



The
**BRITISH
UNIVERSITY
IN EGYPT**



ISSN: 3009-657X

**THE DEPARTMENT OF
POLITICAL SCIENCE**

PSCM VI

**Global Fractures, Regional Orders: Conflict and
Cooperation in a New Era**

**20
26**

**WE TAKE YOU TO THE REAL
WORLD... NOT JUST TALK TO YOU
ABOUT IT**



www.bue.edu.eg

The British University in Egypt
Faculty of Business Administration, Economics & Political
Science

The Department of Political Science

PSCM-VI Proceedings

The Political Science Students Conference Model — Sixth
Edition

"Global Fractures, Regional Order: Conflict and
Cooperation in a New Era"

April 21, 2026

Conference Chairperson

Prof. Amany Khodair (Vice Dean for Research &
Postgraduate Studies and Head of the Political Science
Department)

Conference Coordinator

Dr. Moatamer Amin (Undergraduate Programme
Director)

Keynote Speaker



Dr. Amr El-Shobaky

Former member of the Egyptian Parliament

Senior Expert, Al-Ahram Center for Political & Strategic Studies



Kindly note that all names are presented in alphabetical order, solely for organizational clarity and without reference to any form of ranking.

PAPERS PRESENTERS

Ahmed Kenawy & Karim Ayman

Alya Islam

Farah Feshair

Jannah Kamel & Hana Mosaad

Mahmoud Mohamed

Mariaam Atef

Mireille Ayman

Nada Ibrahim ElDaly

Samar Mohamed Yahia Abdalla

Shadia Taissir Mahmoud Aly

Sondos Madhi

Ziad El-Sayed Ghazy & Habiba Mohamed Ibrahim

MEMBERS OF THE ORGANISING COMMITTEE

Dr. Nayera Ibrahim
Mr. Amen El Sayed
Mr. George Ekram
Ms. Karma Nossair
Ms. Perihan Abdelgawad
Ms. Rola El Zeini
Ms. Yara Mohamed

MEMBERS OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA TEAM

Mr. George Ekram
Ms. Perihan Abdelgawad
Ms. Yara Mohamed

ACADEMIC COMMITTEE/ REVIEWERS AND PANALISTS

Prof. Amany Khodair
Prof. Yasmin Khodary
Assoc. Prof. Ahmed Fawaz
Assoc. Prof. James H. Sunday
Assoc. Prof. Maha Ghalwash
Assoc. Prof. Rana Mazid
Dr. Alex Prior
Dr. Amira Hossam
Dr. Mereet Hany Adly
Dr. Moatamer Amin
Dr. Nayera Ibrahim
Ms. Ayat Abdelaziz
Ms. Reem Elbarbary

STUDENTS CONTRIBUTING TO THE CONFERENCE

ORGANISATION OUTREACH INTERNS

Falmata Ibrahim
Farah Elorfahly
Jana Amr
Lojain Waleed
Marina Khalil
Nada Hosny
Sohaila Hany
Yassin Elwakil
Yomna Adel

Social Media Interns

Ayatullah Bassem
Farah Nader
Hana El Deghedy
Maryam Saeed
Mayan Mounir
Nourhan Zoheir
Seba Mohamed

**Note from Prof. Wadouda Badran, Pro Vice-Chancellor for the Social Science Cluster,
the British University in Egypt:**

Pro Vice-Chancellor for the Social Science Cluster

The British University in Egypt:

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the Political Science Conference Model (PSCM) at the British University in Egypt. In my capacity as Pro Vice-Chancellor for the Social Sciences Cluster, I am proud to see how the PSCM continues to grow as a distinguished platform that embodies both academic excellence and the dedication of our political science students.

Now in its sixth edition, the PSCM further advances its mission of fostering critical engagement with pressing global issues. It provides students with a valuable opportunity to bridge theory and practice, equipping them with the analytical and professional skills essential for their future careers.

I commend the organizing team for their continued efforts in delivering such a meaningful initiative, and I am delighted to witness the thoughtful discussions and innovative perspectives presented in this year's edition.

Warm regards,

Prof. Wadouda Badran

Pro Vice-Chancellor for the Social Science Cluster

The British University in Egypt

Note from Prof. Hadia Fakhreldin, Dean at the Faculty of Business Administration, Economics and Political Science, The British University in Egypt:

Dean at the Faculty of Business Administration, Economics and Political Science

The British University in Egypt

It gives me great pride and pleasure to celebrate the Political Science Conference Model (PSCM), a distinguished initiative that highlights the outstanding talent, initiative, and academic excellence of our students.

The PSCM is more than simply a conference; it represents a dynamic reflection of the transformative learning experience our faculty strives to provide. Through this platform, students put their knowledge into practice, engage with real-world political issues, and further develop their critical and analytical skills in meaningful ways.

The PSCM has become a valued tradition within both the Department and the Faculty, one that I have had the privilege to witness since its early beginnings and throughout its continued growth and evolution. Observing its progress over the years has been both inspiring and deeply fulfilling.

I sincerely commend our students for their remarkable efforts in organizing the PSCM and applaud all participants for contributing to such a rich and intellectually rewarding experience.

Warm regards,

Prof. Hadia Fakhreldin,

Dean at the Faculty of Business Administration, Economics and Political Science

The British University in Egypt

Note from Prof. Amany Khodair, Conference Chair & Head of the Department of Political Science, The British University in Egypt:

Head of the Department of Political Science

The British University in Egypt

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the sixth international edition of the Political Science Conference Model (PSCM), a truly special initiative that continues to highlight the energy, excellence, and dedication of our students at the British University in Egypt.

With its dynamic agenda, engaging panels, and global spirit of collaboration, PSCM offers a distinctive platform for dialogue that is both intellectually stimulating and forward-looking. I remain continually inspired by the passion, creativity, and leadership our students bring to this experience, from shaping meaningful discussions to presenting original research.

This year's edition was no exception. It was a pleasure to witness the richness of ideas, the diversity of perspectives, and the strong sense of community that characterized every moment of the conference. From insightful keynote addresses to outstanding student contributions, PSCM VI (2026) reflected the values we hold at the core of our work: critical thinking, openness, and mutual respect.

To every student who contributed, whether through organizing, presenting, or participating, thank you. Your efforts reflect the very best of our department and our shared aspirations for the future.

Here's to many more editions of PSCM, growing stronger, expanding further, and continuing to elevate the voices of the next generation of political thinkers.

Warmest Regards,

Prof. Amany Khodair

Chair of the Political Science Conference Model

Head of the Department of Political Science

The British University in Egypt

List of Best Paper Awards – PSCM VI

The top 3 Best Paper Awards for PSCM VI, based on the quality of the papers presented, are as follows:

- **First Place:** Mahmoud Mohamed (H Level)
- **Second Place:** Mireille Ayman
- **Third Place:** Shadia Taissir

Index

Between Gaza and Khartoum: An applied case study of why do Egyptian youth know about one conflict over the other 12

Ahmed Kenawy & Karim Ayman

The Domestic Vehicle of Iran's Foreign Policy: Nuclear Strategy and Internal Power Dynamics (2017-2023) 27

Alya Islam

Domestic Lobbying and Foreign Policy: Italy's Memorandum of Understanding with China's Belt and Road Initiative 37

Farah Feshair

Development and Marine Conservation at a Crossroads: The Consequences of Neoliberalism on the Egyptian Red Sea 49

Jannah Kamel & Hana Mosaad

Post-October 7th, 2023, Egyptian-Iranian Rapprochement: Examining Balance of Perceived Israeli Threats 62

Mahmoud Mohamed

Strategic Hedging through the Abraham Accords: The UAE's Dual Mechanism Approach to Iranian Threats and Gulf Security Realignment from 2019 to 2023 76

Mariaam Atef

The Politics of Victimhood and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Centricity of Victimhood in the October 7th Attack and its Aftermath 88

Mireille Ayman

Post-truth Politics and the Manufacturing of Legitimacy: The case of the Gaza Genocide 111

Nada Ibrahim ElDaly



Iraq Through an American Lens: The Effects of Mass Media Portrayal on the Breaching of Iraq's Sovereignty 130

Samar Mohamed Yahia Abdalla

Between Principal and Practice: Gender Egalitarianism and the Politics of Legitimacy within the Polisario Front 141

Shadia Taissir Mahmoud Aly

From Screen to Embassy: Comparing Netflix's The Diplomat (2023) and Real-World Diplomacy 158

Sondos Madhi

Egyptian Anti-Displacement Framing and Discursive Adaptation in U.S. Executive Rhetoric during the Gaza War 172

Ziad El-Sayed Ghazy & Habiba Mohamed Ibrahim

Between Gaza and Khartoum: An applied case study of why do Egyptian youth know about one conflict over the other

Ahmed Kenawy
Karim Ayman

Introduction

Traditional media served as the fundamental source of political awareness for a vast period of history. During globalization, an added information platform emerged as a media source. Through social media access, people started discovering novel ways both to learn about information and to distribute news. Network users seeking awareness face multiple barriers to discover valid information because of unreliable material as well as agenda biases and information prejudice. Social media platforms influence political user awareness about specific topics negatively.

This paper evaluates how social media shapes political awareness alongside educational understanding of political science students situated in Egypt. The research investigates how much Egyptians knew about both events, including the Sudanese civil war and the 7th of October attacks. This research seeks to explore why Egyptian students know more about the 7thth of October over the Sudanese civil war. In this regard, using the agenda-setting theory, the paper argues that Egyptians know more about Gaza than what is happening in Sudan due to the Media agenda covering one issue over the other. This is due to the way the media covers Gaza more in both most frequently used languages (Arabic and English), the context and nature of the conflict itself; and the algorithm bias that pushes what can collect more reactions.

Theoretical Framework

The agenda setting theory plays a crucial role in mass communication and in political science fields. The theory discusses how public awareness is being shaped due to the media focusing

on one certain topic and leaving the other (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007, p. 44). McCombs and Valenzuela (2007) derived the main concepts of agenda-setting theory from Lippmann's (1922) idea of media-verifiable reality. Agenda-setting research reveals dual levels of media influence. The transfer of critical issues by media outlets to the public mind constitutes first-level agenda-setting (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007, p. 44). Exposure of a child pornography network on Chilean investigative program "Contacto" brought this issue to prominence across public forums as well as legislative departments and law enforcement agencies (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007, p. 45). Media institutions utilize second-level agenda-setting techniques to render issues significant by both deciding on the topics they will cover and influencing their portrayal with emphasized attributes (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007, p. 47). Within the framework of social media, a study of 29 political issues between traditional and social media platforms shows that the relationship runs in multiple directions instead of following the traditional top-down pattern. Social media leads traditional media in agenda-setting for LGBT rights and gun control and other social issues according to Granger causality tests outlined in Neuman et al.'s (2014, p. 204) study. The discourse of traditional media proves superior when it comes to affecting economic policy and foreign relations according to Neuman et al. (2014, p. 200).

Almakaty (2025) argued that the agenda setting theory has gone through three main layers, where each building on the layer before understanding the evolution of social media. First, it goes to object salience, or the basic issue level, that is focusing on how nonstop coverage of something like inflation or a war makes it feel like the top priority. Reporters decide what is important, through headlines, airtime, or front-page real estate, and that influences us, especially if we are unsure about an issue ourselves, which is called "need for orientation." Surveys often show the public's most important problems list matching the media's focus.

Next, the second level dives into attributes, which views how issues get framed. For example, coverage might zoom in on immigration's economic downsides over its human side, coloring how we evaluate it. This is not just picking topics; it is slowly guiding people's lens, blending into framing theory, where certain factors stick in people's mindset and sway opinion.

Then came the third level, which is called Network Agenda Setting (NAS), which is created specifically for the current social media environment. Where the media tends to organize concerns rather than treat them as separate problems, for example, linking climate change to politics and hidden superleaders to dominate the political and economic field. Thus, this theory has developed over decades to go with the changes that happen in the world.

Methodology

The analysis uses quantitative survey data and qualitative personal interviews to obtain an accurate conclusion about this subject. These two case studies were selected because of their parallel characteristics. Sudan along with Palestine share similarities as Middle Eastern states ruled by Muslim majorities, thus, the surveys and interviews are needed to understand why Egyptians demonstrate awareness of only a specific set of topics. This paper employs the agenda setting theory since it shows how media organizations choose news items for their self-serving purposes. The format of this social topic makes it well suited for analysis.

The quantitative surveys will be used to measure the amount of awareness one the individual have regarding their social media usage, their general political knowledge, and their knowledge regarding the two issues, the Gaza-Israeli conflict, and the Sudanese civil war. The survey was conducted using 25 samples of political science students from Egypt.

For the qualitative part, the paper approached the chosen sample with semi-structured questions. The reason this approach was specifically chosen is to understand the root causes of why

students might know about one topic over the other. The qualitative interviews were conducted on 6 students who follow news on social media on regular matters to understand on a deeper level how social media relates to political knowledge and how does it function within.

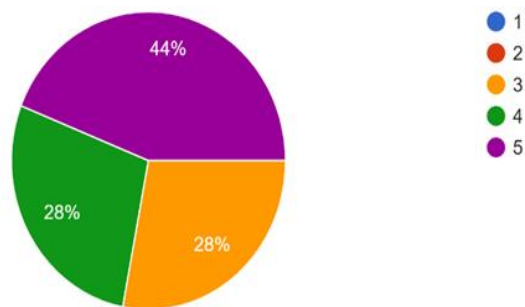
However, there are significant limitations in this study. First, it is using a sample of 27 students of political science in a single university and one school in Egypt. Thus, research is not applicable to the entire Egyptian population or even to all the Egyptian students. Second, the self-reported measure of awareness was not objective testing but a self-reported measure, which is not necessarily an accurate measure of depth of knowledge. Third, this work does not analyze the Egyptian state media or state interests, which also affects what the Egyptians watch and learn. These limitations ought to be overcome in future studies by using larger and diverse samples and examining traditional media and political influences.

Language and Content availability

Based on the data collected, one of the main reasons people know about one topic over another is the language used. The survey's findings show that, compared with the Sudanese war, participants' understanding of the Gaza war was notably greater, suggesting that language influences patterns of media coverage and visibility.

Figure:2

From one to five, how much do you think you know about the war in Gaza?
 25 responses



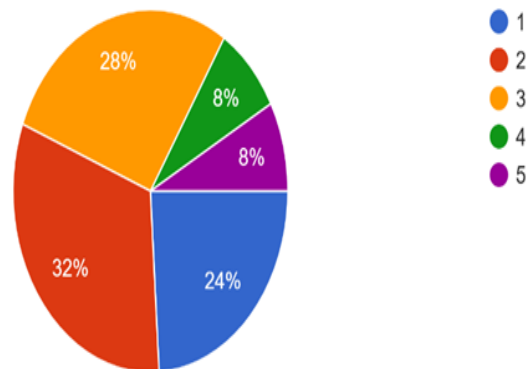
(Source: Author)

As it appears in figure two, around 44% of the participants ranked their knowledge of the conflict at the highest level, which shows that over two-thirds of participants consider themselves to be well-informed about the conflicts in Gaza. This pattern not only shows increased exposure, but it also suggests widespread popular content, which is often produced in the languages that are most often spoken globally.

Figure: 3

From one to five, how much do you think you know about the war in Sudan?

25 responses



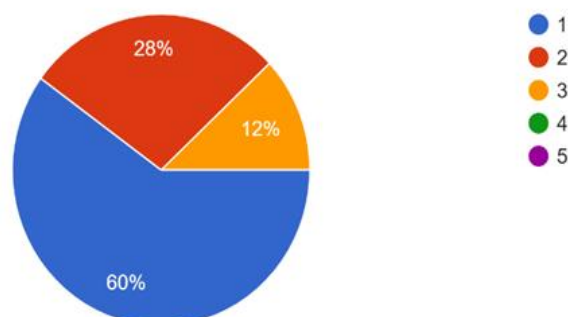
(Source: Author)

On the other hand, as shown in Figure 3, there seems to be much less awareness about civil conflict in Sudan. Thus, this gap shows how media systems favor some conflicts over others, as well as differences in the amount and reach of available content.

Figure: 4

How many posts do you see about the war in Sudan weekly?

25 responses



(Source: Author)

In figure 4, it shows that around 60% of respondents claimed that they were exposed to a few posts or news related to the Sudan war. This limited exposure shows that the Sudanese conflict is far less visible in social media discourse, which eventually minimizes its importance in the awareness of the people. In other words, the Sudanese conflict holds less attention in students or new generation's awareness of the current regional conflicts.

When being asked about these results from the students who were interviewed under the question "which language do you consume more and how does it affect your awareness," the students' answers were not so different from each other. The 6 students consumed news in English with only one balancing it with Arabic. Yet, they all believed that looking for news using different languages would lead to different results. This is because the news is being sold to a certain audience who can read this language. Therefore, they get different narratives based on the language that they use.

This can explain why the students only see minimal posts about Sudan on weekly basis compared to Gaza. This is due to Gaza being covered by western and Arabic media due to the number of players it involves. This means that media on both sides push for its own agenda where they focus on what the people want instead of; they need to see over the globe.

Cultural context

Interviews showed that Egyptian students are concerned more about the Palestinian issue, not merely at the material or political level. Rather, the Palestinian cause has been entrenched in the Egyptian youths through a keen sense of culture. One student has made it clear: In Egypt we are taught of Palestine since our childhood--it is in our textbooks. Others said that Palestine

was part of the culture and religious consciousness¹ of Egypt, which was developed by means of education, media, and political discourses.

Another point that was brought up in the interviews was that the nature of any conflict is important. Students saw Gaza as a global problem that involved the global powers such as U.S. and Israel. In contrast, they viewed Sudan's war as an "internal" African affair². Such perceptions indicate how cultural frameworks that exist in the first place dictate the conflicts perceived to be significant.

Decades of Egyptian art and media have strengthened this cultural awareness. Egypt has considered Palestine since Nakba in 1948 not only as a regional issue, but also as a moral and cultural problem, related to the Arab identity, justice, and resistance (Al-Haggar, 2025). Famous Egyptian writers such as Naguib Mahfouz and Sonallah Ibrahim wrote about the issues of justice, oppression, and solidarity. Poets like Ahmed Fouad Negm transformed the Palestinian cause into a strong poem which represented mass resistance. Filmmakers such as Youssef Chahine, such as *The Sparrow* (Al-Asfour), associated the suffering of Palestinians with the general Arab experience. These artistic practices serve as cultural avenues in the agenda-setting process to continue to bring Palestine to the forefront of the mind, making it a high-priority issue (Mohamed, 2025).

Visual arts have been contributing as well. Such artists as Inji Aflatoun and Helmy El-Touny employed the images of fighters of resistance, mourning mothers, olive trees, and keys as an emblem of the Right of Return. These have been incorporated in the Egyptian visual language of solidarity with Palestine (Mohamed, 2025). In addition to arts, the Egyptian organizations

¹ One of the students argued this is mainly caused by the existence of Jerusalem, a holy and sacred place for both Muslims and Christians which creates the Majority of the Egyptian population.

² The U.S. and Israel are involved in Gaza, and thus it seems more significant. The war in Sudan is more like a local war.

have assisted the Palestinian culture by publishing, educating, and conducting public events. Palestinian authors are featured on the Cairo International Book Fair and Palestinian history is taught in schools and on national media (Yehia, 2025).

Thus, the Palestinian cause is deeply embedded in Egypt's collective consciousness, a story of honor, struggle, and historical ties passed across generations. Palestine continues to be an issue of dominance in film and popular culture³, even in geographically proximate conflicts, such as in Sudan. In comparison, in Egypt, Sudan has never received such a cultural support and is perceived as a neighboring state, at best. Such framing implies that the Sudanese civil war does not have the same perception as the Hamas-Israeli conflict.

These observations are well supported by quantitative data. In a survey, students indicated that 81 percent of them were more familiar with Gaza than with Sudan, although both are neighbors in the region (see Figure 5). In estimating the number of posts per week on conflict-related issues, 81% of students viewed five or more posts on Gaza, and 50% viewed one post on Sudan. Interestingly, even politically active students who regularly visited political pages did not see much content related to Sudan. This implies that not only algorithms are culturally biased, but it even influences the creation of media content⁴.

³ Many famous Egyptian movies such as Encrypted letter, Upper Egyptian in the American university, and Andaleeb Al dokki have presented the Palestinian issue in their movies as part of the plot (Amin, 2023). This made the Palestinian issue to be shifted from "Egyptian national security issue" to be part of the Egyptian identity itself.

⁴ In response to estimates of their weekly exposure to conflict-related posts, students estimated that they saw more frequently in Gaza's case (5+ posts for 81% of respondents), rather than Sudan's case (only 1 post for 50%).

Figure: 5

From one to five, how much do you think you know about the war in Gaza?	From one to five, how much do you think you know about the war in Sudan?	COUNT of From one to five, how much do you think you know about the war in Sudan?	COUNT of From one to five, how much do you think you know about the war in Gaza?
3	1	1	1
	2	1	1
3 Total		2	2
4	1	1	1
	2	1	1
	3	2	2
	5	1	1
4 Total		5	5
5	2	3	3
	3	3	3
	4	2	2
	5	1	1
5 Total		9	9
Grand Total		16	16

(Source: Author)

It is worth noting that the data revealed that even those students that actively followed political pages, did not encounter much Sudan-related content meaning that cultural biases go beyond the algorithms to influence the very production of media as well.

This comes into play even though more than 50% of the students follow comparative political posts on social media. Yet, the media outlets have its own agenda that involves Palestine and Gaza being covered as shown in the graph below.

The cultural issue can be mainly tracked back to the creation of the Egyptian republic itself. This is because the main ideological basis that Nasser had built Egypt upon back then was Pan-Arabism, an ideology that its core was the Palestinian issue. The state media was heavily influenced of what Nasser believes in as it was in the Egyptian national interest (Bauer, 2022). One can argue that this is why the state media until today still pushes for more coverage for Palestine over Sudan as the state media still supports the government narrative. Thus, Palestine gets more coverage as it is not just the national threat issue but the ideological core for state media that supports it.

Algorithm Biases

The question still presents, even if the cultural aspect exists, why the social media does not show the other news? The algorithmic bias is a direct indication of the third level of agenda-



setting theory Network Agenda Setting, in which the media structure issues instead of discussing them as distinct problems (Almakaty, 2025), making Gaza a part of bigger regional politics but Sudan an isolated case. According to Einarsson et al (2023), social media algorithms can change the “for you page” based upon the clickable stories and videos. This means that over time, the people get exposed to different views based upon what the majority is interested in. Therefore, if there is a topic that people are less interested in, it will vanish over time due to the algorithm (Einarsson et al, 2023). The survey results provide direct empirical support for this pattern, with most participants reporting daily with Gaza content while little exposure to Sudan, on the other hand. This means that this algorithmic filtering has a key role in shaping unequal visibility between two conflicts.

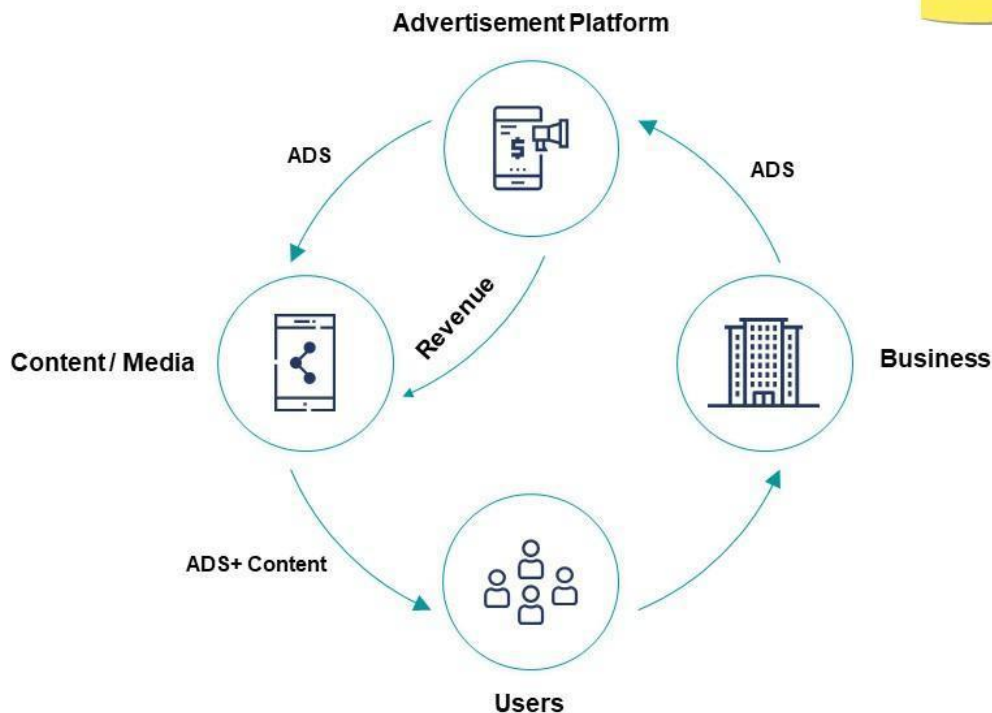
Technological platforms and the attention economy

The social media platforms have a straightforward rule, which is to engage in generating income (European Digital Media Observatory, 2023). The algorithms maximize user engagement since this has the effect of developing advertising revenue based upon advertising revenue model

Figure: 6

Advertising Revenue Model

In this model, user generate revenue through advertisement. Edit this as per your business requirement



(Source: SlideTeam, n.d)

This is the reason social media had been mentioned in the interview responses of students wherein one of them observed that algorithms on social media promote Palestinian content since it receives more reactions... The same thing cannot be said of Sudan. Another student noted that they read the same in Gaza, but in Sudan the postings are covered down unless I searched for it. It is a manifestation of first-level agenda-setting, when the issue of salience is transferred, and platforms choose what will be seen by users due to the profit motive (McCombs and Valenzuela, 2007). Gaza content attracts an elevated level of emotional involvement, the complex war in Sudan is not the type of content that can be repaid with the shocking formula algorithm.

Palestinian Media Infrastructure vs. Destruction of Sudan.

Finally, The Al-Aqsa TV of Hamas has foreign donors to the tune of around 5 million every year (State Media Monitor, n.d.), and that covers their regular narrative coverage. On the other hand, a majority (more than 90 percent) of Sudanese media infrastructure is destroyed, and 80 percent of the nation is offline (Ahram Online, 2025). According to one student, “Sudan is too African to be of interest to the Arab world and too Arab to be touched by Africa.” The silence is beneficial to those in power-no one makes money out of the coverage of Sudan, therefore there is no coverage, and this is in line with the principle of agenda-setting that media select certain news items because it served their self-interest (McCombs and Valenzuela, 2007).

Conclusion:

To sum it up, the Egyptian borders faced in less than a year two conflicts emerging on its borders from the south and the East. Yet, the political science students inside of Egypt know too much about what is happening within the Eastern borders than what is happening beyond the southern borders. This goes back to three main reasons. The first is the language that is used to search for the news as different languages will show different narratives and different issues. The second cause is the cultural context as Egyptians feels that they are related toward Palestine more than Sudan. The final cause is the biases of the algorithm where students felt that some posts were pushed upon them. This cause kept playing a hidden role in the previous two causes as well.

However, these findings are not suggested to be taken for guaranteed as the sample is limited and needed to expand further research.

Appendix:

Qualitative Survey:

1. [Document 11.docx](#)
2. [Document 14.docx](#)
3. [Document 13.docx](#)
4. [Document 12.docx](#)
5. [Document 18.docx](#)

References:

8. Al Hagggar, K. (2025, February 5). Opinion | Egyptian Art and Literature: The Unyielding Voice of Palestine. [Opinion | Egyptian Art and Literature: The Unyielding Voice of Palestine - Dailynewsegypt](#)
9. Almakaty, S. S. (2025). Agenda setting theory in the digital media age: a comprehensive and critical literature review. <https://doi.org/10.55670/fpll.futech.4.2.6>
10. McCombs, M., & Valenzuela, S. (2007). The agenda-setting theory. Cuadernos de Información, 20, 44-50. [The Agenda-Setting Theory](#)
11. Mohamed, A.A. (2025, March 6). Palestine in Paintings: Through the Eyes of Egyptian Artists. [Palestine in Paintings: Through the Eyes of Egyptian Artists](#)
12. Mohd Zain, N. R. (2014). Agenda setting theory. ResearchGate, 1-12. [\(PDF\) Agenda Setting Theory](#)
13. Neuman, W. R., Guggenheim, L., Jang, S. M., & Bae, S. Y. (2014). The dynamics of public attention: Agenda-setting theory meets big data. Journal of Communication, 64(2), 193-214. Journal of Communication - 2014 - Russell Neuman - The Dynamics of Public Attention Agenda-Setting Theory Meets Big Data.pdfda
14. Yehia, A. (2026, January 21). Palestinian pavilion draws crowds at Cairo International Book Fair. Palestinian pavilion draws crowds at Cairo International Book Fair - City Lights - Books - Ahram Online. [Palestinian pavilion draws crowds at Cairo International Book Fair - City Lights - Books - Ahram Online](#)
15. Ahram Online. (2025, January 28). Sudan's forgotten war. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/4/560942/Opinion/Sudans-forgotten-war-A-failure-of-media-and-consci.aspx>
16. European Digital Media Observatory. (2023, March 7). What is the disinformation economy? <https://edmo.eu/2023/03/07/what-is-the-disinformation-economy>
17. State Media Monitor. (n.d.). Al-Aqsa TV profile. <https://statemediamonitor.com/2024/10/al-aqsa-tv>



18. Amin, H. (2023, October). The Palestinian cause is at the heart of Egyptian cinema: burning a flag and refusing to shake hands - Alqadiat alfilastinia fi qalb alsiynima almisriati.. harq ealam warafd musafaha. <https://shorturl.at/KN82k>
19. Bauer, A. (2022). Egypt and the Palestinian Cause: An analysis of contemporary foreign and domestic political dimensions. *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.*

The Domestic Vehicle of Iran's Foreign Policy: Nuclear Strategy and Internal Power Dynamics (2017-2023)

Alya Islam

Introduction

Iran's nuclear policy oscillates between escalation and diplomacy as continuum, moving on a spectrum of interactions in ways that external pressure cannot explain. This paper examines the period of 2017-2023, beginning with the withdrawal of the U.S from the JCPOA in May 2018, a moment that is considered as a pillar in this study. This timeframe is chosen purposely because it holds the maximum pressure sanctions as the external variable constant against two other administrations, focusing on internal groups (factions) as the main reason behind Iran's different strategic decisions. It raises the question, why did Iran remain in the JCPOA for over a year after the U.S withdrawal and why did it then pivot to an aggressive escalation under Raisi's administration facing the same external conditions?

This paper aims to answer this research question: **how do electoral victories of Iran's political factions (Hardliners and Pragmatists) and the institutional interests of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) determine the tactical shifts between diplomacy and escalation in the nuclear policy?**

Additionally, this paper argues that Iran's nuclear policy changes aren't merely rational response to external threats but primarily driven by the internal dynamics; specifically, the competition between the political factions for control of state institutions and the structural economic interests of the IRGC in a sanctions-bound 'resistance economy'. Utilizing the state-level analysis, this circular cycle of escalation and diplomacy is driven by two domestic factors; The factional competition with the ascendance of the Hardliners and the Pragmatists in the institutions of parliament and presidency creates observable and radical shifts in the nuclear

paradigm and diplomatic interaction. The second is the IRGC's institutional interests, often described as the 'state within a state' due to its vast reach in political and economic aspects of the country. It has structural incentives to create a 'resistance economy', often pushing the policies taken towards escalation regardless of the international interests.

The methodology used is qualitative case studying that utilizes process-tracing to compare between two distinct eras: the post-withdrawal era under President Rouhani (2018–2021), analyzing the reasons Iran continued to comply with the JCPOA despite U.S. defection. *The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA); an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 countries aimed at limiting Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. And President Raisi (2021-2023), known for being a hardliner.

The structure of this paper consists of several sections; a literature review, followed by a theoretical framework for the Bureaucratic Politics Model, two comparative bodies of the two Presidents; Raisi and Rouhani.

I. Literature Review: Overlooked Domestic Vehicle

A recurring analytical issue is evident in the scholarly discourse on Iran's nuclear program between 2017 and 2023: an over-reliance on external factors to explain strategic shifts, which results in an ignorance of the fundamental role played by internal politics. Three main theories emerge from an examination of literature, but none of them can adequately account for the fluctuation between the JCPOA's diplomacy and the "Maximum Pressure" era's escalation.

The most popular narrative, in particular Foreign Policy, is the systemic level of analysis of coercive diplomacy. This view put the entire 2017-2023 era as a mere reaction to Western, primarily U.S. policies. Scholars like Tabatabai (2020) argue that maximum pressure sanctions were the sole driver of Iran's behavior, framing Tehran's decisions as a direct response to Washington's coercive tools. Additionally, the Trump administration's withdrawal and re-

imposition of even harder sanctions from 2018 are showcased as the sole cause for Iran's nuclear escalation (Fitzpatrick, 2021). It is unable to explain important details, such as why Iran remained in the JCPOA for over fourteen months after the U.S withdrawal in 2018, enduring renewed sanctions without immediate reaction. If external pressure solely determined behavior, then compliance after defection isn't logical. The same external 'tool', crippling sanctions, produced diplomatic restraint under Rouhani but escalation under Raisi. The failure of this model to explain these inconsistent findings indicates that unit-level variables have a significant impact (Tabatabai, 2020).

Another strand of literature explored into ideational factors by emphasizing how Iran assumes the continuity of revolution. The constructivism debate sees "resistance" as an established culture that governs the state. Whilst it helps offer an explanation for the ideological language of the Iranian leadership used throughout the entire decade, it offers a fixed and monolithic image. The paper fails to cope with the considerable tactical flexibility of the state, from Zarif's sophisticated diplomacy to the IRGC's crude razors edge (Sadjadpour, 2023). An exclusively ideational account cannot explain why the principles of "neither East nor West" were practically avoided in conduct of the JCPOA negotiations and smartly raise in the two years following 2021 (Sadjadpour, 2023). This suggests that ideational resources are mobilized by contending factions and are not determinative of policy.

A third, more nuanced, group of scholars focuses on Iran's domestic politics (Rakel, 2023; Sadjadpour, 2023). Their work on factionalism provides the essential groundwork for this paper, confirming that internal rivalries exist. However, when applied to the 2017-2023 period, this literature often treats domestic dynamics as a secondary complication. The IRGC, in particular, is frequently analyzed only as a hardline political bloc, and its actions are seen as ideologically motivated. What remains underdeveloped is a systematic framework that explicitly showcases the links between factional electoral outcomes and the IRGC's 'parochial'

economic interests as the direct cause in shifts for nuclear tactility (Golkar, 2023). The Corps' vast commercial empire, which is structurally incentivized by a "resistance economy," has a vested material interest in ensuring the failure of diplomatic engagement and the perpetuation of a sanctions-bound environment, a causal logic that remains underdeveloped in existing accounts of this era.

This paper addresses Iran's post-2018 nuclear behavior from the lens of internal dynamics (Tabatabai, 2020; Fitzpatrick, 2021). Rather than treating this as a gap, the view is analytical. By focusing on the period after the U.S withdrawal, when external pressure was constant, the weight of factional competition and the IRGC's institutional interests become more apparent (Brummer, 2021). The era cannot simply be seen as engagement then pressure, it is instead a case of internal power struggles parroting the national plan (Sadjadpour, 2023).

II. Theoretical Framework

This paper posits the Bureaucratic Politics Model as its primary analytical framework. Originally developed by Allison and Halperin and actively applied in modern foreign policy scholarship (Brummer, 2021; Hudson, 2023). The model rejects the idea of the state as a unitary and centralized rational actor. Instead, it argues that foreign policy outcomes are the product of bargaining, competition and compromise between institutional actors. Each institution has its own distinct interests and resources (Allison & Halperin, 1972; Hudson, 2023). The question revolves doesn't revolve around 'what does Iran want?' but rather, 'which institutional player currently holds the control of levers of power and what do they need?'.

For this analysis, there are two critical bureaucratic actors that are the pillars of shaping Iran's foreign policy decisions. The first is the factional political competition. With Iran's unique political architecture, it creates a power struggle between different institutional coalitions, mainly the Pragmatists and the Hardliners (Rakel, 2023). The Bureaucratic Politics Model

frames these factions not simply into a watered-down ideological camp but as competing organizational players whose policy preferences are shaped by the institutions they occupy (Hudson, 2023; Brummer, 2021).

The pragmatists are often leaning towards the elected presidency, economic integration and sanctions relief as their drive towards diplomacy being interpreted as the rational approach towards security (Rakel, 2023). Whilst on the other hand, Hardliners are deeply integrated into non-elected institutions, emphasizing the revolutionary ideology and rejecting any types of Western influence, viewing diplomacy as more perilous than isolation (Semati, Cassidy & Khanjani, 2021). And as a result, an electoral victory for either party not only changes the policy outcomes but also redefines how the institutional balance of power inside the state operates, in which in turn adjudicates how the state perceives and reacts to systemic forces such as international sanctions (Fitzpatrick, 2021).

The second variable is the organizational interests of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Bureaucratic Politics Model is particularly suitable because it reframes the IRGC not as a mere ideological block, but rather as a bureaucratic institution with massive material interests in policy outcomes (Golkar, 2023). The IRGC is defined as a ‘state within a state’ with vast economic reach and political influence that are linked to security and defined by the tension and external pressure (Wehrey, 2022).

The ‘resistance economy’ model, which strives under sanctions, supports the riches of the institutions and power and creates a strong structural motive to take escalation and aggression as the rightful method over diplomatic resolution (Golkar, 2023; Ostovar, 2022).

The Bureaucratic Politics Model also tackles that the IRGC’s escalatory measures persists even when the presidency is held by Pragmatists: the IRGC operates as an autonomous bureaucratic actor with independent resources, economic networks and command structures (Hudson, 2023;

Brummer, 2021). Its interest do not simply disappear when a moderate wins an election. What changes is the degree to which a Pragmatist president can harbor enough political power to outmaneuver the IRGC (Sadjadpour, 2023; Golkar, 2023).

III. Background: The Pragmatist Institutional Balance and Its Limits (2018-2021)

When the Trump Administration withdrew from the JCPOA and reinstated sanctions in May 2018, the Pragmatist state under Rouhani chose to comply, maintaining the deal's limits even when the principal actor had walked away (Fitzpatrick, 2021; Tabatabai, 2020). It was the product of a specific and fragile institutional balance, the Pragmatist faction held adequate control over the presidency and foreign ministry to evade the IRGC and the Hardliner pressure for immediate escalation (Golkar, 2023). Rouhani and Zarif framed the compliance as a strategic asset, to preserve Iran's relationship with European signatories and maintain the narrative that Tehran was the main actor, not Washington (Sadjadpour, 2023).

The IRGC retaliated aggressively. Every month Iran remained in the JCPOA without any tangible economic relief, which weakened the whole notion of a 'resistance economy' and destroyed Hardliner institutional dominance (Golkar, 2023; Wehrey, 2022). When the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchange (INSTEX), the European mechanism that enabled limited trade with Iran while bypassing U.S sanctions, failed to adhere to the goals of producing sanction reliefs by mid-2019, Rouhani's internal political power began to devolve rapidly. (Fitzpatrick, 2021) Iran started systematically breaching the JCPOA rules, but even these violations were calculated and reversible. The Pragmatists held the line for as long as they could. But by 2021, the institutional conditions that made restraint possible were disappearing, not by external pressure but by a domestic political redefinition that would give control of the Iranian state to the Hardliner-IRGC spectrum (Sadjadpour, 2023).

IV. The Shadows of Tehran; Consolidation and Systematic Escalation (2021-2023)

The 2021 presidential election serves as the ground zero of the analysis. Most explanations see Raisi's election as just another example within the external pressure narrative, serving the story of; escalation was inevitable as a reaction to the maximum pressure campaign under Trump's administration (Nephew, 2021). The 2021 election was a bureaucratic model. For the first time, the presidency, parliament, judiciary and IRGC were all under the same umbrella of factions, eliminating the internal institutional tension that occurred under the previous escalation (Sadjadpour, 2023). Through the lens of the Bureaucratic Politics Model, the competing institutional actors that previously pulled policies in opposite directions are suddenly unified, the results are unconstrained expression of the dominant faction's organizational interests (Allison & Halperin, 1972; Brummer, 2021).

Raisi's election was not of a representative popular will, the Guardian Council has systematically removed all significant moderate and pragmatic candidates before the vote, producing low voter results (Sadjadpour, 2023). Through this institutional architecture, the Pragmatist faction that had limited the IRGC escalatory pressure under Rouhani's presidency was structurally removed from the competition (Wehrey, 2022). From the Bureaucratic Politics Model perspective, the 'essential' players that had previously blocked the escalation no longer existed in the state apparatus (Brummer, 2021; Hudson, 2023).

The dramatic shift in Iran's nuclear foreign policy after 2021 is watered down as a simple reaction to Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign (Nephew, 2021). While the U.S withdrawal serves as a powerful external condition, the road to escalation wasn't a mere automatic response: it was a policy of the new Hardliner-IRGC formation that did not face any internal institution resistance (Golkar, 2023). The state was fundamentally reshaped to pursue the nuclear program that served the institutional and ideological purposes, with the executive branch merging with the Hardline parliament, judiciary and the IRGC'S power left unchecked (Sadjadpour, 2023; Wehrey, 2022).

After being freed from the constraints imposed by a pragmatic presidency, the Raisi administration and the IRGC initiated a planned and deliberate process of nuclear escalation. Instead of being a careless response to sanctions, this was a deliberate activity to boost leverage, demonstrate resilience, and support the "resistance economy" idea (Golkar, 2023). Almost immediately, Iran began cautiously going outside the JCPOA's bounds. It gradually raised its stockpile of 20% and then 60% enriched uranium, which is just a short technological step from weapons-grade, and set up advanced centrifuge plants at its nuclear facilities (Arms Control Association, 2022; IAEA, 2022).

The IRGC's institutional interests served as the cornerstone of this strategic shift. The "resistance economy" is the Corps' commercial strategy, not just a policy (Golkar, 2023). The IRGC's influence over the enormous wealth of the Iranian economy, from smuggling networks to black market currencies and import-substitution sectors, was supported by the country's isolation and international conflict (Golkar, 2023; Ostovar, 2022). This financial ecosystem would have been directly threatened by a return to the JCPOA and the promised economic normalization, which would have diminished the Corps' economic and political hegemony and exposed IRGC-owned companies to outside competition (Rakel, 2023; Wehrey, 2022).

V. Discussion: Cross-Case Analysis

What makes the Raisi era the analytical pillar of this paper is precisely the stark contrast it provides with Rouhani's era. Under Rouhani, the same external pressure with maximum sanction produced restraint because the bureaucratic actors inside the state pulled the policy away from escalation (Fitzpatrick, 2021). Whilst under Raisi, the same external pressure produced systematic escalation because those 'challenging' actors had been eliminated (Sadjadpour, 2023). The external variable remained unchanged. It was the domestic institutional variable. The fundamental explanatory contribution of the Bureaucratic Politics

Model is that institutional actors' power over the state and their organizational needs affect foreign policy results rather than what the international system demands.

VI. Conclusion

Changes in Iran's nuclear policy from 2017 to 2023 cannot just be explained by swings in external pressure. As shown across two comparative case studies, factional competition and the IRGC's organizational economic interests internal institutional factors in Iran are the main causal factors of tactical nuclear shifts.

The strongest evidence supporting this claim is provided by a comparison of the two cases. During Rouhani's presidency, the sanctions imposed by maximum pressure had a restraining effect. This was not due to weakened external pressure but stemmed from conflicting bureaucratic actors within the state who diverted policymaking from escalating actions. With Raisi, the same outside pressure produced systematic escalation, not because the external environment changed, but rather because the internal actors that previously constrained escalation were structurally eliminated. The outside variable stayed the same. The variable pertaining to domestic institution did not.

The Bureaucratic Politics Model uncovers something that solely structural accounts do not: the IRGC's resistance to normalization is not the result of ideology but rather organization, driven by its material stakes in a sanctions-ridden "resistance economy". Unless this institutional reality is destabilized, external pressures alone will never render manageable diplomatic results. For the IRGC, conflict is not an issue that needs to be resolved. It is an essential requirement for exploitation.

VII. References

Allison, G., & Halperin, M. H. (1972). Bureaucratic politics: A paradigm and some policy implications. *World Politics*, 24, 40–79.

Arms Control Association. (2021, January 8). Iran enriches uranium to higher levels. *Arms Control Today*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-01/news/iran-enriches-uranium-higher-levels>

Brummer, K. (2021). Foreign policy analysis and the bureaucratic politics paradigm. *European Political Science*, 20, 468–479.

Fitzpatrick, M. (2021). Iran: A good deal gone bad. *Survival*, 63(2), 73–88.

Golkar, S. (2023). *Iran's Revolutionary Guard: The threat that grows while America sleeps*. Potomac Books.

Hudson, V. M. (2023). *Foreign policy analysis: Classic and contemporary theory* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.

International Atomic Energy Agency. (2022, November 17) <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov2022-70.pdf>

Nephew, R. (2021). *The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field*. Columbia University Press.

Tabatabai, A. (2020). *No conquest, no defeat: Iran's national security strategy*. Oxford University Press.

Ostovar, A. (2022). The grand strategy of militant clients: Iran's way of war. *Security Studies*, 31(1), 1–29.

Rakel, E. P. (2023). *Power, Islam, and political elite in Iran* (updated ed.). Brill.

Sabet, R., & Golkar, S. (2022). The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps: From a Military Institution to a Hegemonic Power. *The Middle East Journal*, 76(1), 31-52.

Wehrey, F. (2022). Iran's revolutionary guards after Soleimani. *Foreign Affairs*, 101(2).

Domestic Lobbying and Foreign Policy: Italy's Memorandum of Understanding with China's Belt and Road Initiative

Farah Feshair

Introduction

Italy's signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with China regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2019 was an extraordinary decision. Not only because it is the only G7 state that has participated in the initiative, but also because the decision was based on the need to satisfy Italy's domestic economic pressures. Given that Italy was facing economic stagnation at that time, and needed to minimize the negative external consequences. Especially with the United States -China's first economic competitor- and the European Union (EU).

Thus, the research problem revolves around Italy being the only G7 country to sign the MoU with China's Belt and Road Initiative despite potential political and strategic risks. This leads to the following research question: how did the domestic business and industrial lobbying shaped Italy's foreign policy decision to sign an MoU with China's BRI in 2019?

Accordingly, this paper argues that Italy's decision to join the initiative was majorly influenced by the domestic economic lobbying due to its internal economic issues. This pressure led the Italian government to attempt to satisfy both its Western allies and domestic lobbying groups through framing it as a pure economic decision.

Hence, the research will attempt to analyze this issue using the two-level game approach, that allows for the analysis of foreign policy and its connection to domestic policy, particularly the concept of win-set. To address this puzzle, the study provides an integrated analysis that combines macro-economic indicators such as Italy's GDP percentage from 2016 to 2019 and its trade balance dynamics, with a discourse analysis of official statements by Italian leaders at the same timeframe.

Lastly, the paper will first explain the methodology used, including descriptive economic statistics and a minor discourse analysis. Followed by a theoretical framework, focusing on Putnam's two-level game approach. Then a contextual background that explains the BRI, the G7, trade balance, Confindustria. It will then delve into the main analysis before summarizing the findings in the conclusion.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology, supported by a limited use of descriptive statistics from the world bank. This is complemented by minor discourse analysis of speeches of the Italian prime minister Conte and his deputy minister Luigi Di Maio. The discourse analysis was conducted directly on Italian scripts as the researcher possesses a sufficient proficiency in the Italian language to understand and analyse some of their discourses and quotes in their original form. The methodology is employed to understand how domestic pressures and industrial lobbying - the independent variable- shaped Italy's foreign policy decision to sign the BRI MoU in 2019 - the dependent variable-.

This qualitative approach fits perfectly with the nature of the study because it allows for an in-depth analysis of complex domestic motivations and influences that cannot be understood through numerical data alone. The study relies on secondary and primary data, including official speeches, academic articles, and economic and political press reports. Lastly, to further show the relationship between both levels, this paper analyses the trade balance of Italy and China by providing data of the deficit and the surplus of Italy by quantifying the difference between exports and imports.

Theoretical framework

Putnam (1988) has developed the two-level game as an approach to analyze foreign policy. He assumes that there are two levels by which foreign policy is analysed; international and

domestic levels. This entangled relation to him is a given. Instead, in his article he focused on how domestic political factors interact with external politics.

He assumes that the national level embodied in domestic groups, pressure governments to maximize their interests. While at the international level governments aim to satisfy their domestic demands taking into account the need to avoid foreign adverse consequences (Putnam, 1988). This was used in the paper to explain that the national level of the domestic business and industrial lobbying in Italy have affected Italy's foreign policy decision of signing the MoU with China -the international level-. (Conceição-Heldt & Mello, 2017).

Moreover, Putnam offered an idea to balance between both levels, as governments try to find a middle ground between international negotiations outcomes and the domestic agreed upon negotiations calling it "win-set". This approach aligns perfectly with the paper's argument as it examines how Italy reached a win-set between signing the MoU with China's BRI and keeping the strategic alliance with the G7 states.

Contextual Background

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is an initiative that targets extending trade, investment, and political influence throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe (Lozano, 2023). It is used in this paper to assess Italy's 2019 decision to sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) as a reaction to domestic pressures and influences.

Since Italy was the only G7 member to sign the MoU, it is essential to briefly explain that the G7 is an informal bloc of 7 members including the USA, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, UK and Italy. They usually meet to discuss international issues like economy and security (CFR editors, 2025).

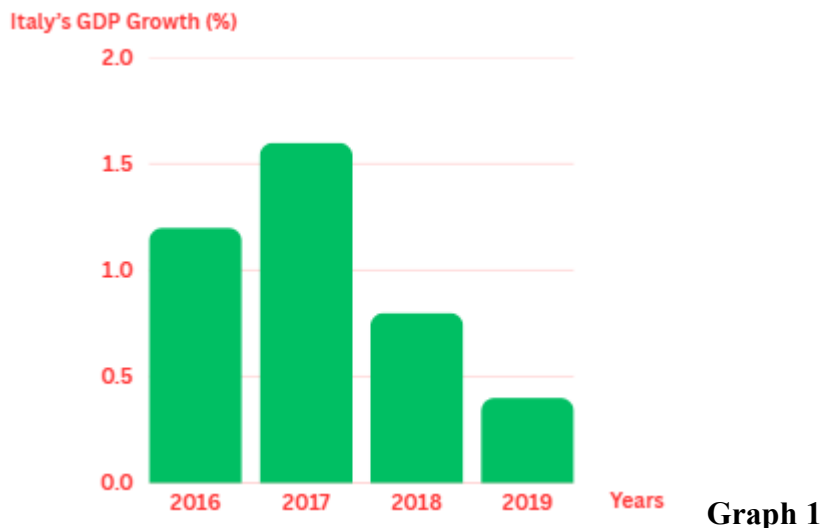
The domestic pressure in the case of Italy can be seen by analysing the content of 'Confindustria', the main Italian employers' association that represents Italian industrial

companies of all sizes, and it acts as the collective voice of Italian business interests (Ambasciata d'Italia a Pretoria, n.d.).

Domestic Economic Crisis

a. Italian Low GDP growth

To study the extent of internal pressure and lobbying, it is fundamental to evaluate Italy's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 2016 until 2019 -when the decision was taken-. Hence, Graph 1 shows the Italian annual GDP growth rate. Whereby it has increased from 1.2% in 2016 to 1.6% in 2017. However, an increasing GDP growth decline started from 2018 with 0.8% reaching 0.4% in 2019 (*GDP Growth Italy*, n.d.).



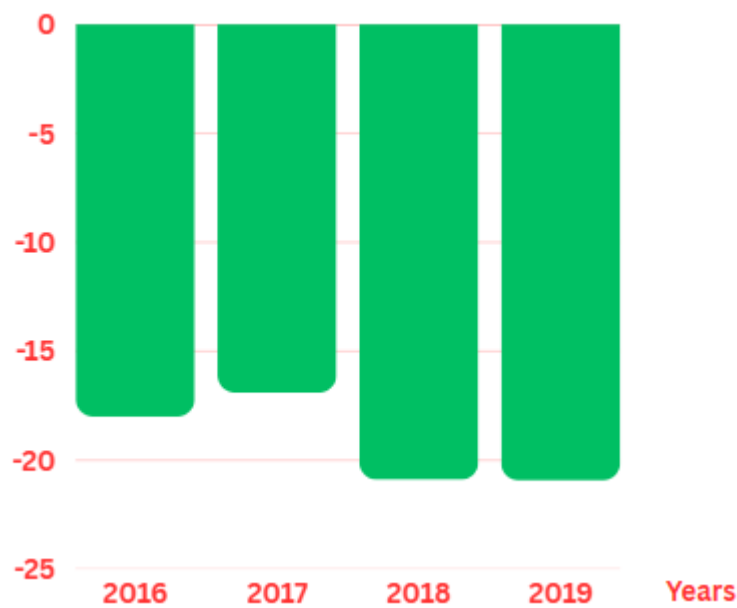
Graph 1

This decline illustrates the poor economic conditions in Italy especially in 2019 when it reached its worst GDP growth. This parallel the decision of signing the MoU. Thus, Cristiani argued that the domestic economic pressure and financial decline in Italy prior 2019, triggered the decision makers in Italy to find new ways to revive their economy. China's interest in Italian products made the trade with China a good opportunity (2019). Thus, BRI became a valuable opportunity for the Italian trade with China (Mazzocco & Leonard Palazzi, 2023).

b. Italian-Chinese Trade Balance

The most important factor in examining domestic pressure in the case of Italy is measuring the trade balance between China and Italy. Graph 2 shows the trade balance between both states from 2016 to 2019 demonstrating a continued trade deficit in favour of China, which reflects a structural imbalance in the economic relationship between them. In 2016, the Italian trade balance recorded a deficit of around -18 billion Euros, before slightly decreasing in 2017 to around -16.9 billion Euros. Yet the direction changed again in 2018 as the Italian trade deficit has increased reaching around -20.9. Finally, in 2019, the trade deficit stabilized with a slight increase reaching around -20.93 (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2020).

Italian trade deficit with China (in Billions)



(Graph 2)

This output shows that the gap between exports and imports continued to widen. Thus, Italy's imports from China have largely exceeded its exports; especially from 2017 until 2019 where the decision of signing the MoU was taken. Moreover, from a two-level game perspective, this reflects a clear domestic economic pressure on the Italian decision makers -government-, especially from businessmen, who may have

viewed strengthening ties with China through signing a memorandum of understanding on the BRI as a potential opportunity to reduce losses.

c. Internal Industrial and business lobbying pressure

In addition to the political discourse of the Italian government, the stances taken by the Italian industrial lobby groups represented in the Confindustria, reflect the extent of the internal economic pressures that was faced during the memorandum signing phase.

In 2019, Confindustria have issued an official position paper calling clearly for a more strategic and cohesive relationship with China regarding the trade imbalance between them. Port authorities and maritime associations that were involved in the BRI have also expressed their concern about the lack of reciprocity; arguing that the initiative still gives China greater benefits compared to Italy. Therefore, they have called for a unified European approach to the initiative (Poggetti, 2019).

This means that such demands from industrial lobbies provide clear evidence that the domestic economic lobby had a great influence on Italy's foreign policy decision. Hence, Conte tried to satisfy the local industries and companies in his speeches. Therefore, it became crucial for the Italian government to find a Win-Set that balances the domestic economic pressures and their foreign policies toward their allies.

d. Beyond the Official Statements

In light of the official economic indicators, the discourse analysis of the Italian prime minister; Minister Conte, and his deputy; Minister Luigi Di Maio have highlighted the connection between the domestic economic pressures and the decision to sign the MoU.

Minister Luigi Di Maio said: "Today the Made in Italy brand wins" after discussing the MoU decision in a meeting with Conte (Ferrari, 2019). His use of the

word “wins” can be understood as a trial to frame the agreement as a supportive step for local industries, in the context of internal pressures of those affected by the trade deficit.

Additionally, in an interview, Minister Conte has emphasized that this agreement is a great opportunity to rebalance the trade balance between them and China and that he wants to increase Italy’s exports to China ⁵ (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2019). Moreover, Minister Conte said: “Chinese economy is a huge economy with huge potential even for Italian companies, and I confess that we trust that we can also improve our exports to be able to enjoy better access conditions for our companies” (CGTN, 2019).

These statements refer to China not only as an economic partner but also introduces it as a necessity in addressing domestic economic pressure, specially that he used the phrase “we trust”, which is also linked to reassuring domestic companies and industries and justifying the agreement to them.

Thus, the discourse can be understood as an attempt to introduce their foreign decision in a way that serves the domestic economic interest. This aligns with the two-level game as it assumes that leaders reshape international interactions to ensure their domestic interests.

External Pressures on Italy’s Foreign Policy Toward China’s BRI

While signing the MoU was a respond to the domestic pressures as argued, this decision was likely to create tensions with strategic allies including the USA. Amid the clear escalation of competition between the USA and China as discussed by Zhao (2021). It is noteworthy to mention that Italy has cooperated with China in the BRI while some reports including CFR (2025) stated that members of the G7 became closer and more cooperative as a response to counter China’s BRI.

⁵ Text translated from the original quote: “E una grande opportunità anche per riequilibrare la bilancia commerciale con la cina. Vogliamo potenziare il nostro export”

Therefore, Italian official discourses has attempted to reframe the agreement in a way that minimizes the negative outcomes and costs. Thus, Deputy Prime Minister Di Maio stated, "It is not a political agreement with China but a trade opportunity...this is a surge forward by Italy, a chance of progress towards the future." (Ferrari, 2019).

This discourse directly denies any political alignment with China and insists on framing the memorandum as a purely economic decision. This approach can be interpreted as an attempt to reassure the United States that Italy is not allying with China at the expense of its Western allies.

b. Italy's Attempt to Reach a Win-Set

Malinconi (2023) pointed out that the Italian economic lobbies have been strongly pressuring the government to maintain trade relations with China, and that they might push the government to sign new agreements in the future if the memorandum of understanding is not renewed.

This observation confirms that domestic economic pressures were indeed significant, and that the government needed to find a strategy that would satisfy the domestic concerns while avoiding the foreign political costs, thus once again adhering to the two-level game, specifically the Win-Set.

Furthermore, during a press conference, minister Di Maio has stressed that they are allies of the USA, when he was directly questioned about Italy's cooperation with China (US embassy and consulates in Italy, 2019). Additionally, there is an absence of a clear formal official criticism from the United States nor the EU -including the G7- towards Italy for signing of the memorandum. Thus, this silence can be interpreted as a relative success for the Italian government in decreasing the external costs of the decision, thereby succeeding in finding a Win-Set.

Conclusion

To conclude, referring back to the research question of how did domestic economic pressures influenced Italy's decision to join China's Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, the analysis of the GDP growth decline from 2016 to 2019 and the trade imbalance in China's favour, demonstrated that the domestic economic situation was a major driving force behind the signing of the MoU. Accordingly, these findings have shown that the domestic economic lobbying in Italy, including the Italian Confederation of Industries (la Confindustria), to a large extent, played a significant role in shaping this foreign decision.

Furthermore, an analysis of official discourse revealed that Italian leaders framed the agreement as a purely economic decision, trying to maximize gains by satisfying both domestic business and industrial lobby while maintaining good relations with their Western traditional allies, particularly the United States. This two-level analytical approach helps explain the interplay between domestic policy and foreign policy, showing how the Italian government tried to balance between both.

Thus, it can be argued that Italy has largely succeeded in finding a Win-Set that addresses domestic economic needs while reducing external political costs. Lastly, this research suggests the need for future studies on the reasons behind not signing a second term of the MoU after its expiration in 2024.

Reference list

Ambasciata d'Italia a Pretoria. (n.d.). Ambasciata d'Italia a Pretoria – Il sito ufficiale dell'Ambasciata d'Italia a Pretoria. <https://ambpretoria.esteri.it/en/italia-e-sud-africa/diplomazia-economica/fare-affari-in-italia/useful-links/confindustria/>

CGTN. (2019, March 22). Italian PM: Italy is the natural terminal of the BRI. CGTN | Breaking News, China News, World News and Video. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514f3145544e33457a6333566d54/index.html>

CFR editors. (2025, July 8). What Does the G7 Do? Center of Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-does-g7-do>

Conceição-Heldt, Eugénia & Mello, Patrick. (2017). Two-Level Games in Foreign Policy Analysis. 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.496.

Cristiani, D. (2019). Italy Joins the Belt and Road Initiative: Context, Interests, and Drivers. *Jamestown*, 19(8).

Ferrari, I. (2019, March 18). Italy to sign China BRI memorandum, says Conte | [www.italianinsider.it](https://www.italianinsider.it/?q=node/7859). italian insider. <https://www.italianinsider.it/?q=node/7859>

GDP Growth Italy. (n.d.). world bank group. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2019&location=IT&most_recent_value_desc=false&start=2016&view=chart

Il Fatto Quotidiano. (2019, March 15). Via della Seta, Conte: "Memorandum si firma, non mettiamo a repentaglio nessun asset strategico" (Belt and Road, Conte: "The memorandum will be signed; we are not putting any strategic asset at risk") [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqCUOKV4N90>

Lozano, N. (2023, March 9). BRI investment in Asia: nature of different approaches by subregion. Global Affairs. Universidad de Navarra - Global Affairs and Strategic Studies. Global Affairs and Strategic Studies. <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/bri-investment-in-asia-nature-of-different-approaches-by-subregion>

Malinconi, M. (2023, May 18). *Italy and the BRI: A Love Story That Never Started – chinaobservers*. chinaobservers. <https://chinaobservers.eu/italy-and-the-bri-a-love-story-that-never-started/>

Mazzocco, I., & Leonard Palazzi, A. (2023, December 14). *Italy Withdraws from China's Belt and Road Initiative*. center of strategic and international studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/italy-withdraws-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>

Poggetti, L. (2019, September 17). Italy's new government lays the foundation for a more balanced China policy. Merics. <https://merics.org/en/comment/italys-new-government-lays-foundation-more-balanced-china-policy>

Putnam, R. D. (1988). Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games. *International Organization*, 42(3), 427–460. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706785>

US embassy and consulates in Italy. (2019, October 2). Secretary Michael R. Pompeo And Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio At a Press Availability <https://it.usembassy.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-italian-foreign-minister-luigi-di-maio-at-a-press-availability/>

World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS). (2020). Italy trade balance, exports, imports by country and region 2020. <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/ITA/Year/2020/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>



Zhao M. (2021). The Belt and Road Initiative and China–US strategic competition. *China International Strategy Review*, 3(2), 248–260. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00087-7>

Development and Marine Conservation at a Crossroads: The Consequences of Neoliberalism on the Egyptian Red Sea

Jannah Kamel

Hana Mosaad

Introduction

Marine conservation is increasingly recognized as a political battleground rather than a neutral ecological project. Oceans and coastal ecosystems, while celebrated for their biodiversity and cultural values, are simultaneously commodified through tourism, shipping, aquaculture, and extractive industries and their consequences only treated as an afterthought. The case of Egypt is especially concerning, since tourism and shipping supply great amounts of profit along with global significance. This contradiction raises a central question: Why is grassroots marine activism continually marginalized, as governments and corporations elevate profit above ecological integrity; even as these corporations' sustenance and profit are dependent on the preservation of marine life and health?

This research argues that marine conservation threatens the systems of global capitalism, state power, and other local struggles as it inserts its importance as a resource to be concerned over regardless of its monetary return or power benefit. To defend the oceans is not only to safeguard biodiversity; it is to resist the erasure of life itself and to imagine futures beyond the violence of neoliberalism. Egypt's Red Sea provides a critical lens through which one examines these dynamics, as its ecosystems are simultaneously exploited for profit yet celebrated as conservation sites. The paper is organized into four sections: a conceptual & theoretical framework of marine conservation under neoliberalism; an analysis of Egypt's coastal degradation drivers; examination of the case of tourism, shipping, and poaching; and a concluding reflection on conservation beyond capitalist logics. Methodologically, the study

employs an analytical approach, integrating policy analysis with multiple case studies anchoring the analysis.

Conceptual Frameworks

Marine Conservation

Marine conservation refers to the protection and sustainable management of ocean ecosystems to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem services. Conceptual frameworks emphasize ecosystem-based management, resilience, and adaptive governance. For example, Smith et al. (2016) highlight the importance of linking scientific assessment with policy through the European Marine Strategy Framework Directive, while Therriault (2022) stresses place-based approaches in conserving kelp forests.

Marine Degradation

Marine degradation encompasses ecological decline due to pollution, overfishing, habitat destruction, and climate change. UNEP (2024) identifies land-based nutrient pollution (nitrogen and phosphorus), plastics, and untreated wastewater as major drivers of degradation, while Hatje and Rayfuse (2025) emphasize global governance challenges in addressing marine pollution under the UN Ocean Decade framework. Coral reef degradation, as noted by Frontiers research, also poses socioeconomic risks by undermining livelihoods dependent on marine ecosystems.

Neoliberal and Capitalist Economic Policies

Neoliberal and capitalist economic frameworks often prioritize market-based instruments and commodification of nature. Castree (2010) argues that neoliberal governance reframes environmental issues through market logic, while Tulloch and Neilson (2014) show how sustainability discourses have been co-opted into neoliberal projects, neutralizing radical

critiques of capitalism. These policies can exacerbate marine degradation by privileging short-term economic gains over ecological resilience.

Marine Conservation in Egypt under Neoliberal and Capitalist Policies

Marine conservation in Egypt is not a neutral ecological endeavor but a contested terrain where global capitalism, state power, and local struggles collide. The country's embrace of the "blue economy" and large-scale conservation initiatives illustrates how protecting the oceans is entangled with economic imperatives, geopolitical disputes, and social inequalities. To defend Egypt's seas is therefore to resist the erasure of life itself and to imagine futures beyond the violence of neoliberalism.

Degradation Drivers and Capitalist Expansion

Egypt's coastal ecosystems have suffered extensive degradation due to pollution, overfishing, and unsustainable development. Sarhan (2021) documents how untreated wastewater, industrial effluents, ballast water discharge, and oil spills have damaged coral reefs and fisheries. Coral reefs near Hurghada have declined by 50% over three decades, while Red Sea fish stocks fell by 71% between 1991 and 2010. These ecological losses are inseparable from neoliberal reforms that prioritize rapid tourism expansion and aquaculture growth, often at the expense of ecological integrity.

The Suez Canal epitomizes the collision of capitalist expansion and ecological vulnerability. Neogi (2021) shows that its 2015 expansion was justified as a solution to unemployment and economic stagnation, yet ecological concerns such as invasive species migration and eutrophication were sidelined. The canal facilitated migration of jellyfish and other species, undermining fisheries and tourism. Here, conservation is subordinated to the imperatives of global trade, revealing how capitalist infrastructures actively produce ecological crises.

Shahhat (2023) highlights that Egypt's marine areas are sites of conflict among oil and gas exploration, shipping, fisheries, and tourism. The absence of integrated Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) reflects weak institutional capacity and fragmented governance, leaving ecosystems vulnerable to exploitation. This fragmentation is not accidental but symptomatic of neoliberal governance, which privileges industrial growth and foreign investment while marginalizing ecological and community concerns.

Conservation under Neoliberal Constraints

Conservation initiatives themselves are shaped by neoliberal and capitalist logics. Ras Mohammed National Park is internationally recognized, yet enforcement is uneven and adjacent areas remain degraded due to plastic pollution and industrial runoff (Shahhat, 2023). Mackelworth et al. (2019) demonstrate that transboundary marine conservation often becomes entangled in geopolitical disputes, with states using Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to assert sovereignty or secure resource rights. In Egypt, conservation is subordinated to capitalist imperatives of tourism and trade, undermining its ecological purpose.

Holmes and Cavanagh (2016) caution that neoliberal conservation exacerbates inequalities by distributing costs and benefits unevenly. In Egypt, aquaculture and ecotourism profits accrue to investors and elites, while local fishing communities bear the costs of declining stocks and restricted access. Deutsch (2020) shows in her comparative study of dolphin conservation that neoliberal rationalities commodify biodiversity and deepen inequality, while community-based approaches can temper these impacts. Egypt's reliance on centralized, market-driven conservation mirrors the Cambodian case, privileging revenue generation over community reciprocity.

Even strategic planning for aquaculture reflects these contradictions. Abdel-Hady et al. (2024) propose a SWOT-AHP framework for marine aquaculture, identifying strengths such as

competitive pricing and suitable weather, but also weaknesses including reliance on wild seeds, poor water quality, and costly feed. Experts perceive threats and weaknesses as outweighing opportunities, underscoring systemic vulnerabilities. While the framework offers a path toward sustainable aquaculture, its implementation depends on collaborative governance—yet neoliberal policy environments fragment stakeholders and prioritize short-term profitability.

Tourism and the Commodification of Marine Life

In addition to the lack of adequate care and continuous exploitation and commodification of marine life under capitalism, the profit-focused tourism industry is also one to blame. The consumption of experiences within Red Sea tourism is not literal or tangible; it refers to the commodification of the sea and its creatures and ecosystems as only useful for the enjoyment of the tourist and the generating of profit. The cost of such experiences in the sea and coastal cities is usually harmful and destructive as they are unnatural to the habitat and disturb environments, habitats, and natural patterns.

For example, habitat destruction is among the most common consequences of marine or beach tourism as resorts and hotels get built as close to the water as possible. Since their ownership of the land extends towards the water, developers in Quseir, for example, partook in “beach enhancement” to remove anything that could disturb the sterile beach experience of visitors, such as excavating both living and fossil reefs to broaden the beach and swimming area (Hawkins & Roberts, 1994). The direct consequence of such infrastructure and construction is the loss of habitat such as mangroves, bird nesting grounds, areas for turtle nesting and safe gestation, and shallow water crustaceans and mollusks (El Nemr et al., 2016).

Additionally, the construction of resorts and hotels in Sharm El Sheikh and Hurghada have other indirect destructive consequences. According to Hawkins & Roberts (1994), Hurghada has greatly suffered of coastal infilling – the man-made filling of bays and coasts with “earth,

rock and sediment to create new land for development” (Kahveci & Onur, 2024) – despite a law in place that limits development to be behind 30 meters of the high tide. Additionally, the text highlights the harm to underwater life caused by debris runoff from construction sites, which include toxins such as cement that smother and harm the fragile seagrass and corals, compounding with the threats to climate change (Hawkins & Roberts, 1994).

Wildlife Interaction and Coral Reef Damage

Another very common activity for tourists of coastal areas is the experience of interacting with wildlife. Such activities come in the form of boat rides, snorkeling, diving, or even recreational free diving in the area. Such behavior is one of the major direct causes of destruction for a variety of reasons, mainly the sheer number of visitors wanting to participate in such activities, and the ignorance of these visitors regarding the appropriate methods of interacting with the environment.

For example, as explained by Madkour (2015, p. 65), shallow lagoons in the western coast of the Giftun el-Kebir island in Hurghada that became popular spots for diving and tourist yachts have shown significant loss of seagrass meadows, which are an important place for various species nursery and feeding. The consequences are diverse and extend the damage to various organisms such as green sea turtles, crustaceans, mollusks, oysters, and shrimp (Madkour, 2015, p. 65). Additionally, popular diving and snorkeling sites especially in Hurghada have directly witnessed the degradation, reduction, and even disappearance of whole coral reefs due to trampling; as much as 43% reduction in per cent hard coral over the 9-year period of the study, as noted by Jameson et al. (2007). Such is especially concerning, considering the notable percentage of tourism revenues coming from the Red Sea’s assets of natural beauty, raising questions over the sustainability of the industry.

Global Shipping Industry and Its Red Sea Impacts

One of the other consequences to the capitalist exploitative system is the consequences of the shipping industry on marine life. The industry has been on a sustained increase in intensity of shipping in order to keep up with the demand for transport. The consequences of that have been globally catastrophic for all marine life that cause ocean acidification because of their oil pollution in the water, air pollution from the exhaust coming from ships, and greenhouse gasses (Pirotta et al., 2019). Specifically, the Red Sea is one of the major strategic transportation routes for oil and other products. Accordingly, the Red Sea has suffered from major disturbances such as oil spills, falling of shipping containers because of the passage of ships to the Suez Canal, and disturbances and threats to marine life in attempts to look for and extract oil (Kostianaia et al., 2020).

Beyond these direct impacts, the degradation of the Red Sea environment has been compounded by the sinking of vessels and the accidental loss of cargo at sea. These incidents release plastics, chemicals, and petroleum products into fragile ecosystems, creating long-term contamination that disrupts coral reef systems and threatens biodiversity. Oil spills in particular have been shown to persist in the northern Red Sea, where circulation patterns trap pollutants and intensify their destructive effects on marine habitats and coastal tourism economies (Kostianaia et al., 2020). The accumulation of plastics and oils from shipping accidents further exacerbates the vulnerability of marine giants such as whales and dolphins, which are already under pressure from noise pollution and collisions with vessels (Pirotta et al., 2019). Thus, the shipping industry not only accelerates global climate and ecological crises but also directly undermines the resilience of the Red Sea's unique marine life through chronic pollution and habitat destruction.

Whale Shark Poaching in the Red Sea: The Case of Bahloul & others

Marine conservation in Egypt's Red Sea is not only about safeguarding biodiversity but about confronting the violence of neoliberal neglect and the failures of state power. The illegal capture

of Bahloul, a well-known whale shark in Hurghada, illustrates how global capitalist demand, weak enforcement, and inadequate public communication collide to erode life. This incident reveals the fragility of conservation policies in practice and underscores the need to imagine futures beyond the violence of neoliberalism.

The Incident and Official Response

Bahloul was a beloved whale shark frequently sighted by divers and tourists in Hurghada, celebrated as a symbol of the Red Sea's ecological richness (Newsflare, 2020). In January 2026, viral footage showed fishermen harpooning and restraining him, an act that sparked outrage among conservationists and the public (Lovin Cairo, 2026). The Egyptian Ministry of Environment issued a statement urging tourists to avoid disturbing whale sharks and reiterated that harming them is illegal (Egypt Independent, 2026a). The Red Sea Protected Areas Authority pledged to track down the perpetrators, while the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR) called for an emergency plan to protect marine ecosystems and stop poaching (ECESR, 2026).

This was not the first time such violence occurred. In 2013, another whale shark was slaughtered in the Suez region, prompting Hepca to denounce the act and demand an investigation (Hepca, 2013a). That same year, Egypt announced new legal protections for sharks and manta rays, hailed as a "long-awaited victory" for marine conservation (Hepca, 2013b). Yet despite these laws, the penalties remained lenient and enforcement inconsistent, allowing poachers to disregard the illegality of their actions.

Yet, the responses for the Bahloul incident in 2026 were reactive and limited. No transparent prosecutions or deterrent penalties were publicized, and the government's communication strategy focused narrowly on tourist behavior rather than systemic threats. This silence undermined conservation by failing to mobilize communities and tourists as allies in protection.

As proven by the article cited, there is no proof of any "legal repercussions" against the captured offenders (Egypt Independent, 2026b). The recurrence of whale shark poaching over more than a decade, despite the existence of protective laws, demonstrates how weak penalties and poor enforcement normalize the crime and embolden offenders.

Policy Failures and the Battleground of Conservation

The Bahloul incident exemplifies the weaknesses of Egypt's marine governance. Despite whale sharks being listed as *Endangered* on the IUCN Red List and protected under CITES and CMS (World Wildlife Fund, 2026), enforcement within Red Sea MPAs remains minimal. Studies of shark conservation elsewhere show that large MPAs often fail when patrols are underfunded and ecological data is not integrated into enforcement (Jacoby et al., 2020). Bahloul's capture demonstrates that poachers can operate openly, even in high-tourism zones, without fear of immediate consequences.

The repercussions were inadequate compared to the gravity of the crime. Killing or capturing an endangered species should trigger maximum penalties under Egyptian and international law, yet the absence of visible prosecutions normalizes poaching. Moreover, the government failed to actively inform the public about whale shark protection, ecological importance, or the legal consequences of harming them. This lack of transparency & general awareness of the public reflects a broader neoliberal logic: conservation is subordinated to tourism revenues and global capitalist demand, while local communities are left to bear the ecological and social costs.

Bahloul's death – and the many before him (that have been made available to the public) as shown by the collection of sources/incidents over an approximate 20-year timeline – thus becomes emblematic of the battleground of marine conservation. Global capitalism commodifies whale sharks through tourism and illicit trade; state power asserts authority but fails to protect life; and local struggles emerge as communities and activists demand

accountability. To defend the oceans in this context is not only to safeguard biodiversity but to resist the erasure of life itself and to imagine futures beyond the violence of capitalist policies.

Conclusion

Marine conservation in Egypt is a battleground where global capitalism, state power, and local struggles collide. Pollution, destructive construction, human-wildlife interaction, overfishing, and invasive species are symptoms of deeper structural forces that commodify ecosystems and subordinate conservation to economic imperatives. The consequences of tourist spots, harms of shipping, and the poaching of Bahloul expose the fragility of Egypt's marine conservation system. Despite protective laws and international listings, enforcement is weak, penalties are lenient, and NGOs' reach is highly limited/rarely translated into actual policy. This failure reflects how neoliberal policies place profit above ecological justice; leaving whole ecosystems and endangered species vulnerable and turning a blind eye to the facts that prove this method of constant abuse will cause severe repercussions on, not just the environment, but the tourism and fishing industries as well. If countries and economies continue down this path, there will be no marine life left to attract tourists to go snorkeling and diving, there will be no fish left for fishermen to catch, the sea will just turn to a barren toxin-filled body of water. Bahloul's death (like the many before him), coral reef disappearance, and marine destruction thus symbolize the urgent need for systemic change. To defend Egypt's seas is therefore to resist the violence of neoliberalism, to challenge the erasure of life, and to imagine futures where biodiversity and human communities are sustained beyond the logics of capital. Even when the capitalist economic interests point towards the prioritization of specific industries like tourism or shipping, they must be heavily regulated (if not completely restructured) to ensure the continued flourishing of one of Egypt's most valuable assets; the Red Sea.

Bibliography

Abdel-Hady, M. M., et. al. (2024). A comprehensive approach to strategic planning for marine aquaculture in Egypt: SWOT-AHP analysis. *Marine Policy*, 162, 106057. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106057>

Castree, N. (2010). Neoliberalism and the biophysical environment: A synthesis and evaluation of the research. *Environment and Society: Advances in Research*, 1(1), 5–45. Berghahn Journals. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2010.010102>

Deutsch, S. (2020). “Who doesn’t like dolphins?!” Neoliberalization, variegated environmentalities, and value alterations in a cross-national comparison of Irrawaddy dolphin conservation. *Geoforum*, 114, 159–171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.05.010>

Dong, Yanyan. (2025). *The impact of tourists on the marine environment: A review and managerial implications*. 25(9). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-025-02385-x>

Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR). (2026). *After the recent shark incident in Hurghada, ECESR recalls for an emergency plan to protect marine ecosystem and stop poaching*. Retrieved from <https://ecesar.org/en/after-the-recent-shark-incident-in-hurghada-the-egyptian-center-for-economic-and-social-rights-ecesar-recalls-for-an-emergency-plan-to-protect-marine-ecosystem-and-stop-poaching/>

Egypt Independent. (2026a). *Environment Ministry urges tourists to stay away from whale sharks*. Retrieved from <https://www.egyptindependent.com/environment-ministry-urges-tourists-to-stay-away-from-whale-sharks/>

Egypt Independent. (2026b). *Authorities arrest fishermen involved in hunting whale shark*. Retrieved from <https://www.egyptindependent.com/authorities-arrest-fishermen-involved-in-hunting-whale-shark/>

El Nemr, A., El-Said, G. F., & Khaled, A. (2016). Risk Assessment of Organochlorines in Mollusk from the Mediterranean and Red Sea Coasts of Egypt. *Water Environment Research*, 88(4), 325–337. <https://doi.org/10.2175/106143016X14504669767977>

Hatje, V., & Rayfuse, R. (2025). Understanding and beating marine pollution under Ocean Decade Vision 2030 Challenge 1. *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, 82(2), fsaf009. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsaf009>

Hawkins, A. J. P., & Roberts, C. M. (1994). *The Growth of Coastal Tourism in the Red Sea: Present and Future Effects on Coral Reefs*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0006-3207\(96\)83265-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0006-3207(96)83265-4)

Hepca. (2013a). *Hepca denounces Suez whale shark slaughter – we demand an investigation!* Retrieved from <https://www.hepca.org/news/hepca-denounces-suez-whale-shark-slaughter-%E2%80%93-we-demand-an-investigation!->

Hepca. (2013b). *Long-awaited victory for shark and manta protection*. Retrieved from <https://www.hepca.org/news/long-awaited-victory-for-shark-and-manta-protection>

Holmes, G., & Cavanagh, C. J. (2016). A review of the social impacts of neoliberal conservation: Formations, inequalities, contestations. *Geoforum*, 75, 199–209. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.07.014>

International Fund for Animal Welfare. (n.d.). *Coral: Facts, Conservation, Ecological Importance*. IFAW. Retrieved March 9, 2026, from <https://www.ifaw.org/international/animals/coral>

Jacoby, D. M. P., et. al. (2020). Shark movement strategies influence poaching risk and can guide enforcement decisions in a large, remote marine protected area. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 57(9), 1782–1792. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2664.13654>

Jameson, S. C., Ammar, M. S. A., Saadalla, E., Mostafa, H. M., & Riegl, B. (2007). A Quantitative Ecological Assessment of Diving Sites in the Egyptian Red Sea During a Period of Severe Anchor Damage: A Baseline for Restoration and Sustainable Tourism Management. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 15(3), 309–323. <https://doi.org/10.2167/jost719.0>

Kahveci, H., & Onur, M. (2024). Changing ecological environment before and after coastline filling designs. *Journal of Coastal Conservation*, 28(1), 28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11852-023-01025-y>

Kostianaia, E. A., Kostianoy, A., Lavrova, O. Yu., & Soloviev, D. M. (2020). Oil Pollution in the Northern Red Sea: A Threat to the Marine Environment and Tourism Development. In S. F. Elbeih, A. M. Negm, & A. Kostianoy (Eds.), *Environmental Remote Sensing in Egypt* (pp. 329–362). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39593-3_12

Lovin Cairo. (2026, January 27). *An illegal capture of a whale shark in the Red Sea is sparking online fury!* Retrieved from <https://lovin.co/cairo/en/announcements/illegal-capture-whale-shark>

Mackelworth, P. C., et al. (2019). Geopolitics and marine conservation: Synergies and conflicts. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 6, 759. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2019.00759>

Madkour, H. (2015). DETECTION OF DAMAGED AREAS DUE TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ALONG THE EGYPTIAN RED SEA COAST USING GIS, REMOTE SENSING AND FORAMINIFERA. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288316019_DETECTION_OF_DAMAGED_AREAS_DUE_TO_TOURISM_DEVELOPMENT_ALONG_THE_EGYPTIAN_RED_SEA_COAST_USING_GIS_REMOTE_SENSING_AND_FORAMINIFERA

Ministry of Planning, Economic Development & International Cooperation. (2025). THE QUARTERLY GDP NOTE – FY 2024/2025 Q3: ANALYZING GROWTH MOMENTUM, SECTORAL PERFORMANCE, & INVESTMENT TRENDS. Ministry of Planning, Economic Development & International Cooperation. [https://mped.gov.eg/adminpanel/sharedFiles/\[Pub. GDP Note_Q3_24-25\]_Note_-_English_version_-_June_2025_-_FINAL_077.pdf](https://mped.gov.eg/adminpanel/sharedFiles/[Pub. GDP Note_Q3_24-25]_Note_-_English_version_-_June_2025_-_FINAL_077.pdf)

Newsflare. (2020). *Whale shark in Hurghada, Egypt*. Retrieved from <https://www.newsflare.com/video/374065/whale-shark-in-hurghada-egypt?origin=bahlol>

- Neogi, R. (2021). Neocolonialism and the ecological crisis of the Suez Canal. *Maneto: Temple University Multi-Disciplinary Undergraduate Research Journal*, 2(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.15367/m:urj.v2i1.159>
- Pirotta, V., Grech, A., Jonsen, I. D., Laurance, W. F., & Harcourt, R. G. (2019). Consequences of global shipping traffic for marine giants. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 17(1), 39–47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.1987>
- Sarhan, A. A. (2021). Towards a blue economy in Egypt: Economic assessment of environmental degradation of marine and coastal resources. *Journal of Environmental Sciences*, 50(12), 63–83. <https://doi.org/10.21608/JES.2021.269807>
- Shahhat, M. A. A. (2023). Toward implementing the marine spatial planning approach in the Egyptian marine areas. *Maritime Research and Technology*, 2(2), 108–113. <https://doi.org/10.21622/MRT.2023.02.2.108>
- Smith, C. J., et. al. (2016). Managing the marine environment: Conceptual models and assessment considerations for the European Marine Strategy Framework Directive. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 3, 144. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2016.00144>
- Therriault, T. (2022). Toward a conceptual framework for managing and conserving marine habitats: A case study of kelp forests in the Salish Sea. *Ecology and Evolution*, 12(7), e8510. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.8510>
- Tulloch, L., & Neilson, D. (2014). The neoliberalisation of sustainability. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, 13(1), 26–39. <https://doi.org/10.2304/csee.2014.13.1.26>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2024). *Ecosystem degradation & pollution*. UNEP. <https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/ecosystem-degradation-pollution>
- World Wildlife Fund. (2026). *Whale shark*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/shark/whale-shark>

Post-October 7th, 2023, Egyptian-Iranian Rapprochement: Examining Balance of Perceived Israeli Threats

Mahmoud Mohamed

I. Introduction

Since the Outbreak of the 2023 Gaza War, West Asia has witnessed significant structural transformations, altering regional alignments and threat perceptions. The gradual shift in Egyptian – Iranian relations after decades of estrangement demonstrates a striking example of strategic reassessments. Multiple exchanges of high-level visits, such as Then- Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry’s visit to Tehran in May 2024 along with Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian’s participation in the Cairo-hosted Developing-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation (D-8) summit in December 2024 highlight a new pattern of interaction among the two West Asian powers, unprecedented since the suspension of ties in 1979. (Ahram Online, 2024; Bakr, 2024).

This renewed calibration challenges conventional balance of power logic that would expect heightened rivalries between these two historically hostile powers, especially amid persistent ideological divergences. The most structural variable in the power equation has been Israel’s expanded military intervention, evident in Israeli strikes on seven states in two years. (Cafiero, 2025; Ibrahim, 2025). Thus, by utilizing Stephen Walt’s Balance of Threat theory (BOTT), this paper questions how have reperceived Israeli threats pushed Egypt and Iran to adopt a threat balancing strategy since October 7th 2023 despite the continuity of ideological differences?

Thus, this paper argues that post-2023 Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement represents a pragmatic balancing response to heightened perceived Israeli threat, which manifested in Israel’s growing aggregate power, geographical proximity of Israeli threats as well as Israel’s

rising offensive capabilities and intentions. These four indicators of re-interpreted Israeli threat have generated pragmatic incentives for Egyptian-Iranian containment of Israeli power.

Methodologically, this paper relies on a qualitative approach to evaluate the explanatory power of BOTT to Egyptian-Iranian pragmatic outreach. Aggregate power is measured through allies' support and economic performance. Geographical proximity is operationalized through direct military engagements, territorial dynamics such as the Philadelphia corridor developments, and Israeli military expansion. Third, offensive capabilities are assessed via analyzing nuclear discourse and military buildups. Fourth, offensive intentions are evaluated by examining elite rhetoric. Overall, chronological analysis is applied to prove how the four threat indicators systematically spiked before cases of diplomatic outreach.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first introduces BOTT. The second assesses the role of the aggregate power and geographical proximity factors in increasing mutual perception of Israel as a threat. The third section discusses how threat perception is heightened by offensive capabilities and offensive intentions.

II. Theoretical Framework: Balance of Threat Theory

Stephen Walt's (1990) *Origins of the Alliances* volume came as a critical response to Kenneth Waltz's Balance of power paradigm. Walt argues that states form alliances not to balance against other powers, but against other perceived threats. Instead of countering the U.S. dominant position post-WWII, states aligned with the Americans to balance against perceived rising and more immediate Soviet threat. The 1981 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established to counter rising Iranian threat on the region, evident in Tehran's war against Baghdad. Thus, Alliances are formed to prevent superior powers from dominating the region. (Walt, 1990).

Hence, four factors are identified as the main indications of perceived threats. First, Aggregate power of a state showcases its relative power to other states. Second, geographical proximity determines the degree of closeness of the threat. Third, offensive capabilities of the threatening state highlight the extent of the urgency of that threat. Fourth, offensive intentions of the opponent state refer to the level of its aggressive postures. Overall, these indicators define the level of threat posed by the opponent state and thereby, the need to balance it. (Erdogan, 2022).

Consequently, this paper applies these four indicators to measure the increase in Egyptian and Iranian perception of Israeli threat. First, it highlights the rise of Israeli aggregate power and Egyptian-Iranian moves to re-balance the relative power equation. Second, it underscores the how Egypt-Iran relations correspond chronologically to geographically proximate Israeli threats. Third, it helps understand Egyptian and Iranian perception of the Israeli nuclear issue and American military buildup. Fourth, it delves into how Cairo and Tehran view Israel's intentions as threatening to regional security. In general, If BOTT explains Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement, then increases in Israeli threat indicators should chronologically precede or coincide with diplomatic outreach.

III. Israeli Aggregate Power and Geographical Proximity

Post-“Al Aqsa Flood” Operation on the 7th of October 2023 witnessed significant structural transformations in the region. Iran's Axis of Resistance, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza received decisive blows, reflecting the decline of the Iranian aggregate power regionally. Moreover, the collapse of the Assad regime and the rise of a U.S.-friendly government in Syria in December 2024 adds another setback to Iranian regional power projection. (Pinfold et al., 2025). Against this isolation, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi paid ten visits to Egypt in one year in parallel with proxies' decapitation. Pezeshkian's participation in the Cairo-hosted D-8 summit came ten days after regime change in Syria. Thus,

this ten-day gap suggests direct correlation between Syrian collapse and Iranian diplomatic outreach to Egypt. (Egyptian Oula Channel, 2025; Samir, 2024).

In addition, Iranian leadership that long relied on indirect confrontations with the Israelis currently views a geographically closer “Israeli threat”. On April 1st, 2024, The Israelis attacked the Iranian Consulate in Damascus, killing Senior IRGC commander Mohammad Zahedi. Similarly, Israel directly targeted twenty locations across Iran, focusing on missile facilities and air defense systems in October 2024. Subsequently, Iran retaliated on both April and October 2024, employing 120 and 180 ballistic missiles respectively, showcasing direct state-state military engagements. This shift from proxy warfare to direct state-state confrontation fundamentally altered threat perception, as geographical proximity is a core BOTT indicator. (al-Dessouki, 2025).

This geographical proximity of the Israeli threat contributed to diplomatic outreach with Egypt. By the overwhelming June 2025 War, Araghchi had met Egyptian President El Sisi four times, more than any other regional leader. Additionally, on 15th of June 2025, three days after the start of Israeli strikes on Iran, the Tehran City Council voted by a majority to change the name of "Khaled Islambouli Street" to "Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah Street”. This symbolic gesture, removing a figure associated with Anwar Sadat's assassination, directly addressed a historic Egyptian grievance, demonstrating how proximate Israeli threat creates incentives for bilateral concession (Al-Gamal, 2025; Egyptian Oula Channel, 2025).

The same balancing logic is present in Egypt’s approach to Isarel. Israel’s growing aggregate power posed a direct threat to Egypt’s security. U.S. unprecedented support to Israel after October 7th attacks shifted the relative power equation. U.S. President Donald Trump’s proposal to expel the Palestinians into Egypt in February 2025 created a tense relationship between Cairo and Washington. This was exacerbated by Trump’s May 2025 visit to the region

that excluded Egypt, unlike his 2017 visit when El Sisi was invited to a joint Gulf summit. (Saleh, 2025).

This waning Egyptian regional influence made Egypt's rapprochement with Iran strategically feasible to balance against U.S. tendency to isolate Egypt. In May 2025, Mohamed Houssein Sultani, then-Head of the Iranian Interests Section in Egypt stated that "80% of the outstanding issues have already been resolved between Egypt and Iran". This diplomatic breakthrough, coinciding with the American President's tension with Egypt, confirms Cairo's push to diversify its diplomatic options. (The New Arab, 2025).

In addition, Economic concerns are central to this strategic re-alignment. Iran-backed Houthi rebels' strikes on Israel since November 2023 has had devastating impacts on Suez Canal revenues. From its all-time high 10.25 billion dollars record in 2023; They dramatically declined to 3.9 billion dollars in 2024. (Bakr, 2024). Therefore, Egypt sought to leverage Iran's close ties with the Yemeni group to enhance the navigation situation in the Red Sea similar to China's contact with Iran to curb Houthi attacks in January 2024. This ensures that Egypt avoid further decline in its economic might. (Bakr, 2024).

Moreover, Egypt's September 2025 strategic mediation between IAEA and Iran has deeper aggregate economic objectives. In fiscal year 2025, There were almost no Iranian investment inflows to Egypt and bilateral trade in 2023 amounted to only \$5.1 million, far below the lowest trade interaction Egypt had with any Gulf state. A sanctions-free Iran would boost Egypt's economic productivity not only through investment, but also via a reliable and cheap source of oil and gas to meet the growing needs of its 107 million people. Thus, this goal, explicitly acknowledged by Mojtaba Ferdosipoo the Head of the Iranian interest section in Egypt, would diversify Egyptian energy options amid overreliance on Israeli gas. (Bakr, 2024; Hendawi, 2025).

Another dimension to this economic aspect of Egyptian aggregate power accumulation is the tourism sector. A full diplomatic reconciliation between Cairo and Tehran would permit at least two million pilgrims annually to visit religious sites such as El Imam Houssein and El Sayeda Zeinab mosques. These locations that house tombs of members of the Prophet Mohammed's family are sacred to Shia religious belief, creating an entire tourism segment to Egypt that would enhance the economic aspects of Egypt's balancing strategy. (Al-Dakhakhni, 2025; El-Menawy, 2025).

This emphasis on tourism cooperation prospects manifested on multiple occasions. During Araghchi's visit to Cairo in June 2025, He joined three former Egyptian foreign ministers for dinner at a restaurant in the Khan El Khalili bazaar. These activities tolerated only for a special guest by the Egyptian security establishment underlines the symbolic religious meaning of this move. Furthermore, According to Iranian Minister of Tourism and Culture Reza Salehi Amiri, a cultural exchange program was announced in May 2024 to attract one million Iranian tourists to Cairo during the next five years even without formal ties, showcasing the role of tourism in this reset. Considering that tourism contributed to 8.5 percent of Egypt's GDP in 2024, this program could largely boost the state's struggling economy. (Bakr, 2024; Hendawi, 2025).

Geographically, besides Egypt's 226-kilometer-long border with Israel, Israeli occupation of the Philadelphia corridor in May 2024 expanded the scope of bilateral tensions. This violates the military annex stipulated in the peace agreement, which allows for the presence of only four Israeli brigades on the border. Therefore, Egyptian-Israeli tensions reached all-time low when Diaa Rashwan, head of the State Information Service, mentioned that "the distance between Arish and Tel Aviv does not exceed 100 km", hinting at possible military confrontations in September 2025. (Essam El-Din, 2025; Frantzman, 2024; Nasser & Üçağaç, 2025).

This border contention corresponded with high-profile Egyptian-Iranian interactions. In May 2024, then-Iranian Foreign Minister Amir Hossein Abdollahian revealed consultations

aimed at improving relations between Egypt and Iran. Furthermore, in May 2024, then-Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry participated in Tehran in the official funeral ceremonies for the late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. Albeit ceremonial, this constituted an unprecedented official visit by a high-level Egyptian official to Iran since the suspension of relations in 1979. (Ahram Online, 2024; Frantzman, 2024).

The same applies to the July 2024 Abdelatty's attendance of the inauguration ceremony of Iran's new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, in Tehran. This mission possesses two major significances: it marked the first such high-level participation in decades as well as Abdelatty's first diplomatic mission after assuming the position in the same month. This underlines that the timing - immediately after taking office and before visits to traditional allies - signals that Iran was a priority for Egypt's new diplomatic leadership. Overall, one may connect the closeness of the Israeli threat to Egypt's renewed openness to Iran. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Islamic Republic of Iran, 2024).

IV. Offensive Capabilities and Offensive Intentions

Israeli offensive capabilities are also key to this re-alignment. Egypt is primarily concerned with containing Israeli nuclear capacities, the sole ones in West Asia. In his meeting with Araghchi in June 2025, AbdelAatty stressed "1970s Egyptian-Iranian pioneering initiative to call for a nuclear weapons-free Middle East should apply to everyone without exception" in reference to Israel. Similarly, In the Cairo agreement ceremony, AbdelAatty called for "the universality of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, with one state in the region has not joined yet, threatening regional security". The same containment strategy applies to Iranian threat perception of Israeli nuclear program. In June 2025, Araghchi argued that "The side that threatens to use nuclear weapons is the Zionist entity. Multiple Israeli ministers threatened to use them in Gaza". In the case of any direct escalation, the Egyptians and the Iranians seek to limit Israeli offensive capabilities. (Egyptian Oula Channel, 2025; Elimy, 2025).

Therefore, besides re-opening the discussion on Israeli nuclear program, Egypt's mediation role in the nuclear issue aimed at preventing another Israeli strike on Iranian territory similar to June 2025. In other words, there was an Egyptian-Iranian agreement to contain Israeli offensive capabilities. Out of twenty six phone calls held between Egyptian and Iranian foreign ministers between June 2025 and the start of the second Israeli-American war on Iran, Abdelatty held thirteen phone calls with Rafael Grossi, the head of the IAEA on the same days of his contacts with the Iranians, demonstrating a clear correspondence between dismantling the Israeli argument for an offensive attack on Iran and Egyptian-Iranian contacts. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, 2026).

In addition, December 2025 Israeli-induced American military buildup in the Gulf reinforces this rapprochement. Trump's mobilization of thirteen destroyers, two aircraft carriers and dozens of F-35 and F-15 fighter jets presents a strategic threat to regional stability. This increase in Israeli-American offensive capabilities in preparation for a military strike with Iran caused a systematic rise in Egyptian-Iranian communications, holding eleven phone calls by the start of the Israeli strikes in February 2026, emphasizing the need for "military de-escalation". (Koettl et al., 2026; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, 2026).

Finally, Israeli offensive intentions are the clearest factor in this rapprochement. Israeli strikes on seven states in two years changed Egyptian perception of Israeli behavior. In September 2025 Doha summit that was held post-Israeli strikes on Qatar, El Sisi stated that "Israel has no intention of moving towards peace in the region". He even referred to Israel as "the enemy" for the first time since 1979 peace treaty. Thus, Israeli unrestricted military strikes magnified Egypt's threat perception. (Extra News, 2025). It is notable that Egypt appointed Major General Hassan Rashad as the head of the General Intelligence, a former head of the Iranian dossier in the service only one month after Israeli strikes on Qatar. I.e. There is a direct

correlation between Israeli offensive intentions and more moves towards a closer relationship between Cairo and Tehran (Carroll, 2025; Hendawi, 2025).

For Egypt, this makes Iran a balancing power for Israeli behavior. This is clearly viewed in Abdelatty's statement that "It's not acceptable to allow any single party to dominate the region or to engineer what is called the restructuring of the region". Israeli intent makes balancing more urgent even when capabilities existed before. According to retired Major General Samir Farag, who is close to the Egyptian regime, "Egyptians are with Iran in this war for the sake of balance. If Iran falls, only Egypt will remain.". Thus, Cairo's circles believe that Iran's regional decline makes it a status-quo oriented state that does not seek to redesign the regional order. Hence, Egypt prefers a "strong and united Iran" to deter Israel but not powerful enough to seek regional transformation. (Hendawi, 2025; Hendawi, 2026).

From Iran's viewpoint, Israeli aggressive behavior does not pursue Iran's mere containment but regional destabilization. In September 2025, Araghchi urged to "rescue the world from the threat that the Israeli regime poses to international peace and security". Israeli direct war against Iran in June makes it obvious how far the Israeli aggression can pursue. Consequently, Egypt's ties with Washington and willingness to mediate in the nuclear issue can mitigate isolation and serve de-escalation. This explains the declaration of the decision to exchange ambassadors between the two states on the 20th of February 2026. This decision, announced amid escalating Gulf tensions, represents the culmination of the rapprochement process. (Extra News, 2025; Tasnim News Agency, 2026).

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper investigated the post-2023 Egyptian – Iranian reset via the lens of the BOTT. This paper attempted to answer how interpreted and heightened Israeli threats have incentivized Egypt and Iran to re-consider their bilateral ties since October 7th 2023 despite the

persistence of ideological differences between revolutionary Iran and conservative Egypt. Hence, this paper has argued that the gradual rapprochement between Cairo and Tehran after October 2023 is best understood as a pragmatic balancing behavior driven by intensifying perception of Israeli threats, overriding ideological divergences and confirming BOTT's core premise. The study systematically linked the evolution of Egyptian-Iranian ties to changes in the four main indicators of threat perception namely, aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions.

First, changes in the regional balance of aggregate power caused a pragmatic outreach. The collapse of Iran's Axis of Resistance and increasing U.S. support for Israel urged both parties to enrich their diplomatic partnerships. Moreover, Economic pressures, tourism prospects and Red sea instability played a key role in shedding light on the material gains of this balancing strategy.

Second, the geographical proximity of Israeli military activities manifested in direct strikes on Iranian territories in April, October 2024 and June 2025 and the Philadelphia corridor tensions has increased the urgency of threat perception for both states, bringing Israeli military power closer to Egyptian and Iranian security environments. The chronological correspondence between these developments and increased diplomatic communications between Cairo and Tehran highlights how proximity generates incentives for strategic coordination even among historically hostile actors.

Third, concerns over Israeli offensive capabilities, particularly the nuclear program and U.S military buildup in the Gulf represent an additional driver for strategic reengagement. Egyptian mediation efforts regarding Iran's nuclear dossier present in parallel discussions with both Iran and IAEA reveal how Egypt's balancing approach has sought to prevent future escalations. Finally, the perception of Israeli offensive intentions has contributed significantly to this rapprochement. Israeli extensive military overreach and regional structuring ambitions

underlined Egypt's keenness on maintaining Iranian strategic resilience as a counter-balance to Israeli pressures while pushed Iran to re-engage diplomatically with Egypt to break isolation.

Eventually, this study is limited by its reliance on public statements and media reports; access to internal decision-making documents would strengthen causal claims. Future research should examine whether this rapprochement extends to other policy areas and how long it persists under changing threat conditions. This case confirms BOTT's utility in explaining West Asia alliances while also suggesting that economic interdependence (tourism, trade, energy) may amplify threat-based balancing - a potential extension to Walt's framework.

VI. References

- Ahram Online. (2024). *Egypt FM heads to Tehran to attend Iran president funeral*. Available at: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/524056/Egypt/Egypt-FM-heads-to-Tehran-to-attend-Iran-president.aspx>
- Al-Dakhakhni, F. (2025). Can Tourism Help Revive Egypt-Iran Relations? *Al-Asharq Aswat*. Available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5152737-can-tourism-help-revive-egypt-iran-relations>
- Al-Dessouki, A. B. F. (2025). SHIFTS IN ISRAEL-IRAN DETERRENCE AND THE RAMIFICATIONS ON REGIONAL SECURITY. *JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES*, 9(22), 19-115. Available at: <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/11/Issue-22.pdf#page=20>
- Al-Gamal, S. (2025). Iran renames Islambouli Street to Hassan Nasrallah in bid to reconcile with Egypt. *Ahram Online*. Available at: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/548010/Egypt/Iran-renames-Islambouli-Street-to-Hassan-Nasrallah.aspx>
- Bakr, S. (2024). A New Direction in Egypt-Iran Relations? Not So Fast. *Gulf International Forum*. Available at: <https://gulfif.org/a-new-direction-in-egypt-iran-relations-not-so-fast/>

- Cafiero, G. (2025). How Israel's strike on Doha is forcing a Gulf security reckoning. *Atlantic Council*. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-israels-strike-on-doha-is-forcing-a-gulf-security-reckoning/>
- Carroll, R. (2025). Egypt's Sisi appoints new chief of powerful intelligence agency. *Al Monitor*. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/10/egypts-sisi-appoints-new-chief-powerful-intelligence-agency>
- Egyptian Oula Channel (2025). *Joint press conference of Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdel-Aty and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/pGY6RbGBPRs>
- Elimy, A. (2025). A Gray-Zone Relationship: Egypt and Iran. *El Hurra*. Available at: <https://alhurra.com/en/9469>
- El-Menawy, A. (2025). Egypt's cautious rapprochement with Iran. *Arab News*. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2603498>
- Erdogan, A. (2022). Saudi foreign policy doctrine post-2011: The Iranian factor and balance of threat. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 31, 6–24. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12256>
- Essam El-Din, G. (2025). Egypt stands up to Netanyahu's provocations. *Al-Ahram Online*. Available at: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/50/552738/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt-stands-up-to-Netanyahu%E2%80%99s-provocations.aspx>
- Extra News (2025). *Press conference of Foreign Minister Dr. Badr Abdel-Aty and his Iranian counterpart*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/Iw1juLUXt->
- Frantzman, S.J. (2024). Iran is seeking closer ties to Egypt. *Foundation of the Defense of Democracies*. Available at: https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_ed/2024/05/15/iran-is-seeking-closer-ties-to-egypt/
- Hendawi, H. (2025). Egypt and Iran forge unlikely alliance in changing political landscape. *The National*. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2025/08/11/egypt-iran-geopolitical-map/>

- Hendawi, H. (2026). Iran war deepens Egypt's fears of Israel reshaping region by force. *The National*. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2026/03/03/iran-war-deepens-egypts-fears-of-israel-reshaping-region-by-force/>
- Ibrahim, E. (2025). Are Iran and Egypt relations on the cusp of a 'seismic shift'? *Responsible Statecraft*. Available at: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/iran-egypt-relations/>
- Koettl, C. & Schmitt, E. & Cai, A. & Mellen, R. & Wood, D. (2026). Where the U.S. Is Building Up Military Force Near Iran. *New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/29/us/politics/trump-iran-us-military-maps.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Egypt. (2026). *Activities of the Foreign Minister*. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.eg/ar/Ministers/ForeignMinisterMeetings>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Islamic Republic of Iran. (2024). *Iran acting FM meets with Egyptian foreign minister in Tehran*. Available at: <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/750589/Iran-acting-FM-meets-with-Egyptian-foreign-minister-in-Tehran>
- Nassar, F & Üçağaç, A. (2025). An Analysis of Egyptian and Israeli Discourse on Israel's Control of the Philadelphi Corridor during the 2023 Gaza War. *The Rest Journal*. Available at: <https://therestjournal.com/2025/01/30/an-analysis-of-egyptian-and-israeli-discourse-on-israels-control-of-the-philadelphi-corridor-during-the-2023-gaza-war/>
- Pinfold, R. G., Jones, C., & Ehteshami, A. (2025). Collision course: How Iran and Israel brought the Middle East to the brink of war. *Global Policy*, 16(2), 289-298. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70004>
- Saleh, A. (2025). Iran, Egypt initiate a new chapter of rapprochement amid growing regional tensions. *Peoples Dispatch*. Available at: <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2025/06/06/iran-egypt-initiate-a-new-chapter-of-rapprochement-amid-growing-regional-tensions/>
- Samir, M. (2024). Iran President Attends D-8 Summit in Egypt, 1st Visit in a Decade. *Daily News Egypt*. Available at: <https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2024/12/19/iran-president-attends-d-8-summit-in-egypt-first-visit-decade/>



Tasnim News Agency (2026). *Iranian Official: Decision Made to Exchange Ambassadors with Egypt*. Available at: <https://www.tasnimnews.ir/en/news/2026/02/20/3521396/iranian-official-decision-made-to-exchange-ambassadors-with-egypt>

The New Arab (2025). *From isolation to influence: Iran tries regional diplomatic comeback, starting with Bahrain and Egypt*. Available at: <https://www.newarab.com/news/starting-bahrain-and-egypt-iran-tries-diplomatic-comeback>

Walt, S. M. (1990). *The origins of alliance*. Cornell University Press. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/9duv6449>

Strategic Hedging through the Abraham Accords: The UAE's Dual Mechanism Approach to Iranian Threats and Gulf Security Realignment from 2019 to 2023

Mariaam Atef

I. Introduction

The 2020 Abraham Accords normalized relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel, marking a significant transformation in Middle Eastern diplomacy. Much of the emerging scholarship interprets this shift through a neorealist lens, framing normalization as a traditional balancing coalition against Iran. However, such interpretations risk oversimplifying the UAE's broader strategic calculus in an era defined by systemic uncertainty, regional fragmentation, and perceived US retrenchment, defined as the gradual reduction of direct American military involvement in the Middle East and increasing ambiguity surrounding Washington's long-term security commitments to Gulf partners (MacDonald & Parent, 2024).

The central research question guiding this study is: How has the UAE used the Abraham Accords to implement a strategy of strategic hedging toward Iran, and what are the geopolitical implications for Gulf security dynamics? By examining post-2020 security cooperation, diplomatic positioning, and crisis behavior. In doing so, it contributes to debates on alliance formation and middle-power strategy in a transforming Middle Eastern order.

This paper argues that the UAE's participation in the Abraham Accords is better understood as a strategy of strategic hedging rather than straightforward external balancing. More specifically, it argues that the UAE represents a distinct variant of hedging among middle powers, characterized by the simultaneous institutionalization of security cooperation and economic engagement, rather than the selective or reactive hedging observed in comparable regional cases. While external balancing typically involves clear alignment with external

powers to directly counter a perceived threat, hedging functions as a geopolitical insurance strategy in which a state advances its national interests while simultaneously avoiding the risks associated with rigid alignment or overt confrontation (Hamdi & Salman, 2020). Under conditions of uncertainty, states pursue diversification of partnerships and calibrated engagement to protect their sovereignty and manage risk while maintaining strategic flexibility.

The UAE's perception of Iran reflects elements of the Balance of Threat framework: Tehran possesses significant aggregate military capabilities, an extensive missile arsenal, geographic proximity across the Gulf, and a record of proxy involvement in regional conflicts (Triantama, 2023). Yet despite these threat perceptions, the UAE has avoided adopting a fully confrontational posture toward Iran. This restraint reflects the UAE's domestic priorities, particularly its focus on economic diversification and global integration under Vision 2021, which make regional instability and political polarization costly (Kirmanj & Tofik, 2023).

Normalization with Israel provided the UAE access to advanced defense technologies, cybersecurity cooperation, and enhanced deterrence capabilities, while also strengthening its strategic relationship with the United States. However, rather than locking Abu Dhabi into a rigid anti-Iran bloc, the Abraham Accords functioned as an instrument of multi alignment (Bakare, 2024).

II. Theoretical Framework: Strategic Hedging in Middle Power Geopolitics

Strategic hedging has emerged in international relations literature as a response to the limitations of traditional alliance theory in explaining state behavior under conditions of systemic uncertainty. Rather than committing to rigid balancing or band wagoning, hedging describes a strategy through which states pursue diversification of partnerships while avoiding explicit alignment or direct confrontation. It functions as a form of geopolitical insurance: states simultaneously cultivate cooperative relations with multiple actors while maintaining deterrent capabilities against potential threats (Hamdi & Salman, 2020). While strategic hedging provides

the primary analytical lens for this study, defensive realism offers a complementary perspective by emphasizing the UAE's general preference for stability and security under conditions of regional uncertainty.

Hedging is typically characterized by the coexistence of two mechanisms toward a potential rival: engagement and counterbalancing. On one hand, states preserve diplomatic, economic, or institutional channels to reduce tensions and avoid escalation (Al-Moslemani, 2021). On the other, they quietly strengthen military capabilities or alternative partnerships to mitigate vulnerability (Hamdi & Salman, 2020). This dual-track approach creates strategic ambiguity, signaling flexibility rather than firm alignment in the event of major conflict.

Although this dual-track logic is widely observed among middle powers, its implementation varies significantly. In cases such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, hedging often takes the form of shifting alignments or episodic engagement. By contrast, the UAE case examined here demonstrates a more structured and simultaneous application of both mechanism.

III. UAE Pre-Accords Position Toward Iran

Before the 2020 Abraham Accords, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) viewed Iran as its primary regional security challenge. While unresolved territorial disputes over Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs persisted, these were less central than broader concerns about Iran's regional influence and military capabilities (Al-Moslemani, 2021; Guéraiche, 2023a). The UAE's approach combined cautious deterrence with pragmatic engagement, reflecting the dual goals of safeguarding national security and maintaining commercial links with Tehran (Triantama, 2023).

This combination of power asymmetry and regional assertiveness created a pronounced security dilemma, whereby defensive measures taken by one state are interpreted as threats by

the other, reinforcing mutual suspicion and strategic uncertainty. In structural terms, this relationship also reflects an asymmetric balance of power that favors Iran in terms of regional military capabilities. Abu Dhabi recognized Iran as its primary conventional military threat, prompting sustained investment in defense readiness and strategic planning. At the same time, the UAE pursued robust economic engagement with Tehran, particularly through Dubai's trading networks, reflecting a pragmatic balance between security concerns and economic interdependence.

Security calculations were further complicated by perceptions of U.S. retrenchment following regional crises in 2019, raising doubts about the reliability of external guarantees Abu Dhabi recognized Iran as its sole conventional military threat, prompting sustained investment in defense readiness and strategic planning. At the same time, the UAE pursued robust economic engagement with Tehran, particularly through Dubai's trading networks, reflecting a pragmatic balance of security and economic interests. Security calculations were further complicated by perceptions of U.S. retrenchment following regional crises in 2019 where attacks on oil tankers occurred near the UAE coast and in the Gulf of Oman , raising doubts about the reliability of external guarantees (Al-Moslemani, 2021).

In response, the UAE adopted a posture blending deterrence, diplomacy, and hedging. While maintaining credible military readiness against Iran, Abu Dhabi preserved diplomatic channels and economic ties, signaling vigilance without direct confrontation. This approach laid the groundwork for the strategic hedging framework formalized in the Abraham Accords, enabling the UAE to diversify its security partnerships while managing risks posed by an assertive Iranian regional posture (Jones, 2025). Importantly, this strategy reflects not a traditional balancing coalition against Iran, but a broader pattern of regional repositioning in which the UAE maintains engagement with Iran due to enduring economic interdependence, particularly as Dubai functions as a key commercial gateway for Iran despite sanctions.

IV. Post-2020 UAE Strategy: Dual Mechanism Hedging through Israel Iran Engagement

Following the Abraham Accords, the UAE shifted from cautious balancing toward a dual-mechanism strategy of strategic hedging (Abdullayev, 2024). This dual-track strategy has enabled the UAE to operationalize its hedging posture in practice, translating strategic flexibility into concrete policy behavior toward both Israel and Iran. Rather than representing a simple policy adjustment, this shift reflects the formalization and expansion of an already existing approach into a more structured and institutionalized strategy. This distinguishes the UAE from other regional actors that signed the Accords or engage in hedging behavior. For example, Bahrain's normalization has been more closely aligned with security balancing against Iran and lacks sustained economic or diplomatic engagement, while Saudi Arabia's approach reflects more cautious and selective engagement rather than full institutionalization (Sons, 2024).

1. Security Cooperation with Israel

The first mechanism of the UAE's hedging strategy involves enhancing its deterrent capabilities through normalization with Israel. While the Accords were framed as peace agreements, they functioned as geopolitical insurance, providing the UAE with access to high-end military and intelligence technology, including joint development of advanced counter-drone systems with Israel Aerospace Industries and EDGE Group, incorporating radar, electronic warfare, and autonomous interception capabilities. In addition, negotiations over the acquisition and local production of the Hermes 900 unmanned aerial system from Elbit Systems illustrate the transfer of advanced drone and surveillance technology to the UAE (Al-Eshaq & Bakir, 2025). Since 2020, security cooperation has evolved from clandestine contacts to an institutionalized quasi-alliance focused on countering asymmetric threats from Iran and its proxies (Jones, 2025; Triantama, 2023).

The UAE has leveraged this partnership to acquire cutting-edge Israeli defense technology, particularly in cyber-security, artificial intelligence, and missile defense systems (Traub et al., 2023). This cooperation is supported by measurable financial commitments, including a \$14 million joint R&D agreement between EDGE Group and Israeli firm High Lander focused on autonomous and counter-drone technologies. More broadly, UAE defense-industrial expansion reaching approximately \$1.5 billion in international orders by 2022 has been partly enabled by partnerships with Israeli firms and technology transfer arrangements (Al-Eshaq & Bakir, 2025). Collaborative efforts between EDGE Group and Israeli companies such as Israel Aerospace Industries and Elbit Systems have further focused on the development of unmanned and air defense systems.(Jones, 2025; Triantama, 2023).

Furthermore, the Accords acted as a catalyst for the UAE's acquisition of advanced American hardware, most notably the F-35 fighter jet. Although the deal was later suspended and remains unfulfilled. (Abdullayev, 2024). Normalization effectively removed the political barrier of Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME), allowing Abu Dhabi to modernize its air force to counter Iran's superior aggregate power in military personnel. Beyond procurement, the UAE has participated in joint military exercises with Israel, including large-scale air force drills and Red Sea naval maneuvers alongside the United States and Bahrain. These activities signal a credible counter-balancing mechanism intended to raise the cost of Iranian aggression without formalizing a mutual defense pact (Triantama, 2023).

2. Diplomatic Engagement with Iran

A hallmark of this engagement is the restoration of full diplomatic ties, highlighted by the UAE's decision to return its ambassador to Tehran in 2022 (Al-Moslemani, 2021). This move signaled that Abu Dhabi would not be "locked" into a purely antagonistic bloc, even as it

deepened ties with Israel. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAE utilized "soft power" by providing medical aid to Iran, a gesture of innovative diplomacy that was not reciprocated by other Gulf rivals (Guéraiche, 2023b).

The UAE's engagement is largely transactional, anchored by the robust commercial ties between Dubai and the Iranian economy. Despite international sanctions, the UAE remains a vital trade hub for Iran, with bilateral trade volumes serving as a stabilizing force that makes hard military balancing prohibitively expensive (Guirado & de Terán, 2021). Notably, the UAE is consistently identified in the literature as one of Iran's most important trade partners and a central re-export hub, particularly under international sanctions. Academic studies show that Iran's import economy has remained structurally dependent on Emirati trade channels, especially through Dubai, which functions as a key gateway for sanctioned goods and financial flows (Batmanghelidj, 2021). The UAE seeks to portray itself as the "Switzerland of the Middle East" a global hub for trade and finance that can "talk to everyone" regardless of political friction (Guéraiche, 2023b). This multi-alignment approach ensures that the UAE remains an indispensable interlocutor in regional security dialogues.

3. Crisis Behavior and De-escalation Signaling in the 2019 Fujairah Maritime Incidents, 2022 Houthi Strikes, and the 2023 Israel– Hamas War

The "originality" of the UAE's hedging strategy is most visible in its crisis behavior, which is defined by strategic ambiguity and a refusal to adopt a zero-sum posture during periods of high tension (Guirado & de Terán, 2021). Unlike a state committed to traditional balancing, the UAE frequently sends restraint signals to avoid being "entrapped" in broader rivalries between the U.S., Israel, and Iran (Sons, 2024). This was evident in cases such as the 2019 Fujairah tanker attacks, where the UAE avoided directly attributing responsibility to Iran in its official reporting, and during the 2022 Houthi drone and missile strikes on Abu Dhabi, where its response remained defensive and limited rather than escalatory (Abdullayev, 2024).

Evidence of this restraint was seen during the 2019 tanker attacks off the coast of Fujairah. While the U.S. and Israel were quick to blame Iran directly, the UAE maintained a non-accusatory stance in its official reports to the UN, citing a "state actor" without naming Tehran (Triantama, 2023). Similarly, following the 2022 Houthi drone and missile strikes on Abu Dhabi, the UAE's military response was calibrated and defensive, focusing on acquiring Israeli air defense tech rather than launching an escalatory counter offensive (Juneau, 2025). This demonstrated a commitment to "agility" using pragmatic solutions to manage threats while keeping the door open for future de-escalation.

The UAE's reaction to the 2023 Israel-Hamas war further illustrates this hedging posture. Despite immense public pressure and diplomatic strain, the UAE refused to abrogate the Abraham Accords, choosing instead to use its ties with Israel to exert moderate influence on the military campaign and facilitate humanitarian access. By maintaining the relationship, the UAE preserved its strategic autonomy and ensured it remained a relevant player in the "day after" regional security architecture (Jones, 2025; Khalilia, 2024). These cases are analyzed within a 2019 to 2023 timeframe, capturing the UAE's crisis behavior across the late pre-normalization period and the consolidation of its post-Abraham Accords strategic posture.

This behavior is part of a broader trend toward multi-alignment, where the UAE balances its partnerships with the U.S. and Israel against deepening economic ties with China and Russia, as well as its recent entry into the BRICS group. By diversifying its security and economic dependencies, the UAE avoids the risks of abandonment by a single great power while maximizing its own geopolitical clout (Hamdi & Salman, 2020; Sons, 2024). Ultimately, post-2020 evidence confirms that the UAE views normalization not as a final alignment, but as an instrument of hedging designed to navigate an era of systemic transition with maximum strategic flexibility.

V. Implications for Regional Order

For the regional order, this evolution marks a transition from a US led unipolar system toward a fragmented multipolarity where local powers exercise "subtle power" to shape their own security environment (Kidwai, 2020). This shift has been significantly accelerated by the Abraham Accords, which institutionalized formal cooperation between the UAE and Israel and created a new axis of security coordination outside traditional Arab consensus frameworks. Regional architecture is therefore being redefined; no longer governed solely by geographical adjacency, the "Regional Security Complex" is increasingly shaped by the pursuit of "geopolitical insurance" and strategic autonomy. This is evident in the emergence of structured UAE-Israel security and defense cooperation, alongside continued Emirati engagement with Iran, which together reflect a departure from binary alignment politics. As a result, the Palestinian issue has been increasingly marginalized in regional diplomatic priorities, while a new security hub centered on Israeli-Emirati cooperation has emerged to address the "Axis of Resistance" (Jones, 2025; Juneau, 2025).

VI. Durability of the New Order

The durability of this new order is underscored by its resilience during the 2023 Israel-Hamas war, where signatories resisted intense public and diplomatic pressure to abrogate the Accords (Karataş & Uslu, 2022). This persistence is anchored in the "neoliberal" foundation of Emirati foreign policy, which views status, economic diversification, and technological acquisition as essential components of its "Vision 2021" and long-term stability (Traub et al., 2023). While Iran's conventional military inferiority and the threat of regional proxies like the Houthis remain sources of uncertainty, the UAE's success in using normalization as an instrument of hedging suggests that these patterns are becoming permanent features of the regional geopolitical landscape (Triantama, 2023).

VII. Conclusion

Ultimately, the Abraham Accords should be understood not as a conventional alliance formation but as a strategic instrument embedded within the UAE's broader approach to managing regional uncertainty. By combining security cooperation with Israel and sustained engagement with Iran, the UAE has operationalized a dual-track strategy that enhances deterrence while preserving diplomatic and economic flexibility.

The key contribution of this paper lies in demonstrating that hedging among middle powers is not uniform. While existing literature often treats hedging as a general strategy, the UAE case reveals a more institutionalized and multidimensional form that integrates military, economic, and diplomatic tools simultaneously. In contrast to other regional actors such as Bahrain or Saudi Arabia, where hedging remains partial, reactive, or security-dominated, the UAE's approach is characterized by consistency, economic depth, and formalized cooperation structures. This distinction is critical for understanding variation in middle-power behavior in the Middle East.

This study only covers developments up to 2023 and does not include later escalations involving Iran that happened after this period. However, ongoing regional tensions may still affect how the UAE views the Abraham Accords, especially in terms of security and deterrence. While these events are outside the scope of this paper, continued Iranian pressure and regional instability could affect the UAE's perception of the importance of the Abraham Accords as a tool for deterrence, military cooperation, and reducing security risks.

VIII. Bibliography

Abdullayev, H. P. (2024). Between Peace and Conflict: The Middle East After the Abraham Accords. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 24(1), 40–50. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-1-40-50>

Al-Eshaq, S., & Bakir, A. (2025). Dynamic Security Regime: Analyzing UAE-Israel Security and Defense Cooperation Post Abraham Accords. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 03043754251359980. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754251359980>

- Al-Moslemani, S. M. (2021). The GCC, Iraq, and Iran: Perception of Threats Before and After the Crisis. In *Gulf Studies* (Vol. 3, pp. 163–178). Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-8735-1_10
- Bakare, N. (2024). De-securitizing and normalizing a regional actor: The case of Israel and Abraham accords. In *Arab-Israel Normalisation of Ties: Global Perspectives* (pp. 45–68). Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-7765-9_3
- Batmanghelidj, E. (2021). The Ins and Outs of Iranian Industrial Resilience under Sanctions. *The Muslim World*, 111(1), 96–112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12374>
- Guéraiche, W. (2023a). The UAE's Innovative Diplomacy: How the Abraham Accords Changed (or Did Not Change) Emirati Foreign Policy. In *Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations* (pp. 543–557). Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10971-3_27
- Guéraiche, W. (2023b). The UAE's Innovative Diplomacy: How the Abraham Accords Changed (or Did Not Change) Emirati Foreign Policy. In *Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations* (pp. 543–557). Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10971-3_27
- Guirado, J., & de Terán, I. G. (2021). The United Arab Emirates in the Middle East. Anti-islamism, militarism, and multiple-pressure strategy. *Revista Espanola de Ciencia Politica*, (56), 71–96. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.56.03>
- Hamdi, S., & Salman, M. (2020). The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 12(2), 127–152. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12528>
- Jones, C. (2025). Israel and the Gulf monarchies: A new Regional Security Complex or just complex regional security? *Middle Eastern Studies*, 61(3), 321–328. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2025.2455378>
- Juneau, T. (2025). Iran's Annus Horribilis in 2024: Beaten, but Not Defeated. *Middle East Policy*, 32(2), 3–17. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12814>
- Karataş, İ., & Uslu, N. (2022). The Abraham Accords: Can Interculturalism Solve Grave Conflicts of the Middle East? *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 57(2), 297–315. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2022.0022>
- Khalilia, A. (2024). Dynamics of normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab Gulf. *Palestine Technical University Research Journal*, 12(2), 185–205. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.53671/pturj.v12i2.563>
- Kidwai, S. A. (2020). The Rise of Iran as a Regional Power. *India Quarterly*, 76(2), 313–328. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928420917801>
- Kirmanj, S., & Tofik, R. (2023). The UAE's Foreign Policy Drivers. *Middle East Policy*, 30(4), 56–71. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12717>
- MacDonald, P. K., & Parent, J. M. (2024). The Dynamics of US Retrenchment in the Middle East. *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, 54(2). <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3287>



Sons, S. (2024). The Gulf momentum in flux geopolitics in the GCC states in times of growing multipolarism and regional transformation. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics* (pp. 619–642). Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47227-5_45

Traub, D., Cohen, R. A., & Kertcher, C. (2023). The road to normalization: The importance of the United Arab Emirates' neoliberal foreign policy in the normalization with Israel: 2004–2020. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 32(1), 60–78. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12286>

Triantama, F. (2023). UNITED ARAB EMIRATES - ISRAEL RAPPROCHEMENT: A RATIONAL CHOICE OF EMIRATIS. *Journal of International Studies(Malaysia)*, 19(1), 169–199. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jis2023.19.1.7>

The Politics of Victimhood and The Palestinian Israeli Conflict: The Centricity of Victimhood in the October 7th Attack and its Aftermath

Mireille Ayman

Introduction

When looking at current ongoing conflicts worldwide, none stand out more than the Palestinian Israeli conflict which has been ongoing for decades. Garnering more international attention than ever, victimhood stood out as a major aspect present within both sides' accounts and appeals for international recognition since the October 7th attack.⁶ Victimhood is primarily based on an unequal distribution of power and as such is inherently political, shaping narratives, beliefs and experiences. Palestinian and Israeli victimhood have an exclusionary dynamic where each one's victimhood has a unique form and is based on the absence of the Other. This makes it an essential aspect in the protractedness of the conflict and thus understanding it becomes necessary. As such, it is important to focus on victimhood as a central agent for the analysis and explanation of the October 7th attack and its aftermath seeing as it has been a very significant development in the conflict.

This paper seeks to address the following question: how did victimhood shape the behavior of Israelis and Palestinians during and after the 7th of October attack? Furthermore, a sub-question of this research is: do competitive victimhood narratives employed by both sides throughout the conflict impact its outcomes? Using Social Identity Theory (SIT) this paper argues that victimhood greatly impacts the behavior of both groups during and after the 7th of October attack where each

⁶ This paper uses Sayar (2019) conceptualization of victimhood defined as the following: "Victimhood can be described as a mindset that one perceives oneself as victim along with some feelings, beliefs, and behaviors related to this perception. Furthermore, the act of harm done on another or a group is called victimization, while the collective identity based on that harm is defined as victimhood. [An] identity based on victimhood [signifies] a search for recognition".

one competes for victimhood as a positive distinguishing determinant of social identity, which leads to the employment of social creativity and social competition strategies to improve their social status. This culminates in the reinforcement of exclusive victimhood narratives and the adoption of more extreme policy preferences by Israelis. Since this conflict is asymmetric, Palestinians' social competition strategy mainly relies on an approach of appeal, but there is still violence and aggression in its accompaniment. All of this contributed to the conflict's protracted and violent nature. This paper will begin by providing a literature review. Then the paper's theoretical framework, Social Identity Theory, will be discussed followed by the methodology used to prove its argument. Following that, it will employ the methodology on the case study and discuss outcomes. Finally, main contributions and conclusions will be provided.

Literature Review

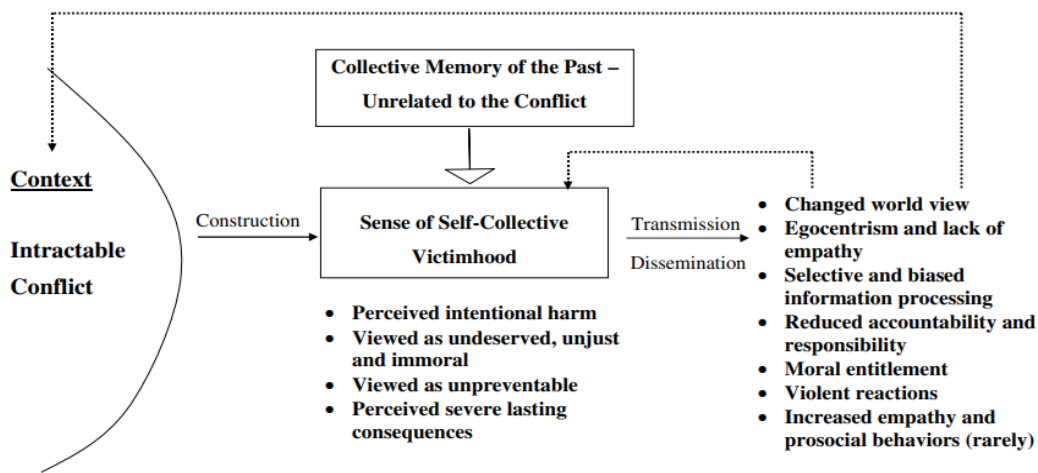
The examination of the literature allowed for the discernment of the relation between conflict, politics and victimhood, Palestinian victimhood, Israeli victimhood, the interplay between Israeli and Palestinian victimhood as main strands. The main points of each strand will be presented.

Politics, Victimhood and Conflict

The first strand addresses victimhood in relation to politics and conflicts. The literature shows that victimhood is a core conflict-supporting belief since it acts as the society's prism through which information processing and decision-making occurs (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020; Zur, 2008). That's because victimhood offers a societal conceptualization of conflict dynamics that gives a meaningful explanation of events which strengthens ingroup solidarity, and

promotes collective mobilization (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Jacoby, 2015; Serhii & Larysa, 2024; Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020).⁷ This is the foundation of politics of victimhood where collective experiences of victimhood become a powerful motivator for individual and group political action as seen in *Figure One* (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Kelman, 1999; Jacoby, 2015; Sayar, 2019; Schori-Eyal et al., 2014; Serhii & Larysa, 2024).

Figure One: Collective Victimhood in Protracted Conflicts



Source: Bar-Tal et al. (2009, p.243)

Research showed that, in conflicts, the psychology of victimhood deepens mutual distrust and impairs empathy, often resulting in a sense of righteousness and

⁷To elaborate, scholars conceptualized victimhood as a status, but as a foundation of societal systems and a continuous process not just that establishes social and political functions of the group (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Jacoby, 2015; Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020; Noor et al., 2012).

For example, common suffering is a big unifying force especially when it is a part of national memory and imposes societal duties in the form of upkeep of this victimhood (Caplan, 2012; Jacoby, 2015). As such victimhood is a significant element in the construction of the collective identity of an ingroup, especially observed in times of conflict (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Horwitz, 2018; Jacoby, 2015; Noor et al., 2012; Pappé, 2015). Collective memory employs history to provide political justification for nation building and explain past events and becomes the socio-psychological infrastructure for conflict-based identity and behavior (Ballinger, 2004; Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Jacoby, 2015; Schori-Eyal et al., 2017). Core societal beliefs and ethos of protracted conflicts are based on victimhood where outgroup is evil and unjust while ingroup is just and moral (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). As such, it serves as a way to differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup; where the outgroup is delegitimized and framed as vile and violent and while ingroup is idealized thus aiding in gaining international recognition of the justness of their cause (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Kelman, 1999; Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020).

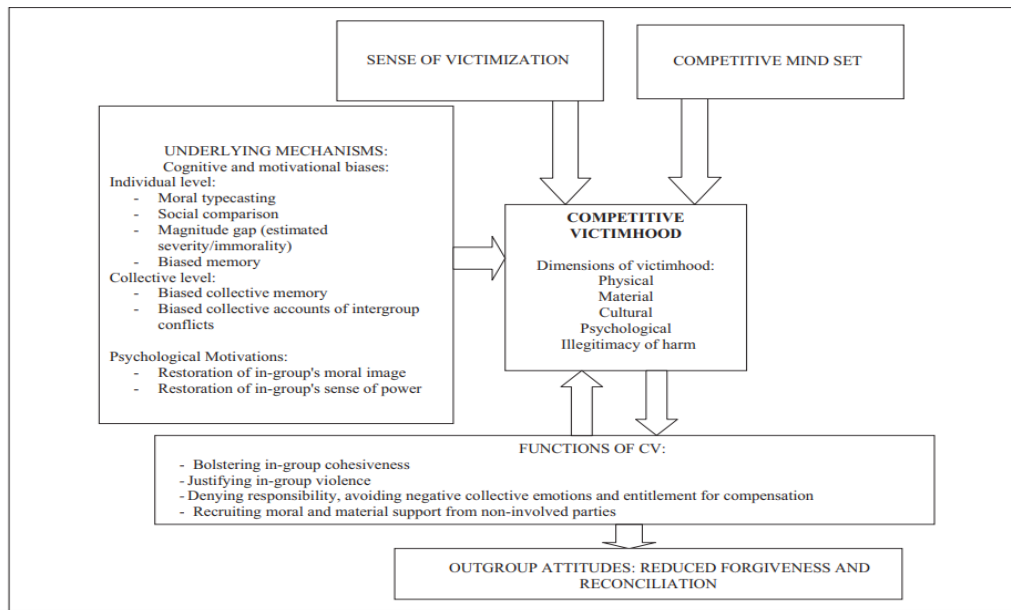
moral entitlement (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Jacoby, 2015; Karlin, 2010; Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020; Schori-Eyal et al., 2017).⁸ As such, victimhood is perceived as zero-sum where each group seeks the status of victim and automatically assigns the other that of the victimizer, leading to the emergence of competitive victimhood (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Ferguson et al., 2010; Hameiri & Nadler, 2017; Karlin, 2010; Kelman, 1999; Noor et al., 2012; Sayar, 2019; Schori-Eyal et al., 2014; Serhii & Larysa, 2024; Zur, 2008).⁹ As such, both sides of the conflict justify their own behavior by establishing victimization which can also act as proof of entitlement to compensation as seen in *Figure Two* (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Noor et al., 2012; Sayar, 2019; Schori-Eyal et al., 2014; Serhii & Larysa, 2024).¹⁰

Figure Two: Mechanisms and Functions of Competitive Victimhood

⁸ The moral authority granted to victims is often equated to a carte blanche for violence and can lead to a disconnection between harms inflicted upon the outgroup and the ingroup's experiences (Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020). This is also evidenced by the political elites that "aspire" to achieve the victim status and institutionalize it (Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020). As such, the politicized "ideology of victimization" often comes in tandem with self-defense as part of the political elites' strategy to gain public support and international recognition and becomes their rationale for aggressive measures (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Jacoby, 2015; Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020; Zur, 2008)

⁹ Collective victimhood has social and political profits and thus parties to a conflict strive to maintain it as a way to gain an advantage for ingroup at the expense of the outgroup (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Ferguson et al., 2010).

¹⁰ As a result of the deep sense of insecurity that comes with this, any negative actions are used as proof of innate hostility and justifies harsher and more aggressive methods in dealing with them thus cementing a sense of righteous victimhood (Karlin, 2010).



Source: Noor et al. (2012, p.353)

Victimhood's internalization often results in an "exaggerated entitlement ideology" that desensitizes a group to their own aggressive actions (Ferguson et al., 2010; Jacoby, 2015; Karlin, 2010; Kelman, 1999; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Staub, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2012; Volkan, 2014; Zur, 2008).¹¹ Thus, this can result in the dehumanization of the other group and the delegitimization of any hostile or retaliatory actions and thus prolonging the conflict (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Karlin, 2010; Mack, 1988; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Schori-Eyal et al., 2014).

Palestinian victimhood

The second strand addresses the main characteristics and foundations of Palestinian victimhood. Pappe (2015) highlighted that for Palestinians, Israel is the

¹¹ To add, societal narratives of victimhood are passed on from one generation to another in the form of national narratives which increase the group's identification and internalization of their victimhood furthering the need for gaining recognition for their suffering and leading to moral inversions at times (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Ferguson et al., 2010; Jacoby, 2015; Karlin, 2010; Kelman, 1999; Mauer, 2024; Schori-Eyal et al., 2017). With the assigning of blame to the other group, the victim achieves moral superiority and the outgroup's experiences are devalued. This is further explored later in this paper.

The outgroup's possibility of being victims is completely negated and the ingroup's role as a victimizer is discarded each group seeking to justify own actions through delegitimizing the other's (Karlin, 2010).

ultimate victimizer that puts them through inexplicable suffering daily and denies them of their most basic human and civil rights.¹² Furthermore, the Palestinian identity is intertwined with their struggle to exist and to resist (Akkus, 2019). As such, exclusionary victimhood is a crucial component of the Palestinian narrative where it is employed as the basis for national unity and resisting occupation (Akkus, 2019; Caplan, 2012; Jacoby, 2015).¹³ To add, Palestinians claim the moral high ground in addition to victimhood where this moral image stemming from their narratives of resistance is used to condemn Israeli narratives and justify own resistance and/or violence (Ballinger, 2004; Kenderes, 2012).¹⁴ They believe that the West and Israel use the holocaust as their claim of victimhood to gain advantage through the manipulation of international opinion and camouflage all crimes committed against them. Thereby they disregard Israelis claims of victimhood and their exclusionary conceptualization of victimhood is reinforced (Caplan, 2012).

Israeli victimhood

The third strand focuses on the Israeli victimhood, its importance in nation-building, and how it is a core aspect in their behavior and state strategies. The premise underpinning the Israeli ethos, identity, and politics is victimhood and historical victimhood; becoming the country's foundational identity (Bar-Tal, 1998;

¹² A core component of Palestinian national identity is the "Nakba" which is considered to be the ultimate trauma of their victimhood and is equivalent to the Israeli's memory of the holocaust (Caplan, 2012). The Nakba is commonly viewed as a constant reminder of the shame and dispossession they suffered and thus constitutes a call to action and instrument for activism (Caplan, 2012).

¹³ To add, its importance is compounded by the fact that their state institutions are weak and are secondary to the Israeli state institutions and thus are insufficient for comprehensive nation building (Akkus, 2019; Caplan, 2012; Jacoby, 2015).

¹⁴ Wermenbol (2017) argues that the Palestinian narrative of exclusive victimhood is based on the interpretive framework of their reality as an 'ongoing Nakba' and the resultant victimization led to hopelessness that fueled many Palestinian attacks as the attempt to change their current situation (Wilmer, 2017). This exclusionary victimhood is also used by the PLA who uses the moral, just, and freedom fighting aspects of Palestinian character to bolster its image internationally (Kenderes, 2012). Also, in its failure in achieving the goals of Palestinians, it uses the victim status as well to claim externally enforced powerlessness (Kenderes, 2012).

Caplan, 2012; Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020; Peleg, 2019). The construction and imposition of Israeli national identity is grounded in the construction of the ‘Other’ that is constantly threatening their security and thus requires conquering (Pappe, 2015; Wermenbol, 2017).¹⁵ As such, violence is framed in a way that is sympathetic to their cause where their acts of aggression are legitimized and their status as victims was internationally appropriated to serve this regard (Kenderes, 2012). Palestinian resistance also plays in their favor further cementing their narrative through terming it “terrorism” and as such the asymmetric extreme form of military reaction is justifiable (Kelman, 1999; Kenderes, 2012). On a societal level, there are significant links between Israelis’ views on the conflict and the societal belief of being a victim in it where a 2008 study showed that over 40% of respondents highly agreed and 20% somewhat agreed with the statement ‘Throughout all the years of the conflict, Israel has been the victim and the Arabs and the Palestinians are the side causing harm’ (Bar-Tal et al., 2009).¹⁶

How the Victimhood of Israelis and Palestinians Interplay

¹⁵ The Jewish Israeli victimization narrative is predicated on the Holocaust as the pillar of Jewish common belief of illegitimate exclusion and persecution which led to the emergence of political Zionism that called for the formation of a state for Jews (Akkuş, 2019; Bar-Tal, 1998; Puar, 2015). Furthermore, their status as victims is furthered by their view of Arab states as major threats to their security and the continuation of Palestinian attacks and this victim mentality is used to justify their occupation of Palestinian territory and the imposition of military control (Wilmer, 2017). As such, the status of victimhood in that sense became sacred where the Jew henceforth is the ‘ultimate victim in modern history’ since they have had to defend themselves for years from the baseless antisemitism and Arab hostility (Akkuş, 2019; Bar-Tal, 1998; Kelman, 1999; Pappe, 2015; Schori-Eyal et al., 2014). The emergent righteous victim self-image is an essential aspect of the Zionist ideology that is deeply rooted in the conduct of the Israeli political elite that incorporates victim narratives as justification for armed conflicts (Caplan, 2012; Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2020; Pappe, 2015; Peleg, 2019). Peleg (2019) added a unique dimension by noting that Zionism, which acts as a national liberation movement, adopted an agentic victorious victimhood where victim status is denied from other groups (this also includes different sects of Jews like the Mizrahi, and Yemeni Jews) i.e. exclusionary victimhood.

¹⁶ This is explained in the literature through the claim that Israelis are operating under a legitimized victimhood that was historically and generationally passed down, and this perceived victimhood became a kind of mass delusion that allows settler colonialism to be supported and practiced by many Israelis who do not see it as wrong (Mauer, 2024; Schori-Eyal et al., 2014).

The fourth strand focuses on the interplay between the victimhood of both sides and how this shapes the behavior and dynamics of both groups. Reinforcing fear and misunderstanding, literature showed that victimhood is a root cause of the conflict's protracted nature, leading to impaired empathy and distrust that gave rise to an exclusive victimhood mentality and entitlement ideology, justifying the delegitimization of the other and hostile retaliatory action (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Hameiri & Nadler, 2017; Kelman, 1999; Schori-Eyal et al., 2014).¹⁷ The Israel-Palestine conflict draws heavily from past and present victimhood to perpetuate its status quo where both sides claim the role of the victim and attempt to subvert the other's narrative (Karlin, 2010; Moussa, 2020; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Wermenbol, 2017). The acknowledgement of the other side as a victim has been absent in both sides and there is a noteworthy fear surrounding the acknowledgement of this process (Pappe, 2015). For Israelis, recognizing Palestinians as victims is traumatic since it involves the recognition of the injuries of the atrocities they committed against the land's native population and questions the foundational basis of their state ('a land without a people for a people without a land') and thus disqualifies their identity's fundamental constitution (Caplan, 2012; Pappe, 2015).¹⁸ As for Palestinians, acknowledging Israelis as victims serves as a de facto justification for Israeli actions and aggression since sympathizing with their suffering also takes away from the demonized and degraded image that they have of them (Pappe, 2015).

¹⁷ Karlin (2010) claims that victimhood is the most pervasive issue in the Israeli Palestinian conflict and this claim is backed by Hameiri & Nadler's (2017) emphasis on victimization as a major building block of each group's collective identity.

¹⁸ Instead, they see Palestinian as the victimizers who are driven by the same hatred motivating their precursors (Caplan, 2012).

The relation between both sides' exclusionary victimhood led to exclusive ingroup narratives becoming more salient and thus competitive (Caplan, 2012; Kenderes, 2012; Kelman, 1999; Wermenbol, 2017). This is because recognition is a form of legitimacy and also recognition of the other invalidates the exclusionary narrative of each side, both deny the other where at most times Palestinians refer to Israelis as the "Zionist entity" and "imperialist power" and Israelis refers to Palestinians as "security threats" or "terrorists" (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Hameiri & Nadler, 2017; Kelman, 1999; Puar, 2015; Siniver, 2011). In addition, the establishment of victimhood is of key importance to both sides since it is their most powerful tool for eliciting diplomatic, military, and monetary support on both domestic and international levels (Kelman, 1999). Victimhood henceforth is cultivated to gain international recognition and a right for 'righteous' retaliation (Kelman, 1999).¹⁹ As such, changing these victimhood narratives would be a necessary precondition for the resolution of the conflict (Wermenbol, 2017).

The examination of the literature showed that there is a clear absence of the examination of the perceptions of the 7th of October attack and its aftermath through the lens of victimhood although it provides excellent explanatory insights into the behavior of both sides in the conflict. Based on this, this paper asks the question of: how did victimhood, as a foundational element of the social identity of Israelis and

¹⁹ This is a barrier to conflict resolution where negative interdependence stands in the way of having a transcended national identity or reconciliation (Kelman, 1999; Wermenbol, 2017). Victimhood can also be used as a way to reject international pressures and justify lack of restraint in action against Palestinians which is linked to victimhood granting moral entitlement and a license to commit immoral acts (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). This is clear in 1973 Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir response to international criticism where she stated: 'As for those who are trying to preach to us now ... You didn't come to the help of millions of Jews in the Holocaust ... you don't have the right to preach' (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). To add, a study found a strong association between Israeli sense victimhood and reduced group guilt over Israeli actions against Palestinians where those with strong victimhood sense expressed less guilt and moral accountability, employing more exonerating narratives and justifications than their counterparts (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Schori-Eyal et al., 2014).

Palestinians, effect and shape their behaviors in the October 7th attack and its aftermath?

Theoretical Framework

To examine these questions, this study will employ the Social Identity Theory of intergroup relations (SIT).

Social Identity Theory (SIT):

Intergroup conflicts are best explained by looking at them in terms of a group phenomenon where in social situations individuals think of themselves as group members and seek a positive social identity (Ellemer & Haslam, 2012; Hogg, 2016; Trepte, 2013; Suleiman, 2004).²⁰ This is produced by intergroup comparisons where groups vie for favorable comparative dimensions and as such the social identity they hold underpins competitive intergroup behavior (social comparison) (Ellemer & Haslam, 2012; Hogg, 2016; Trepte, 2013; Pilecki & Hammack, 2013; Suleiman, 2004).²¹ Thus, social groups are a primary determinant of social behavior and perception, and as such they dictate a specific form of a shared identity on their members which shapes who they are and how they are supposed to behave (social identification) (Ellemer & Haslam, 2012; Hogg, 2016; Trepte, 2013).²²

Another important dimension added by SIT is the importance of power and status differences in determining group and individual behavior especially in

²⁰ The theory's creator, Tajfil (1972) defined social identity as an individual's knowledge of belonging to certain social groups whose membership comes with emotional and value significance. This theory differentiates between personal and social identity through psychological processes where social categorization separates individuals into group clusters and defines each person's place in society (Tajfel, 1974).

²¹ They highlight ingroup distinction from outgroup where people discriminate against outgroup and favor their ingroup (Ellemer & Haslam, 2012; Hogg, 2016; Trepte, 2013).

²² Social identity content is shaped by the features of the group, and the social identity shapes the individual's emotions and behavior (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). The aforementioned processes of social categorization, social comparison, and social identification are how people define their position relative to other groups and derive social reality (Ellemer & Haslam).

asymmetrical interactions (Suleiman, 2004).²³ SIT differentiates between the different social strategies that people use to derive a positive social identity and respond to status inferiority (Ellemer & Haslam; Kessler, 1999; Mummendey et al., 1999). They are: first, individual mobility where individuals seek to be included in a group of higher social standing rather than a devalued one; second, social creativity which is the process where group members attempt to redefine cognitive interpretations of intergroup comparison where the ingroup is represented positively as opposed to the outgroup, and the third is social competition where groups engage in forms of conflict to change the status quo (Ellemer & Haslam; Pilecki & Hammack, 2013; Suleiman, 2004). As such, these identity enhancement strategies can lead to intergroup discrimination and conflict to maintain particularistic positive identities (Ellemer & Haslam; Kelman, 1999). Since groups look for positive distinctions over others, moral superiority inherent in victimhood is coveted and as such is a socially competitive element of social identity (Pilecki & Hammack, 2013). Victimhood is a form of perception of group status instability and illegitimacy. As such, the group will engage in the measures as discussed in order to “correct” their status. The higher the saliency of victimhood in a group’s perception, the more likely they will undertake the social competition strategy.

Based on this theory, this paper argues that each group competes for victimhood as a positive distinguishing determinant of social identity to respond to status inferiority. This leads to the employment of social competition strategies to

²³ This depends on their perception of the group’s status quo in terms of legitimacy (perception of status quo as just or fair) and stability (security of group status and its ability to be challenged by outgroup) (Pilecki & Hammack, 2013; Suleiman, 2004). In cases of illegitimacy and instability of the low status group, it will attempt to narrow the social distance between them and the higher social status group (Pilecki & Hammack, 2013; Suleiman, 2004).

improve their social status. As for how this explains/relates to the October 7th attack and its aftermath, this paper will utilize the following methodology to establish that.

Methodology

This paper employs a deductive qualitative approach that is similar to that of Pilecki & Hammack (2013) where victimhood was explored through discourse analysis. Unlike them, however, it will focus on the relation between discourse and the reproduction and legitimization of social power structures and victimhood and their role as social competition and creativity strategies (van Dijk, 1993). Through critical discourse analysis these underlying ideologies, power relations, hegemony, and inequalities constructed within discourses can be unearthed (Bibi & Shaheen, 2025; Damanhoury et al., 2025; van Dijk, 1998). Since ideologies are socially shared beliefs of groups, exploration of victimhood through SIT lens and CDA is viable (van Dijk, 1998). This will enable the understanding of ‘if and how’ victimhood is used and applied within a discursive social competition strategy to gain positive group distinction over the other (Bibi & Shaheen, 2025; van Dijk, 1998).

Van Dijk (1998)’s Ideological Square, focusing on how language is used to create and propagate an “us vs them” mindset to enable favourable distinction to be awarded to ingroup, will be utilized to analyse the discourse used in interviews of Israelis and Palestinians (Wibowo, 2025; van Dijk, 1998). It provides the assumption that an overall strategy of ideological communication consists of the following main moves as seen in the following Figure Three:

Figure Three: Van Dijk (1998)’s Ideological Square:

- 1) Express/emphasize information that is positive about Us.
- 2) Express/emphasize information that is negative about Them.
- 3) Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about Them.
- 4) Suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about Us.

Source: Author based on Van Dijk (1998)

These four moves play a big role in the strategy of positive ingroup distinction and negative outgroup presentation with great implications on groups or social issues (van Dijk, 1998). The data used for this research is from an interview of Palestinian and Israeli advocates to suit the paper's societal level approach. Specifically, this paper uses the transcript of an interview/roundtable conducted by Jubilee after October 7th featuring 4 Palestinian advocates and 4 Israeli advocates in order to apply van Dijk's (1998) ideological square (please find the transcript in Appendix A). The mode of analysis and information presentation follows Wibowo (2025).

Application and Research Results

The following figures contain the result of the application of the methodology (Appendix B shows the step prior to the following one):

Figure Four: Emphasizing Ingroup's Good Things:

Table 1: Quadrant 1 - Emphasize "Our" Good Things		
Element	Content	
Quadrant	1 - Our Good	
	Palestinians	Israelis
Key Points	• Emphasize ingroup's morality and the peace-seeking nature of their group, seeking peaceful co-existence. • Moral Cause where, only wanting to regain their freedom and land, they engage in peaceful resistance. • Express deep familial and societal attachments. • Show tolerance and respect for all, including 'jews'.	• Maintain justifiability and lawfulness of actions as they were used to defend their state and society. • Stress on the group's peacemaking efforts and constant usage of diplomatic means (legitimize the morality of group actions even when met with hostility). • Emphasize group's aim for peace although they have been unjustifiably victimized by both the world and Palestinians.
Strategy	Show own ingroup's good qualities to establish positive distinctions over outgroup. This is done by speaking positively about own actions and intentions. This validates each group's social standing and delegitimizes the other group's claims. Also, it helps solidify each one's victim status.	
Example in Speech	"I consider everyone in or Palestine to be an extended member of my family." "We do not want Jewish people to die,...[no] Muslim that believes in Islam truly, that can justify in any way, that a Jewish person doesn't have the right to live, zero."	"From our perspective, we have diplomatically offered peace so many times ... we would never initiate those wars." "I think that the most pro-Israel thing you can do is wanna live in peace."
The Goal	-Earn third-party acknowledgement of ingroup's social standing's positive distinction and thus gain international support. -Mitigate social structure instability by enhancing ingroup solidarity and maintainance of comparative advantage over outgroup.	

Source: Author based on interview from Jubilee (2023)

Figure Five: Emphasizing Outgroup's Bad Things:

Table 2: Quadrant 2 - Emphasize "Their" Bad Things		
Element	Content	
Quadrant	2- Their Bad	
	Palestinians	Israelis
Key Points	• Showcase how they have been victimized historically and currently by Israelis. (This also takes the focus away from October 7th and unearthes their historical victimhood). • Emphasize unmerited hostility, brutality, and aggression by Israelis, including death tolls of civilians and gruesome real-life examples. • Comparatively show that they have suffered a lot more than Israelis and delegitimze Israeli claims of morality.	• Repeated emphasis on group's losses and great trauma and peril they suffered because of constant exposure to security threats from palestinians. • Maintain that many Palestinians have been brought up to victimize Israelis and that many of them truly want to ensure their eradication. • Palestinian retaliatory actions framed as terrorism and great stress placed on Hamas commitment of atrocities.
Strategy	Highlight outgroup's negative qualities using harsh language and real life incidents (with numbers) to establish relative positive distinctions of ingroup over outgroup. This is a strategy of social competition that allows them to change ingroup's status quo for the better through emphasizing outgroup's aggression and victimization.	
Example in Speech	"I looked up children killed ... 16-year-old, 15-year-old, 14-year-old ..." "This is the logic of Israel. If you're Palestinian, you're a terrorist." "75 years of illegal occupation, we have been bleeding and we have been suffering."	"...slaughter 1400 of our people, and they raped our women and they beheaded our babies" "My question is why the kids in Gaza are learning books of Hitler." "After this October 7th massacre, the guys flying in and like raping and burning people are being called militants and not terrorists."
The Goal	Justify ingroup's actions and delegitimize that of outgroups. It also helps mobilize own group and by emphasizing outgroup's brutality and victimization, they solidify their social standing, gain international support and validate resistance claims.	

Source: Author based on interview from Jubilee (2023)

Figure Six: Hiding Outgroup's Bad Things:

Table 3: Quadrant 3 - Hide "Our" Bad Things		
Element	Content	
Quadrant	3 - Our Bad (Hidden)	
	Palestinians	Israelis
Key Points	- Deflecting responsibility by attributing violence to radicals and emphasizing group peacefulness. - Attribute group wrongdoing to years of occupation and exposure to Israeli aggression and crimes against humanity - Demonstrate inequality between groups and asymmetry between power capabilities of both sides.	- Justify actions as lawful and in self-defence against terrorism - Deny accusations of immorality by claiming they only seek security, peace, and a way to protect themselves. - Downplay incidents incited by them by denying that they happened or claiming they were justified as a response to terrorism.
Strategy	Attribute ingroup negative behavior to outgroup actions; by legitimizing own actions as a counter to outgroup's unjustifiable ones. Also, groups refuse to take responsibility for victimization of another by simply establishing that they are the victim.	
Example in Speech	"Aren't there some radical people on both side? I'm sure there are. We can't control everybody." "Israel is one of the strongest militaries in the world...The people in Gaza, literally the civilians have nothing to defend themselves with. Their buildings are falling on them."	"I don't call it occupation, I call it protect your country from some terrorist organization, extremists." "They said 500 people and this Israel had bombed. Every major news outlet reported this. ..It was proven very unequivocally that's not what happened."
The Goal	By deemphasizing wrongdoings or delegitimizing accusations of victimization, groups maintain their positive social identity. This also helps them avoid responsibility and the resultant cognitive dissonance of being part of a stigmatized 'evil' social group.	

Source: Author based on interview from Jubilee (2023)

Figure Seven: Emphasizing Ingroup's Good Things:

Table 4: Quadrant 4 - Hide "Their" Good Things		
Element	Content	
Quadrant	4 - Their Good (Hidden)	
	Palestinians	Israelis
Key Points	- Minimize Israeli suffering or experiences - Blame Israelis and their government for actions committed against them by Palestinian groups (resistance). - Delegitimizing Israeli fears and claims of self-defence and peacefulness. This is by emphasizing that Israelis initiated and propagated the conflict.	- Downplayed Palestinian claims of peacefulness by highlighting Hamas attacks. - Insisted on focusing on Palestinian terrorists (Hamas) and always redirecting conversations to focus on that. - Placed blame on civilians in Gaza as well for the October 7th attacks. This is to leave no room for the 'innocent civilians' argument.
Strategy	Hide or ignore any positive contributions of the outgroup by only focusing on their negative actions. This helps solidify ingroup claims of higher moral standing while giving the outgroup no room for rebuttal of the negative social status being attributed to them.	
Example in Speech	"Do you think it's appropriate to be partying till six in the morning a few miles away from an open air prison where people don't have water". "Every time we say ... what about us? 10,000 Palestinians just were unalived and bombed Gaza. What about us?"	"It's Hamas' fault." "What they did in October 7th. They are animals, they're monsters. They more than animals. You know, animals kill to feed children, animals kill to feed themselves, to survive. They did it for fun. So for me, they're monsters." "A lot of Gaza citizens went in, you saw them in plain clothing going through the border and coming in and kidnapping people".
The Goal	Prevent outgroup from establishing positive distinctions that decrease ingroup's status quo and social standing. This is also to maintain own narratives of victimhood by showing irredeemability of other group's actions and avoid ingroup dis cohesion.	

Source: Author based on interview from Jubilee (2023)

Discussion

Through applying CDA, the main assumptions of the SIT have been confirmed where constant usage of victimhood as a social competition strategy was evident within the discourse of both Palestinians and Israelis. A very interesting and noteworthy phenomenon is that as soon as one group points out their own suffering or attempts to highlight ingroup positive distinctions, they are quick to be countered by the other group. This shows a high level of competitive victimhood and just how great the instability of the social belief structure is and that the ingrained belief of its illegitimacy shapes intergroup behavior. This is evident from the various attempts to redefine social realities and relative distinctions by both groups

Within this interview the narratives of competitive victimhood were very clear, with each group competing to establish their own righteousness and unjustifiable victimization which is a clear employment of social competition strategy. A clear example of this is the October 7th attack itself, where for one group it can be seen as a justifiable response as resistance against victimization of the other. While for the other group it is seen as further victimization by outgroup and justification for further retaliation. As such, in its aftermath there is increased social tensions and higher reliance on victimhood narratives as social competition strategies to maintain better intergroup distinction and gather international support to group's own cause as seen in this interview.

As such, the October 7th attack led to the reinforcement of exclusive and competitive victimhood narratives for both sides. This culminated in mutual delegitimization and dehumanization, heightening tensions, and inciting extremist behaviour by both groups which is especially seen in Israeli policy preferences for violence and in the Palestinian strategy of appeal and even justification of the attack.

Conclusion

To conclude, through utilizing the SIT to answer the question of how victimhood shaped the behavior of Israelis and Palestinians during and after the 7th of October attack, this paper found that victimhood greatly impacted the behaviour of both groups during and after the 7th of October attack leading to the reinforcement of exclusive victimhood narratives through the adoption of various social competition strategies. This greatly contributed to furthering the protracted status of the conflict and heightened competitive intergroup dynamics. As such, this paper was able to establish the importance of using the lens of victimhood to understand and gain insights into the behaviour of both sides of the conflict. That said, it recommends future research to conduct more in-depth interviews to further validate this paper's argument and establish the extent of the effect that victimhood narratives have on the behaviour of both sides.

Bibliography

- Akkuş, B. (2019). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the perspective of identity perception: an analysis in the framework of institutions. *The Journal of International Social Research*, 12(65), 155–165. <https://doi.org/10.17719/JISR.2019.3434>
- Ballinger, P. (2004). Exhumed histories: Trieste and the politics of (exclusive) victimhood. *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 6(2), 145–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461319042000242038>
- Bar-Tal, D. (1998). Societal beliefs in times of intractable conflict: The Israeli case. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 9(1), 22-50.
- Bar-Tal, D., Chernyak-Hai, L., Schori, N., & Gundar, A. (2009). A sense of self-perceived collective victimhood in intractable conflicts. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 91(874), 229–258. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1816383109990221>
- Bibi, A., & Shaheen, U. (2025). Resistance and Rhetoric: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Mahmoud Abbas's Speeches on the Israel-Palestine Conflict. *Social Science Review Archives*, 3(1), 1745-1755.
- Caplan, N. (2012). Victimhood in Israeli and Palestinian national narratives. *Bustan the Middle East Book Review*, 3(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187853012x633508>
- Damanhoury, K. E., Saleh, F., & Lebovic, M. (2025). Covering the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: A critical discourse analysis of Al Jazeera English and BBC's online reporting on the 2023 Gaza War. *Journalism and Media*, 6(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6010009>
- El-Kurd, M. (2025). *Perfect victims: And the Politics of Appeal*. Haymarket Books.
- Ellemers, N., & Haslam, S. A. (2012). Social identity theory. *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, 2, 379-398.
- Ferguson, N., Burgess, M., & Hollywood, I. (2010). Who are the Victims? Victimhood Experiences in Postagreement Northern Ireland. *Political Psychology*, 31(6), 857–886. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2010.00791.x>
- Hameiri, B., & Nadler, A. (2017). Looking backward to move forward. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 43(4), 555–569. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216689064>

- Hogg, M. A. (2016). Social identity theory. In *Understanding peace and conflict through social identity theory: Contemporary global perspectives* (pp. 3-17). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Horwitz, R. B. (2018). Politics as victimhood, victimhood as politics. *Journal of Policy History*, 30(3), 552–574. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0898030618000209>
- Hweij, R. A. (2024). The Colonizer Within: Exploring facets of internalized oppression in Palestine. *Cairo Studies in English*, 2024(2), 79–97. <https://doi.org/10.21608/cse.2024.317161.1185>
- Jaber, L., Stirbys, C., Scott, J., & Foong, E. (2022). Indigenous Women's Experiences of Lateral Violence: A Systematic Literature review. *Trauma Violence & Abuse*, 24(3), 1763–1776. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380221077316>
- Jacoby, T. A. (2015). A theory of victimhood: Politics, conflict and the construction of victim-based identity. *Millennium*, 43(2), 511-530.
- Jubilee. (2023, October 8). *Israel vs Palestine | Middle ground roundtable* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/fo_nWmRGi_o
- Karlin, D. R. (2010). *Righteous victims: The role of competing victim identities in the Israeli Palestinian Conflict: A social psychological paradigm* (Order No. 1477212). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Publicly Available Content Database. (577384148). <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/righteous-victims-role-competing-victim/docview/577384148/se-2>
- Kelman, H. C. (1999). The interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian national identities: the role of the other in existential conflicts. *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(3), 581–600. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00134>
- Kenderes, A. M. (2012). *Facebook, Political Narrative, and Political Change: A Case Study of Palestinian Youth*. 1–362. <https://escholarship.org/content/qt3p3041rq/qt3p3041rq.pdf?t=n2f7yw>
- Kenderes, A. M. (2012). *Facebook, Political Narrative, and Political Change: A Case Study of Palestinian Youth*. 1–362. <https://escholarship.org/content/qt3p3041rq/qt3p3041rq.pdf?t=n2f7yw>
- Kessler, T. (1999). Strategies to cope with negative social identity: Predictions by social identity theory and relative deprivation theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

- Kira, I. A., Alawneh, A. W. N., Aboumediene, S., Lewandowski, L., & Laddis, A. (2014). Dynamics of oppression and coping from traumatology perspective: The example of Palestinian adolescents. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 20(4), 385.
- Mack, J. (1988). The Enemy System *The Lancet*, 332(8607), 385–387. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(88\)92848-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(88)92848-6)
- Markiewicz, T., & Sharvit, K. (2020). When victimhood goes to war? Israel and victim claims. *Political Psychology*, 42(1), 111–126. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12690>
- Mauer, B. (2024). Drama triangles in Nadine Gordimer’s “Once upon a Time” and The War in Gaza. *Zenodo (CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research)*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13135992>
- Meister, R. (2002). Human rights and the politics of victimhood. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 16(2), 91–108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7093.2002.tb00400.x>
- Mohammed, R. S., & Al-Ghezze, K. H. A. (2024). frame semantic analysis of The Israeli Narrative of Victimization in Gaza wars. *Mağallat Wāsiṭ Li-l-‘ulūm al-Insāniyyat*, 20(4), 565–546. <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.vol20.iss4.755>
- Moussa, E. S. (2020). *Victimhood as a driving force in the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Reflections on collective memory, conflict ethos, and collective emotional orientations* [Doctoral thesis, Bournemouth University]. Bournemouth University. <https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/33949/>
- Muldoon, O., Orla T. Muldoon, Robert D. Lowe, and Katharina Schmid, Lowe, R., & Schmid, K. (2016). Identity and psychological health. In S. McKeown, R. Haji, & N. Ferguson (Eds.), *Understanding peace and conflict through social identity theory: Contemporary Global Perspectives*. Springer.
- Mummendey, A., Kessler, T., Klink, A., & Mielke, R. (1999). Strategies to cope with negative social identity: predictions by social identity theory and relative deprivation theory. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 76(2), 229.
- Nadler, A., & Shnabel, N. (2008). Instrumental and socioemotional paths to Intergroup Reconciliation and the Needs-Based Model of Socioemotional Reconciliation. In *Oxford University Press eBooks* (pp. 37–56). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195300314.003.0003>

- Noor, M., Shnabel, N., Halabi, S., & Nadler, A. (2012). When suffering begets suffering. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 16(4), 351–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868312440048>
- Pappe, I. (2015). Insecurity, victimhood, self and other: the case of Israel and Palestine. In A. El-Affendi (Ed.), *Genocidal Nightmares: Narratives of Insecurity and the Logic of Mass Atrocities* (pp. 141–152). <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501302169.ch-008>
- Peleg, I. (2019). *Victimhood discourse in contemporary Israel*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Pilecki, A., & Hammack, P. L. (2013). “Victims” versus “Righteous Victims”: The rhetorical construction of social categories in historical dialogue among Israeli and Palestinian youth. *Political Psychology*, 35(6), 813–830. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12063>
- Puar, J. K. (2015). The ‘Right’ to maim: Disablement and inhumanist biopolitics in Palestine. *borderlands*, 14(1), 1-27.
- Sayar, E. (2019). *The problem of agency in the politics of victimhood: Nietzsche, Arendt, and Foucault* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Scheepers, D., & Ellemers, N. (2019). Social identity theory. In *Social psychology in action: Evidence-based interventions from theory to practice* (pp. 129-143). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Schori-Eyal, N., Halperin, E., & Bar-Tal, D. (2014). Three layers of collective victimhood: effects of multileveled victimhood on intergroup conflicts in the Israeli–Arab context. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 44(12), 778-794.
- Schori-Eyal, N., Klar, Y., Roccas, S., & McNeill, A. (2017). The shadows of the past. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 43(4), 538–554. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216689063>
- Serhii, H., & Larysa, V. (2024, May). THE PROBLEM OF COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD AMONG SOCIAL GROUPS. In *XXIV International scientific and practical conference «Modern Scientific Challenges are the Driving Force of the Development of Scientific Research»* (May 22-24, 2024) Bruges, Belgium. *International Scientific Unity*, 2024. 237 p. ISBN 978-617-8427-16-0 (p. 210).
- Siniver, A. (2011). Israeli Identities and the Politics of Threat: A Constructivist interpretation. *Ethnopolitics*, 11(1), 24–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2011.571186>

- Staub, E. (2006). Reconciliation after Genocide, Mass Killing, or Intractable Conflict: Understanding the Roots of Violence, Psychological Recovery, and Steps toward a General Theory. *Political Psychology*, 27(6), 867–894. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2006.00541.x>
- Suleiman, R. (2004). Planned Encounters between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis: A Social-Psychological Perspective. *Journal of Social Issues*, 60(2), 323–337. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-4537.2004.00113.x>
- Sullivan, D., Landau, M. J., Branscombe, N. R., & Rothschild, Z. K. (2012). Competitive victimhood as a response to accusations of ingroup harm doing. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 102(4), 778.
- Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social Science Information*, 13(2), 65–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204>
- Trepte, S. (2013). Social identity theory. In J. Bryant & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Psychology of entertainment* (2nd ed., pp. 255–271). Routledge
- van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249–283. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42888777>
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. London, UK: Sage.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2015). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (2nd ed.). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584194.ch22>
- Volkan, V. (2014). *Killing in the name of identity: A Study of Bloody Conflicts*. Pitchstone Publishing (US&CA).
- Wermenbol, G. (2017). A battlefield of memory: the Nakba and the Holocaust as exclusive victimhood narratives [PhD thesis]. University of Oxford.
- Wibowo, J. (2025). Analyzing Trump and Pence's CRT Speeches Using the Ideological Square. *Journal of Scientific Research, Education, and Technology (JSRET)*, 4(4), 2117-2128.
- Wilmer, F. (2017). *Victimization, Empathy, and Breaking the Cycles of Violence in Israel and Palestine*. 5(2), 61–77. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2017.02.001>

Young, I. F., & Sullivan, D. (2016). Competitive victimhood: a review of the theoretical and empirical literature. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 11, 30–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.04.004>

Zur, O. (2008). Rethinking “don’t blame the victim”: The psychology of victimhood. *Journal of Couple Therapy*, 17(4), 15–36.

Appendix A:

Full transcript of the Jubilee (2023) interview used can be accessed through this link:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nRSQOcRrWpyk5uDWrcT_SZdTU8UB3S6B/view?usp=drive_link

Appendix B:

This paper, using the transcript of the Jubilee (2023) video that the same channel had uploaded on YouTube, conducted critical discourse analysis as previously shown. To achieve these results, this paper applied the SIT and CDA onto the transcript by itself and primarily reached the following results which can be accessed through this link:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/18mPZ4V7iEziQZkKHoGp7EJXcqg-Z9yO4/edit?usp=sharing&oid=103864337134445655163&rtpof=true&sd=true>

Post-truth Politics and the Manufacturing of Legitimacy:

The case of the Gaza Genocide

Nada Ibrahim ElDaly

Introduction

George Orwell once said, “The very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world,” warning that “Lies will pass into history” (Orwell, 1943). The horror of such narrative manipulation did not end during his time. The reality of the modern world, with its technological advancements and globalised communication platforms, has created new parameters for the erosion of truth, especially in a vicious war. While the capacity of this technology to distort reality has led to the frequent disappearance of truth, this phenomenon is nowhere more dangerous than in the context of the Israeli war on Palestine, especially since October 7th, 2023. The complexity of the Gaza Genocide lies in the contradicting narratives, images, and news claims circulating social media and official news sites. Some appear real, some are easily doubted, while the believability of others is largely debated. With the rising existence of artificial intelligence (AI) interference, claims of Israeli legitimacy have been built on the rubble of the Palestinians’ misery. In a world where reality is disappearing, this truth has become a matter of dispute. Accordingly, this paper poses the following question: “How is disinformation through deep-fake propaganda allowing the manufacturing of legitimacy in modern post-truth politics during the Palestinian genocide?” Using the Palestinian conflict as a case study, this paper argues that through the utilisation of AI deepfake propaganda and the Liar’s dividend in a Post-Truth politics world, Israel manufactures a victim brand that institutionalises ‘Alethocide’, depicts the Palestinians as manipulative actors, and legitimises their mass genocide of the Palestinians.

This paper is structured around qualitative secondary research, news reports, social media posts and comments, investigative journalism reports, and government/armed forces reports. To ensure the framework of legitimacy, post-truth, disinformation, and deepfakes is applied, the research was conducted in two phases. The purpose of this approach is to connect academic theory with the empirical reality of the Palestinian genocide, particularly by investigating how scholarly models of post-truth politics, disinformation, and legitimacy manufacturing are operationalised in reality. The research begins with a systematic review of subject-specific academic papers examining the intersection between the elements of the framework and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By cross-referencing these findings, this paper establishes a grounded link between the technical reality and how synthetic media is used to disrupt the “socially constructed system of norms” that Suchman identifies as the foundation of legitimacy.

To capture the transition from theory to reality, this study employs a comparative investigation of the narratives defining the current Palestinian conflict, using the case of Al-Shifa hospital complex as a critical point for forensic insight.

Conceptual framework: Legitimacy, deepfakes, and Post-truth politics

To analyse how acceptance of governmental action is manufactured during times of conflict, legitimacy must be defined. Sociologist Mark Suchman (1995) explains legitimacy as a “generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions”. This research establishes Suchman’s legitimacy through the broader lens of Social constructivism, which postulates “that the world is constituted socially through intersubjective interactions... and that ideational factors such as norms and identity are central to the constitution and dynamics of

world politics” (J.Jackson-Preece, 2022). Legitimacy is thus not a fixed objective status, but an epistemically constructed normative and cognitive perception held by the people and is influenced by the knowledge they are exposed to.

Consequently, those considered legitimate are those who have the capacity to formulate support within Suchman’s “socially constructed” normative system. In the modern vitality of the digital age, legitimacy competes with the speed and resonance of norms diffused through society via social media. This creates a constant vortex of changing beliefs, and those who can most effectively manipulate the socially manufactured perceptions of the people through digitally constructing their relatability become legitimate.

With constantly shifting beliefs, “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Ghosh, 2022) take hold. The distinction between authentic and synthetic realities has been deliberately collapsed due to the oversaturation of information-sharing platforms with narratives that feed on constructed social norms and beliefs. As Ghosh explains, Post-truth is thus how the shifting of information in the media leads to “fail[ing] to distinguish between the boundaries of truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and non-fiction” (Ghosh, 2022). Post-Truth is an era of total ruin for constructivist intersubjective agreements, the collective agreements/understandings produced by interactions between actors within a given society.

Post-truth politics rise due to the rapid development of AI technology. For the sake of fitting into the existing norms, then stretching them to accommodate new beliefs, political actors can re-engineer them using “deepfakes”.

Deepfakes, synthetic media created to make real people say or do things that they have not (Hameleers et al., 2024), do not merely reflect cleavages in reality but actively rewrite it (Lulu, 2025). Their efficacy lies in the way they synthesise reality by creating high-quality audio-visual evidence mimicking the real world so perfectly that it bypasses rational scepticism. This allows political actors to provide ‘visual proof’, making a manufactured narrative appear undeniable.

Accordingly, people’s minds have become fields of disinformation. What makes disinformation dangerous is that it is manufactured information propagated with the deliberate intent to mislead (Wafaa AbdelRahman, 2025). The more deepfakes are used, the easier it becomes to spread disinformation and manipulate people into a post-truth state.

The use of deepfakes has turned into a weaponised act, fueling public fragmentation based on social and ideological cleavages (Dobber et al., 2020) while protecting the state’s ‘socially constructed’ legitimacy from external criticism. Hence, political actors do not need to convince people of a particular lie. They employ the power of Suchman’s legitimacy by constructing their power within a cleavage through whatever version of an event exists within it, even if it means successfully building believable claims on lies. This becomes what law professors Chesney and Citron (2019) called the ‘Liar’s Dividend’.

They coined the term as the secondary effect of disinformation, highlighting that the existence of deepfakes allows political actors to dismiss authentic, incriminating evidence as ‘fake’. Disinformation thus achieves its ultimate goal of not just convincing supporters, but building a public so paralysed by uncertainty that they abandon the search for objective truth (J.O.D.M, 2025).

The battle for legitimacy in the twenty-first century is fought on a curated digital theatre of constructed perception. By synthesising Suchman's legitimacy as a socially constructed assumption within the logistics of Post-Truth Politics, it appears that power is derived from the ability to manufacture a legitimate reality. The rise of deepfakes has provided the technical infrastructure for this creation, allowing the propagation of disinformation to bypass the public's critical assessments of the world. This framework thus provides the necessary lens to analyse the discourse of the Israeli genocide on the Palestinians as a conflict where the manufacturing of legitimacy relies not on truth, but on the strategic dominance of post-truth intersubjective social and digital realities seeking to deconstruct shared norms of evidence and human rights.

Methodology

Moving from concepts to reality and considering how the combat zone extends beyond the ground into the digital sphere, Boolean operator search strategies are used as data filters to isolate keywords used to manufacture legitimacy within the crisis. They retrieve specific news reports, statements, social media posts, and state media to expose the claims being spread by both sides of the conflict, the Israeli government and the Palestinian civilians and pro-Palestinian Arab media.

The Israeli perspective: the Boolean strings were built with the help of Google Gemini to formulate them in Hebrew.

[site:idf.il](https://idf.il) (מנהרות OR חמאס) "בית חולים שיפא"

Where:

שיפא = בית חולים = Al-Shifa Hospital

מנהרות = Tunnels

אמצעי לחימה = Weapons

("Al-Shifa" OR "weapons" OR "hostages") site:jpost.com OR site:timesofisrael.com OR site:ynetnews.com after:2023-10-07

The Palestinian Perspective: An Arabic string was formed using Gemini to see the counter-narratives of pro-Palestine media.

(مستشفى الشفاء OR تفجير OR مقبرة جماعية) site:aljazeera.net OR site:skynewsarabia.com OR site:alarabiya.net OR site:bbc.com/arabic OR site:alqaheranews.net/ar after:2023-10-7

Application and Investigation of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The following analysis examines the findings retrieved from media, news, and scholarly work detailing the intersection between the framework and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It sheds light on the intricacies of the power and utilisation of deepfakes by the Israelis to silence the Palestinians. The crisis became visible to the world with the Hamas uprising on October 7th, 2023, and this commenced the official normative construction of widespread deepfake and disinformation-based propaganda.

According to Israeli media, October 7th marked the death of 1,200 Israelis/ foreign nationals (HRW, 2024). Contrastingly, the Palestinian Health Ministry and the UN have reported the death of over 71,800 Palestinians, and due to the severity of the retaliatory attacks by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), thousands of unaccounted people are trapped under tonnes of rubble (Al-Qahera News, 2026) (UNOCHA, 2026). This thus raises a critical question within Suchman's framework and the intersubjective, socially constructed lens. How have global narratives rationalised and

normalised a casualty ratio where for every Israeli/Non-national killed on October 7th, approximately 43 Palestinians have been killed?

Through the lens of manufactured legitimacy, this disproportionate reality is not merely accepted; it is systematically framed as a necessity, as a protection against a socially constructed security threat (Matt McDonald et al., 2018). Israel consistently maintains global legitimacy through nation branding. It is the strategy a country uses to build its reputation, “just like what Israel built for itself, the reputation of being the victim” (Hamza, Think Marketing Magazine, 2023).

Israel consistently triggers two main elements to gain worldwide sympathy towards its victim brand: emotions and fear. They play on two crucial beliefs based on beliefs ingrained in the Western mindset: the Holocaust (1914-1945), and the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York, 2001. The former is used to emotionally blackmail the West for its leniency with Nazi Germany, thus gaslighting governments into being on their side. The latter, and the far more context-resonating, is that Muslims in general (Palestinians in particular) are vicious terrorists who want to end Jews, prohibit non-muslim ideals from rising, and kill opposition ruthlessly.

This dual-layered branding functions as the normative foundation of Suchman’s Legitimacy. Since security has no strict definition, Israel was able to construct a dangerous security threat that, without their intersubjective manipulation, would not have existed (Matt McDonald et al., 2018). By framing military action as a preventative protection measure against a ‘repetition of history’ rather than offence, Israel ensures that its actions are perceived as normatively justified and appropriate under the social norms of Western liberal democracies. Jones (2025) defines this as ‘alethocide’, “a systematic strategy that not only erases truths around egregious acts of violence but also actively constructs false narratives that seek to reshape societal norms, manipulate public

opinion, ... It is a symbiosis of both disinformation and propaganda”, and it lies at the core of Israel’s post-truth brand.

They keep this brand alive through an intricate interaction between intrastate and global capabilities. Domestically, Israel has the world’s most film schools per capita, at 21 film schools for their 8 million-person population (IZZYY, n.d). This concentration of professional cinematography gives Israel a narrative surplus, enabling it to produce synthetic realities to dominate the post-truth environment. It gives them a veneer of polished truth built on professional precision, especially when it comes to showing the power of their military in combat (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: Deepfake video on the IDF’s Instagram, highlighting that there are “Hamas terrorists hiding under an UNRWA elementary school” (IDF via Instagram, 2025)

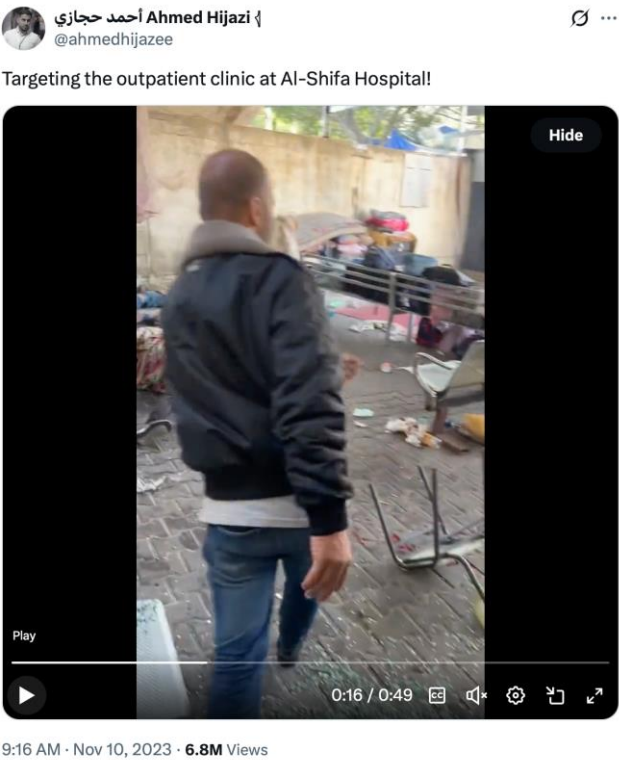
Figure 2: An infographic publication on the IDF's Instagram propagating the capabilities of their special forces (IDF via Instagram, 2026)



The power of the Israeli cinematic literacy extends beyond the production of state propaganda. It provides the framework for the ‘Pallywood narrative’, “a derogatory term suggesting that Palestinians stage scenes of suffering for propaganda purposes [it] has been a recurring theme in disinformation campaigns against Gaza” (Jones, 2025). By saturating the global consciousness with professional state media, Israel can weaponise Suchman’s (1995) system of formulating legitimacy. ‘Pallywood’ functions as a strategic weapon designed to trigger the ‘Liar’s dividend’ (Chesney and Citron, 2019). When Palestinians attempt to counteract Israeli propaganda by sharing their reality on social media, it is labelled as ‘staged’ by Israeli media and

supporters, which exploits the widespread diffusion of their manufactured perspective to ensure that raw evidence is greeted with cognitive suspicion.

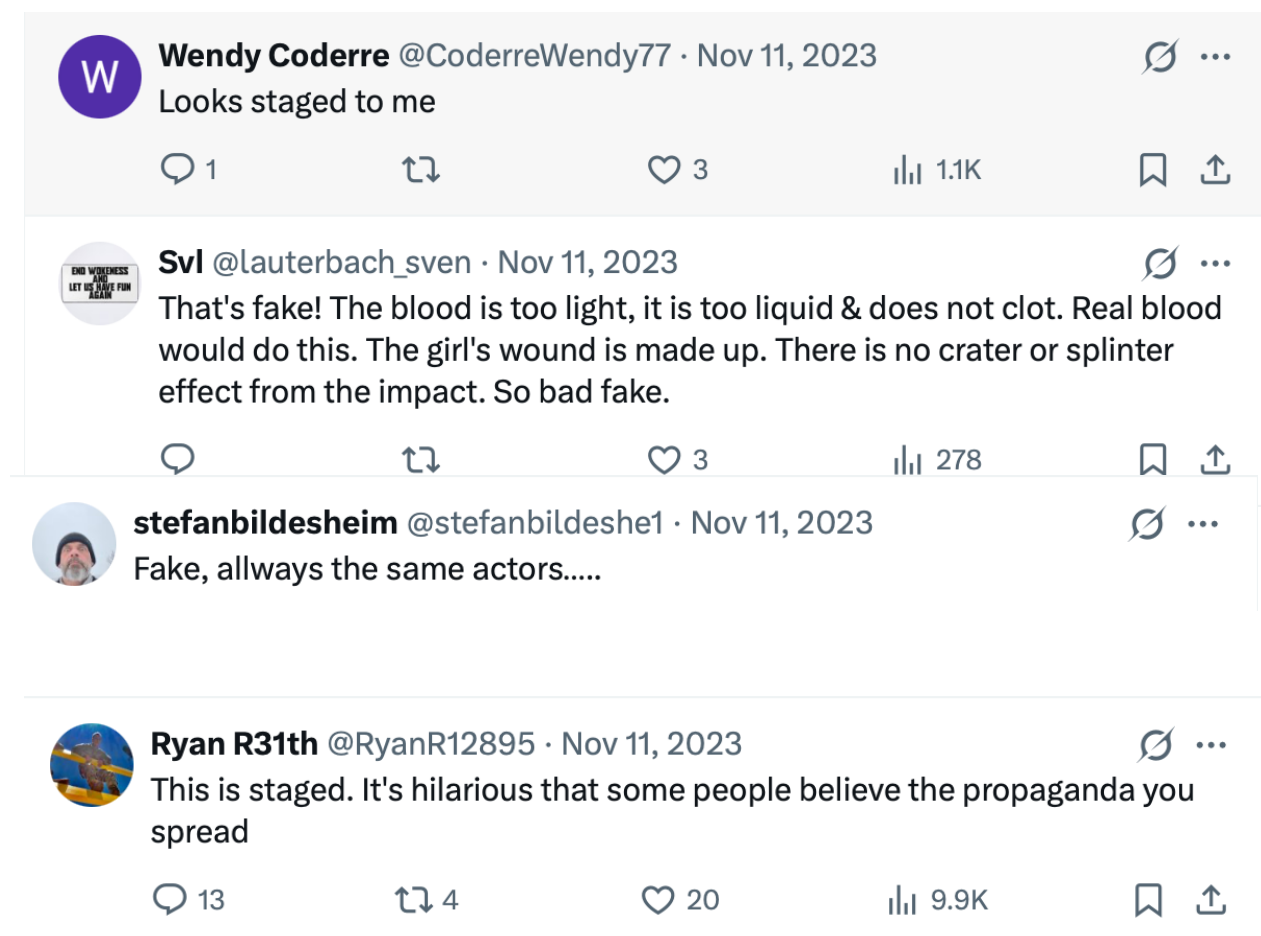
Figure 3: Palestinian civilian video at Al-Shifa Hospital Complex, posted via X account. (Hijazi, 2023)



The effect of this cognitive manipulation is visible in the digital reaction towards Palestinian civilian journalism (Figure 3). A video documenting the unfiltered reality of the siege appeals to the viewers’ moral legitimacy by showcasing distress and hardship. Yet, the efficacy of this is neutralised by the preconditioned “Pallywood” (France24, 2023) lens.

Figure 4:





As demonstrated in Figure 4, the discourse surrounding the footage illustrates the Liar's dividend (Chesney and Citron, 2019), where the possibility of fabrication is weaponised to dismiss vivid empirical evidence of suffering. By employing 'Pallywood', the audience recontextualises the calamity of figure 3 not as a systemic humanitarian crisis, but as a deceptive production. This transition illustrates a critical shift in comprehension. Through this constructed tool, Palestinians are no longer viewed as victims of moral, cognitive, and physical warfare; they are reframed as deceptive actors in an ongoing ploy to trick people's senses, making their suffering undeserving of international sympathy. This enforced scepticism is the ultimate manifestation of Alethocide, the systemic murder of truth (Jones 2025). International credible media align with this false

propaganda, consequently stripping this active genocide of its moral urgency, reducing it to a trivial digital artefact and securitising the narrative. In this state of manufactured apathy, individuals have become desensitised to the distinction between truth and lies, ensuring that mass atrocities can proceed without the friction of public conscience.

Al-Shifa Hospital Complex:

Al-Shifa hospital complex was once a humanitarian shelter in the Gaza Strip, and it serves as one of the primary cases exposing how the Israeli deepfake oversaturation has silenced the Palestinian reality from being uncovered. Al-Shifa's destruction brought forth waves of masked evidence of how legitimacy and security can be constructed and manufactured via deepfake cinematography. In 2024, the IDF published a 3D simulation video depicting Al-Shifa as a militia complex with underground tunnels used by Hamas as a command centre (Figure 5).

Figure 5



Later investigations by Forensic Architecture (2024) and Swissinfo (2025) revealed that the simulation lacked a basis in reality. Yet, considering its supreme quality and since it had been published by official state media, referenced by internationally credible news sites²⁴ and the White House (Reuters, 2023-2024), “it gave an impression of being factual and authentic” and became “deeply ingrained in the collective memory” (Swissinfo, 2025).

This synthetic certainty functioned as a digital shield, providing the ethical and humanitarian clearance for an Israeli military raid resulting in 200 reported deaths and 500 detentions. The reality emerged only after the synthetic narrative had served its purpose. On the Pro-Palestinian front, in 2025, Al-Jazeera’s reporters showcased the discovery of thousands of Palestinians in shallow mass graves across the complex, hidden under shrouds of a falsified reality. This is the true power of deepfake-induced liar’s dividend in a Post-truth world. When a cinematic illustration is given more humanitarian and ethical authority than the physical testimony of the dead, legitimacy has been successfully manufactured.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how in the era of synthetic realism, legitimacy is a manufactured perception based on the strategic management of doubt and information fatigue. Through the case study of Al-Shifa Hospital, this research illustrates how the utilisation of 3D simulations and victimised nation branding effectively shifts Suchman’s (1995) system of defining legitimacy. This shift weaponises the Liar’s Dividend and socially constructed securitisation, where the over-saturation of the digital landscape with synthetic realities dismantles the moral and humanitarian legitimacy of the Palestinian testimonies and shapes them as an active threat.

²⁴ This includes the NewYork times and Reuters

Consequently, the findings suggest that the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians represents the institutionalisation of ‘Alethocide’²⁵. By physically targeting journalists and civilian witnesses while simultaneously delegitimising authentic citizen documentation as ‘Pallywood’, Israel ensures that its cinematic infrastructure remains the primary architect of the historical record. This affirms a transition into a post-truth embodiment, where, as Orwell cautioned, the concept of objective truth is not merely disappearing; it is being actively rewritten. The danger identified in this paper is not simply the prevalence of falsehood, but the erosion of the epistemic capability to distinguish truth from the manufactured. The world has transitioned into a state where mass atrocities are successfully reframed as staged productions.

Bibliography:

Abdel Rahman, W. S. (2025, July). Analysis of the mechanisms of using artificial intelligence to manipulate social media content and mislead public opinion in the Middle East. *□لة المصرية لبحوث*. *المجلة المصرية لبحوث الاتصال الجماهيري*. 8(2). *الاتصال الجماهيريكية الإعلام جامعة بني سويف*. 10.21608/mebp.2025.357866.1152

Al Jazeera’s Salama among six Gaza journalists killed by Israel in attacks. (n.d.). Al Jazeera English. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/25/al-jazeera-journalist-mohammed-salama-among-14-killed-in-israeli-attack>

Business Legitimacy: 'Staying on the “right” side of public opinion... and how to avoid controversy'. The Open University Business School. <https://business->

²⁵ a systematic strategy that not only erases truths around egregious acts of violence but also actively constructs false narratives that seek to reshape societal norms, manipulate public opinion, ... It is a symbiosis of both disinformation and propaganda, (Jones, 2025)

school.open.ac.uk/news/business-legitimacy-staying-right-side-public-opinion-and-how-avoid-controversy

Chesney, R., & Citron, D. (2019). *Deepfakes and the New Disinformation War: The Coming Age of Post-Truth Geopolitics*. *Foreign Affairs*, 98(1), 147–155.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26798018>

Dobber, T., Metoui, N., Trilling, D., Helberger, N., & Vreese, C. d. (2020, July 25). *Do (Microtargeted) Deepfakes Have Real Effects on Political Attitudes?* ORCID.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220944364>

ECIAIR 2019 European Conference on the Impact of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics. (2019). Academic Conferences and Publishing Limited.

Forensic Architecture. <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/assessment-israeli-material-icj-jan-2024>

Ghosh, B. (2022, January 9). Politics of Manufacturing Consent in a Post-Truth Society. *Journal of Developing Societies*, 38(1).
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0169796X211068451?casa_token=yM6C3XuRJycAAAAA%3AvhxYylbtVvivYZWo9O7aUEhfTkVjJeeZm3VB_b0d4GDbuZZ8jJnKVvXS6qKZ7ilOCxAvbzwKC9dA_pQ

Hamza, S. (2023, October 20). *How Israel's Branding Strategy is Playing The Victim Role Through Promoting Lies*. Think Marketing Magazine. <https://thinkmarketingmagazine.com/how-israels-branding-strategy-is-playing-the-victim-role-through-promoting-lies/>

Hijazi, A. (2023). X (Previously Twitter).
<https://x.com/ahmedhijazee/status/1722875805691207890?s=20>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/white-house-says-it-has-evidence-hamas-using-al-shifa-hospital-run-military-2023-11-14/>

Humanitarian Situation Update #355 | Gaza Strip. (2026, January 29). OCHA. Retrieved February 14, 2026, from <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-355-gaza-strip>

Hunnicut, T. (2023, November 14). White House says it has evidence Hamas using Al Shifa hospital to run military actions. Reuters.

IDF. [Instagram post].
https://www.instagram.com/p/DTDtIFTjXpI/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

IDF. Instagram, November 2025.
https://www.instagram.com/reel/DRR3xtFjYLX/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

Inside Israel's booming Film and Television industry. IZZY. <https://izzy.streamisrael.tv/inside-israel-booming-film-television-industry/>

Israel Defence Forces. (2024, April 1). Ha-mivtza b'veit ha-cholim Shifa nigmar: Kodot Tzahal ve-ha-Shabak hishlimu et ha-pe'ilut [The operation at Shifa Hospital is over: IDF and Shin Bet forces have completed the activity]. <https://www.idf.il/אתרי-יחידות>

Israel/Palestine: Unprecedented Killings, Repression Urgent Action Needed to Prevent Further Mass Atrocities. (2024, January 11). Human Rights Watch.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/11/israel/palestine-unprecedented-killings-repression>

Jackson-Preece, J. (2022). *International relations: theories, concepts and debates*. The London School of Economics and Political Science.

https://emfss.elearning.london.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/659580/mod_label/intro/IR1198.pdf

J., O. D. M. (2025, June 27). The Liar's dividend: How disinformation erodes trust and shields deciet. *EMPOWERVERSE*. ResearchGate. 10.5281/zenodo.15752343

Jones, M. O. (2025). Evidencing alethocide: Israel's war on truth in Gaza. *Third World Quarterly*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2462791>

Landay, J. (2024, January 3). US believes Hamas used Al Shifa Hospital but evacuated before Israeli operation- source. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-believes-hamas-used-al-shifa-hospital-evacuated-before-israeli-operation-2024-01-03/>

Lulu, R. A. (2025). *The discourse of Palestinian displacement in the artificial intelligence era: A multimodal discourse analysis of AI-generated videos*. *International Communication Gazette*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/17480485251406816>.

Michael Hameleers, M., van der Meer, T. G.L.A., & Dobber, T. (2024). *Distorting the truth versus blatant lies: The effects of different degrees of deception in domestic and foreign political deepfakes*. Science Direct.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563223004478>

Orwell, G. (1943). *Looking Back on the Spanish War*. The Orwell Foundation.
<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/looking-back-on-the-spanish-war/>

'Pallywood propaganda': Pro-Israeli accounts online accuse Palestinians of staging their suffering. (2023, November 21). France24. <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231121-pallywood-propaganda-pro-israeli-accounts-online-accuse-palestinians-of-staging-their-suffering>

Realistic fantasy: Israel's 3D propaganda. (2025, October 13). Swissinfo.ch
<https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/war-peace/realistic-fantasy-israels-3d-propaganda/90158363>

Searching with Boolean Operators. (n.d.). EBSCO Connect. Retrieved February 14, 2026, from
https://connect.ebsco.com/s/article/Searching-with-Boolean-Operators?language=en_US

UNGA. (2024, August 23). Global Threats to Freedom of Expression arising from the Conflict in Gaza. *United Nations General Assembly*, (A/79/319), 23. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/79/319>

Williams, P. D., & McDonald, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781315228358/security-studies-paul-williams-matt-mcdonald?refId=1c48f517-a9a1-48fc-bfdc-b8e864b9f4d0&context=ubx>

Arabic sources

"مقابر جماعية" سياسة ممنهجة لإخفاء الأدلة على الجرائم الإسرائيلية بغزة-أ1. (2025, October 5).

JazeeraArabic.

<https://www.ajnet.me/politics/2025/10/5/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9->

[%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-
%D9%85%D9%85%D9%86%D9%87%D8%AC%D8%A9-
%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%A1](#)

. Al-Jazeera /اكتشاف مقبرة جماعية لعشرين شخصا من عائلة العساف في بيت لاهيا Al-Jazeera. 2025).

Arabic. <https://youtu.be/FzqDpDcwh20?si=AoD4bQ-4ESktGdvU>

Al Qahera News. 71,800 شهيد و171,555 جريحا منذ بدء العدوان على غزة. (2026, ٢ فبراير).

<https://alqaheranews.net/ar/news/156209/-شهيد-و-جريحا-منذ-بدء-العدوان-على-غزة>

Iraq Through an American Lens: The Effects of Mass Media Portrayal on the Breaching of Iraq's Sovereignty

Samar Mohamed Yahia Abdalla

Introduction

Western media's mass portrayal and illustration of foreign nations is an important determinant of their position in the global order regarding diplomatic and economic relations, in particular, the narrative in which the American media chooses to narrate can cause a ripple effect. Despite extensive and detailed research in journalistic and academic coverage, there's a significant gap in understanding the role of American pop culture in shaping and defining Iraq's sovereignty in the current international sphere, as discussions regarding the war in the media shifted from news-based reporting to 'entertainment-based'. This paper employs critical discourse analysis and framing theories to examine American pop culture's interpretation of the Anglo-American invasion. The paper analyses American-made media, notably music released from 2003 till 2004, as well as films and video games that are set during the Iraq war. The paper argues a reoccurring theme that can be seen is the reinforcement of orientalist stereotypes, casting the American military as the 'saviors of democracy', with Iraq as a failed state that is in perpetual internal conflict that demands external dependence. This research underscores the profound link between media representation and the harm it inflicted on sovereignty.

Theoretical framework

Framing theory focuses on the way in which media and communicators mold public perception and opinion on a subject by emphasizing certain aspects of a narrative whilst setting aside and disregarding other aspects. When applying the theory to media and communications, it suggests

that the media directs the attention of the audience on certain events then positioning them within a definition. The effect can be witnessed in pop culture²⁶, how media portrays repetitive narratives that are from one-side of the perspective, this narrative is repeated due to the audience's acceptance and agreement. Essentially, framing theory proposes that the way in which content is presented to the audience (the 'frame') influences and molds how people process and absorb the information presented to them, it acts as pillar or structure for the meaning in which the audience is meant to adopt. Frames can be defined as the central ideas or lenses that structure or build the message of meaning that is being sent to the viewership. The concept of the framing theory shares the same roots and origins as the agenda-setting tradition²⁷, they both focus on how the media and the government draw the attention of the public's eye to specific subjects, but the difference is agenda-setting dictates what topics are being discussed (what to think) whilst framing constructs the outlook (the how to think). Gregory Bateson was the first to introduce the concept in 1972, it was later expanded by sociologists like Erving Goffman, in his work *Frame Analysis* (1974).

Gail Fairhurst and Robert Sarr's (1996) *The Art of Framing*, suggested that there are techniques in which frames are constructed. Starting with a metaphor, that can be used to box conceptual ideas by comparing it to existing topics. Stories (myths and legends in some cases) are used to make the topic or narrative memorable to the audience. Slogans, jargons and catchphrases are also used to make the subject more memorable and relatable by using captivating words and phrases. Tradition in the form of rituals or ceremonies is used to enhance the significance of the narratives to the audience. The use of tradition is linked to artifacts, these objects are presented as valuable symbols, transforming the topic to a relevant visual or cultural phenomenon. Contrast is used to differentiate

²⁶ Pop culture: modern popular culture transmitted via the mass media and aimed particularly at younger people.

²⁷ Agenda-setting theory: developed by Dr. Maxwell McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw in 1972, posits that media influences what is that the people should think about by making certain topics more prominent, causing their relevance to the public.

the subject and what it is not. Lastly, to spin the narrative in such ways to push towards an inherent bias, to present the moral standing intended non-directly.

For the sake of understanding, it is important to briefly identify what state sovereignty is. State sovereignty is the supreme, absolute, and exclusive ability of a state to govern itself, population, and territory, without the intervention of external forces (states or non-state actors). During the Montevideo Convention (1933), the standard characteristics of a state under international law were set under article 1, “The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states”. It is a significant concept in International Relations as it guarantees autonomy and independence in domestic affairs, as well as international affairs such as economic and diplomatic relations. It is the foundation of the international order as states need to recognize and respect the sovereignty of other states to maintain the global system. A state’s inability to maintain its sovereignty is therefore recognized as a failed or weak state²⁸, leading to internal widespread chaos and power vacuums. These fragile, often war-torn states, are characterized by high levels of corruption, violence, poverty, and other human rights violations, often leading to reliance and dependence on external actors to stabilize the state. In the case of this research, Bergh, A & Papadopoulos, A (2024) explain that the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein’s regime in April 2003 by the U.S-led coalition in caused destabilization in the Iraqi state, resulting to in endless internal conflict, relying on the humanitarian intervention of international organizations such as the UN to maintain some form of order.

Literature Review

²⁸ Failed/weak state: nations that are unable to fulfil sovereignty, identified by their lack of security, legitimacy, and public service.

When reviewing the literature on American Media portrayal of US wars, several studies had focused on the effects that the media had on audience perceptions of the war, the studies were also published towards or after the departure of U.S troops from Iraq in late 2011.

Mirrlees (2025) explained how war movies and televisions shows produced by Hollywood follow Pentagon entertainment policy, to maintain the American military's reputation amongst the American population. With over 2,500 war-themed media being released with the assistance and creative supervision of the Pentagon, with enhancements and changes being made to meet with military goals, such as encouraging enlistment. Rosenberg (2013) emphasizes that most movies about the Iraq war are set after the soldiers have served their deployment or service and their difficulty to adjust to life back home rather than portraying the combat or questioning the justification.

Miller (2011) research analyzes and surveys music videos that represent the conflicting political opinion on the war, as artists expressed their political stance through their art, with some showing their approval of the Bush administration and others who criticized the American's military industrial complex²⁹, the study further explores the significance of music and imagery by examining data and surveys on public perception, rating, and political shifts following the release of these music videos.

Rob King (2023) reviewed the depiction of the Iraq war and scenes that replicate the battlefield in video games belonging to the First Person Shooter (FPS) genre³⁰, further pushing the contemporary stereotype that paints Muslims and Arabs as the enemy.

²⁹ Military industrial complex (MIC): refers to the relationships between a nation's military, defense contractors, and government entities, that can influence public policies and national interests.

³⁰ First Person Shooter (FPS) games: defined and characterized by their perspective, the player gets to experience the events of the game through the eyes of the character.

Barranco et al., (2023) looked back at the Anglo-American invasion 20 years later, analyzing Iraq's stance as a state in the international stage when it comes to aspects such as the justification of the invasion and its results, the weakening Iraq's sovereignty, the scale of casualties, the interferences of other states in collaboration with the U.S, and challenges with climate change, as well as the effect it had on the legitimacy of human rights protections. The article also offers suggestions and solutions on how both states can move forward from the legacy of the war. Al-Rahim (2026) covered the post-war infringements committed on Iraq's sovereignty by regional external actors such as Turkey and Iran, as well as the ongoing U.S breaches on Iraqi sovereignty, the article also highlights the domestic challenges the state faces when regarding sovereignty.

Case study and findings

In the case of this research, media portrays the Iraq war as the war against terrorism post 9/11 (the metaphor), leads American heroes and patriots to fight in Iraq (the story) against Saddam Hussein's regime based on accusations of 'ties to Al-Qaeda' and 'possession of weapons of mass destruction' and to challenge terrorists by asking them to 'bring it on!' (slogans). The fight for liberty and freedom against oppressive forces is a part of American culture and history (tradition), with the use of American iconography³¹ such as the Statue of Liberty and the American flag (artifacts). The media clarified the differentiation between the Vietnam War (1965-1973) and Iraq War (2003-2011), with the focus on media related to Vietnam being the draftee disillusionment, whilst media related to Iraq focused on the 'volunteer' soldiers and their post-combat trauma (contrast), that American veterans dealt with, highlighting the struggle and inability to adapt with life after

³¹ American iconography: consists of powerful and enduring symbols, objects and images that represent the U. S's history, national identity and culture.

combat, highlighting the sacrifices that the soldiers have made to ensure the safety and freedom of their homeland (the spin).

The end of the Vietnam War led to the end of the military draft system in 1973, transitioning the U.S to an all-volunteer military. This is one of the main distinguishes between Iraq war movies and other war movies, as these movies focus on the stories of specialized units. American Sniper (2014) is a biographical film based on the memoir by Chris Kyle, a sniper in the U.S Navy Seal, who became the deadliest marksman in U.S military history with 255 kills from four tours in Iraq. The film making approximately \$547 million dollars worldwide during its year of release. The Hurt Locker (2008) is another critically claimed film with an approval rating of 96% on Rotten Tomatoes, about a bomb disposal team and their mental anguish as they serve in the Iraq war. The film was later selected to be preserved by the United States National Film Registry for being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant”. The reoccurring theme that can be seen in most Iraq war movies is their focus on the psyche of American soldiers, who are seen as more of ‘heroes’ or ‘warriors’ as they choose to be in an environment so far removed from the average American life; rarely do these movies reflect or tell stories about Iraqi society.

The American music industry is much more divided in comparison to the film industry regarding the Iraq war. Music artist expressed their stances through their music. Country artists reflected the patriotism that built the foundations of the genre. During March 2003, the same month in which the U.S-led coalition’s ground invasion of Iraq, Daryl Worley released his single “Have You Forgotten?”. The song may not directly mention the Iraq war by name, but the lyrics justify and defend the war as vengeance for 9/11, following the theme of fearmongering that was used by the media; “I hear people sayin’, we don’t need this war but I say there’s some things worth fighting for, what about our freedom and this piece of ground?”. The song remained at 1 on the Hot Country

Songs chart for 7 weeks and reached 22 on the Billboard's Hot 100 in 2003. The song played into the fear mongering by using 9/11 as a referral event as a justification for the invasion. "American Idiot" is a punk rock opera-style album by the band Green Day released 21st September 2004. The album explored themes of disillusionment and distrust amongst young people. The main track under the same title, it was written as a protest song using the themes of fear and xenophobia that were used in the media, "I'm not a part of a redneck agenda, now everybody do the propaganda, and sing along to the age of paranoia". The album and the main title specifically, is still deemed as a powerful political statement and is seen as pioneer in the genre of political and protest music.

First Person Shooter (FPS), is a genre within action video games, where the player experiences the events and combat through the point of view of the character. A distinctive feature is the three-dimensional environments that make the game experience a lot more realistic. Six Days in Fallujah is developed by Highwire Games and published by Victura. As the name suggests, the game is based on the Second Battle of Fallujah, the first major engagement the U.S-led coalition fought against Iraqi insurgency that began on November 7th, 2004, and lasted six days. The battle was recorded to be the most tragic and bloodiest battle of the war and that the U.S marine were involved in since the Vietnam war, with a total of 107 killed and 613 wounded from the coalition; an estimate of 1,200 to 2,000 insurgents killed and approximately 1,500 captured. The game was first developed by Atomic Games and was first announced in 2009 as a survival horror game, but due to controversy was shelved by its developer Konami on April 27th of 2009, leading to the bankruptcy of Atomic Games, yet despite the complications the game was released June 22nd, 2023. The game was heavily criticized, with initial criticism claiming that the battle was too recent, and that the game would be unable to handle the subject matter effectively as it is twisted to fit a Pro-American narrative. The announcement of the game's revival in 2021 drew more criticism,

and the release of the game cemented these criticisms as the loading screens and character interviews were all about and of U.S Marines, with no Iraqi commentary. The first-shooter person gameplay of Six Days in Fallujah can be seen as possibly perpetuating hatred towards Iraqis as the aim of the game is to ‘eliminate the enemy’.

A reoccurring theme that can be seen in media related to the Iraq war is the infantilization of the Iraqi state, it further pushes the narrative that the U.S invasion is justified. The American military’s presence is seen as essential and heroic, as without this foreign and western intervention, state will collapse.

Conclusion

American influence relies within its pop culture, the world consumes American-made media following American trends whilst absorbing the American way of thinking. The framing theory helps explain how these ‘frames’ that define *how* the audience thinks, and the ways in which these ‘frames’ are built. The perception of the population on a state effects a state’s sovereignty, as a state is no longer seen as capable of maintaining autonomy and is reliant on external forces. The difference in media related to the Iraq war in comparison to other American-related media showcases the sensitivity and inability to hold accountability as Iraq continues to suffer the consequences of the invasion.

References

Fairhurst, Gail T., Sarr, Robert A. (1996). The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Goffman.(1974).Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience. New York: Harper &Row.

Mirrlees,T. (2025). The Militarization of Movies and Television. The Costs of War project. Brown University's Watson School of International and Public Affairs.
[Militarization of Movies and TV.pdf](#)

Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, 1933. Article 1. Page 2. [Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States \(1933\)](#)

Bergh, A & Papadopoulos, A. 2024. The Descent into Chaos: A Theoretical Analysis of the Iraq War. The Grimshaw Review of International Affairs. https://grimshawreview.lse.ac.uk/articles/6

Rosenberg, A. (2013). How Iraq Changed Everything: From ‘The Hurt Locker’ To ‘The Marine,’ The Rise Of Soldiers In Pop Culture. ThinkProgress. [How Iraq Changed Everything: From ‘The Hurt Locker’ To ‘The Marine,’ The Rise Of Soldiers In Pop Culture – ThinkProgress](#)

Miller, Henry, "Stars, stripes, cameras and decadence music videos of the Iraq War era" (2011). HIM 1990-2015. 1163. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorstheses1990-2015/1163>

King,R. (2023). Remembering Baghdad: Videogames and the War on Terror. Historical Games Network. [Remembering Baghdad: Videogames and the War on Terror | Historical Games Network](#)

Barranco et al.,. (2023). How the War in Iraq Changed the World-and What Change Could Come Next. Atlantic Council. [How the war in Iraq changed the world—and what change could come next - Atlantic Council](#)

Al-Rahim,R.(2024). Iraq's Illusory Sovereignty: Domestic and Foreign Culprits. *Arab Center Washington DC*.[Iraq's Illusory Sovereignty: Domestic and Foreign Culprits](#)

[Complete National Film Registry Listing | Film Registry | National Film Preservation Board | Programs | Library of Congress](#)

Mr. Beat, 2024 March 26. The Iraq War Explained. YouTube.

https://youtu.be/NWICnxeVLp4?si=1VeubnQlG_WPXbbC

Now You See It, 2020 September 25. Is There An Iraq War Genre?.YouTube.

https://youtu.be/GTCopIalS4U?si=0bpfSGXEstAl4_Ma

<https://masscommtheory.com/theory-overviews/framing-theory/>

<https://communication.uui.ac.id/framing-theory-shaping-perception-through-media/>

<https://share.google/hSBq7xUc48sJci46V>

<https://share.google/uPEY9KwxNN3tEX4US>

<https://share.google/PiJmsiLE81nTWmHGy>

[https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-war-quotes-conflict-its-aftermath-2023-03-](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-war-quotes-conflict-its-aftermath-2023-03-15/#:~:text=30%2C%202005%20%2D%20%22This%20is,%20Dec)

[15/#:~:text=30%2C%202005%20%2D%20%22This%20is,%20Dec](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-war-quotes-conflict-its-aftermath-2023-03-15/#:~:text=30%2C%202005%20%2D%20%22This%20is,%20Dec)

[https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/comparing-iraq-and-](https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/comparing-iraq-and-vietnam#:~:text=Comparisons%20of%20Vietnam%20and%20Iraq,are%20neither%20easy%20n)

[vietnam#:~:text=Comparisons%20of%20Vietnam%20and%20Iraq,are%20neither%20easy%20n](https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/comparing-iraq-and-vietnam#:~:text=Comparisons%20of%20Vietnam%20and%20Iraq,are%20neither%20easy%20n)

[or%20optional.](https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/comparing-iraq-and-vietnam#:~:text=Comparisons%20of%20Vietnam%20and%20Iraq,are%20neither%20easy%20n)

<https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/sovereignty/>

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386990598_State_Sovereignty_and_International_Law

[_A_Modern_Legal_Dilemma_in_Global_Governance](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386990598_State_Sovereignty_and_International_Law)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_of_Westphalia

<https://costsofwar.watson.brown.edu/paper/consuming-war-how-pop-culture-captures-our-attention-and-fuels-forever-wars>

[Darryl Worley – Have You Forgotten Lyrics | Genius Lyrics](#)

[Have You Forgotten? \(album\) by Darryl Worley - Music Charts](#)

[American Idiot - Wikipedia](#)

[American Sniper \(2014\) - IMDb](#)

[The Hurt Locker \(2008\) - IMDb](#)

[Military-industrial complex | Definition, Elements, Influence, & Facts | Britannica](#)

[Six Days in Fallujah - Wikipedia](#)

Between Principal and Practice: Gender Egalitarianism and the Politics of Legitimacy within the Polisario Front

Shadia Taissir Mahmoud Aly

Introduction

Across the contemporary international order, movements that seek recognition for projects of national liberation are seldom judged by military capacity alone. Their claims are also weighed against prevailing moral expectations (Arendt, 1970; Chenoweth, 2023). Among those expectations, the language of gender equality now occupies a conspicuous place. Yet the relation between such language and the social reality it purports to describe is not always straightforward. In certain instances, movements renowned for egalitarian commitments appear to coexist with social arrangements that seem far less transformed than the rhetoric might suggest. The result is an empirical tension difficult to dismiss. If proclamations of equality stand alongside practices that only partially conform to them, the question that arises is perhaps less concerned with discourse accuracy. Rather, one must inquire why such discourse endures with persistence, and what political work it may perform beyond the domain of social work itself.

The case of the Polisario Front and the institutions of the Saharawi Democratic Republic has long occupied a distinctive place in this discussion. One body of scholarship portrays the Saharawi camps as unusually progressive in matters of gender (Allan, 2010, 2011; Lippert, 1992; Tripp, 2023). Within that account, the revolutionary project is said to have elevated women's public authority and recast customary rules, namely through participation in governance and social organization. Here, a question perhaps arises: what distinguishes this particular movement with regards to gender equality that matters from other so doing states, NGOs, political parties, other liberation movements that incorporate women quotas on the face of it or even authoritarian

regimes. To this vein of scholarship, not only were women integrated into quotas, public administrations, and codified regulatory structures, but, the Saharawi case exhibited a far deeper socio-cultural configuration that distinguished it from comparable attempts at doing so. What most sat apart the Sahrawi experience from analogous liberation movements was that such female visibility did not arise *ex nihilo*. It, in truth, drew legitimacy from deeply rooted Sanhaja-Berber customs that have long conferred upon women A large degree of social latitude. The traditionally constituted as women's sovereign domain, i.e., the tent, is found to be legally and symbolically hers, such that in marital rupture it was often the husband who departed rather than the wife (Allan, 2010; Lippert, 1992). To these scholars, divorce, moreover, carried little social stigma. Indeed, a divorced woman was often met with communal celebration, for remarriage enhanced rather than diminished her perceived social maturity and desirability.

Equally significant was the absence of the so-called *purdah*. Sahrawi women interacted openly with unrelated men and participated within intellectual salons wherein politics, poetry and public memory were publicly contested (Allan, 2011). Also, though formally patrilineal, Saharawi social organization exhibited, to a large extent, matrilineal tendencies. That is where their husbands resided in proximity to the wife's kin network. Thus, that reinforced female security and leverage even within domestic life. Even religious practice acquired a distinct local inflection. While Islamic Maleki jurisprudence prevailed, customary local practice moderated restrictive rigid patriarchal gender interpretations common elsewhere within the region. Polygamy, for instance, is seen to be entirely socially disfavored and comparatively very rare there (Allan, 2010). Yet, a second line of inquiry advances a more guarded judgement with ethnographic and historical studies contending that patriarchal relations remain resilient within Saharawi Society (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014; Isidoros, 2019; Mundy, 2015; Wilson, 2016). The discourse of equality, so the argument proceeds,

does not invariably correspond with everyday practice. What appears publicly as egalitarian commitment may also coexist with enduring hierarchies. While this scholarship convincingly reveals the endurance of patriarchal structures within Sahrawi society, it leaves comparatively underexplored the political and institutional reasons why egalitarian discourse nonetheless persists with such durability and prominence.

This context may beg the question of why the Polisario Front sustains a discourse of gender egalitarianism despite enduring contradiction between its proclaimed egalitarian ideals and social practice? This paper contends that the discourse operates less as a faithful reflection of social relations than a calculated register of legitimacy. It is through aligning its rhetoric with widely accepted moral expectations that the movement attempts to signal normative credibility to international audiences of different kinds. That is without necessitating the holistic transformation at the societal level, and precisely because such practices possessed indigenous relevance, they also proved especially effective for international projection and diplomatic narration.

The analysis adopts concepts from sociological institutionalism and social movement's framing theory mechanisms. It traces how the logic of appropriateness appears through diagnostic framing, how mimetic isomorphism unfolds through prognostic framing, and how decoupling emerges through motivational framing. Methodologically, the paper employs a qualitative case design, using process tracing and interpretive discourse analysis. Process tracing is employed to reconstruct the sequential development through which institutional pressures, wartime mobilization and international normative expectations shaped Polisario's discourse over time. Yet because legitimacy itself, the external one that is, is not merely material but discursively constituted, interpretive discourse analysis becomes equally necessary. It permits an examination of how the movement made that transformation believable and intelligible, legitimate and

internationally persuasive through political language and framing and symbolic representation. Coupling both methods therefore allows an analysis of causation alongside meaning making. The sections that follow develop the conceptual framework, examine the application of each sequential stage, and end with a synthetical conclusion.

Institutional Logics Through Discursive Frames

It is within this section that the governing analytical problem shall be stated. It examines why the Saharawi national liberation movement operating in exile sustains a discourse of egalitarianism, despite evident tensions between the declared ideals and the observable practices. By way of orientation, one must clarify that the persistence of such discourse cannot be reduced to inconsistency nor dismissed as mere rhetoric. More often than not, such a disjunction for an exiled government signals a patterned response to structural constraint (Powell & DiMaggio, 2012; Scott, 2013). Recognition, credibility and continuity do not arise spontaneously; they are secured within an international field exhibiting normative expectations. Thus, this paper rejects unidirectional explanations, i.e., those that rest upon a single causal register. It advances, instead, a structuralist and constructivist account. An account that treats legitimacy as a performative construct shaped by institutional pressures yet mediated by political agency.

In so doing, the analytical ground must first be cleared of a prevailing interpretation. Internal reform or grassroots mobilization models present that a discourse of egalitarianism, or lack thereof, to be the outcome of endogenous sociopolitical change (Alinsky, 1989; Boyd & Mitchell, 2013; Chambers, 2018; Sharp, 2005; Spade, 2020), suggesting that change originates from the community level and works its way up to influence structures. What this process really

means is, to this view, bottom- up mobilization is often necessary to force top-down actors to make changes that they otherwise would not. In Chile (Donoso & Von Bülow, 2017), Poland (Davies, 2005), and Brazil (Gonçalves, 2014), for instance, localized grassroots mobilization pressured their governments to codify desired social norms into law or, at least, official policy. If adopted, such a reading would contend that Polisario Front's gender egalitarian discourse was brought about only by the efforts and the demands of the Saharawi population. However, this lens fails to consider the regulatory force of international normative structures.

In an attempt to resolve these limitations, (i.e., to understand the reasons for the so-called gender egalitarian discourse of the Polisario and on what domains such discourse manifests), the research presented here combines insights from both sociological institutionalism and framing theory. The former illuminates how organizations define legitimacy. Legitimacy, for sociological institutionalists, is one which conforms with external social expectations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The latter clarifies how actors render conduct intelligible and, perhaps more importantly, persuasive (Benford & Snow, 2000). To have both perspectives combined is to comprehend the case and what it faces of constraint and the agency that it exhibits more holistically. The causal mechanism proposed here proceeds in three linked stages, each of which is constituted on what bases the Polisario constructs its narrative. The proposed framework herein advances a sequential model in which each stage is predicated on the fulfillment of the proceeding one.

The first stage delineates the linkage of diagnostic framing through the logic of appropriateness. Here, the Polisario Front secures legitimacy through a normative alignment that defines colonial domination as a condition requiring redress. Such alignment establishes the diagnostic horizon of what is wrong, with whom and why it matters (Benford & Snow, 2000). External institutional successes then encourage conformity with internationally valorized norms.

It is within these norms that the prognostic register emerges, namely what a legitimate actor ought to embody (Benford & Snow, 2000). Mimetic isomorphism is the exact mechanism through which the act of modeling oneself after successful international organizations compels a transformation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The resultant prognostic solution is arguably no more a social transformation than a practice of egalitarian mimicry. It is the symbolic adoption of progressive policies to signal modern political legitimacy to external observers (Benford & Snow, 2000).

At last, to further illustrate how such narrative of gender equality is little more than the strategic mechanism of gaining legitimacy, decoupling as a sociological institutionalist concept may prove useful. Because external mandates trigger formal policy updates, and, at the same time, internal operations maintain established routines, substantive change often fails to materialize. This manufactured gap of what an organization, e.g., the Polisario Front, claims to have or do and what is actually practiced on the societal level, makes it avoid disruption on the path of gaining legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Such a separation enables external credibility and internal continuity. This is not to say that decoupling functions as deception, but more as an adaptive strategy reconciling competing demands without requiring immediate overhaul. The motivational framing here rests upon the external portrayal of oneself as aligning with progressive values as a way of calling to action. Motivational frames create this sense of urgency that moves a group towards collective goals (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Rendering Equality Appropriate

To begin, the strategic adoption of gender egalitarianism by the Polisario Front constitutes a decisive episode of institutional adaptation. This was a one which was undertaken between the

movement's founding in 1973 and the proclamation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic in 1976 (Healy, 2011). It is within this formative interval of normative convergence and political framing that one might call as stage zero. That is, this stage can be understood as the focal point from which the movement started its attempt of gaining recognition. In other words, this period was nothing but the preconditions and the prerequisites of establishing an organization with a unique discourse of egalitarianism. Such a narrative, to the minds of a cohort of young Saharawi intellectuals, was an operative instrument and not just an abstract construct at that time. The task was explicit, to construct a coherent national project from a displaced and tribally organized population.

Here, the logic of appropriateness as a sociological institutionalist concept is utilized to comprehend the rationale that drives this initial phase. It dictates that political actors act upon what is perceived as legitimate, right or appropriate within their specific normative environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Choices, according to this reading, are not necessarily the products of raw calculations. Here, one circles back to the question of why is it that for Saharawi people to gain recognition, the tendency there was to largely promote a discourse of gender egalitarianism? The answer is that for the Polisario leadership, that mentioned environment was one of anticolonial order of the 1970s. At then, the United Nations increasingly codified gender equality as a marker of modern statehood. The charter's preamble affirmation of equal rights established an early foundation in 1945 (Charter of the United Nations, 1945). Then, the mid 1970s introduced further consolidation. The declaration of the international women's year in 1975, followed by the decade for women, elevated gender integration to programmatic status (United Nations, n.d.). Resolution 3010 articulated this orientation with precision, defining women's participation as a prerequisite for development (UN General Assembly, 1972).

Moreover, parallel pressures emerged within the African institutional sphere. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) (1963) advanced decolonization as a governing norm. Recognition within this field required conformity with prevailing expectations of political modernity, which included, but was not limited to, moving away from traditional leadership to formally codified administrative institutions. The Polisario elite discerned the implications, namely a movement seeking diplomatic legitimacy cannot present itself as an extension of conservative regional structures. Distinction from Moroccan monarchical conservatism and Spanish colonial administration became imperative. Gender egalitarianism, thus, acquired a strategic value as a visible index of normative alignment (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, 1976). To circle back to the logic that made the movement adopt a rhetoric of a quality, gender egalitarianism is to be perceived as not mutually exclusive from decolonial efforts of that time. In other words, it was regarded almost as central, and, in fact, went hand in hand with the dominant discourse of decolonization (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, 1976). This was why, to the Polisario, what was deemed appropriate from a movement that brands itself by being anticolonial was to have a narrative of gender equality as well. Such narrative was fortified both internationally at the UN and regionally at the OAU.

This orientation can further be processed through diagnostic framing. Such framing identifies a problem and attributes causation, i.e., who is responsible for it and how (Benford & Snow, 2000). Here, to the Polisario, the impediments exist on the two levels, both the external and the internal. The principal internal impediment was tribal fragmentation. The qabila system was represented as an anachronistic structure sustained by colonial policy (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, 1976). Spanish administration, it was argued, have preserved tribal divisions through calculated governance, e.g., selective patronage to trigger rivalry and stifle unified resistance like

in the Djama'a that was mainly and only led by men (Hodges, 1983). Fragmentation, here, impeded national consolidation, and the leadership assigned blame for divisions, rigidity and patriarchy to colonialism through its different rules. In so doing, women's exclusion from public authority was cast as a colonial distortion and not as a cultural tradition.

To substantiate such claims, the Polisario contended that gender equality and even women's supremacy was already an integral part of the Saharawi society before colonial rule, maintaining, that it was prevalent all along. The Hassaniya precedent was invoked, wherein nomadic culture recognized women's authority within the domestic encampments (Allan, 2010, 2011; Deubel, 2012). This autonomy, though historically bounded, provided symbolic continuity. Hereby, the leadership did not discover egalitarianism but selectively amplified existent practices. This way, domestic competence was recast as civic entitlement to such norms. The discourse, therefore, acquired local intelligibility and international resonance simultaneously.

Emulating The Script of Equality

If the previous stage established the cognitive premises of legitimacy, this one marks their institutional realization. What had been an alignment in principle now assumed administrative form. The movement confronted, in 1975 and 1976, not only diplomatic uncertainty but also mass displacement and total war (Central Intelligence Agency, 1977; United Nations Security Council, 1975). Under such conditions, improvisation alone would not suffice, for when survival is at stake, organizations turn to models that have already secured recognition.

It is here that mimetic isomorphism possesses an explanatory force. Polisario leadership replicated structures associated with successful revolutionary states. This is especially that it was,

and still is, a government in exile in the Tindouf plateau (hamada) in the Algerian province. Tribal fragmentation was, in turn, brought about by colonial rule and was left as one of its legacies (Hodges, 1983). In turn, patriarchy was, to a large extent, linked to tribal fragmentation in the sense that it assigned roles to what they see as the most powerful, meaning men. Therefore, to achieve liberation, patriarchy must be dismantled, and, in greater part, centralized mobilization would be the remedy toward the identified problems. Thus, it is this that constitutes the prognostic frame.

In that reading, gender became the operative axis of that mobilization. For one, the National Union of Saharawi Woman (UNMS), founded in 1974, assumed decisive authority after 1976. It functioned not as an auxiliary body but, more so, as an administrative engine (National Union of Sahrawi Women, n.d.). The camps were organized into Welayas and Dairas. Within each Daira, five committees were instituted, e.g., health, education, food distribution, Justice, and production (National Union of Sahrawi Women, n.d.; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). Such divisions mirrored the bureaucratic grammar of modern statehood. Here, because male combatants were deployed at the front, in the guerilla conflict that is, women occupied nearly all of these posts (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). The prognostic frame thus entered material life. Hereby, administration in composition and in execution became within the hands of the camps' females.

Replication, moreover, is understood to be a highly possible mechanism that the movement adopted to gain legitimacy. Replication, in that sense, refers to the appropriation of the Polisario of the organizational vocabulary and hierarchical charts associated with the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front, 1962) and, in part, the socialist model of the German Democratic Republic (Constitution of the German Democratic Republic, 1968). It is for these models constructed and narrative of heroism, Vanguardism and national unity. This was not imitation for

its own sake, but rather, it provided legibility. With this, international observers could recognize the form even in the absence of territory. Further, such modeling signaled adhering to progressive norms embedded within the post-colonial order.

Educational reform also illustrates the same logic. The establishment of the 27 February school for women created a residential center for ideational and vocational instructions. Within those schools, standardized curriculum altered tribal transmission of knowledge (Lippert, 1992; Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, 1976). Training combined literacy, political doctrine and administrative techniques. By these means, the movement produced cadres who embodied the so-called appropriate citizen of the modern Republic. Hereby, having schools for women proved or, at least, attempted to prove that exile had not suspended institutional ambition.

Material construction reinforced the prognostic commitment. Women manufactured sun-dried mud bricks and erected clinics, schools and administrative offices (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). The act carried conceptual weight. Female labor addressed the shortage of manpower. At the same time, it dramatized the redefinition of social function. The woman of the camp became builder of the state. Such imagery aligned with the declarations of 1974 and 1976, which designated women as integral to revolutionary life and pillars of national state formation (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, 1976).

Institutional transformation consolidated the shift. The second general congress Translated the notion of liberation both at the international and national levels into mandate. Anticolonial struggles and social restructuring were henceforth inseparable. Hence, again, this was the solution to the problem that they previously identified. Administrative specializations multiplied, ministries were delineated, civic education was standardized, and a legal facade emerged, one that was

believed to be sufficient to persuade the OAU and the UN that a state in waiting not only existed but so did its claim..

Performing Reform While Preserving Order

This section analyzes the transition from a society in total mobilization to a society in frozen conflict. It argues that the Polisario uses motivational framing to sustain the egalitarian discourse as a vital diplomatic asset. That is while deliberately Practicing what the concept of decoupling entails. It is where the formal memetic structure of the aspiring state no longer perfectly aligned up with the increasingly conservative and pragmatic reality of the camps, as delineated by Meyer and Rowan (1977).

Hereby, an examination of the reasons as to why women returned to the private sphere is conducted. The 1991 UN brokered ceasefire changed the physical and psychological landscapes (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.). With the end of active hostility, men returned to the camps from the front lines in large numbers, turn creating a spatial encroachment on the administrative domains women had built (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). In light of this, motivation shifted from survival to diplomatic endurance.

Decoupling makes this reality legible. Decoupling, for institutional theorists, occurs when an organization maintains a formal structure to satisfy external audiences but, in practice, operates differently (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). When it comes to the formal structure, the UNMS still exists, the five-committee system in the Dairas still meets, the quotas for women in the national secretariat remain. These are the legitimate surfaces that international NGOs and UN observers see during visits. The actual practice, by contrast, is rather different. Scholars like Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

(2014) have noted that while women hold the majority of middle management roles, e.g., health and education, the high stakes decisions regarding military strategy and foreign policy have drifted back into almost exclusively male circles. Equality has been decoupled. That is, it is total at the grassroots level, i.e., the visible part of the camp. Yet, it thins out at the executive one.

For the Polisario, humanitarian aid was indeed necessary for survival. Many western donor agencies such as those from Spain (Head of State, n.d.), and Italy (Italy's cooperation with developing countries, 1979) have specific mandates to fund gender inclusive projects. To that end, the Polisario maintains such outward discourse, for they understand That it is a primary competitive advantage over other refugee populations or even the Moroccan administration. They also trained highly specialized women to represent the SADR that are articulate and well-spoken at the UN Human Rights Council and European Parliaments (Rossetti, 2012).

Ultimately, these conflicting practices from outwardly complying with the norms to internally maintaining a patriarchal structure operationalized in helping their motivational frames. On the one hand, having a gender egalitarian discourse motivates international actors to support their movement. On the other, stability is maintained internally without breaking any structure and women are still motivated to advocate for the movement using the ostensible lens they were given and taught. It is important to note that this is not to suggest that the Polisario's egalitarian commitment was wholly insincere or just fabricated for external consumption. Fidelity to those values could be very much the case, and while it is incomplete on the ground level, the case illustrates how genuine revolutionary aspirations, wartime necessities and international legitimacy incentives may become mutually reinforced, and still nonetheless produce uneven institutional outcomes to maintain stability.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, one must reflect, what, then, is secured through this configuration? International recognition, normative credibility and strategic endurance. The discourse of gender egalitarianism operates in this reading as a legitimating resource embedded within structural constraint. Agency remains present, though never unconstrained. The Polisario Front adopts, adapts and sequences norms in response to the demands of the organizational field. Legitimacy thus appears neither accidental nor purely instrumental. It is produced at the intersection of structure, discourse and political calculation.

Bibliography

- Arendt, H. (1970). *On violence*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Alinsky, S. (1989). *Rules for radicals: A pragmatic primer for realistic radicals*. Vintage.
- Allan, J. (2010). Imagining Saharawi women: the question of gender in POLISARIO discourse. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 15(2), 189-202.
- Allan, J. (2011). Nationalism, resistance, and patriarchy: the poetry of Saharawi women. *Hispanic Research Journal*, 12(1), 78-89.
- Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual review of sociology*, 26(2000), 611-639.
- Boyd, A., & Mitchell, D. O. (Eds.). (2013). *Beautiful trouble: A toolbox for revolution (pocket edition)*. Or Books.

Charter of the United Nations, June 26, 1945, 1 U.N.T.S. XVI.

<https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf>

Constitution of the German Democratic Republic. (1968). Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland. German History in Documents and Images.

<https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/Document%2012%20Constitution%20of%20the%20GDR%201968.pdf?hl=en-US>

Central Intelligence Agency. (1977, January 6). The Western Sahara issue: Intelligence report 6761. U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969- 1976, Volume E-9, Part 1, Documents on North Africa, 1973- 1976 (Document 116).

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve09p1/d116>

Chambers, E. T. (2018). *Roots for radicals: Organizing for power, action, and justice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Chenoweth, E. (2023). The role of violence in nonviolent resistance. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 26(1), 55-77.

Davies, N. (2005). *God's playground a history of Poland: Volume II: 1795 to the present* (Vol. 2). Oxford University Press.

Deubel, T. F. (2012). Poetics of diaspora: Sahrawi poets and postcolonial transformations of a trans-Saharan genre in northwest Africa. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 17(2), 295-314.

Donoso, S., & Von Bülow, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Social movements in Chile: Organization, trajectories, and political consequences* (pp. 65-97). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, E. (2014). *The ideal refugees: Gender, Islam, and the Sahrawi politics of survival*. Syracuse University Press.

Gonçalves, S. (2014). The effects of participatory budgeting on municipal expenditures and infant mortality in Brazil. *World development*, 53, 94-110.

Hodges, T. (1983). Western Sahara: the roots of a desert war.

Healy, P. O. (2011). *Making History in the Sahara: historiography in the nationalist discourse of the Polisario Front, 1973-1976* (Doctoral dissertation, American University of Beirut, Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies).

Head of State [Jefature del Estado]. (n.d.). Law 1/2023, of February 20, on Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Global Solidarity [Ley 1/2023, de 20 de febrero, de Cooperación para el Desarrollo Sostenible y la Solidaridad Global]. Official State Gazette [Boletín Oficial del Estado], (44), 26097- 26155.

<https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2023/02/21/pdfs/BOE-A-2023-4512.pdf>

Italy's cooperation with developing countries, Law of February 9, 1979, no. 38. Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, n. 44.

<https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1979-02-09;38>

Isidoros, K. (2019). *Nomads and nation-building in the Western Sahara: Gender, politics and the Sahrawi* (Vol. 62). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Lippert, A. (1992). Sahrawi women in the liberation struggle of the Sahrawi people. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 17(3), 636-651.

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American journal of sociology*, 83(2), 340-363.

Mundy, J. (2015). Imaginative Geographies of Algerian Violence: Conflict Science. *Conflict Management, and Antipolitics* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 6.

National Union of Sahrawi Women. (n.d.). NUSW: National Union of Saharawi Women. ARSO.

<https://www.arso.org/NUSW-1.htm?hl=en-US>

National Liberation Front. (1962). The Tripoli Program.

<https://humanities-collections.exeter.ac.uk/dame/s/en/item/10552>

Organization of African Unity. (1963).

https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7759-file-oau_charter_1963.pdf?hl=en-US

Powell, W. W., & DiMaggio, P. J. (Eds.). (2012). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. University of Chicago press.

Rossetti, S. (2012). Saharawi women and their voices as political representatives abroad. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 17(2), 337-353.

Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. (1976, August 30). Constitucion de la Republica Arabe Saharaui Democratica.

Sharp, G. (2005). Waging nonviolent struggle. *Porter Sargent, Boston*, 40.

Scott, W. R. (2013). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities*. Sage publications.

Spade, D. (2020). *Mutual aid: Building solidarity during this crisis (and the next)*. Verso Books.

Tripp, A. M. (2023). The social and political lives of women in an egalitarian matricultural society: The case of Western Sahara. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 30(2), 678-700.

Un General Assembly. (1972). International Women's year (A/RES/3010(XXVII)).

[https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/3010\(XXVII\)](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/3010(XXVII))

United Nations Security Council. (1975). Resolution 380 (1975) [on the situation concerning Western Sahara] (S/RES/380).

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/93734>

United Nations. (n.d.). World Conference of the International Women's year, 19 June -2 July 1975, Mexico City, Mexico.

<https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/mexico-city1975>

United Nations Peacekeeping. (n.d.). MINURSO fact sheet. United Nations.

<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minurso>

Wilson, A. (2016). *Sovereignty in exile: a Saharan liberation movement governs*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

From Screen to Embassy: Comparing Netflix's *The Diplomat* (2023) and Real-World Diplomacy

Sondos Madhi

Introduction

“The idea of America”, “the American dream”, and “the American way” are all phrases people often use in mainstream media. Deborah Cahn, the writer of the Netflix Series: *The Diplomat*, said that all of those who work in foreign service have a pure intention in a way or another and that they have certain beliefs about America and pursue their career in diplomacy not because of a high pay check (which they don't receive) but because they are representing America and “the idea of America” (Abrams, 2025). The screening of the series began in 2023; however, it is still being filmed, as Season 4 is expected to be released in October 2026. The methodological tool used to perform this analysis is Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). The research questions this paper aims to address are: To what extent does *The Diplomat* (2023) present an accurate or distorted vision of diplomatic practice and U.S. foreign policy from post-2019 till 2026, and how such portrayals influence public understanding of international relations? The reasoning behind why the timeframe begins from 2019 instead of 2023 is because the series reflects a shift in diplomatic discourse. To begin with, the Covid-19 pandemic surge caused a disruption in negotiation between government representatives as face-to-face communication was not an option. While some authors argue that technology has helped make state interactions more transparent, others have been investigating the dark sides of digital diplomacy and diplomats being in the cyberspace even after Covid had ended (Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, 2021). Moreover, Trump had left office in 2021, his foreign and domestic policy framework of “America First” remained behind. This framework employs the idea that America exhibits strong nationalist tendencies and

is willing to view itself as any other anarchic power, caring only for its own interests. *The Diplomat* portrayed the U.S. as a self-aware and aggressive force that sometimes acts irrationally just like Trump (Schaefer, 2025). Although the war on Ukraine began in 2022, the diplomatic post-Ukraine War narrative was displayed in Season 3 when an MI6 agent confirmed that Russia had lost contact with a nuclear submarine in the North Sea called Poseidon (a name the writer of *The Diplomat* may have intentionally chosen, since Poseidon is a moody and powerful deity, often depicted as protecting sailors but harbouring deep grudges). The blame on Russia, the false allegations against Russia being the one behind the attack of the British aircraft carrier, and the fear both the U.S. and the UK had, all helped strengthen the historical context of the series (Armbrüster, 2025). This paper contends that by dramatizing U.S. foreign policy through *The Diplomat*, Netflix projects a self-image of American diplomacy that reinforces and challenges traditional notions of geopolitical leadership, cooperation, feminism, and crisis management, illustrating how streaming media functions as a cultural mirror of national identity in the international arena. The prominent episode that this paper examines in detail is Episode 3 “Lambs in the Dark” from Season One. The paper is divided into: Introduction, Conceptual Framework, Methodology, Literature Review and Identifying the Gap, Brief Summary and Character Description, Wordplay, Symbolism, and Real-Life Examples, Reflection on Gender & Heightened Realism, and Conclusion. This study is guided by a conceptual framework based on the key concepts of diplomacy, feminism, and realism, which structure the analysis throughout the paper.

Conceptual Framework

Diplomacy can be defined in many ways depending on the context and the lens used to decode the meaning (Chitadze, 2024). The definition this paper uses is the following: Diplomacy is the way an official actor, such as a head of state, government official, diplomat/ambassador, or

special body, deals with external states to implement their goals and protect their interests. Diplomatic activity is based on four main pillars: negotiation, dialogue, and representation. When done correctly, disputes are resolved, and mutual agreements are made (Rehman, 2025). Two forms of diplomacy which apply to this paper's topic are: Public Diplomacy and Digital Diplomacy.³²

Gendered diplomacy, although another form of diplomacy, falls under the concept of Feminism. It examines how gender-based norms and power dynamics influence diplomatic actions and thoughts, often resulting in a male-dominated field that overlooks female perspectives. Scholars highlight a “gendered multilevel games system” where gender symbols are contested to fulfill foreign policy aims while managing domestic and international expectations (Aggestam & True, 2021). Feminist IR theory promotes a “gender inclusive” approach, emphasizing women's agency and the intersection of identities, while analysing the rise and institutionalization of pro-gender norms alongside societal resistance (Aggestam & True, 2020).

Lastly, realism in this paper is mentioned in two different ways: (1) realism in IR, and (2) realism in art. Realism in IR can be simply defined as a theory that views the world as an anarchic

³² Public diplomacy is a state's ability to build alliances and communicate strategically in order to achieve their ultimate goal which is to have the highest influence in the international arena through the use of tools such as social media. Digital diplomacy is intertwined with public diplomacy as it is defined as the communication of ministries, ambassadors, and consulates around the world through websites and official social media profiles (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, n.d.).

system where competition leads to conflict, and states care to protect their own interests only - (Dunne et.al, 2013). The main form of realism this paper focuses on is structural realism (also known as neorealism) introduced by Kenneth Waltz in 1979. He defined it using 4 core principles: the international system as decentralized and anarchic, states are the key units or actors, the distribution of power or capabilities as in both economic and military among great powers either unipolar, multipolar, or bipolar, and lastly states prioritize their own security and survival and do not rely on others for protection. Waltz also defined two types of Structural Realism: Offensive (attacking first to pre-empt) and Defensive (attacking to defend oneself). This paper also applies another form of realism which is realism in art. This means that the series can be either a true and objective depiction of real events and characters in everyday life or an intensified and exaggerated sense of reality that focuses on immersive experiences (Bassett, 2020; Losoncz, 2023).

Methodology

This paper applies a qualitative research method, using both primary and secondary data to analyse the series. The primary data in this paper is the raw materials collected and assessed such as visual images, dialogue, and narrative structures. The secondary data is the articles, books, interviews, or reviews conducted by others. During the data collection process, episode 3 was chosen as it appealed to be the one with the richest dialogue and narrative structure.

The analytical lens applied to decode this data is Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA/MMDA). MCDA is a modern extension of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This method is adapted from the field of Humanities, specifically Linguistics. This paper uses The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis to guide the analysis. MCDA is the best tool to assess the series, as it makes it possible to see the cultural representations in media from a closer angle (Gee & Handford, 2012). The analysis is guided by a four-step procedure, first the textual aspects

such as the transcripts of what has been said during the episode especially the conversations between Kate and the other main characters are investigated and assessed thoroughly by reading between the lines and looking for symbolic meanings behind the usage of specific vocabulary. The second step focuses on an analysis of visuals through pausing and taking an image of specific scenes where body language and facial expressions play a huge role in how an idea is articulated to the audience. The third step is interpretive, where meanings are constructed. The last step focuses on how the narrative can be put into context based on when the episode was released and what political and historical events had occurred prior to that or even afterwards. However, it is important to acknowledge that MCDA has inherent limitations, particularly the challenge of avoiding subjectivity when interpreting textual and visual cues and situating them within context.

Literature Review and Identifying the Gap

Some scholars synthesized international feminist theories as well as Foreign Policy Analysis to investigate how states integrate the rights of women within their diplomatic and security agendas. Case studies of Sweden and Australia were used to explain why some governments prioritise this issue while others resist its importance. The findings were that the how question can be answered by using a systematic method that tracks continuity and change. Throughout the years there has been a recent rise in gender-sensitive diplomacy (Aggestam & True, 2020b).

Noor and Altaf (2025) analyzed Season 2 using CDA and Fairclough's three-dimensional model to examine how linguistic choices and strategies were used to mirror real global diplomacy and gender roles and expectations. Their study highlighted an important aspect of special use of

vocabulary and rhetorical devices³³ in shaping the public's understanding of IR and how fiction dramas can both reflect and influence real-world political discourse. This is done through the usage of cultural diplomacy as a tool of soft power to help spread certain ideologies, messages, values, and norms of the country in control of the narrative. Soft power does not only address the dissemination of these ideas but also the elements which are used to persuade the target audiences. However, it is important to note that there are tensions between a country and itself as to how it wants to be represented, what kind of propaganda they would like to spread, and how an idealized and unified vision can be constructed? A clear example of this is how the "American Way of Life" has been sold as a cultural product through Hollywood movies (Zanella et al., 2024). Learning from the previous works, this paper offers a unique lens using MCDA, to contribute to the literature and fill in the gap.

Brief Summary and Character Description

"Lambs in the Dark" S1 Ep. 3, focuses on the friction between Ambassador Kate Wyler and her husband Ambassador Hal Wyler as they navigate an escalating international crisis. At the very beginning of the series, in episode 1, "The Cinderella Thing", the UK's aircraft carrier *HMS Courageous* is bombed. Following the bombing, twenty-five Royal Navy Personnel were killed. This event acts as a catalyst for all the events that happen later. Following the explosion, Kate is appointed as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom to investigate who directed the bombing operation and to prevent the crisis from escalating further (Chang, 2023). Kate's handling of the

³³ such as ethos, pathos, and logos

situation can be linked to the theme of crisis diplomacy³⁴, while the role of the United States reflects the broader theme of power negotiations³⁵.

In episode 2, “Don’t Call it a Kidnapping”, Hal gets drugged and kidnapped by operatives working for the Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rasoul Shahin. On the phone, Shahin explains to Hal that Iran has nothing to do with the UK bombing, and that if the U.S. decided to attack Iran that they would consider it an unprovoked attack rather than a retaliation. Moreover, Shahin gave confidential information about an assassination plan to Hal to establish intelligence cooperation.³⁶ Hal made sure it was Shahin not someone else by asking him how his stomach was, knowing that he had done an operation when they were in Geneva (Chang, 2023). Other than Kate and Hal, there are seven main characters³⁷ that play very important roles in episode 3. The transparency between Kate and Dennison reflects the theme of alliance politics³⁸.

Wordplay, Symbolism, and Real-Life Examples

The titles of the episodes are all very creative and depend heavily on wordplay. The title of episode 3; “Lambs in the Dark” is very symbolic. To begin with, lambs are small sheep that are less than twelve months old. In Christianity, lambs symbolise purity, innocence, gentleness, vulnerability (MyMythos, 2023). In the dark is an idiom or an expression which is used when

³⁴ “Crisis diplomacy refers to the diplomatic efforts and strategies employed by countries to manage and resolve international crises” (Diplo, 2021).

³⁵ When states, political actors such as Ambassadors, or organisations bargain to achieve preferred outcomes in situations where there are conflicting interests (Bajalski, 2017).

³⁶ Sharing and exchanging secret information in this case is a great reflection of what is known as intelligence cooperation or liaison which is used to enhance security or improve relations (NATO, 2025).

³⁷ Main Characters: Nicol Trowbridge: the Prime Minister of the UK, Austin Dennison: the British Foreign Secretary of the UK, Billie Appiah: the White House Chief of Staff, William Rayburn: the President of the United States, Stuart Hayford: Kate’s Deputy Chief of Mission, Eidra Park: CIA Station Chief in London, and Miguel Ganon: U.S. Secretary of State (Romero, 2025).

³⁸ Two different states or members of states join hands and agree to cooperate with one another as they have a common purpose or a mutual benefit (Uhlener, 2015).

someone is not informed about something that they should know (Cambridge University Press, 2023a). In the context of the series the darkness represents secrecy, uncertainty, and hidden agendas.

Episode 3 began with Trowbridge stating that if it was Iran he will “rain hellfire upon Tehran”. His tone of voice was both angry and threatening. His eyes widened and his features hardened while his jaws tightened. His threat reflected offensive realism although he believed it to be defensive. Rayburn then lands in the UK and Trowbridge meets him for lunch where they talk about politics, poetry, and sandwiches. Both Trowbridge and Rayburn had a soft grin and a smile on their faces when talking to one another. However, Trowbridge lied to Rayburn making him believe that the *HMS Courageous* was sinking and that’s why they need a carrier group from the U.S. Dennison informed Kate that this is a lie and what Trowbridge wants is a visual of an American warship to scare Iran. Hence, they are all lambs in the dark.

When Rayburn and Trowbridge were walking outside in the garden, Billie told one of the staff members: “Can we get the president out of the woods?”. Out of the woods was meant both literally and figuratively as in out of danger (Cambridge University Press, 2023a). Reading between the lines, the language that they speak in the series is in real life Joe Biden’s. The former U.S. Ambassador to Italy: Melvin Sembler, said “*I don’t speak Italian. I speak Bush*” (Goldfien, 2023). The sentence signifies personal familiarity with the president. This shows how language can be used to relay specific messages depending on word choices. When Kate was trying to convince Rayburn that Iran was not necessarily behind the attack and that the U.S. shouldn’t send ships to the *HMS Courageous*, Rayburn paused and then said: “An attack on one is an attack on all” (TV Show Transcripts, 2023). This is the same sentence Biden said in a NATO meeting (The

White House, 2021). Furthermore, the Secretary General of NATO said the same sentence recently (EU, 2025).

Reflection on Gender & Heightened Realism

Episode 3 addressed gender equality and female roles through various scenes, but mainly the one where Billie and Stuart sat with Kate to have a small talk. When Billie asked Kate: “You wanna know why you're on the list?” Kate replied: “Uh, I have a uterus”. This objectifies the view of females. Billie goes on “that’s not...not the only reason”. Billie then explains why Kate is the best fit for the job and that what they want is a female to be confident but not too confident and pretty but not too pretty. Billie continues, “You spent seven years building a ticket where an elderly guy could hand the baton to an electable woman and deliver us the first female president.” Kate replies, “Now you want someone with no voting record, no baggage, no opinions. Clean me up, put me in a dress, and hope I never speak.” Kate’s intonation here echoes the rhythm of “I cross my heart and I hope to die,” deliberately playing on Billie’s emotions to convey that accepting the vice presidency feels akin to signing up for a slow political death (TV Show Transcripts, 2023).

Falling back to reality, historically, diplomacy has been dominated by men, reinforcing power structures. Despite the progress, and although females have been trying to break the glass-ceiling effect in politics, women remain underrepresented in top diplomatic roles. Roughly 9% of American Women became Ambassadors (Zainulbhai, 2016). Feminist IR theory assesses how hegemonic masculinity functions as a foundational structure within the field of diplomacy up till now as diplomatic organizations are not gender-neutral and are formed to reward traditionally masculine traits and marginalize feminine ones (Lenine & Sanca, 2022). Moreover, in a recent interview with the former U.S. Ambassador to the UK: Jane Hartley, noted that the series does not portray the underrepresentation of women in the diplomatic field (DW News, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Diplomat* shows how language plays a huge role in diplomacy and how streaming media acts as a cultural mirror through which states construct and project national identity. Moreover, it depicts females as represented even though they are underrepresented. The case of Iran is very prominent till now especially during the current attacks. Further analysis should be conducted in collaboration with the linguistics department to produce a comprehensive table that synthesizes all the key scenes. In addition, with a new season expected to be released soon, a follow-up analysis will be necessary depending on the developments within the series.

Reference List

- Abrams, K. (2025). *Diplomacy in the streaming era*. Routledge.
- Aggestam, K., & True, J. (2020). Gendering foreign policy: A comparative framework for analysis. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16(2), 143–162. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orz026>
- Aggestam, K., & True, J. (2021). Political leadership and gendered multilevel games in foreign policy. *International Affairs*, 97(2), 385–404. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa222>
- Armbrüster, E. (2025). *The Diplomat Season 3 recap: Ending explained and Season 4 setup*. The Viewer's Perspective. <https://theviewersperspective.com/2025/10/19/the-diplomat-season-3-recap-ending-explained/>
- Bajalski, B. (2017). Power in the process of negotiation [PDF]. *ResearchGate*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334260412_power_in_the_process_of_negotiation
- Bassett, C. (2020). *Postcolonial resistance and cultural identity*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cambridge University Press. (2023). Be out of the woods. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/be-out-of-the-woods>
- Cambridge University Press. (2023). In the dark. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/in-the-dark>
- Chang, R. (2023a). 'The Diplomat' episode 1 recap: "The Cinderella thing." *Netflix Tudum*. <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/the-diplomat-episode-1-recap>

Chang, R. (2023b). 'The Diplomat' episode 2 recap: "Don't call it a honeymoon." *Netflix*

Tudum. <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/the-diplomat-episode-2-recap>

Chitadze, N. (2024). Tools and functions of diplomacy in the modern period. In *Innovations and tactics for 21st century diplomacy* (Chapter 1). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-6074-3.ch001>

Crisis diplomacy – Diplo. (2021). *Diplo*. <https://www.diplomacy.edu/topics/crisis-diplomacy/>

DW News. (2022). Russia's war in Ukraine: NATO's response

[Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5BmA4lY494>

Dunne, T., Kurki, M., & Smith, S. (2013). *International relations theories: Discipline and diversity* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Eggeling, K. A., & Adler-Nissen, R. (2021). The synthetic situation in diplomacy: Scopic media and the digital mediation of estrangement. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab005>

EU. (2023). [Facebook Reel]. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/798114693299478>

Gee, J. P., & Handford, M. (Eds.). (2012). *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis*.

Routledge. <https://circulosemiotico.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/routledge-handbook-of-discourse-analysis.pdf>

International Women's Development Agency. (2023). What is feminism? *IWDA*. <https://iwda.org.au/learn/what-is-feminism/>

- Lenine, E., & Sanca, N. (2022). Gender, feminism and diplomacy: Analysing the institution through the lenses of feminist international relations. *Organizações & Sociedade*, 29(100), 98–122. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-92302022v29n0004en>
- Lobell, S. E. (2017). Structural realism/offensive and defensive realism. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (pp. 1–23). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.304>
- Losoncz, I. (2023). *Resistance and reconciliation in postcolonial societies*. Springer.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation. (n.d.). Public and digital diplomacy. www.exteriores.gob.es. <https://www.exteriores.gob.es/en/PoliticaExterior/Paginas/DiplomaciaPublicaDigital.aspx>
- MyMythos. (2023). Lamb archetype meaning & symbolism. *MyMythos*. <https://mymythos.org/archetype/lamb/>
- NATO. (2025). Joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/joint-intelligence-surveillance-and-reconnaissance>
- Noor, M., & Altaf, K. (2025). Dissecting power games: A critical discourse analysis of *The Diplomat* Season 2. *Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review*, 03(03).
- Rehman, T. U. (2025). Indo–Pak diplomacy: Prospects and barriers. *International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy*. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJDIPE.2025.147274>

- Romero, A. (2025). *The Diplomat Season 3 cast: Kate Wyler, President Grace Penn, and more stars explained. Netflix Tudum.* <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/the-diplomat-cast-keri-russell>
- Schaefer, P. (2025). We're already living in *The Diplomat's* world. *Substack.com*; *Going Transatlantic by Peder Schaefer.* <https://pederschaefer.substack.com/p/the-netflix-show-that-gets-transatlanticism>
- TV Show Transcripts. (2023). *The Diplomat: Episode transcript.*
- OurBoard. <https://tvshowtranscripts.ourboard.org/viewtopic.php?f=1820&t=62227>
- The White House. (2021). NATO: Joe Biden says “An attack on one is an attack on all” [Video]. *YouTube.* https://youtu.be/5kFAqwA5_vE?si=bzVcZWG5DQmsjIGX
- Uhlaner, C. J. (2015). Politics and participation. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 504–508. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-097086-8.93086-1>
- Zainulbhai, H. (2016). Few American women have broken the glass ceiling of diplomacy. *Pew Research Center.* <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/07/22/few-american-women-have-broken-the-glass-ceiling-of-diplomacy/>
- Zanella, C. K., Junior, & Silva. (2024). Cultural diplomacy and soft power: Critical analysis and methodological application. *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 67(1). <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202400112>

Egyptian Anti-Displacement Framing and Discursive Adaptation in U.S. Executive Rhetoric during the Gaza War

Ziad El-Sayed Ghazy

Habiba Mohamed Ibrahim

I. Introduction

Contemporary conflicts are not governed solely by military capabilities but by the language through which political actors construct legitimacy, responsibility, and acceptable conduct. In highly mediated conflicts such as the Gaza War, diplomatic rhetoric becomes a central arena in which competing narratives define not only what actions are justified, but also which outcomes are considered permissible within international norms. The early stages of the conflict were characterised by a strongly securitised discourse, particularly within statements issued by the United States executive branch, where emphasis was placed on self-defence and counter-terrorism. However, as the humanitarian consequences of the war intensified, this discursive environment became increasingly contested.

Existing literature largely conceptualises Middle Eastern middle powers as security mediators operating within the structural constraints imposed by major powers, often overlooking the role of normative discourse as a strategic instrument of influence. In the context of the Gaza War, rising concerns over displacement, civilian protection, and territorial legitimacy introduced new pressures into U.S. diplomatic communication that cannot be fully explained through material or strategic factors alone. This study addresses that gap by examining the Egyptian anti-displacement framing and how it interacts with evolving U.S. executive rhetoric. It assesses the following question: to what extent did Egyptian diplomatic discourse contribute to the increased salience of humanitarian and legal language in U.S. statements? The paper argues that Egypt did not transform

U.S. policy but contributed to a process of **discursive adaptation** by reinforcing normative constraints within an already evolving humanitarian context.

The paper proceeds as follows. It first reviews the relevant literature and outlines the constructivist framework guiding the analysis. It then presents the methodology before examining the discursive trigger, Egyptian normative framing, and U.S. executive discourse. The following section brings these strands together through findings and analysis, demonstrating how discursive adaptation emerges within a contested normative environment, then ending with the conclusion.

II. Methodology

This study employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine official statements issued by the United States executive branch, including the White House and the U.S. Department of State, between October 2023 and early 2025. The analysis focuses on key speeches and public remarks by President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken. These are compared with selected Egyptian statements, particularly those delivered by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The study examines recurring linguistic patterns related to displacement, sovereignty, and humanitarian responsibility, tracing how these themes evolve over time. This approach allows for the identification of discursive adaptation and the assessment of how Egyptian normative framing interacted with U.S. rhetorical developments.

III. Literature review

1- Egypt as a Security Mediator and Status-Quo Stabiliser:

A substantial body of literature conceptualises Egypt's regional role primarily through the lens of security mediation and crisis management. Scholars such as Steven A. Cook (2012) and Curtis

R. Ryan (2015) portray Cairo as a pragmatic stabilising actor whose diplomatic behaviour is driven by the pursuit of regional stability, regime security, and strategic leverage. Within this perspective, Egyptian engagement in Gaza is typically interpreted through operational functions such as ceasefire facilitation, intelligence coordination, and border management, particularly along the Rafah crossing. This literature positions Egypt as an indispensable intermediary capable of managing escalation without fundamentally altering the regional balance of power (Chaziza & Lotmar, 2025).

Extending this structural interpretation, Marc Lynch (2016) argues that Arab middle powers operate within geopolitical constraints shaped by great-power priorities, limiting their capacity to transform broader political narratives. From this viewpoint, Egypt's diplomatic activity is understood as reactive rather than ideationally innovative, reinforcing the status quo rather than reshaping normative debates. Such interpretations emphasise institutional limitations and material constraints, thereby privileging security functionality over discursive agency (Siniver & Tsourapas, 2023).

Recent policy-oriented studies reinforce this stabilisation narrative. Reports produced by the International Crisis Group (2024) document Egypt's extensive coordination with regional actors such as Qatar in managing ceasefire negotiations and humanitarian access through Rafah. These studies highlight Egypt's concern with preventing mass displacement into Sinai and containing regional spillover, framing its diplomatic actions as defensive mechanisms designed to preserve territorial security. Similarly, Shaziza and Lotmar (2025) conceptualise Egyptian engagement as a form of **“specialised diplomacy,”** whereby geographic positioning and institutional memory allow Cairo to maintain influence while preserving regional equilibrium. Nassar and Uchagach (2025) further illustrate this pragmatic orientation through analysis of Egyptian discourse on the

Philadelphi Corridor, demonstrating how officials balance sovereignty claims with adherence to existing agreements in order to sustain mediator credibility.

2- Constructivist Perspectives on Middle Powers and Norm Entrepreneurship

A second body of literature, grounded in constructivist international relations theory, conceptualises middle powers as normative actors capable of shaping political discourse through identity-based strategies. Foundational constructivist scholarship, particularly the work of Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), introduces the concept of the **norm life cycle**, in which norm entrepreneurs mobilise shared values to redefine standards of appropriate behaviour. Within this framework, influence is exercised not through coercion but through the strategic deployment of ideas capable of reshaping collective expectations. This perspective shifts analytical attention from material capabilities to discursive authority, making it particularly relevant to the study of diplomatic rhetoric during periods of conflict (Cearpaic, 2023).

Recent scholarship applies these constructivist insights to the behaviour of regional and middle powers. Fromm (2019) identifies what he terms Egypt's "**normative duality**," arguing that Cairo selectively adopts liberal principles such as sovereignty and humanitarian protection while maintaining strategic flexibility. Similarly, Aboelela (2025) conceptualise Egypt as a form of **competitive soft power**, capable of shaping narratives through diplomatic language rather than direct coercion. These interpretations suggest that middle powers possess the capacity to construct persuasive normative frameworks that resonate beyond their immediate geopolitical position, particularly in multilateral and crisis environments.

Parallel research examines the role of Western normative identity in shaping responses to conflict. Studies of European foreign policy discourse, including The Unit for Political Studies

(2025), highlight how the European Union frames its external actions through references to international humanitarian law and human rights, even when practical policies remain strategically constrained. Policy-oriented analyses further document measurable rhetorical shifts among European states after 2023, particularly in France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, where official language increasingly referenced civilian protection, humanitarian access, and adherence to legal obligations. These developments suggest the existence of what constructivist scholars describe as a **discursive structure of opportunity**, in which identity tensions create openings for normative reinterpretation (Pace, 2024).

While existing literature effectively explains Egypt's role as a security mediator and highlights the importance of norms in shaping international discourse, it does not adequately examine how Egyptian normative framing interacts with evolving U.S. diplomatic language during conflict. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how anti-displacement discourse promoted by Egypt may contribute to the increasing salience of humanitarian and legal language in U.S. executive statements during the Gaza War.

IV. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts constructivism as its main theoretical concept to explore the role of diplomatic discourse in international political behaviour. Constructivist theory highlights that international politics is organised not just by material power but by socially constructed meanings, norms and identities which influence state interests and actions (Wendt, 1995). In this view, diplomatic language serves as a process by which legitimacy, accountability, and legitimate behaviour are established during conflict.

One of the key constructivist ideas that can be applied to the given research is the involvement of international norms in the process of state behaviour. Humanitarian law and civilian protection norms and territorial sovereignty shaped the way actors perceived the war in Gaza (Guzzini & Leander, 2006). The principle of norm-based leadership also helps in understanding how long-term diplomatic framing can help states to influence discourse and promote rhetorical change in other international actors (Zehfuss, 2004).³⁹

V. The Discursive Trigger: “Greater Israel” and the Emergence of Normative Tension:

A critical discursive moment emerged with the reappearance of territorial rhetoric associated with the concept of “Greater Israel,” which introduced long-term questions of sovereignty and territorial legitimacy into the Gaza War. In March 2023, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich publicly referenced a map depicting expanded Israeli borders and stated that “the Palestinian people are an invention,” a claim that provoked significant international concern regarding territorial maximalism (Al-Dabash, 2025). Although this statement preceded the war, its implications resurfaced as the conflict intensified, particularly in debates surrounding the future political status of Gaza. Subsequent references to expanded territorial visions, including discussions linked to the notion of “Greater Israel,” reinforced concerns that the war could extend beyond immediate security objectives toward more permanent territorial outcomes. As these

³⁹ The constructivist approach is particularly well-suited to this research, as it focuses on discursive interaction rather than material change. This framework enables the analysis to concentrate on how Western discourse has shifted in response to new normative tensions, specifically by examining how Egyptian diplomatic framing prioritises humanitarian and legal norms. Thus, the constructivist approach provides the essential analytical tool for understanding how middle powers can influence international discourse through language and normative positioning.

narratives gained visibility, U.S. diplomatic discourse encountered increasing tension between its strategic alignment with Israel and its long-standing commitment to principles such as territorial sovereignty and international law. This tension did not produce an immediate policy change but destabilised the purely securitised framing that had characterised early U.S. executive statements.

At the same time, growing reports of humanitarian deterioration in Gaza, including large-scale civilian casualties and displacement risks, intensified pressure on U.S. officials to incorporate broader normative considerations into their rhetoric. According to BBC News, concerns emerged among policymakers that the conflict could result in mass displacement into neighbouring territories, particularly Egypt, raising questions about long-term regional stability (Adams, 2024). Similarly, analysis by The New York Times highlighted fears within Egyptian policymaking circles that displacement into Sinai would undermine both regional security and the viability of a future Palestinian state (Kingsley, 2025).

Analytically, these developments created a discursive environment in which security-based justifications became increasingly difficult to sustain in isolation. The emergence of territorial rhetoric associated with “Greater Israel,” combined with escalating humanitarian concerns, generated a normative tension within U.S. executive discourse. This tension opened space for alternative framings centred on legality, displacement, and civilian protection, thereby establishing the conditions under which external normative actors, including Egypt, could engage in shaping the broader rhetorical environment.

VI. Egyptian Normative Framing and the Construction of Anti-Displacement Discourse

Egyptian diplomatic discourse during the Gaza War consistently framed forced displacement not as a humanitarian contingency but as a normatively illegitimate act grounded in violations of international law and threats to regional stability. In October 2023, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi declared that “Egypt categorically rejects any attempt to displace Palestinians into Sinai” (Presidency of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 2023). The phrase *categorically rejects* functions as a strong normative boundary, transforming displacement from a negotiable policy option into an unacceptable violation. This linguistic construction shifts the issue from humanitarian management to one of sovereignty and political legitimacy.

This framing was reinforced through official statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Egypt, which emphasised that “forced displacement represents a violation of international law and threatens regional stability” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Egypt, 2025). The invocation of international law is analytically significant, as it situates Egypt’s position within a broader normative framework that resonates with globally recognised legal principles. Rather than relying solely on national security arguments, Egyptian discourse strategically embedded displacement within the language of legality and legitimacy, thereby expanding its relevance beyond regional concerns.

A similar pattern is evident in Egypt’s engagement within multilateral settings. Statements delivered at the United Nations repeatedly emphasised the protection of civilians and the rejection of population transfer as foundational principles guiding conflict conduct. This repetition across diplomatic platforms reflects a form of norm entrepreneurship, whereby consistent framing reinforces particular interpretations of acceptable behaviour. Through this process, anti-displacement discourse was elevated from a national concern to a broader normative expectation within international debate.

Importantly, the effectiveness of this framing lies not in immediate policy outcomes but in its capacity to structure the terms of discourse. By persistently linking displacement to illegitimacy, sovereignty, and legal violation, Egyptian diplomacy contributed to the stabilisation of anti-displacement language as a central reference point in discussions surrounding the Gaza War. This created a discursive environment in which alternative actors, including the United States, increasingly encountered normative pressure to engage with these themes within their own rhetorical formulations.

VII. Discursive Adaptation in U.S. Executive Statements

U.S. executive discourse during the Gaza War initially reflected a strongly securitised framing that prioritised strategic alignment and counter-terrorism. In October 2023, President Joe Biden stated that “Israel has the right to defend itself and its people, full stop” (White House, 2023). The phrase *full stop* is analytically significant, as it constructs Israeli military action as unquestionable and closes space for immediate normative contestation. This formulation reflects a discourse in which security legitimacy overrides competing considerations, positioning military response as both necessary and justified.

As the conflict progressed, however, U.S. executive language began to incorporate references to humanitarian responsibility and civilian protection. In November 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasised that “civilians must be protected, and humanitarian assistance must reach those in need” (U.S. Department of State, 2023). The use of the modal verb *must* signals a normative obligation rather than a descriptive statement, marking a shift in rhetorical emphasis toward legal and ethical considerations. This adjustment did not displace the underlying security framework but introduced an additional layer of normative accountability into U.S. discourse.

This pattern of discursive adaptation continued in subsequent statements. In early 2024, U.S. officials increasingly stressed the importance of conducting military operations in accordance with international humanitarian law, alongside calls to minimise civilian harm (White House, 2024). Such formulations reflect an effort to balance enduring strategic commitments with growing normative pressures, particularly as humanitarian conditions in Gaza deteriorated and international scrutiny intensified.

Importantly, these changes should not be interpreted as a direct policy transformation but as a recalibration of rhetorical boundaries. U.S. executive discourse did not abandon its securitised foundation; rather, it expanded to incorporate humanitarian and legal language as part of a broader effort to maintain legitimacy. Within this evolving discursive environment, themes emphasised in Egyptian diplomatic framing, particularly the illegitimacy of forced displacement and the centrality of civilian protection, became increasingly difficult to exclude from official rhetoric. This convergence does not indicate unilateral influence but suggests interaction within a shared normative space, where repeated framing contributed to shaping the language through which the conflict was publicly justified.

VIII. Findings and Final Analysis

The findings of this study point to a structured process of **discursive adaptation** within United States executive rhetoric, which can be understood through a three-stage analytical pattern: **securitisation, normative disruption, and constrained adaptation.**

In the initial stage, U.S. discourse was dominated by a securitised framework that prioritised self-defence and alliance credibility. Linguistic markers such as “full stop” functioned

to close normative debate and establish a rigid justificatory boundary. This stage reflects a discursive environment in which alternative frames, particularly humanitarian or legal ones, remained marginal.

The second stage emerges with the introduction of **normative disruption**, driven by two intersecting pressures: the reappearance of territorial rhetoric associated with “Greater Israel” and the escalation of humanitarian conditions in Gaza. Together, these elements destabilised the coherence of purely security-based discourse by introducing contradictions with established U.S. commitments to international law and civilian protection. At this point, Egyptian diplomatic framing becomes analytically relevant, not as a causal force, but as a **stabilising normative reference** that consistently defined displacement as illegitimate.

The final stage involves **constrained adaptation**, where U.S. rhetoric expands to incorporate humanitarian and legal language without abandoning its securitised foundation. Terms such as “must protect civilians” signal the emergence of normative obligation within official discourse. Crucially, this adaptation reflects alignment with an already circulating normative vocabulary in which Egyptian anti-displacement framing played a reinforcing role.

This three-stage pattern demonstrates that discursive change is neither linear nor externally imposed. Instead, it emerges through interaction within a shared normative environment. The findings therefore validate the research question by showing that Egyptian framing contributed to increasing the **salience and stability of anti-displacement discourse**, shaping the boundaries within which U.S. officials articulated legitimate positions. This highlights a broader implication: middle powers can influence international politics not by altering policy directly, but by structuring the **conditions of rhetorical legitimacy**!

IX. Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that changes in U.S. executive discourse during the Gaza War are best understood as a process of discursive adaptation shaped by normative pressure, rather than a direct policy shift. While early statements prioritised securitised language, growing humanitarian concerns and territorial tensions required broader normative engagement. Within this context, Egyptian diplomatic framing played a reinforcing role by consistently embedding anti-displacement norms within international debate. The findings show that middle powers can influence international politics not through coercion, but by shaping the boundaries of legitimate discourse, contributing to how major actors justify and communicate their positions during conflict.

X. List of References:

AbdulKarim, F., & Kingsley, P. (2025, February 17). Palestinian displacement in the West Bank is at its highest since 1967, experts say. The New York Times. <https://url-shortener.me/GFFQ>

Adams, P. (2025, November 21). Palestinians forced from West Bank refugee camps left in limbo as Israeli demolitions go on. BBC News. <https://url-shortener.me/GFFO>

Ahram Online. (2025, August 14). Netanyahu's 'Greater Israel' rhetoric threatens regional peace: Egypt. <https://url-shortener.me/GFGX>

Al-Dabash, A. (2025, May 22). Friedman's plan, which Smotrich dreams of. Al Jazeera Net. <https://url-shortener.me/GFFM>

Cearpaic, M. (2023). A constructivist analysis of Egypt's normative duality: Between the spread of U.S. norms and the aftermath of the Arab Spring. *Annals of the „Ovidius” University of Constanța – Political Science Series*, 12, 55–82. <https://url-shortener.me/GFLX>

Chaziza, M., & Lutmar, C. (2025). Between constraint and opportunity: Egypt's niche diplomacy in a shifting global order. *World*, 6(4), Article 138. <https://url-shortener.me/GFM0>

Cook, S. A. (2012). *The struggle for Egypt*. Oxford University Press. <https://url-shortener.me/GFMF>

C-SPAN. (2025, October 13). President Trump delivers remarks on the Middle East peace agreement. <https://url-shortener.me/KRR9>.

Diaaeldin, H. (2023, November 30). The West polarised: Impact of the war in Gaza. Al Habtoor Research Centre. <https://url-shortener.me/GFFT>

Ferragamo, M. (2026, March 10). A guide to the Gaza peace deal. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://url-shortener.me/GFJ2>

Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organisation*, 52(4), 887–917. <https://url-shortener.me/KRWT>

Fromm, N. (2019). *Constructivist niche diplomacy*. Constructivist Niche Diplomacy. Springer. <https://url-shortener.me/KRX0>

Guzzini, S., & Leander, A. (Eds.). (2006). *Constructivism and international relations: Alexander Wendt and his critics*. Routledge. <https://url-shortener.me/KRDH>

- International Crisis Group. (2024). Egypt's Gaza dilemmas (Middle East and North Africa Briefing No. 91). <https://url-shortener.me/GFM1>
- Lynch, M. (2016). The new Arab wars. Proquest. <https://url-shortener.me/KRW3>
- Maziad, M., & Spraagen, A. (2025, November 6). Egypt's role in Gaza and its relations with Israel. University of Maryland; J Street. <https://url-shortener.me/GFGN>
- Nassar, F., & Üçağaç, A. (2025). An analysis of Egyptian and Israeli discourse on Israel's control of the Philadelphi Corridor during the 2023 Gaza War. The Rest Journal. <https://url-shortener.me/GFLY>
- Pace, M. (2024). The construction of EU normative power and the Middle East 'conflict' 16 years on. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies. <https://url-shortener.me/GFLS>
- Presidency of the Arab Republic of Egypt. (2023, October 21). President El-Sisi's Speech at the Cairo Summit for Peace. <https://url-shortener.me/KRFF>
- Ryan, C.R. (2009). Inter-Arab alliances: Regime security and Jordanian foreign policy. Inter-Arab Alliances: Regime Security and Jordanian Foreign Policy. 1-264. <https://url-shortener.me/GFM5>
- Saikal, A. (2025, September 21). Is Benjamin Netanyahu on a mission to realise a Greater Israel? The Conversation. <https://url-shortener.me/GFFJ>

Siniver, A., & Tsourapas, G. (2023). Middle powers and soft-power rivalry: Egyptian–Israeli competition in Africa. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 19(2), orac041. <https://url-shortener.me/GFLU>

The Unit for Political Studies. (2025, June 4). Transformations in European attitudes toward the genocidal war on Gaza [Situation Assessment]. Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies. <https://url-shortener.me/GFLQ>

Wendt, A. (1995). Constructing International Politics. *International Security*, 20(1), 71–81. <https://url-shortener.me/KRDA>

Zehfuss, M. (2004). *Constructivism in international relations: The politics of reality*. Cambridge University Press. <https://url-shortener.me/KRDE>

Aboelela, T. M. K. E. (2025). *The institutional influence on social entrepreneurship in the Middle East: The case of Egypt*. Nottingham Trent University. <https://url-shortener.me/KRY5>.

Ahram Online. (2025). Egypt rejects any Palestinian displacement, warns of regional dangers. <https://url-shortener.me/KRY7>.

US. Embassy in Georgia. (2023, October 7). Remarks by President Biden on the terrorist attacks in Israel. <https://url-shortener.me/KRYJ>



The
**BRITISH
UNIVERSITY
IN EGYPT**



ISSN: 3009-657X

**THE DEPARTMENT OF
POLITICAL SCIENCE**

PSCM VI

**Global Fractures, Regional Orders: Conflict and
Cooperation in a New Era**

**20
26**

**WE TAKE YOU TO THE REAL
WORLD... NOT JUST TALK TO YOU
ABOUT IT**



www.bue.edu.eg