

IDEOLOGICAL LENSES AND CONFLICT NARRATIVES: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF EDITORIAL NARRATIVES ON THE IRAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT IN HAARETZ, KAYHAN INTERNATIONAL, AND THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2023–2025)

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ABSTRACT

A thematic analysis of editorial stories within three ideologically different newspapers, namely Haaretz (Israeli liberal), Kayhan International (Iranian state-oriented), and The Wall Street Journal (American conservative) on the topic of the Iran-Israel conflict is conducted for the time period from October 2023 to March 2025. The study employs the six-stage thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and counts the utilization of six most prevalent narrative themes within 677 editorials published by the mentioned media outlets. According to the results, there were fifteen themes found within the scope of three newspapers, which can be divided into five thematic clusters per newspaper. For instance, Haaretz consistently frames the conflict through the lens of the declining morals of Israelis and democratic principles within their country. On the other hand, Kayhan International represents Iran as the vanguard of the revolution, while both Israel and the US are regarded as aggressors within this framework. Finally, The Wall Street Journal depicts a scenario, when Israel becomes the victim of an attack on the side of democracy from Iran and its proxies. Overall, the outcomes of the study illustrate the importance of ideology as an overarching and dominating factor in narrative construction in the sphere of conflict reporting.

Keywords: Thematic analysis, framing theory, Iran-Israel conflict, editorial narratives, media ideology, conflict journalism, Haaretz, Kayhan International, Wall Street Journal

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of the linkage between media and conflict is one of the most researched but also one of the more complicated fields in the study of communication. Media coverage is not just about reporting conflict; it is about creating a narrative around it, which involves emphasising certain actors, highlighting some events as more significant than others, and assigning a moral dimension to the conflict to judge who is

responsible, and who is legitimate. The Iran-Israel conflict is one of the most mediated and disputed geopolitical rivalries of the modern era in the Middle East and is characterized by profound ideological differences, proxy wars, nuclear capabilities, and visions of regional dominance (Haji-Yousef, 2003; Roomi, 2023). The Gaza war, the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, the killing of Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and the direct missile

attack to Israel by Iran were the most critical stages of this conflict between October 7, 2023 and March 2025. These events produced an unprecedented amount of editorial comment in the worldwide press, giving a chance to a rare analysis of how news organizations build thematic narratives in reaction to acute geopolitical crises. Media outlets are an important factor in framing this conflict and have the power to frame narratives and attribute blame towards the other side in ways that are best suited to the ideology and geopolitical agenda behind their reporting. Media plays a role in shaping public opinion and policy discourses, which can be influential and reinforce polarized views that can escalate or mitigate tension (Alim, 2024; El-Dahmanhoury et al., 2025). This dynamic is especially strong in the case of editorial texts, where explicit perspectives and normative evaluations are a more inherent part of the text than in other genres. This paper will exclusively cover thematic analysis as the identification, naming and interpretation of the recurring themes in the narrative as a way of understanding the manifestation of editorial ideology in the coverage of conflicts.

Rather than quantifying framing variables thematic analysis allows researchers to excavate the deeper narrative logic that organizes editorial discourse the underlying stories that each outlet tells about who is responsible, who is victimized, and what the conflict ultimately means.

Three outlets were selected for their ideological diversity and prominence Haaretz, a liberal Israeli newspaper known for its critical stance on Israeli policies Kayhan International, a state-aligned Iranian outlet reflecting anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist rhetoric; and The Wall Street Journal, a conservative American publication aligned with pro-Israel and U.S. strategic interests. Together, these outlets represent the three most directly implicated national perspectives in the Iran-Israel conflict, making them ideal sites for comparative thematic analysis.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What dominant narrative themes does Haaretz employ in its editorial coverage of the Iran-Israel conflict, and how do these themes reflect its liberal ideological orientation?

RQ2: What dominant narrative themes does Kayhan International employ in its editorial coverage of the Iran-Israel conflict, and how do these themes reflect its state-aligned ideological orientation?

RQ3: What dominant narrative themes does The Wall Street Journal employ in its editorial coverage of the Iran-Israel conflict, and how do these themes reflect its conservative ideological orientation?

RQ4: How do the narrative themes identified across the three outlets compare, and what do these comparisons reveal about the relationship between media ideology and conflict framing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior Research on Iran-Israel Conflict Media Coverage

In recent years, a significant number of studies has focused on the representation of the Iran-Israel conflict and other Middle Eastern tensions in the media. Nikou (2016) used the Goffman's frame analysis approach to analyze the framing of the 2014 Gaza War in two U.S. newspapers (The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal) and two Iranian newspapers (Kayhan and Shargh). The study showed that the U.S. media reflected the official Israeli narrative, stressing the violence of the Palestinians as the root cause of the conflict and, at times, wiping the slate clean of Israeli responsibility by claiming that it was in response to Palestinian violence. The Iranian outlets highlighted the Israeli aggression and made the issue a part of the Israeli occupation.

Yaghoobi (2009) utilized the critical discourse analysis method to analyze the representation of the war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006 in Kayhan International and the American magazine Newsweek. Kayhan International foregrounded Israel as the actor in negative material processes (Israel "fired shots" at the Hezbollah rockets, "Israel's responses were defensive counterstrikes, etc.), as well as emphasizing the role of Israel in these processes through active constructions and the term "Zionist" (Israel has "fired shots" at the Hezbollah rockets, Hezbollah has "Zionist"

support from Israel etc.). Newsweek, on the other hand, foregrounded Hezbollah as the actor in the destructive processes, while Israel's responses were presented as defensive counterstrikes (Hezbollah has been backed by Israel's "Zionist" support, Hezbollah's fire from Israel was an act of aggression, etc.). These syntactical decisions were based on conflicting ideologies.

Alim (2024) contrasted the framing of the Iran-Israel conflict in Al Jazeera and BBC from April 2024, revealing that Al Jazeera tended to focus on the conflict frame, which was more about regional tensions and "Iran's retaliatory motives," whereas the BBC tended to focus on the responsibility frame, which was more about Iran and "Israel's defense. There's no mention of morality nor of economic effects in either outlet, examples of how editorial biases shape perceptions in ways that can lead to nuanced understanding or can make matters worse. From the perspective of media framing.

Gunay (2025) analyzed the coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli war during October 7, 2023, and looked at how international media have portrayed the war. Gunay (2025) concluded that the New York Times and Taz used pro-Israel frames and frequently used negative frames for Hamas. The Guardian demonstrated a combination of pro-Israel and human-interest frames and some empathy for Palestinians, whereas Hurriety's human-interest themes were clearly Palestinian. The framing differences illustrate the ways in which the media construct meaning through the selective emphasis they give to certain narratives in relation to their editorial policies and the cultural contexts in which they operate.

El-Dahmanhoury et al. (2025) employed critical discourse analysis to compare Al Jazeera English and BBC online coverage of the 2023 Israel-Gaza War, focusing on transitivity, intertextuality, and lexicalization across 136 articles. Contrary to expectations, both outlets used active voice similarly in headlines, but Al Jazeera provided more nuanced portrayals of Palestinian actors beyond Hamas, quoted Palestinian and NGO voices more frequently, and engaged in balanced negative lexicalization. BBC favored Israeli and Western voices, reinforcing pro-Israeli narratives.

In this mixed methods study, combining quantitative framing analysis with qualitative interviews of journalists, Mejsstrik (2024) explored the framing of Israel's war in Gaza with Hamas in 2023 in 10 Czech online media outlets. The study revealed that the conflict frame and the pro-Israeli law and order frame were the most prevalent ones and that left leaning outlets tended to contain more Palestinian injustice and defiance frames. Interviews showed that external considerations like political elite framing and the Islamophobic sentiments in society influenced framing, sometimes reinforcing a pro-Israeli framing.

In order to measure the balance of coverage, Pinker (2025) analyzed a quantitative sample of 1561 New York Times articles published between October 7, 2023, and June 7, 2024, and also identified a dominant account of the conflict that highlighted Hamas's attack on the first day and followed with an Israeli military response, while minimizing Israeli casualties and exaggerating the suffering of the Palestinians. This can lead the reader to identify with Palestinians rather than Israel, and it can distort the reader's perception of Israel's dynamics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Framing Theory

This study is based on the theoretical research of framing theory, which is one of the most influential paradigms in media and communication research. The concept behind framing theory is that media not only reflect the world, but also shape it – they pick out certain facts from the world, arrange them in a specific sequence and present them in a certain light, serving a particular interpretation that is dominant over others. The idea of “framing” was first coined in a sociological context by Erving Goffman (1974), who said frames are “interpretive schemata that are used by individuals for organizing and comprehending their everyday experiences.” Goffman's frames are mental frameworks, through which individuals communicate the significance of events, and place them in larger patterns of meaning that are culturally and socially constructed. Here the framing is not considered only as media attribute of the media

text but as it is considered as a basic cognition process by which human beings are dealing with complex social reality. Building on Goffman's observations on the field of media studies, Robert Entman (1993) developed the most widely cited and operationally useful definition of the concept of framing for communication researchers. Entman uses the term framing to describe the phenomena of selecting certain aspects of one's perceived reality, making them more salient in a communicating text, and thereby promoting a particular problem definition, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation, and/or a recommendation for treatment. The four-function approach to framing – as a process of defining the issue, diagnosing cause, making moral judgment, and recommending a remedy – turned framing from a sociological abstraction to a concrete analytical instrument that could be applied systematically to the analysis of media texts. Because editorials are opinion-based texts, and as such are designed for the same purpose as other opinion texts, they are especially relevant to Entman's framework, which highlights that they function as problem identification and definition, causal etiology, moral evaluation of actors, and recommendation of course of action.

Thematic Analysis as an Interpretive Framework

The concept of 'framing theory' is used to view how meaning is being produced in the media, while the main method used in the study is the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a process for identifying patterns (themes) within the data, analyzing them, and reporting them, said Braun and Clarke, a pattern being something significant about the data with respect to the research question, and a patterned response or meaning within the data. The aim of this definition is to be very broad, so that thematic analysis is not allied to any specific epistemological tradition, and can be used in a variety of qualitative research paradigms. Importantly, Braun and Clarke differentiate between thematic analysis done at the semantic or explicit level (which is about what is said) and latent or interpretive level (which is about what is assumed to be the case that gives rise to what is said). The present

study focuses mainly at the latent level and considers the editorial themes as a reflection of the ideological structures that shape each outlet's portrayal of the Iran-Israel conflict.

Thematic analysis is conducted in a rigorous and transparent manner with the aid of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. In the first phase, familiarization with the data, students are immersed in the data, reading and re-reading 677 editorials to gain familiarity with the content, rhetorical strategies and common themes of the texts. The second phase consists of creating initial codes, systematic labels that identify the text's features, content, and meaning that seem to be relevant to the research questions, as well as the explicit content (e.g., specific references to blame attribution) and the implicit content (e.g., the ideology behind editorial language). The third step is to identify themes, where codes are then combined to form larger patterns that represent some larger meaning of the data. The fourth step is the theme review step where the researcher compares candidate themes with the entire dataset to determine if they have good internal logical coherence and if they are meaningful and different from each other. The fifth phase is to label and identify themes, provide a label and a detailed description for each theme that will clearly explain the scope of the theme and why it is important. The 6th phase is the final one, where the themes are written up and supported with data in full. This study utilizes quantitative framing data (blame attribution percentages and tone distributions), which is triangulated and validated with the qualitative themes derived from close reading, in a systematic manner that follows all six phases of the study.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Procedure

Corpus: 677 editorials from three outlets covering Iran-Israel conflict (October 7, 2023 - March 31, 2025)

- **Haaretz:** 246 editorials (Israeli, liberal)
- **Kayhan International:** 266 editorials (Iranian, state-aligned)
- **Wall Street Journal:** 165 editorials (American, conservative)

Selection: Census of all editorials addressing the conflict, identified through keyword searches

Analysis: Applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis

Analytical Procedures

Phase 1: Familiarization

- Read all 677 editorials multiple times (approximately 6 months)
- Noted initial patterns, striking language, contradictions
- Generated preliminary analytical memos documenting observations

Phase 2: Coding

- Systematically labeled interesting features across entire corpus
- Coded both semantic (explicit) and latent (interpretive) meanings
- Used NVivo qualitative analysis software for organization
- Applied codes liberally, with over-coding preferable to under-coding

Example codes:

- "Zionist entity" terminology usage
- Casualty emphasis and description
- Moral legitimacy claims
- Strategic competence narratives
- Victimhood framing

Phase 3: Theme Search

- Organized codes into hierarchical structure (themes > sub-themes > codes)
- Used visual mapping to explore code relationships
- Generated initial theme names (working titles)
- Generated approximately 30-40 potential themes initially

Phase 4: Theme Review

- Reviewed each potential theme against:
 - Coded data (internal coherence)
 - Entire dataset (external distinctiveness)
 - Research questions (relevance)
- Merged similar themes, eliminated low-prevalence themes
- Refined theme boundaries

- Final: 15 distinct themes (5 per outlet)

Phase 5: Theme Definition

- Named each theme concisely and informatively
- Defined scope and boundaries
- Calculated prevalence (percentage of editorials containing theme)
- Identified supporting sub-themes
- Linked themes to research questions

Phase 6: Reporting

- Selected representative quotations (2-3 per theme)
- Presented findings organized by outlet
- Discussed theme interactions and contradictions

Credibility Procedures

Prolonged Engagement: 6 months analytical period, multiple corpus readings

Triangulation: Multiple coders (researcher + 2 colleagues) reviewed themes independently, discussed until consensus

Peer Debriefing: Bi-weekly meetings with supervisor and colleagues

Audit Trail: Documented all analytical decisions in dated memos (47 memos total)

Negative Case Analysis: Actively searched for editorials not fitting predicted themes, documented exceptions

Reflexivity: Acknowledged researcher's background and potential biases (Pakistan-based researcher, English-language education, familiarity with conflict issues)

RESULTS

Fifteen themes were identified from the news in the three outlets, five per newspaper. The two sets of themes depict a unified narrative ideology, establishing the outlet's meaning with regard to the Iran-Israel conflict. The themes are listed below in order of frequency in the editorial data set.

Themes of Liberal Self-Critique and Moral Accountability" The editorializing of Haaretz is rooted in a consistent liberal viewpoint on Israel which focuses on self-criticism, democratic accountability and diplomatic pragmatism. The 97.6% negative score for Israel (240 editorials) and 87.8% neutral score for Iran (216 editorials) indicate that the

editorial policy of the newspaper is oriented towards moral evaluation of the self, not the other.

Theme 1 Israel's Moral and Governance Failures

The most common kernel of Haaretz's reporting is to portray Israel as morally and politically sullied, guilty of civilian damage in Gaza, of democratic decay, and of government incompetence. This theme challenges Israel's leadership, particularly Prime Minister Netanyahu, and suggests that Israel's policies are self-destructive and morally bankrupt. The language of moral accountability is used in the editorials of this theme and the military actions undertaken by Israel are consistently portrayed not as an act of self-defence, but as a trend of escalatory activity which compromises Israel's own legitimacy.

Representative editorials feature HAA201 ("Unleashing an Apocalypse" on June 11, 2024) which characterizes Israel's tight grip on Northern Gaza as a "moral stain," and HAA203 ("Netanyahu's Ethnic Cleansing" on October 11, 2024) blaming Israel for forcibly evacuating populations. The rhetorical tactics range from 'war crimes' (HAA164) to 'moral nadir' (HAA211) and 'apartheid' (HAA210), and Netanyahu is referred to as a 'pathological liar' (HAA219) with a 'blood-soaked government' (HAA202). This theme is backed up in numbers with 97.6% of negativity and 21.1% of aggressor blame attribution for Israel (52 editorials). It corresponds with the accounts of violence that Teneboim-Weinblatt et al. (2016) identified as a component of Israeli liberal discourse of criticism of military action in order to push for reform.

Theme 2 Democratic Erosion and Internal Repression. This group of editorials, which is closely related to the theme of moral failures, but analytically different, is dedicated solely to the internal democratic deterioration of Israel. Haaretz sees the Netanyahu government as systematically undermining judicial independence, cracking down on dissent, and persecuting political opponents, framing the conflict not just as an external security issue, but as a "vehicle for authoritarian consolidation" within the country.

HAA035 ("Arresting Arabs and Left-wingers," November 14, 2023) denounces the arrest of criticism, and HAA095 ("Gaza War Won't Stop," March 3, 2024) alerts to a judicial coup taking place during the war. In HAA221 ("Enemy of the State," December 16, 2024), Justice Minister Levin is branded a "threat to democracy. The rhetorical terms used include the following: McCarthyite persecution (HAA015), reign of fear (HAA178), and authoritarian government (HAA217). The government is a "pro-Netanyahu dictatorship" (HAA234) that is a "witch hunt" (HAA142). This theme reveals Haaretz's unique function as a forum for liberal self-reflection in Israel's society, calling for change and motivating its readers to examine Israel's policies towards the region and domestically.

Theme 3: Iran as a Peripheral Regional Threat

Iran is treated as a secondary player, a peripheral player in the conflict, not a central one, by Haaretz. The neutral tone expressed in the 87.8% of the 216 editorials (relatively low 13.8% for attributing blame to Iran as an aggressor) are quantitatively reflected in this framing. What Haaretz does do is to situate Iranian involvement in Israel's own failings, rather than adding fuel to Iran's fire. HAA195 ("Score Is Settled," October 27, 2024) neither condemns nor justifies Iran's missile attack, its primary focus being Israel's humanitarian difficulties in Gaza, specifically without discussing Iran's strategic interests. The June 23, 2024, HAA139 ("Two Options Facing Israel") mentions Iran as a regional threat along with Hamas and Hezbollah, but then turns to the diplomatic intransigence of Israel as the real issue. Iran is characterized as a "broader threat" (HAA026) or as being "a step away from a nuclear bomb" (HAA155), but these descriptions are not necessarily detailed or are not the core of the editorial arguments. This is a theme that has been suggested recently by Freilich (2022), who argues that Israel should pursue diplomatic rather than military initiatives to deal with the nuclear threat.

Theme 4: Iran's Proxies as Regional Actors and Humanitarian Crisis Drivers

When Haaretz does go deep into the topics of Iranian proxy warfare, it is usually as a humanitarian issue, where Palestinian suffering is the result of both Israeli military operations and the dynamics resulting from proxy warfare. In this theme, civilian casualties, infrastructure destruction, and the resulting humanitarian crisis are highlighted as proof of the failure of policy not as tales of successful defence or legitimate military action. In the film HAA133 ("Rafah Horror", May 29, 2024), the viewer is shown 45 Palestinian refugees who were killed in an airstrike, as a sad part of a pattern of failure. The October 29, 2024, book, HAA197 ("If It Looks Like Ethnic Cleansing"), charges Israel with having "blocked aid" and labels it a "moral crime. In the December 18, 2023 HAA056 ("Defenseless in the Face of Israeli Violence"), Palestinians are labeled an "entirely defenseless population" against settler violence. This thematic cluster is saturated with the language of humanitarian urgency "humanitarian catastrophe" (HAA201), "mass killing" (HAA060) and "blood of Palestinian children" (HAA233). This theme is anchored quantitatively by the 21% aggressor blame assigned to Israel, as well as with the frequent editorial notes that use numbers like "30,000 Palestinians killed" (HAA094).

Theme 5: The United States – A Flawed but Indispensable Diplomatic Player

The tone in Haaretz's coverage of America is not either overly critical or excessively supportive. Indeed, the 67.9% tone-neutral editorials (167 editorials) and 13.8% tone-positive editorials (34 editorials) toward the United States demonstrate the newspaper's awareness of the need for American partnership and simultaneous willingness to assess U.S. diplomacy morally and strategically. Thus, for example, while HAA244 ("Thank You Joe Biden," January 24, 2025) appreciates the services rendered by President Biden by mediating a ceasefire deal ("excellent service") and calls America a "true friend" (HAA054), or even "a paragon of true friendship" (HAA017) when it comes to mediation efforts, other editorials criticize certain aspects of American politics. HAA166 ("Israel's Last Chance,"

August 20, 2024) commends the country's efforts in trying to free the hostages via intensive diplomatic means, while HAA199 ("Trump Is Bad for Jews," November 5, 2024) criticizes him for being a menace as he helps the country to proceed with annexation, as well as HAA243 ("Greenlight Jewish West Bank Terror," January 22, 2025) for his decision to lift sanctions from settlers. The U.S., therefore, can be characterized as both "true friends" or "something [that] terrifies liberal democracy" (HAA204) depending on the context.

Kayhan International: Themes of Revolutionary Resistance and Anti-Imperialist Struggle

The organization of the editorial coverage at Kayhan International is based on the coherent Iranian ideology that idealizes its revolutionaries and demonizes Israel and the United States by framing the conflict within the broader context of oppression by imperial powers. As such, the 100% negative tone towards Israel (243 editorials) and 94.7% negative tone toward the US (230 editorials) combined with the 72.4% positive tone towards Iran (176 editorials) indicate the editorial approach's commitment to an ideological perspective.

Theme 1: Israel as an Illegitimate Genocidal Aggressor

The prevalent theme in the coverage of Israel as an aggressor by Kayhan International characterizes the country as a "Zionist entity" a formulation that delegitimizes its existence and represents Israel as an illegitimate genocidal aggressor responsible for a "holocaust" in Gaza and systematic violence in the region. This theme is focused on denying Israel's existence rather than criticizing its actions, thus making any Israeli action illegal due to an inherent illegitimacy of the entity as such.

KAY165 ("Six Months of Genocide," April 7, 2024) cites 33,000+ deaths in the "holocaust" that is being conducted by the Israelis. KAY212 ("Deceptive Truce," January 15, 2025) claims 47,000 people dead due to "bloodthirsty" behavior of the Israelis. KAY011 ("Unprecedented Vengeance," July 31, 2024) calls Israel "cowardly terrorism" and a crime against sovereignty when it kills the Hamas

leader Haniyeh in Tehran. On September 28, 2024, KAY031 ("Nasrallah Achieves Immortality") characterizes the assassination of Hezbollah leader Nasrallah as "dastardly terrorism" resulting in a "death warrant" for the entire Israel. The rhetoric also includes a range of epithets including "satan-worshipping" (KAY241), "rabid dog" (KAY242), and "cancerous tumor" (KAY023). The 97.9% aggressor blame attribution and 100% negative tone confirm the importance of this theme. Yaghoobi (2009) finds that the syntax used in Kayhan articles reflects the ideological orientation against Zionism.

Theme 2: Iran as a Moralist and Revolutionary Vanguard

On the other hand, unlike how Kayhan treats the state of Israel, Kayhan International idolizes Iran as a moral guide of the Axis of Resistance, as a victim of Western attacks, and as a protector of the oppressed peoples around the world. In this regard, the Iranian government's military efforts like launching missiles and bombing others are considered acts of just revenge or victory, which unveil the powerlessness of their enemies, and inspire oppressed people across the world.

The first example is KAY161 ("Western Regimes Bewildered," April 16, 2024), which celebrates Iran's Operation True Promise for humiliating its rival through precise strikes. Another case is KAY163 ("Iranian Projectiles," April 14, 2024), which praises Iran's tactical genius for penetrating the Iron Dome. KAY011 highly praises Iran's "decisive vengeance planning" with the initiative taken by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution. Furthermore, Iran's "paramount power" (KAY015) is praised in KAY019 ("Iranian President's Visit to Iraq," September 10, 2024) for promoting regional stability in Iran's favor. Besides, Iran is characterized as a "vanguard of liberation" (KAY029) and "leader of the Free World" (KAY009). Indeed, the high percentage of positive tone (72.4%, 176 editorials) and the zero aggressor blame quantify the presence of this theme in Kayhan. According to Celso (2024), this phenomenon should be understood within the context of Iran's Shiite Imamate project.

Theme 3: The Declining US Imperialism as Adversary of Iran

According to Kayhan International, the United States is characterized as a "super terrorist" and an enemy state of Iran, where Israel is described as a necessary ally. Moreover, its global hegemonic project is seen as nearing its end due to resisting forces in the international community. The United States is thus not presented in the role of mediator but in an adversarial capacity as part of an oppressive global hegemony with a declining power project. The United States is seen as an accomplice in the alleged crimes against humanity perpetrated by Israel.

Empirical examples of this theme include descriptions such as "the main criminal" for providing arms to Israel ("Israel's Weapons," KAY212); a genocidal intention in U.S. policy referred to as "dastardly Biden" (KAY164, "Gaza Genocide," April 13, 2024); illegal bombing of Syria referred to as "illegal" (KAY237, "CENTCOM Terrorists," November 12, 2024); and criticism of decline and hypocrisy of US (KAY233, "G20 Summit," November 20, 2024). Rhetorical figures in Kayhan corpus range from "Genocidal Joe" (KAY165) to "Biden the Butcher" (KAY036) and "evil empire" (KAY180). Quantitative analysis found that a high percentage of the editorials attribute aggressor identity to the United States (91.8%) in 223 editorials, and in a negative tone (94.7%) in 230 editorials. According to Itzhakov (2020), Iran can use the United States' image to divert attention from internal dissatisfaction.

Theme 4: Iran's Proxies as Heroic Resistance Forces

Kayhan International frames Iran's proxy forces Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iraqi militia groups not as terrorist organizations but as heroic martyrs and freedom fighters engaged in a legitimate struggle of national and Islamic liberation. Their suffering is framed as both evidence of Israeli and American brutality and as fuel for the ongoing revolutionary struggle that will ultimately defeat the Zionist-Western order.

KAY211 ("Truce Welcome," January 19, 2025) glorifies Palestinian "resistance" despite the staggering death toll, while KAY207 ("Killing

Fields," May 11, 2024) frames 35,000 killed Palestinians as defiant victims of a genocidal project. KAY046 ("Al-Aqsa Storm," October 8, 2023) celebrates Palestinian "self-defense" as exposing Israel's "state terrorism," while KAY048 ("Chivalrous Palestinians," October 10, 2023) praises their "chivalry" against what it calls "unmanly" Israelis. KAY044 frames Hamas leader Sinwar's death as fueling resistance and predicts Israel's imminent end. Rhetorical affirmations of Palestinian heroism "heroic" (KAY007), "indomitable" (KAY062) and descriptions of martyrdom as strengthening resistance (KAY167) pervade this theme. The consistent references to the "Gaza holocaust" (KAY165) and the near-total aggressor blame for Israel quantitatively support this theme's prevalence.

Theme 5: Global Resistance Against Zionist-Western Hegemony

The fifth thematic cluster in Kayhan International positions the Iran-Israel conflict within a grand narrative of global anti-hegemonic struggle. Iran is presented not merely as a regional actor but as the leader of a worldwide "Free World" of resistance movements, allied nations, and oppressed peoples who are collectively defeating the U.S.-Israel imperial order. This theme frames the conflict as a civilizational turning point.

KAY206 ("World Varsity Movement," May 12, 2024) credits Iran with inspiring pro-Palestinian university rallies worldwide, framing this as a global awakening. KAY166 ("Qods Day Rallies," April 6, 2024) celebrates worldwide resistance. KAY012 ("Flourishing Ties," August 28, 2024) praises Iran's cordial ties with Latin America in opposition to Zionism, while KAY170 ("US, Zionists Dead Scared," October 27, 2024) highlights Iran's BRICS role in countering neocolonialism. KAY018 ("Islamic Unity," September 15, 2024) lauds Iran's bridge-building between Sunni and Shia communities against U.S.-Zionist plots. Terms like "Axis of Resistance" (KAY035) and "Ummah" (KAY069) are deployed to unify global opposition. The 72.4% positive tone for Iran and the editorial notes emphasizing global solidarity "Latin America's consciousness supports this" (KAY043) quantitatively underpin this theme.

The Wall Street Journal: Themes of Conservative Strategic Defense and Threat Containment

The Wall Street Journal's editorial coverage is organized around a coherent conservative American perspective that defends Israel as a victimized democratically, frames Iran as an existential threat to regional and global stability, and calls for stronger U.S. leadership in containing Iranian power. The 84.8% positive tone toward Israel (140 editorials), the 68.5% negative tone toward Iran (113 editorials), and the 73.3% negative tone toward the U.S. (121 editorials primarily criticizing Biden's perceived weakness) reflect an editorial philosophy of hawkish pro-Israel conservatism.

Theme 1: Israel as a Victimized Democratic Ally

The dominant theme in WSJ's coverage frames Israel as a victim of Iran-backed aggression particularly Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023 and as a morally justified democracy defending itself against existential threats. This theme emphasizes Israel's strategic and ethical superiority, aligns it with U.S. interests, and consistently frames Israeli military operations as legitimate and necessary acts of self-defense.

WSJ001 ("War Returns," October 7, 2023) frames Israel as a victim of Hamas's surprise assault killing 700 with "awful civilian scenes," while WSJ060 ("Israel's Untold Gaza Progress," February 4, 2024) praises Israel's progress in the war as it freed 110 hostages. WSJ115 ("Israel Returns Fire," July 31, 2024) lauds Israel's precision strike on Haniyeh, highlighting intelligence capability and justifying retaliation, while WSJ134 ("Israel's Deterrence Lesson," September 29, 2024) praises what it calls the remarkable display of strategic capability in killing Hezbollah's Nasrallah. Israel's actions are described as "just" (WSJ114), "proportionate" (WSJ031), and "ethical" (WSJ095), with terms like "massacre" (WSJ137) and "slaughter" (WSJ008) used to emphasize Israeli victimhood. The 0% aggressor blame for Israel (140 non-aggressor editorials) and the 84.8% positive tone quantitatively anchor this theme. Nikou (2016) confirms WSJ's pro-Israel narrative, framing Israeli actions as self-defense particularly post-October 7, 2023.

Theme 2: Iran as a Malevolent Global Threat

The Wall Street Journal depicts Iran as a "terror master" orchestrating regional chaos through its proxy networks and pursuing nuclear ambitions that pose an existential threat not only to Israel but to global stability. This theme frames Iran as a primary aggressor with no moral legitimacy whose containment is a paramount strategic imperative for the United States and its allies.

WSJ135 ("Iran Opens the Door," October 1, 2024) condemns Iran's launch of 181 ballistic missiles as an "act of war" and urges Israeli retaliation, while WSJ081 ("Iran's Ominous Attack," April 14, 2024) characterizes the attack as a malevolent escalation. WSJ115 accuses Iran of funding and guiding Hamas and Hezbollah with 6,000+ rockets, while WSJ111 ("Triumph of the Houthis," July 21, 2024) links Iran to Houthi attacks including a Tel Aviv strike. WSJ118 ("Dangerous New Iranian Nuclear Reality," August 11, 2024) warns that Iran is "days from a nuclear breakout capable of killing millions." Iran is described as a "rogue state" (WSJ005), an "axis of terror" (WSJ082), and "malign" (WSJ143), with its proxies termed a "terrorist hydra" (WSJ108). The 52.7% aggressor blame (87 editorials) and the 68.5% negative tone (113 editorials) quantitatively confirm this theme. Inbar (2020) and Freilich (2022) highlight Israel's perception of Iran's nuclear and proxy threats, justifying WSJ's hawkish stance.

Theme 3: Iran's Proxies as Primary Aggressors

In The Wall Street Journal, the groups supported by Iran, such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Houthis, have often been referred to as the main perpetrators for the violence committed against Israel and creating instability in the region. This way of looking at the conflict takes the blame off Israel because the agents used are seen as instruments of aggression employed by Iran, and the overall image created of Iran is negative.

WSJ137 ("Lessons of October 7," October 6, 2024) talks about Hamas' actions as "massacre" causing 1,200 deaths and calls Hamas "genocidal"; WSJ125 ("Hamas Murders Six Hostages," September 2, 2024) severely condemns the killing of hostages; WSJ129 ("Hezbollah Gets a Pager Message," September 17, 2024) praises Israel's bold step of

eliminating rocket launchers of the terrorist group Hezbollah, which has 8,000 rockets at hand; WSJ148 ("Hezbollah's Cease-Fire," November 26, 2024) positively assesses Israel's military operations against Hezbollah. These actors are labeled as "terrorist," "jihadist," and "genocidal," and their actions in Israel are called "pogrom" (WSJ023) on October 7, 2024, whereas the terrorist Hezbollah is portrayed as the "sword of Damocles" (WSJ122). Attributing 53% of the aggressor's share to Iran only reinforces this perspective.

Theme 4: The United States as a Flawed but Essential Leader

According to the Wall Street Journal, the US is a key security guarantor for the West and Israel but is being continuously scrutinized for its policies under President Biden with a conservative perspective. It is because of the country's policy towards Iran and inadequate support to Israel that it receives overwhelmingly negative reviews in the journal; however, positive opinions account for only about 13.3% (22 editorials) and relate to Trump's coverage.

Examples of such articles would be WSJ110 ("Biden Gives Iran Another Sanctions Break," July 18, 2024), which accuses the US government of issuing sanctions waiver amounting to \$10 billion, hence allowing Iran to finance terrorism; and WSJ141 ("Biden's Pre-Election Threat," October 16, 2024), where Biden is condemned for his threat to stop his support to Israel on humanitarian issues. However, as far as the articles praising the USA are concerned, one can mention WSJ143 ("Trump's Win," November 7, 2024) reporting about the change in the region of the Middle East, as Iran ceased domination in this area due to Trump's election victory; WSJ157 ("Warning to Hamas," February 11, 2025) appreciating the tough deterrence measures of Trump's government. Policies of Biden were referred to as "appeasement" (WSJ110), "deterrence failures" (WSJ135), and "betrayal" (WSJ095). Instead, Trump's measures were positively defined as "a show of force" (WSJ121) and "bold" (WSJ156). In addition, the USA was called "stalwart ally" (WSJ027) of Israel. Call to cease deterrence made by Keshavarz (2024) agrees with Wall Street Journal's hawkish

Theme 5: Global Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Bias

The fifth thematic cluster in WSJ's editorial coverage frames the conflict within a broader narrative of global antisemitism and anti-Israel bias, presenting campus protests, UN resolutions, and International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice actions as manifestations of a coordinated campaign to delegitimize Israel while ignoring Hamas's crimes. This theme defends Israel's legitimacy against international criticism and positions its critics as either antisemitic or politically motivated.

WSJ119 ("Still Paying for Anti-Israel Campus Protest Chaos," August 15, 2024) condemns antisemitic protests at Columbia and UCLA, likening encampments to a "Jew Exclusion Zone," while WSJ089 ("Stakes at Columbia," April 30, 2024) links campus protests to Hamas and Houthi support. WSJ147 ("U.N.'s Anti-Israel Genocide Purge," November 26, 2024) criticizes the UN for what it calls false genocide claims, while WSJ088 ("International Criminal Court," April 26, 2024) opposes ICC arrest warrants as undermining Israel's justified defense. Protests are characterized as "antisemitic" (WSJ087) and "lawbreaking" (WSJ090), the UN is called a "disgrace" (WSJ021), and Israel is said to face a "genocide libel" (WSJ057) and a "propaganda war" (WSJ150). The 84.8% positive tone for Israel and the editorial notes defending against international bias ("falsely accused," WSJ056) quantitatively support this theme. Porter (2015) critiques Israel's construction of existential threats as a political strategy, providing scholarly context for this thematic cluster.

DISCUSSION

Ideological Coherence and Narrative Logic

The themes emerging from the thematic analysis show that editorial writing for each news organization is not an arbitrary choice of reactions to events, but rather an ideological endeavor and a storytelling attempt aimed at constructing a certain narrative about the Iran-Israel dispute that serves particular political interests. In each group of five themes, there exists a self-reinforced storytelling system: the five themes operate within a framework where a coherent moral world is created that legitimates

specific characters and condemns others, that condones acts of violence while condemning others, and that demands certain actions and opposes others.

All the five themes put together in Haaretz create a story of Israel's liberal self-criticism, wherein Israel finds itself ethically tainted (Theme 1), its democracy atrophied (Theme 2), with Iran irrelevant to the story (Theme 3), Iran's proxy forces relevant mainly because they cause Palestinian misery (Theme 4), and the United States an ally but an unreliable one (Theme 5). Such storytelling allows Haaretz to cater to its liberal readership through promoting internal debates and policy reforms; however, as Inbar (2020) notes, it can be detrimental to the country's security narrative.

The five themes created by Kayhan International weave together a storyline of moral righteousness of revolution: Israel is guilty of genocide and injustice (Theme 1), Iran is heroic (Theme 2), the United States is an imperial villain (Theme 3), Iran's proxies are freedom fighters (Theme 4), and all the events fit into a bigger picture of the world-wide awakening to hegemonic evil (Theme 5). According to Roomi (2023), this storyline supports Iran's political interests both domestically and internationally.

These five themes in the Wall Street Journal narrative explain why it needs to be a conservative narrative of strategic necessity for survival: 1) Israel is a victim democracy, 2) Iran poses an existential danger, 3) Iran's proxies act as primary aggressors, 4) The United States must play a more dominant role, and 5) Those who oppose Israel act out of antisemitic or political motives. This narrative logic works well for the WSJ conservative readership in that it emphasizes the need for closer cooperation between the United States and Israel, the requirement for a hard-line policy toward Iran, and the denigration of all opponents of Israel's war tactics at home and abroad.

Event-Specific Framing and Thematic Activation

One significant point about the thematic analysis is that certain incidents of conflict bring to mind specific themes, although the approach is quite systematic in each case. The Gaza War, the murder of Haniyeh, the murder

of Nasrallah, and Iran's missile attacks each function as catalysts for each of the outlets' thematic schemes.

For instance, the Gaza struggle triggers Haaretz's Theme 1 ("moral stain"), HAA201, and Theme 4 ("30,000 Palestinians killed"), HAA094, Kayhan's Theme 1 ("holocaust"), KAY165, and Theme 4 ("47,000 killed"), KAY211, as well as WSJ's Theme 1 (" Hamas's surprise assault"), WSJ001, and Theme 3 (" Hamas terrorists"), WSJ104. It is obvious that the very same events elicit entirely divergent narratives based on the thematic context chosen by each of these media outlets.

Haniyeh's assassination similarly activates distinct thematic clusters: Haaretz critiques escalation as strategically counterproductive (HAA158 "strategic futility"), Kayhan condemns the killing as Israeli terrorism and frames Iran's response as righteous (KAY011 "decisive vengeance"), and WSJ praises it as a demonstration of Israeli intelligence capability and justified retaliation (WSJ115 "precision strike"). This pattern confirms Gunay's (2025) finding that framing differences reflect editorial policies and cultural contexts that shape which aspects of events are emphasized.

6.3 Comparative Thematic Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

Although the ideological underpinnings of the three newspapers are very distinct, there appear to be some remarkable structural similarities. For instance, the United States is a theme of considerable importance in all three newspapers – although from extremely contrasting perspectives. Haaretz perceives the United States as an imperfect yet indispensable ally (Theme 5), Kayhan portrays it as an embattled declining empire (Theme 3), while WSJ sees it as an imperfect yet indispensable leader (Theme 4). In all these cases, the United States is the fulcrum around which the geopolitical discourse of the newspapers revolves.

In addition, proxy force is another common theme among all three media outlets, although with drastically contrasting assessments of it. For Haaretz, the proxy force refers to the humanitarian crisis and regional actors involved in causing it (Theme 4); on the contrary, for Kayhan, it is the heroic resistance

forces (Theme 4), while for WSJ, the proxy force refers to the main aggressors (Theme 3). In other words, the proxy force issue becomes one of the most essential themes in which ideological differences between the media outlets are manifested.

The most basic difference, however, concerns their attitude toward Israel. The most harsh rhetoric of Haaretz is related to the criticism of Israel itself in regard to its internal flaws, which is not seen neither in Kayhan nor in WSJ. The most intense criticism by Kayhan is directed outward to the external enemies of Iran, including Israel and the US, without any self-reflection on internal issues. On the contrary, the most supportive tone of WSJ is related to Israel, whereas its internal criticism focuses on American policy weaknesses. All the above-mentioned is consistent with Mejsstrik (2024) about the impact of ideologies on conflict framing, and confirms the findings of Alim (2024).

Implications for Conflict Journalism

The results of thematic analysis have crucial ramifications for understanding the functioning of editorial journalism within the context of conflict. Firstly, one must note that the analysis proves that editors do not just present ideologies but rather build and reinforce them using narratives that serve as frameworks. The framework constructed by each publication becomes an inherent interpretative tool, which allows the readers to interpret the news events based on the narrative logic that is already established.

The results have serious ramifications for public perceptions of political conflicts. In accordance with the findings of Mahmood and Alvi (2024), polarized media discourse is detrimental to peaceful negotiations. Since one can interpret the conflict between Israel and Iran using several different narratives such as the moral failure of Israel, the revolutionary struggle, and strategic containment of threats it is impossible to construct a unified picture of the situation within the media environment.

As suggested by Teneboim-Weinblatt et al. (2016), a more complex actor-event approach is needed for classifying news accounts covering conflict topics in an attempt to address the inadequacies associated with the use of binary

categories such as peace journalism versus war journalism. From the results of the thematic analysis, one can conclude that there is a unique position occupied by each of the newspapers discussed in relation to the actor-event typology, neither peace journalism nor war journalism.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a thematic analysis of editorial narratives in three ideologically distinct newspapers covering the Iran-Israel conflict from October 2023 to March 2025. Through the application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis to 677 editorials from Haaretz, Kayhan International, and The Wall Street Journal, fifteen distinct narrative themes were identified five per outlet that collectively reveal how ideological orientation fundamentally shapes conflict journalism.

Haaretz's themes of moral failure, democratic erosion, peripheral threat construction, humanitarian crisis framing, and pragmatic U.S. partnership construct a narrative of liberal self-critique that serves internal Israeli debate. Kayhan International's themes of Israeli illegitimacy, Iranian revolutionary vanguardism, U.S. imperial antagonism, proxy heroism, and global anti-hegemonic struggle construct a narrative of revolutionary partisanship that serves Iranian state propaganda. The Wall Street Journal's themes of Israeli victimhood, Iranian malevolence, proxy aggression, U.S. leadership necessity, and global anti-Israel bias construct a narrative of conservative strategic defense that serves U.S.-Israel alliance politics. These findings have three key implications. First, they confirm that thematic analysis is a powerful tool for excavating the deeper narrative logic that organizes editorial discourse revealing not just what outlets say about conflicts but the underlying stories they tell about who has the right to violence, who deserves sympathy, and what the conflict ultimately means. Second, they demonstrate that ideological orientation is not merely one factor among many in shaping editorial content but the organizing principle that determines which facts are emphasized, which actors are humanized, and which policy prescriptions are advanced. Third, they underscore the

importance of critical media literacy in conflict contexts, as audiences exposed primarily to one outlet's thematic framework are being offered not a window on the conflict but a particular ideologically constructed perspective on it.

Future research should expand the comparative scope to include Arab-language outlets such as Al-Jazeera, European newspapers, and Pakistani or Turkish press to capture a broader range of thematic frameworks. Longitudinal analysis extending beyond March 2025 would allow examination of how themes evolve as conflicts develop. Research into audience reception would help assess whether and how editorial themes shape public understanding and policy attitudes. As Roomi (2023) observes, Iran's unilateral ideological strategy has marginalized the Palestinian cause and isolated Iran regionally a paradox that thematic analysis of editorial coverage helps to illuminate and that future conflict-framing research should continue to examine.

The Iran-Israel conflict remains one of the most consequential and contested geopolitical rivalries of our time. Understanding how media outlets construct narrative themes about this conflict is not merely an academic exercise it is essential groundwork for the critical media literacy that democratic publics need to navigate the polarized information environments in which contemporary conflicts unfold.

Ethical Considerations:

This research was done under the ethics provided by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan and Advanced Studies and Research Board (ASRB) of The Islamia University of Bahawalpur. The Departmental Ethics Committee of Media and Communication Studies gave this research ethical approval.

Conflict of interest:

The authors do not claim that they have any conflict of interest with the research or the authorship and publication of this manuscript.

Data availability:

The editorial data and framing analysis applied in this study were based on the publicly available newspaper archives. The data set that

was used to derive these findings can be found in the hands of the respective author on a reasonable request.

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