



Research Summary:

The Legality of Israeli and Iranian Actions During Operation Rising Lion

(June 12-24, 2025)

as Discussed in the Media and Legal Forums

A new Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI) study examined, using artificial intelligence (AI), media outlets with a combined reach of over 2 billion monthly visitors. The findings show that during the 12-day campaign, Operation Rising Lion, there was extensive media engagement with questions concerning the legality of Israel's actions in the fighting, but relatively few concerning the legality of Iran's actions.

The study reviewed 17 leading global news outlets and found that of the hundreds of items addressing Israel's and Iran's adherence to international law during the fighting, 77% of the items published focused on Israel, and only 23% on Iran. This imbalance was even more pronounced in Al Jazeera, where the proportion of references to Israel's actions – mostly critical – reached about 92%.

Background: Why Examine References to “Legality”?

The use of legal rhetoric such as “violation of international law” or “war crimes” helps frame criticism (or support) of one side of the conflict in a manner that lends additional credibility to the critique or endorsement.

It is important to stress that the legal arena has come to occupy an increasingly central role in efforts to delegitimize the State of Israel. By labeling Israel as a “criminal state” – including accusations of “genocide,” “apartheid,” and similar terms – a negative perception of Israel is becoming entrenched among wide audiences.

Methodology

The study identified 1,348 articles published during Operation Rising Lion on the English-language websites of 17 major global media outlets that reached 2.11 billion people in June 2025 (according to [Similarweb](#)). These articles were located using keywords presumed to be linked to issues of legality (e.g., “civilians,” “law,” “international law,” etc.).

Next, using advanced AI tools, the study filtered for articles that actually addressed the legality of actions under international law in the context of the fighting between Iran and Israel.

Finally, with the assistance of these AI tools, a deeper analysis was conducted. This included identifying who was raising the issue of legality – whether Iran, Israel, a third country, or a non-state actor (such as journalists, human rights organizations, legal experts, and the like). The analysis also classified the “tone” of the coverage (critical, supportive, or neutral/unbiased) and broke down the specific legal issues discussed in the publications.

In addition to examining news websites, the study also reviewed leading professional legal forums (blogs) where international law experts – regarded as influential in the Western legal discourse – participate.

Findings

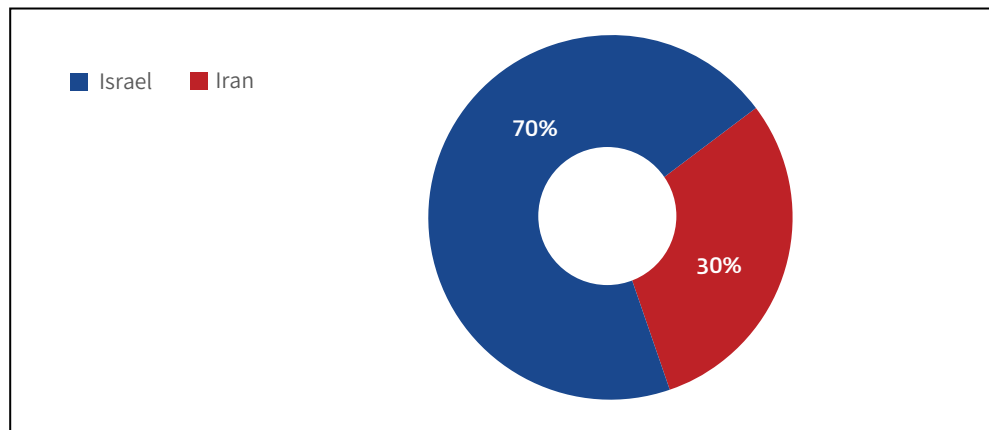
1. Ratio of References to the Legality of Iran's Actions vs. Israel's Actions

Of the 1,348 articles collected from the media outlets listed above, which contained content with a potential connection to “legality,” 242 articles

explicitly addressed legality in the context of the fighting. Of these:

- 176 articles (about 70%) dealt with the legality of Israel's actions.
- 76 articles (about 30%) dealt with the legality of Iran's actions.¹

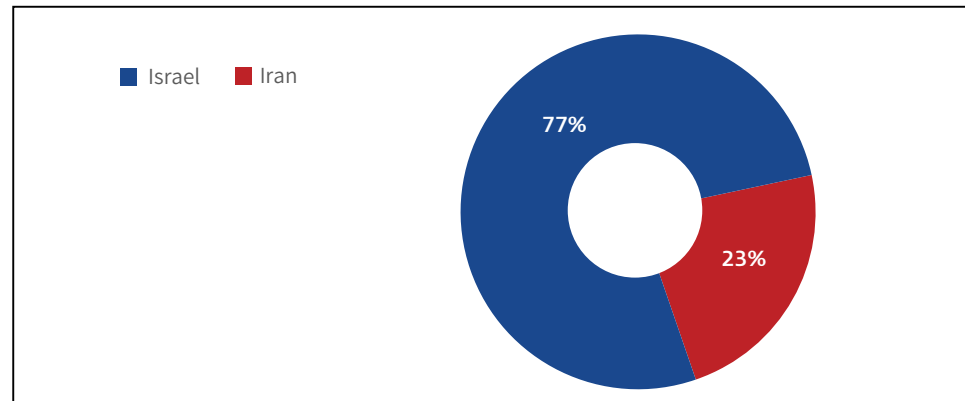
Overall Legality Mentions: Israel vs Iran total



However, this picture is incomplete: A substantial portion of media references to “legality” were merely quotations of official accusations made by either side against the other (e.g., Iranian or Israeli

claims that harm to civilians constitutes a war crime), or self-justifications of their own actions (e.g., Iran claiming it acted under the “right to self-defense”).

Overall Legality Mentions: Israel vs Iran Without Mutual Accusations (third parties)



Data does not include quotations of Iranian or Israeli officials

Thus, the real question is: “How does the world – meaning actors other than Israel or Iran – regard the legality of each side’s actions?”

When excluding mutual accusations and self-justifications, and examining only third-party references, the results were:

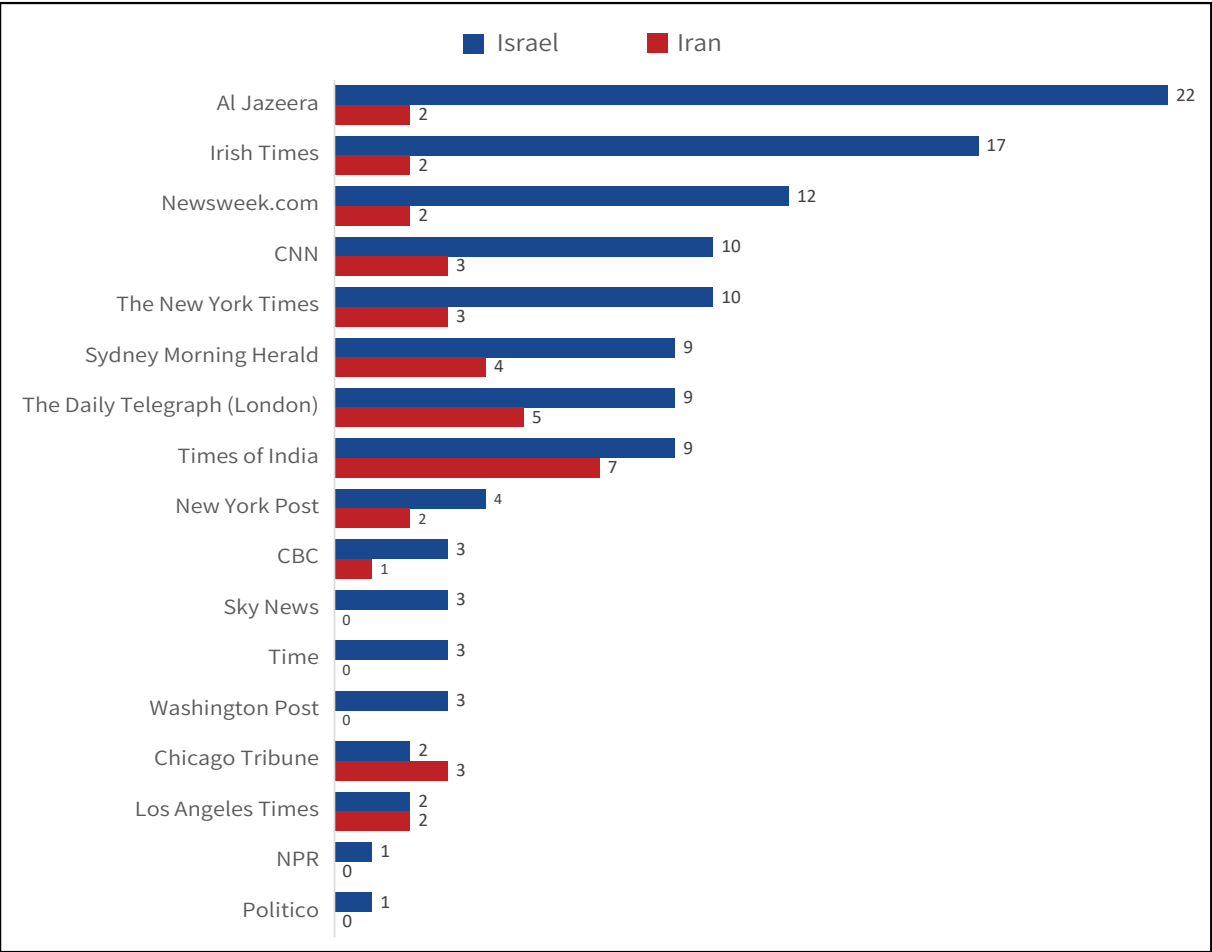
- 120 references addressed the legality of Israel’s actions
- Only 36 references addressed the legality of Iran’s actions

In other words, about 77% of third-party references focused on Israel, while only 23% focused on Iran.²

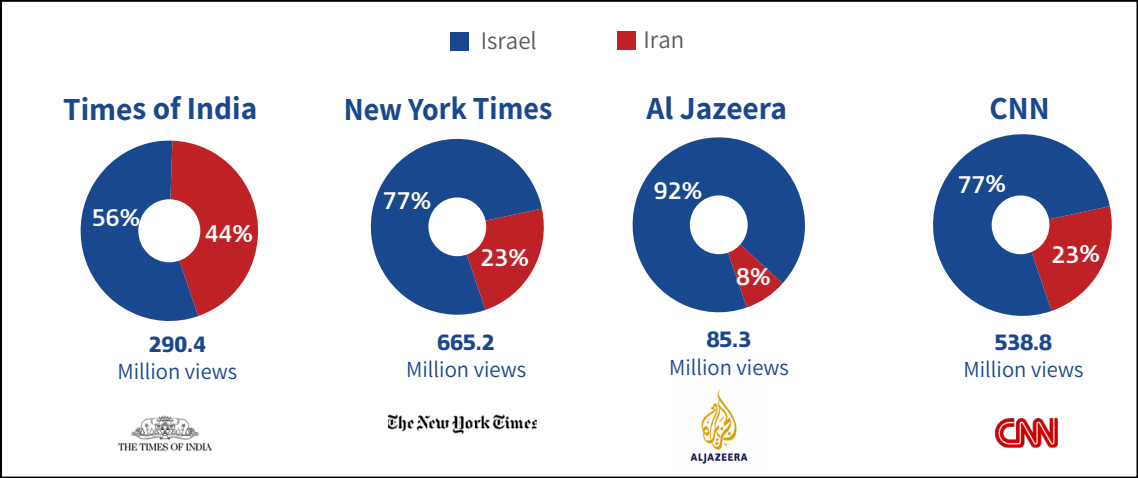
2. Distribution by Media Outlet

The following bar chart illustrates the distribution of references to the legality of Israeli and Iranian actions, excluding articles that consisted solely of “mutual recriminations” or self-justifications by state officials. That is, the chart shows third-party references – such as those made by journalists, experts, NGOs, or others.

Without Mutual Accusations



The ratio of media legality references regarding Iranian and Israeli actions during Operation Rising Lion (excluding direct quotations of officials)

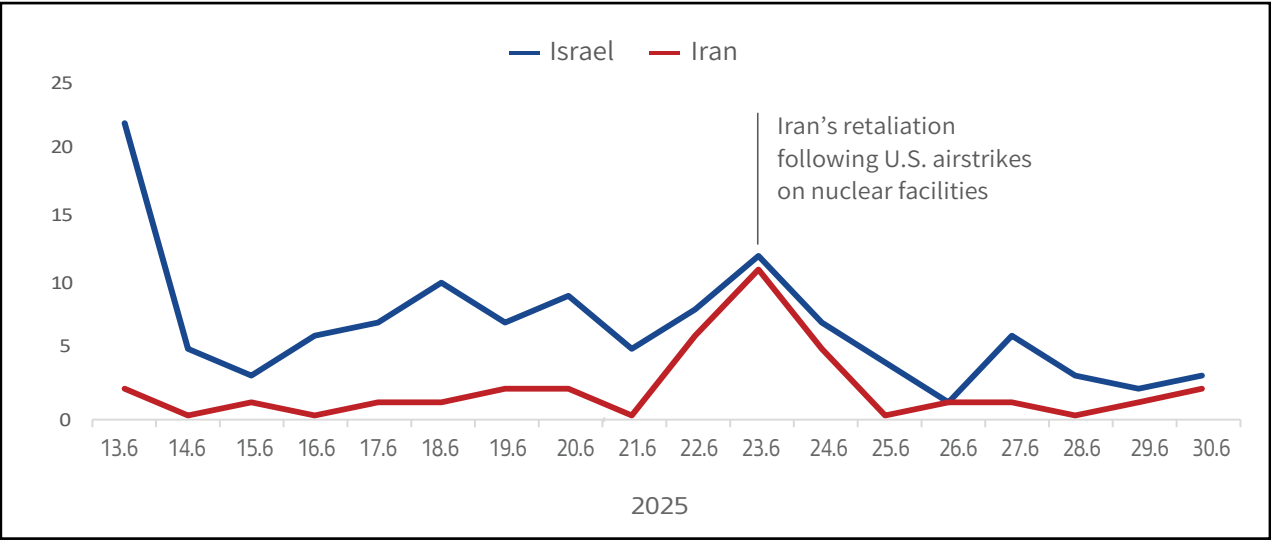


3. Distribution Over the Course of the Fighting

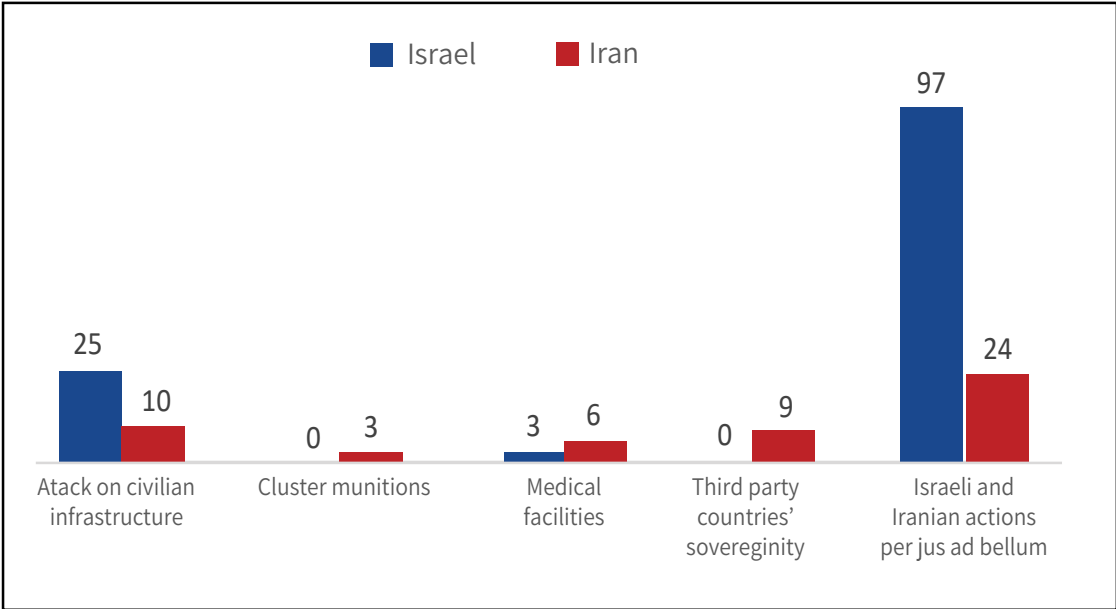
Unsurprisingly, in the opening days of the conflict the discussion focused primarily on the question of Israel’s decision to launch Operation Rising Lion. Accordingly, most of the discussion in those

days revolved around the legality of Israel’s initial strikes. However, as shown in the following graph, throughout almost the entire duration of the fighting, references to the legality of Israel’s actions consistently outnumbered those concerning Iran’s actions.

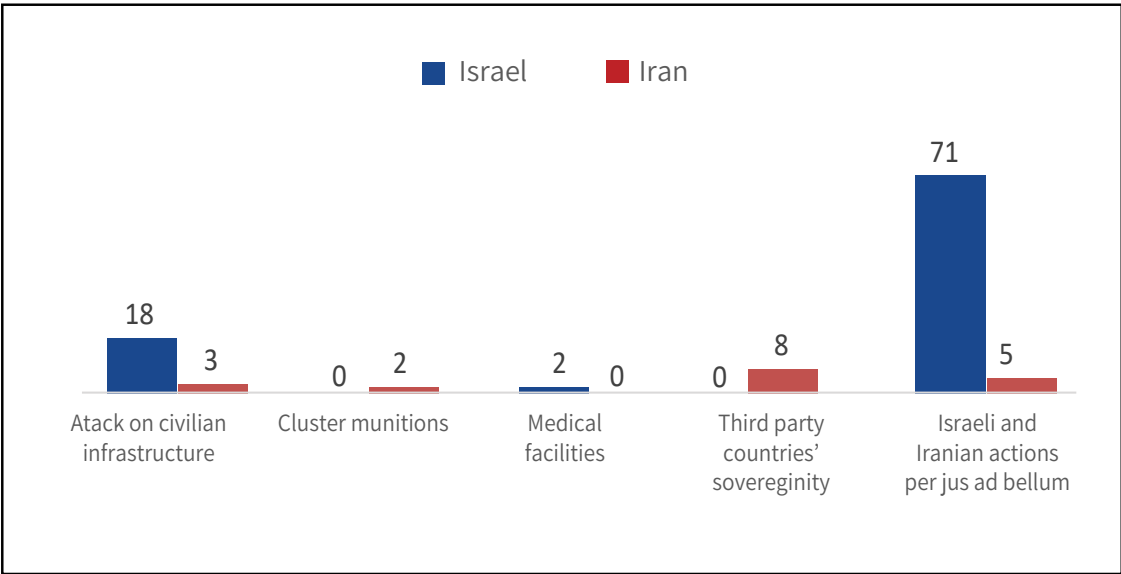
Daily Articles Discussing Legality: Israel vs Iran



True Value Count Comparison for Topics Including Mutual Accusations



True Value Count Comparison for Topics Excluding Mutual Accusations



Blue: References to the legality of Israel's actions

Red: References to the legality of Iran's actions

4. Main Issues Discussed

The study found that the main legal issues debated in the media were as follows:

- A. **The law on resorting to the use of force (*Jus ad bellum*)** – The legality of Israel’s decision to launch Operation Rising Lion and Iran’s subsequent response. For example, claims that Israel violated the UN Charter and that its actions could not be justified under the principle of self-defense, and, conversely, Iranian claims that Iran was entitled to exercise the right to self-defense in response to Israel’s attack.
- B. **Harm to civilians and to civilian infrastructure** – Coverage of strikes on targets alleged not to be military objects or combatants, such as accusations referring to the targeting of Iranian nuclear scientists.
- C. **Attacks on medical facilities and personnel** – Reports of strikes on hospitals and harm to medical staff.
- D. **Violation of the sovereignty of other states** – Issues surrounding actions conducted across border without the consent of third countries.

In addition, and for the reasons stated in page, the study also looked for possible references to the legality of the use of cluster munitions.

The following graph depicts the extent of reference to each of these issues during the fighting, including mentions of the mutual recriminations exchanged between Israel and Iran (e.g., Iranian officials accusing Israel of unlawful aggression, or

Israeli ministers accusing Iran of unlawful attacks on civilians).

When filtering out mutual accusations and focusing solely on third-party actors, the picture becomes even more one-sided: far greater emphasis was placed on Israel’s actions compared to those of Iran.

These findings show more extensive discussion of Israel’s actions concerning attacks on civilians, medical personnel, and medical facilities in Iran, than of Iranian attacks on civilians and medical facilities in Israel. In essence, nearly all discussions of “legality” concerning Iranian attacks came from mentions of accusations leveled official Israeli sources.³

This is particularly jarring given that, during the conflict, Iran fired 591 missiles with over 50 impact sites in populated areas. These attacks killed 31 Israelis and injured approximately 3,500 (according to the Institute for National Security Studies – [INSS](#)).

In some cases, even when Iranian actions were mentioned, they were presented in a way that obscured their full legal implications. For example, after the direct hit on Soroka Medical Center in Be’er Sheva, the media quoted a high-ranking Iranian official claiming that the missile had targeted a site within one kilometer of the hospital. Yet, there was no acknowledgement that firing such a heavy missile (with such a large margin of error) at a densely populated area cannot legally be regarded as a “discriminate attack.”

5. Case Study 1 – Israel’s use of cluster munitions and their use against Israel

Israel had long faced harsh criticism over its use of cluster munitions in the Second Lebanon War, even before the international process led to the prohibition of cluster munitions in battle (the Dublin Convention – the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM)). Over 110 countries have ratified the CCM, although Israel and Iran are not, so far, parties to it.

The issue of cluster munitions use has continued to garner media attention since then. It has come up most recently in the Russia-Ukraine war, with criticisms both of Russia’s use of them against Ukrainian civilians, and U.S. provision of such munitions to Ukraine. Outlets like [CNN](#) and the [New York Times](#) (both included in this study) have addressed the issue.

During Operation Rising Lion, however, coverage of Iran’s cluster munition attacks on Israel was extremely limited (as shown in the graph above). In the few instances where it was mentioned, it was in a muted and marginal manner – contrasting sharply with the far more extensive and critical treatment of other issues.

It is worth noting that after the 12-day conflict between Israel and Iran, Amnesty International issued a report accusing Iran of illegally using cluster munitions against Israel. Yet, the organization was silent during the fighting itself.

6. Case Study 2 – The Absence of Discussion on the Legality of Iran’s Response

Israel argued that it is engaged in an armed conflict with Iran, which, in its view, entitled it to attack Iran under international law. Consequently, much of the public and legal discourse has revolved around whether Israel’s attack on Iran could be justified as “self-defense” under the rules of Jus ad Bellum in international law.

However, international law regulates the use of force by both sides in a conflict. The relevant question is not only whether Israel acted lawfully in launching Operation Rising Lion, the legality of Iran’s response should also be scrutinized. Among other things, Iran would need to show that its actions were both “necessary” and “proportional” to repel Israel’s armed attack.

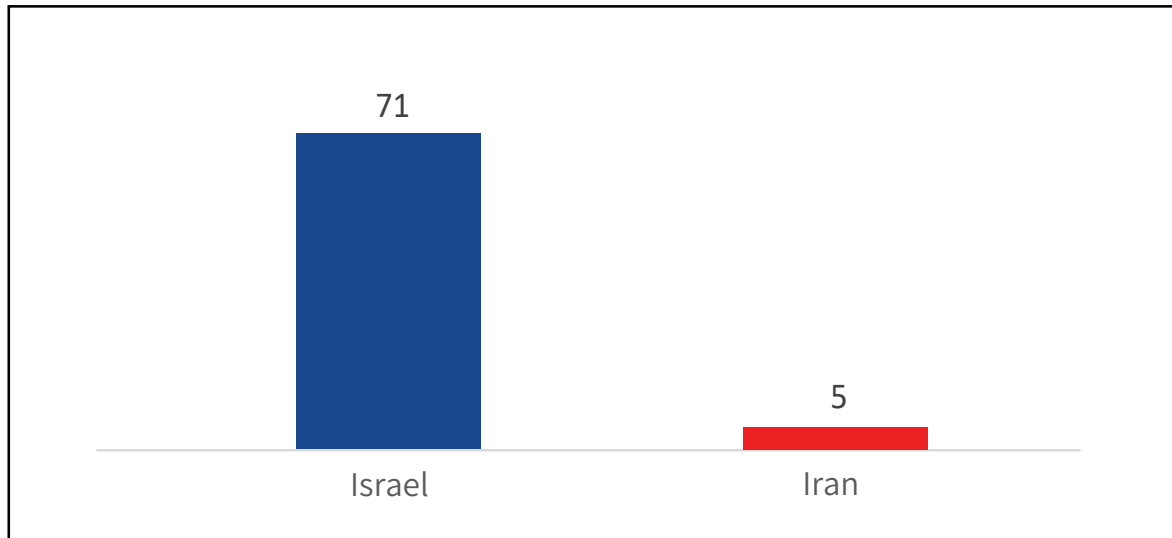
Put simply: Can indiscriminate rocket fire on Israeli cities be considered a legitimate act of self-defense?

In past cases, such as the Second Lebanon War, or Israel’s response to October 7, there was extensive debate in the legal and public spheres regarding Israel’s right to respond, and whether its actions complied with international law.

By contrast, in the case of the 12-day war with Iran, there was very little discussion – either in the media or legal forums – about the legality of Iran’s response. Instead, the discourse focused almost exclusively on whether Israel’s initiation of the offensive was justified.

The following graph illustrates this imbalance, showing the extensive focus on Israel’s decision to launch the campaign versus the minimal attention to the legality of Iran’s actions in this context:

Israeli vs Iranian actions per jus ad bellum



7. The Use of Legal Rhetoric as a Tool of Public Diplomacy

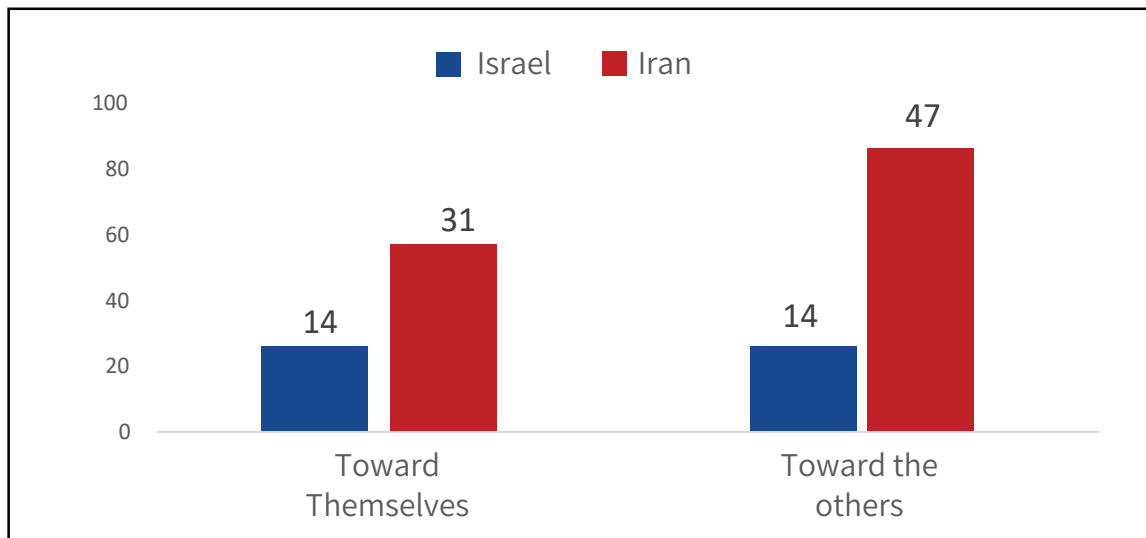
As part of this study, researchers examined the extent to which legal rhetoric was used – that is, the degree to which the media quoted statements by Iranian and Israeli officials about their own state's actions on the one hand, and the illegality of the adversary's actions on the other.

The findings revealed a **clear advantage for Iranian legal rhetoric:**

- Iranian officials consistently framed their actions as lawful, presenting Iran as a state that abides by international law.
- At the same time, they worked to depict Israel's actions as violations of international law, even as war crimes.

By contrast, Israeli officials were found to use legal language far less frequently in their communications.

Israeli vs Iranian claims (toward themselves vs each other)



(**Toward themselves** – each country’s statements about the legality of its own actions)

Toward the other – each country’s statements about the legality of the adversary’s actions)

It is possible that, as with other aspects of this study, this imbalance partly reflects a pro-Iranian

media bias, rather than a true absence of Israeli legal framing. Yet, a sample review of statements by Israeli officials suggests that, indeed, unlike their Iranian counterparts – who made deliberate, consistent efforts to invoke international law – Israeli officials often refrained from systematically employing such legal rhetoric when addressing Iran’s actions.

8. Legal Forums

Legal forums serve as a focal point for dialogue among specialists in international law. The writing in these venues is academically rigorous and professional, and their contributors include some of the world’s leading legal experts. Naturally, such forums attract the broader community engaged in international law — among them lecturers and academics, judges and lawyers, military and

foreign affairs experts, and officeholders in justice and defense ministries worldwide — individuals with potential influence over how decision makers throughout the world shape their positions.

As part of JPPI’s study, attention to the legality of actions by **Iran and Israel** was examined across three leading forums: *Just Security*, *EJIL: Talk!* (the blog of the *European Journal of International Law*), and *Opinio Juris*.⁴

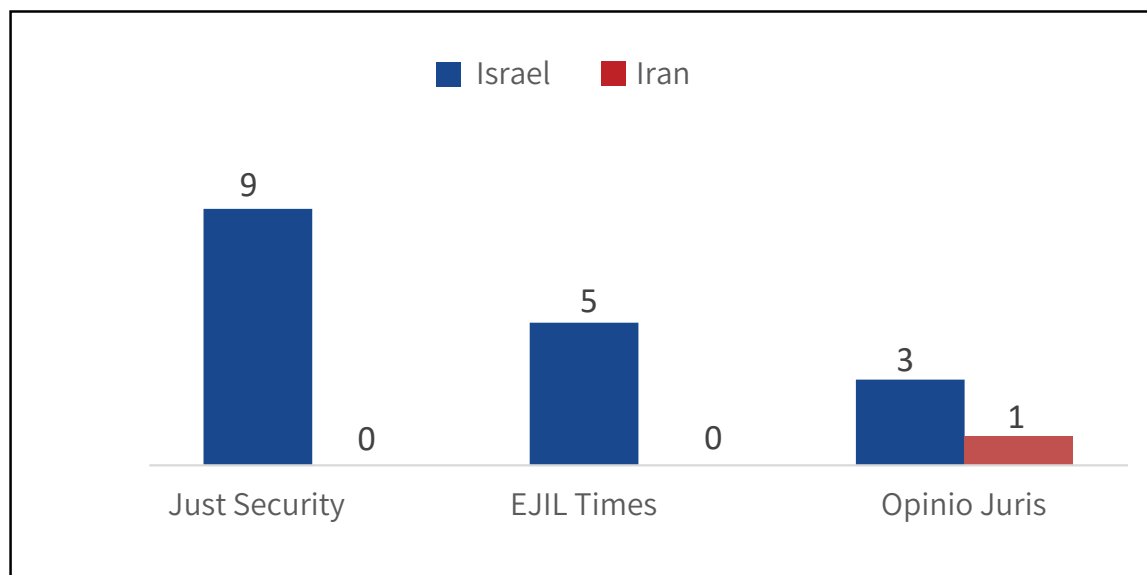
The study found that during the fighting, 17 articles were published that dealt with issues arising from the war between Iran and Israel. All of them addressed the legality of Israel's actions, and only one also discussed the legality of Iran's actions. Of these articles, approximately 70% were critical of Israel, about 24% were "neutral, and only one was "positive" — and even then, only because the party cited as expressing a "positive" stance toward Israel was the president of the United States, not a legal expert.

With respect to substance, all the articles focused on the legality of Israel's use of force, and just one also considered the legality of Iran's resort to force. No article addressed the legality of attacks on medical facilities or Iran's use of cluster munitions in firing at population centers. This stands in sharp

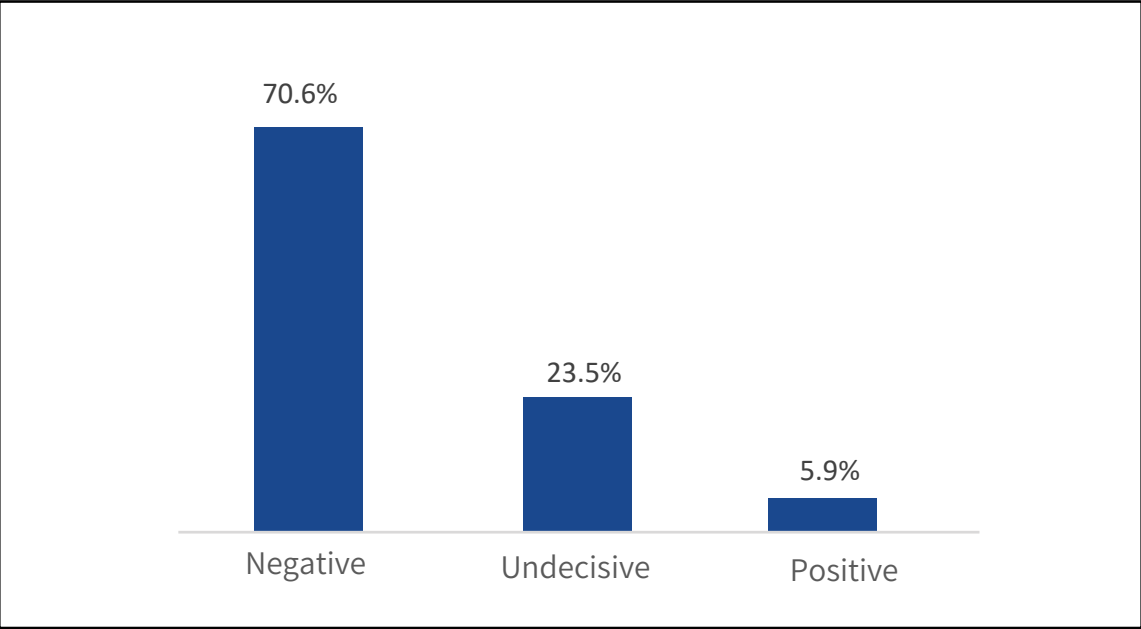
contrast to the extensive academic treatment of the legality of Israel's use of cluster munitions in Lebanon, and to the broad attention paid in these same forums to the legality of Israeli strikes in Gaza against hospitals and other medical facilities. The only article that dealt with attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure focused solely on Israel's actions.

In short, analysis of the legal forums reveals a bleak picture: a critical discourse focused almost exclusively on Israel, alongside an almost complete disregard for Iran's conduct during the war — even on issues at the very core of global legal debate — issues that continue, even aside from Operation Rising Lion, to generate severe criticism of Israel.

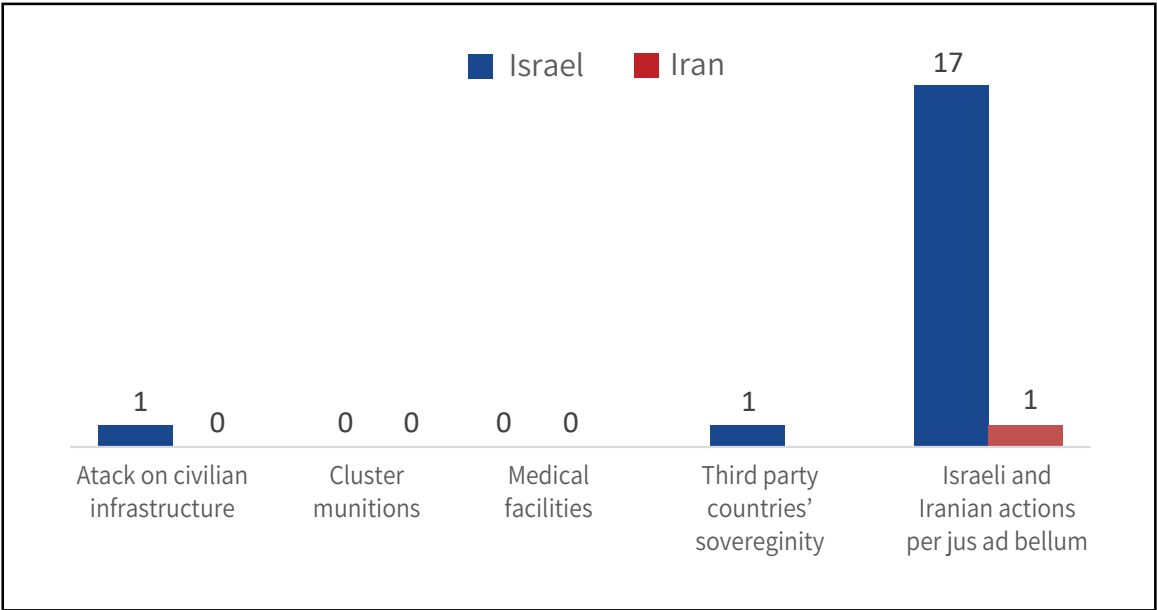
Count of Articles Discussing Legality of "Israeli" Actions vs "Iranian" Actions



Tone Distribution in Legality Discussion regarding Israel during Israel-Iran Conflict



True Value Count Comparison of Topics



Recommendations

- 1. Timely Publication of Legal Reports** – Israel should publish, both immediately upon the outbreak of hostilities and promptly after they conclude, official reports explaining the legality of its actions while also pointing to the legal violations of its adversary. With respect to Operation Rising Lion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only released such a report six weeks after the operation ended, which diminished its influence on media discourse or the positions of legal experts.
- 2. Greater Use of Legal Rhetoric by Israeli Officials** – Israeli political and public diplomacy figures should employ legal language more consistently. To achieve this, they must receive systematic briefings and recommendations from the relevant legal advisers as an integral part of their preparation for press briefings and conferences.
- 3. Leverage Technology and Social Media** – During hot conflicts, Israel should better use technological tools, particularly social media, to “amplify” its narrative, including the legal justification for Israel’s actions and its adversary’s violations of international law.

Endnotes

- 1 242 publications addressed the legality of the actions of both Israel and Iran; accordingly, when tallying references by side, the count is greater than the total number of articles.
- 2 Nor is that the whole story: Of the 36 items discussing the legality of Iran’s actions, eight examined Iranian actions against a third party, not Israel — for example, the legality of attacking U.S. bases on Qatari soil. Therefore, when we look only at how third parties addressed the legality of hostilities between Iran and Israel, 81% focused on Israel, and only 19% addressed the legality of Iran’s actions.
- 3 We emphasize that this does not imply that there was no media coverage of harm to civilians in Israel. The study focused on cases that included discussion of the legality of the actions.
- 4 It should be noted that several expert opinions supportive of Israel were published outside these forums. See: [Schmitt](#); [Corn and Kittrie](#); [Tsagourias](#).

