

Mahdi Mohebirad on International Law, Sanctions, and Citizen Activism

Transcript of the conversation Helena Cobban held with global economist John Ross on 5/9/2026. Find the audio on [Apple Podcasts](#) or [Spotify](#). The video is on YouTube, [here](#).

[Helena Cobban]

Hi everyone, I'm Helena Cobban. I'm the president of Just World Educational and welcome to number 21 in our current series of conversations, video conversations on the Iran crisis, which is actually a follow-on to our broader project on Gaza and the world, given the connection between these two issues.

So today, I'm really happy that our guest is Mr. Mahdi Mohebirad, who is an international law researcher based in Tehran. And thank you, Mahdi, for being with us. You are also the director of the Organization for Defending Victims of Violence. So we will be delighted to hear your views on a range of issues.

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

It is a great pleasure to connect with you today. And actually, as you know, we are currently living under the heavy shadow of war and actually constant regional tensions here in Iran. This makes platforms like yours all the more vital for sharing the realities on the ground.

And thank you for having me. And I'm ready to dive into our discussion.

[Helena Cobban]

That's great. So actually, first of all, I would like to ask you about the conditions, your conditions, both for your family and for your workplace. You obviously right now have some electricity and some internet for doing this conversation.

But in your home, do you live in an apartment or whatever? Do you have electricity there? Do you have water?

Is it scary? Do you have children? Tell me just a few vignettes about how your life is.

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

As a short answer, yes, everything now is okay here in Tehran, actually. I live in Tehran and the electricity is okay. And this condition is stable in these days, actually.

But if I want to answer your question broadly, I first emphasize that the recent aggression against our country and war in general, which is inherently destructive, has triggered a multitude of human rights violations. The impact I am about to describe does not merely affect me or my family or my neighborhood or my colleagues. It is an existential threat that targets the entire Iranian population.

The impact I am about to describe does not just affect me or my family or my colleagues. It is a threat which targets all the Iranian population. When you look at the intersection between war and human rights, the violations are severe.

Beyond the obvious threats to the right to life, we are witnessing the systematic deprivation of psychological security and economic stability. For example, the constant shadow of military conflict directly disrupts the supply chain of essential goods, paralyzing daily life and imposing trauma on many different civilians. But to truly understand the depth of this crisis, we need to take a step back.

The current situation cannot be reused in a vacuum. Long before these military escalations, the Iranian people have been fighting silent war forced upon them through UCMs, unilateral coercive measures and sanctions, or what is commonly called blockade. From an international law perspective, this brings us to a critical point regarding Article 51 of the UN Charter.

You know that Article 51 guarantees the inherent right of a state to self-defense. The ultimate beneficiary of this right is the citizen. A state exercises self-defense to protect its people.

When decades of illegal sanctions deliberately target, for example, infrastructures, economy, and all these things, they severely undermine the state's capacity to defend its civilians against external military attacks. The sanctions strip the citizens of their fundamental right to be protected. Therefore, the blockade and the military aggression are not separate issues.

We should say that they are interlinked mechanisms that violate the basic human rights and the rights of the Iranian population.

[Helena Cobban]

You know, I find that really interesting. I wrote a piece not long ago about how actually these, as you call them, UCMs, unilateral coercive measures, sanctions, unilaterally applied by our government here in the United States, constitute a form of terrorism because the intention is to inflict pain on the citizens in order that they then affect the politics of the country. And that's exactly, you know, in as much as there is a definition of terrorism, that's what it is.

It's inflicting pain on non-combatants in order to effect political goals.

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

Yeah. You know, there are some, actually, opinions about UCMs. You know, some Western scholars argue that these UCMs just affect states and not affect civilians or, I mean, other parts of the country. But actually, it is not true because we can see in these years that UCMs affect, actually, the population more than states because the impacts of UCMs on human rights are severe and it affects many different human rights.

When we are talking about vulnerable groups such as children or women or even patients, the lack of medicine or some bans from importing medicines and other essential supplies to our country affects the Iranian people. And we cannot say that they don't affect the entire population. Even if it affects the students, scholars, we can talk about the right to education, we can talk about the right to development because our country needs to improve its, actually, powers and other things in order to...

We want to be developing, actually, developed countries, but with sanctions, it is really hard. It is really hard and, actually, it affects the economy, either.

[Helena Cobban]

So, what we're talking about here is different types of harm that my government has been inflicting on your people. The first is the long-standing, decades-long harm from sanctions, which obviously got increased with President Trump's early April declaration of the new blockade on all of Iran's ports. So, that's the harm from sanctions.

And then, of course, we had the harm from the completely unprovoked military aggressions, both of last June and the one that was launched on February 28th. So, how do you characterize the steps that your government has taken and that it is continuing to take to bring all these infractions to the attention of the relevant international bodies?

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

So, in addressing how these infractions, as you said, are brought to international attention, the Iranian government has employed a multifaceted legal and diplomatic strategy. If I want to mention some of them, especially on the legal front, a key milestone was Iran's participation in the ICJ advisory opinion proceedings regarding the legal consequences of Israel's policies in the occupied territories. You know that while Iran strategically avoids participating in contentious cases, such as the South Africa case, to maintain its policy of non-recognition of Israel, it fully utilized the advisory opinion proceedings.

Iran presented comprehensive oral and written legal arguments at the ICJ, and emphasizing the violation of the right to self-determination and systematic breaches of international humanitarian law by Israel. And diplomatically, Iran has utilized forums like the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council in Geneva to document these violations by reading some statements, or submitting some written statements, or communications with the UN and UN bodies, and so on. Furthermore, there is a concerted force to mobilize regional and emerging blocs, such as the OIC, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and BRICS, urging them to move beyond mere rhetoric and implement concrete political and economic pressure on these issues.

However, from my perspective as a researcher, while these state-led courts are vital for setting the legal stage, the true burden of the detailed documentation falls on civil societies, NGOs. The government provides the official platform, but it is our job as NGOs on the ground to ensure that the human realities, the actual names, the missing students, as you know, like Makan Nasiri in Minab school at Hormozgan province, and shattered

communities are never reduced to mere statistics in these international corridors. And that's it.

I think the NGO participation is really, really important at this critical moment.

[Helena Cobban]

Has your organization, ODVV, have you produced materials to show the harms from the decades of sanctions and from the most recent round of sanctions?

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

In the midst of war, we had the 61st session of the Human Rights Council. And you know that we were unable to participate physically in these events due to the situation. And that's why we just submit some statements through video intervention.

And we held some side events regarding the recent war at the UN by participation of other NGOs we worked with. But no Iranian NGOs could participate in that side event. But as you know, there is a 62nd session on June 2026, Human Rights Council session, regular session.

And we might participate in that meeting in order to defend our people, defend our civilians regarding the recent war by submitting some statements, holding some exhibitions and side events regarding the recent issues and different dimensions of it.

[Helena Cobban]

So right now, as I understand the position of your government, it is for obviously the total lifting of the US unilateral sanctions, and also for reparations for the harms, both during the current war and perhaps the longer term harms from sanctions. You know, here in the United States, one thing I found is that a lot of people have kind of treated it as normal, that one of the things the United States can do around the world is impose unilateral sanctions on other countries of which it disapproves. So I think it's really important and interesting for people here in the United States to understand more deeply that sanctions, when they're unilaterally applied, have no legitimacy at all.

In fact, they violate, as you had noted, several core principles and articles in the UN Charter. And so I hope that with, you know, this ongoing diplomacy that we have, it's complicated diplomacy, because it's, you know, messages are passed through the government of Pakistan. But it's important that people here in the United States understand the severity of this issue of sanctions.

And, you know, I thank you for, you know, laying out to some degree, you know, the impact that sanctions have had historically and that they are the new big sanctions the blockade are having right now. I want to ask how you judge the effectiveness of the current, let's say, panoply of international bodies, and whether it's the UN Security Council, or the ICJ, or the ICC, or, you know, even let's say the International Atomic Energy Authority, but all these international bodies that are supposed to hold violators accountable in a meaningful way. Do you see any of that happening?

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

You know, we must be pragmatic. International law is fundamentally a tool. And we must calibrate our expectations to the actual capacity of this tool.

Some people say nowadays that international law is dead. There is no international law. You know, for example, when you look at the International Court of Justice, its ultimate legal limits, in many cases, is a formal condemnation and a judgment that if there is some problem, if there is a problem in enforcement of that judgment, we only have Article 94 of the UN Charter, the enforcement of the ICJ judgment, rest with the Security Council.

Naturally, due to the US veto power, we immediately hit the wall of enforcement. So the ruling is not executed by the condemned state, and the mechanism is paralyzed. However, does this mean the tool is useless?

I think not. No. Because in international relations, these legal documents are completely sufficient for diplomatic isolation and delegitimization.

What we often refer to as the strategy of naming and shaming, we have this. So think about it, before the war on Gaza, the average global citizen knew very little about international courts, such as ICJ, ICC. Today, the constant discourse around these UN organs has placed unprecedented legal and public pressure on Israel.

That's awakening in itself, it's a strategic victory, I think. The same logic applies to the ICC, International Criminal Court. Even if an arrest warrant against the Israel prime minister does not resolve in his immediate physical arrest, the issuance of the warrant is an achievement, I think.

It restricts his diplomacy mobility and shatters the illusion of absolute impunity. While it falls short of our ideal version for international criminal justice, it is an undeniable step forward. This reality brings us to a truth.

We desperately need to reform these mechanisms and the UN Charter itself, no matter how difficult that may be. Because changing the UN Charter is really hard, and we can say it is impossible, actually. But currently, these principal organs of UN are monopolized by a traditional circle of power.

This leaves developing nations, the Global South, relying on less impactful mechanisms. But this reality must never lead to passivity. On the contrary, it should serve as a powerful catalyst, urging the Global South to actively challenge the status quo and push for a fundamental transformation of the international order.

This is my opinion.

[Helena Cobban]

That's very forcefully put. Thank you so much. What precisely should the Global South be pushing for, like changing the veto system in the Security Council or building a completely new organization, given the shortcomings of the United Nations?

What's your view of a good path forward?

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

You know, there are some important but controversial debates among international law scholars in all over the world, especially in the Global South, regarding changing or modifying the UN Charter. One of them is this, for example, to add some more member states in the Security Council. I'm talking about permanent members.

For example, I think a few years ago, Brazil and India or even Japan and Germany, they tried to be a part of this council, but they couldn't. I think that it is not something really important to add some permanent members, but something that is really important, we have different principal organs. But when we are talking about the most important judicial organ of the UN system, I mean the ICJ, the states expect to actually gain something from these international courts.

But in a sense, we don't see such a thing. We should change some parts of the UN Charter in order to make ICJ decisions more productive and actually imperative.

[Helena Cobban]

So that the ICJ would gain some form of enforcement authority, or how would that work?

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

Yes, I mean, the ICJ now only works with Article 94 of the UN Charter. And if there is any P5 in the party, in the case, actually it doesn't work. For example, we can see that even in ICC, you know, most of the cases that now we have seen in this court belongs to African citizens.

No European, no American, even no some, I mean, Eastern countries. Because, for example, China might support them. Russia might support them.

In some other countries, the US might support them. And it doesn't work. And some scholars actually believe that this court is only for Africans.

[Helena Cobban]

I mean, one of the things about the International Criminal Court is that, you know, states can join it or not join it. It's not actually part of the UN system, part of the universal UN system. And the fact that the United States, Israel, Russia and China are not members of it means that its effectiveness is very limited.

And it's actually, I mean, I've done quite a lot of work and research on the ICC myself. I went to the Hague, I went to the court and saw some sessions. And I had earlier gone to some sessions of the preceding tribunal for Rwanda, the ICTR.

And it is striking how much this whole apparatus of international individualized criminal justice, because this is not adjudicating disputes between states, which is what the International Court of Justice does. But the ICC seeks to hold individuals accountable for

their actions. But it's all administered by Europeans, nearly all administered by Europeans at the ICC.

And as you noted, the people being tried are Africans. So it comes across from my perspective, since I grew up in Britain, you know, at a time when we had the fading of the British Empire, but the British Empire was still essentially there. It looked like a colonial setup, where you have white Europeans sitting in judgment on people who are black Africans.

And from that perspective, it seemed very distant from what one would hope to see of an international court. It was interesting that they brought the cases against some Israeli leaders, including, of course, Netanyahu, and his earlier. Yeah.

Because those infractions, those actions were committed on the territory of Palestine, which is a member of the ICC, although Israel is not. And so that was one tiny instance in which this very weird and amorphous body called the State of Palestine, well, that meant something, you know, because it has apparently a territory that upon which Netanyahu's actions were being committed. But at the end of the day, what difference has it made the fact that he has an arrest warrant out there?

It hasn't made very much difference to his life at all. Whereas, for the people at the ICC, and of course, for somebody like Francesca Albanese, the actions that Karine Kahn of the ICC or Francesca Albanese or others, the actions they took to try to uphold international law end up getting them punished by the United States. So that is a very strange, and I would say, not beyond strange, I think it's an outrageous situation that we hear who are citizens of the United States, we need to reverse those kind of outrageous actions as speedily as we can.

Do you see any hope that those that kind of skewing of international law and international institutions can be reversed and that they can be made into fair and equitable institutions?

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

Before I answer the question, you addressed some names such as Francesca Albanese. She is really under the pressure. When she talks about the realities occurred in the occupied Palestinian territories, even her living is full of stress and anxiety.

I saw her in the Human Rights Council in one side event, which an NGO organized it last year. She was really nice, I mean, by mentioning different aspects of international law and other legal documentations about the atrocities committed in OPT. But you know, even the ICC judges, they cannot even book or reserve something outside their territories, for example, in Europe, in the US and so on.

It's really awful, because there are special rapporteurs, there are judges, and this is hilarious. They are talking about truth, they're talking about something normal, but they are not in safe zone. But if I want to answer the question in general and to address whether the corpus of international law has suffered new damage or was already flawed, I must take a pragmatic view.

The system was already fundamentally flawed long before October 2020. Historically, the principal organs of international law have been monopolized by a traditional circle of power, as I mentioned a few minutes ago. This created a long-standing double standard, where the rule seemingly applied only to the weak, while the powerful enjoyed immunity.

What we have witnessed since the genociding as it began is not necessarily the creation of new flaws, but rather the brutal and deniable exploiter of these existing structural hypocrisies. Yes, this crisis has a silver lining. Before this, the average global citizen knew very little about international law, courts, and other things similar to that.

But today, the global is awakening. Actually, they demand justice. They know that the UN system is not complete, it's not perfect, but they demand the international community to wake up, to do something, and not to be passive.

They hope a little about those tools. As I said, there is a tool which is called international law, it is not complete, but they want that international law works even in a minimum stage.

[Helena Cobban]

So, when you talk about a silver lining, I mean, I admire your optimism, because of course, this is a silver lining to a very, very black cloud of destruction and death, both in Gaza, in the West Bank, in South Lebanon, and in your country. And for us here in the United States, you know, it seems very hard sometimes to see the silver lining, because we see our friends in all those places, you know, suffering so badly. But I have just one final question.

Is your organization in touch with citizen organizations elsewhere in the global South, as well as in the global North, that you're working in collaboration with other organizations?

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

Actually, we work with some other NGOs who work on many different subjects, such as UCM, but actually, most of them are from global South, not North. And we have a little connection with them.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, that's good. Can you tell us if there's like an organization of these organizations, if you like? Is there like an alliance?

How can we learn more about these organizations?

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

What do you mean? I didn't understand.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, just, you know, you said you're in touch with them, but is there like a formal alliance between these organizations around the world? Because I have some friends here in the United States who work with like this different rights organizations.

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

Because mutual activities is better than individual activities. When some NGOs work together, or even they submit something as a joint, for example, statement, it is more impressive than the individual or something like, I don't know, organizing meetings, webinars, I completely agree with that.

[Helena Cobban]

So, Mehdi, I know that you've had some trouble with your website at ODVV, that it got taken down. I hope it gets put up again soon, because I think people around the world need to learn much more about your work. And it's such important work to be doing as a citizen organization there on the ground in Iran.

I just really wish you all the best. And thank you very much again for coming on to our podcast series here. For people who are watching this, do go to our website, www.justworldeducational.org.

Maybe we can find a way to get some of your reports onto our website and cooperate in that way with your organization. And people who go to our website, of course, we want you to donate to support our work, which keeps projects like this Iran crisis project going. That was just my little intervention there, Mehdi, to do my advertising for our organization.

But really, my thanks go to you right now for everything you've done to make this conversation so worthwhile.

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

Thank you very much. As a final point, I'd like to say that, you know, as you said, due to some emergency situations, our website doesn't work well. So I'd appreciate it if you can share our products such as, I don't know, brochures, booklets, or interviews on your website.

And as a second point, it is really admirable that you are preparing these podcasts about the recent aggression against Iran. The people in Iran are residents. They are really powerful.

But we should not actually show that they are innocent. And some powerful states are actually perpetrating some many different crimes. I wanted to mention some of these numbers and statistics, but due to the lack of time, I will send it to you later.

And you can share these statistics regarding the recent war on your website about many different aspects about educational, I don't know, historical places, airports, medical facilities, hospitals, and so on. And it was my pleasure to connect with you today. It was a really great conversation.

And I hope to have more meetings and webinars together. And that's it.

[Helena Cobban]

Thank you so much, Mehdi. And yes, we will see what we can do to help amplify your voice, especially in the global Anglosphere.

[Mahdi Mohebirad]

Thank you very much.