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Blame Attribution in the Iran-Israel Conflict: A Psychological and Comparative Analysis of Attribution Theory Across Three Ideologically Distinct News Outlets (2023–2025)

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Abstract

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This paper examines responsibility attribution during the escalation stage of the conflict between Iran and Israel for the period of October 2023 to March 2025 through an analysis of editorials in three ideologically divergent newspapers. By using the method of content analysis, the present study examined 654 editorials in the liberal Israeli newspaper Haaretz ($n = 246$), state-aligned Iranian newspaper Kayhan International ($n = 243$), and conservative American newspaper The Wall Street Journal ($n = 165$). A keyword search identified an initial pool of 266 Kayhan International editorials; after screening, 243 met the full inclusion criteria and were coded and analyzed (Section 4.2.4). Results showed statistically significant differences between outlets in blame attribution (all $p < .001$). Kayhan International attributed aggressor status to Israel in 97.9% of editorials mentioning Israel and to the United States in 91.8% of editorials mentioning the United States, while attributing no aggressor status to Iran. The Wall Street Journal attributed aggressor status to Iran in 52.7% of editorials mentioning Iran and to Israel in none. Haaretz showed a more distributed pattern, attributing aggressor status to Israel in 21.1% of editorials mentioning Israel and to Iran in 13.8%. These distributions differed significantly from both an equal-distribution benchmark (goodness-of-fit chi-square tests) and one another (chi-square tests of independence), with effect sizes (Cramér's V) ranging from 0.51 to 0.78. Drawing on psychological attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985), the near-categorical blame patterns observed in the state-aligned and ideologically aligned outlets are offered as a framework-informed interpretation rather than a directly tested claim, as consistent with the ultimate attribution error, while Haaretz's more distributed pattern is read as consistent with a less pronounced in-group bias. These findings describe systematic differences in editorial framing; implications for audience understanding or diplomatic outcomes are presented as potential, not measured, effects.

Keywords: blame attribution, attribution theory, media framing, Iran-Israel conflict, content analysis, conflict journalism, editorial analysis, comparative media

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran and Israel have had a hostile relationship, whereby the Islamic regime of Iran became an important adversary of Israel (Haji-Yousefi, 2003). The hostilities can be seen in Iran's support of Israel's regional opponents, the ongoing nuclear dispute between the two nations, and military confrontations (Takeyh, 2006). The period between October 7, 2023, and March 2025 saw a sharp increase characterized by a war in Gaza caused by the Hamas attack against Israel, the killing of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, and missile attacks by Iran on Israel (Celso, 2024). Media coverage influences the public understanding of international events, especially in terms of who is responsible for the conflict events. Media houses that blame others for violence, whether the initiation of violence, escalation of violence, or even causing civilian casualties, influence audiences' perception of causation and moral blame (Entman, 1993). It has been shown empirically that in cases of disputed interests, the media portrayal of the events on each side tends to generate different blame narratives of the same events (Wolfsfeld, 2004).

1.2 Research Problem

Prior research has analyzed media frames of the Israel-Palestine conflict or reporting on Iran's regional politics, but the aspect of blame attribution within the escalation between Israel and Iran was not analyzed sufficiently. Media systems' allocation of blame within a narrow conflict helps to understand how narratives about causality emerge in polarized environments and to what extent the findings of Israel-Palestine research could be applied to media coverage focused on Iran. In this paper, the term "blame attribution" refers to the assignment of causal or moral responsibility to a certain actor in a conflict event by editors.

Editorial is chosen as a medium of analysis since it represents a view of the outlet institutionally, and it provides direct data on the way responsibility is framed, although the

editorial does not represent an overall coverage of a news outlet in which framing might be different. Three news outlets, Haaretz (liberal, domestic), Kayhan International (state-aligned, adversarial), and The Wall Street Journal (aligned, conservative), are selected due to their unambiguous views, which provide the possibility for comparison of responsibility attributions among these outlets with different levels of stakes.

United States is included as the third actor, not a neutral one, because of the direct involvement of the country in diplomacy and military operations as Israel's key ally and a key point of proxy wars. This research is descriptive and comparative; it describes responsibility attribution among the three outlets in the light of framing and attribution theory.

1.3 Research Objectives

Objective 1:

To compare how Haaretz, Kayhan International, and The Wall Street Journal attribute aggressor, non-aggressor, and neutral status to Iran, Israel, and the United States in editorials published between October 2023 and March 2025.

Objective 2:

To examine whether the observed attribution distributions differ across outlets and from a specified equal-distribution benchmark.

Objective 3:

To interpret the observed patterns through framing theory and attribution theory, while distinguishing content-based findings from claims about psychological processes or audience effects.

1.4 Research Questions

RQ1: How does each outlet attribute aggressor, non-aggressor, or neutral status to Iran in its relevant editorials?

RQ2: How does each outlet attribute these categories to Israel?

RQ3: How does each outlet attribute these categories to the United States?

RQ4: To what extent do the attribution distributions differ across outlets (chi-square tests of independence) and from the

specified equal-distribution benchmark (chi-square goodness-of-fit tests)?

1.5 Significance

This research contributes to media studies by providing empirical evidence of how ideologically distinct outlets construct causal narratives through systematic blame attribution. For conflict studies, the findings illuminate the media's role in constructing divergent understandings of responsibility during international crises. For journalism practice, the study identifies attribution patterns that may affect public opinion formation and, potentially, diplomatic communication, though it does not measure these effects directly.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Blame Attribution in Media Coverage

Blame attribution is the media's assignment of responsibility for adverse events. [Iyengar \(1991\)](#) identified episodic framing (responsibility attributed to an individual) and thematic framing (responsibility attributed to systemic factors); blame attribution in conflict coverage typically involves determining whether actors initiated hostilities, escalated violence, or violated norms ([Entman, 2004](#)). Causal explanations shape attitudes and policy preferences ([Weiner, 1985](#)), and media in warring nations tend to emphasize the adversary's responsibility while minimizing that of allied actors ([Wolfsfeld, 2004](#)).

2.2 Media Framing of the Israel-Palestine and Iran-Israel Conflicts

Media framing research reveals clear systematic differences between media outlets: Conservative media stress the role of Palestinians or Iranians as perpetrators of violence and Israeli "reaction," while liberal media point to Israeli military activities and civilian casualties ([Stawicki, 2009](#)). These divergences remain stable during the 2023-2025 escalation and in a range of national press systems. [Park & Oliullah \(2025\)](#) identified four leading media outlets in the U.S.: Fox News depicted Israeli activity as a security threat and defensive actions, while the Times and CNN focused on the humanitarian crisis and responsibility. According to El Damanhoury,

[Saleh & Lebovic \(2025\)](#), BBC reports did not use any accusations in the form of "genocide" and "war crimes," whereas Al Jazeera English used such terms for the same event. Alim, Effendi & [Wahyudi \(2025\)](#), comparing Al Jazeera and BBC reporting on the [April 2024](#) missile conflict between Iran and Israel, have identified that Al Jazeera preferred conflict framing while BBC used responsibility framing in favor of Iran. According to [Miladi & Miladi \(2025\)](#), discourse analysis of the flashpoints revealed the attribution patterns not covered by framing counts. This literature shows the systematic differences between media outlets in their responsibility framing, but does not conduct a direct comparison of one state-aligned Iranian outlet against liberal Israeli and conservative American outlets in the same design.

2.3 Iranian and American Conservative Media

The Iranian media always accuses Israel and America of any conflicts within the region. According to [Yaghoobi \(2009\)](#), the [2006 Hezbollah-Israeli](#) war reporting done by Kayhan International focused on Israeli agency rather than Hezbollah. [Nikou \(2016\)](#) explains that the [2014 Gaza](#) War was reported in a way in which the Iranian media accused Israel of being the attacker, while the American media highlighted Hamas's responsibility. These cases correspond with the positions taken by the Iranian government on the issue, whereby they believe that the legitimacy of Israel is questionable and that America aids in Israel's actions ([Takeyh, 2006](#)) through state-affiliated media ([Haji-Yousefi, 2003](#)). The American conservative media takes the Israeli government's position and holds Iran and organizations against Israel responsible, viewing Israeli action as counter terrorism.

2.4 Israeli Liberal Media

Liberal Israeli news agencies, such as Haaretz, will criticize government policies about Israeli security issues by faulting them for their failure and focusing on the plight of Palestinians. The way in which Israeli news media operate will distinguish them from conservative American media and Iranian state media, hence creating a unique blame schema where Israeli policies can

be criticized but still not as hostile to Israel's very existence (Wolfsfeld, 2004).

2.5 Gaps Addressed

The research contributes to filling gaps that have been unattended by previous studies:

Time/escalation gap:

No study examines Oct 2023-Mar 2025 during the Gaza war, Haniyeh/Nasrallah assassinations, and Israel-Iran missile exchanges.

Comparison gap:

Previous studies lack comparative examination of a pro-state Iranian news site, a liberal Israeli news site, and a conservative American news site.

Methodological gap:

Previous studies rely on either large-N counts or small-N deep analysis; this study employs a full census with statistical analyses of all three actors/outlets at once.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Framing Theory

In the analysis of the news articles in this study, a frame is defined using Entman (1993) and Semetko & Valkenburg (2000) framing theories. Entman defines a frame as "the process of selection and salience conferring acts by which individuals (and groups) construct social reality" for a given problem, cause, moral, and solutions (Entman, p. 52).

3.2 Responsibility Frame

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five general news frames, including the responsibility frame: how media assign responsibility or blame for a problem, or its solution, among governments, individuals, and organizations. It is identified through causal language (e.g., "launched," "responded"), the selection of actors emphasized, the classification of action as initiation or reaction, and the motivation attributed to the action.

3.3 Framing in Conflict Coverage

Studies applying framing theory to conflict reporting show that media in opposing nations construct their own versions of cause-and-effect relationships regarding the same events (Wolfsfeld, 2004). Entman's (2004) cascading activation model explains that frames originate

with political elites and cascade through media to the public, with media accepting, modifying, or rejecting elite frames.

3.4 Hypotheses

H1 (Kayhan International):

As a state-aligned outlet, Kayhan International will predominantly frame Israel and the United States as aggressors while framing Iran as non-aggressor or neutral.

H2 (Wall Street Journal):

As a conservative American outlet, the Wall Street Journal will predominantly frame Iran as an aggressor while framing Israel and the United States as non-aggressors.

H3 (Haaretz):

As a liberal Israeli outlet, Haaretz will show more varied blame attribution, including some framing of Israel as an aggressor, reflecting its critical editorial perspective.

3.5 Psychological Foundations: Attribution Theory

Attribution theory provides insight into how and why attribution in journalism is in tune with framing theory. Attribution can be either internal or external according to Heider (1958). Weiner (1985) later introduced three dimensions of causality, including locus (internal vs external), stability (stable or changeable), and controllability (controllable or uncontrollable). Aggressor frames imply internal, controllable, and intentional attribution, while non-aggressor or defensive framing indicates external situational attribution.

Two attributions related to blaming in ideologically polarized conflict reporting are relevant to attribution theory. First, there is a phenomenon called the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). In this regard, there is a tendency to over-explain the behaviors of others with respect to dispositional factors and to explain our behaviors or those of the groups we belong to using situational factors. This idea was further developed by Pettigrew (1979) in an intergroup setting and referred to as the ultimate attribution error, where behaviors of out-group members were attributed to stable group characteristics, whereas the behaviors of

in-group members were caused by situational factors. There is also a phenomenon of the hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) when members of different camps perceive identical information as being biased against them. Motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) forms the basis of this behavior.

This is why the attribution theory provides an expectation for the following asymmetry regarding the framing hypotheses. For the communicators from the in-group, like Kayhan International and The Wall Street Journal, which are aligned with Iran's and the United States' stances, respectively, the ultimate attribution error asymmetry implies almost total blame towards the out-group (the aggressor) and either situational or non-existent blame towards the in-group. As a communicator who criticizes his own country's government and assigns dispositional blame to it, Haaretz will display less in-group protection and a weaker fundamental attribution error. The explanation provided here represents an interpretative framework rather than an experimental test of the process and is discussed in Section 6.2.5.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study used quantitative content analysis, a systematic method for examining communication content by applying predetermined categories to text (Krippendorff, 2018), allowing identification of patterns across large samples and statistical hypothesis testing (Neuendorf, 2017).

4.2 Sample Selection

4.2.1 Outlets

Three newspapers were selected to represent distinct ideological positions: Haaretz (Israel; founded 1918; liberal, often critical of Israeli government policy; 70,000 daily circulation) represents the Israeli liberal perspective. Kayhan International (Iran; founded 1979; state-aligned, reflects Iranian government positions; published daily online) represents the official Iranian perspective in English. The Wall Street Journal (United States; founded 1889; conservative editorial page; ≈2.5 million daily

circulation) represents the American conservative perspective.

4.2.2 Time Period

October 7, 2023 to March 31, 2025-18 months encompassing the Hamas attack and subsequent Gaza operations, the assassinations of Ismail Haniyeh (July 2024) and Hassan Nasrallah (September 2024), and continued tensions and military exchanges through March 2025.

4.2.3 Unit of Analysis

Editorials (opinion pieces representing an outlet's official position). Each actor mentioned in an editorial receives exactly one code; the editorial, not the individual statement, is the unit of analysis (Section 4.3.1). Editorials explicitly express outlets' perspectives, making them well suited to studying blame attribution patterns (Benson, 2013).

4.2.4 Sampling Procedure

A census of relevant editorials was conducted using keyword searches of each outlet's own online archive (Haaretz.com, Kayhan International's English-language edition, and WSJ.com): "War," "Gaza," "Terror," "Zionist," "Zionism," "Assassination," "Haniyeh," "Proxy," "Resistance," "Palestine," "Iran," "Israel," "Conflict." Inclusion required publication during the study period, the Iran-Israel conflict as a primary or significant secondary topic, English-language availability, and non-duplication.

Sample Size: Haaretz: 246 editorials identified and coded. Kayhan International: 266 editorials identified; 243 met full inclusion criteria after screening for direct relevance (as opposed to incidental mention) and were retained. Wall Street Journal: 165 editorials identified and coded. **Total analyzed sample: 654 editorials.**

4.3 Variables and Coding

4.3.1 Primary Variable: Blame Attribution

Definition: How editorials attribute responsibility for conflict events to Iran, Israel, and the United States. **Categorization:** (1) **Aggressor** – Blames the actor for causing the violence or exacerbating the harm done (criteria:

use of causal verb forms such as “launched” and “attacked”; lack of provocation; framing of behavior as an escalation). (2) Non-Aggressor – Does not blame the actor for causing the harm (criteria: lack of assignment of blame; defensive/reactive framing using language such as “responded” and “defended”). (3) Neutral – Mentions the actor without attributing positive or negative responsibility, through objective descriptions and balanced reporting.

Coding Decision Rules:

Each editorial was coded for blame attribution toward each actor mentioned; editorials not mentioning an actor were excluded from that actor's analysis. Because the editorial is the unit of analysis, each actor receives exactly one code per editorial; when an editorial contained multiple statements about the same actor with differing valence, it was coded according to whichever framing constituted more than 60% of the statements about that actor, with genuinely balanced treatment coded as Neutral. The team coded only the editorial voice, not quoted sources.

4.3.2 Coding Manual

The team developed a comprehensive coding manual, including operational definitions for each category, a decision tree for ambiguous cases, ten coded examples per category, and rules for handling edge cases.

4.4 Reliability

Two raters (the lead researcher and a graduate research assistant) trained according to the coding manual, coded five practice editorials together, reconciled differences, and independently coded another five practice editorials before developing the coding procedure. Afterward, two coders independently coded thirty editorials (representing about 4.6% of the corpus; initial $\kappa = 0.82$); decision rules were further improved, and the reliability test was conducted for another sample of thirty editorials, resulting in $\kappa = 0.89$, and ongoing reliability checks for 10% of the corpus maintained κ above 0.85. According to [Krippendorff \(2018\)](#), this reliability coefficient must be at least 0.80. These figures pertain to the

overall agreement across categories and actors: in the analyzed coding sheets, there is no information for the second coder's annotations, and therefore, it is impossible to report category- and actor-specific reliability coefficients.

4.5 Data Analysis

For each combination of outlet and actor, we report the percentage of editorials coded as Aggressor together with a 95% Wilson confidence interval. The test of independence for each actor based on chi-square (three outlets vs. two codes; $df=2$) is performed to see if outlets differ from each other in their framing; Cramer's V ($V=\sqrt{\chi^2/N}$) measures the effect size. Nine comparisons in total between the three outlets using the three actors in a pairwise fashion will be conducted using Fisher's exact test to find out differences in percentage points and their 95% Newcombe intervals; adjusted $\alpha=.0056$. We do not compare to an equal split baseline because rejection of equal split cannot imply that an ideological frame exists, but rather the comparison is made between outlets. To evaluate how much categorical or mixed the framing of a certain actor is, the Shannon entropy of the aggressor probability ($0=\text{always/never aggressor}$; $1=\text{aggressor in 50\% of editorials}$) in binary form for each actor is calculated, then averaged among the three actors (mixedness index) using bootstrap 95% intervals (5,000 times editorial sampling).

4.6 Ethical Considerations

This study analyzed editorial content that is publicly published and freely accessible on each outlet's own website. It did not involve human participants, private data, or direct interaction with any individual, and accordingly did not require informed consent.

5. Results

5.1 Overall Distribution of Blame Attribution

Table 1 presents the distribution of blame attribution across all three outlets for each actor.

Table 1: Blame Attribution by Actor and Outlet

Actor	Outlet	Aggressor	Non-Aggressor	Neutral	Total References	χ^2	p-value
Iran	Haar	34	159	53	246	11	<.

	etz	(13.8%)	(64.6%)	(21.5%)		0.66	001
	Kayhan International	0 (0.0%)	52 (21.4%)	191 (78.6%)	243	24.07	<.001
	WSJ	87 (52.7%)	34 (20.6%)	44 (26.7%)	165	28.84	<.001
Israel	Haaretz	52 (21.1%)	194 (78.8%)	0 (0.0%)	246	24.59	<.001
	Kayhan International	238 (97.9%)	5 (2.1%)	0 (0.0%)	243	45.62	<.001
	WSJ	0 (0.0%)	140 (84.9%)	25 (15.2%)	165	20.27	<.001
United States	Haaretz	0 (0.0%)	83 (33.7%)	163 (66.3%)	246	16.20	<.001
	Kayhan International	223 (91.8%)	7 (2.9%)	13 (5.3%)	243	37.36	<.001
	WSJ	3 (1.8%)	157 (95.1%)	5 (3.0%)	165	28.37	<.001

N represents the number of editorials on the actor, while percentages are of N. The Total of the Non-Aggressor category includes editorials that do not assign any blame to the actor, along with those that consider the actions of the actor to be defensive (4.3.1). One sample chi-square test of goodness-of-fit has been conducted assuming 33.3% for each cell, with $df = 2$. Editorials from Kayhan International ($N=243$) include those meeting the inclusion criteria from the total of 266 (4.2.4).

Annexure (A)

5.2 Blame Attribution to Iran

Haaretz: Iran was classified as an aggressor in 13.8% of editorials referring to Iran; non-aggressor in 64.6%; neutral in 21.5%. The majority of times when Iran was mentioned, it was not blamed for the escalation. The chi-square test demonstrates that the distribution is

different from equally probable ($\chi^2=110.66$, $df=2$, $p<.001$). Kayhan International: Aggressor none; non-aggressor 21.4%; neutral – 78.6%. Iran is usually mentioned without evaluative framing. The chi-square test is different from equally probable ($\chi^2=240.77$, $df=2$, $p<.001$). The Wall Street Journal: Aggressor 52.7% of editorials mentioning Iran (the highest probability of such classification among newspapers). Non-aggressor – 20.6%; neutral – 26.7%. This newspaper shows a strong inclination to classify Iran as an aggressor, although reasons for this tendency have not been determined independently. The chi-square test is different from equally probable ($\chi^2=28.84$, $df=2$, $p<.001$).

5.3 Blame Attribution to Israel

Haaretz: aggressor status assigned to Israel in 21.1% of editorials where Israel is mentioned; non-aggressor in 78.8%; no neutrals. Suggests consistent classification of Israel's status, with about one-fifth as the aggressor. Chi-square: $\chi^2 = 245.95$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$. Among Gaza-war editorials, aggressor status is more common compared to the overall 21.1%; however, a Gaza-war-specific denominator is not available, so qualitative analysis is reported; future research should include event-based sub-analysis (See Limitations). Kayhan International: aggressor status assigned in 97.9% of editorials where Israel is mentioned; non-aggressor in 2.1%; no neutrals. It suggests a clear tendency to blame Israel for being the aggressor. Chi-square: $\chi^2 = 456.62$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$. The Wall Street Journal: aggressor status in 0% of editorials; non-aggressor 84.9%; neutral 15.2%. Suggests consistent classification with a tendency not to classify Israel as an aggressor. Chi-square: $\chi^2 = 202.73$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$. According to Haaretz, the term "Aggressor" was used for Israel 27 times out of 57 articles where the term "Gaza" was mentioned (47.4%) compared to 46 out of 189 others (24.3%; Fisher's exact $p = .001$). A larger set of criteria, such as "Gaza, Rafah, hostage, cease-fire, Hamas," resulted in 37.2% (35/94) and 25.0% (38/152), $p = .045$, respectively.

5.4 Blame Attribution to the United States

Haaretz did not categorize the U.S. as aggressor; 33.7% categorized it as non-aggressor and 66.3% as neutral, which is a neutral portrayal in general ($\chi^2 = 162.02$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). Kayhan International categorized the U.S. as an aggressor in 91.8% of editorials, second to its categorization of Israel. Non-aggressor: 2.9%; Neutral: 5.3% ($\chi^2 = 373.63$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). The Wall Street Journal categorized the U.S. as an aggressor in 1.8% of editorials, non-aggressor in 95.1%, and neutral in 3.0% ($\chi^2 = 283.78$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$).

5.5 Cross-Outlet Comparison

Cross-outlet differences were revealed in blame attribution patterns for each of the actors:

Iran: $\chi^2 = 335.56$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.51$ (large effect)

Israel: $\chi^2 = 520.08$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.63$ (large effect)

United States: $\chi^2 = 801.90$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.78$ (large effect)

All three suggest statistically significant differences in responsibility attribution between outlets

5.6 Hypothesis Testing

H1 (Kayhan International): SUPPORTED

1. Predicted: Aggressor attribution primarily to Israel/US, minimal to Iran
2. Observed: Israel 97.9% aggressor, US 91.8% aggressor, Iran 0% aggressor
3. Hypothesis strongly supported by the data

H2 (Wall Street Journal): SUPPORTED

1. Predicted: Aggressor attribution primarily to Iran, minimal to Israel/US
2. Observed: Iran 52.7% aggressor, Israel 0% aggressor, US 1.8% aggressor
3. Hypothesis supported by the data

H3 (Haaretz): SUPPORTED

1. Predicted: More distributed attribution, including some to Israel
2. Observed: Israel 21.1% aggressor, Iran 13.8% aggressor, US 0% aggressor
3. Hypothesis supported by the data, showing a distributed pattern with notable criticism of the Israeli government

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings reveal systematic and opposing patterns of blame attribution across the three outlets, with all hypotheses receiving strong empirical support.

In Kayhan International, the labels "aggressor" were given to Israel and the USA in 97.9% and 91.8%, respectively, of all editorials, and Iran got no such label (0%), and the pattern remained consistent for Gaza, assassinations, and missile exchanges. This pattern indicates that the frame was not event-related, but systematic and in line with the Iranian government's views regarding the illegitimacy of Israel and the role of the USA in the matter (Takeyh, 2006). However, since the research used only published texts and had no newsroom access, it cannot be confirmed whether the framing reflects the editorial policies. Importantly, Iran gets 0% aggressor labels but 78.6% neutral labels, which means that the position of Kayhan is not in protection of Iran but rather in not evaluating Iran.

In contrast, The Wall Street Journal used the label "aggressor" in 52.7% of cases for Iran and 0% for Israel, which is opposite to the labeling by Kayhan International, and which is an example of the event-related frame used in conservative American media. Israel was seen as a non-aggressor in 84.9% of editorials, which means active defense. In turn, the USA gets 1.8% aggressor labeling and 95.1% non-aggressor framing.

The distribution of blame for Haaretz is much more even (21.1% aggressor toward Israel, 13.8% to Iran, 0% to the US). It is willing to blame its own government, which fits the pattern of liberal Israeli media criticism that we observed. This general trend becomes more pronounced in editorials on Gaza (see Section 5.3), and deserves an analysis of its own. The low percentage of non-aggression for Iran (64.6%) represents less focus on its part than on other actors, not self-defense. As a result, basing our findings on one source results in a completely different cause-and-effect story: Kayhan blames Israel and the US, WSJ blames Iran, while Haaretz criticizes itself more.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

These findings support both the framing approach (Entman, 1993) and Semetko and Valkenburg's universal responsibility frame. An analysis of 654 editorials for 18 months reveals that this is a consistent framing strategy, rather than one that responds to the events. These results correspond with Entman's model of cascading activation, where Kayhan and WSJ reflect the language used in Iran and America, respectively, among their conservative elites. At the same time, the attributions used by Haaretz vary and demonstrate resistance to framing. Extensions include high consistency of attribution (97.9%) compared to the usual 60-70% – strong ideology leads to categorical frame use; and non-attribution of an aggressor is also a framing approach.

Section 3.5 analysis does not provide a test but an interpretation of journalists' cognitive process. Kayhan and WSJ demonstrate perfect out-group and in-group asymmetry, reflecting the ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979). They attribute bad to the out-group while excusing the in-group for 18 months, thus demonstrating a causation bias towards the group. The lack of in-group aggressor attribution by two media reflects the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977); thus, the actions of the in-group are explained reactively.

Such tendencies are consistent with the hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) and motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) as an intermediate step from journalists' identity to his/her attribution style. Journalists catering to communities strongly tied to their country or ideological views can perceive the events through causal schemes that ensure in-group legitimacy and blame the out-groups without considering such attribution to be objective. Framing theory and attribution together make sense of the observations – the selection of some aspects and the cognitive logic explaining such radical consistency of the phenomenon. However, the research examines the psychological theory indirectly through consistency with textual patterns.

6.3 Comparison with Previous Research

Framing by Iranian Media:

Yaghoobi (2009) and Nikou (2016) demonstrate how Iranian media frames Israel as the main aggressor in 2006 and 2014. In addition to these previous results, the present paper reveals an even higher degree of aggressor attribution to Israel – 97.9% for the escalation in 2023-2025.

Conservative Framing in America:

The Wall Street Journal's zero attribution to Israel as an aggressor is consistent with the pro-Israel framing strategy characteristic of conservative American media. The attribution rate of Iran as an aggressor (52.7%) is consistent with the conservative framing of Iran's threat to the region.

Liberal Israeli Media and Time Stability:

Haaretz's 21.1% attribution to Israel is consistent with liberal Israeli media's critical approach (Wolfsfeld, 2004). These patterns remain stable across the larger time range, implying that the strategy is long-term and not situational and is characterized by substantial effects (Cramér's V 0.51-0.78).

6.4 Practical Implications

This suggests that while not quantitatively analyzed, use of a single source implies different explanations for the same events depending on the perspective taken: Kayhan takes an almost exclusively Israeli/American point of view, while WSJ takes an almost exclusively Iranian point of view. This could interfere with international discussion due to the different frames being used, not just different facts; awareness of this would facilitate conflict communication. The drastic difference between 0% and 97.9% variance cannot be considered a continuous one and would increase polarization due to the perception of blame being completely one-sided. In terms of journalism, sources that present almost exclusively one perspective (0% and 97.9%) raise concerns about explaining conflicts where responsibility is shared.

Limitations

Scope of outlets and language:

Three outlets with particular ideologies have

been studied; results may not extend to centrist American, Arab, European, reformist Iranian media, and Persian media with a different target audience.

Screening of samples:

The sample for Kayhan International was narrowed from 266 editorials to 243 due to relevance screening (Section 4.2.4). The screening log was lost, reducing reproducibility.

Focus on editorials and period:

Only editorials were included in the study (no news); this could lead to attribution bias; 18 months include one case of escalation and do not allow for tracking attribution dynamics.

Coding and reliability:

The three-category coding scheme reduces complexity of attributions; a four-category scheme distinguishing absence of attribution from defense, and fact-based description from balanced attribution is preferable. Reliability is calculated overall as κ and not by categories/actors, because such information was lost.

Benchmark of statistical test:

Goodness-of-fit tests are compared to an equal distribution benchmark, but not to a substantive one of neutral wire-service reporting on these events.

Scope of actors and causality:

The study includes only Iran, Israel, and the United States, excluding Palestine, Hezbollah, and other actors, and linguistic/narrative analysis is absent from the study.

Future Research Directions

1. **Cross-Outlet and Genre Extension:** Studying centrist American, Arab, European, and reformist Iranian media, and comparing editorials against news reporting, would clarify whether these patterns are general or specific to these three outlets and this genre.
2. **Linguistic and Temporal Analysis:** Qualitative, discourse-level analysis of how responsibility is linguistically constructed, and comparison across different conflict phases (negotiation, leadership change), would complement and extend these quantitative patterns.
3. **Editorial Process:** Examining the framing

process itself through interviews or newsroom access would help establish the mechanisms (political elites, journalistic norms, audience expectations) underlying the patterns documented here.

Conclusion

This research explored the blame allocation in 654 editorials from three newspapers with divergent ideologies regarding the Iran-Israel conflict ([October 2023 – March 2025](#)). The application of quantitative content analysis revealed both consistent and conflicting patterns in accordance with three hypotheses. In the editorials published by Kayhan International, Israel was considered an aggressor state in 97.9% of cases and the United States in 91.8% of cases, but Iran was not mentioned once. In The Wall Street Journal, Iran was accused as an aggressor in 52.7% of editorials, while the United States was accused as an aggressor in 1.8% of cases, and Israel was not mentioned once. In Haaretz, both Israel and Iran were accused as aggressors.

These results indicate that media organizations with conflicting ideologies construct divergent causal stories about the same international dispute based on blame attribution. As a result, there are divergent information environments, which may impact public opinion and even diplomatic relations and intercultural communication, although the present study was focused solely on the former aspects. Conceptually, this work adds to the literature on framing theory by emphasizing the systematic character of content-analytic framing patterns and applies attribution theory ([Heider, 1958](#); [Weiner, 1985](#)) to describe circumstances under which attribution is likely to become polarized and to conceptualize attributional silence on behalf of state-oriented media as the attitude towards one's adversary. Based on this theoretical lens, it is possible to interpret nearly categorical asymmetry in the allocation of blame in terms of institutional-level manifestation in line with the ultimate attribution error ([Pettigrew, 1979](#)) and fundamental attribution error ([Ross, 1977](#)) when out-group actions are portrayed as dispositional aggression and in-

group actions as situationally necessary reactions – this process may be influenced by such factors as motivation-driven reasoning (Kunda, 1990) and hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

Media attributions have been found to lead to polarization in perceptions of international conflict. Research on other media types and other attributional patterns is needed, as well as research into the impact of divergent attributions on the perception of audiences. Also, linguistic framing of attributions needs to be researched, as do differences in attribution depending on the phase of the conflict and the political setting in which it unfolds. International research into attributions with regard to climate change, immigration, and economic issues might be done as well.

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Annexure (A)

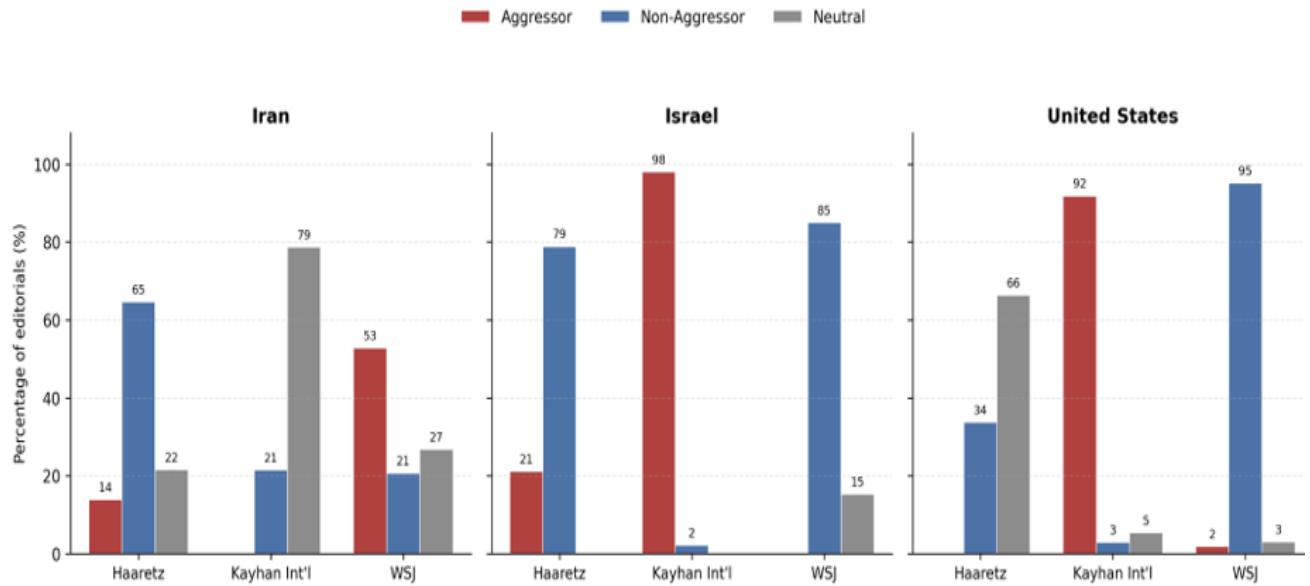


Figure 1. Blame attribution by outlet and actor, as a percentage of editorials mentioning that actor. Bars show the percentage of editorials coded Aggressor, Non-Aggresor, or Neutral for each outlet (Haaretz, Kayhan International, WSJ), grouped by actor (Iran, Israel, United States). Percentages within an outlet-actor group sum to 100%, subject to rounding.