

Iran's Strategic Narrative and Defensive Posture in the U.S.-Israel Conflict: Perceptions, Justifications, and Regional Implications

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper explored the Iranian strategic discourse and defensive stance in relation to the U.S.-Israel war, and how perceptions, reasons and implications in the region influenced its actions. **Method:** Based on the Realist theory and the principle of a security dilemma, the study examined the hybrid military approach of Iran, integrating defensive, asymmetric, and proxy warfare to maintain sovereignty and prevent foreign aggression. The study employed a qualitative approach that relies on secondary sources; such as academic literature, policy statements, and regional accounts on the interplay between the ideological narrative of defense, legitimacy, and resistance of Iran and its behavioral patterns. **Results:** The research showed that there is a considerable gap in perceptions: in the United States and Israel, the same actions were interpreted as signs of expansionist intentions and destabilizing actions, which would strengthen the security dilemma, whereas Iran saw the same actions as defensive ones and the need to preserve the regime. The discussion has indicated that the strategic narrative of Iran has been the key to justification of its policy in the domestic context and persuasion of the international audience, but it has not been effective in all cases and circumstances. The paper came to the conclusion that the strategic discourse and defensive stance of Iran could not be separated, and ideology, perception, and operational behavior were all integrated in the Iranian security policy. Its compromise nature helped Iran to survive in a hostile region without being deterred, but at the same time, created more tension with its opponents because of conflicting interpretations. On the basis of these results, the study suggested creating a multilateral dialogue platform to clarify the intentions and enhance the communication process, creating defensive strategies to combat hybrid threats and asymmetric operations, and enhancing the strategic narrative through transparency, public diplomacy, and information campaigns based on research. Such steps would help to increase mutual understanding, decrease the number of misperceptions, and help to create a more stable regional security environment. **Novelty:** Based on the Realist theory and the principle of a security dilemma, the study examined the hybrid military approach of Iran, integrating defensive, asymmetric, and proxy warfare to maintain sovereignty and prevent foreign aggression.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has been shifting away from Western orientation in its foreign policy and towards a system of resistance to perceived imperial domination and maintenance of political sovereignty [1], [2]. This transformation was not merely institutional but ideological, embedding a worldview that integrates religion, politics, and anti-hegemonic resistance into the structure of the Iranian state [3], [4]. Over the decades, this ideological foundation evolved into a strategic posture that combines rhetorical opposition with pragmatic adaptation, enabling Iran to maneuver within an international system dominated by more powerful actors. Iran's behaviour in the U.S.-Israel conflict is therefore shaped by ideology, perception, and strategic necessity, all of which must be considered to fully understand its actions. This complexity highlights the importance of analysing Iran not merely as a rational actor

in realist terms, but as a state whose identity and historical experiences significantly inform its strategic calculations [5], [6].

Iran's strategic narrative functions as a central instrument for constructing meaning, rationalising policy decisions, and communicating its objectives to both domestic and international audiences. It plays a crucial role in mediating the relationship between ideology and practice. Strategic narratives, as noted in international relations scholarship, are proactive tools of statecraft that frame conflicts in morally persuasive terms and shape perceptions of legitimacy rather than merely reflecting policy outcomes [7]. In the Iranian context, dominant discourse emphasises defensive resistance, anti-imperialism, and support for oppressed populations, thereby situating Iranian actions within a broader ethical and political framework [8]. This message is disseminated through multiple channels—including state media, religious rhetoric, diplomatic engagement, and digital platforms—forming a comprehensive communication strategy aimed at reinforcing regime legitimacy and influencing international perception [9]. Importantly, this narrative also functions as a deterrence mechanism by signalling resolve and the willingness to escalate under the principle of self-defence, complicating adversaries' strategic calculations. However, the effectiveness of this narrative depends on its credibility, which is frequently contested by counter-narratives advanced by the United States and Israel, both of which portray Iran as a destabilising and revisionist actor. This clash of competing narratives reinforces a broader struggle over legitimacy that lies at the heart of the conflict.

Iran has developed a complex and adaptable military doctrine that complements its narrative production and is designed to optimise strategic impact within a hostile environment by compensating for conventional weaknesses. This doctrine is grounded in the concept of asymmetric warfare, enabling Iran to exploit the vulnerabilities of technologically superior adversaries through capabilities such as ballistic missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, cyber operations, and proxy forces [10], [11]. The strategy of forward defense extends this approach by relying on allied non-state actors in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen to create strategic depth and reduce the likelihood of direct confrontation on Iranian territory [12], [13]. Although Iranian leaders frame these measures as defensive responses to foreign aggression, their operational implications often blur the boundary between defense and offense, as they involve active engagement across multiple theatres of conflict. This ambiguity is further intensified by Iran's decentralised military structure, particularly the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which operates with a degree of autonomy and flexibility that enhances Iran's capacity to respond to emerging threats. Consequently, Iran's military posture can be characterised as a hybrid system that combines conventional deterrence with irregular and asymmetric warfare, challenging traditional classifications of state behaviour in international relations.

The evolving dynamics of the U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict also underscore the critical role of perception and misperception in shaping strategic outcomes. From Iran's perspective, its actions are fundamentally reactive, driven by the need to counter external

threats and ensure regime survival amid persistent economic sanctions, military threats, and covert operations [14]. Conversely, the United States and Israel interpret these same actions as evidence of expansionist ambitions and a deliberate effort to alter the regional balance of power, thereby justifying their own strategies of containment and deterrence [15]. This divergence in interpretation reflects a classic security dilemma, in which defensive measures by one actor are perceived as offensive threats by others, producing a cycle of escalation that is difficult to control [16]. The dilemma is further aggravated by limited communication channels, mutual distrust, and the influence of domestic political considerations on foreign policy decision-making. Moreover, the increasing participation of non-state actors introduces additional complexity, as these entities may operate with varying degrees of autonomy and pursue objectives that do not always fully align with those of their state sponsors. As a result, the conflict cannot be adequately understood solely through a state-to-state framework but must instead be analysed as a multilayered network of interactions operating across different levels of analysis.

Beyond direct strategic interactions, Iran's posture carries implications that extend well beyond the regional theatre, particularly in relation to global oil markets, maritime security, and the broader balance of power in the Middle East. Iran's geographical position and its capacity to influence critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz grant it substantial leverage over global energy flows, thereby heightening the stakes of any potential escalation [17]. The ability to disrupt maritime traffic in this corridor places Iran at the centre of international energy security calculations and reinforces its strategic relevance within global geopolitics. Furthermore, Iran's engagement with emerging global powers and participation in evolving political and economic alliances reflect broader structural shifts toward multipolarity, where traditional Western dominance is increasingly contested.

From a legal standpoint, Iran consistently invokes the right to self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter to justify its actions, particularly in situations it defines as responses to perceived aggression [18]. However, the interpretation of this principle remains contentious, especially in cases involving pre-emptive measures or indirect engagement through proxy actors. This legal ambiguity highlights the difficulty of applying established international law frameworks to contemporary forms of hybrid and asymmetric warfare. Additionally, the growing significance of information warfare and strategic communication further complicates the analytical landscape. Competing narratives vie for legitimacy within an increasingly fragmented global media ecosystem, making it more difficult to construct an objective assessment of intent, responsibility, and proportionality in the conflict environment.

Consideration of these complexities, there is a strong necessity of a thorough and integrative study that looks at the correlation between the strategic narrative of Iran and its defensive stance in the context of the U.S. Israel conflict. Although the available literature has given useful information about certain elements of the Iranian behavior, there is still a tendency to separate narrative and strategy domains, thus ignoring their interdependence. This paper will help fill this gap by examining how the narrative

building of Iran informs and shapes its operational behaviour and how this relationship affects regional politics and perceptions by foreign powers. The study will offer a more detailed picture of the role that Iran plays in the current international system by using a multidisciplinary methodology that will utilize the ideas of realism, constructivism, and strategic studies. Lastly, the paper argues that Iran has a strategic narrative beyond a justification tool, but a vital element of its overall deterrence design, enabling it to bargain a complex and often hostile world and still retain a certain level of strategic freedom.

Statement of Problem

Although there exists abundant literature on the foreign and security policy of Iran, there is a dire gap in the understanding about the correlation between the strategic defence discourse and the current military and geopolitical performance of Iran in the setting of the US-Israel conflict. Existing scholarship frequently approaches Iran either through the lens of ideological discourse or material capabilities, often treating these dimensions as separate components of a broader strategic framework [8], [10]. As a result, Iran is commonly portrayed in binary terms – either as a purely defensive actor reacting to external aggression or as an expansionist power seeking regional dominance – thereby oversimplifying the complexity of its foreign policy behaviour. This analytical limitation obscures the reality that Iranian actions may simultaneously embody defensive and offensive characteristics, reflecting a hybrid approach shaped by ideological motivations as well as structural constraints [7].

This challenge is further compounded by the apparent contradiction between Iran's proclaimed defensive posture and its more assertive, and at times escalatory, activities across multiple regional theatres. While Iranian authorities consistently frame military operations as acts of self-defence grounded in international legal principles, their reliance on asymmetric warfare, proxy networks, and forward defence strategies indicates a broader and more integrated strategic design that extends beyond purely reactive defence [11], [13], [18]. Such ambiguity presents significant difficulties for scholars and policymakers alike, complicating efforts to accurately interpret Iranian intentions and anticipate future behaviour.

Moreover, a substantial perception gap persists between Iran and its principal adversaries, particularly the United States and Israel. From Iran's perspective, its actions are necessary measures to ensure regime survival and counter persistent external threats, whereas its opponents interpret the same behaviour as evidence of expansionism and regional destabilisation [6], [15]. This divergence exemplifies a classic security dilemma, wherein defensive measures undertaken by one actor are perceived as threatening by others, thereby heightening the risk of miscalculation and escalation [16]. Since the conflict has regional and global consequences, such as effects on security, energy stability, and international norms, the lack of an analytical framework to unite these antagonistic interpretations is a large gap in the academic literature and policy discussion.

Subsequently, this paper examines the problem of aligning the strategic story of Iran with its behaviour, and how this relationship affects the attitudes and results of the US-Israel conflict. Through the integration of discourse analysis and strategic evaluation, the

research will offer a deeper understanding of the Iranian stand, which will not only help in advancing the theoretical aspect but also policy issues of interest. **Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following central research questions:

- a. How does Iran construct and communicate its strategic narrative of defense, legitimacy, and resistance within the context of the U.S.–Israel conflict?
- b. To what extent does Iran's military doctrine and operational behavior reflect a defensive, offensive, or hybrid strategic posture?
- c. How do differing international perceptions of Iran's strategic posture shape regional dynamics and the trajectory of the conflict?

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between Iran's strategic narrative and its defensive posture within the U.S.–Israel conflict.

The specific objectives are to:

- a. Analyze Iran's strategic narrative, focusing on how it frames its actions in terms of defense, legitimacy, and resistance.
- b. Examine Iran's military doctrine and operational practices to determine whether its posture is defensive, offensive, or hybrid in nature.
- c. Assess the implications of international perceptions of Iran's strategy for regional security and conflict escalation.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on the Realist theory and the security dilemma is the fundamental principle of the theory. According to realist theory, the international system is characterised by anarchy, where states prioritise survival, sovereignty, and security as their primary objectives [6], [19]. Within this framework, Iran's strategic discourse and military posture—comprising asymmetric capabilities, proxy networks, and forward defence—can be interpreted as rational responses aimed at preserving state security against more powerful adversaries in the context of the U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict. From a realist perspective, such measures reflect logical calculations designed to maximise deterrence and ensure regime survival under structural constraints. The concept of the security dilemma further explains the paradoxical nature of this strategic interaction, wherein defensive steps undertaken by Iran to enhance its security are perceived by the United States and Israel as offensive threats. These perceptions trigger countermeasures that intensify regional tensions and deepen mutual distrust, thereby reinforcing a cycle of escalation [16].

This analysis will apply the theoretical perspective of Realism as the primary theoretical perspective to highlight the structural constraints and strategic considerations that motivate the behaviour of Iran. It views the defensive-offensive stance of Iran as a rational reaction to an environment dominated by stronger players, where perception, deterrence, and credibility are the keys to survival. The paradigm allows one to analyse the operational behaviour and the narrative of the Iranian strategy as part of a consistent security policy, and how structural insecurity and the security dilemma influence policy decisions and enemy responses in the US-Israel-Iran conflict.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research design used in this study is qualitative research which is purely based on secondary sources to analyze the Iranian strategic narrative and defensive stance in the U.S. Israel war. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, regional analyses, and reliable news sources, including those of both international and regional approaches, such as the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and Middle Eastern research centers are used to collect data. Through content analysis, the paper forms patterns in the Iranian strategic narrative, the military doctrine, and the operational behavior and the influence of international perceptions on the regional dynamics. The secondary-source method is suitable as it enables developing historical, ideological, legal, and strategic aspects in detail.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Core Themes of Defense, Legitimacy, and Resistance

A review of the evolution and propagation of the Iranian strategic discourse of defence, legitimacy and resistance, as applied to the U.S.-Israel conflict, demonstrates that it is a highly institutionalized and historically predetermined process, which is indissolubly connected with the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has advanced its foreign and security policies on the principle of resistance to external domination, particularly by the United States and Israel, which are portrayed as primary threats to its sovereignty and ideological identity [1], [2]. This position extends beyond rhetorical opposition; it is embedded in a broader political-ideological framework that integrates Shi'a Islamic principles with anti-imperialist discourse, constructing an image of Iran as a defender of justice and a champion against oppression [3], [4]. The historical memory of the Iran-Iraq War further reinforced this narrative by institutionalising a sense of vulnerability and resistance that continues to shape Iran's perception of external threats and its justification for maintaining a robust defensive posture [20]. From a constructivist perspective, this reflects the influence of identity and historical experience on state behaviour, as Iran's self-conception as a revolutionary and resistant state directly informs how it interprets and responds to the actions of its adversaries [5]. Consequently, Iran's strategic narrative represents a sustained and coherent structure that integrates ideology, history, and security considerations, enabling it to frame its policies as both necessary and legitimate within a hostile international environment.

This narrative is disseminated through a multifaceted strategy involving state-controlled media, diplomatic engagement, and transnational networks to shape perceptions at domestic and international levels. Iranian officials consistently frame their policies within the discourse of defence and legitimacy, frequently invoking international legal norms – particularly the right to self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter – to justify their actions and align them with accepted global standards [14], [18]. This legal framing is complemented by a broader discursive emphasis on victimhood and

resistance, portraying Iran as compelled to respond to aggression rather than acting as an aggressor.

Strategic narratives, as argued by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, function as instruments of power that shape how events are interpreted and legitimised [7]. In Iran's case, narrative construction serves to provide moral and political justification for its actions, targeting both domestic audiences and international observers. The role of media in this process is significant, as state-sponsored outlets and digital platforms disseminate a consistent message that legitimises Iran's position while challenging opposing narratives [9]. Furthermore, Iran's engagement with allied non-state actors across the region amplifies its narrative through the so-called "Axis of Resistance," a networked framework that reproduces themes of resistance and anti-hegemony across multiple theatres [8], [21]. This narrative expansion enhances its resonance among audiences receptive to anti-Western discourse, particularly within parts of the Global South where historical experiences of colonialism and foreign intervention shape political interpretations [22], [23].

On the substantive content level, the analysis has determined that there are three interconnected themes; defense, legitimacy and resistance as the main components of the Iranian strategic discourse, each has a different but complementary role in forming its discourse. The defence theme is reflected in the consistent framing of Iranian state actions as responses to external threats and as necessary measures to safeguard national independence and territorial integrity [14]. This theme is closely linked to legitimacy, which is constructed through both legal and moral appeals positioning Iran within the framework of international law and ethical responsibility, particularly regarding its support for the Palestinian cause and opposition to Israeli policies [18], [24]. The resistance theme functions as the ideological core of the narrative, situating Iran's strategic behaviour within a broader struggle against oppression and injustice and thereby elevating its policies from mere national interest to a moral and historical mission.

However, tensions remain within this narrative, particularly regarding the divergence between its defensive framing and the proactive nature of Iran's regional engagements, including its support for proxy forces and involvement across multiple Middle Eastern conflict zones [10], [11]. Critics argue that such activities undermine the credibility of Iran's defensive narrative by suggesting a more assertive or expansionist agenda, whereas Iranian officials maintain that these measures constitute elements of a forward defence doctrine designed to deter aggression and secure strategic depth [13], [15]. This divergence illustrates the contested nature of strategic narratives, whose effectiveness depends not only on internal coherence but also on their acceptance by external audiences, which varies across political and cultural contexts.

Strategically, the findings indicate that Iran's narrative is not a supplementary rhetorical device but a core component of its broader security architecture. Through deliberate articulation and dissemination of themes such as defence, legitimacy, and resistance, Iran shapes both its behaviour and its deterrence posture. At the same time,

the narrative's effectiveness is constrained by competing interpretations and by actions that external observers may perceive as inconsistent with declared intentions. This interaction reinforces the constructivist insight that strategic narratives are both reflective and constitutive of state action, shaping and being shaped by policy behaviour [5].

Furthermore, the analysis underscores the importance of examining the relationship between narrative and perception. Divergent interpretations of Iran's actions by the United States, Israel, and other actors heighten the risk of miscalculation and contribute to the persistence of the conflict [6], [16]. By doing so, the strategic narrative of Iran may be considered as a form of non-material power that increases the material power of the state, enabling it to sustain a certain level of strategic coherence, despite having to operate in a complex and often antagonistic international environment. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that any complete understanding of the role played by Iran in the U.S.-Israel war should consider the interplay of narrative production, strategic behaviour, and perception because all of them interrelate to shape the direction and outcome of the war.

Hybrid Posture: Convergence of Defensive and Offensive Elements

The military doctrine of the Iranian military forces and their behaviour on the battlefield can be examined to define whether it is an aggressive, defensive, or hybrid strategic stance. This research demonstrates a dynamic and multi-layered trend according to which traditional dualistic categories of international relations cannot explain everything. Iran's military policy is consistently described as fundamentally defensive, framed as necessary for regime preservation and the protection of national sovereignty within a hostile geopolitical environment marked by persistent threats from Israel and the United States [14], [15]. This self-perception is reinforced by official doctrine emphasising deterrence, self-reliance, and the avoidance of large-scale confrontation with technologically superior adversaries. However, closer examination of Iran's military capabilities and operational behaviour suggests that its strategy extends beyond traditional defensive paradigms to include elements of active engagement, strategic depth, and indirect power projection. Scholars argue that Iran's approach is best characterised as asymmetric deterrence, whereby conventional weaknesses are offset through capabilities designed to impose significant costs on adversaries [10], [13]. These include ballistic missiles, unmanned aerial systems, naval disruption strategies, and cyber operations, all intended to deter aggression by raising the anticipated costs of conflict. From a realist perspective, such measures represent rational adaptations to structural constraints in an international system dominated by stronger actors [6]. Nonetheless, the integration of these capabilities into a broader framework of forward deployment and indirect engagement complicates the classification of Iran's posture as purely defensive, indicating instead a hybrid strategy that merges defensive objectives with offensive instruments.

The doctrine of forward defence constitutes a central component of this hybrid posture, projecting influence beyond Iran's borders to neutralise threats before they reach domestic territory. This strategy is operationalised through extensive networks of allied non-state actors across Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, which serve both as instruments

of influence and as buffers against external aggression [8], [21]. By engaging indirectly through these networks, Iran reduces the risks associated with direct interstate confrontation while maintaining strategic presence in key regional arenas. The International Institute for Strategic Studies notes that this indirect engagement enhances Iran's strategic depth beyond what would be achievable through conventional capabilities alone [11]. Critics contend, however, that such activities blur the distinction between defence and offence, as support for armed groups in regional conflicts may contribute to escalation and instability [15]. This raises significant questions regarding whether these measures can legitimately be characterised as defensive, particularly when they intensify regional conflicts or weaken fragile states. From a strategic standpoint, such behaviour may be interpreted as deterrence by punishment, signalling Iran's willingness to impose costs indirectly across multiple domains [10]. At the same time, Iranian officials maintain that these policies are necessary components of a forward defence doctrine intended to prevent encirclement and external aggression, thereby reinforcing the broader narrative of defence and regime survival.

The functional dimension of Iran's military policy further illustrates the hybrid nature of its strategic posture, particularly in its application of asymmetric warfare and technological innovation. Iran has invested substantially in capabilities that enable multidomain operations across land, sea, air, and cyberspace, thereby enhancing its responsiveness to a wide spectrum of threats [11]. These capabilities frequently depart from conventional military doctrine, including coordinated drone operations, precision-guided missile deployment, and the integration of cyber operations into broader strategic campaigns. As noted by Farzanegan and Hokayem, such developments reflect a pragmatic and adaptive model of warfare that prioritises flexibility, adaptability, and cost-efficiency, enabling Iran to confront technologically superior adversaries without engaging in direct large-scale confrontation [25], [26].

However, these tactics may also be perceived as offensive, particularly when employed in pre-emptive or retaliatory operations against perceived threats. The increasing frequency and geographical spread of Iranian military engagements—both direct and indirect—reinforce this interpretation. From a legal perspective, Iran justifies such measures under the principle of self-defence, although the application of this doctrine to hybrid and asymmetric warfare remains highly contested, especially regarding pre-emptive strikes or extraterritorial operations [18]. This legal ambiguity complicates efforts to categorise Iran's posture within traditional normative and theoretical frameworks, underscoring the limitations of applying conventional legal standards to contemporary conflict environments.

Analytically, the evidence suggests that Iran's military doctrine is best characterised as a hybrid strategic posture in which defensive objectives are pursued through both defensive and offensive instruments. This hybridisation appears to be an intentional and adaptive strategy rather than a sign of inconsistency. As Walt and Jervis argue, states may adopt strategies that seem contradictory at a tactical level but remain coherent when assessed in light of broader security imperatives and threat perceptions [6], [16]. In Iran's

case, the integration of asymmetric capabilities, forward defence, and strategic communication enhances deterrence, extends influence, and contributes to regime stability without necessitating conventional large-scale warfare.

Nevertheless, this strategy carries inherent risks, particularly the danger of misperception and unintended escalation if adversaries interpret hybrid measures as aggressive rather than defensive. The decentralised nature of Iran's military structure and its opaque decision-making processes further intensify this perception gap, making it difficult for external observers to accurately discern intent. Ultimately, Iran's strategic posture must be understood as a multidimensional system integrating elements of offence, defence, and deterrence, shaped by both capability constraints and broader security calculations rather than reducible to a single categorical label.

Divergent Perceptions: Iran's Self-View versus Adversaries' Interpretations

The extent to which an interpretive environment is highly fragmented and conflicting narratives, strategic interests, and historical experiences coalesce to create a perpetual misunderstanding and escalation is shown by examining the ways in which different international views of the strategic posture of Iran influence the dynamics of the region and the trajectory of the U.S.-Israel conflict. Facing what it perceives as sustained external pressure from the United States and Israel—including economic sanctions, military threats, and covert operations—Iran frames its actions through a defensive lens centred on deterrence, sovereignty, and regime survival [14], [15]. Within this context, the development of asymmetric capabilities and regional engagement can be interpreted as efforts to offset the advantages of more powerful adversaries and prevent strategic encirclement. However, this self-perception sharply contrasts with that of its principal opponents, who interpret the same policies as evidence of expansionist ambition and regional destabilisation. The United States and Israel, in particular, regard Iran's missile programme, support for non-state actors, and forward defence doctrine as direct threats to regional security and the broader international order [10], [13]. This divergence exemplifies what Jervis conceptualises as the security dilemma, whereby measures taken by one state to enhance its security are perceived as threats by others, triggering cycles of mistrust and escalation [16]. The absence of sustained diplomatic engagement and the broader geopolitical rivalry between Iran and its adversaries further entrench this perception gap, reducing opportunities for confidence-building and mutual understanding.

Beyond the immediate actors in the conflict, perceptions of Iran's strategic posture vary considerably across regional and global contexts, generating a complex and sometimes contradictory pattern of responses. In certain Middle Eastern contexts, particularly among states aligned with the United States, Iran is frequently portrayed as a revisionist power seeking influence through proxy networks and ideological mobilisation, thereby exacerbating sectarian tensions and undermining state sovereignty [26], [27]. By contrast, some actors in the Global South—including African and Asian scholars and policymakers—interpret Iran's posture through an anti-hegemonic lens, viewing its resistance to Western dominance as a legitimate assertion of sovereignty and

strategic autonomy [22], [23]. These divergent perceptions carry practical implications for international alignments, diplomatic engagement, and coalition formation, as states respond to Iran's actions in accordance with their own historical experiences and strategic priorities. For instance, Nigeria and several African states, while not directly involved in the conflict, often adopt more neutral or non-aligned positions, emphasising dialogue, peaceful resolution, and adherence to principles of non-interference and multilateralism reflected in regional policy discourses. This variation underscores the contextual nature of perception formation, as identical strategic actions may be interpreted differently depending on an observer's position within the international system.

The role of strategic narratives in shaping perceptions is particularly significant, as rival actors actively construct and disseminate interpretations that reinforce their positions and legitimise their policies. Iran's narrative of defence and resistance seeks to frame its actions as both necessary and morally justified, grounded in principles of sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and international law [7], [18]. In contrast, the United States and Israel advance counter-narratives portraying Iran as a destabilising actor whose conduct threatens regional peace and security, thereby legitimising policies of containment, deterrence, and, in certain cases, direct intervention [6], [15]. These competing narratives are propagated through diplomatic statements, media reporting, and policy publications, creating a contested informational environment in which objective evaluation becomes increasingly difficult. International institutions and global media further amplify or challenge dominant interpretations depending on how events are framed. Consequently, perception emerges not merely as a reflection of material capabilities but as the product of discursive contestation, where actors strategically shape understanding to advance their geopolitical objectives. This dynamic underscores the importance of narrative power in contemporary international relations, particularly in asymmetric and ideologically charged conflicts.

More critically, the interaction between perception and strategic behaviour significantly influences conflict trajectories, especially regarding escalation, deterrence, and prospects for resolution. When actions intended as defensive signals are misinterpreted as aggressive manoeuvres, they can provoke pre-emptive or retaliatory responses, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and increasing the risk of miscalculation [16]. This challenge is particularly pronounced in contexts of indirect and asymmetric warfare, where attribution is often ambiguous and distinctions between state and non-state actors are blurred. The absence of shared interpretive frameworks complicates the development of effective communication channels and crisis-management mechanisms, thereby heightening the probability of unintended escalation. At the same time, shifts in perception—whether achieved through diplomatic engagement, confidence-building measures, or narrative reframing—have the potential to alter conflict dynamics and facilitate de-escalation. This analysis highlights the necessity of integrating both material and ideational dimensions in the study of international security, as perceptions and narratives shape not only state behaviour but also how that behaviour is interpreted. Ultimately, the trajectory of the U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict is influenced not solely by

military capabilities or strategic calculations, but also by how these elements are perceived, interpreted, and communicated within the international system.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This paper examined the strategic discourse and defensive stance of Iran concerning the U.S.-Israel conflict with a focus on perceptions, rationales, and regional implications. The results show that Iran uses narratives of resistance to support both internal and regional policies, framing its activities as defensive, legitimate, and ideologically based. To discourage adversaries and maintain strategic depth, its military position is a hybrid strategy in terms of which defensive actions are combined with asymmetric and indirect military strategies. Iran is perceived differently by the international community; some regional and Global South actors perceive its activities as a justified resistance, and opponents perceive it to be destabilising. **Implication :** Such contrasting views intensify the tensions and form a security dilemma, and it is necessary to highlight the role of both material capabilities and strategic narratives in the development of regional dynamics. **Limitation :** Ultimately, the actions of Iran and the attitudes which they generate are closely connected and can significantly influence the course of the U.S.-Israel conflict. **Future Research :** This paper examined the strategic discourse and defensive stance of Iran concerning the U.S.-Israel conflict with a focus on perceptions, rationales, and regional implications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were stated based on the major findings of the study: I. Create a Multilateral Strategic Dialogue Platform: Since the perception of the strategic posture of Iran is different, there should be the establishment of a multilateral dialogue platform between Iran, the United States, Israel, and the neutral mediators.

- a. Establish a Multilateral Strategic Dialogue Platform: Given the divergent perceptions of Iran's strategic posture a structured, multilateral dialogue involving Iran, the United States, Israel, and neutral mediators should be created. This platform would be aimed at clarifying the intentions, providing verified information on military capabilities, and the crisis communication mechanisms. This organized conversation is capable of minimizing misunderstanding, establishing trust and avoiding the growth of indirect or asymmetric conflicts.
- b. Formulate Defense and Security Policies to combat Hybrid Threats: In the light of the hybrid military posture of Iran with defensive and offensive capabilities, the actors in the region are required to develop security policies that will counter the asymmetric and indirect threat. This involves increased intelligence-sharing, checking up of proxy networks, cyber defense planning, and adaptable deterrence measures. These measures would enable the states to react in the same manner without causing unintentional escalation.
- c. Foster Strategic Narrative Management and Transparency: Because the strategic narrative of defense and legitimacy is the way Iran is perceived both by its domestic

and foreign audiences, the regional and international actors are advised to practice strategic narrative management. This may involve public diplomacy programs, information campaigns supported by research, and academic exchanges to dispel misconceptions and give proper contextual knowledge of the Iranian policies. Open communication will also assist in the minimization of tensions that are based on propaganda and create a more stable environment in the region.

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