

ISSN 2957-2169

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15153275>

**Citation:** Davoudpour, A. R. (2025). The Great Persian Famine (1917–1919): Causes, Consequences, and Legal Reflections on Historical Responsibility. *Journal of Iranian International Legal Studies*, 7(1), A1. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15153275>



# The Great Persian Famine (1917–1919): Causes, Consequences, and Legal Reflections on Historical Responsibility

Amirali R. Davoudpour <sup>1</sup>

1- Iranian Canon of Medicine and Law, Administrative Wing of Law and Healing Association, Iranian Watchdog of Medicine and Law, Tehran-Iran

Email of the corresponding author: [davoudpour@iintbar.org](mailto:davoudpour@iintbar.org)

Accepted and published April, 2024

This article is published under CC BY 4.0 creative common license that Allows others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as they credit the original creator.

---

## Abstract

The Persian Famine of 1917–1919, which coincided with World War I, stands as one of the most catastrophic humanitarian disasters in Iranian history. While estimates of the death toll vary between 2 to 10 million people, the famine's causes are rooted in both natural factors and foreign military intervention, particularly by British forces. This paper reviews the causes, consequences, and scholarly debates about the famine's nature — including claims of it being a "silent genocide" — and explores the theoretical possibility of pursuing international legal action for historical injustice.

**Keywords:** Famine, Genocide, Iran, World War I

## **Introduction**

Iran's declared neutrality during World War I failed to shield its population from catastrophic suffering. Despite official non-alignment, the country became a battleground for rival imperial powers. British, Russian, and Ottoman forces occupied Iranian territory, requisitioning food supplies, disrupting agriculture, and exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities (Majd, 2003; Cronin, 2010). These interventions coincided with environmental disasters—including severe droughts and locust infestations—and a weak Qajar administration unable to coordinate relief (Katouzian, 2003; Afkhami, 2009). The convergence of these factors precipitated a famine (1917–1919) that killed an estimated 8–10 million Iranians, with some scholars arguing the crisis meets the criteria of genocide due to deliberate neglect and resource extraction by occupying forces (Majd, 2003; Schabas, 2000).

The famine's enduring legacy in Iranian collective memory underscores its role as a touchstone for anti-colonial narratives. Unlike post-war Germany or Japan, where Allied occupations included mechanisms for accountability and restitution (Dower, 1999; Barkan, 2000), the Persian famine remains conspicuously absent from global reckonings with historical injustice. This omission reflects broader hierarchies of memory that marginalize non-Western trauma (Falk, 2009; Orford, 2017). Yet within Iran, the famine is memorialized as a testament to foreign exploitation and national resilience, shaping modern political identity (Atabaki & Zürcher, 2004; Abrahamian, 2008).

Legal scholars contend that such historical harms demand scrutiny through frameworks of state responsibility and transitional justice (Cassese, 2003; UN General Assembly, 2005). The famine's scale and the demonstrable role of foreign actors raise unresolved questions about culpability, reparations, and the limits of international law in addressing colonial-era violence. Analyzing this episode not only illuminates a neglected humanitarian catastrophe but also challenges contemporary systems of redress to confront legacies of imperialism beyond Eurocentric paradigms.

## **Causes of the Famine**

## 1. Foreign Occupation and Food Requisition

British, Russian, and Ottoman forces occupied Iranian territory. The British, in particular, were accused of monopolizing grain supplies for military use, exacerbating local food shortages (Majd, 2003; Cronin, 2010).

## 2. Drought and Agricultural Collapse

Severe drought and poor harvests from 1917–1919 led to reduced food production across Iran (Atabaki & Zürcher, 2004).

## 3. Blockades and Trade Disruption

British naval blockades prevented the import of grain from India and Mesopotamia, a vital source of food during shortages (Majd, 2003).

## 4. Epidemics

The famine was accompanied by deadly outbreaks of cholera, typhus, and the 1918 influenza pandemic, increasing mortality rates exponentially (Abrahamian, 2008).

## 5. Corruption and Administrative Failure

The Qajar state's inability to manage relief efforts, combined with an unjust tax system and widespread corruption, worsened conditions (Cronin, 2010).

## Death Toll Estimates

Source	Estimated Death Toll	Notes
Mohammad Gholi Majd (2003)	8–10 million	Considers British policy deliberate
Western Academic Consensus	1.5–2 million	Acknowledges famine but disputes "genocide" label
Iranian National Narratives	4–8 million	Range based on local accounts

## Consequences

- Collapse of agricultural infrastructure
- Long-term economic decline
- Rise of anti-colonial sentiment and nationalist movements
- Legacy of distrust toward Britain and other foreign powers

### **Violation of Iran's Neutrality During World War I: An International Law Perspective**

Despite Iran's official declaration of neutrality during World War I, the country became a theatre of military occupation and conflict, primarily by the forces of Britain, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire (Cronin, 2010). This occupation was a clear violation of the established principles of international law governing the rights and duties of neutral states in armed conflict. According to the Hague Convention (V) Respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land (1907), a neutral state's territory is inviolable. Article 1 of the Convention explicitly states: "*The territory of neutral Powers is inviolable*" (Hague Convention V, 1907, Art. 1). Furthermore, Article 2 of the same Convention prohibits belligerents from moving troops or convoys of either munitions of war or supplies across the territory of a neutral Power (Hague Convention V, 1907, Art. 2). Despite these binding legal obligations, foreign powers disregarded Iran's neutral status and occupied various regions for strategic and economic reasons, particularly the control of oil resources and trade routes (Katouzian, 2003).

Moreover, under customary international law, the principle of respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity forms a cornerstone of international relations, reinforced by Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, which prohibits "*the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state*" (United Nations, 1945). Although the UN Charter came into force after World War I, its provisions reflect long-standing principles of international law existing at the time. The conduct of the occupying powers in Iran not only violated the specific obligations under the Hague Conventions but also undermined the foundational principle of sovereignty in international law. The Iranian case exemplifies how geopolitical interests of great powers have historically overridden the legal protections granted to neutral states under international law, leading to long-lasting political, economic, and social consequences (Afkhami, 2009).

## Legal Analysis: Can a Lawsuit Be Pursued?

There are a number of legal obstacles to pursue a compensation for the British involvement in famine

1. *Non-Existence of Relevant International Law (at the Time):*  
The events occurred before the establishment of international legal norms on crimes against humanity or genocide (Genocide Convention, 1948).
- 2.
3. *State Immunity:*  
The principle of state immunity protects states from retrospective lawsuits over historical events unless waived.
4. *Lack of Adjudicating Forum:*  
No international court currently holds jurisdiction over colonial-era famines unless a special tribunal is created.

### Legal Obstacles

#### 1. Non-Existence of Relevant International Law (at the Time)

One of the most significant legal obstacles in addressing historical atrocities is the non-existence of relevant international legal frameworks at the time the events occurred. Many mass atrocities took place before the development and codification of international criminal law norms governing crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide. For instance, the Genocide Convention, which defined and criminalized genocide, was only adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 (United Nations, 1948). Similarly, the modern concept of crimes against humanity was articulated during the Nuremberg Trials after World War II and was not part of customary international law prior to this period (Cassese, 2003). Therefore, efforts to retroactively apply these legal principles to earlier events face substantial challenges, as the principle of legality (*nullum crimen sine lege*) prohibits punishing acts that were not criminalized at the time they were committed (Schabas, 2000).

## **2. State Immunity**

Another considerable obstacle is the principle of state immunity, which shields sovereign states from the jurisdiction of foreign national courts, particularly in relation to acts performed in the exercise of sovereign authority (*acta jure imperii*). This doctrine is deeply rooted in customary international law and is recognized in various international instruments, including the United Nations Convention on Jurisdictional Immunities of States and Their Property (United Nations, 2004). In the context of historical atrocities, state immunity often prevents victims or their descendants from bringing retrospective lawsuits against states for past crimes unless the state explicitly waives its immunity. Courts have consistently upheld state immunity even in cases involving allegations of serious human rights violations committed prior to the development of contemporary international legal norms (Ferri, 2017). This has been reaffirmed by decisions such as *Germany v. Italy* (2012), where the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that state immunity applies even to acts involving grave breaches of human rights or international humanitarian law committed during wartime (ICJ, 2012).

## **Legal Arguments for Pursuit**

### **1. Moral Responsibility and Reparations**

Precedents exist for historical apology and reparations, such as Germany's reparations to Holocaust victims or Japan's apologies for wartime actions.

### **2. Customary International Law Evolution**

There is growing recognition of historical injustices in international law, especially regarding colonial crimes (Falk, 2009).

### **3. Universal Jurisdiction Debates**

Some legal scholars argue that universal jurisdiction could, in theory, apply to colonial crimes of this scale if states choose to legislate accordingly (Orford, 2017).

## **Legal Arguments for Pursuit**

While significant legal obstacles hinder the possibility of pursuing formal litigation over the 1917–1919 Persian Famine, several legal theories and precedents support the argument that such historical crimes warrant legal accountability, reparations, or at least formal acknowledgment.

### **1. Moral Responsibility and Reparations**

There are established international precedents in which states have accepted moral responsibility for past atrocities, often leading to reparations or official apologies. Germany's post-World War II reparations to Jewish Holocaust survivors, totaling billions of dollars in compensation, remain the most prominent example of such a mechanism (Barkan, 2000). Similarly, Japan has issued formal apologies and limited reparations for its wartime actions in Asia, particularly concerning the so-called "comfort women" during World War II (Dower, 1999).

In the case of Iran, while direct reparations may not yet have a legal basis under existing international treaties, the moral imperative for the British government to acknowledge its role in exacerbating the famine is reinforced by these precedents. Reparations are increasingly seen not merely as financial compensation but as essential steps in historical reconciliation and transitional justice processes (Torpey, 2006).

### **2. Customary International Law Evolution**

Customary international law has progressively incorporated the principle that severe violations of human rights and mass atrocities — even if committed during colonial times — may give rise to claims of state responsibility. While at the time of the Persian Famine there was no codified international humanitarian law applicable to such actions, the evolving body of law addressing crimes against humanity and colonial injustices suggests that states have an ongoing duty to address their past actions (Falk, 2009).

The International Law Commission (ILC) has recognized that certain norms, such as the prohibition of genocide, slavery, and

crimes against humanity, have attained *jus cogens* status — meaning they represent peremptory norms from which no derogation is permitted (Cassese, 2003). The British policy of grain requisitioning, blockade of food imports, and disregard for civilian suffering may be interpreted, in light of modern standards, as a violation of these emerging norms.

### **3. Universal Jurisdiction Debates**

Universal jurisdiction is a legal principle that permits states or international bodies to prosecute individuals or entities responsible for grave crimes, regardless of where the crime was committed or the nationality of the perpetrators or victims (Orford, 2017). Although primarily used for contemporary crimes such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, legal scholars have debated the extension of universal jurisdiction to colonial-era atrocities, especially where no effective remedy or acknowledgment has occurred (Lessa & Payne, 2012).

In the context of the Persian Famine, this principle faces several hurdles — notably the passage of time, state immunity doctrines, and lack of existing tribunals for colonial crimes. However, universal jurisdiction debates have increasingly focused on historical justice, and special tribunals could theoretically be established by the United Nations or through bilateral agreements to address specific cases (Ryngaert, 2015).

### **4. Emerging Trends in International Law and Transitional Justice**

Recent legal developments demonstrate a growing global sensitivity toward addressing historical injustices through reparative and restorative measures. The African Union, for example, has supported calls for reparations for colonial crimes and slavery, while the United Nations has recognized the right of victims to truth, justice, and reparations in post-conflict societies (UN General Assembly, 2005).

A potential pathway for Iran could involve initiating proceedings in international forums, such as the UN Human Rights Council or the International Court of Justice (ICJ), seeking an advisory opinion on



the legality of Britain's wartime conduct in Persia and its obligation to offer reparations or apology.

## **Conclusion**

While the practical pursuit of a lawsuit against Britain or other involved powers remains legally challenging, moral and political pressure could yield apologies or reparative gestures. The Persian Famine remains a stark reminder of the intersection between imperialism, war, and humanitarian catastrophe.

### **Pursuit of Justice for Colonial-Era Famines: Legal and Diplomatic Mechanisms**

In light of the historical injustices caused by colonial-era famines, particularly those that occurred under British colonial administration, there is an increasing call for the formation of an independent *International Commission of Inquiry* to investigate these events within the framework of international law and transitional justice. Such commissions have precedent under the auspices of the United Nations, as seen in inquiries into past atrocities and gross human rights violations (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2006, Art. 7). The inquiry would aim to collect evidence, assess state responsibility, and document the scale of human suffering caused by famine policies, particularly those exacerbated or caused by colonial mismanagement, forced requisition of food, and economic exploitation (Mukherjee, 2015).

Furthermore, there is a growing demand for an *official apology* from the British government, aligning with international practice where former colonial powers have issued apologies for historical injustices. The apology would not only be symbolic but would serve as a step toward acknowledgment, truth-telling, and reconciliation, in line with the principles of the *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law* (United Nations General Assembly, 2005, Principle 22). This principle emphasizes the importance of official apologies as a form of satisfaction for victims of historical injustices.

Moreover, the pursuit of *reparative justice* can be undertaken in international forums such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) or, where applicable, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), provided there is bilateral consent between the affected state and the former colonial power. Under Article 36 of the Statute of the ICJ, states may submit disputes concerning reparation

and state responsibility if both parties consent to the Court's jurisdiction (ICJ Statute, 1945, Art. 36). Additionally, the UNHRC provides avenues for addressing systematic human rights violations and historical injustices through its special procedures and Universal Periodic Review mechanisms (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2021). While the legal pursuit of reparations for colonial-era famines is complex due to temporal jurisdictional limitations and the principle of non-retroactivity in international law (Schabas, 2000), these avenues offer platforms for victimized populations to seek justice, recognition, and potentially reparative measures in accordance with evolving international norms.

## References

1. Abrahamian, E. (2008). *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Afkhami, G. R. (2009). *The Life and Times of the Shah*. University of California Press.
3. Atabaki, T., & Zürcher, E. J. (2004). *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah*. I.B. Tauris.
4. Barkan, E. (2000). *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices*. W.W. Norton & Company.
5. Cassese, A. (2003). *International Criminal Law*. Oxford University Press.
6. Cronin, S. (2010). *The Army and the Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1921-1926*. I.B. Tauris.
7. Cronin, S. (2010). *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions since 1800*. Routledge.
8. Dower, J. (1999). *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. W.W. Norton & Company.
9. Falk, R. (2009). *Human Rights Horizons: The Pursuit of Justice in a Globalizing World*. Routledge.
10. Ferri, D. (2017). *Fundamental Rights and Legal Remedies in Europe*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
11. Hague Convention (V) Respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land. (1907). Retrieved from: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hague-v-1907>
12. International Court of Justice (ICJ). (1945). *Statute of the International Court of Justice*. Retrieved from: <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/statute>
13. International Court of Justice (ICJ). (2012). *Jurisdictional Immunities of the State (Germany v. Italy: Greece intervening)*. ICJ Reports.
14. Katouzian, H. (2003). *Iranian History and Politics: The Dialectic of State and Society*. Routledge.
15. Lessa, F., & Payne, L. A. (Eds.). (2012). *Amnesty in the Age of Human Rights Accountability: Comparative and International Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
16. Majd, M. G. (2003). *The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia, 1917-1919*. University Press of America.
17. Mukherjee, J. (2015). *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India*. Cambridge University Press.
18. Orford, A. (2017). *International Authority and the Responsibility to Protect*. Cambridge University Press.
19. Ryngaert, C. (2015). *Jurisdiction in International Law*. Oxford University Press.

20. Schabas, W. A. (2000). *Genocide in International Law: The Crime of Crimes*. Cambridge University Press.
21. Torpey, J. (2006). *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics*. Harvard University Press.
22. UN General Assembly. (2005). *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law*. A/RES/60/147.
23. United Nations. (1945). *Charter of the United Nations*. Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>
24. United Nations. (1948). *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. General Assembly Resolution 260 (III).
25. United Nations. (2004). *United Nations Convention on Jurisdictional Immunities of States and Their Property*. General Assembly Resolution 59/38.
26. United Nations General Assembly. (2005). *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law*. Resolution 60/147. Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/basic-principles-and-guidelines-right-remedy-and-reparation>
27. United Nations Human Rights Council. (2006). *Institution-building of the United Nations Human Rights Council*. Resolution 5/1, Art. 7. Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/institution-building>
28. United Nations Human Rights Council. (2021). *Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council>
29. Wikipedia contributors. (2024). *Persian famine of 1917–1919*. Retrieved from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian\\_famine\\_of\\_1917%E2%80%931919](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian_famine_of_1917%E2%80%931919)