

Original Article

The Role of Media in Shaping Rivalries: Framing Contention in the Middle East Regions

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Abstract - This study investigates media as a site for the construction and reconstruction of public opinion and national narratives, specifically within post-war and crisis contexts in the Middle East. It illustrates how the nature of war is not only military and political, but also media and information. In this respect, Israeli and Iranian media, to an extent, are also part of the world media and are at the center of constructing important issues like security, legitimacy and morality. Using a comparative lens with a qualitative content analysis, the dissertation explores how Israeli and Iranian media produce representations of the other through linguistic preferences, symbolic representations, and narrative discourses, which reinforce national ideologies, support foreign policy positions, and undermine out-groups. The project also deals with the growing influences of disinformation, propaganda, and digital media as 'escalators' or 'de-escalators' in regional tensions. With the aid of Entman's (1993) framing theory, this essay reveals how media framing functions as a type of soft power, fuelling ideological polarization while creating obstacles for peace-building. Finally, it illuminates how media are strategically employed in geopolitical competitions and provides a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationships between media, war and international diplomacy.

Keywords - Media Roles, Media Framing, Post-Conflict Region, Middle East Countries, Soft Power, Cyber Warfare, Digital Disinformation.

1. Introduction

The functioning of the media in the post-war Middle East is quite different from that of Western countries (Aivas, 2017). It is within this framework that the Israel and Iran rivalry remains one of the most durable and complex contemporary geopolitical struggles, underlined by deep religious, ideological and cultural fissures. This confrontation has also transgressed the realm of regular warfare into a game of economic sanctions, proxy wars, and a growing fight for influence in public opinion and information. The media is now on centre stage, not merely in delineating the "realities" of the conflict, but in influencing perceptions, manipulating diplomatic discourse, and negotiating a path between escalation and de-escalation. With this, Israeli, Iranian and international media shape emotional narratives that resonate worldwide, artfully framing the conflict through language, symbolism and storytelling. These stories reveal political fears and media prejudices, shaping the public debate over security, legitimacy, and ethics. The controversial developments, amongst others, are the Iranian nuclear project, Israel's military campaigns and cyber-warfare being used as the case studies span from January 2024 to July 2025, to understand better how media framing perpetuates ideological plans and generates wider international tension. Grounded on Entman's

(1993) media framing perspective, the study examines how the Israeli media commonly frames Iran as an existential threat, one that uses trauma from history, including the Holocaust, and how the Iranian media tends to frame Israel as a colonial and imperialist entity that is representative of the West's authority. These contradictory depictions operate in a broader geopolitical context, in which the media works as a psychological and diplomatic warfare tool. The study also chronicles the expanding role of cyber warfare and digital propaganda in this rivalry.

Israel and Iran both use cyber capabilities and information operations to influence public opinion and attack critical infrastructure. These stories are amplified via the deep-fake hijacked social media, including through automated bots, escalating the cycle of violence. Finally, this research contends that the media represents a type of soft power in the confrontation between Israel and Iran, in which strategic framing legitimizes national policies and delegitimizes the adversary. By so doing, the media further polarizes an ideological rift and obstructs peace-making. This study aims to provide an analytical account of the role of media-propelled information wars in structuring political contestations within the wider framework of the world-as-politics.



2. Research Theoretical Framework First

Theoretical perspectives of this section are based on the analysis of three relevant variables to present the arena of this study, which are framing in media and conflict contests, regional rivalries in the Middle East in a structure of international relations, and media as an instrument of influence and its potential use as a weapon.

2.1. Framing Theory in the Contests of Media and Conflict

According to Aivas et al. (2025), based on communication and media studies, Relevancy is the concept of framing, which describes how news organizations frame, prime, and prejudice information, so that society is presented to the public in a framework in which the public reads and thinks about what they hear. Goffman (1974) first introduced framing in terms of cognitive structures—schemata of interpretation—people used to make sense out of the world. Building on this groundwork, Entman (1993) defined framing as consisting of four principal functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. These concepts comprise the theoretical underpinnings of aspects of media framing in political and conflict reporting. In the context of international conflict and violence, framing strongly shapes audience perceptions of legitimacy, aggression and victimhood. Terms such as “terrorist” and “freedom fighter” have clear ideological meanings that influence public support or opposition (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). As such, media framing becomes a political tool, usually employed for legitimizing or delegitimizing actors, in line with the source media’s geopolitical orientation. Recent works have emphasised how explanations of media frames in a war context are fluid and contested. According to Ojala and Pantti (2020), the media is a field of symbolism in which contending actors vie for authority and attempt to reframe narratives, increasingly enabled through the affordances of social media (Aziz & Aivas, 2025). Western media narratives: Following up on these Western cultural stereotypes is the reality of the Middle Eastern portrayal of the media as discussed by Fahmy and Eakin (2021).¹ The media’s orientalist and reductionist representation of the Middle Eastern conflicts falls into dichotomies between “civilized” and “barbaric”, between ‘democracy’ and ‘terror’, almost taking it to the extremes. The framing process is, however, further complicated by the logic of digital and algorithmic media environments, which determine what content is visible and in what ways it is accessed. Van der Meer et al. (2023) argue that by collapsing spatial and temporal constraints, digital media super-charges the quickly spreading and emotionally loaded and polarized frames, especially in high-strung geopolitical contexts. Likewise, Klinger and Svensson (2022) argue that the digital public sphere’s framing is to a growing extent inherent in memetic warfare, user-generated content and algorithmic curation, instead of traditional editorial gatekeeping.

In the Israel–Iran conflict, the framing goes beyond news journalism to become a weapon of strategic information

warfare. Levy and Huckleberry 2031 Other state-funded news outlets Evidence indicates that state-affiliated news media like Press TV and i24News create narratives that resonate with national foreign policy objectives, by employing moral rationalizations typically alongside existential threats – Hussein, et al. 2027 numerus form (Abraham and Zuckerman 2023). Yet as Neumann & Golberg assert, the framing contest between competing states during periods of escalation is further heightened, revealing that the speed of media response is an essential tool in diplomatic strategy. In addition, framing is having an impact on actual policy. According to Hoffman, Malik, and Yılmaz (2022), Iran being continually constructed as an existential threat to U.S. interests has legitimized policy measures (i.e., sanctions, military interventions, and diplomatic isolation). Iranian media, in turn, depicts Israel as a colonial invader, tapping into local anti-imperialist feelings and a sense of Muslim brotherhood. In conclusion, as an analytical framework, framing theory offers a tool to critically analyse not only the way conflict is represented in media, but also how the media can be seen as a battlefield in the geopolitical struggle. Digital technologies in times of war: Challenges of framing processes in ethics and epistemology rise along with the advent of digital technology and its power, information politics and warfare (Aivas, 2025).

2.2. Regional Rivalries in the Middle East within the Framework of International Relations

The Israel-Iran enmity is one of the longest-running and most combustible conflicts in the region, a showdown of ideology, strategy and defiance on Middle East battlefields and, occasionally, behind the scenes. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which ousted Iran’s pro-Western monarchy and installed a theocratic government, the Iranian state has sought to pose as a vanguard of Islamic resistance to what it sees as imperialist powers, particularly the United States and Israel. Israel, in contrast, views Iran as its chief strategic threat, in part because of Tehran’s nuclear program, its web of allied non-state actors spread across its region, and its overt anti-Zionist posture (Katz, 2015; Eisenstadt & Khalaji, 2011). Rather than play out as a classic military fight, the Israel–Iran confrontation takes place on other stages—diplomatic, cyber, intelligence and by proxy. Iran’s backing of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, its sponsorship of Shi’a militias in Iraq and Syria, is a part of its efforts to assert its influence and contest the dominance of Israel and the West in the region (Berman, 2020). In turn, Israel uses a policy of strategic ambiguity as well as preemption by such measures as the targeted assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, cyber-attacks like the Stuxnet virus and aerial bombings of Iranian assets in Syria (Friedman, 2022). The latter conflict is prompting concerns around the world. Who stated that this particular struggle is now deeply embedded in the post-Arab Spring order, fostering a culture that enhances the weak state institutions in the region and thus Iran and Israel’s involvement, and in extending their scope of influence, specifically by proxy, throughout the civil

wars. Vakil and Yacoubian (2021) frame this latest eruption as part of a larger set of great power competitions, in which the regional conflict is an imperative that contributes to and is influenced by the strategic interests of external players such as the United States, Russia, and China. The ideological aspect of the competition is still as important. The anti-colonial rhetoric of Iran, which refers to Israel as the “Zionist entity”, functions in more than one way; it situates Iran as an anti-colonial power and a champion of Palestinians’ rights and as an advocate of Islamic justice (Al-Rawi, 2023). Israel, on the other hand, paints Iran as a revisionist and destabilizing state seeking regional dominance and a nuclear arms race, thereby legitimizing its strategic convergence with Gulf Arab states applied to the Abrahamic Accords (Goldberg, 2023; Dyer, 2022; Aivas, 2014).

Furthermore, cyber and hybrid warfare have grown as critical battlefields. Both countries have built elaborate cyber capabilities to conduct espionage, sabotage infrastructure, or create psychological operations (Rid & Zetter, 2023). Such endeavours are typically supported by a range of focused media narratives, intended to shape domestic and international perceptions of legitimacy, denial and strategic forbearance. Nuclear diplomacy, especially regarding the JCPOA, complicates matters further. Despite its claims that its nuclear program is for civilian ends, Israel is deeply suspicious of what it views as Tehran’s true intentions and has lobbied hard against the agreement in both the U.S. and internationally (Slav, 2023). This opposition has sometimes further strained Israel’s relations with Western allies, especially Democratic American administrations that are more open to engagement with Iran. In short, Israel’s tensions with Iran are not just a two-way fight. It is a geo-strategic hot spot with strategic international implications on the crossroads of ideology, security, religion, and international diplomacy. It is a conflict so deeply rooted in technological warfare, media tactics, and fluctuating alliances that it is one of the most entangled and possibly destabilizing confrontations in modern-day international relations (Aivas et al., 2025; Al-Rawi, 2021).

2.3. The Role of Media as a Tool of Influence and Its Potential for Weaponization

In the current interconnected media world, the media itself can be much more than a space for disseminating information; it is a serious cross-carriage to the geopolitical arena. Israel and Iran continue to be active in the weaponization of old and digital media to influence narratives, global opinion and state interests. This use of media as an instrument of strategy includes aspects of public diplomacy, proprietary operations, and cyber war (Aivas, 2025). Press TV, Iran’s state-funded English-language broadcaster, is a case in point. Born to counter Western media dominance and offer Iran’s viewpoint to a global audience, Press TV is a key component of Iran’s media machine (Lynch, 2019). The channel imagines Iran as a sworn enemy of Zionism and Western imperialism, vigorously disputing the validity of

Israeli and U.S. practices in the region (Al-Rawi, 2021). In addition to its broadcast activities, Iran also operates a network of state-sponsored social media accounts, autonomous bots and disinformation operations and targeting, in particular, Western diaspora communities and regional enemies (Nimmo et al., 2022). Israel, on the other hand, has made big investments in strategic communication and digital diplomacy. News broadcasts such as i24News, as well as government and military social media feeds, are deliberate in their construction of an image of Israel to the world as a rational democratic shooter measuring itself against an asymmetrical attacker. State-level content analysis has shown that, in times of heightened military tensions, the Israeli media constructs stories about national security, terrorism and co-existence. Israel also uses tactics like partnerships with influencers, online advocacy (‘hasbara’), and liaisons with digital platforms to forward digital-based messaging supportive of the state on a global scale (Bar-Tikva, 2022).

This rivalry is also played out in the information space, with each state using the media to delegitimize the other and acquire soft power capital. Iran portrays Israel as a repressive war-crime committing actor that oppresses Muslims, Palestinians in particular (Makovsky, 2020); Israel portrays Iran as an existential threat and the leading sponsor of international terrorism (Shavit & Cohen, 2021). This contestation of narratives is expedited by “in-genius”, means of production, user-generated content, and algorithmically ranked channels like Twitter/WhatsApp, YouTube, or Telegram. According to recent research, disinformation and media manipulation are increasingly widespread features of this conflict. Both Iran and Israel are in the top 20 countries that are involved in “computational propaganda”, ranging from the dissemination of misinformation to fake news to deep-fakes to strategically deployed online behaviour (Bradshaw & Howard, 2021). These strategies are not only directed at international audiences; they also operate domestically to support state narratives and rationalize policy choices. In addition, the current use of media as a weapon is becoming multimodal and hybridized: featuring text, video, memes, and live-streams combined with cyber and psychological operations (Bali et al., 2022). Nations like Israel and the United States exploited media leaks, drone footage, and instantaneous social media updates during the Syrian and Gaza conflicts, in a bid to control perceptions and normative responses (Rezaei, 2024). These are strategies to create strategic ambiguity or moral clarity, depending on which geopolitical audience one is trying to influence. After all, the media engagement of Israel and Iran is far more than a mere propaganda war, but a layered contest for control of the narrative on multiple layers of legitimacy and geopolitics.

3. Research Data Collection

This study uses a comparative qualitative content analysis to explore how Israeli, Iranian, and international media

represent and frame significant events in the Israel–Iran standoff. By closely reading select news articles, the paper attempts to reveal prevailing narratives, ideological frame patterns and biases within competing regions' geopolitical and cultural images.

3.1. Research Data Design

The study covers the period from January 2024 to June 2025 and identifies numerous critical inflection points in the Israel–Iran confrontation (Jalal, 2024). These include resumption of international talks about Iran's nuclear program, increased Israeli military language about actions in Syria and Lebanon, key targeting efforts, significant cyber-attacks on key infrastructure, and more general regional instability following the Gaza war and Houthi naval actions. This long timespan allows for a longitudinal analysis of changes in media framings in the face of changing conflict dynamics (Makridis, 2024).

3.2. Research Data Sources

A purposive sample of 180 news articles was used (40 for each randomly selected event) to include media reports from all three major geopolitical blocs: Israeli, The Jerusalem Post, Haaretz, Iranian (Press TV, Tasnim News Agency) and international (BBC News, Al Jazeera English). Sixty articles were captured specifically because they directly referred to critical flashpoints. This includes statements that were perceived to have originated from the Islamic Republic of Iran (as opposed to Peoples Republic of China); Israeli military attacks on targets in Syria (or Lebanon), and Iranian forces, Hezbollah infrastructure and weapons' transfers more generally; Events around cyber and information warfare, including state-based cyber-attacks, digital espionage, and narrative framing of cyber events. Articles were chosen within 48 hours of each incident, focusing on lead stories and editorials that most prominently reflected each outlet's framing strategy. The exclusive inclusion of English-language sources ensures cross-comparability and supports a consistent interpretive framework.

3.3. Research Analytical Framework

The study is guided by Entman's (1993) framing theory, which identifies four core functions of media framing: Problem definition – How is the issue presented? Causal attribution – Who or what is held responsible? Moral evaluation – What ethical stance is implied? Treatment recommendation – What responses are proposed or legitimized? In this study, each article was coded according to these functions, with particular attention paid to: Language use and stylistic register; Political and military affiliations (friend/foe distinctions); Visual elements (photographs, graphics, and embedded videos); Structural features (headlines and introductory paragraphs). Finally, this approach was designed to identify recurring narrative strategies, use of historical references or memory templates,

and the construction of identities such as victim, aggressor, or moral authority across the competing media eco-systems.

3.4. Research Coding and Intercede Reliability

A structured codebook was developed during the pilot phase, which involved analysis of an initial subset of 15 articles from January 2024. Two trained coders conducted the full analysis of the 180 articles. Intercode reliability, assessed using Cohen's Kappa, demonstrated high consistency in the application of coding categories ($\kappa = 0.84$).

3.5. Research Limitations

The analysis is limited to English-language reporting, which may exclude culturally specific narratives and public sentiment expressed in Hebrew- and Persian-language media. Additionally, the focus on mainstream, elite media sources omits content disseminated via social media and unofficial digital platforms, where both state and non-state actors also actively frame narratives (Abdulqadir and Aziz, 2024). Despite these limitations, the triangulated and comparative methodology offers valuable insight into the function of media framing as a form of soft power and information warfare in the context of the Israel–Iran conflict (Anghaei, 2016).

4. Research Data Analysis

The research content analysis reveals consistent patterns in how the Israel–Iran conflict is framed by Israeli, Iranian, and international media across multiple dimensions. Three primary thematic categories emerged: divergent media framing, Cyber and psychological operations, and the construction of moral legitimacy.

4.1. Divergent Media Framing

Firstly, Israeli media outlets, particularly The Jerusalem Post and Haaretz, typically employ a securitized narrative portraying Iran as an existential threat. This framing is deeply rooted in Israel's collective memory, shaped by the Holocaust and its long-standing security anxieties (Kedar, 2021; Smooha & Peleg, 2023). In the case of the conservative regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iranian leadership is regularly described as radical and as one of the main destabilizing agents, while Iranian support for groups such as Hezbollah and other non-states is placed in the framework a threat matrix, understood as transnational (Schulze, 2022). The nuclear threat, which Israel has portrayed as an imminent and intolerable threat, serves as a foundation for Israeli justifications for preemptive military actions and massive intelligence campaigns (Tilles, 2023). The Copenhagen School has argued for the concept of "securitization", in which media help consolidate a rhetoric to legitimate exceptional security measures (Buzan et al., 2023). Editorials have long portrayed Israeli preemption as a morally justified response to the traumas of history (Makovsky, 2024), even as they delegitimize Iran as "sponsor of terror" or "aggressor." This dichotomic narrative facilitates both domestic consensus-

making and foreign policy justification, but also entrenched societal polarization and promotes blocking dialogue (Reinhart, 2023; Sasson-Levy & Marom, 2023).

Furthermore, Israeli coverage tends to simplify Iran's internal politics and the dynamics of its nuclear diplomacy, contributing to a monolithic image of the enemy (Zand, 2022). From a critical media studies perspective, such narratives inform and mold public attitudes, forming a militarized national mythology (Neiger, Meyers and Zandberg, 2014). Recent work on digital media ecologies has emphasized the way that social media magnifies these securitized frames with an algorithmic filtering who have fueled echo chambers and heightened the rhetoric of antagonism (Ben-David & Sadeh, 2024; Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2023). In essence, Israeli media portrayals of Iran are not merely reflective but constitutive of national threat perceptions, reinforcing a zero-sum worldview that restricts diplomatic imagination.

Secondly, Iranian state-affiliated media, notably Press TV and Tasnim News Agency, construct a counter-narrative rooted in Islamic resistance, anti-colonialism, and revolutionary ideology. Israel is routinely referred to as the "Zionist entity"—a term deployed to deny its legitimacy and position it within a colonial framework (Kian, 2022). Iranian media present the conflict as a moral struggle in which Iran assumes the role of defender of oppressed Muslims, particularly Palestinians (Azizi & Mousavi, 2023). This discursive framing is heavily informed by the ideological legacy of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and is aimed at establishing Iran as the vanguard of anti-imperialism and pan-Islamic solidarity (Rahimi & Alizadeh, 2023; Sadeghi & Mehrabi, 2024). The portrayal of Israel as a human rights violator functions to position Iran as a moral actor resisting global injustice (Fazel, 2023) and serves to rally domestic support while reinforcing regional influence through the "Axis of Resistance" (Farid, 2023). Emotional and religious symbolism and selective historical references contribute to a simplified "good versus evil" narrative that legitimizes Iran's regional interventions and resistance to foreign pressure (Nouri & Ebrahimi, 2023; Mehrdad & Salehi, 2023). However, this framing reinforces manichean dichotomies that constitute diplomatic rigidity and oversimplify the complexities of Palestinian politics (Mansouri & Karimi, 2014; Shirin & Yeganeh, 2022). Iranian media tend to use international norms and human rights discourse, particularly, to delegitimize Israel at the international level. This strategy reflects broader information warfare tactics to influence international perception (Ebrahimzadeh, 2024; Khozravi, 2023). Recent scholarship has also documented Iran's growing use of digital technology platforms and other social media to bypass Western gatekeeping and reach local and/or diasporic sympathizers directly (Soleimani & Hamedani, 2023), as well as the potential for such platforms to reinforce conspiracy theories and social divisions (Ghazizadeh & Amiri, 2023). At a more general level, Iranian news media

framing is a strategic and discursive formula mixing ideological rhetoric with ideological moralizing, and strategic communication in the struggle to strengthen domestic cohesiveness and establish international legitimacy, even as it plays a role in intensifying adversarial relations.

Thirdly, the global media is more diverse, influenced by different editorial visions, geopolitical loyalties, and audience priorities. Although major Western outlets such as BBC News, CNN and Reuters will generally aim for an objective approach, their coverage of the Israel–Iran conflict tends instead to mirror dominant Western policy perspectives, focusing on Iran's nuclear pursuits and regional belligerency (Freedman, 2024; Hassan & Kim, 2024). Israeli security concerns are typically legitimated, while criticism of Israeli military behaviour may be made to maintain the facade of a journalist's tic equilibrium (Weaver & Cook, 2023). On the other hand, the anti-hegemonic Al Jazeera English often accentuates the pro-Iranian and pro-Palestinian worldviews. The network frames Israeli actions, especially in Gaza, as disproportionate and in violation of international law, often underplaying the complexity of Iranian foreign policy (Yousef & Al-Mansour, 2023; Aday et al., 2023). This approach aligns with Al Jazeera's editorial commitment to amplifying marginalized voices and resisting Western-dominated narratives (Sakr, 2022). These framing divergences are not incidental but reflect underlying geopolitical orientations, ownership structures, and state influence on media policy (Zayani & Sahraoui, 2023; Gomez & Rantanen, 2023). Thus, coverage of the same events can vary significantly—what Western media may frame as counter-terrorism, Al Jazeera may depict as aggression against civilians. Critically, such competing narratives illustrate the "mediatization" of conflict, where media logics increasingly shape diplomatic and strategic calculations (Couldry & Hepp, 2024). The agenda-setting role of international media has significant implications for public perception and policymaking, and these effects are magnified by digital platforms that facilitate the circulation of credible journalism and disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2023). In sum, international media narratives around the Israel–Iran conflict reflect differing geopolitical alignments and editorial philosophies. Western media promote containment and stability, while outlets such as Al Jazeera highlight themes of resistance and injustice. Together, these framings mirror larger struggles around legitimacy, representation, and influence in the global (or international) sphere.

4.2. *Cyber and Psychological Operations*

The Israeli-Iranian conflict has long since moved from the battlefield to cyberspace. This transition confirms the increasing deployment of conflict to the virtual realm, where cyberattacks, information manipulation, and psychological operations have become instrumental in both traditional and non-traditional operations by state and non-state actors (Rid, 2020; Singer & Friedman, 2024). Vague borders that allow

espionage, sabotage and propaganda to become blurred characterize the cyber domain, making it difficult to categorize conventional conflict and media assessments. Reciprocal cyber warfare. Aspersio said that Spain and Iran have been involved in cyber operations against each other's critical infrastructure and intelligence assets, which are covered by mutual accusations both officially and in the media. Israeli officials, for example, blamed Iranian hackers for interruptions in energy and water infrastructure (Alshammari & Johnson, 2024), while Iranian media have blamed Israel for cyberattacks against nuclear facilities and communications networks (Threat, 2021). The clandestine character of cyberwarfare, combined with the political interest in overstating the threat, also creates sensationalist accounts of such activities. A major challenge with media reporting on cyber incidents is the absence of independent verification and technical detail. Typically compared to traditional wars, cyberattacks are not often backed by solid proof, with attackers and victims able to spin their narratives (Bailey & Chen, 2023). News outlets, in their rush to cover breaking events quickly, do so largely based on unverified statements by anonymous officials or on cybersecurity firms, it could mean creating alarmist public opinion (Carter & Metcalf, 2024). The spread of such narratives is also escalated by the Internet's digital echo chambers and algorithmic amplification on social media, allowing for the viral sharing of sensational and polarising messages.

Cyberwarfare involves more than just interrupting operations; there is also the problem of disinformation campaigns to influence public perception and narratives. Both state-related Israeli and Iranian actors have demonstrated using troll farms, bot networks, and synthetic media, including deepfakes, to influence international and domestic audiences (Zhang & Kornblum, 2024). Such campaigns can mean denouncing a competing state, promoting alleged human rights abuses, or stoking schisms among diaspora groups linked to opposition forces. The tactics defy traditional concepts of sovereignty and diplomacy, creating atmospheres of continued suspicion and polarization (Gagliardone et al., 2024). More generally, the digitalization of war indicates that strategic concerns related to commanding imagery, narratives, and information have rivalled traditional coercive military capabilities (Nissenbaum & Zeitzoff, 2023). In this realm, media take on two roles – mediators of cyber-conflict and channels of disinformation and sensationalisation (Yaqub, 2022). This tension between journalistic urgency and the shadowy nature of cyber events may lead to reportage that, in practice, may reinforce polarisation and the securitisation of information eco-systems, with or without intention (Whittaker & Sæbø, 2024). The psychological aspect of cyber warfare intertwines with identity and memory on the national level. In the Israeli press, cyber threats are often associated with existential fears associated with historical suffering, reinforcing storylines that emphasize the need for vigilance and survival as a people (Goldberg & Ram, 2024).

On the other hand, Iranian media depict cyber operations as resistance against Western injustice and as an essential part of the country's anti-imperialist position and its claim to cyber sovereignty. Finally, the cyber and psychological planes are a critical front in the Israel–Iran faceoff. The media do not just cover this world; they are jockeying for positions as players on this digital playing field. In the face of information asymmetry, politicized speech, and technical complexity, we need smarter, nuanced technology journalism to help counter misinformation and create informed public engagement (Brog, 2003).

4.3. *The Construction of Moral Legitimacy*

Moral legitimacy is an important aspect of the Israel–Iran struggle, since both parties seek to justify their behaviour and delegitimize the behaviour of the other side. This normative contest is conducted strategically in the media framing, which enlists historical formations, national identities and ideological establishment to maintain the domestic public mind and bespeak external minds (Khatib, 2023; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2024; Aivas, 2020). From the Israeli perspective, moral legitimacy is deeply intertwined with its self-conception as a liberal democracy anchored in Western political traditions. Discourses surrounding democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law are frequently employed in Israeli media and political rhetoric to legitimize state actions (Rubenstein, 2023). Central to this moral framing is the collective memory of the Holocaust and the existential threat of annihilation. The trauma of genocide functions symbolically to validate Israel's security doctrine, including preemptive military strikes against Iran's nuclear infrastructure and affiliated proxy groups (Glain, 2019; Shaffer, 2024). This portrayal presents Israel as a nation under siege, morally compelled to adopt defensive postures, even when its actions appear disproportionate to external observers. Israel also invokes legal norms selectively, defending its military interventions under Article 51 of the UN Charter as exercises in self-defense, while characterizing Iran as a violator of international law due to its support for non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas (Goldman, 2024). Conversely, Iran constructs its moral legitimacy through a lens grounded in Islamic unity, anti-imperialism, and resistance. State-backed media routinely frame the conflict as a struggle against Western domination, positioning Iran as a defender of oppressed Muslim communities, particularly the Palestinians (Aghaie & Shaker, 2024). The use of the term “Zionist entity” to describe Israel is more than rhetorical—it conveys a perception of Israel as an illegitimate colonial project, thereby legitimizing Iran's opposition as a righteous, anti-colonial stance (Hassanpour, 2023). Iranian narratives frequently employ the symbolism of martyrdom and religious duty, framing their proxy engagements as sacred acts of defense for Islamic territories and values. By framing its actions as forms of self-determination and defense against imperial aggression—especially that of the United States and Israel—Iran reinforces a discourse of resistance (Khosravi, 2023).

Both nations engage in a struggle to claim victimhood and moral superiority, each casting the other as the principal aggressor responsible for regional instability and violations of international law. This binary moral framing functions not only to reinforce home-front sentiment and address friendly international audiences, but also to mould the worldwide discourses on sovereignty, justice and human rights. Using victimhood strategically reflects the idea of “frames of recognition” as described by Judith Butler (2009), in which there is a claim that moral and political validity lies in the visibility of suffering. Even if Israel’s moral story is based on historic trauma and survival imperatives, while Iran’s is on resisting foreign domination and standing with the oppressed, these competing moral frameworks that fit together like jigsaw puzzle pieces make diplomacy a labyrinth, and only entrench the parties in their respective positions while limiting the chances of a compromise. Global media continues to amplify these narratives while increasingly deepening worldwide polarization, fuelling feuds both in global public spheres and diasporic communities. Important to emphasize that these “claims of moral legitimacy” are almost never disinterested, devoid of some strategic purpose, or free from geopolitical calculation. These narratives of “victimhood” are weaponized to claim “a form of western moral high ground that is instrumental in challenging the global normative order” (Zare & Yadollahi, 2023) rather than a mere ethical gesture. In summary, the moral dimension of the Israel–Iran conflict is, for the most part, a contested and dynamic domain in which media representations act as mechanisms of identity construction, explanations of policy, and mobilization of an audience. The rival depictions of victimhood and virtue are a stark reminder of the powerful role that symbolic power plays in nurturing and escalating modern geopolitical competition (Yaqub, 2024).

4.4. Discussion of the Results

The Israel–Iran war is a case in point of how the old-fashioned, state-based enmities are turning into a battlefield of the 21st century: An information-centric battlefield, where the strategic control of narrative becomes a real form of power, to the detriment of “old-style” military capabilities. The results indicate that media eco-systems in Israel and Iran strategically frame news with ideological language, predicted sources, and emotional discourses to rationalize their status and delegitimize their rivals. There is nothing passive in media in this regard, for it generates impact and retraction, as well as the editing, representation, and reconstruction of public discourses and attitudes. Based on Joseph Nye’s (2004) notion of soft power, media framing emerges as a strategic mechanism through which states vie to establish moral preeminence, form coalitions, and legitimize their international behaviour. Both such actors present themselves as “defenders of democracy” (Israel) and “advocates of anti-colonial resistance and Islamic solidarity” (Iran) in displays of mediated agency seeking to gather domestic support and influence diplomatic alignments through media as an active

site of discursive contestation. This paper demonstrates that framing is more than a journalistic practice but a strategic communicative tool in a statecraft process. In international disputes, framing helps to rally support, legitimize behavior, and mitigate reputational risks (Entman, 2008). Israel’s alleged perception of an existential threat from Iran, as well as its victimhood and moral rectitude, is, above all, a pseudo-legitimization for its counter-attack methods and existential demands. Iran’s media, on the other hand, portrays its resistance to Israel as a defensive position that is a necessity and moral obligation against Israel. The findings also have implications for the potential harms that could result from the weaponization of the media, the creation of fixed political positions and limited diplomatic space being the products of adversarial framing. The so-called fake news, algorithmically strengthened echo chambers, and digital propaganda in the space of Twitter/X, Telegram, and YouTube are making the issue even worse. These technologies amplify hostile media narratives and reinforce cognitive biases and heighten affective polarization (Tufekci, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In this polarized informational environment, information itself has become a target and a weapon, as rival states wage cyber-informational offensives to undermine the epistemic authority of their adversaries and their ability to establish credible “truth” within the international system.

This multiplication of partisan realities breeds epistemic fragmentation: in a very basic sense, Americans can no longer agree on what is real or true, a toxic condition for a region replete with proxy wars, nuclear brinksmanship, and sectarian flashpoints. Lastly, the idea of international media as a neutral, disinterested observer is becoming more and more subject to dispute. Even wire services and news organizations that maintain a semblance of objectivity, like the BBC and Al Jazeera English, do not escape institutional, regional and ideological bias. Their framing, however, changes as per the changing geopolitical dynamics of global media (Thussu, 2018). This behaviour is part of a larger pattern in which global journalism, which seems to be entitled to immunity, is frequently disputed on the grounds of narrative diplomacy configured by international power dynamics and identity politics. The comparative rationale – as it appears in Table No 01 demonstrates how state media in Israel and Iran portray their own position in a narrative framework to morally legitimize their own position while de-legitimizing the other. Israeli media emphasizes democratic values, the memory of the Holocaust and the legal right to self-defense, and paints Iran as a radical force of destabilization. Iranian media, on the other hand, legitimates its stance on anti-imperialist ideology, Islamic resistance and solidarity with the Palestinians, depicting Israel as a colonial, usurper and illegitimate regime. Despite their contrasting ideological systems, both states press similar moral-symbolic narratives, a history of victimization, and legal justification in order to generate support and justify the escalation of violence. These stories shape deeply divided publics, reifying binary “us versus them” thought patterns and

undermining prospects for diplomatic resolution. Moreover, the table highlights the instrumental function of “old” media and “new” media in shaping the national audiences and the international public opinion, notably in terms of interpersonal solidarity to access some geopolitical locks (i.e., West alliances vs. South World). In the end, the study shows that the Egyptian

and Israeli media is an ideological battlefield in which moral justification does not lead to peace, but rather, it justifies violence and promotes perpetuating conflict (for additional research documenting this see, Aivas et al., 2025; Shaffer et al., 2024; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2024; Khatib, 2023).

Table 1. Detailed Comparative Framework on Moral Legitimacy in Israel-Iran Media Conflict

Dimension	Israel's Media Narrative	Iran's Media Narrative	Shared Patterns & Effects	References
Core Political Identity	Democracy, liberal values, Western alignment, emphasis on the rule of law, pluralism	Islamic Republic, anti-imperialism, pan-Islamic unity, revolutionary legitimacy	Both use identity as a foundation for moral superiority claims	Khatib (2023); Lynch & McGoldrick (2024)
Historical Justification	Holocaust trauma, existential survival, post-colonial victimhood	Colonial oppression, anti-Zionism, Palestinian struggle as regional liberation	Historical trauma serves as a lens for current conflict framing	Butler (2009); Shaffer (2024)
Enemy Depiction	Iran as an existential threat: “radical Shi’ite regime,” “state sponsor of terrorism,” “destabilizing force”	Israel is an illegitimate “Zionist entity,” a colonial settler state, and an aggressor against Muslims.	Demonization intensifies polarization, reduces empathy and diplomatic openings	Hassanpour (2023); Goldman (2024)
Legitimization of Violence	Preemptive self-defense, deterrence, framing military action as necessary for survival	Defensive jihad, resistance, liberation struggle, proxy warfare, framed as just and morally mandated	Violence framed as justifiable defense, reinforcing cycles of retaliation	Shaffer (2024); Zare & Yadollahi (2023)
Legal and Moral Discourse	Emphasis on UN Charter rights, international law, and moral imperative to protect citizens	Accusations of Israeli violations of international law, apartheid allegations, and U.S. imperialism	Competing legal frameworks are weaponized in the media to legitimize opposing actions.	Goldman (2024); Khosravi (2023)
Use of Symbolism & Narrative	Holocaust references, democratic resilience, “existential threat” framing	Martyrdom culture, religious symbolism, “axis of resistance,” Palestinian liberation	Symbolism mobilizes domestic and diaspora audiences; deepens ideological divides	Rubenstein (2023); Aghaie & Shaker (2024)
Psychological Impact on Audiences	Heightened fear of annihilation calls for unity against an external threat	Mobilization through religious solidarity, anti-colonial narratives, victimhood and empowerment	Both foster collective identities, reinforcing “us vs them” mentality	Aghaie & Shaker (2024)
Media Strategy and Platforms	Use of multilingual outlets (e.g., i24News), social media campaigns, and targeted public diplomacy.	State-run media (Press TV, Tasnim), social media networks, proxy group communications	Sophisticated media eco-systems employed for international influence and domestic control	Lynch (2019); Aghaie & Shaker (2024)

International Audience Targeting	Appeals to Western democratic values, human rights, and attempts to influence allied governments.	Appeals to the Global South, Muslim-majority countries, framing Israel as a colonial aggressor	Both seek to shape international public opinion and diplomatic stances	Nye (2004);
Conflict Escalation Effect	Media framing intensifies security fears, legitimizes aggressive foreign policy.	Framing resistance as a moral imperative legitimises proxy conflicts and retaliatory violence.	Media narratives harden public opinion, reduce diplomatic flexibility	Tufekci (2018); Rid (2020)

Table 2 systematically categorizes the thematic strategies employed by both Israeli and Iranian media outlets to construct moral legitimacy, thereby elucidating the mechanisms of narrative warfare and their broader ramifications for conflict and diplomacy. Key themes such as victim framing, moral absolutism, and justification invoke cultural constructs that enable each side to assert moral righteousness and historical empathy. The media utilize emotive rhetoric, dichotomous moral framing, and selective interpretations of legal history to reinforce the portrayal of the opposing party as fundamentally illegitimate. These approaches foster a siege mentality, delegitimize prospects for negotiation, and cultivate an environment hostile to peace-building efforts.

The incorporation of religious and ideological symbolism—such as Holocaust remembrance in Israeli discourse and martyrdom narratives in Iranian media—illustrates the deep cultural and emotional roots from which these tactics arise, rendering the narratives both resonant and resistant to change. Furthermore, psychological operations

and public diplomacy function as tools for domestic mobilization and as instruments for shaping foreign perceptions and forging international alliances (Nye, 2004; Lynch, 2019).

Additionally, the reciprocal portrayal of victim and perpetrator roles complicates an already politicized media landscape, hindering objective analysis while perpetuating cycles of recrimination and misinformation. This dynamic undermines the effectiveness of third-party mediation by disrupting shared understanding and fragmenting the narrative.

Overall, the table demonstrates that both states' media engage in highly strategic and emotionally charged communication to assert moral superiority, thereby entrenching intractability and confirming the media's role not as a facilitator of reconciliation but as an amplifier of conflict—an outcome well documented in media and conflict scholarship (e.g., Tufekci, 2020; Shaffer, 2024; Aghaie & Shaker, 2024)

Table 2. Thematic Breakdown of Moral Legitimacy Construction Tactics

Theme	Description	Tactical Media Tools	Impact on Conflict & Peace Process	References
Victimhood & Trauma Framing	Each side positions itself as a historical and contemporary victim of aggression.	Emotional language, historical analogies, and victim testimonials	Entrenches zero-sum narratives, hinders compromise	Butler (2009);
Moral Absolutism	Clear moral binaries: "Good" self vs. "Evil" adversary	Black-and-white framing, demonizing language	Fuels polarization and justifies escalatory rhetoric	Goldman (2024); Hassanpour (2023)
Legal Justification	Claims to international legal and normative authority	Citation of UN resolutions, international law, and moral rights rhetoric	Undermines adversary legitimacy, complicates third-party mediation	Khosravi (2023); Shaffer (2024)
Religious & Ideological	Use of religious narratives	Symbolic imagery, invocation of religious	Mobilizes domestic base, international	Aghaie & Shaker (2024);

Symbolism	(Holocaust, martyrdom) to justify actions	holidays and martyrdom culture	sympathizers	Rubenstein (2023)
Psychological Operations	Media as a battlefield for shaping perceptions, fears, and loyalties	Disinformation, fear appeals, propaganda campaigns	Increases societal polarization, deepens mistrust	Rid (2020); Tufekci (2018)
International Public Diplomacy	Strategic framing aimed at influencing global public opinion and diplomatic alliances	Multilingual news outlets, social media, and diplomatic messaging	Shapes foreign policy and alliances, influences, sanctions and support policies	Nye (2004); Lynch (2019)
Victim-Perpetrator Role Reversal	Each side accuses the other of being the true aggressor	Accusations in headlines, framing in op-eds and interviews	Confuses neutral audience, perpetuates misinformation cycles	Zare & Yadollahi (2023)
Theme	Description	Tactical Media Tools	Impact on Conflict & Peace Process	References
Victimhood & Trauma Framing	Each side positions itself as a historical and contemporary victim of aggression.	Emotional language, historical analogies, and victim testimonials	Entrenches zero-sum narratives, hinders compromise	Butler (2009);
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Legal Justification	Claims to international legal and normative authority	Citation of UN resolutions, international law, and moral rights rhetoric	Undermines adversary legitimacy, complicates third-party mediation	Khosravi (2023); Shaffer (2024)

Table 3 illustrates how Israeli, Iranian, and international media employ distinct content strategies to construct moral legitimacy within conflict reporting. The framing of headlines reveals two contrasting narratives: Israeli media predominantly emphasize Iran as a regional security threat, while Iranian media depict Israel as the aggressor, reflecting a pronounced ideological divide. Although international media outlets strive for neutrality, subtle biases are discernible and vary according to the outlet’s editorial stance (e.g., BBC versus Al Jazeera).

Source attribution further underscores this polarization, with Iranian and Palestinian sources frequently cited by Iranian media, Israeli security institutions by Israeli media, and a broader spectrum of voices—including human rights organizations—referenced by international outlets, indicating an attempt at balanced reporting. Visual elements reinforce these narratives, as Israeli media frequently utilize military imagery and historical references to evoke a sense of threat,

whereas Iranian media favor emotive depictions of suffering and resistance. International publishers blend these approaches but occasionally prioritize human-interest perspectives.

Linguistically, Israeli media adopt a tone that is predominantly alarmist and defensive, contrasting with the defiant and ideologically charged rhetoric characteristic of Iranian media; international coverage varies in tone consistent with each outlet’s editorial orientation.

Moreover, the frequency and timing of coverage correspond to political flashpoints, with the degree of emphasis shaped by national or institutional priorities, highlighting the strategic deployment of media during crises to influence public perception. The data suggest that media serve as potent instruments for moral framing and legitimization, with content shaped by political context, institutional affiliations, and ideological frameworks.

Table 3. Media Content Features Exemplifying Moral Legitimacy Construction

Feature	Israel Media Example	Iran Media Example	International Media Tendencies
Headline Framing	“Iran’s Nuclear Threat Imperils Regional Security”	“Zionist Regime’s Aggression Against Gaza Continues”	Neutral phrasing with occasional bias: BBC focuses on nuclear risk; Al Jazeera on Palestinian impact
Source Attribution	Reliance on government and military officials, security analysts	Quotes from Revolutionary Guards, Palestinian groups	A mix of official statements, expert opinions, and human rights organizations
Visual Imagery	Military hardware, maps showing Iran’s nuclear sites, and Holocaust remembrance events	Images of protests, religious ceremonies, and Palestinian suffering	Balanced use of imagery, sometimes emotionalized to highlight humanitarian concerns
Language & Tone	Alarmist, urgent, defensive	Defiant, moralistic, anti-imperialist	Varies by outlet: some use neutral, others use emotionally charged language.
Frequency & Timing	Peaks during Israeli strikes or Iranian nuclear announcements	Peaks during Israeli military operations or international condemnations	Coverage intensity tied to flashpoints; editorial bias influences volume and prominence

Source Attribution: Major voices in the Israeli press are often government officials, security experts and military brass, who lend the aura of an expert voice to the state and its security argument. Iranian media relies on news from the Revolutionary Guards or Palestinian networks to present views that correspond to Iran's political and military interests, with particular emphasis on anti-imperialism and resistance. International media sources are varied, including official statements, expert analysis, and reports from human rights organizations, which can provide a fairer or critical light.

5. Research Conclusion

The ongoing confrontation between Israel and Iran, fraught with long-standing ideological, political, and religious rivalries, has spread, to an ever-increasing extent, beyond conventional battlefields into realms by now considered routine in the media and information age. This research highlights the importance of media framing and its impact on public opinion, national narratives, and international diplomacy in long-term conflict. Through an exploration of how narratives and ideologies are articulated and reaffirmed in discursive and representational practices, the study shows how, on either side of the conflict, media framing works to (1) legitimize foreign policy agendas and national ideologies and (2) deepen ideological divides between the two countries.

Based on comparative qualitative content analysis, the study outlines the increased importance of cyber operations, propaganda and disinformation in the context of rising tensions between Israel and Iran. In the world of the modern

cyber-attack and media manipulation, the road to peace only gets more ambitious today because the media itself has become a weapon in the struggle for soft power, and therefore serves as a wedge that, with a greater polarization can deepen the ideological chasms and geopolitical flames of animosity.

Building on Entman’s (1993) framing theory, the study demonstrates how Israeli media frames Iran as an existential threat, while Iranian media frames Israel as a colonial and imperial power. These alternative narratives do more than frame domestic and international perceptions; they are also strategically (psychologically and diplomatically) useful exercises in propaganda war that contribute to cementing rivalries’ identities.

The study contributes to public understanding of media as an agent in the current geopolitical competition. It provides a fresh perspective on the nature of information warfare and the importance of framing to conflict dynamics. The results add to a more general understanding of media gatekeeping, conflict communication, and media shaping (as more than a mere mirror) of the global conflict terrain.

Given the pace of change in digital technologies and in malicious strategies to spread disinformation, it will be critical for policymakers to have a sophisticated understanding of the role of media in either contributing to or preventing international conflict in future diplomacy and peace-building initiatives.

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