

Geopolitical and Legal Risk Assessment of Targeting Dual-Use Energy and Water Infrastructure in the Middle East: A Comprehensive Verification of the Trump Administration's Remarks on Destroying Power Plants

Introduction: The Paradigm Shift of Total Infrastructure Destruction and the Structure of the Crisis

In modern armed conflicts, the boundary between military objectives and infrastructure essential for civilian survival has become highly complex due to geopolitical and technological factors. This tension reached an unprecedented crisis point in April 2026, when the President of the United States issued a declaration threatening the "permanent destruction" of Iran's energy and transportation infrastructure. On April 7, 2026, President Donald Trump posted on his social media platform, Truth Social, stating, "A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again." He issued an ultimatum that if the Strait of Hormuz was not reopened, Iran's bridges and power plants would be targeted and completely demolished so as "never to be used again".¹ A specific deadline of 8:00 PM (EST) on that same day was set for this ultimatum.³

This statement caused severe alarm among legal scholars and former senior military officials both within and outside the United States. While debates are unfolding within frameworks such as "is it legal or illegal" or "is there any historical precedent," these discussions critically lack a crucial perspective when faced with the physical reality of the Middle East. That cold reality is that in the Middle East, including the Persian Gulf, "destroying power plants" is physically synonymous with "wiping out drinking water for tens of millions of people".⁴

This report synthesizes various data and the views of military and legal experts to technically elucidate the physical and structural inseparability of power and desalination facilities in the Middle East. Furthermore, it provides a multifaceted and comprehensive analysis of the illegality of permanent infrastructure destruction under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), including the Geneva Conventions; the historical evolution of US military doctrine regarding infrastructure targeting in past campaigns (the Gulf War, Kosovo War, and Iraq War); the legal review process (JAG) and the duty of service members to disobey unlawful orders under the military chain of command; and the devastating impact that breaking this "taboo" would have

on the national security of Israel, a US ally.

Physical and Structural Inseparability of Power and Water Supply in the Middle East

To evaluate the impact of operations targeting power plants in the Middle East, it is essential to understand the structural and thermodynamic reality of water resource supply in the region. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is the most water-stressed region on Earth, holding about 6% of the global population but less than 2% of the world's available renewable freshwater resources.⁶ Looking across the entire Arabian Peninsula, there is not a single permanent river that flows year-round, and the groundwater aquifers that have historically supported the water supply of various countries are depleting at a rate far exceeding their natural recovery capacity.⁴

Under such harsh environments, what enables rapid urbanization, industrialization, and the life support of tens of millions of people is "fossil-fueled water"—namely, massive seawater desalination plants.⁶ Middle Eastern countries, centered around the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, operate over 400 desalination plants along their coasts, singularly producing about 40% of the world's desalinated water.⁸

Technical Integration via Co-generation (Combined Heat and Power) Systems

Large-scale desalination plants in the Middle East are not built as independent water treatment facilities; rather, they are physically integrated with power plants as "Integrated Water and Power Projects" (IWPP). This is not merely for locational convenience, but a thermodynamic necessity arising from the immense energy demand required to desalinate seawater.⁴

The primary desalination technologies adopted in the Middle East are broadly categorized into thermal methods like Multi-Stage Flash (MSF) and Multiple Effect Distillation (MED), and high-pressure methods like Reverse Osmosis (RO).⁹ None of these can be economically or physically sustained without co-location with a power plant.

1. **Thermal Desalination (MSF / MED):** These thermal methods, which separate salt by evaporating seawater, consume colossal amounts of thermal energy. Therefore, large-scale facilities in the Middle East draw "low-pressure steam" (waste heat) exhausted after generating electricity at Combined Cycle Gas Turbine (CCGT) power plants directly into the evaporators of the desalination plant.⁹ Consequently, the moment the adjacent power plant's turbines stop and the supply of waste heat is cut off, MSF and MED plants physically become inoperable.
2. **Reverse Osmosis (RO):** Even the RO method, which does not require heat, consumes an extremely large amount of electricity to drive the high-pressure pumps that force seawater through semi-permeable membranes.⁹ Since electricity costs constitute the largest portion of an RO plant's operating expenses, they are built directly connected by

cables on the same site as power plants to minimize transmission losses and share infrastructure (such as intake/outfall pipes and electrical control cables).⁴

A specific example is the "Jebel Ali Power and Desalination Plant" in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). This facility holds a Guinness World Record as the world's largest single-site natural gas power generation facility (with a capacity of approx. 8,694 megawatts), while simultaneously being a massive co-located facility producing hundreds of millions of gallons of drinking water daily using MSF technology and others.¹⁴ Similarly, the "Ras Al Khair" facility in Saudi Arabia integrates a 2.6-gigawatt power plant with a hybrid MSF/RO desalination plant, supplying water to 3.5 million people in the Riyadh region.¹⁷

In these complexes, the "power plant" and the "desalination plant" are a "single target" from an attacker's perspective. Bombing power turbines or substations does not mean another facility will "subsequently shut down in tandem"; it means that one bombing will cause "the simultaneous annihilation of both water and power production".⁴

Overwhelming Dependence on Desalination for Drinking Water

The severe water stress faced by these nations is clearly reflected in their reliance on desalination plants. The table below shows the proportion of seawater desalination in the drinking water supply of major Middle Eastern countries.

Country	Desalination Dependence for Drinking Water	Notes	Sources
Qatar	100%	Complete dependence. Risk of reserve depletion within days.	19
Bahrain	90% - 100%	Groundwater reserved for emergencies since 2016. De facto total dependence.	8
Kuwait	90%	90% of residential water depends on desalination.	19

Oman	86%	High dependence despite introducing solar-powered plants.	19
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	80% - 90%+	Near 100% dependence in major cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi.	20
Saudi Arabia	50% - 70%	Some inland groundwater use, but major cities rely heavily on desalination.	20

Regarding Iran, because the country possesses mountainous regions and rivers, its overall national dependence on desalinated water is limited to a few percent (about 3-5%) of total demand.¹² However, these macro-level statistics mask fatal local vulnerabilities. In the southern coastal regions and islands (such as Qeshm) facing the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, residents' survival is heavily dependent on desalination infrastructure.⁵ Furthermore, Iran is a large country with a population of approximately 90 million²⁶; even if the water sources are groundwater or dams, the municipal water systems required to distribute that water to cities and homes rely entirely on electricity-driven pumps.⁴

President Trump's threat to "completely destroy power plants so they can never be used again" does not merely signify the loss of an energy grid. If power is cut off, coastal desalination plants will instantly cease functioning, and inland water distribution pumps will fall silent. In a nation of 90 million, drinking water would dry up within days to weeks, triggering rampant and lethal waterborne diseases like dysentery and cholera due to the loss of sewage treatment capabilities. This is physically identical to the act of intentionally causing mass casualties through widespread dehydration and sanitary collapse.²⁶

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the Illegality of Attacking "Objects Indispensable to the Survival of the Civilian Population"

Intentional attacks on infrastructure supporting civilian life are strictly regulated by modern international law, which evolved from reflections on the total wars of the 20th century. The core legal dispute surrounding the April 2026 threat of "complete destruction of power plants" lies in

the interpretation of the norms dictating under what conditions attacks on dual-use infrastructure constitute war crimes.

Absolute Prohibitions under Article 54 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions

The legal cornerstone of civilian infrastructure protection is the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions (AP I), adopted in 1977. Article 54, "Protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population," explicitly prohibits strategies that deprive residents of basic survival infrastructure for military advantage.³¹

Article 54, paragraph 2 clearly states:

"It is prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works, for the specific purpose of denying them for their sustenance value to the civilian population or to the adverse Party, whatever the motive..."³¹

As previously detailed, Middle Eastern Integrated Water and Power Projects (IWPP) are structurally and functionally the very definition of "drinking water installations." As legal experts like Marko Milanovic, Professor of Public International Law at the University of Reading, point out, unless a plant supplies water "exclusively" to a military base—an extremely exceptional circumstance—ordering a bombing of power/desalination facilities in the Middle East is "manifestly unlawful".²⁵

Furthermore, Article 8 (War Crimes) of the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) stipulates that "intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival" (which includes water deprivation) and "intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects" are explicitly defined as war crimes.³³ Amnesty International has warned that President Trump's rhetoric that "a whole civilization will die" could constitute genocide, as defined by the Genocide Convention and the Rome Statute, which involves the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".³

The Principle of Proportionality and the Fallacy of the Dual-Use Interpretation

A logic frequently employed to justify military operations is the concept of "dual-use" infrastructure. Because power grids support civilian life while simultaneously supplying electricity to enemy air defense radars, command/control communications, and munitions factories, they have historically been interpreted as potential "military objectives".³⁶

However, IHL contains the unavoidable requirement known as the "Principle of Proportionality."

This principle dictates that the incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, or damage to civilian objects must not be "excessive" in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated from the attack.²⁹

In a scenario involving the "complete and permanent destruction" of Iran's power plants and bridges, the anticipated direct "military advantage" would be the neutralization of Iran's air defenses and the severing of logistics. On the other hand, the resulting "civilian harm" would entail cutting off the drinking water supply for 90 million people, the simultaneous shutdown of hospital life-support systems, the loss of sewage treatment capacity leading to fatal infectious disease pandemics, and starvation caused by the collapse of the cold chain (refrigerated food distribution).³

In a previous statement signed by over 100 US legal scholars, it was warned that attacks on energy infrastructure "could entail" war crimes.³⁸ However, in the Middle East, where electricity and water are physically integrated, the cautious phrase "could entail" is grossly insufficient. When weighing military advantage against the mass death of tens of millions (via dehydration and epidemic), it is logically impossible to satisfy the proportionality requirement. Moreover, the "reopening of the Strait of Hormuz" demanded by President Trump is more of a diplomatic/political request than the elimination of an immediate military threat.⁴⁰ Destroying the survival foundation of civilians intentionally and permanently to extract political concessions is not a military action, but rather "collective punishment" (a violation of Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention).²⁹

Historical Evolution of Infrastructure Targeting in US Military Doctrine and the Formation of a Taboo

The argument that "attacks targeting power plants and grids have been conducted in the past" is a misleading interpretation that ignores historical context. The consensus among military legal experts in 2026 is a direct product of the profound humanitarian and strategic lessons learned from US military operations in the Middle East and the Balkans over the past 30 years. Analyzing past operations clearly shows how US military doctrine has consciously moved away from the "permanent destruction of civilian infrastructure."

1991 Gulf War: Complete Destruction Leading to Public Health Collapse and Humanitarian Disaster

During Operation Desert Storm (the Gulf War) in 1991, the US-led multinational coalition conducted massive strategic bombings against Iraq's power grid.⁴² These bombings reduced Iraq's power generation capacity to a mere 4% of its pre-war level, successfully paralyzing the military's command and control functions as planned.⁴³

However, behind this military success, secondary and tertiary impacts inflicted devastating harm on civilians. The loss of power halted water treatment plants and sewage pumping stations across Iraq. Consequently, untreated raw sewage overflowed into the Tigris and

Euphrates rivers, severely contaminating drinking water sources.⁴⁴

Post-war epidemiological surveys highlighted this humanitarian disaster. According to an August 1991 survey conducted by the International Study Team (IST) led by Harvard researchers, Iraq's infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) from 1985 to 1990 was 32.5; however, in the post-war period from January to August 1991, this figure skyrocketed to 128.5.⁴⁵ Additionally, multiple demographic analyses based on a large-scale 1999 UNICEF survey (conducted with Iraqi government cooperation) confirmed that the under-5 mortality rate sharply doubled from around 50 in 1989 to approximately 104–118 in 1991, remaining high throughout the 1990s.⁴⁴ Although the 1999 UNICEF data was later criticized for containing intentional manipulations by Saddam Hussein's regime for propaganda to lift sanctions⁴⁹, independent re-evaluations removing this manipulation still upheld the undeniable fact of a "sharp spike in mortality rates" resulting in tens of thousands of infant deaths due to the collapse of power, water, and sanitation infrastructure.⁴⁷

This 1991 experience left a strong trauma and lesson within the US military: "Complete destruction of the power grid directly leads to massive civilian casualties from waterborne diseases." Since then, the "permanent destruction" of power grids in the Middle East has effectively become a taboo.

1999 Kosovo War: Shift from Permanent Destruction to "Temporary Incapacitation"

The lessons of 1991 brought about a dramatic shift in target selection during the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (Kosovo). Forced to attack the power grid to paralyze the Yugoslav military's air defense and communication networks, the US Air Force opted against blowing up the power turbines themselves. Instead, they deployed a new weapon in combat: the "BLU-114/B" conductive carbon fiber submunition (commonly known as the soft bomb or blackout bomb).⁵¹

This specialized weapon dispersed countless carbon fiber threads over high-voltage power lines and substations, causing massive short circuits without physical destruction and forcing safety systems to trigger, thereby cutting off transmission.⁵²

The objective of this operation was not "permanent destruction of infrastructure" making power plants unusable forever, but rather "temporary incapacitation" serving as pressure against the political leadership.⁵¹ The design ensured that once the military objectives were achieved, or if the impact on civilians exceeded acceptable limits, the fibers could be removed and systems rebooted to restore power within hours or days, thereby avoiding a fatal, long-term collapse of hospitals and water/sewage systems.

2003 Iraq War: Minimizing Collateral Damage and Precision Strikes

The doctrine of infrastructure protection was further refined during the 2003 Iraq War. Highly vigilant against repeating the 1991 public health collapse, US Central Command (CENTCOM)

intentionally excluded power plants, public water purification facilities, and civilian infrastructure from its target lists, or kept strikes to an absolute minimum.⁵⁶

Even when attacks on dual-use facilities were indispensable, extremely precise methods were employed. For instance, to eliminate the Iraqi Ministry of Information's communications capabilities, instead of destroying the entire building with a massive explosion, a Predator drone fired a low-yield Hellfire missile to surgically destroy a single communications antenna on the roof. This restricted damage to adjacent mosques and civilian buildings to mere shattered windows ("minimal damage").⁵²

Considering this 30-year historical context, President Trump's April 2026 declaration to "decimate every bridge and burn, explode, and render unusable every power plant" is not mere hardline rhetoric. It is a regressive declaration intending to completely discard the rules of engagement and compliance with International Humanitarian Law that the US military has painstakingly developed to minimize civilian harm.¹

The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and the Duty of Service Members to Resist "Manifestly Unlawful Orders"

The President's extrajudicial threats of destruction are creating severe legal and ethical fractures within the US military chain of command. If ordered to permanently destroy power plants co-located with desalination facilities (= the drinking water sources for tens of millions), US military personnel will face a fatal dilemma.

The Legal Duty to Refuse Unlawful Orders and Nuremberg Principles

Under the framework of the US Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and Customary International Humanitarian Law (Rule 154), while service members have a duty to obey the orders of their superiors, they bear a higher legal "duty" not to obey "manifestly unlawful orders".²⁵

If an order would be immediately recognized as illegal by a person of ordinary sense and understanding, it is considered "manifestly unlawful." Given that Article 54 of the Geneva Conventions strictly prohibits attacks on "drinking water installations," an order to completely destroy co-generation power plants in the Middle East clearly exceeds this threshold.³

As established by the Nuremberg principles following WWII, the "superior orders defense" (claiming one was just following orders) does not exempt an individual from criminal liability for executing war crimes.⁵⁹ While the President may possess broad immunity for official acts under US Supreme Court precedent, this immunity does absolutely not extend to the bomber pilots, drone operators, or frontline commanders who authorize and execute those orders. They personally bear the risk of being prosecuted as war criminals by the International Criminal

Court (ICC) or domestic tribunals.³

Bipartisan Concerns and the Role of the JAG Legal Review System

In response to this reality under military law, an unusual warning was issued across US politics and media. Six Democratic lawmakers with military or intelligence backgrounds, led by former Army Ranger Rep. Jason Crow (D-CO) and including Senators Mark Kelly and Elissa Slotkin, released a video message speaking directly to service members. They invoked their "oath to the Constitution" and pleaded that "You can refuse illegal orders... You must refuse illegal orders".⁵⁸ Rep. Crow explicitly stated that targeting civilians or blowing up civilian power plants are war crimes that cannot be ignored.⁶²

In response, President Trump labeled them "traitors" and condemned their actions as "seditious behavior" punishable by death.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth declared an end to "stupid rules of engagement" and "politically correct wars," promising a ruthless campaign of maximum lethality with "no quarter, no mercy." He even took retaliatory actions, such as demoting the lawmakers who encouraged refusing illegal orders.²⁵ It should be noted that issuing an order of "no quarter" (leaving no survivors) is itself a war crime prohibited by the Hague Conventions and the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions.²⁹

Notably, concerns regarding unlawful orders are shared across party lines. Even prominent conservative opinion leader Tucker Carlson publicly called on White House staff and military personnel to "say no" or resign if President Trump orders the use of weapons of mass destruction against civilians or other insane attacks.⁶⁹

In actual US military operations, operational plans (target lists) must absolutely undergo a "legal review" by the Judge Advocate General (JAG). Given that the total destruction of power plants objectively constitutes a war crime—meaning the cutoff of drinking water for 90 million people, vastly deviating from the principle of proportionality—it is highly plausible that JAG would refuse to approve the operational plan, or that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff would strictly limit the scope of the operation. Since an executive order alone cannot nullify International Humanitarian Law or the individual criminal liability of service members, this asymmetry has birthed an unprecedented crisis of civilian control: a scenario where the Commander-in-Chief issues an order, but the military chain of command refuses or alters it to ensure legality.

Asymmetry of Retaliation and the Fatal Threat to Israel's National Security

The most fatal and strategic consequence overlooked by President Trump's threat of "complete destruction of energy infrastructure" is that the price will be paid by Israel, America's greatest ally. In modern asymmetric warfare, breaking the taboo to declare that "it is acceptable to target power and desalination plants" provides hostile actors with both the justification and the precedent to strike Israel's Achilles' heel.

Israel's Vulnerability Through Extreme Reliance on Seawater Desalination

Over the past 20 years, Israel has deployed the world's most ambitious water security program to overcome water shortages caused by climate change and population growth. Once heavily reliant on drawing water from the Sea of Galilee, Israel now depends on Seawater Reverse Osmosis (SWRO) desalination technology for approximately 70% to 85% of the nation's drinking water consumption.⁷¹

Five massive desalination plants (Sorek A & B, Hadera, Ashkelon, Palmachim, and Ashdod), which act as the nation's lifeline, operate along Israel's Mediterranean coast.¹³ Similar to the Gulf States, these facilities are intimately tied to energy infrastructure.

1. **Hadera:** One of the world's largest SWRO plants, the Hadera desalination facility, is built directly on the grounds of the "Orot Rabin" (Rabin Lights) coal and gas power station. By sharing infrastructure with the power plant to maximize efficiency, this plant alone supplies drinking water to over 1 million people.⁷⁵
2. **Sorek:** A mega-facility singlehandedly meeting about 20% of Israel's municipal water demand, Sorek has a dedicated power plant (70MW scale) co-located on-site to provide cheap and stable electricity exclusively for the desalination process.⁷⁹
3. **Ashkelon:** The highly efficient Ashkelon facility also receives primary electricity directly from an adjacent, dedicated combined-cycle co-generation power plant (natural gas) to drive its high-pressure RO pumps.⁷⁸

The Terror of "Mutually Assured Dehydration" and the Price of Norm Collapse

Geographically, Israel is a very small nation, and its massive desalination plants are concentrated in a few locations along the Mediterranean coast.¹³ Unlike deep underground military bunkers or missile silos, it is physically impossible to armor and conceal these plants, which feature intake pipes pumping massive volumes of water from the sea, vast arrays of RO filters, and adjacent power turbines and substations.⁹

If the United States forces through an operation to destroy Iran's power and desalination infrastructure "never to be used again," it will utterly shatter the international community's norms regarding infrastructure protection. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has already issued explicit retaliatory warnings that if the US attacks Iranian infrastructure, they will "target all energy and desalination infrastructure belonging to the United States and the Zionist regime (Israel)".⁸²

Iran has a proven track record of successfully executing strikes against Saudi Arabian oil facilities and desalination plants using cheap yet highly accurate drones and cruise missiles, often through proxy forces like the Houthis in Yemen.⁶ Furthermore, even in the current conflict, exchanges of drone attacks have already occurred around desalination facilities on

Iran's Qeshm Island and in Bahrain, proving that water infrastructure can indeed become a target.⁵

Should Israel's integrated power and desalination complexes at Hadera, Sorek, and Ashkelon be destroyed by Iranian missiles or drones, Israel would face an existential "water crisis" within days. While power outages can be managed through rolling blackouts and oil can be imported and stockpiled, it is physically impossible to instantly transport and substitute the hundreds of millions of liters of "freshwater" consumed daily by millions of people using tankers from the outside. If the water stops, agriculture will wither, and urban public health will collapse in a matter of days.

In other words, the "taboo against attacking civilian infrastructure (power/desalination plants)" that President Trump is attempting to break is the very shield that has protected the fragile Achilles' heel of America's ally, Israel. If the rules of "total war through infrastructure destruction" are applied to the region, it establishes a strategic equilibrium of "Mutually Assured Dehydration"—allowing even actors with asymmetrical military power to seize the throat of a highly developed desert nation like Israel.

Conclusion: The True Question to Ask and the Decision of the Chain of Command

From the analysis of the devastating threats made against Middle Eastern energy infrastructure in April 2026, the following conclusions are drawn:

First, in the Middle East, "power plants" and "desalination plants" are physically integrated (co-generation) due to thermodynamic and economic necessities. An attack on a power plant inevitably results in the complete severance of the drinking water supply. Faced with this physical reality, the logic that "it is legal because it is dual-use" entirely collapses.

Second, depriving a nation of 90 million people of power and water is the epitome of an "attack on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population" prohibited by Article 54 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, and constitutes a war crime drastically deviating from the principle of proportionality. Although the US military learned the historical lesson of the massive excess mortality (especially among infants) caused by power grid destruction during the 1991 Gulf War—and adjusted its tactics in the 1999 Kosovo War and 2003 Iraq War—the current threat completely reverses this humanitarian evolution.

Third, such "manifestly unlawful orders" directly conflict with the duty of service members to disobey under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Even if the President holds immunity, the frontline soldiers executing the orders and the JAG officers reviewing the legality bear personal responsibility for war crimes, leading to unprecedented and severe dysfunction and fracturing within the chain of command.

Fourth, and strategically most critical, justifying the permanent destruction of energy and water infrastructure exposes a fatal vulnerability for Israel, a nation geographically

concentrated and extremely reliant on seawater desalination. Providing Iran and its proxies with the justification to "target desalination plants" is a self-destructive strategic blunder that threatens Israel's very existence as a nation.

Therefore, the question that must be asked now is not a superficial debate over "whether there are historical precedents for infrastructure attacks." The fundamental question is: "Will the international community and the US military chain of command allow and execute a military operation that physically cuts off drinking water to tens of millions of people and endangers the survival of an ally?" The answer to this question lies not in the rhetoric of political leaders, but is entrusted to the decisions of the operational planners and every single frontline service member standing between international law and their own criminal liability.

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