



**BIAS AND IDEOLOGY IN WESTERN AND MIDDLE EASTERN MEDIA
COVERAGE OF THE IRAN–ISRAEL WAR: A QUALITATIVE FRAMING
ANALYSIS**

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Abstract

The paper looks at how the media of the West and the Middle East framed the Iran war with Israel in various ideologies. The study employs the qualitative framing analysis with the assistance of critical discourse analysis to discuss the manner in which the news narratives created aggression, self-defense, retaliation, legitimacy, suffering in the civilian population and order in the region. This paper claims that strategic stability, deterrence, and security-focused explanations are generally favored in Western coverage and foregrounding of sovereignty, historical grievance, asymmetry, and humanitarian impact are more common in Middle Eastern coverage. Since peer-reviewed studies are yet to particularly examine the Iran-Israel war, the paper also utilizes relatively related studies on Israel-Palestine and Gaza coverage to interpret more generalized trends in the way the equivalent media systems frame conflict. The paper is placed against the backdrop of the April 2024 escalation following the attack on the Iranian consular office in Damascus and the June 2025 Israel-Iran conflict as outlined by the UK House of Commons Library that has seen Israel launch major strikes against Iranian nuclear and military targets and Iranian retaliatory strikes. Altogether, the paper demonstrates that media do not merely report on war but do construct the sense of the populace to choose, highlight, and to morally patternize the events into conflicting interpretations of legitimacy and blame.

Keywords:

Media framing, media bias, ideology, Iran–Israel war, Western media, Middle Eastern media, qualitative analysis, critical discourse analysis, conflict reporting, war narratives, victimhood, self-defense framing, geopolitical communication, news discourse, international relations

Introduction

The battlefield is not the sole place where the war is fought. Fighting is also done by headlines, images, comments by experts and choice of facts presentation. In contemporary conflicts, the media institutions are at the center of creating audiences with the perceptions of violence, responsibility and legitimacy. The Iran-Israel war is a good example to examine this process due to its military build up coupled with intense geopolitical competition, polarization of the region



and a conflicting international narrative. Media systems have framed the conflict very differently, especially in Western and Middle Eastern sources, in which the same events are frequently viewed through the prism of vocabularies of security, retaliation, occupation, sovereignty, and victimhood that are very different (House of Commons Library, 2025a, 2026; Ibrar and Khan, 2025; Mohamed, 2024

It is significant to the immediate background to this conflict. In April 2024, an Israeli attack demolished the Iranian consular building in Damascus, killing top Iranian officials and this was widely termed as a significant escalation. Iran then proceeded to attack Israeli directly with missiles and drones, what was analysed by the U.S. Institute of Peace as the largest direct attack ever. Later that year, the conflict intensified once more in June 2025 with Israel bombing Iranian nuclear facilities, military installations, and leaders and Iran counterstruck with its own attacks; the UK House of Commons Library called this a period an armed Israel-Iran conflict and later evaluated its ongoing regional implications in a 2026 briefing (Associated Press, 2024; House of Commons Library, 20

There was no single story of these events. Western sources tended to contextualize them in terms of deterrence, stability in the region, nuclear menace and politics of alliances. The outlets in the Middle East have a higher tendency to focus on sovereignty, previous provocation, Western two-sidedness and civilian casualties in the region. In this paper, the argument is that, these differences are not just stylistic. They represent different ideological constructs that are entrenched in news routine, choice of sources and priorities in news. This paper thus poses the question: how do western and Middle Eastern media frame responsibility, self-defense and victimhood when reporting on the Iran-Israel war? And what do those constructions tell us about bias and ideology in the reporting of international conflicts? (Alharbi, 2025; Al-Najjar & Zaid, 2025; Matar, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The present paper is based on the framing theory. According to Entman (1993), framing can be defined as the process of highlighting some aspects of the perceived reality and rendering them more salient in communicating text so as to advance a specific definition of a problem, causal explanation, moral judgment or treatment suggestion. This definition is particularly handy when it comes to conflict reporting since it is hardly possible to fight wars by the use of facts alone. They are also argued with the interpretive labels. Initially it could be formulated as retaliation, aggression, self-defence, provocation or pre-emption and each term has a varying moral contexts (Entman, 1993, 2007).

The framing theory also comes in handy to explain why bias in the media does not necessarily have to be presented as blatant falsehood. Prejudice may arise by focusing on, ordering, excluding, and prioritizing sources. D' Angelo (2002) believes that the process of framing research must be considered as a multiparadigmatic field since it unites the questions of production, text and audience. Similar, de Vreese (2005) states that framing is a process that entails frame-building and frame-setting: framing is created by journalists and institutions, and it is the framing that influences the way the people are going to interpret it. Framing is considered by Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) as one of the most important media-effects models, which demonstrates how news fails to simply inform people of what has happened but assists in the way people think about what has happened. Van Gorp (2007) also highlights that framing is both cultural and textual in the sense that the frames are based upon already familiar symbols, stereotypes and narrative repertoires that



are already known by the audience. There is also research on competitive framing which demonstrates that power of a frame, under polarized conditions, is not only dependent on repetition but also on the effectiveness with which it can play off other competing interpretations (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 2007).

These concepts can be applied to the analysis of the Iran-Israel war since the war is within a very competitive media environment. Israeli state narratives, Iranian state narratives, western diplomatic narratives, Arab region narratives as well as humanitarian narratives all put claims as to who initiated the violence, whose proportional response is appropriate and whose suffering is most valuable. This is the reason why it is especially suitable to use qualitative framing analysis in this case (de Vreese, 2005; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative comparative approach of framing. It does not make an attempt to do a statistical content analysis of all coverage. Rather, it looks at some of the common patterns of interpretations in the way Western and Middle Eastern media has framed the conflict. Themes addressed in the analysis include aggression, retaliation, self-defense, legality, sovereignty, and victimhood, as well as civilian suffering, and regional stability. Qualitative analysis of framing is appropriate since the main problem is an interpretative issue: the production of meaning, and not the frequency of the occurrence of some words (D'Angelo, 2002; de Vreese, 2005).

Due to the fact that specialized peer-reviewed literature on the topic of Iran-Israel media coverage is still in its early development, the paper will be a synthesis of case-specific background materials on the 2024 and 2025 escalations and the neighboring peer-reviewed literature on Gaza, Israel-Palestine, and the overall conflict framing. This is methodologically viable since much of the same outlets, ideological lines and discursive practices can be found in these related conflicts. The recent comparative analysis of CNN, Al Jazeera, BBC, The Times of Israel and Western legacy media offers good evidence that the location of the Middle East conflicts, regional and ideological, affects the way these conflicts are framed, humanized, and explained (Alharbi, 2025; Ibrar & Khan, 2025; Mohamed, 2024; Matar, 2025).

Background: What made the Iran War with Israel a Media Framing Battlefield.

The April 2024 and June 2025 tensions elevated the Iran-Israel conflict to a significant media spectacle worldwide. The April 2024 attack on the Iranian consular compound in Damascus assassinated high-ranking Iranian officials and seemed to be, even in media coverage, a major escalation. The direct reaction of Iran with the drones and the missiles was then termed by USIP as unprecedented direct attack which comprised over 170 drones, at least 30 cruise missiles and over 120 ballistic missiles. The occurrences transformed the war into a primarily indirect clash to direct military exchange with a colossal symbolic significance (Associated Press, 2024; USIP, 2024).

The June 2025 stage raised the stakes even higher. The UK House of Commons Library has said that Israel attacked nuclear facilities, nuclear scientists, key Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officials and military facilities starting on 13 June 2025, and Iran retaliated with military action, and subsequently the United States targeted nuclear facilities at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan. According to the same briefings, Israel justified its activities by stating that it was done to avoid Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon when Iran denied that it was making the weapon (House of Commons Library, 2025a, 2025b). In April 2026, the Commons Library continued to explain the



consequences of the 2025 conflict as one of the main factors leading to ongoing instability in the Middle East, with Israeli and joint U.S-Israeli attacks having damaged the Iranian defenses and nuclear program and increasing the risks to the rest of the region (House of Commons Library, 2026).

This was a perfect conflict in terms of media. Would the story start with Iranian missiles, with Israel striking Damascus, with Iran and its nuclear program or with the larger war in the region which is associated with Gaza and Lebanon? Even the selection of the point of inception predetermines a lot of the moral organization of the story (Entman, 1993; House of Commons Library, 2025a; USIP, 2024).

Western Media Coverage

One major trend in the western media coverage is the preeminence of a security frame. This frame tells the story of the conflict in terms of deterrence, nuclear risk, coordination of alliances, military capability and the risk of regional escalation. Israel is commonly sold as a country that is facing a serious security dilemma, and Iran as a destabilizer whose behavior is viewed in the context of suspicion. The larger story is frequently framed in a context of strategic rationality as opposed to structural criticism in even cases where criticism of Israeli policy is present (House of Commons Library, 2025a; Al-Najjar and Zaid, 2025).

This tendency is supported by the use of lexical means. Israeli military action has been characterized in terms of pre-emptive, retaliatory, deterrent, etc., and thus put within a well-established language of statecraft. It is more probable that Iranian action can be termed as a barrage, threat, or escalation. These are not neutral terms. They determine how readers impose legitimacy in the process of making an editorial judgment, even prior to any explicit judgment being done (Entman, 1993, 2007; de Vreese, 2005).

Official and elite sources are also favored by the western media. The key words of the tale are frequently prescribed by the Israeli official, the U.S. spokesperson, Western diplomats, security analysts and defense experts. This type of source directs coverage at the questions of whether deterrence is working, whether the war will escalate or not, and what the implications are to the nuclear diplomacy or energy markets. The issue of international law and civilian casualties can come into the limelight, but frequently in the background, to strategy and security (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; House of Commons Library, 2025b; Berka, 2025).

This interpretation is supported by recent scholarly contributions on the related Middle Eastern conflicts. Al-Najjar and Zaid (2025) state that the reporting of Gaza by Western media was characterized by gross ethical flaws particularly in disregarding the Palestinian voices and context. Matar (2025) also claims that the culture of routine in Western legacy media made Israeli epistemic violence and deprivation of Palestinians of full agency and knowable political subjects normal. These are applicable even though they refer to Gaza instead of Iran -Israel directly but provide insight into the extent to which Western media institutions tend to reproduce dominant geopolitical assumptions when reporting on the region (Al-Najjar and Zaid, 2025; Matar, 2025).

Arabic Media Reportages.

The Middle East media tends to present the conflict in a different perspective. Although regional outlets are diverse by nature and are politically positioned, most emphasize more on sovereignty, chronology, asymmetry, and historical grievance. Instead of beginning with the missile attack by Iran they are more likely to begin with the strike at Damascus or the regional background of Gaza,



Syria and Lebanon. That sequencing matters. In case the conflict starts narratively when the direct attack of Iran starts, then Iran seems to be the escalator. In the case of opening fire on Iranian diplomatic posts and an expanded war in the region, Iranian action is seen as part of a chain of revenge, although this is disputable (Associated Press, 2024; Mohamed, 2024).

The metaphorical framing of the ideological narratives in the work of Alharbi (2025) in CNN, Al Jazeera, and The Times of Israel reveals how metaphor and use of symbols are used to embed the ideological narratives. Ibrar and Khan (2025) also discover that the framing of the 2023 Palestine-Israel conflict by Al Jazeera, CNN, and Global Times was based on more ideological systems, such as Pan-Arab, capitalist, and state-based logics. Comparing Arab and Western online platforms, Abdrabu (2026) finds that Arab and Western media tend to narrate different stories using various framing methods, particularly those related to humanitarian crisis, moral responsibility and information gaps. Such results contribute to the understanding of why in Middle Eastern coverage of the Iran-Israel war, the suffering of civilians and grievance of the region were more often discussed as the main than the secondary factor (Abdrabu, 2026; Alharbi, 2025; Ibrar and Khan, 2025).

Meanwhile, the media of the Middle East are not a-political. Certain state-affiliated sources can be excessively legitimization of Iranian behavior, or understate the dangers of militarized escalation, or reduce complicated occurrences to simplified anti-Western interpretations. The thing is that one side is not objective and the other biased. The fact that both of them exist in the realms of different ideologies and the fields influence what becomes visible, credible, and morally urgent (D'Angelo, 2002; Van Gorp, 2007).

Comparative Discussion

The comparison indicates that there are various significant differences. First, Western coverage is usually biased towards strategic-security frame, whereas the Middle East coverage tends to focus more on sovereignty and asymmetry. Second, the use of the language of self-defense and deterrence by Israel is normalized more often by Western outlets and is challenged by Middle Eastern outlets more often by the language of provocation, illegality and double standards. Third, the victimization of the victims is different. The analysis of German reporting by Konneker and Salehi reveals that media discourse is capable of establishing hierarchies in death, such that certain victims are more grievable than others due to the differing humanization and contextualization of the victims. This concept is quite applicable in this case: the Israeli fear and vulnerability have been individualized by the Western coverage more than the suffering of the people in the region: Arab, Lebanese, Syrian, etc., who are also victims of the same war machine in the region (Könneker & Salehi, 2025).

The other difference that is significant is the authority of a source. The Western media sources are more likely to favor Israeli, American and Western diplomatic ideas. The Middle Eastern news outlets are more likely to give voice to regional commentators, Arab officials, and views that are located locally. As sources not only give information but a definition of what the conflict is, source selection is a mechanism of ideological filtering (Entman, 2007; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). The bigger picture is that the bias in the media coverage of the war between Iran and Israel is not merely a matter of misinformation. That is a question of framing. Two reports can include various facts that are similar and yet, lead the viewers to completely different conclusions due to the difference in chronology, focus, morality words, and the story viewpoint. This is precisely the



prediction of the framing theory, interpretation is determined by selection and salience. Recent studies of framing effects also find that frames can have a political impact even in a crowded information setting, but their impact differs by competition and biases of the audience (Berka, 2025; Chong and Druckman, 2007).

Conclusion

This paper has presented the thesis that the way the war between Iran and Israel is covered by the Western and Middle Eastern media can be attributed to different ideological approaches. The Western coverage is more inclined towards deterrence, security, strategic calculation and stability in the region. The Middle East coverage tends to put more emphasis on the sovereignty, asymmetry, historical grievance, and civilian sufferings. These trends are not rigid and there is significant variation in either of the spheres of media. Nevertheless, the prevalent differences in framing are apparent.

A qualitative framing analysis assists in revealing that there is not a single situation when reporting on war is descriptive. The forms of media discourse put together the ways in which the publics cognitively make sense of aggression, self-defense, retaliation and victimization. That is not the case with the Iran-Israel war where the media are not third parties to the war. They are involved in the conflict of legitimacy. To that end, when conducting any serious academic analysis of this war, it is important to note that it is not only missiles and diplomacy that should be taken into consideration, but words, frames, and ideology, as well (Entman, 1993, 2007; de Vreese, 2005; House of Commons Library, 2026).

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