICRC 2005, Rule 15)⁵– were wholly inadequate and disproportionate. Respect for IHL places an equal emphasis on a state’s obligation pursuant to ensure observance by its own armed forces *and* respect by other persons or groups (ICRC 2005, Rule 139).⁶ Thus, there is a legal foundation and moral obligation under IHL for the compliance and

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1. [US: Cluster Munitions Plan a Deadly Regression | Human Rights Watch.](#)
 2. [Trump Administration Releases 2026 National Defense Strategy | Lawfare.](#)
 3. For videos showing the immediate aftermath of the strikes, see: [Telegram: View @enmehrnews](#), [Telegram: View @farsna](#), and [Telegram: View @mehrnews](#). In total, the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) estimates 763 schools have been either damaged or destroyed. Reports later emerged that the US hit an elementary school and sports hall in the southern city of Lamerd with children once again among the dead: [New U.S. Missile Hit Iranian Sports Hall and School, Analysis Shows - The New York Times.](#)
 4. Whilst the United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR) eventually held an urgent debate on March 27 –prompted by an official request from the Islamic Republic of Iran– the outcome was only to urge the US to conclude its so-called probe and publish the results. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a weak statement highlighting its alarm by reports of strikes despite its specific mandate to advocate for all state parties to safeguard the rights to life, survival, and development of every child, and to take all measures to ensure children’s rights are respected in armed conflicts: [Iran: Children must never be collateral damage, UN committee says | OHCHR.](#) A joint statement issued by eight UN experts focused more on the broader regional escalation than the war crime committed in Minab: [UN experts denounce aggression on Iran and Lebanon, warn of devastating regional escalation | OHCHR.](#)
 5. ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 15.
 6. ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 139.

enforcement of its instructions which should have prompted –at the very least– demands for those responsible for planning and executing the unlawful US strike to be held accountable.

Public health infrastructure has also been struck and rendered inoperative, further compounding the human toll. Disruptions to chronic disease management, maternal and neonatal care, infectious disease control, and mental health services generate excess mortality and long-term morbidity arguably surpassing the direct fatalities caused by the conflict (Moradi-Lakeh et al., 2025).¹ This emergency health crisis unfolds against a backdrop of prolonged economic fragility and structural sector weaknesses following decades of sanctions with inflationary pressures, restricted procurement pathways for essential medicines, and environmental stressors severely straining institutional resilience². Damage and destruction to hospitals and essential health infrastructure –the Iranian Red Crescent Society estimates 316 health care facilities have been hit³– raise grave concerns with regards to legal obligations and public health imperatives.⁴ Again, the international community would have been expected to respond with clarity and unity calling for all parties to fully comply with IHL, ensuring the protection of medical personnel, facilities, and civilian infrastructure is preserved.

The lack of global condemnation and the broad absence of a better coordinated international response has been both notable and striking. The international community, including the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), regional bodies, and member states should have urgently intervened to avert the impending catastrophe and unequivocally affirmed that inciting, ordering, or committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide intent entail individual criminal responsibility under international law. The POTUS’ threats, coupled with escalating US-Israeli attacks destroying critical civilian infrastructure, terrorized millions of people in Iran and their distressed diaspora relatives as ten-of-millions of lives hung in the balance. Calls for immediate action to stop unlawful attacks that would potentially plunge an entire country into darkness and deprive millions of their fundamental human rights to life, water, food, healthcare, and an adequate standard of living, were absent. International law, once again, has seemingly failed to act and protect.

1. On the devastating impacts to population health, see Moradi-Lakeh et al. (2025) with Sajadi and Majdzadeh (2022).
2. For long-term health and environmental harm for civilians, see: [Iran: Israel’s Oil Depot Strikes Endanger Environment, Health | Human Rights Watch.](#)
3. [How the U.S.-Israeli Strikes on Iran Have Damaged Schools and Hospitals - The New York Times](#)
4. Ghandi Hospital in Tehran serves as an illustrative example after it was targeted on March 1 resulting in harrowing footage of medical personnel scrambling to move cells, embryos, and infants from an in-vitro fertilization department: [Iran demands international action after attacks impact hospitals, schools | US-Israel war on Iran News | Al Jazeera.](#)

The international community should have acted urgently to the growing US-Israeli propensity for violence by calling on all parties to exercise maximum restraint, strictly adhere to IHL, and take all feasible measures to protect civilians and civilian objects. In particular, the UN was expected to reinforce these obligations and help prevent the looming large-scale humanitarian disaster whilst responding to the immediate needs. Basic public oversights that should accompany the use of military force are missing with the need for impartial and transparent voices becoming more, no less, important. Concerns about rhetoric and threats from senior US officials –especially the war crime of ordering or threatening the denial of no quarter– highlights systematically weakened institutional safeguards.¹

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN Secretariat department responsible for coordinating and financing emergency responses, has thus far pledged a pitiful US\$12M from its emergency disaster fund to support field operations Iran compared to a staggering US\$84.8 allocation for Lebanon (FTS, 2026).² The World Health Organization (WHO), worse still, has released a mere US\$800,000 from its Contingency Fund for Emergencies to support Iran’s health response.³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, other UN agencies have completely avoided reporting humanitarian aid contributions for Iran to OCHA’s managed Financial Tracking Service (FTS) which tracks contributions and funding flows.

The UNHCR –by far the largest single UN agency operational in Iran– appears to be in a situation of denial and paralysis. Critically understaffed, the agency has done little else other than publish periodic Humanitarian Situation Reports.⁴ The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), mandated by the UN General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children’s rights and to meet their basic needs, has failed to both mobilize political will and material resources in Iran only issuing its first country-specific press release on the announcement of the ceasefire.⁵ The International Committee of the Red Crescent (ICRC) in Iran has issued a solitary statement focused on the heavy price civilians are paying amid the escalating hostilities.⁶ Perhaps the

1. On the US Secretary of Defense’s threatened denial of quarter, see: [Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Air Force Gen. Dan Caine Hold a Press Briefing > U.S. Department of War > Transcript | U.S. Department of War](#). In IHL, it is especially forbidden to declare that no quarter will be given–indeed a prohibition set out in the Department of Defense’s own law of war manual.
2. [Lebanon 2026 | Financial Tracking Service](#).
3. [WHO releases US\\$800,000 from its Contingency Fund for Emergencies for Iran health response - Iran \(Islamic Republic of\) | ReliefWeb](#).
4. Latest reports and updates can be found here: [Situation Middle East Situation](#).
5. [UNICEF Stands With Iran’s Children as Ceasefire Offers Path to Recovery](#).
6. [Iran: Civilians are paying a heavy price amid escalating hostilities - ICRC in Iran | ICRC in Iran](#).

starkest illustration of humanitarian inaction –given its special mandate to protect lives and dignity of those affected by armed-conflict– the Movement’s financial ask for its Complex Emergency Appeal has reached CHF 120M (approximately US\$150M) with little indication it will be adequately funded.¹ Indeed, the ICRC’s first batch of emergency relief items to the IRCS was only delivered on April 14.² None of the actions and measures will likely contribute in a meaningful or sufficient manner to the protection of civilians or the safeguarding of their rights.

In the relative absence of a clear course of action or political steer from the international community, the cost of collective inaction cannot be underestimated. The UN and international community have failed to fulfil its obligation and moral imperative to intervene in the US/Israel’s illegal war in Iran. At the core of all humanitarian actions lie the fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. These principles, rooted in IHL, have practical operational relevance in emergency situations and are fixed in a commitment to meet the assistance and protection needs of affected populations distinctly and separately from political motivations. The humanitarian imperative, the ethical basis of most humanitarian organizations, necessitates that there is an obligation to provide relief unconditionally, wherever and whenever it is needed.

The US’ coercive leverage over the international community is a very real factor and continues virtually unabated with the fundamental ethical principle of impartiality frequently not applied for modern relief operations in practice. International organizations, especially the UN, remain largely dependent on US funding (regardless of major reductions in recent voluntary contributions) leading to collective paralysis which sets a perilous precedent for a broken system to effectively maintain peace and security. No longer fit-for-purpose, a handful of powerful nations appear to have manipulated an entire sector for their own short-term political gains with the US seemingly front and center. But for high-stakes humanitarian crises where the cost of failing to act is measured in the lives lost, inaction and claims of neutrality simply cannot be equated with passivity and silence. On the surface, Iran today represents the latest striking example of major disparities in assistance vis-à-vis the severity of needs when it comes to the international community yielding to US/Israeli agendas.

Alleviating suffering and addressing its root causes by denouncing injustices –thus creating a potential operational momentum for political change– should be of paramount importance. Whilst the apparent moral

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1. [Iran, MENA | Complex Emergency - Revised Emergency Appeal \(MDRIR018\) - Iran \(Islamic Republic of\) | ReliefWeb.](#)
 2. [Iran: ICRC delivers the first batch of emergency relief items to Iranian Red Crescent Society - Iran \(Islamic Republic of\) | ReliefWeb.](#)

dilemma between neutrality and political advocacy may seem on the surface mutually exclusive, a more pragmatic approach would view them as being complementary: it is in the interest of victims of violence that both philosophies coexist. Neutrality should be a tool for action otherwise it risks becoming a façade. Humanitarian endeavors are intended to be active –bearing witness through the overarching concept of *témoignage*– by calling attention to grave atrocities and forcing action. Indeed, the apparent moral indifference of the international community makes it ostensibly complicit in reinforcing the *status quo* of Iranian civilian suffering and US/Israeli impunity.

In trying to justify the US/Israeli attacks on Iran, US politicians have sought to adopt humanitarian-type rhetoric, claiming that their actions were enabling the liberation of the repressed Iranian population.¹ Echoing the start on the 2003 US-Iraq War, humanitarian intervention was argued as both permissible and a moral duty. But in contravention of the requirements of the R2P doctrine –notwithstanding the absence of authorization of the UNSC– the military assault on Iran fails to meet *all* the traditional criteria commonly applied for both the *jus ad bellum* (law on the use of force) and *jus in bello* (law in war). Humanitarian inaction, and the failure of the UN et al to take a moral stand, risks not only complicity in the perpetuation of unlawful acts of violence, but also the absolute erosion of the very values that underpin principled humanitarianism. Moreover, the international community's legal obligations to neither aid nor assist in the commission of internationally wrongful acts, as well as to cooperate to bring an end through lawful means serious breaches of peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*), including the basic rules of international humanitarian law, have been conspicuously absent.

Further, the absence of a clear and sustained invocation of the R2P in response to the US/Israeli attacks on Iran reveals fundamental weaknesses of the doctrine and affirms arguments about its insularity. Despite the intensity and global significance of the violence, there have been no calls whatsoever from any R2P-related advocates –including the Global Network of R2P Focal Points– for the imposition of meaningful opposition measures to protect the civilian population and its objects reflecting the structural reality that the application of the R2P is contingent not on the scale or severity of harm, but on political will and power alignment. Where violations are attributable to, or implicate, powerful states and their allies, the doctrine becomes effectively inoperative. In such contexts, R2P's selective invocation exposes its instrumentalization, deployed in cases where intervention is politically expedient, and withheld where it would require confronting those with the capacity to resist or veto accountability. Selectivity and partiality in determining when recognized legal and moral principles should be

1. [Six key lines from Trump's statement on Iran strikes.](#)

applied clearly undermines its standing whilst unequivocally exposing the partisan political standing that masquerades as a universal ethical norm. Attacks of this scale in urban settings have simply reinforced the tension between assertions of moral authority and the actions that erode the core tenets of IHL.

Conflict of interest

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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