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Theoretical Analysis of the Iran and Israel Conflict: Identity, Power, and Ideology

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Received: 25 April 2025

Revised : 25 May 2025

Accepted : 06 June 2025

Online : 30 June 2025

Abstract

Israel's pre-emptive security measures, such as the destruction of Iranian nuclear facilities, Iran's nuclear ambitions, and its support for proxy groups like Hezbollah, have all contributed to the escalation of tensions over time. Both international security and regional stability have been significantly impacted by this conflict. This study aims to analyse how domestic political factors and systemic pressures influence foreign policy, especially in high-stakes disputes like Iran-Israel. It employs neoclassical realism and social constructivism theories to examine this complex issue, including the role of identity, power and ideology in it with qualitative exploratory research type by obtaining the data through literature, documents as well as focus group discussions. This study argues that the Iran-Israel rivalry is based on the interaction of ideational and material factors. Social constructivism sheds light on how ideological narratives fuel hostilities, while neoclassical realism reveals the systemic and domestic drivers of each state's actions. Together, these viewpoints provide a comprehensive understanding of the conflict.

Keywords: Conflict, Iran, Israel, Theoretical Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

There has consistently been a geopolitical and ideological rivalry between Iran and Israel for several decades. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran adopted an anti-Israeli policy, severed diplomatic ties, and labelled Israel as a primary adversary. For years, Israel and Iran have used third parties like Hamas, Hezbollah and other armed organisations to wage proxy wars and launch assaults on one other's assets. Tehran's rhetoric and the development and encouragement of armed groups across the Middle East, which could endanger Israel's defence and security at the height of the conflict in 2024 and possibly be the first attack Iran has carried out against Israel since the 1979 revolution, have led Israel to believe that Iran poses a serious threat (Koloay et al., 2024). Throughout their tenure, many Iranian administrations have implemented unique policies that are impacted by a number of variables, such as the government's financial resources, the foreign community's perception of Iran generally, and ideological links to the most conservative senior political figures (Bazoobandi & Talebian, 2023).

Historically, the dispute between Iran and Israel has been attributed to disparities in the two nations' identities and opposing philosophies, making it difficult to reach an agreement for peace. Due to the fact that there are so many cultural variations and diverse points of view, there will be conflict. On the one hand, some countries want the conflict to cease. On the other hand, some countries aspire to attain all of their goals regardless of whether the purpose is to govern or to have it. However, before terminating and resolving the dispute, the conflict solver must first comprehend it well. In general, a variety of causes contribute to conflict. Countries battle for political power due to varying interests, powerful and weak forces, diverse cultures and customs, and shifting societal ideals. In addition to the causes of conflict, there are conflict traits. Knowing the features of conflict will assist the resolver in choosing what measures to take to completely resolve the disagreement and the essence of conflict is threefold: specific conflicts that occur for specific reasons, such as cultural or ideological differences; general conflicts that occur due to nuclear threats or human rights issues; and interconnected conflicts that occur as a result of a problem but spread, making the conflict more difficult to resolve (Stroh, 2019).

Prior research has examined the conflict between Israel and Iran from a historical standpoint, with some works employing theoretical approaches and analysis. However, since the war between Iran and Israel peaked in 2024, no prior research has been discovered that delves further into the conflict from the perspectives of social constructivism and neoclassical realism theories. This research will also go into deeper detail on how identity, ideology, and power all play a part in the rivalry between the two nations. This study aims to analyse how domestic political factors and systemic pressures influence foreign policy, especially in high-stakes disputes like Iran-Israel through the lens of theories. Iran-Israel relations are shaped by religious ideologies and narratives, according to social constructivism, which highlights the socially constructed nature of identities and threats. Neoclassical realism, on the other hand, analyses how domestic political factors and systemic pressures influence foreign policy, especially in high-stakes disputes like Iran-Israel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the Iran–Israel conflict generally falls into two major analytical approaches: constructivist perspectives that emphasize identity and ideology, and realist perspectives that focus on material power and regional strategic dynamics. Constructivist literature such as Akbarzadeh & Barry (2016), Karimifard (2012), and Mohammad Nia (2012) demonstrates that Iran's post-1979 revolutionary identity as an Islamic Republic shapes its anti-Israel foreign policy, driven by moral–

religious narratives and a commitment to defending oppressed Muslim communities. Conversely, Israel's identity as a Jewish state, grounded in the historical experiences of diaspora and the trauma of the Holocaust—as outlined by Siniver (2012) and Tarasiuk (2021)—produces a heightened perception of existential threat toward Iran. This body of work underlines that the enmity between the two states is embedded in mutually exclusive identity constructions that are difficult to reconcile. Studies focusing on ideology and religious narratives further reinforce the understanding that the conflict is not merely a matter of geopolitical rationality. Works by Khairunnisa (2021b), Rezaei & Cohen (2014), and Roomi (2023) illustrate how Iran's Shi'a revolutionary ideology and Israel's Zionist ideology intensify tensions through symbolic mobilization, adversarial rhetoric, and support for non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas. At the same time, research by Grabowski (2022), Kaunert & Wertman (2020), and Kaye et al. (2011) highlights the securitization processes undertaken by both states, especially through the construction of nuclear threats and hybrid warfare, which extend the conflict into wider regional alliances and geopolitical networks.

Beyond ideological factors, realist scholarship emphasizes the importance of material capabilities and security strategies in explaining the Iran–Israel rivalry. Nili (2011), Maher (2023), and Beck (2020) note that the imbalance in military capacity—particularly Israel's technological superiority and Iran's reliance on proxy forces—pushes each state toward distinct strategies for balancing threats. Israel depends on advanced military capabilities and alliances with the United States and Gulf states, whereas Iran adopts asymmetric approaches through its proxy groups to compensate for its conventional limitations. Koloay et al. (2024) further argue that this competition contributes to regional instability and heightens the risk of wider conflict in the Middle East. The literature also highlights the significant role of domestic politics in shaping each country's foreign policy. In Iran, the dominance of the Supreme Leader and the IRGC, as explained by Bibi & Ali (2022), reinforces a revolutionary and anti-Israel orientation. Meanwhile, Berrebi & Klor (2006) and Yilmaz & Morieson (2022) show how Israeli political leaders use security issues and civilizational populist narratives to strengthen domestic legitimacy and justify assertive policies toward Iran. Holsti's analysis on the influence of national leaders in foreign policy formulation (Khairunnisa, 2021a) is also relevant in understanding these internal dynamics.

Overall, existing scholarship indicates that prior studies tend to analyze the Iran–Israel conflict in a fragmented manner—focusing either on identity and ideology or on military capabilities and strategic security concerns. Very few studies integrate both perspectives. The article fills this gap by combining social constructivism and neoclassical realism to explain how identity, ideology, material power, international structures, and domestic political factors collectively shape and sustain the Iran–Israel conflict, particularly in relation to the most recent escalation in 2024.

Although a substantial body of literature has examined the Iran–Israel conflict through either constructivist analyses of identity and ideology or realist assessments of power politics and strategic behavior, existing studies largely treat these dimensions in isolation. Prior research has not sufficiently explored how identity narratives, domestic political structures, and material power asymmetries intersect to shape the dynamics of the rivalry. Furthermore, the recent escalation of tensions in 2024 has not yet been analyzed within an integrated theoretical framework that combines social constructivism and neoclassical realism. This analytical gap limits the scholarly understanding of how ideational and material factors jointly reinforce the persistence and intensification of the conflict. Accordingly, this study seeks to fill this gap by employing a dual-theoretical approach to offer a comprehensive explanation of the ideational, domestic, and systemic drivers underpinning Iran–Israel relations.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative exploratory research method. It examines this complex issue utilising neoclassical realism and social constructivism theories, as well as the roles of identity, power, and ideology. Data for this study were gathered through literature studies and secondary sources, as well as a focus group discussion to obtain primary data. In terms of identity and ideology, this study investigates the basis of the Iran-Israel conflict, with a brief discussion of its historical context following the Iran revolution in 1979. On the other hand, these components generate power, resulting in a confrontation between the two nations in 2024, which will be examined through theoretical analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

The results of the study show that the Iran–Israel conflict is shaped by the interaction between identity, ideology, and strategic interests analyzed through social constructivism and neoclassical realism. Key findings confirm that Iran's revolutionary identity and Israel's identity as a Jewish state reinforce the perception of existential threats, thus sharpening the polarization of the two countries. The analysis also shows that the imbalance of material power, the use of proxy strategies, as well as domestic pressure on individual countries contribute to the sustainability of the conflict. The table or schema presented shows how ideological factors and strategic capabilities intertwine, and the accompanying narrative clarifies the relationship between identity, power, and domestic political dynamics that reinforce this rivalry. These findings reinforce the results of previous studies that emphasized that conflicts are not only geopolitical, but are also maintained by ideological constructions and internal political dynamics.

Discussions

The Role of Identity and Ideology (Social Constructivism)

The competitiveness mandated by the logic of post-Cold War commerce is a striking difference. Conflict logic does not mandate the requirement for collaboration. The emergence of political identity following the Cold War has become increasingly common, and it is characterised by the freedom to choose. Following the cold bloodshed, countries became increasingly motivated to embrace a democratic system; however, democracy cannot guarantee a country's freedom from conflict and bloodshed due to the fact that at its core, political identity is a road to globalisation that ultimately leads to a power struggle. This power struggle becomes the source of more popular political identities in the form of notions, which are frequently used as the basis for competition. The notion that an activity may be proclaimed lawful if a community or group of people believes it to be so reinforces the validity of identity as a country's foreign policy. Because a country's foreign policy and the nature of international relations serve as the foundation for the establishment of such an identity (Subotić, 2016). This can also be proof that having an identity is crucial in the creation of foreign policy since it allows a country to be recognised for its position and quality by other nations.

Iran and Israel's foreign policy orientations are largely shaped by their identities, which are deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and religious narratives. Iran frames itself as a revolutionary Islamic Republic, a concept greatly influenced by the Islamic Revolution that followed in 1979. This identity combines Shiism, anti-imperialism, and Persian heritage. It frames Iran as a defender of oppressed Muslims, especially Palestinians, and as an opponent of Western, particularly American, influence in the Middle East (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016). Particularly noteworthy is Iran's use of Shiite symbolism in its foreign policy which fosters

anti-Israel sentiment and solidarity with Shiite organisations as an expression of Islamic solidarity. This revolutionary identity shapes Iran's foreign policy as a moral duty rooted in Islamic values. It emphasises a transnational responsibility to support Islamic communities facing perceived oppression. The Shiite community's political movement has become an international political problem, eliciting both positive and negative responses from the nations or areas in which it has spread. Sunni Muslims frequently respond negatively because of the dispute surrounding Shiite beliefs and teachings. These differences of thought are what eventually led to numerous confrontations and carnage in several nations where the Shiite movement has established itself (Khairunnisa, 2021b).

Israel's identity, on the other hand, stems from its historical view of itself as a Jewish state. Zionism, which sees Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people with a right to self-determination based on religious and historical claims to the land, formed Israel's founding philosophy as it emerged from the trauma of diaspora and anti-Semitic persecution (Tarasiuk, 2021). The state perceives itself as under constant threat, particularly from regional adversaries like Iran. Iran is considered an existential threat due to its support for Hezbollah and its anti-Israel rhetoric. This perception underpins a foreign policy strongly oriented toward defence (Siniver, 2012). Furthermore, Israeli society's siege mentality perpetuates an "us versus them" narrative, supported by cultural and religious rationales in political policy and public debate. As a result, the identities of Israel and Iran, which are influenced by different historical and ideological perspectives, manifest as opposing foreign policies, with each country viewing the other as a serious threat to its very existence.

Role of Ideology, Norms, and Religious Narratives

The rise of group identification in society will undoubtedly elicit a variety of responses, which were both favourable and negative. However, the identification of a group will receive a reaction based on the conditions or the compatibility of society with the group. In other words, if society has a preference for certain elements of the group, the result will undoubtedly be a favourable response that does not violate current social standards. Nevertheless, the biggest problem with group identification in society is that it might be viewed negatively and as going against existing social norms if any of its elements are inconsistent or drastically different from society. One notable distinction is the competitiveness required by the logic of post-Cold War business in which collaboration is not a prerequisite of conflict logic. The freedom to choose is a defining feature of the increasingly prevalent political identity that emerged after the Cold War. After the Cold War, countries grew increasingly motivated to install a democratic system, despite the fact that democracy does not guarantee a country's freedom from conflict and bloodshed. Essentially, political identity is a road to globalisation with the end objective of a power struggle. This power struggle becomes the source of the rising dissemination of political identity in the form of ideas, which are frequently used as the basis for competition.

Iran and Israel's foreign policy frameworks are shaped by ideology, conventions, and religious narratives. These factors influence both their actions and how they perceive each other. For Iran, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought an ideological shift in its foreign policy. This revolution emphasised resistance to imperialism and support for Shiite and oppressed Muslim groups worldwide, especially in Palestine. It transformed Iran's foreign policy from a state-centric approach to one grounded in Shiite Islamic values (Mohammad Nia, 2012). Iran's Shiite identity and anti-Western principles guide its foreign policy. These principles highlight its opposition to Israel as a strategy to counter Western influence in the region (Karimifard, 2012). This religious and ideological framework views supporting groups like Hezbollah as a way to promote Islamic unity and defending what Iran considers just causes within the Muslim world.

For Israel, Zionism and Jewish nationalism are equally important to its foreign policy. The foundation of Israeli identity is Zionist ideology, which advocates for the return of Jews to their ancestral homeland and is strongly associated with Israel's defensive foreign policy posture. Israel's Basic Law upholds the notion that it is a "Jewish state," placing Jewish identity at the centre of its security and national policies (Tarasiuk, 2021). Furthermore, the Holocaust and anti-Semitism have solidified a defensive stance in Israeli policy, presenting existential threats in a manner that supports the "siege mentality" in political and popular discourse (Siniver, 2012). This mind-set supports a foreign policy that prioritises security and self-preservation, especially when combined with religious narratives of biblical land claims. Thus, ideology and religious narratives not only define each nation's self-image but also shape a foreign policy in which both Iran and Israel view each other as ideological and existential adversaries.

Israel and Iran's constructed threat perceptions motivate both countries to form and maintain strategic alliances in order to mitigate perceived existential threats. Iran's support for Hezbollah, anti-Israel rhetoric, and nuclear development are seen by Israel as serious dangers to its survival (Grabowski, 2022). Because of this viewpoint, Israel has strengthened its ties with nations that share its apprehension about Iranian influence, including the United States, which offers significant military assistance, and a number of Gulf States that also see Iran as a regional force that threatens stability. Israel's security-driven alliances are further heightened by its perception of being surrounded by Iranian-backed forces in Gaza and Lebanon, especially in the fight against Hamas and Hezbollah (Kaye et al., 2011).

Iran frames Israel as an imperialist force in the region and an extension of Western influence. It also views Israel as an ideological rival. This perspective aligns Iran with proxies and allies that strengthen its anti-Israel position. Groups like Hezbollah and Hamas receive financial and military support from Iran to challenge Israel's regional dominance (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). By fostering these alliances, Iran builds a network of influence that stretches from Lebanon to Yemen. This network allows Iran to position itself as a defender of Islamic causes, particularly against Israel's regional policies (Kaye et al., 2011).

Strategic Factors Shaping the Conflict (Neoclassical Realism)

State-Centric Approach

The Iran-Israel conflict is deeply embedded in state-centric policies that focus on national security, sovereignty, and strategic power. Both states prioritise survival and regional influence above all else. This perspective aligns with structural realism, which sees states as rational actors competing in an international system. For Israel, national security is closely tied to countering Iran's influence. Iran's nuclear ambitions and its support for groups like Hezbollah and Hamas heighten this concern. Israel relies on strong military deterrent and strategic alliances, particularly with the United States. These policies aim to maintain regional stability and prevent Iran from gaining a nuclear advantage that could shift the balance of power (Maher, 2023). Iran, on the other hand, views Israel as both an ideological and strategic adversary. It often ties its opposition to Israel to its self-proclaimed role as a defender of the Muslim world. This perspective is shaped by a state-centric approach but is complicated by Iran's regional influence.

Through proxy alliances and a nuclear program, Iran enhances its deterrence capabilities, giving it greater control over Middle Eastern geopolitics (Roomi, 2023). The conflict between the two states intensifies as both seek to counterbalance each other through regional alliances. Israel has built partnerships with certain Arab states, while Iran has strengthened its ties with non-state actors in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine (Beck, 2020). The focus on state-centric priorities reflects a realist framework. Both states perceive each other's alliances and capabilities as existential threats. This perception drives a balance-of-power

approach, emphasising military strength, nuclear development, and diplomatic strategies. The result is a highly securitised conflict between two nations vying for regional dominance.

The Iran-Israel conflict is shaped by unequal power dynamics, different threat perceptions, and heavy reliance on proxies. These elements are influenced by both historical and strategic factors. Israel holds a significant advantage with its superior military infrastructure. This includes advanced systems like the Iron Dome and a presumed nuclear arsenal. These capabilities give Israel a qualitative edge in conventional warfare (Nili, 2011). Its strategy emphasizes pre-emptive strikes to address threats. Examples include targeting Iranian-linked sites in Syria and taking a firm stance against Iran's nuclear activities. In contrast, Iran compensates for its weaker conventional military by adopting an asymmetric approach. It relies on proxies like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. These groups expand Iran's influence and allow it to challenge Israeli interests indirectly, avoiding direct conflict (Kaunert & Wertman, 2020). Iran's leadership presents this strategy as part of its revolutionary ideology and a tool to counter Israeli and Western imperialism while pursuing regional dominance.

The conflict's intensity is fuelled by mutual perceptions of existential threats. Israel sees Iran's nuclear program and its proxy networks as direct challenges to its sovereignty. This perception drives Israel to strengthen alliances with the United States and Gulf states to counter Iran's influence. At the same time, Iran views Israeli military actions and Western support as attempts to undermine its revolutionary goals and regional ambitions (Grabowski, 2022). This dynamic creates a cycle of action and reaction. Power imbalances and the use of proxies sustain the hostility. Both nations' strategies, rooted in ideology and security concerns, have shaped a conflict defined by hybrid warfare and on-going competition for regional dominance.

Domestic Politics in Shaping Foreign Policy

In international relations, each country has its own national interest, which motivates it to collaborate with other nations; yet, the national interest is inextricably linked to the internal situations of the country headed by the leader. Thus, it is possible to conclude that a country's domestic political situations are the primary predictor of a leader's foreign policy, which is also directly tied to the national interest he holds at the moment. According to Kalevi Holsti's notion, a nation's foreign policy is the outcome of its internal analysis of its external environment prior to formulating a particular foreign policy. According to Holsti's analytical framework, a leader's actions may be influenced by a number of factors, including the political personality of the state leader and the situation or strategic environment that prevailed at the time the policy was published (Khairunnisa, 2021a). Although the foreign policy framework is primarily geared towards analysing a country's leader at the individual level, the conflict between Iran and Israel is nevertheless pertinent to Holsti's paradigm since, at its core, foreign policy is issued by individuals.

Domestic politics play a key role in shaping the foreign policies of both Iran and Israel. These policies often reflect internal power dynamics and societal pressures. In Iran, the theocratic system gives significant power to the Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader sets foreign policy priorities through institutions like the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which align with revolutionary ideology (Bibi & Ali, 2022). Hard line factions within the clerical establishment use anti-Israel rhetoric to bolster their legitimacy. They also link domestic cohesion to regional goals, such as resisting Western influence and supporting Palestinian causes (Kaunert & Wertman, 2020). These approaches show how Iran's foreign policy serves as a tool to reinforce its revolutionary identity and consolidate domestic power.

Similarly, Israel's foreign policy is deeply influenced by its internal political landscape, particularly the rise of right-wing populism. Leaders like Benjamin Netanyahu have used civilizational populism to frame Israel as the defender of Western values. This narrative

positions Iran and other adversaries as threats, helping to build domestic support for aggressive foreign policies (Yilmaz & Morrieson, 2022). Electoral pressures also play a significant role. Israeli leaders often adopt security-focused policies to address public concerns about existential threats. This includes pre-emptive actions against Iran's nuclear program and its proxies (Berrebi & Klor, 2006). The domestic political dynamics of both Iran and Israel are closely tied to their foreign policies. These internal pressures create a cycle of hostility, driven by ideological and political priorities within each state.

Social constructivism and neoclassical realism offer complementary but distinct perspectives on the Iran-Israel conflict. Social constructivism focuses on the ideational and identity-driven aspects of the conflict. It explains how the national identities of Iran and Israel, shaped by religious and cultural narratives, influence their foreign policies. Iran's revolutionary Islamic identity and Israel's self-conception as a Jewish state form the basis of their mutual hostility. These identities frame each other as existential threats (Yilmaz & Morrieson, 2022). This perspective highlights the role of constructed narratives and ideology in sustaining enmity. Neoclassical realism, on the other hand, emphasises material and systemic factors. It examines how power imbalances, external pressures, and domestic politics shape state behaviour. Israel's advanced military and its alliances with Western powers contrast with Iran's reliance on asymmetrical strategies like proxy warfare. This demonstrates how states address security dilemmas by responding to external threats and internal political demands. Together, these theories provide a nuanced understanding of the conflict. Social constructivism sheds light on its deep ideological roots. Neoclassical realism, on the other hand, focuses on the tangible strategies and power struggles. When combined, these perspectives offer a holistic view. They connect identity-driven motivations with practical security concerns, creating a more comprehensive picture of the Iran-Israel conflict.

The Iran-Israel conflict is shaped by a complex mix of ideology, identity, and strategy. Social constructivism explains how the identities of both nations influence their perceptions of each other as existential threats. Iran's revolutionary Islamic identity fuels its opposition to Israel. Similarly, Israel's identity as a Jewish state reinforces its defence-focused policies, particularly against Iran's proxies and nuclear ambitions. Therefore, it can be argued that the primary factors contributing to the development of a protracted war are the stark ideological and identity disparities between the two nations. Furthermore, the growing number of people rebelling against Israel via social media or by staging large-scale protests in multiple nations also affects the two countries' growing propensity to engage in conflict creating difficulties in resolving it.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this viewpoint emphasises the critical role of ideology and speech in perpetuating the conflict. Neoclassical realism emphasises material power, systemic forces, and internal political limits. It illustrates how Iran and Israel, motivated by security concerns, deal with foreign threats and internal political issues. This concept serves to legitimise actions such as Iran's assistance for proxy organisations and Israel's pre-emptive military operations. Together, these theories show how ideational and material factors work hand in hand to sustain the rivalry. The insights from this analysis go beyond Iran and Israel. They offer a deeper understanding of other conflicts shaped by identity and power struggles. Recognising the connection between ideology and systemic realities is essential for creating policies that address both the causes and effects of long-standing geopolitical conflicts. However, the conflict between Iran and Israel needs to be discussed further in further research, both from a theoretical and non-theoretical perspective due to the fact that the conflict continues and has not yet found a point of complete peace, especially due to the strong historical records of both countries.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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