



## Expert meeting: The humanitarian response in Lebanon and Iran

Tuesday 31 March 2026 | 13.00 – 14.30 CET | Location: Zoom

### Summary Report

*This report is based on the available information at the time of the session. The situation in Lebanon and Iran has developed since.*

#### Introduction

Since late February 2026, escalating airstrikes by the United States and Israel in Iran, and by Israel in Lebanon, have led to a sharp increase in civilian casualties and destruction, often in densely populated areas. KUNO provided a situational update on political and humanitarian developments, with a primary focus on Lebanon while also addressing developments in Iran, where possible, as limited access and the relative absence of humanitarian actors in Iran continue to limit insights into the situation there.

The humanitarian situation in Lebanon has deteriorated rapidly since the intensification of Israeli attacks on 2 March 2026, marking the most severe escalation since the November 2024 ceasefire. This surge in violence has compounded an already fragile socio-economic context, placing significant strain on communities and overstretched public services. More than 1.2 million people – approximately 20 per cent of the population - have been displaced, with widespread disruptions to access to healthcare. According to Lebanon’s Ministry of Health, [over 1,000 people were killed](#) between 2 and 23 March, including a significant proportion of children.

As of mid-March, reported [casualties in Iran exceeded 1.200](#), with more than 17.000 injuries and extensive damage to civilian infrastructure across at least 20 provinces, particularly in Tehran.

The session aimed to deepen understanding of humanitarian needs and response capacities, as well as the gaps between them, at a critical moment for scaling up international support. It was moderated by **Nora Stel** (Radboud University), with contributions from **Erwin van Veen** (Clingendael), **Benoit de Gryse** (Stichting Vluchteling), and **Zeina Dimassi** (Aspire, Lebanon).

#### Zoomed-out analysis: confrontation between Israel, the United States, and Iran

The current escalation must be understood within a longer trajectory of geopolitical tensions. As highlighted by Erwin van Veen, United States policy has historically framed Iran as a “rogue state,” limiting possibilities for sustained diplomatic engagement. This perception, rooted in events such as the 1979 hostage crisis, continues to shape political discourse and policy choices.

At the same time, Israel's strategic focus has shifted over recent decades. While Iraq once constituted its primary concern, Iran is now widely regarded by Israeli leadership as the central existential threat. This shift reflects Iran's expanding regional influence, including its support for actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, allied groups in Syria under Assad, and Hamas. These relationships are often described as forming an "axis of resistance," perceived by Israel as an increasingly coordinated military challenge.

Recent diplomatic efforts, including negotiations in early 2026, were effectively abrogated by military escalation.

### **Military dynamics**

The ongoing military confrontation is characterised by a lack of strategic clarity, particularly on the part of the United States, which appears increasingly entangled in a conflict driven in part by Israeli strategic priorities. Initial expectations that sustained airstrikes would destabilise the Iranian regime have proven overly optimistic.

Israel's military strategy has centred on large-scale destruction of both military and civilian infrastructure as well as industrial capacity, aimed at weakening Iran's long-term capabilities to fight, govern and develop economically. In this context, considerations of proportionality went out of the window, with an emphasis on destruction through the application of overwhelming force.

Iran, in turn, has shifted its strategy from defence to offence, expanding the scope of the conflict, including attacks targeting the Gulf states, while also discarding the principle of proportionality. This approach seeks to exert indirect pressure by disrupting global energy markets and raising the diplomatic as well as economic costs for the United States and its allies.

### **Impact of the conflict**

The humanitarian and economic consequences are most acute in Iran, followed by Lebanon, while neighbouring countries such as Iraq face indirect effects, including fiscal pressures linked to oil prices. The Gulf states are increasingly exposed to physical damage and economic risks, potentially affecting investment flows and labour markets.

At the global level, the conflict is contributing to rising energy prices and increasing food insecurity, with disproportionate effects on economically vulnerable regions, including parts of the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. The distribution of these impacts remains highly unequal. While the United States and Israel face relatively limited short-term consequences, longer-term economic and political costs, particularly for the United States, may prove more significant than anticipated, Erwin van Veen argues.

## **Prospects for conflict resolution**

Prospects for de-escalation remain limited. While the United States may increasingly recognise the benefits of disengagement, current dynamics suggest continued involvement rather than withdrawal. Israel appears committed to sustaining its military operations, particularly in Lebanon, while Iran signals willingness to absorb short-term losses in pursuit of longer-term strategic gains. Taken together, these dynamics point toward a protracted conflict with no immediate pathway to resolution.

To add here is a [short essay](#) by Erwin, which provides a more up-to-date reflection of the first phase of the war until the ceasefire.

## **Discussion: civil society and advocacy**

Pressure from the international community remains very limited. While both the United States and the European Union possess potential means of influence, the likelihood of substantial intervention appears limited. On a diplomatic front, especially from the EU to put sanctions on Israel (which could make an impression), things are not shifting. Moreover, the Gulf states are not aligned in their reaction.

In this context, civil society actors play an increasingly important role. Their efforts focus on raising awareness, mobilising public and political pressure, and targeting financial entities that have relations with Israel. At the same time, reinforcing moral and legal accountability is critical, particularly in light of growing concerns about the erosion of international humanitarian law.

The reported use of tactics previously observed in Gaza, including bombing civilian infrastructure such as schools, which can now be seen in Lebanon, shows the complete hubris of Israel's leadership.

## **Observations from Lebanon**

Drawing on a recent visit, Benoit de Gryse highlighted the scale and severity of the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon. The situation is marked by widespread displacement and patterns of destruction that resemble those seen in other high-intensity conflicts, such as Gaza, including significant damage to healthcare infrastructure.

Displacement is expected to become increasingly protracted, particularly as parts of southern Lebanon are systematically attacked and depopulated. A pervasive climate of fear and uncertainty affects both civilians and aid workers, exacerbated by the absence of basic protective infrastructure such as early warning systems and shelters. A key concern is the scale and relative invisibility of displacement, since only ten per cent of displaced individuals reside in formal shelters and ten per cent in informal settlements. Others stay with family and friends or rent accommodation, where landlords exploit the situation by raising rents. This creates additional vulnerabilities, particularly for already marginalised groups. There is a big worry that

the 80% of people will soon run out of coping mechanisms that are still available to them now. At the same time, local organisations demonstrate strong levels of coordination and commitment, building on experience from previous crises. However, funding is lacking severely to meet growing needs. At the time of the session, only six per cent of the required funding had been secured, with pledged contributions yet to materialise.

Syrian and Palestinian refugees, as well as migrant workers, face barriers to accessing formal support systems and shelters. For many, this results in difficult choices between unsafe conditions in Lebanon and precarious alternatives elsewhere, such as Syria.

Shelter conditions are often inadequate, with public buildings such as schools repurposed despite limited capacity. This places further strain on host communities and risks undermining social cohesion.

### **Advocacy in the Netherlands**

Advocacy efforts in the Netherlands face structural limitations. There is a need to move beyond a narrow focus on fundraising towards stronger political engagement and accountability. Parliamentary processes remain a key entry point, including initiatives aimed at documenting and addressing violations of international humanitarian law.

At the same time, reports or initiatives such as the report “[Help onder Vuur](#)” (“Aid under Fire”) by the AIV (*Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken*) underscore the importance of protecting aid workers and upholding legal frameworks in practice. The erosion of these protections has implications beyond the immediate context, potentially weakening the broader international humanitarian system.

### **The humanitarian response in Lebanon**

As outlined by Zeina Dimassi, coordination of the response has improved since the last displacement crisis in 2023, particularly through more structured collaboration between government ministries. These developments have contributed to a more coherent response framework and reduced fragmentation among actors.

Cash assistance has become more streamlined and better aligned with government systems, while accountability mechanisms have strengthened. In sectors such as education, more formalised procedures have helped reduce misuse and improve oversight.

Despite these improvements, significant challenges remain. Funding gaps persist across key sectors, including food security and WASH, while access constraints continue to limit service delivery in hard-to-reach areas. Non-Lebanese populations remain particularly vulnerable due to barriers to accessing formal support systems. The conditions of the shelters are basic, as many schools are serving as shelters now.

Local actors play a central role in the humanitarian response. Their strengths lie in their rapid mobilisation capacity, strong community ties, and relatively high levels of accountability to affected populations.

However, these actors also face significant challenges. Many operate under conditions of displacement and personal insecurity, often without adequate financial or psychosocial support. Strengthening duty-of-care provisions for local responders remains a critical priority.

Looking ahead, the scale of destruction and its economic repercussions are likely to have long-term global implications. However, prospects for meaningful short-term solutions remain limited.