

THE WAR IN IRAN AND THE NEGATIVE EXTERNALITIES FOR LIBERAL INTERVENTIONISM

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Abstract: The 2026 war between the USA and Israel, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other, has eluded the initial hopes of the Trump administration that a decisive victory could be achieved in a quick fashion and in addition to having wide-ranging impacts across many different spheres, including on the world economy as a whole, also appears likely to significantly reduce the prospects for European involvement in humanitarian interventions taking place beyond the borders of the continent, at least in the conceivable future. The paper employs qualitative methodology, which is reliant on the integrated analysis of a vast collection of primary and secondary sources that fall within the international relations, political science, and international security disciplines. Following a literature review, in which it examines the main assumptions that underpin the philosophy of liberal interventionism and some of the relevant trends, it advances a threefold argument. Firstly, it contends that military operations inspired by liberal interventionist principles, in order to be able to stake a claim for credibility, need to at least pay lip service to multilateralism. However, Trump's embrace of unilateralism and frequent disregard for the opinions of European allies, as it occurred during the prelude to the Iranian crisis, makes it increasingly likely that US-led interventions would be associated with the pursuit of narrow Realpolitik interests, resulting in them being unpalatable for European politicians and the general public in European countries. Secondly, the strategic vulnerability of Europe due to the war in Ukraine not appearing to be winding down, with Trump widely perceived as having done less than the bare minimum in terms of putting pressure on the Russian side in order to negotiate in good faith and make concessions, coupled with the economic fallout for Europe courtesy of the Iran war, is quite likely to dampen European enthusiasm for the use of force in order to end human rights violations in Africa, Latin America or Asia, especially given that they would detract from or at least be perceived to be detracting from the support offered for the Ukrainian war effort or be viewed as economically unsustainable. Thirdly, the war in Iran may give a significant boost to nuclear proliferation around the world and in the long-term possibly increase the number of "rogue" states possessing some sort of nuclear capacity, which would further reduce the space for humanitarian interventions due to Western countries' risk aversion and general unwillingness to test certain red lines pertaining to sovereignty in the case of nuclear powers.

Keywords: *United States, Donald Trump, Iran, liberal interventionism, nuclear proliferation*

Field: Social Sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

On 28 February 2026, in the context of the Iran-Israel proxy conflict and as part of the Middle Eastern crisis, the United States and Israel began airstrikes on Iran, with the major targets being various military and government installations, while on the same date the country's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and a number of senior military and intelligence officials were assassinated. The war has widely been described as illegal, under both US and international law, with many experts depicting it as a crime of aggression and not coming close to meeting the threshold for the use of pre-emptive force, (Siddique, 2026) with the large-scale attacks taking place prior to a scheduled fourth round of negotiations in Vienna, Austria concerning the reaching of an agreement pertaining to the nuclear program of Iran. Iran's response to the onslaught, which has included the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a key global economic chokepoint, has according to the International Energy Agency (IEA), resulted in an unprecedented disruption in the history of the global oil market (Nelson, 2026) as well as negative impacts on international trade, aviation and tourism, in addition to sparking a rise in volatility in the case of financial markets. The Trump administration has offered multiple rationales and shifting justifications for starting the war, including the need to orchestrate regime change and pave the way for the Iranian opposition to assume power, ostensibly largely in response to the Iranian authorities' brutal crackdown on the protests that began on 28 December 2025, which resulted in possibly the largest massacres of civilians in the modern history of Iran. On 13 January 2026, Donald Trump informed Iranian demonstrators in a social media post that "help was on the way", (Elwelly & Erickson, 2026) urging them to take control over their institutions. In the days preceding the war as well as during its initial phase, a number of prominent political figures such as Republican Senator Lindsey Graham maintained that the invocation of humanitarianism as a factor behind the USA's decision-making calculus in toppling the country's leadership was far from misplaced, while opponents of the war who ascribed more cynical motives to the US president's decision to pursue

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a military solution in relation to Iran, nonetheless acknowledged that the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) global political commitment, which has helped entrench the perception that humanitarian needs can supersede the rules on sovereignty and non-intervention under international law, had proved at least somewhat useful in allowing Trump to dress up the war with faith-based legitimacy. (Taub, 2026) However, there are ample grounds on which to argue that liberal interventionism may turn out to be a major casualty even after the dust from the war, frequently appraised by foreign policy experts to be a major strategic blunder stumbled into by the USA, to a degree at the behest of Israel, starts to settle.

Liberal interventionism represents a doctrine, according to which it is acceptable to go beyond economic coercion and deploy military forces (with the expectation that they may have to be combat ready rather than simply “keep the peace”, depending on the situation) in order to intervene in the domestic affairs of other states, sometimes at least partially for the sake of securing national interests, especially in situations in which the adversarial country in question systematically denies basic human rights to its citizens. (Olsen, 2024) As mentioned above, one of its cornerstones is the R2P political proposal, which was approved by the United Nations General Assembly at the 2005 World Summit, and stipulates (in paragraphs 138-139 of the Outcome Document) that it is not only permissible, but even required by the international community to step in and take concrete actions, not limited to peaceful means, if citizens are being subjected to or are at a risk of facing mass atrocities. (Geis & Schröder, (2024) In the opinion of American political theorist Michael Walzer, such interventions are justified when the acts that are perpetrated “shock the conscience of mankind”. (Nardin, 1995) Support for liberal interventionism often goes hand in hand with the promotion of democratic governance, which is premised on the belief that democracies are intrinsically more peaceful and are significantly less likely to deliberately put their citizens in situations in which their fundamental freedoms will be violated. (Geis & Schröder, (2024) Thus, in certain instances liberal interventionism may be justified with reference to the advancement of liberal norms and values rather than in response to a concrete event that is likely to endanger the life and well-being of specific cultural, ethnic, religious or social groups. The end of the Cold War is deemed to have contributed to an “unprecedented level of liberal intrusiveness”. Liberal interventionism, which was buoyed by the “unipolar moment” (Olsen, 2024) and the “end of history” outpouring of optimism regarding the ineluctable spread of democratic norms, remained a pillar of the new US-led liberal international order throughout the 1990s. Multilateralism, largely in contrast to the Cold War era, also displaced unilateralism as the primary means through which to pursue humanitarian ends. The UN Security Council’s approval was sought – and quite often granted – in every instance of humanitarian intervention that occurred during this decade. (Jones, 2015) However, even though the global consensus on humanitarian interventions had begun to erode by the early 2000s, it continued to occupy a prominent place within the US (and by extension European) political landscape in the 2000s and 2010s as well, as evidenced, for instance, by the ideological alignment between the proponents of the “democratic peace” theory and neoconservative thinkers during the first presidency of George W. Bush, with many political liberals and “human rights hawks” showing support for the Bush doctrine during the lead-up to the Iraq war. (Olsen, 2024) The Obama doctrine did not constitute a sharp break from his predecessor’s one, similarly combining liberal internationalism with conservative realist assumptions, drawing on both pragmatic and principled considerations in its foreign policy approach, entailing a degree of selectivity, as evidenced by the US intervention in Libya in 2011 (contributing to the toppling of the Muammar Gaddafi regime) and the non-intervention in Syria in 2013 (when, albeit strongly considering it, the Americans eventually refrained from pursuing a norm-enforcement action in the Middle Eastern country after receiving intelligence concerning the Bashar al-Assad loyalists’ use of sarin gas against civilians in Ghouta, southwestern Syria). (Ibid) Critics of liberal interventionism have denounced it as constituting little more than a global hegemonic or neo-imperialist project that frequently fails to show the required level of understanding of the local social and political contexts, as well as a cure that often turns out to be worse than the disease itself due to often encouraging ill-fated interventions that do not empower the right actors, resulting in blowback effects because of increasing instability, in addition to creating power vacuums to be filled by warlords or terrorist organizations. In part due to factors such as the emphasis on combating terrorism through other means, dismay over the nation-building costs incurred in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the relative decline in the power of the USA, (Yukaruç, 2024) liberal interventionism has lost popularity among NATO members in comparison to its heyday in the early years after the Cold War, though it is clear that American foreign policy elites still firmly believe that interventions in foreign countries, often under the guise of humanitarianism, can still be beneficial in terms of safeguarding US national interests. (Balthasar, 2017) However, many of the developments surrounding the war in Iran, especially when viewed through the prism of Trump’s style of foreign policy-making, seem quite likely to further delegitimize and reduce the appetite for liberal interventionism among the European member countries of NATO.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper gives the nod to qualitative research, (Lim, 2025) striving to analyze a multitude of secondary sources of information that deal with topics falling within a number of social science disciplines, while also remaining cognizant of the insights that can be gleaned from primary works, which are of course as a rule the most up-to-date when it comes to rapidly unfolding current events. The literature review is part of the introduction of the article and is intended to provide proper context to the issues under consideration. In the subsequent sections the article veers between theoretical propositions concerning liberal interventionism and country-specific examples, on occasions evaluating certain matters through a social constructivist framework, paying special attention to the linguistic tools employed by major political figures such as Donald Trump and their trickle-down effects on the wider society. While not intended to be prescriptive and to call upon the Western European political figures to adopt a certain course of action, it may not necessarily tick all the possible boxes when it comes to full scientific detachment.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With regard to the liberal interventionist angle, Trump's purported humanitarian justifications in relation to Iran have from the outset had a rather hollow ring to them from the standpoint of many European politicians. In January 2026, the US president explicitly encouraged protesters against the Iranian authorities to keep demonstrating and promised that help was on the way, but during the critical window when thousands of protesters lost their lives, his administration took no action and he subsequently reversed course, claiming that the Iranian regime had agreed to put a stop to the crackdown, leading to a feeling among many of the Iranians committed to democracy that they had been led down the primrose path by the US political elites. (Serjoie, 2026) While in 2002 and 2003 George W. Bush built a long (albeit in many respects misguided and convoluted) case for overthrowing the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, Trump's argument in favor of engaging in military action was viewed as hastily put together without too much of an effort to properly explain the US position, with allied countries such as the UK kept out of the official loop when it came to operational details prior to the Americans' joint strikes with Israel. (Mason et al., 2026) The option of making a more persuasive case for going to war that could have referred to the renewed missile build-up by Iran, which might play out in such a fashion as to eventually overwhelm the defense systems of the other Middle Eastern countries, a credible threat even without nuclear warheads being in the picture, was not really pursued by the Trump administration. (Meyer-Resende, 2026) In contrast to previous US administrations, Trump's prior record is also a blemish against him in terms of being in a good position to argue that he is strongly committed to humanitarianism. The George W. Bush administration oversaw a doubling of foreign aid worldwide between 2001 and 2009, the largest increase since the Truman administration, and used it to encourage developing countries to take steps conducive to political and economic reform. In particular, total US government development aid to the continent of Africa increased from \$1.3 billion in 2001 to more than \$5 billion in 2008. (Natsios, 2008) In contrast, preliminary data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that international development aid from its member countries fell by approximately 23 percent from 2024 to 2025. Much of that decline stemmed from a major reduction in funding from the United States, as part of the Trump administration's moves to freeze US foreign aid and development work. (Stepansky, 2026) Perhaps more ominously, Trump's history of incendiary rhetoric that appeared to portray Islam and Muslims as being dangerous and not necessarily an integral part of the US social fabric, which some sources have linked to an increase in hate crimes against this demographic, (Byman, 2021) has been markedly dissimilar to that of the previous American presidents. On 17 September 2001, Bush spoke at the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., and emphasized that the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. In the same speech, he further recognized Muslim Americans as legitimate and valuable contributors to U.S. society while also going to great lengths to prevent public backlash against US Muslims, stating that intimidation of fellow Americans due to different religious beliefs was to be considered beyond the pale. (Ching, 2020) In addition to the more than a one-month gap between the Iranian regime's mass killings of protesters and the launch of the strikes, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's references to Iran being driven by prophetic Islamic delusions and Trump's threat on 7 April 2026 that a whole civilization will perish if no deal was reached, (Gritten, 2026) while eventually not acted upon, could in some respects be interpreted as blurring the distinction between pro- and anti-regime forces within Iran because of tacitly evoking imagery of a religious struggle between Christians and Muslims. (Khokhar, 2026) Even though Trump's military intervention in Iran represents a sharp break from his previously declared goal not to start new wars, but to end them, Trump's behavior has nevertheless been consistent with his inclination to

eschew detailed consultations with allies and the clear preference that he exhibits for unilateral activities. Notably, in the 2025 US National Security Strategy, the USA sets out to oppose “intrusive” international organizations and human rights regimes. The main enemies of freedom, democracy, and rights are no longer the autocratic powers, but the transnational institutions such as the EU or traditional American allies in Europe that are sensitive to the plight of minority groups and are motivated by a desire not to allow executive overreach. Accordingly, this new document is virtually bereft of references to democracy and Western values. (Acton et al., 2026) One of the main features enhancing the credibility of liberal interventionism, as manifested during the humanitarian missions in the 1990s, is its endorsement of multilateralism, (Jones, 2015) with the underlying assumption being that there is a broad consensus among the intervening countries and the dominant Western power is unquestionably committed to liberal democracy as well as eager to lead by example. By essentially abandoning many principles of the US-led alliance system, thus no longer appearing to be on the same side as the Europeans with regard to a steadfast commitment to a post-1945 international liberal order as well as his opaque and often self-contradictory intentions, (Baer & Brown, 2026) Trump seems to have made it inordinately difficult for any European allies to jump on board when it comes to future interventions (unless they represent truly open-and-shut cases in terms of which countries are in the right). This is partly due to the European politicians being liable to suffer reputational costs worldwide and having to walk a tightrope in terms of successfully convincing their own citizens that following Trump’s lead is likely to pay off, with a December 2025 poll for the Paris-based European affairs debate platform *Le Grand Continent*, which covered nine European countries, revealing that on average 48% of the respondents saw the US president as an enemy of Europe. (Henley, 2025) Over the course of the January 2026 Greenland crisis, Trump’s desire to annex the autonomous Danish territory, justified to some degree by the supposed inability of Denmark to take good care of it and guarantee its security, was arguably coached in the language of liberal interventionism, though explicitly directed against the sovereignty of a democratic European country, which did not make for good optics from the standpoint of the Europeans. Thus, it is hardly surprising that with regard to the Iranian situation, Trump has at no point come anything close to forming a semblance of a coalition of the willing such as the one that participated in the Iraq war, with NATO’s major allies – Germany, the UK, and France – keeping their distance, and even the Trump-friendly leaders of Italy, Hungary, and Slovakia remaining lukewarm in their assessments of the wisdom of the American campaign. (Webber, 2026) If we are to borrow British diplomat Robert Cooper’s terminology, (Cooper, 2003) the United States under Trump appears to be metamorphosing into a full-fledged modern state (in contrast to the post-modern states of the European Union that prioritize cooperative security and have ruled out state-to-state wars against other democracies) or even into a “rogue” power (Da Silva, 2026) that is willing to break international taboos at a whim and treats allies with warlike aspirations. In that regard, a number of political pundits have actually voiced concerns that a quick Trump triumph in Iran could be somewhat dangerous for the Europeans due to once again encouraging the US president to set his sights on Greenland. (Meyer-Resende, 2026)

Another issue, in part traceable to the previously identified ruptures in the trans-Atlantic alliance, that is likely to contribute to a waning European interest in humanitarian interventions, at least until Trump’s second term comes to an end, is connected to Europe’s increased strategic and economic vulnerability engendered by the Trump administration’s actions both prior to and after the start of the Iran war. (Shariati, 2026) Unlike over the course of previous decades, such as the 1990s and 2000s, Europe is currently not in the enviable position to enjoy a situation of internal tranquility because of having to contend with the reality of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war for the fourth year in a row. While before the beginning of Trump’s second term many analysts and politicians may not have had particularly high hopes regarding the likelihood that the US president would be able to broker a peace deal at least somewhat favorable to Ukraine, there is still unease and disappointment that the Europeans now have to provide the bulk of the funding for the arms transfers to Ukraine and the Trump administration does not seem to be fully in the embattled country’s corner even when it comes to offering moral support. Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s changed approach to dealing with Trump following their much publicized Oval Office bust-up on 28 February 2025, for instance by becoming conciliatory and willing to toe the line with regard to US peace proposals, has mostly failed to bear fruit, due to the US president still shying away from piling serious pressure on his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to budge from his maximalist demands. (Pifer, 2026) Zelenskyy has also, up until recently, (Zadorozhnyy, 2026) been one of the European leaders who has been the most supportive of Israel and USA’s war against Iran, volunteering Ukrainian help when it comes to drone defense, but his offer was unceremoniously rebuffed by the US president. (Chiappa, 2026) Even though it would be disingenuous to apportion all (or even most of the blame) for the continuing carnage in Ukraine to Trump, the American president has been unable to live

up to his campaign promise of a quick resolution to the conflict and has to a large extent only heightened the Ukrainians' and Europeans' feelings of insecurity in relation to Russia. In this regard, it is worth noting that the Iran war has contributed to the exhaustion of Patriot interceptor stocks, with Zelenskyy expressing concerns in April 2026 that the USA and the Middle Eastern countries had expended more than 800 PAC-3 interceptor missiles during the first three days of the war. (Haavik, 2026) During the same month Polish Defense Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, in response to report that the USA had informally requested a redeployment, confirmed that Poland had no intention to relocate one of its air defense Patriot batteries to the Middle East, emphasizing the need for Polish airspace and NATO's eastern flank to remain sufficiently protected. (Jack & Cienski, 2026) Poland has been among the closest US allies within NATO, notably breaking ranks with many of the other European countries by refusing to send military personnel to Greenland as part of the Operation Arctic Endurance that began in January 2026 and was widely viewed as a deterrence exercise directed against the United States, (Wojdyga, 2026) which is another indication that as long as the Russian threat remains present, even the most pro-US countries will be quite reluctant to extend finite resources on far-flung conflicts. One uniquely favorable aspect undergirding the pro-intervention consensus of the 1990s was that decade's generally magnanimous economic climate. Economic growth in many Western nations, attributable to a degree to the post-Cold War peace dividend, made the fiscal costs of humanitarian intervention seem more manageable. (Jones, 2015) However, in a contemporary Europe that is plagued by a multitude of economic uncertainties, voters in Western nations have become more likely to cast their lots for "nation-building at home" projects than for those associated with nation-building in foreign countries. (Ibid) The Iran war has only made the overall economic picture even less optimism-inducing. Many economists caution that it will take months for the full impact of the conflict to be truly felt, with the risks of stagflation assessed as elevated while it is dubious whether many of Europe's cash-strapped governments will be in a position to shield their citizens from the expected economic fall-outs. (Treeck, 2026) Thus, it is almost certainly the case that unless the economic outlook drastically improves, the pursuit of ambitious and far-reaching humanitarian aims will be rather low on the list of Europe's priorities, at least until the end of the 2020s. In essence, a continent that sees itself as vulnerable in terms of both economic- and security-related metrics will likely shun liberal interventionism not only in geographically distant regions, but also in the near abroad, unless vital security interests are appraised to be at stake.

In addition, it is worth noting that the long-term impacts of the Iran war may entail a further reduction of the scope for liberal interventionist pursuits due to being likely to spur nuclear proliferation and thus potentially swell the ranks of the nuclear states. The global non-proliferation regime was facing significant challenges even prior to the onset of the war, but according to security experts such as Ramesh Thakur and Jennifer Kavanagh, acquiring nuclear weapons has now essentially become a matter of existential importance for a less restrained and more defiant Iranian regime, (Stancati et al., 2026) with the new supreme leader Mojtaba Khamenei appearing to be more well-disposed towards the development of nuclear weapons than his father. (Campbell, 2026) Unless the USA succeeds in forcing regime change, which currently does not seem to be feasible unless the Americans commit a substantial amount of troops for a ground invasion, Iran may continue along the uranium enrichment path, also potentially creating a domino effect by pushing neighboring countries and US allies such as Saudi Arabia to seek ways to acquire nukes, especially given that these states have been targeted by Iranian retaliation strikes. (Cole, 2026) The lack of sufficient trust in the extended deterrence provided by the Trump administration has also caused shifts in attitudes in South Korea where 76.2 % of citizens answered in the affirmative in a 2025 Asan Institute for Policy Studies poll regarding whether they were in favor of indigenous nuclear weapons. (Campbell, 2026) The belief in the necessity of hedging one's bets when it comes to both conventional and nuclear weapons has in recent years also manifested itself in the public policy discourses in other countries such as Ukraine, Poland, and Brazil. (Dalton, 2026) Even though building a nuclear bomb in secret is exceptionally difficult, it is still doable, as evidenced by South Africa's announcement in 1993 that it had developed nuclear weapons in the 1980s (albeit it retained them for a rather short period), a development that it had largely managed to keep under wraps, (Dizikes, 2022) so a country that slips under the US radar and receives technical assistance from a major power that is adversarial to the Americans, might be able to pull it off. Even though it is only speculative at this stage, a world that consists of an increased number of states with nuclear warheads, especially when they are not electoral democracies, will essentially make more places virtually off limits for liberal interventionists, (O'Hanlon, 2000) as is the case with regard to North Korea, because of the disproportionate risks that such interventions would carry due to the targeted countries' ability to retaliate in a devastating fashion.

4. CONCLUSION

With the curtains appearing to drop when it comes to US unipolar primacy as well as the return of politics based on spheres of influence, the current international environment is in many respects unfavorable from the standpoint of the proponents of liberal interventionism. The Trump administration's ill-fated decision to attack Iran is likely to only further stifle their hopes – in addition to disillusioning isolationists within the Make America Great Again (MAGA) wing of the Republican Party (which will make them less inclined to support future interventions, countenanced by either Republicans or Democrats, even if they could convincingly be argued to be fully justifiable on humanitarian grounds and to be in line with US national interests), it has exposed additional trans-Atlantic fault lines, and will potentially fuel nuclear proliferation, which means that at least until the conclusion of Trump's second term, European enthusiasm for humanitarian interventions may remain at a nadir.

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