



The Sound of Conflict: A Quantitative Analysis of Editorial Tone in Liberal, State-Aligned and Conservative Media Framing of the Iran-Israel Conflict (2023-2025)

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Abstract

This research consists of a quantitative content analysis of the editorial tone employed by three ideologically opposing newspapers, namely, Haaretz, a liberal Israeli newspaper; Kayhan, an International state-aligned Iranian newspaper; and The Wall Street Journal, a conservative American newspaper, on the Iran-Israel conflict between October 2023 and March 2025. Analyzing 677 editorials, the research is a systematic measurement of the sentiment positive, negative, and neutral across the countries of Iran, Israel, and the United States. Findings that proved statistically (using chi-square) that there is a profound and predictable ideological polarization in sentiment. Haaretz is overwhelmingly negative to Israel, 97.6% Kayhan is universally negative to Israel, 100% and the US, 94.7% while being positive to Iran, 72.4%. WSJ is strongly positive to Israel, 84.8% and is negative to Iran, 68.5%. The results demonstrate the importance and quantifiability of editorial tone as a critical instrument of the use of media as ideological expression that each media outlet uses to fulfil different geopolitical mandates of internal critique, resistance mobilization or strategic alliance reinforcement.

Keywords

Editorial Tone, Bias of Ideologies, Media Framing, Iran-Israel Conflict.

Introduction

The Iran-Israel Conflict: Ideological Discord and Escalation

The rivalry between Iran and Israel is a foundational conflict for Middle Eastern geopolitics as it is characterized by deep-rooted ideological disharmony, strategic rivalry, and proxy warfare (Haji-Yousefi, 2003). Historically, the two nations were in a mutually beneficial alliance, largely facilitated by the US against the Soviets (Tierney, 2002). This relationship experienced a major rupture with the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, when the Ayatollah Khomeini's regime adopted a bold anti-Zionist foreign policy, turning Israel from a strategic partner into an existential ideological enemy (Takeyh, 2006; Roomi, 2023). This upward trend was accompanied by an increase in media coverage around the world, most of which was tainted with preexisting ideological investments. In a conflict as politically charged as Iran-Israel, the selection of language, the assignment of blame, and the framing of actors as legitimate or illegitimate are not incidental but deliberate editorial choices. These choices, in turn, shape public understanding and can influence the political environment in which diplomacy, or its absence, unfolds (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Hanitzsch, 2020; Gunay, 2025; El-Dahmanhoury et al., 2025)."

Even the media covering this conflict is ideologically fragmented. Media scholars and conflict scholars have observed that news coverage of the Middle East is likely to be biased toward the national and political affiliations of news organisations rather than being objective (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Hanitzsch, 2020; El-Dahmanhoury et al., 2025; Gunay, 2025).

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The Iranian-proxied fighting, starting in 1979, has been in the form of a shadow war through Iranian-backed actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and Houthis in Yemen, among others, as part of the Iranian Axis of Resistance (Celso, 2024). This is a strategic reality that guarantees that conflict coverage is inevitable, that the blame-attribution process is complex and multi-layered, involving many actors, and that media framing becomes a strong influence on public understanding. The transition between 2023 and 2025 was a pivotal one between covert warfare and overt hostility as the Gaza conflict caused the rise of direct missile fire and the assassination of high-profile proxy leaders. Such intensities put the positions of Iran and Israel and its main strategic ally, the US, in the spotlight of the global world.

The systematic cross-ideological comparison is made possible by the selection of three outlets with liberal, state-aligned, and conservative ideologies. The study presents a broader perspective on interpreting and communicating the same geopolitical events across different media systems by simultaneously examining these three archetypes (Stromback, 2014; Saraswat, 2024).

The Media's Role in Assigning Moral Judgment

Media in such a one-sided situation becomes the powerful narrators who build frames of blame and moral judgment. The editorial tone, which is the expression of the feeling in the form of linguistic and rhetorical decisions, is the most direct quantitative indicator of this moral assessment because it selectively uses positive, negative, and neutral words. Media organisations support their ideological accounts, creating discourse of policy and images of legitimacy and culpability in the minds of the people. This paper discusses the editorials of three sources selected for their distinct yet strong ideological prisms.

Haaretz: The liberal, even critical, point of view in the Israeli political life.

Kayhan International: It is the state-controlled mouthpiece of the Iranian regime and it focuses on anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist propaganda.

The Wall Street Journal: The reflection of the conservative American outlook that is mostly pro-Israeli security and hawkish foreign policy.

Literature Review

The Middle East and Media Polarization.

This literature shows a consistent finding that news reporting on the Iran-Israel axis is highly polarized, in which objectivity frequently gives way to national and political identification. An example by Saraswat (2024), however, emphasizes the way in which the media frames Iran (Resistance Geopolitics) in response to the October 2023 escalations based on the geopolitical context. This Polarization has not emerged, but it has been aggravated.

The international media analysis provided by Gunay (2025) on the recent conflict shows the varying editorial policies result in the selective focus on the terror frames, the Pro-Israel versus human interest frames, the Pro-Palestinian versus underscoring the fact that ideological tone takes precedence over perceived facts. This substantiates the fact that the story of Kayhan aligns with its anti-Zionist spirit, as previously determined by Yaghoobi (2019). In the meantime, the WSJ continues to lean towards a pro-alliance message, in line with US trends towards media (Nikou, 2016). The degree of such polarization is further supported by EL-Dahmanhoury et al. (2025), who found that, despite some degree of language similarity, Western outlets predominantly used lexical items that reinforced pro-Israel echoes, directly affecting the established tonal attributions.

2.2 Ideological Biases in Conflict Media

This study is also founded on the literature of media bias. Studies about the partisan media (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016) and the coverage of international conflicts (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Hanitzsch, 2020) have determined that ideological alignment between media organizations and their audiences results in systematic tonal effects. These trends have been strengthened by recent researches on the media coverage of the Middle East conflicts since 2020 to 2025. El-Dahmanhoury et al. (2025) discovered that the most common lexical decisions in the Western outlets were the ones that support the pro-Israel narratives throughout the 2023-2024 Gaza conflict, whereas Gunay (2025) showed that the editorial policies produce selective focus on using the phrase terror or human interest

when discussing the Gaza conflict. A similar account of the effect of Iranian geopolitics of resistance on state-media framing was reported by Saraswat (2024), who also discussed the case of the state-media framing after the October 2023 escalations. These new studies, combined, establish that the tonal patterns that we have found in the current study are a subset of a larger and still continuing trend in conflict media

2.2.1 Israeli Media and Internal Critique (Haaretz)

The academic literature on media and conflict has shown over the years that media discussions of the Middle East are organized around the ideological and political identities of news companies, and deliver partisan and frequently incompatible accounts of the same story (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Hanitzsch, 2020; El-Dahmanhoury et al., 2025). This has been particularly acute in reporting the Iran-Israel conflict since October 2023, where researchers have registered a systematic difference in the choice of frames, the assigning of blame, and moral judgment among Western, Israeli, and Iranian news outlets (Gunay, 2025; Saraswat, 2024; Abdi & Raeesi, 2023).

2.2.2 Iranian State Media and Anti-Imperialist (Kayhan)

The media in Iran, which is aligned to the state, in this case, Kayhan International, is run on a revolutionary-ideological edict which makes journalistic principles subservient to state political agendas. It has recently been recorded using resistance discourse in a systematic way (Saraswat, 2024; Ostovar, 2022; Abdi & Raeesi, 2023). After the October 2023 intensifications, Kayhan International in this framing made the Iranian missile strikes and proxy operations valid in response (Saraswat, 2024; Celso, 2024). Recent studies have proved the role of such outlets as active participants in the information strategy of the so-called soft war in Iran (Abdi & Raeesi, 2023; Khatib, 2023).

2.2.3 Conservative U.S Media and Strategic Alignment (WSJ)

Local politics and foreign policy arguments are frequently evident in U.S. Media Reporting of the conflict. The Wall Street Journal is a conservative outlet that is usually in support of a firm pro-Israel and anti-Iran containment policies (Cutter, 2019). Research shows that the U.S media regularly attributes traits of enemy, such as Iran, to rogue state (Siraj & Rawan, 2010) warranting aggressive action. Such positioning implies that the attitude towards the Israeli frame, Victimized Democratic Ally, is highly positive and towards Iran's views, Malevolent Global Threat, is predominantly negative. The tone towards the U.S., though, may be critical, with the conservative media often criticising what it sees as a weakness in its political stance or a lack of deterrent effect in its foreign policy.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

This research is structurally conceptually grounded in Framing Theory.

Framing Theory

Framing theory provides the foundational lens for this analysis. Entman (1993) defined framing as the selection and salience of certain aspects of a perceived reality to promote a particular problem definition causal interpretations moral evaluation and treatment recommendations.

Tone as Moral Evaluation

Editorial tone classified as positive, negative and neutral is the direct quantitative operationalization of the third framing moral evaluation. In political conflict negative tone assigns blame condemnation or strategic failure while positive tone confers legitimacy, righteousness or success.

Generic Frames

The study condensing method follow the typology developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) which identifies generic frames such as Responsibility, Conflict, Morality and Human Interest. By Quantifying tone effectively measure the emotional and moral weight of these frames as applied to the key actors. For instance a high negative tone linked to Israel in Haaretz is typically driven by the Morality Frame focusing on ethical lapses.

Research Design and Sampling

This study employed a quantitative content analysis approach, examining a census of 677 editorials published between October 2023 and March 2025. The sample comprised 246 editorials from Haaretz 266 from Kayan International and 165 from The Wall Street Journal/

Operationalization of Editorial Tone

The core variable Editorial Tone was coded for the three primary actors, Iran, Israel, and the U.S, in every editorial. Tone was classified into three mutually exclusive categories based on the language

and rhetorical cues: positive, negative, or neutral (Semeko & Valkenburg, 2000). Chi-Square tests were performed on the frequency distribution data to confirm that the observed tonal distributions were statistically significant and ideologically driven.

Results

The analysis confirmed significant ideological differentiation in the application of tone across all outlets and actors ($p < 0.001$).

4.1 Editorial Tone in Haaretz (Liberal Israeli)

Figure 1

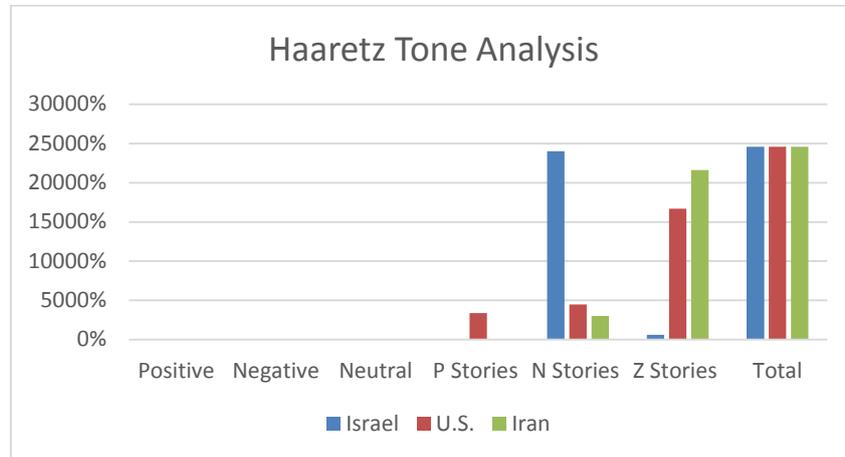


Table 1 presents the tone distribution for Haaretz.

Actor	Positive	Negative	Neutral	P Stories	N Stories	Z Stories	Total
Israel	0%	97.6%	2.4%	0	240	6	246
U.S.	13.8%	18.3%	67.9%	34	45	167	246
Iran	0%	12.2%	87.8%	0	30	216	246

Interpretation: H1 is strongly supported. Haaretz assigns an overwhelming negative tone toward Israel, confirming its role as an internal, critical voice focused on domestic failures. The predominantly neutral tone toward Iran and the U.S. confirms that the emotional and moral scrutiny of the conflict is directed inward.

4.2 Editorial Tone in Kayhan International (State-Aligned Iranian)

Figure 2

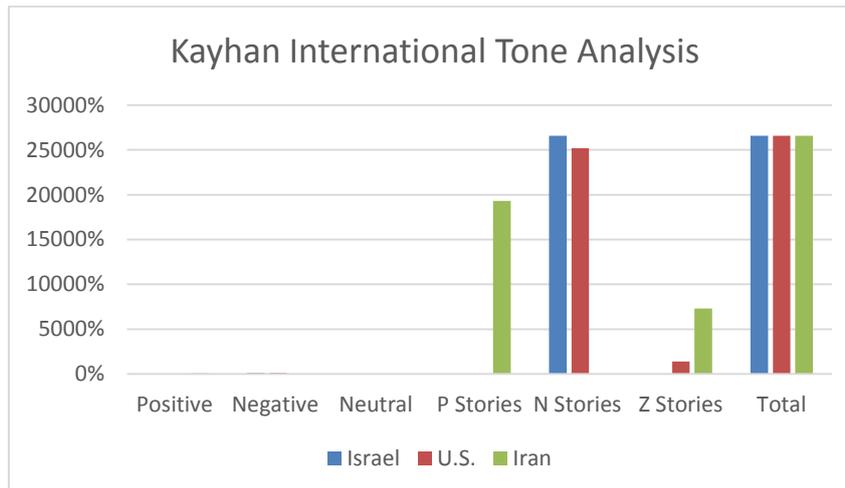


Table 2 describes the tone distribution of Kayhan International, which is absolutely polarized.

Actor	Positive	Negative	Neutral	P Stories	N Stories	Z Stories	Total
Israel	0%	100%	0%	0	266	0	266
U.S.	0%	94.7%	5.3%	0	252	14	266
Iran	72.4%	0%	27.6%	193	0	73	266

Interpretation: H2 is overwhelmingly supported. Kayhan's framing is uncompromisingly propagandistic, with a 100% negative tone toward Israel and 94.7% negative toward the U.S. This

hostility is perfectly counterbalanced by a strong positive tone toward Iran (72.4%), validating its role in mobilizing resistance by constructing a binary moral judgment.

4.3 Editorial Tone in The Wall Street Journal (Conservative American)

Figure 3

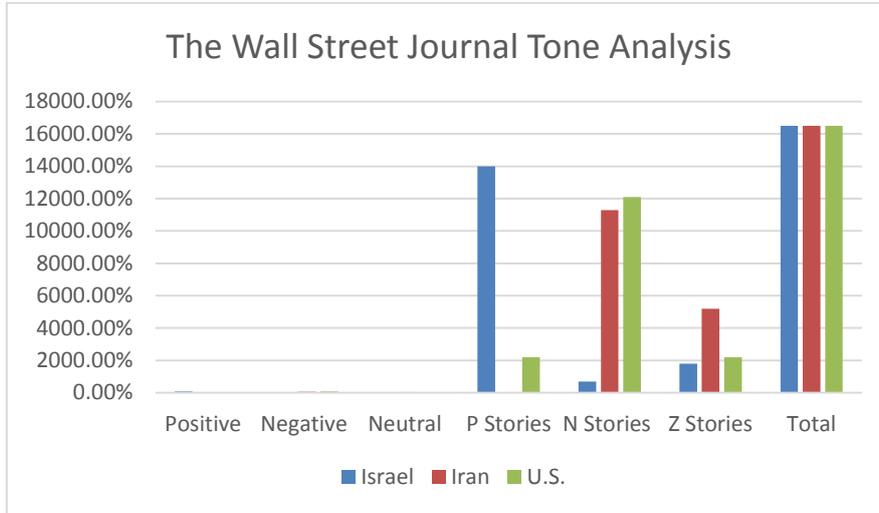


Table 3 Presents the tone distribution for the WSJ, which aligns strongly with Western strategic interests.

Actor	Positive	Negative	Neutral	P Stories	N Stories	Z Stories	Total
Israel	84.8%	4.2%	10.9%	140	7	18	165
Iran	0%	68.5%	31.5%	0	113	52	165
U.S.	13.3%	73.3%	13.3%	22	121	22	165

Interpretation: H3 is supported. The WSJ frames Israel with overwhelming positivity (84.8%) while directing its negative tone toward Iran (68.5%), aligning with its strategic objective of condemning the adversary. The high negative tone toward the U.S. (73.3%) is interpreted as an ideological critique of policy implementation (e.g., deterrence failure) within the context of a strong underlying alliance.

5. Discussion

This research sought to measure the effects of ideological congruence on the tone of the editorial of Haaretz, Kayhan international and the wall street journal concerning the Iran-Israel conflict. These findings have strong empirical evidence to back up the assumption that editorial tone is more than a stylistic attribute but rather a practical tool of ideological framing. The statistical data ($p < 0.001$) demonstrates that there are the three different moral worlds, in which the distribution of positive, negative, and neutral sentiment is determined strictly by the geopolitical mandate of the outlet.

5.1 Haaretz (H1)

The Haaretz data gives the most in-depth insight into how liberal media can act upon the war times. In favor of H1, the outlet allocated 97.6% negative tone to Israel, which is much more negative than the negative tone it allocated to the external enemy, Iran (12.2%). This observation contradicts the Rally Round the Flag effect that is usually exhibited in conflict countries. Rather, it also makes Haaretz an agent of the Morality Frame within itself. The negativity is not an indication that they are sided with Iran (received 87.8 percent neutral coverage), but instead that they concentrated a lot on attribution of the responsibility to the Israeli government. In its rhetoric by making the external threat neutral and concentrating the negativity internally, Haaretz effectively presents the argument that the seriousness of the conflict can be attributed to the failure of its own internal policy, and not to external aggression only. This is in line with the Israeli liberal media body of literature (Teneboim-Weinblatt et al., 2016), which argues that in the case of Haaretz, Israeli liberal media, the conflict is a domestic struggle over the soul of the nation as much as it is a geopolitical one.

5.2 Kayhan International (H2)

Kayhan International's results constitute a textbook example of a totalitarian framing that supports H2. The data show an absolute binary - that is, 100% negative tone to Israel and 94.7% negative tone to U.S. compared to a 72.4% positive tone towards Iran. Unlike Haaretz, which allows for neutrality, Kayhan leaves nothing to chance. This distribution of tones has a definite mobilization

function. By reducing the enemy to pure evil (negative) and the state to pure virtue (positive), the media outlet creates a Manichaeian world. This is in accordance with the "Resistance Geopolitics" framework (Saraswat, 2024), where the media is not an observer but a participant in the "soft war." The absence of a neutral narrative for Israel implies that even the existence of the adversary is considered a negative value in this state-aligned narrative. This tone in this case act as a boundary maintenance mechanism reinforcing the identity of the "Axis of Resistance" against a monolithic "Great Satan."

5.3 The Wall Street Journal (H3)

The WSJ exhibits a unique type of conservative framing, in support of H3, defined by strategic clarity. The 84.8% positive tone towards Israel, and the 68.5% negative tone towards Iran, indicate a worldview that is based on the traditional structures of Western alliances. However, the most interesting data point is the 73.3% negative tone to the U.S. While this will seem counterintuitive to an American paper, the context in which the negativity is used qualifies it in ways that may differ from how Kayhan uses it. While Kayhan is attacking the U.S. as an imperialism entity, the negative tone of the WSJ is probably focused on the administration and how of how it is handling the conflict (ie. it's weakness in deterrence) and not the nation itself. Thus, the WSJ uses tone in order to create a Conflict Frame, calling for a more hawkish foreign policy. By pitting a "virtuous" ally (Israel) against a "malevolent" enemy (Iran), and by condemning the U.S. government for failing to do enough to support that binary in a helpful way, the WSJ serves as watchdog of conservative geopolitical interests.

5.4 Tone as Moral Judgment

Relating this finding back to the Framing Theory developed by Entman (1993), this study confirms that tone is the quantitative operationalization of Moral Evaluation. Positive Tone legitimates actors Kayhan toward Iran, WSJ toward Israel. A negative tone is used to delegitimize the actors and blame Haaretz against Israel, and Kayhan is blamed against Israel/U.S. A neutral tone dulls actors to draw the spotlight to Haaretz's position towards Iran. The vast difference in these assignments of tone implies that audiences who consume these different media diets are witnessing essentially different conflicts. One audience is seeing a government failing its people (Haaretz), another sees a holy war against absolute evil (Kayhan) and the third sees a strategic ally betrayed by weak leadership (WSJ). This broken reality validates the fact that in the modern information ecosystem, "objectivity" is replaced by "ideological consistency."

6. Conclusion

This work shows that in the event of the Iran-Israel conflict in 2023-2025 editorial tone has moved beyond being a tool for bias, it has become a calculated tool for cognitive warfare. The statistical proof confirmed by the extraordinary divergence in sentiment in 677 editorials shows that Haaretz, Kayhan International, and The Wall Street Journal are not reporting on the conflict, but building incompatible moral realities for their respective audiences.

The results of this data shows how each individual outlet puts together tone for a specific geopolitical mandate. Haaretz's 97.6% negative tone towards Israel represents the media institution as a mechanism of internal accountability focusing on democratic self-critique instead of national unity in times of war. Kayhan International's absolute (100%) hostility to Israel and the valorization of Iran (72.4%) at the same time, serves as an example of the use of the state-aligned media as a means for "Resistance" mobilization, in which tone is strictly binary and propagandistic. Meanwhile, The Wall Street Journal's extreme positive tone for Israel (84.8%) and extreme negative tone for Iran (68.5%) is part of the discourse of Western strategic alliance, leading to how the conflict is framed in terms of defensive necessity.

However, as it will be seen in the end, these results validate the core application of Framing Theory: tone is the quantitative trace of moral judgment. Through policing the line between what is good and what is evil rigorously with the help of sentiment these outlets make sure that their viewers view the confrontation through prismatic and mutually exclusive perspectives. Apart from warfare this apparent ideological source of friction as the conflict moves to the stage of express hostility, the role of media in cementing these ideological silos indicates that the sound of conflict is not the sole result of violence but rather the cause of violence which entrenches these ideological silos making it all the more difficult to overcome such positions through diplomacy.

Future Recommendations

This research gives several future research directions. Three outlets of different ideological archetypes were chosen intentionally and analyzed to make a conclusion; further research may provide more generalizable findings on the topic of media reporting of conflicts. There are four areas that should be noted. To begin with, this research study may be expanded in terms of geographical and institutional scope. Also adding in outlets of other regional actors, like outlets of Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Qatar would enable a more detailed mapping of the editorial tone of the entire Middle Eastern media sphere. It would also be valuable to conduct comparative longitudinal studies of tonal changes across each conflict cycle and/or several cycles.

Second, the correlation between editorial tone and audience reception ought to be investigated in the future. It is ambiguous how much the readers of Haaretz, Kayhan International, or The Wall Street Journal can internalize tonal positions of these sources or criticize them. A survey or an experimental study on the attitude change among audience because of ideologically different conflict coverage would contribute significantly to the discipline.

Third, mixed-method designs, which involve quantitative tone analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, should be used in future work. Although the current paper offers statistically sound tonal metrics, the contextual content of particular framing decisions the editorial choices, the ownership patterns, and the political influences that affected each of the outlets is also a valuable subject to further research.

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Ethical Considerations:

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

Conflict of interest:

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

Data availability:

The editorial data and framing analysis applied in this study were based on the publicly available newspaper archives. The data set that was used to derive these findings can be found in the hands of the respective author on a reasonable request.