

# A constructivist analysis of the confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Israeli Regime in the 2025 war

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original Article</p> <p>Main Object: International relations</p> <p>Scope: Iran &amp; Israeli Regime</p> <p>Received: 02 August 2025          Revised: 03 September 2025          Accepted: 06 September 2025          Published online: 17 September 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b>          discourse of resistance, Iran–Israeli Regime war (2025), narrative power, normative contestation, ontological security.</p>	<p>Drawing upon the constructivist framework, this study analyzes the origins and repercussions of the twelve-day war between Iran and the Israeli regime in June 2025. Integrating the concepts of narrative power, ontological security, and normative contestation, this research constructs a multilayered account of how identity- and meaning-based structures influenced the foreign policies of both actors. Departing from previous studies that prioritized military or strategic considerations, it addresses the existing gap by emphasizing discursive dynamics. Methodologically, the study employs critical discourse analysis, utilizing primary materials, including statements, speeches, and media reports, in conjunction with secondary academic literature. The findings demonstrate that, from the perspective of narrative power, Iran— by emphasizing the discourse of resistance and defending the oppressed— presented itself as the protector of Islamic and anti-colonial values, while the Israeli regime, by highlighting the existential threat posed by Iran, justified its actions as legitimate self-defense. Concerning identity, Iran reaffirmed its revolutionary discourse by underscoring its resistance-based identity. Conversely, the Israeli regime, despite opposition from certain domestic groups and disapproval from about 120 states, succeeded in mobilizing domestic support and garnering international backing (typically Western) through the portrayal of a "victimhood identity". At the normative level, disputes regarding interpretations of concepts such as human rights, terrorism, and the Sovereign Right to Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy escalated into serious confrontations within international institutions. The results indicate that this war transcended mere military engagement, embodying a broader struggle over meaning, identity, and legitimacy—one that will have enduring effects on the regional order.</p>

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### 1. Introduction

The twelve-day war between Iran and the Israeli regime in June 2025 (June 11–25, 2025) represents a pivotal moment in the history of Middle Eastern conflicts. Its importance derives not only from the scale and intensity of military operations but also from the intricate identity-based, discursive, and normative dimensions that influenced it. The confrontation commenced with Israeli airstrikes targeting high-ranking Iranian officials and nuclear facilities, including Natanz and Fordow. In response, Iran launched hundreds of ballistic missiles and drones. What transpired was not merely a military engagement, but it turned into a stage for a contest of competing narratives, mutual representations, and reproduction of national identities (Pinfold et al., 2025; Eslami & Kaunert, 2025). A constructivist analysis of the 2025 war—focusing on identity, narrative power, and ontological security—provides a valuable framework for comprehending the conflict beyond its material and military aspects. Specifically, it interprets security as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped through discursive, normative, and identity-based interactions (Conteh-Morgan, 2005: 72). Consequently, the conflict should be perceived less as an exchange of weaponry and more as a battleground of narratives, a site of collective identity reproduction, and an arena where both sides endeavor to safeguard their ontological security—the continuity of the “Self” and opposition to the “Other” (Mitzen & Larson, 2017). The central significance of this perspective resides in its capacity to demonstrate how political, media, and ideological discourses actively influence security realities (Guzzini, 2004: 10). From this perspective, the primary research question becomes: How did mutual identity construction, narrative framing, and ontological concerns contribute to the ongoing confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Israeli regime during the 2025 war? This question is important because it underscores that a rivalry spanning several decades cannot be solely elucidated through materialist approaches but necessitates a more profound engagement with processes of social meaning-making (Krause, 1998: 302). For example, the Israeli discourse depicting Iran as an “existential threat” (Friedman & Ghorbankarimi, 2022: 195) and the Iranian narrative of the Israeli regime as an “illegitimate entity” (Rajiv, 2016: 47) are discursive constructions that legitimize adversarial policies. The central hypothesis of this study is therefore that the 2025 confrontation was not simply a military conflict, but a broad struggle over meaning, identity, and legitimacy—shaped by discursive, identity-based, and normative structures, and leaving lasting effects on the regional order.

Building on this premise, the paper examines the dynamics of narrative power, ontological security, and normative contestation through the lens of critical constructivism, applying critical discourse analysis to investigate the processes of meaning-making embedded in this confrontation.

The subsidiary research questions of this study are articulated as follows.

- How was narrative power utilized within Iranian and Israeli regime discourses to legitimize military actions and identity construction?
- What role did ontological security have in shaping the foreign policies of both sides?
- How did the normative contestation over concepts such as human rights, terrorism, and the Sovereign Right to Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy appear within international institutions?

The subsidiary hypotheses are as follows:

- By emphasizing the discourse of resistance and the defense of the oppressed, Iran reinforced its revolutionary and anti-colonial identity, whereas the Israeli regime justified its actions as legitimate self-defense by highlighting Iran's existential threat.
- Identity crisis and the pursuit of ontological security prompted Iran to develop a resistance-oriented identity, whereas the Israeli regime relied on the depiction of a "victimhood identity."
- The normative contestation within international institutions exemplifies Iran's endeavor to challenge Western-centric paradigms, in contrast to the Israeli regime's efforts to justify its actions through security and non-proliferation norms.

## 2. Literature review

A considerable body of research has endeavored to elucidate the foreign policy conduct of the Islamic Republic of Iran toward the Israeli regime from the perspective of constructivism. Since the Islamic Revolution, an identity-driven discourse founded on the rejection of the Israeli regime and the endorsement of the Palestinian cause has developed as a fundamental element of Iran's foreign policy, consistently reiterated in diverse manifestations over the past forty years. An early notable contribution in this domain is the article by Aghaei and Rasouli (2009), which emphasizes the significance of identity, meaning, and ideational structures in shaping Iran's approach towards the Israeli regime.

Similarly, Vaez et al. (2023) examined identity-related threats to the axis of resistance, illustrating how evolving regional interactions could present ontological challenges to Iranian foreign policy. Shahbazi (2014) delineated the historical development of bilateral relations from the Pahlavi era to the present. He emphasized that the ideological and religious discourse of the Islamic Republic constitutes the foundational framework underlying Iran's antagonism towards Israel.

Likewise, Momeni and Rahimi (2017) examined illustrating how identity-based rivalry extended beyond bilateral interactions and affected regional dynamics within the South Caucasus. Rostaei et al.

(2025) employed a more strategic methodology. Although their research did not explicitly address issues of identity, its implications can nevertheless be interpreted within the broader context of resistance.

Despite these valuable contributions, much of the existing scholarship applying constructivism to Iran's foreign policy remains at a highly theoretical level, lacking detailed case analysis, or interprets the Iran-Israel confrontation predominantly through realist frameworks, emphasizing security and strategic dimensions. By contrast, this study departs from such traditional perspectives, instead foregrounding the discursive, identity-based, and normative dynamics of the conflict. Rather than reducing the confrontation to a matter of military security, it highlights processes of identity construction, narrative framing, and ontological security— dimensions that are often overlooked in earlier research. The novelty of this article resides in its synthesis of three fundamental constructivist concepts— narrative power, ontological security, and normative contestation— to offer a concurrent analysis of the semantic, normative, and identity-related frameworks influencing the foreign policies of Iran and the Israeli regime during the 2025 war. This methodology facilitates a more sophisticated examination of the underlying dimensions of the dispute, transcending material and institutional considerations.

Table 1 provides a summary of the distinctions among realism, liberalism, and constructivism in the analysis of the Iran–Israeli regime war. It demonstrates why constructivism— focusing on identity and discourse— serves as a more appropriate framework for interpreting the conflict as a struggle over meaning, identity, and legitimacy.

**Table 1.** Comparing realism, liberalism, and constructivism in the analysis of the 2025 Iran-Israeli regime confrontation

Theory	Core focus of analysis	Conception of security	View of the 2025 war
Realism	Material power, balance of power	Military security and survival	The war as an attempt to preserve military superiority
Liberalism	Cooperation, institutions, mutual interests	Security through rules and institutions	The failure of international institutions to contain the conflict
Constructivism	Identities, norms, narratives	Ontological security and identity legitimacy	The war as a struggle over meaning, identity, and legitimacy

Source: Compiled by the authors.

### 3. Methodology

This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), aligned with the framework of critical constructivism. CDA approaches language

not merely as a tool of communication but as a social practice through which power and ideology are reproduced. By uncovering dynamics of power and processes of “othering”, it illuminates how norms and identities are constructed and redefined in international relations (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000: 447; Holzscheiter, 2013: 142; Ranabhat, 2022: 30; Valderama-Wallace, 2017). Critical constructivism situates discourse analysis within historical and social contexts, stressing the role of inequality, contestation, and context in shaping meaning (Le, 2002; Shi, 2023: 490). This mutual intersection underscores the role of language in legitimizing or challenging international norms and power relations, thereby enabling a deeper examination of the reproduction or transformation of these norms (Boulos & Hassan, 2023; Michelis et al., 2024: 1514; Kholifah, 2024).

The analysis was carried out in three stages:

- Collecting data from statements, speeches, interviews, and media coverage in Iran and the Israeli regime during the twelve-day war (June 12–25, 2025).
- Coding key terms, metaphors, and semantic frames related to concepts such as “victimhood,” “existential threat,” “legitimation,” etc.
- Interpreting codes through three constructivist concepts:
  - *Narrative power* serves as a tool for both legitimizing and demonizing the “Othering” (Miskimmon et al., 2024: 445).
  - *Ontological security* serves to elucidate the necessity of maintaining identity cohesion during periods of crisis (Steele, 2008).
  - *Normative contestation* serves to analyze disputes concerning human rights, terrorism, and the Sovereign Right to Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy (Deitelhoff, 2020).

For instance, repeated references in Israeli discourse to “existential threat” and “the right of preemptive self-defense” were coded not only as justifications for military action but also as markers of efforts to redefine international norms such as the prohibition of force and the conditions for its preemptive use.

Similarly, frequent Iranian references to “defending the oppressed”, “resisting occupation”, “the right of nations to resist”, and “exposing Western double standards” were coded as instances of reproducing and reinforcing norms such as the right to resistance, right to self-determination, and the legitimacy of countering aggression. By employing these analytical perspectives, the study constructs a comprehensive account of the manner in which threats are discursively shaped, identities are reproduced, and policies are legitimized.

In this process, it fills existing gaps in prior research, which frequently focused solely on strategic or security-oriented analyses, by incorporating elements such as narrative power, ontological security,

and normative contestation, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of identity formation and threat construction within the realm of international politics. This approach not only contributes to a better understanding of the Iran-Israel antagonism but also provides new analytical tools for studying contemporary conflicts in a multipolar and interconnected world. Finally, it is worth noting that the research encountered certain limitations, including restricted access to primary sources due to censorship or classification, as well as the novelty of the subject and the lack of a coherent body of prior literature. Moreover, the potential for bias in media sources posed a challenge, which was mitigated by cross-referencing data from both Iranian and Israeli outlets, as well as independent and neutral sources.

#### **4. Theoretical foundations and Conceptual framework**

##### **4.1. The narrative power approach**

The narrative power approach, as a significant extension of constructivist theory, underscores the pivotal role of narratives in shaping identity, perception, and foreign policy. Narratives—stories that states tell regarding their past, present, and future—serve as interpretive frameworks for understanding the world and delineating national interests. This approach has exerted considerable influence in the analysis of U.S. foreign policy in the twenty-first century, demonstrating how narrative power reproduces national identity and foreign policy strategies (Tsyrf, 2020: 95). The concept of strategic narratives occupies a pivotal position within this framework, positing that states actively construct narratives to manage international credibility and shape external perceptions (Miskimmon et al., 2024: 445). Narrative power is not merely a reflection of state preferences but an active instrument of soft power through which governments enhance the legitimacy of their actions and policies at both domestic and international levels. Narratives in competition with rival narratives operate simultaneously in official diplomacy, public opinion, and media spaces, reinforcing or undermining national identity and global standing (Česnakas, 2021; Dück, 2019).

Beyond the state level, narratives also influence global order, particularly in the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world, as they redefine states' positions and shape international agendas (Forough et al., 2023: 295). Non-state and transnational actors, too, inject their own narratives into the international arena (Museyibzada & Usmonov, 2024: 135).

In sum, the narrative power approach views international relations not merely as a competition of material interests but as a complex arena of discursive and normative struggles, offering a valuable conceptual tool for understanding the dynamics of world politics in a multipolar, interconnected environment.

#### 4.2. The ontological security framework

The concept of ontological security, derived from Anthony Giddens' social theory, pertains to the imperative for states to maintain a continuous and coherent sense of identity over time—distinguishing itself from but complementing physical security (Croft, 2012: 219; Mitzen & Larson, 2017). This framework analyzes foreign policy as an effort to stabilize state identity through routine practices and meaningful interactions (Steele, 2008). While physical security focuses on material threats, ontological security underscores the importance of meaning, identity cohesion, and a consistent narrative of “being” (Mitzen & Larson, 2017). Identity threats may induce ontological anxiety, prompting states to engage internationally as a response (Brummer & Oppermann, 2024: 64). Within this framework, foreign policy is conceptualized as a form of “identity response”, wherein state identities and interests are continuously reconstructed through social interaction and discourse (Flockhart, 2016; Hassan, 2020). This dynamic is exemplified, for instance, in U.S. Middle East policy and its narratives of democracy promotion (Kowert & Barkin, 2024). Furthermore, crises serve to intensify the importance of ontological security by destabilizing established identity narratives (Ceydilek, 2023: 445). Significantly, ontological security extends beyond states to encompass institutions and societies (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016: 3).

States pursue ontological security through two strategies: reinforcing established identity narratives to preserve continuity (the being strategy) and seeking recognition from others to legitimize identity (the action strategy) (Flockhart, 2016: 799). Case studies, such as Britain's neutrality in the U.S. Civil War or the securitization of Muslims after 9/11, illustrate these dynamics (Steele, 2005: 519; Croft, 2012). Nevertheless, this framework faces critique: Rumelili (2013: 52), for instance, argues that the integration of ontological and physical security risks represents an oversimplification. Moreover, some scholars emphasize the “ontological security paradox”, whereby efforts to stabilize identity may generate new insecurities (Jackson & Subotić, 2024: 3).

Ultimately, the framework elucidates state conduct as an effort to protect the integrity of the national “Self”, which can function as both a source of stability and a catalyst for conflict.

#### 4.3. The normative contestation approach

The normative contestation approach, a relatively recent development within constructivism, provides a framework for analyzing how norms are redefined and adapted through international interactions (Deitelhoff, 2020). In this perspective, the contestation is seen not merely as resistance, but also as a mechanism through which norms are reconstructed and legitimized (Lantis & Wunderlich, 2018). Unlike

classical norm-transfer approaches, it emphasizes interpretive processes and bargaining within plural social contexts (Iommi, 2019).

From this perspective, tensions between global standards and local contexts—often exacerbated by cultural and identity differences—and local actors, through the reinterpretation and localization of international norms, create diverse patterns of their acceptance or rejection. (Ün, 2019; Hensengerth, 2015; Isaacs, 2017). Normative contestation thus manifests as semantic struggles across international, national, and local levels, illustrating that even universal norms remain subject to contestation (Hansen-Magnusson et al., 2018: 637).

Norms are considered outcomes of agency and interaction, with internalization regarded as a dynamic and unstable process (Lantis, 2016; Iommi, 2019). Social pressures and perceptions of threats significantly influence the responses of various actors (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2004). The case of the European Union–Uganda, wherein local activists challenged Western norms, exemplifies this dynamic (Saltnes & Thiel, 2021; Isaacs, 2017: 1831). It is important to recognize that the transfer of norms does not inherently lead to their internalization (Johansson-Nogués et al., 2019).

Furthermore, this perspective emphasizes the role of power in the reinterpretation of norms: for instance, U.S. counterterrorism policies have co-opted human rights norms within contradictory discursive frameworks (Maurer & Wright, 2021: 385; Birdsall, 2016: 176), while emerging powers such as China utilize distinctive discourses to influence the reshaping of the global normative order. In summary, the normative contestation approach emphasizes the dynamism, diversity, and contextual nature of norms. It reconceptualizes conflict not as a sign of order failure but as an impetus for normative transformation, thereby enriching our understanding of international relations beyond mere rule adherence or violation to a deeper engagement with the interplay of meaning, power, and context.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Competing narratives and representations in the 2025 war

#### 5.1.1. *Israel's representation of Iran*

Contrary to realist interpretations, which primarily attribute Israel's military actions to material superiority and the balance of power, a constructivist perspective posits that even powers necessitate discursive legitimation. During the twelve-day war in June 2025, alongside the use of force, Israel sought to construct narratives and portray Iran as an 'existential threat'. Despite opposition from certain domestic parties and nearly 120 countries worldwide, it ultimately secured both domestic and international support from Western states. This representation perpetuated a longstanding narrative framework, originating from the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which reconfigured Iran's



role from that of a geopolitical ally to an ideological adversary (Friedman & Ghorbankarimi, 2022: 195; Beck, 2020).

The Israeli regime media highlighted Iran's involvement in arming and directing proxy groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah (Pinfold et al., 2025: 289; Ivanov, 2025). This portrayal served to legitimize strikes not solely against Gaza and Lebanon but also targeting sites within Iran (Bashir et al., 2025: 69; Eslami & Kaunert, 2025: 299). Iran's nuclear program was a significant focus of media coverage, with Israeli discourse often reiterating threat narratives and associating the Islamic Republic with "regional destabilization", "state-sponsored terrorism", and "ideological defiance of the international order" (Maher, 2020: 226; Herman & Peterson, 2012: 24).

Such narratives fostered a persistent sense of threat and concern, thereby shaping public opinion and reinforcing national identity in opposition to a perceived hostile "Othering" (Walling, 2013; Shori et al., 2025: 84). Culturally, the Israeli regime positioned itself as a defender of democracy, contrasting itself with Iran, which is characterized as an ideologically driven system that is incompatible with Western values (Ram, 2008; Magen, 2014). Historical memories, notably the Holocaust, were invoked to amplify perceptions of vulnerability and to justify preemptive measures (Herman & Peterson, 2012). Even the post-war discourse largely remained unchanged but gained complexity, focusing on preventive strategies, regional alliances, and strikes against Iranian infrastructure (Keynoush, 2025; Quamar, 2025). Overall, the Israeli regime continued to portray Iran as a persistent, multilayered threat that necessitates integrated military and intelligence responses (Badhan & Jagota, 2025: 244).

In summary, Israel's portrayal of Iran during periods of war exemplifies the strategic employment of narrative power, as the construction of threat images, the legitimation of actions, the framing of national identity, and the mobilization of the populace were intricately interconnected in representing Iran as the threatening "Othering".

#### *5.1.2. Iran's representation of the Israeli regime*

During the twelve-day war of June 2025, Iran's Official Discourse integrated historical, ideological, and geopolitical elements to portray the Israeli regime as an illegitimate, colonial entity, and expansionist entity, originating from a Western imperial project—specifically, supported by the United States (Jalal, 2023; Rajiv, 2016: 47). In Iranian discourse, the Israeli regime was linked to terms such as "structural racism", "religious apartheid", and "crimes against humanity", thereby delegitimizing its existence and strengthening Iran's internal identity cohesion (Miladi, 2025; Shori et al., 2025: 84). This representation has roots in the 1979 Revolution, which depicted the Israeli regime as the "ideological enemy" and "Little Satan", symbolizing U.S. imperialism

in the Middle East. This approach both fosters internal cohesion and legitimizes support for proxy groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas (Ghofrani, 2024; Keynoush, 2025). Within this framework, the discourse of resistance is considered a key element of Iran's foreign policy and interprets support for anti-Israeli regime groups as a moral and religious mission. During the conflict, Iran portrayed the Israeli regime as the aggressor, highlighting Palestinian civilian suffering and framing its own actions as a "defense of the oppressed" (Ennouri et al., 2025; Pinfold et al., 2025). Iranian media circulated field reports and images from Gaza to build empathy domestically and internationally (Alim et al., 2025). Tehran also emphasized the Israeli regime as an existential threat, and Iran defends its nuclear program as a sovereign right and a defensive necessity (Buheji, 2025; Eslami & Kaunert, 2025). "Iranian authorities have framed the struggle against the Israeli regime as a sacred mission by invoking religious concepts such as 'martyrdom' and 'jihad,' and by representing figures like General Qasem Soleimani." (Meng & Zhang, 2025; Quamar, 2025). Iranian media have also depicted a picture of the 'strategic superiority of the resistance' by emphasizing the Israeli regime's vulnerability to resistance attacks and reporting widespread public anxiety among its citizens (Reznik et al., 2025; Ivanov, 2025).

Moreover, anti-Zionist discourse in cultural products— from films and music to children's programs— has contributed to the institutionalization of this narrative (Saramifar, 2017). On the international stage, Iran endeavored to capitalize on widespread protests against Israeli strikes to portray itself as a defender of human rights (Kertcher & Hitman, 2025).

Regionally, Tehran characterized the Israeli regime as the "illegitimate Other" threatening the Islamic ummah, with the intent of fostering solidarity among sympathetic actors. As a result, the Israeli regime encountered condemnation from most Persian Gulf and Arab states. Qatar reflected Iran's framing in its media while advocating for a ceasefire, whereas normalization partners such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain adopted more cautious rhetoric, emphasizing restraint and diplomatic engagement (Al-Janidi & Sio, 2025; Psaropoulos, 2025; Bandyopadhyay, 2025; BNA, 2025). These reactions illustrate that the process of "othering" in regional politics can concurrently produce identity convergence with potential allies while exacerbating rifts with actors whose political and security identities are closely linked with the West and the Israeli regime.

Overall, the findings of this section indicate that the reciprocal representations of Iran and the Israeli regime during the war played a fundamental role in legitimizing the military actions of both sides. Furthermore, these findings provide substantial evidence supporting the first sub-hypothesis, which underscores the significance of narrative power in shaping identity and justifying foreign policy.

## 5.2. Identity crisis and ontological security

### 5.2.1. Iran's policies for reproducing a resistance identity

The concepts of “identity crisis” and “ontological security” within the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran are intricate, stemming from the interplay of domestic, regional, and international elements. Ontological security pertains to a nation's requirement to sustain stability in its identity narrative and to avert existential dislocation or the diminution of significance. Scholars such as Giddens and Mitzen contend that this matter is fundamental to the discipline of international relations. To comprehensively understand Iran's actions in response to identity crises, it is imperative to examine Tehran's identity politics, as Tehran's foreign policy is grounded in a resistance-oriented identity framework, as evidenced by its support for regional allies (Jaspal, 2014). The ideological basis of this policy is historical, emphasizing resistance to Western dominance, especially in response to perceived threats from the United States and its allies (Khalid et al., 2020).

A key point is that the Islamic Republic of Iran, during extended conflicts, may even prioritize its identity security over physical security. In other words, as long as adversaries are regarded as threats to Iran's Islamic-revolutionary identity, its confrontational posture will endure; only through a change in the adversary's behavior and the establishment of mutual trust can prospects for de-escalation be achieved (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2011: 55). Regionally, Iran's strategy is characterized by a policy of “defensive deterrence”. The pursuit of ontological security intensifies when the state's identity is under threat, often resulting in assertive foreign policy measures. Iran's relationships with groups such as Hezbollah and its role in the political processes of post-Saddam Iraq exemplify not only strategic tools but also manifestations of resistance identity mechanisms against common adversaries, namely the United States and the Israeli regime (Azizi et al., 2020). Consequently, Tehran portrays itself as a liberating force, defending oppressed nations as part of a mission-driven identity.

In response to the United States' “maximum pressure” campaign, Iran's employment of asymmetric warfare tactics and support for proxy groups can be interpreted as strategies aimed at maintaining ontological security (Solhdoost & Pargoo, 2022). These policies not only lead to the weakening of U.S. influence but also reflect Iran's identity as a resilient and anti-hegemonic power. As a result, external threats necessitate the Islamic Republic to perpetually reassess and redefine its revolutionary identity, thereby securing both domestic legitimacy and regional influence.

During the war in June 2025, the relationship between resistance identity and foreign policy was distinctly apparent. By invoking the rhetoric of resistance, Tehran sought to fulfill two primary objectives: promoting national unity and strengthening its geopolitical influence, particularly in opposition to perceived adversaries. Iran's stance against

the Israeli regime was articulated not merely as a defense of sovereignty but also as a leadership role in an anti-colonial struggle (Khalid et al., 2020). This conflict may also significantly influence the dynamic of Iran's national identity. As the political landscape evolves subsequent to this war, Iran is expected to place increased importance on linking its resistance identity with its legitimacy. Framing the conflict as a "defense of the nation and Islamic values" fosters a collective identity in opposition to external threats, whilst simultaneously enhancing domestic unity. This concept of resistance is similarly evident in Tehran's interactions with regional allied groups (Azizi et al., 2020).

Concurrently, the economic consequences of the conflict and the enforcement of sanctions have compelled Iran to advocate for a discourse of "economic resilience", emphasizing domestic production, technological localization, and a reduced dependence on imports (Khalid et al., 2020). Additionally, social and economic policies, such as the expansion of public employment, are articulated as measures of resistance against imperialist influence. External criticism following the war was reinterpreted as "proof of the righteousness of resistance", reinforcing a cycle of security-focused nationalism. Essentially, Iran's foreign policy is not merely a series of tactical steps but a reflection of a profoundly rooted identity narrative shaped by revolutionary experiences, ideological commitments, and existential concerns. The June 2025 war exemplifies this connection between identity and ontological security, whereby the discourse of resistance upholds the legitimacy of Iran's domestic and foreign policies.

#### *5.2.2. Victimhood identity and ontological security in Israeli policy*

For the Israeli regime, security constitutes not only the cornerstone of foreign policy but also a fundamental element of collective identity. Influenced by deep-seated ontological insecurities, geopolitical constraints, a historical sense of vulnerability, and ongoing conflicts, the Israeli regime has dedicated significant periods of its existence to maintaining war readiness and a defensive posture (Tarin et al., 2023: 25). This aggressive and ethnocentric security stance has led the regime to adopt preemptive military strategies and deterrent measures—using both military and nuclear weapons—especially in response to regional threats and internal crises, including social unrest and challenges to political legitimacy.

During the twelve-day Iran–Israel war of June 2025, the regime's reliance on the narrative of victimhood identity became particularly prominent as a central strategy of discursive legitimation. This identity, deeply rooted in Israeli national discourse, has played a pivotal role in legitimizing military operations and shaping perceptions both domestically and internationally (Gale, 2023). In the aftermath of the war, the Israeli regime characterized its military actions not as acts of aggression but as defensive necessities vital for national survival,

thereby minimizing its role in initiating hostilities. This portrayal was amplified through mainstream media and social networks, especially through the depiction of civilian casualties, mass evacuations, and destruction caused by Iranian missile strikes. According to official figures of the regime, Iranian attacks resulted in the deaths of 28 people and the displacement of nearly 15,000 individuals. These figures were widely disseminated across both domestic and international outlets (Goldberg, 2025). Military censorship, including restrictions on reporting strike details, further reinforced this narrative of victimhood. Additionally, statements by Israeli leaders and emotional responses on social media contributed to the consolidation of this perspective. Nevertheless, this strategy faced criticism. Analysts and segments of the public argued that the Israeli regime could not credibly portray itself solely as a victim, given its role in initiating and escalating hostilities. Still, many Western leaders justified Israel's conduct under the rubric of "preemptive self-defense" and as part of a broader mission to safeguard Western security interests (Massad, 2025).

From a realist perspective, Israel's security may be explained in terms of material superiority. However, constructivism reveals that ontological security—anchored in the continuity of identity and meaning—is equally vital. This explains why the Israeli regime sought to reproduce its victimhood identity internationally, in addition to its military actions. Domestically, the narrative of victimhood functions to bolster political and social cohesion by emphasizing threats posed by Iran and Hamas, thereby fostering solidarity rooted in a shared perception of vulnerability. Netanyahu's wartime rhetoric exemplifies this discursive strategy (Lam et al., 2025).

Nonetheless, these narrative encounters opposition: Palestinians and Iranian officials depict the Israeli regime not as a victim but as the perpetrator of structural violence and occupation, thus challenging Israel's portrayal of victimhood. This war illustrates the broader phenomenon of the "war of narratives", wherein each faction endeavors to redefine reality from its own perspective. Global reactions have also been divided. While the Israeli regime continues to enjoy traditional Western backing, growing public awareness of Palestinian rights has intensified scrutiny and accusations of "war crimes" against the Israeli regime (Gale, 2023).

Ultimately, the victimhood identity remains a central pillar of Israel's long-term political strategy. As tensions persist, the regime's reliance on this discourse for legitimizing military actions and securing both domestic and international support is likely to deepen. However, a multilayered and critical analysis of these narratives is essential for evaluating their implications for peace and regional stability.

Significantly, constructivist insights extend beyond the two primary adversaries. Iran's narrative power during the 2025 war—especially its emphasis on "resistance" and "defense of the

oppressed”—not only bolstered Tehran’s domestic legitimacy but also influenced third-party actors. Russia and China, for instance, supported Iran’s stance at the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), reinforcing Tehran’s right to “The Sovereign Right to Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy” and rejecting Western-centric norms (Vatanka et al., 2025; *Atlantic Council*, 2025). In Turkey, Iranian discourse resonated with segments of public opinion, creating pressure on Ankara to adopt a more critical stance toward Israeli actions, though the government maintained caution (*RFI*, 2025).

Conversely, the ontological security framework of the Israeli regime, founded upon the portrayal of a “victimhood identity”, prompted some European nations, such as Germany, to adopt a stance of unconditional support for the regime (Azizi & van Veen, 2025). Nonetheless, this same identity framework elicited a contrasting response from certain Persian Gulf states. Governments concerned about adverse repercussions within their domestic public opinion refrained from explicitly endorsing this narrative and even conveyed diplomatic messages to Iran to avert the escalation of the war (Al-Janidi & Sio, 2025). These findings suggest that concepts such as narrative power and ontological security are not confined to the two principal actors but also directly influence the behavior and foreign policy decisions of other regional and extra-regional actors (Miskimmon et al., 2024; Mitzen & Larson, 2017). Overall, the analysis presented in this section demonstrates that both parties, in response to pressures stemming from identity threats, have tailored their foreign policies to uphold and reinforce their national identity. This, in turn, substantiates the second sub-hypothesis, which posits a connection between identity crisis, ontological security, and patterns of foreign conduct.

### 5.3. Normative contestation at the international level

#### 5.3.1. *The challenge of human rights narratives and terrorism in the policy of the Israeli regime*

Discussions surrounding human rights in the context of counterterrorism have become one of the most contentious aspects of the international order, especially concerning the Israeli regime. The regime consistently characterizes its military operations and repressive policies directed at Palestinians as acts of legitimate self-defense and responses to existential threats (Fernandes, 2025). In this context, notions such as security, deterrence, and preemptive defense serve as mechanisms for circumventing or undermining international human rights standards. Following each phase of conflict, including the 2025 war, the Israeli regime endeavored to reinforce its victimization narrative in order to restore its international legitimacy, portraying itself as a nation under perpetual terrorist threat. By emphasizing Israeli civilian casualties and displacements, it aimed to garner global sympathy and support. Conversely, human rights organizations have consistently documented violations of humanitarian law within the

occupied territories, including allegations of war crimes (Fitriyah & Fadhil, 2025).

From this perspective, it can be demonstrated that reciprocal narratives serve a dual purpose of either stabilizing or redefining international norms. The Israeli regime's narrative, emphasizing "legitimate defense" and the "right to preemptive self-defense", has effectively modified the traditional boundaries of these norms, thereby facilitating the legitimization of the preventive use of force. The regime characterized its preemptive strike as an act of legitimate defense, citing the IAEA resolution as justification for this action. It questioned Iran's nuclear ambiguity, equating it with Iran's covert attempts to develop nuclear weapons. Through interpretive manipulation, the Israeli regime aimed to depict Iran's right to enrichment as a pursuit of nuclear weapons for military use, thus justifying its attacks. Such actions possess the potential to undermine the established norm against the use of force and to weaken the principle of non-proliferation.

On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran's narrative emphasizes concepts such as the "right to resistance" and the "right to self-determination", seeking to reinforce these norms within regional and international discourse while challenging the legitimacy of Western-centric norms, such as the specific interpretation of non-proliferation. This rivalry of narratives suggests that the war of 2025 was not solely about territory and physical security but also about the interpretation of norms and their acceptance. Indeed, while realist analyses elucidate the redefinition of norms, such as "legitimate defense", within the interests of major powers, constructivism illustrates that these redefinitions result from semantic and narrative struggles, and that international legitimacy cannot be attained without these discursive processes.

Consequently, the Israeli regime is compelled, along with its military capabilities, to reproduce security and ethical narratives. Furthermore, mechanisms such as the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) and the "Responsibility Not to Veto" have demonstrated limited effectiveness in addressing the Palestinian crisis. Repeated vetoes by the United States have effectively paralyzed the United Nations Security Council, despite extensive human rights reports documenting the use of disproportionate force, collective punishment, and occupation practices (Upadhyay & Mehrotra, 2025). This selective enforcement has diminished the authority of human rights norms and has legitimized Western double standards. The Israeli regime often evades legal accountability, contravening principles of humanitarian law such as distinction and proportionality, and justifies such violations through counterterrorism narratives (Runa, 2025). The disproportionate focus on security concerns has marginalized human rights considerations, thereby undermining both international institutions and public confidence (Moise & Wang, 2025). This situation has not only

undermined the credibility of esteemed international institutions such as the Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court but has also diminished public confidence in these organizations. Ultimately, the primary challenge concerning the Israeli regime pertains to maintaining an equilibrium between adherence to human rights norms and security considerations. While the regime sustains its legitimacy by highlighting threats labeled as "terrorist", Western powers have frequently either remained silent or endorsed this approach. Such complicity has entrenched the duality in the enforcement of human rights principles. Consequently, attaining a more equitable global order necessitates the redefinition of human rights narratives, the enhancement of accountability mechanisms, and the mitigation of selective policies in the application of international law.

### 5.3.2. *Iran's resistance against imposed Western-centric norms*

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has demonstrated a nuanced form of resistance to Western-centric standards. Drawing upon historical recollections of colonial and neo-colonial interventions, this resistance has become a fundamental element of Iran's national identity and foreign policy (Göksel, 2019). The Revolution, characterized by its slogans of independence and opposition to Western hegemony, established an ideological framework in which liberal-democratic norms, international regimes, and Western cultural values are perceived as mechanisms of imperial dominance (Stein, 2017). This perspective has positioned Iran as a revisionist actor within the international system (Soltaninejad, 2019).

From a constructivist perspective and within the framework of normative contestation, Iran's resistance is not merely a rejection of international norms but a dynamic process involving the redefinition, localization, and reconstruction of norms in accordance with its national identity and interests (Lantis & Wunderlich, 2018). Through agentic reinterpretation, Iran challenges externally imposed norms and adapts them to its socio-political context (Iommi, 2019). This process is particularly evident in its rejection of Western efforts to enforce liberal values or arms-control regimes, thereby further strengthening Iran's resistance-based identity (Rivera, 2022). The 2025 war exemplified this normative contestation distinctly. Beyond mere military confrontation, it embodied a discursive struggle between Iran and the Western-centered order.

Tehran, by rejecting imposed norms and reframing them through a resistance discourse, positioned itself as an active challenger to Western dominance. A central aspect of this normative contestation was Iran's stance concerning the nuclear non-proliferation regime. While the United States and the Israeli regime depicted Iran's nuclear program as a threat to international security, utilizing IAEA resolutions and sanctions as tools of coercion (*The Washington Institute*, 2025), Tehran



responded by reactivating enrichment facilities and issuing a threat to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) following the resolution in June 2025 (Atlantic Council, 2025). These actions emphasized Iran's assertion of sovereign rights to nuclear technology and demonstrated the localization of international standards (Iommi, 2019).

Framing its nuclear program as a defensive measure, Iran characterized the non-proliferation regime as a tool of Western dominance aimed at constraining non-Western nations (Eslami & Kaunert, 2025). Concurrently, by articulating a discourse that defends the oppressed and endorses resistance groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, Tehran reaffirmed its revolutionary identity (Shori et al., 2025). By emphasizing the suffering of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, Iran challenged Western human rights standards, depicting them as a duplicitous instrument for legitimizing the actions of the Israeli regime (Ennouri et al., 2025). This normative contestation revealed a reinterpretation of human rights principles within the framework of resistance discourse. It is essential to note, however, that Iran's centralized governance structure, particularly the significant roles of the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), played a pivotal role in fostering this normative resistance. The Supreme Leader, by emphasizing the "victory of the Islamic Republic" despite the war's toll, cultivated a narrative that rendered defeat under Western pressures unlikely. The IRGC, in coordination with the Supreme National Security Council, managed Iran's military and diplomatic responses, thereby preventing capitulation to Western normative pressures (*The New York Times*, 2025b).

At the regional level, Iran, through managing relations with Persian Gulf states and emphasizing the avoidance of war escalation, successfully averted diplomatic isolation (*The Washington Institute*, 2025). Furthermore, the Islamic Republic of Iran endeavored to influence alternative norms by aligning with non-Western actors and utilizing sympathetic international media outlets. Diplomatic support from Russia and China within the United Nations Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency, the favorable portrayal of Iran's narrative in media outlets such as Al Jazeera and Russian networks, and the partial alignment of Qatar and segments of Turkish public opinion exemplify these initiatives. These measures constitute part of Iran's normative strategy to contest Western-centric interpretations of concepts such as "The Sovereign Right to Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy" and the "right to resistance". This alignment underscored Tehran's ability to forge anti-Western coalitions aimed at redefining the global normative order (MEC, 2024). In conclusion, the 12-day war between Iran and the Israeli regime in June 2025 demonstrated that Iran, by relying on its resistance-based identity, rejecting the nuclear non-proliferation regime (due to its instrumental

use by the West), and reinterpreting human rights norms, asserted its agency in reshaping the global order. Rooted in the historical legacy of the Islamic Revolution and Iran's strategic culture, this resistance not only enhanced domestic legitimacy but also reinforced Iran's position as a revisionist actor within the international system.

### 5.3.3. *Competing narratives in international forums and the United Nations*

The normative contestation between the West and the Israeli regime against Iran has its roots in the decades following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when Iran, by adopting an anti-imperialist discourse and supporting resistance movements, particularly against the Israeli regime, challenged Western norms grounded in the liberal order and nuclear non-proliferation (Jalal, 2023). The Israeli regime and the United States, by portraying Iran as an existential threat and a supporter of militant groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, sought to redefine global security and non-proliferation norms to align with their own interests (Akhtar, 2023). This contest intensified in international forums, particularly within the UN, where the West and the Israeli regime emphasized Iran's nuclear program and regional activities, while Iran countered by invoking sovereignty and resistance norms (Eslami & Kaunert, 2025).

The normative contestation approach, an extension of constructivism, provides an analytical framework designed to elucidate these dynamics. It views contestation not merely as resistance but as a process of reconstructing and legitimizing norms through interpretive struggles and bargaining across various contexts (Deitelhoff, 2020; Lantis & Wunderlich, 2018). During the twelve-day war between Iran and the Israeli regime, international forums— particularly the United Nations— served as platforms for normative contestation of the narratives of Iran and those of the Israeli regime and the West (the United States and Europe). Supported by the United States, the Israeli regime promoted a discourse depicting Iran as an existential threat to both its own security and the international order, primarily due to Tehran's nuclear program and support for proxy groups. Indeed, the narrative construction within international institutions, such as the UN Security Council and the IAEA Board of Governors, was heavily influenced by Western powers, notably the United States. This framing, embedded within a broader normative struggle, was grounded in the non-proliferation norm and the imperative of safeguarding international security (Iommi, 2019).

During the war, the Israeli regime justified its preemptive strikes against Iranian nuclear and military facilities as necessary measures to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, citing Iran's uranium enrichment level of 60%, asserted that such enrichment had no peaceful application, thereby legitimizing Israel's military actions (*The Times of Israel*, 2025). The

narrative was further supported by references to Iran's missile capabilities and its assistance to groups such as Hamas and the Houthis, which were characterized as part of Iran's so-called "ring of fire" strategy and depicted as threats to regional stability (*Council on Foreign Relations*, 2025). Within the United Nations Security Council, Israeli representatives described the strikes as responses to Iran's proxy activities, particularly following the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023 (Bolton, 2025). This narrative, focused on security and deterrence principles, aimed to present Israel's military operations as legitimate acts of self-defense in accordance with international norms. However, normative tensions emerged when domestic Israeli factions accused Netanyahu of exploiting the conflict to strengthen his political position—highlighting the tension between internal democratic norms and external security imperatives (*Tehran Times*, 2025).

Western narratives, particularly those of the United States and Europe, are broadly aligned with Israel's framing but place greater emphasis on overarching principles such as nuclear non-proliferation and global security. These narratives, situated within the context of normative contestation, aim to redefine global norms in accordance with Western geopolitical interests (Ün, 2019). During President Donald Trump's administration, the United States collaborated with the Israeli regime in striking Iranian nuclear facilities, with officials justifying these operations based on Tehran's nuclear activities and its restrictions on IAEA inspections (*CNN*, 2025; Bolton, 2025). At the United Nations, Washington characterized the strikes as measures to uphold the non-proliferation regime, citing Iran's alleged violations of the NPT and UNSC Resolution 2231. This narrative, rooted in normative struggle, minimizes civilian casualties resulting from Israeli strikes and instead emphasizes Iran's missile and drone responses, including its attack on a U.S. military base in Qatar, which was portrayed as an escalatory act threatening regional stability (Moneycontrol, 2025). This approach reflects the United States' efforts to redefine global security norms in favor of its own interests and those of its allies, while marginalizing norms of state sovereignty (Maurer & Wright, 2021). European narratives, by contrast, adopted a more cautious tone. German politician Friedrich Merz supported the Israeli regime and U.S. attacks, asserting that Iran's nuclear program could not remain unchecked (Bolton, 2025). Nonetheless, in various forums, certain European diplomats emphasized the importance of dialogue and de-escalation, underscoring tensions between security-oriented and diplomacy-oriented norms in Europe (*The Times of Israel*, 2025). These divergences, rooted in Europe's diverse political and cultural contexts, underscored the fluid and context-dependent nature of norms (Isaacs, 2017).

Beyond the diplomatic sphere, normative contestation also manifested in the public and media domains (Lantis, 2016). The Israeli

regime and Western nations employed psychological warfare tactics to reinforce their narratives. The Israeli regime, for example, utilized AI-generated content disseminated through platforms such as X and Telegram to diminish public confidence in the Iranian government and to challenge domestic political legitimacy norms (*The New York Times*, 2025a). This exemplifies efforts to influence political norms through non-military means (Hansen-Magnusson et al., 2018). Western media likewise amplified Iran's actions—such as Hebrew-language warnings directed at Israeli citizens—aiming to depict Tehran as an aggressive and untrustworthy actor. These endeavors, situated within the broader context of normative contestation, underscore the media's role in shaping public perceptions and legitimizing security norms (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2004). Overall, Israeli and Western narratives in international forums, centered on non-proliferation and global security norms, consistently portrayed Iran as a threat to the international order, thereby justifying diplomatic and military pressures. However, these narratives encountered challenges from non-Western states and the dynamics of an emerging multipolar order. The United Nations, as the principal arena of this normative struggle, demonstrated limited effectiveness due to profound geopolitical divisions. The risk of escalation—particularly considering Iran's latent nuclear capabilities and Israel's military posture—remains significant (Daftari, 2025). As a catalyst of normative change, contestation underscores that international relations extend beyond material rivalries to include the complex redefinition of meaning and legitimacy (Birdsall, 2016).

A comprehensive analysis of the validity of Western-centric norms, specifically the non-proliferation norm, demonstrates how such standards are integrated within international frameworks to favor established nuclear powers such as the United States and the Israeli regime. Non-nuclear states, exemplified by Iran, are subjected to pressures to restrict their nuclear activities, whereas nuclear nations are not held to equivalent limitations. Furthermore, international institutions—most notably the IAEA and the United Nations Security Council—have frequently exhibited bias in favor of the Western-dominated order when responding to Iran's resistance to norms concerning the Sovereign Right to Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy, rather than upholding neutrality. This scenario represents a contradiction to the principles of international justice and equity, which advocate for impartiality and respect for national sovereignty.

From the perspective of normative contestation, it is essential to distinguish between two categories of norms. The first comprises established norms such as “nuclear non-proliferation” and the “prohibition on the use of force”, which possess broad legitimacy within international law but were subject to interpretive disputes during the 2025 war. The second category includes norms that are under challenge or redefinition, such as Iran's invocation of a “right to

resistance” and Israel’s attempt to redefine “preemptive self-defense” as a legitimate basis for its military actions. This analytical distinction demonstrates that the Iran–Israel confrontation concerns not only differing interpretations of existing norms but also the legitimacy and evolution of emerging norms. The analysis of normative disputes within international institutions indicates that both Iran and the Israeli regime, drawing upon divergent normative frameworks, seek to secure international legitimacy while simultaneously undermining each other’s narratives. This dynamic affirms the third subsidiary hypothesis, namely that normative contestation represents a central arena of struggle dedicated to reconfiguring international norms.

## 6. Conclusion

The Iran–Israel war of June 2025 transcended a simple military confrontation; it embodied a multifaceted arena of identity, narrative, and normative disputes. Utilizing constructivist theory and highlighting three key concepts— narrative power, ontological security, and normative contestation— this study clarifies how discursive and ideational frameworks shaped the foreign policies of both sides and impacted the regional balance of power. From the perspective of narrative power, both Iran and the Israeli regime sought legitimacy through competing narratives. Iran concentrated on resistance and the defense of the oppressed, thereby reinforcing its revolutionary and anti-colonial identity. Conversely, the Israeli regime portrayed Iran as an existential threat, legitimizing its actions as appropriate acts of self-defense. Concerning ontological security, the central focus was on identity crisis: Iran upheld its resistance identity, whereas the Israeli regime advanced a narrative of national unity through a narrative of victimhood. These processes demonstrate that security extends beyond its physical dimension to encompass the preservation of identity and meaning, which are essential for states. Within the realm of normative contestation, disputes between opposing parties over concepts such as human rights, terrorism, and the Sovereign Right to Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy have resulted in significant disagreements within international institutions. By challenging Western-centric norms and emphasizing national sovereignty, Iran has positioned itself as a revisionist actor within the global order, whereas the Israeli regime and its Western allies have sought to justify their actions through the invocation of security and non-proliferation norms. This confrontation has unveiled the dynamic and fluid nature of norms as context-dependent constructs. Overall, the war demonstrated that modern conflicts cannot be sufficiently understood through materialist approaches alone; rather, it necessitates a more profound engagement with processes of meaning-making, identity construction, and legitimacy development. The ramifications of this confrontation will persist both regionally and globally, emphasizing that within

international relations, “meaning” and “identity” hold as much importance as “power” and “security”. These insights not only enhance the understanding of the Iran–Israel war but also establish a theoretical framework for analyzing other contemporary disputes within an increasingly multipolar world.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

### Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

### Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

### Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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