Policy Research Journal
ISSN (E): 3006-7030 ISSN (P) : 3006-7022 Volume 4, Issue 3, 2026

ELITE ANGLO-AMERICAN MEDIA FRAMING AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF PRE-EMPTIVE SELF-DEFENSE LEGITIMACY:

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF U.S.–ISRAEL–IRAN CONFLICT COVERAGE, 2020–2024

Sajid Khan[*1], **Adv. Sudais Bari**[2]

[*1]*Journalist, MS Scholar department of Media and Mass Communication, IIUI.*
[2]*Advocate District Courts, Islamabad and an emerging legal scholar.*

[*1]sajid.pakhtoonyar@gmail.com, [2]sudaisbarif@gmail.com

DOI: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22742704

Keywords
pre-emptive self-defense; Article 51; media framing; Critical Discourse Analysis; U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict; legitimacy; use of force; conflict communication; norm contestation: International Law

Article History
Received: 05 January 2026
Accepted: 18 February 2026
Published: 04 March 2026

Copyright @Author
Corresponding Author: *
Sajid Khan
Adv. Sudais Bari

Abstract

The connection between legal justifications put forth by states when using force and the way the elites frame them in the media is yet under-theorized in both fields of international law and communication studies. This paper investigates how the major elite Anglo-American news media organizations, The New York Times, CNN, BBC News, and The Guardian reported the cases of U.S. and Israeli pre-emptive attacks on Iranian-associated assets from January 2020 to December 2024 in relation to the legal aspects of pre-emptive self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of a deliberately selected corpus of 60 news articles spanning three index events, namely, the Soleimani assassination (January 2020), Israeli military actions in Syria (2022), and the Iran-Israeli direct communications channel (April 2024), complemented by legal doctrinal analysis of state explanations in terms of the tripartite principle of necessity, imminence, and proportionality, the study reveals consistent themes of lexical imbalance, hierarchy of sources, and underutilization of international law in American media outlets. In contrast, British media organizations, especially The Guardian and BBC News, demonstrated higher levels of legal context and source diversity. These tendencies are explained not as essential features of Western media but rather as institutional logic, ownership structures, and editorial policies specific to outlets. This study proposes a legally grounded CDA approach to the analysis of legitimizing war discourse and demonstrates that different legal constructions in elite media have implications for how international use-of-force laws are perceived by policymakers.

1. Introduction

On January 3, 2020, at 1:00 AM, an air strike conducted by US drones killed Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Iran Quds Force, near Baghdad International Airport. The justification offered by the administration of President Donald Trump was that the action had taken place because of the 'imminent threat' to American citizens — a criterion taken straight out of Article 51 of the UN Charter and related customary laws. But, within hours, it was conceded by the authorities that there was no confirmed 'threat or timing' for the same that can be made public (New York Times, 13 January 2020). Despite this

admission, the major Anglo-American media houses, less than 48 hours after the attack took place, were overwhelmingly describing it as a defensive action, without any legal reasoning. Thus, through the Soleimani episode, the dynamic that emerges repeatedly in modern times of international security is evident: while legal reasons for military actions in international law are offered, their adequacy according to the existing international legal standards is neglected by the major media houses.

Below, one will find a discussion about the interaction under investigation in a larger time frame, namely from 2020 to 2024, where American and Israeli military operations were directed against Iran preemptively. The two different methods employed for the analysis include doctrine-based legal analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The first method examines the arguments of states regarding the three essential components of necessity, imminence, and proportionality considering Article 51 and customary international law. CDA is employed to analyze how the media covered the events in four leading Anglo-American elite media organizations, such as The New York Times (NYT), CNN, BBC News, and The Guardian. The reason why such media organizations are chosen is because they are frequently cited in decision-making processes of policy makers in the US and UK.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the relevant literature concerning self-defense doctrine, media coverage of conflict, and legitimacy, combining the theoretical perspective in the literature review. Section 3 outlines the methods, comprising the corpus development, coding scheme, and doctrine analysis criteria. Section 4 details the results of the legal analysis and CDA. Section 5 considers the implications of these results. Section 6 concludes with future research directions.

1.1 Research Question

What way do four prestigious Anglo-American news organizations approach international law during their coverage of pre-emptive strikes by the United States and Israel on Iranian-related targets, and in what way can observed differences in such patterns relate to constructivist approaches to international norm diffusion?

2. Legal Standards, Media Framing, and Legitimacy: An Integrated Review

2.1 The Legal Boundaries of Pre-emptive Self-Defense

Self-defense rights in international law rest upon Article 51 of the UN Charter, which protects the 'inherent right' of states to self-defense in cases where 'an armed attack occurs.' The plain meaning of the wording has led to ongoing interpretative controversy between restrictive and expansive interpretations. Restrictive interpretation, supported by Brownlie (1963) and subsequently by Gray (2018), suggests that the Charter language excludes any action until there is an attack itself. Classical permissive interpretation cites the Caroline principle – derived from an 1837 diplomatic correspondence establishing standards of necessity and proportionality – to permit action in response to threats leaving 'no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation' (Jennings, 1938). This discourse was significantly heated following September 2001. Franck (2002) identified the Bush Doctrine as extending the logic of pre-emption to include preventive strikes against non-imminent threats. This represents a period of extensive doctrinal dispute that this paper's case studies explicitly address. Prior to analyzing the rationales put forward by the United States and Israel, academic integrity necessitates engagement with arguments supporting expansion of pre-emptive doctrine.

The Expansionist Position: Strongest Arguments

According to Schmitt (2003) and Reisman (2014), "imminence" under the Caroline standard must be contextualized considering present-day threat environments. If there is evidence of capability, intentionality, and pattern of operation that suggests future strikes are imminent and, moreover, there are technological constraints on the opportunity for self-protection, such as a timeframe within which a state might develop nuclear capabilities, the expanded timeframe for interpreting imminence can be legally justified.

The 1996 Advisory Opinion of the ICJ on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons was purposely vague regarding anticipatory use in cases of extreme self-defense.

The 'unwilling or unable' standard has been defended by Deeks (2012) and Bethlehem (2012) as an adaptive principle necessary in asymmetric warfare. If states are unable or unwilling to prevent non-state actors from using their territory for attacks on other states, it would not be legally defensible to treat the principle of sovereignty as a shield. According to Corten (2021), however, the doctrine of unwillingness or inability to act does not have customary international law standing. Dinstein (2017) notes the existence of a "doctrine of cumulative attack" whereby a string of individually below the threshold of an armed attack can cumulatively be regarded as an armed attack warranting proportionate action in self-defense. According to Ruys (2010), another state practice element is the fact that since 2001, numerous countries have avoided criticizing preemptive self-defense actions even as they express verbal disapproval.

The Restrictive Counter: Why Legal Contestation Persists

In response to these assertions, Corten (2021) makes the most persuasive counterargument today, proving that state behavior since 2001 represents a pragmatic acceptance of exceptional arguments made by powerful states, rather than any real commitment to a normative position. According to Corten, the failure to condemn such actions stems from political strategy, not international legality. Lubell (2021) also contends that the 'continuing attack' and 'preventive' rationales fail to meet the required standard of opinion juris needed to qualify as customary law. Joyner (2020) demonstrates that Iran's violations of its JCPOA obligations, while arguably violations of treaty law, fall short of an armed attack warranting Article 51 action under any interpretation. Ultimately, the fact that these issues remain open to debate among experts in the field carries important analytical weight: when states cite preemption, they cite justifications whose legal merit remains controversial, a point that may or may not be reflected in elite media discourse.

2.2 Media Framing in Conflict Coverage: Theory and Evidence

Entman's (1993) classic framing theory suggests that frames focus on specific elements from reality and influence the diagnosis of the issue, attributing causality, providing moral judgments, and recommending action. In terms of the conflict frame, frames decide if military action constitutes aggression or defense, how international law fits into the issue, and who gets the right to speak. Bennett's (2016) indexing hypothesis elaborates on this by claiming that elite media accounts tend to reflect the diversity of political discourse among officials, and the media coverage widens its scope of voices in cases where there is disagreement among officials.

Herman and Chomsky (2002) provide a structural explanation for the media-state congruence via the workings of ownership, advertising, sourcing, and ideological filters. The propaganda model is subject to productive critiques. For instance, Kuypers (2002) criticizes it for failing to acknowledge within-outlet heterogeneity, and Peri (2018) highlights the existence of considerable variations in Israeli security media that an overarching "propaganda" model cannot account for. Unlike the propaganda model, Bennett's (2016) indexing approach is empirically more feasible and can explain the variations between outlets found in this research. There have also been attempts to integrate the framing theory into the digital sphere. For example, Al-Rawi (2019) analyzes the algorithmic reinforcement of official discourses on social media, and Tawil-Souri (2022) uncovers the recurring Orientalist tropes in Western representations of Iranian agents.

2.3 Non-Western Counter-Narratives: A Necessary Comparative Reference

A study of Anglo-American media reporting of the conflict between the U.S., Israel, and Iran must be based on the understanding that the extent of coverage is not enough to represent the entirety of the international media scene. The Iranian government owns news agencies such as Press TV

and IRNA, which serve as an alternative voice. These media present a different narrative in which activities conducted by the U.S. and Israeli bodies are seen as sovereignty infringements and acts of war (Ansari, 2019). Among other media outlets, it is important to note Al Jazeera Arabic. This media outlet's editorial independence from Qatar and its focus on pan-Arab audiences have provided a trustworthy platform for a more in-depth legal counter-narrative to the claims of the U.S. and Israeli administrations regarding their actions (Seib, 2012). According to Khamis and Vaughn (2020), one of the biggest discrepancies in media narratives concerning the killing of Soleimani involved the near non-reporting of the legal and political consequences by Western media.

2.4 Legitimacy Theory: The Conceptual Bridge

According to Franck (1990), international law creates a compliance pull that is directly proportional to the legitimacy of its rules. Hurd (2007) provides a constructivist approach where legitimacy is socially constructed within a shared discourse, whereby state actors will always aim at legitimacy even when their legal claims are lacking since it lowers the political risks involved in norm transgression. According to Clark (2005), the process of legitimacy construction is tied with hegemony, whereby hegemonic powers take precedence in shaping the discourse infrastructure upon which the evaluation of international norms is made. The empirical analysis of legitimacy narratives by Johnstone (2011) in Kosovo and Iraq provides clear illustrations on how hegemonic states construct a legitimizing discourse that comes before, and subsequently shapes, formal law.

2.5 Theoretical Framework Summary

Table 1: Theoretical Framework Mapping

Theory	Core Contribution	Application in This Study
Realism	States pursue security in anarchic conditions; legal constraints are instrumentally deployed	Explains motivational structure for legal justification — why pre-emptive doctrine is invoked irrespective of strict legal adequacy
Constructivism / Indexing	Norms are socially constructed; media tracks official debate and shapes normative baselines	Predicts cross-outlet variation; frames the study's implications for norm communication
Critical Discourse Analysis	Language choices reflect and reproduce power relations	Primary analytical method: coding lexical asymmetry, source hierarchy, framing direction, legal salience
Legitimacy Theory	Legitimacy is socially constructed and functions as a substitute for legal authorization	Conceptual frame for interpreting the implications of differential legal engagement across outlets

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research method used in this paper is qualitative, using an interpretivist paradigm that combines two analytical approaches: legal doctrine and Critical Discourse Analysis. The former sets out the normative framework against which state rationales are measured, while the latter analyzes the rhetorical elements of media discourse. Both approaches complement each other: whereas legal

analysis reveals what the media discourse could have cited but did not, CDA reveals what the media discourse cites and in what manner. The present research does not purport to generalize its results beyond the corpus analyzed.

3.2 Corpus Design and Sampling

Index Events and Rationale

The three incidents chosen to represent sample points include:

- All three included a clear public appeal to the pre-emptive self-defense theory made either by the US or Israel.
- All three attracted significant coverage in English-speaking sources.
- The three incidents cover the entire time frame of the study (2020-2024).

Table 2: Index Events and Sampling Rationale

Event Code	Event Description	Date Window Sampled	Why Selected
E1	Soleimani assassination, Baghdad	1–15 January 2020	Highest-profile invocation of imminence doctrine; maximum coverage across all 4 outlets
E2	Israeli airstrike operations in Syria (peak period)	January–December 2022	Best-documented period of Israeli 'campaign between wars'; invokes preventive doctrine
E3	Iran–Israel direct exchange (drone/missile)	1–30 April 2024	First direct inter-state exchange; both sides invoked self-defense simultaneously

Institute for Excellence in Education & Research

Outlet Selection

The four media sources chosen to reflect the differing institutional perspectives found in the Anglo-American media environment. This was purposeful and analytical because there is variance among the ownership structure, political climate, intended audience, and institutional logic, allowing for an analysis of how these elements determine frame formation.

Table 3: Outlet Selection and Institutional Logic

Outlet	Ownership	Political Culture	Primary Audience	Predicted Framing Tendency (Pre-Study)
New York Times	Private/shareholder	Liberal-centrist U.S.	U.S. policy elite	High official-source reliance; security proximity; limited legal critique
CNN	Corporate (WBD)	Liberal-centrist U.S.	Broad U.S. + global	Breaking news speed premium; official framing dominant; lowest legal discourse

Outlet	Ownership	Political Culture	Primary Audience	Predicted Framing Tendency (Pre-Study)
BBC News	Public/state-funded	Non-partisan mandate	UK + global	Moderate legal contextualization; institutional impartiality guidelines
The Guardian	Reader/trust-funded	Progressive-liberal UK	UK professional class	Highest legal discourse; greatest counter-voice inclusion; values journalism

Article Selection Criteria

A total of 15 articles from each source were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Databases: LexisNexis Academic, ProQuest (for NYT and CNN, full-text archives)
- Search terms: ("self-defense" OR "preemptive" OR "pre-emptive" OR "imminent threat" OR "defensive operation") AND ("Iran" OR "Soleimani" OR "IRGC") AND ("strike" OR "attack" OR "operation") in the source's archive
- Date filter: within the specified time for each event
- Inclusion: minimum 500-word length; news item only (not opinions, editorials, letters, or wire duplicate)
- Exclusion: duplicate wire items considered once; analytical articles where the reporter's viewpoint prevails
- Selection: the top 5 most prominent articles from each source for each event, based on word count and placement (front page/hompage)

3.3 CDA Coding Framework

The articles were analyzed through six codes which were dichotomous or scalar in nature within three major categories derived from the theories of Fairclough (1995), Entman (1993), and van Dijk (1993).

IEER
Institute for Excellence in Education & Research

Table 4: CDA Coding Framework with Operational Definitions

Category	Code Label	Operational Definition	Positive Indicator	Negative Indicator
Lexical Choice	Defensive label (DL)	Actor's action is named using defense/response vocabulary in the first 300 words	"targeted strike," "retaliate," "defensive op"	"attack," "assault," "bombing"
Lexical Choice	Threat label (TL)	Iranian actor described with threat-connoting adjective anywhere in article	"destabilizing," "rogue," "hostile forces"	"Iranian military," "IRGC commander"
Source Attribution	Official primacy (OP)	First directly quoted attributed source is U.S. or Israeli government official	First quote: Pompeo/IDF spokesperson	First quote: IAEA/UN/legal expert
Source Attribution	Legal expert present (LE)	At least one international law scholar or institution cited as source	Marko Milanovic quoted; UN Charter cited	No legal source present

Category	Code Label	Operational Definition	Positive Indicator	Negative Indicator
Framing Direction	Initiator attribution (IA)	First violent action in the article's narrative has Iran or Iran-linked actor as grammatical subject	"After Iran-backed forces attacked..."	"Following the U.S. strike, Iran..."
Framing Direction	Legal salience (LS)	First reference to international law appears before word 500 (HIGH) or after word 500 / absent (LOW)	IHL reference in paragraph 2	Legal critique in final paragraph

Intercoder Reliability

A second coder, unfamiliar with the study's hypotheses, independently coded a randomly selected 20% subsample (12 articles, 3 per outlet). Cohen's Kappa was calculated by code. Results: DL κ=0.78; TL κ=0.74; OP κ=0.82; LE κ=0.88; IA κ=0.71; LS κ=0.76. All codes exceeded the Landis and Koch (1977) threshold of κ≥0.70 for substantial agreement. Disagreements (n=9 across 12 articles) were resolved through structured discussion and the final coding decision recorded.

3.4 Doctrinal Legal Analysis

The legality of justification arguments for each index event is judged on three grounds of law: (1) necessity, which requires that there be no other course of action than the use of force; (2) proportionality, where the amount of force used should be equal to the severity of the threat; and (3) immediacy, where the threat is sufficiently immediate to not allow for consideration. Legal texts include the UN Charter (Article 51), ICJ Advisory Opinions (Nuclear Weapons, 1996; Wall Opinion, 2004), and the Caroline correspondence (1842). Secondary texts comprise leading scholars' works: Gray (2018), Dinstein (2017), Corten (2021), Lubell (2021), and, from the expansionary view, Schmitt (2003), Bethlehem (2012), and Deeks (2012).

3.5 Positionality

CDA is an overtly normative approach that does not aspire to value neutrality. The normativity of this study is being explicit about the legal debate concerning preemptive force, and in analyzing how this debate is communicated in elite media. This normativity could affect interpretations in the coding process. This possibility is minimized by defining all codes operationally, reporting intercoder agreement, and focusing on counterevidence and variations across outlets.

4. Findings

4.1 Legal Analysis: State Justifications Against Doctrinal Criteria

Event 1: The Soleimani Strike (January 2020)

The U.S. case relied largely upon the doctrine of imminence. "Soleimani was actively planning attacks against American forces in the region," said Secretary of State Pompeo. Against the tripartite test:

- **Necessity: Not shown.** The U.S. government failed to prove that all diplomatic efforts have been tried. The congressional testimonies of high-ranking officials showed that no timeline was established regarding the plotting activities (Senate Intelligence Committee hearings, February 2020).
- **Proportionality:** Questionable. It is disproportionate to kill a highly ranked military official of another nation. According to Corten (2021), killing a state official rather than an operational commander during an active combat raises doubts about the question of proportionality.
- **Imminence:** No imminence proven using restrictive criteria. The use of the phrase "actively planning" fails to meet the standard set by the

Caroline doctrine that requires threats leaving "no moment for deliberation." Expansionist criteria, according to Schmitt (2003), would find it reasonable to consider the history of attacks carried out by forces led by Soleimani. The government did not make this point explicitly publically, but the UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee ruled that the legal basis "was not established" (UK Parliament, 2020).

Event 2: Israeli Operations in Syria (2022)
Israel's 'campaign between wars' (mabam) strategy provides justification for its sustained airstrike policy targeting the military infrastructure in Syria as a form of pre-emptive self-defense against future Iranian transfers and capabilities buildup.
In relation to the three-part test:

Necessity: Weakness because of the lack of proven engagement through diplomacy/UN channels. There was no UN resolution authorizing such action, nor was there evidence of exhausted diplomacy efforts.

Proportionality: Hard to determine given the operation's opacity, but available information indicates that it is kept proportional with each strike, although the magnitude of this strategy since 2017 casts doubt on its systematic approach.

Imminence: Not claimed. This action is based on the intention to act against future threats, a stance that can be categorized under preventive self-defense according to Dinstein (2017), which lacks customary international law standing. The expansionary counter-narrative (cumulative attack doctrine) may be applicable considering the existence of Iranian-based threats toward Israel; nonetheless, cumulative attack doctrine remains an area of dispute within international law (Lubell, 2021).

Event 3: Iran–Israel Direct Exchange (April 2024)
The April 2024 confrontation started with Iran's drone and missile attacks on Israel, which itself was portrayed by Tehran as a lawful act of self-defense after its consulate in Damascus was targeted by Israel (1 April 2024). The latter never confirmed or denied the claim but responded with its own acts of self-defense in kind. There are several interesting aspects in both claims of self-defense:

- **Iran's position** – If the strike indeed happened, it can be qualified as an attack on premises protected by the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which has often been overlooked in Anglo-American media.
- **Israel's position** – It's worth mentioning that the Israeli actions were proportionate (strikes on radar installations), although there were debates about the legality of striking Iranian territory as a response to the retaliatory strike, in the context of the Article 51 regime.

In his book, Corten (2021) referred to such patterns as a form of "mutual pre-emption," one of the main structural challenges to the Article 51 regime, as it made the aggressor-defender binary practically impossible. However, the legal complexity of the situation became apparent mainly in UK coverage, while US reporting did not reflect it as much.

4.2 CDA Findings: Patterns Across the Corpus

Finding 1: Headline Framing Asymmetry

Table 5: Headline Framing Comparison Across Outlets and Events

Event	NYT	CNN	BBC	Guardian
E1	"U.S. Strike in Iraq Kills Qasem Suleimani" — agency attributed to U.S.;	"Strike that killed Soleimani" — agentless construction; U.S. initiator role passive	"Soleimani: US kills Iran's top general" — factual; no connotative loading	"Soleimani killing: was it legal?" — legality foregrounded in headline

Event	NYT	CNN	BBC	Guardian
	neutral-defensive lexicon			
E3	"Israel Strikes Back After Iran Attack" — Iran as initiator; Israel as responder	"Israel retaliates against Iran" — Israel positioned as retaliator	"Iran and Israel: what happened?" — explanatory neutrality	"Iran's attack was retaliation — international lawyers say" — legal authority and counterview foregrounded

A comparison of headlines shows a clear pattern of differentiation between outlets. Both times, NY Times and CNN headlines placed the American or Israeli agents in roles as responders or 'strike' actors, using the word 'strike,' which has less aggression than the word 'attack.' The Guardian's headlines highlighted the legal aspects of the event or used legal authority. BBC headlines showed neutral objectivity.

Finding 2: Lexical Asymmetry in Action Description

The six types of vocabulary associated with aggressiveness and defense (aggressive-defensive connotation vocabulary) occurred much more often when describing the United States' and Israel's activities compared to Iran's activities. The Iranian activities used more often high-agency aggressive vocabulary. This trend was especially visible in NYT and CNN articles and least visible in the Guardian newspaper articles. It is noticeable in all three events; however, it was the least noticeable in the E3 articles because of the mutual nature of the confrontation of April 2024.

Finding 3: Source Hierarchy and Official Primacy

Table 6: Source Distribution by Outlet (% of attributable quotes across corpus)

Source Category	NYT (%)	CNN (%)	BBC (%)	Guardian (%)
U.S./Israeli government officials	69%	73%	54%	42%
International law experts / institutions	9%	6%	17%	24%
Iranian government / officials	14%	13%	18%	21%
Other governments / multilateral bodies	8%	8%	11%	13%

The source hierarchy results point to a discernible continuum between NYT/CNN (highest primacy) and Guardian (lowest primacy, highest inclusion of experts/counter-voices). The expert type that is particularly analytically significant is the legal expert. In the NYT/CNN articles, the proportion of legal experts among all the sources cited is less than 10%, suggesting that most of these stories lack any independent evaluation by a legal expert on the rationales presented. On the other hand, BBC/Guardian stories have about twice the proportion of legal sources compared to those of NYT/CNN.

Finding 4: Legal Discourse Salience
Discourse on law was evaluated as either HIGH (first mention of international law, Article 51, or law after the 500th word) or LOW (after the 500th word or absence).

Results:

Table 7: Legal Discourse Salience by Outlet

Legal Discourse Salience	NYT	CNN	BBC	Guardian
HIGH (first legal reference before word 500)	2/15 (13%)	1/15 (7%)	7/15 (47%)	11/15 (73%)
LOW (after word 500 or absent)	13/15 (87%)	14/15 (93%)	8/15 (53%)	4/15 (27%)

The salience results show a hierarchy that supports institutional logic theory predictions. In the CNN corpus, legal discourse was either missing or structurally marginalized in 93% of all articles. In the NYT corpus, this number was 87%. However, for BBC and the Guardian, the opposite trend was observed. The position of legal discourse – whether it is found at the beginning or end of an article – is just as relevant analytically as the fact that it is present. For example, when legal criticism is found in the last third of an article in the CNN corpus, those who fail to read the whole article (most people, according to digital reading statistics) do not come across it.

Finding 5 (Key Finding): Outlet Differentiation as the Central Analytical Result
The most theoretically important result is not the overall trend for the Anglo-American elite media to favor security framing from official sources – a trend that fits well with previous studies on conflict media. Rather, it is the extent to which institutional logic and editorial culture help explain the observed within-sample variation. In the case of The Guardian, for example, international law was frequently referenced, legal experts were often quoted, Iranian perspectives were considered, and in two cases (E1 and E3), legal issues were framed in the headlines of those articles. This variation is theoretically relevant because:

- It shows that structural pressures towards official source reliance do not necessarily determine outcomes: there is editorial culture and institutional ownership that makes room for legal discourse in the Anglo-American news environment.
- The result suggests that readers who consume different elite newspapers get differential epistemic access to legal debate about pre-emptive force – a result with consequences for democratic deliberation of security policies.

This differentiation should not be reduced to a simple 'media legitimates force' aggregate result.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Interpretation

These results are in line with a constructivist-indexing theory of conflict media coverage (Wendt, 1999; Bennett, 2016). While U.S. media indexed the narrow scope of discussion among official elites in American politics – in which the legality of pre-emptive doctrine is seldom a contested topic among the elites – British media indexed a wider discussion, including opposition to U.S. and Israeli pre-emptive doctrine by parliamentarians and the legal community, leading to relatively greater legal coverage.
In terms of legitimacy theory (Hurd, 2007; Clark, 2005), the findings imply that Anglo-American elite media sources play distinct roles in the discursive context for the contestation and reproduction of international use-of-force norms. U.S. media, by excluding independent legal analysis from their news reporting systematically, limit public exposure to the yardstick against which the legitimacy of pre-emptive doctrine is measured – without any intentionality on the part of the media editors themselves, but rather due to their sourcing practices. The Guardian fulfills its

informational role more completely in terms of international relations theory on norm communication.

Care needs to be taken here about the implications of this analysis. This research cannot claim that media content influences audiences to condone unlawful violence, or that it "legitimizes" preemption theory in any causal way. This research shows that Anglo-American elites selectively expose their audiences to legal facts surrounding controversial uses of force – a conclusion which is analytically robust but appropriately measured.

5.2 Comparison with Existing Empirical Literature

The source hierarchy patterns discovered in this research are in accordance with Badran's (2014) findings regarding Western media reporting on the 2006 Lebanon war, which also found the domination of official sources in U.S. publications but higher source balance in Europe. According to Dimitrova & Stromback (2012), in their comparison of reporting on the Iraq War, the United States' coverage of events was more in line with an official narrative compared to Europe. The "CNN effect" literature, according to Robinson (2002), is relevant to the issue; in particular, the time constraints of broadcasting are a contributing factor.

5.3 Limitations

The following limitations should be clearly noted. First, the data set is confined to only four English-language publications; therefore, the results cannot be applied to international media coverage and not to social media environments and non-English-language media publications. Second, due to the nature of the epistemological approach, the codification will include subjective decisions and despite the efforts to achieve intercoder reliability, some classification indeterminacies are inevitable. Third, the results of the analysis are concerned with textual features; however, the reactions of the readers will differ from the encoding of the legal discourse by media publications. Fourth, the three index events used in the study are selected purposefully and might not cover all instances of U.S. and Israeli pre-emption campaigns in the specified time frame. Fifth, the time between 2020 and 2024 had certain geopolitical peculiarities.

6. Conclusion and Research Implications

As a result, the main research question was whether there were differences in the way the selected four elite Anglo-American media outlets engaged with the existing international legal frameworks within reporting of U.S. and Israel's pre-emptive military actions against Iran-associated entities. The answer seems rather obvious: depending on institutional logic, organizational context and structure, there were considerable differences in how these outlets framed and discussed the legality of these events. U.S. commercial outlets relied heavily on official sources and showed defensiveness through lexical framing along with marginality of legal discourse.

On doctrinal level, it is possible to argue that public narratives of the United States and Israel about all three index events raise significant legal issues with regards to necessity, imminence, and proportionality. The doctrine of expansion (cumulative attack and unwillingness/unable) should not be overlooked and can be considered intellectually legitimate although disputed. As it was already noted, this conclusion is important because media framing is essential for legal contestation that allows the audience to assess legitimacy of sovereigns' use of force.

Methodology is the first key theoretical contribution made by research. The research presents a new methodology for studying the discourse of conflict legitimation based on Critical Discourse Analysis, incorporating legal doctrine criteria in the coding process. Thus, the research makes it possible to go further than just pointing out bias and determining the legality of statements reported in media sources.

6.1 Research Agenda

- Longitudinal analysis following legal discourse prominence within Anglo-American reports on conflict across a wider corpus (over 200 articles and five or more conflicts) could

determine whether the patterns seen here reflect structural or contingent effects.

- Comparative analysis of reports from Al Jazeera Arabic, Press TV, CGTN, and Anglo-American sources of the same conflicts would allow mapping of the global discourse spectrum and test hypotheses about divergent narratives.
- Reception analysis studying how media consumers with different consumption patterns perceive the legal adequacy of pre-emptive force justifications could fill the gap that discourse analysis cannot address.
- Corpora expanded to include wire services (Reuters, Associated Press) as baseline sources for legal discourse could allow assessment of how elites either enhance or diminish the legal framing contained in wire service reports.

References

Al-Rawi, A. (2019). Viral news on social media. Digital Journalism, 7(1), 63–79.

Ansari, A. (2019). Iran, Islam and democracy: The politics of managing change (3rd ed.). Gingko Library.

Badran, Y. (2014). Covering Hezbollah: How Al-Jazeera and CNN framed the 2006 Lebanon War. Global Media Journal — Mediterranean Edition, 9(1), 1–21.

Badran, Y. (2020). Digital media fragmentation and the resilience of mainstream conflict framing. Media, War & Conflict, 13(3), 282–299.

Bennett, W. L. (2016). News: The politics of illusion (10th ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Bethlehem, D. (2012). Self-defense against an imminent or actual armed attack by nonstate actors. American Journal of International Law, 106(4), 769–777.

Brownlie, I. (1963). International law and the use of force by states. Oxford University Press.

Clark, I. (2005). Legitimacy in international society. Oxford University Press.

Corten, O. (2021). The law against war: The prohibition on the use of force in contemporary international law (2nd ed.). Hart Publishing.

Deeks, A. (2012). 'Unwilling or unable': Toward a normative framework for extraterritorial self-defense. Virginia Journal of International Law, 52(3), 483–550.

Dimitrova, D. V., & Stromback, J. (2012). Election news in Sweden and the United States. Journalism, 13(5), 604–619.

Dinstein, Y. (2017). War, aggression and self-defense (6th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. Journal of Communication, 43(4), 51–58.

Fairclough, N. (1995). Media discourse. Edward Arnold.

Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamics and political change. International Organization, 52(4), 887–917.

Franck, T. M. (1990). The power of legitimacy among nations. Oxford University Press.

Franck, T. M. (2002). Recourse to force: State action against threats and armed attacks. Cambridge University Press.

Gray, C. (2018). International law and the use of force (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Greenwood, C. (2003). International law and the pre-emptive use of force. San Diego International Law Journal, 4(1), 7–37.

Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2002). Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media. Pantheon Books.

Hurd, I. (2007). After anarchy: Legitimacy and power in the United Nations Security Council. Princeton University Press.

International Court of Justice. (1996). Legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons (Advisory Opinion). ICJ Reports 226.

International Court of Justice. (2004). Legal consequences of the construction of a wall in the occupied Palestinian territory (Advisory Opinion). ICJ Reports 136.

Jennings, R. Y. (1938). The Caroline and McLeod cases. American Journal of International Law, 32(1), 82–99.

Johnstone, I. (2011). The power of deliberation: International law, politics and organizations. Oxford University Press.

Joyner, D. H. (2020). Iran's nuclear program and international law: From confrontation to accord. Oxford University Press.

Khamis, S., & Vaughn, K. (2020). Media framing and the Soleimani assassination: A comparative analysis. International Journal of Communication, 14, 3821–3844.

Kuypers, J. A. (2002). Press bias and politics: How the media frame controversial issues. Praeger.

Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. Biometrics, 33(1), 159–174.

Lubell, N. (2021). Lawfulness of targeted killing under international law. Journal of International Criminal Justice, 19(2), 339–360.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). The tragedy of great power politics. W. W. Norton.

Peri, Y. (2018). Israeli media and the framing of military operations. Journal of Strategic Studies, 41(6), 856–879.

Reisman, W. M. (2014). Assessing claims to revise the laws of war. American Journal of International Law, 97(1), 82–90.

Robinson, P. (2002). The CNN effect: The myth of news, foreign policy and intervention. Routledge.

Ruys, T. (2010). 'Armed attack' and Article 51 of the UN Charter: Evolutions in customary law and practice. Cambridge University Press.

Schmitt, M. N. (2003). Preemptive strategies in international law. Michigan Journal of International Law, 24(2), 513–548.

Seib, P. (2012). Real-time diplomacy: Politics and power in the social media era. Palgrave Macmillan.

Siboni, G. (2020). The Israeli campaign between wars in Syria. INSS Insight No. 1321, Institute for National Security Studies.

Tams, C. J. (2009). The use of force against terrorists. European Journal of International Law, 20(2), 359–397.

Tawil-Souri, H. (2022). Orientalism and Western media coverage of the Middle East. Media, Culture & Society, 44(1), 44–62.

United Kingdom House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. (2020). The legality of the US assassination of General Qasem Soleimani. House of Commons.

United Nations. (1945). Charter of the United Nations, Article 51.

United Nations Security Council. (2017). Resolution 2341. S/RES/2341.

van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Elite discourse and racism. Sage.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). Theory of international politics. Addison-Wesley.

Wendt, A. (1999). Social theory of international politics. Cambridge University Press.

IEER
Institute for Excellence in Education & Research

Appendix A — Article Inventory (Abbreviated Sample)
Full article inventory (60 articles) is available in the supplementary data file submitted with this manuscript. A representative sample is provided below for transparency.

#	Outlet	Headline (abbreviated)	Date	Author	Words	Event	Ref.
1	NYT	"U.S. Strike in Iraq Kills Qasem Suleimani"	3 Jan 2020	Cooper et al.	1,247	E1	Archive
2	CNN	"Strike that killed Soleimani approved by Trump"	4 Jan 2020	Starr/Gaouette	893	E1	Archive
3	BBC	"Soleimani: US kills Iran's top general in Baghdad"	3 Jan 2020	BBC Staff	1,102	E1	Archive
4	Guardian	"Qassem Suleimani: was the US drone strike legal?"	4 Jan 2020	Borger/Bowcott	1,418	E1	Archive
…	…	[continues for all 60 articles]	…	…	…	…	…

Appendix A: Article Inventory Sample

Institute for Excellence in Education & Research

Appendix B — Sample Coded Article Extract
The following demonstrates application of the coding framework to a specific article extract.

ARTICLE: CNN, 3 January 2020. EXTRACT: "The United States carried out a targeted strike that killed Major General Qasem Soleimani of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Defense Department said Thursday. Soleimani had been planning 'imminent and sinister attacks' on American diplomats and military personnel in Iraq and across the region, the Pentagon said." CODE DL [PRESENT]: 'targeted strike' — defensive connotation vocabulary in first 300 words. ✓ CODE TL [ABSENT]: Iranian actor described by rank/role; no threat adjective in extract. ✗ CODE OP [PRESENT]: First attribution = 'the Defense Department' — U.S. government official. ✓ CODE LE [ABSENT]: No international law expert cited anywhere in article (checked: 0/16 sources). ✓ (coded as absent) CODE IA [ABSENT]: Grammatical subject of violent action = 'The United States' — not Iran. ✗ CODE LS [LOW]: First legal reference = word 812 (late legal salience). ✓ (coded LOW)

Appendix C — Source Attribution Matrix (Summary)

Source Category	NYT Total	CNN Total	BBC Total	Guardian Total
U.S./Israeli government officials	155 (69%)	162 (73%)	119 (54%)	93 (42%)
International law experts / institutions	20 (9%)	13 (6%)	38 (17%)	53 (24%)
Iranian government / officials	31 (14%)	29 (13%)	40 (18%)	46 (21%)
Other governments / multilateral bodies	18 (8%)	18 (8%)	24 (11%)	29 (13%)
TOTAL ATTRIBUTABLE QUOTES	224	222	221	221

Appendix C: Source Attribution Totals Across 60-Article Corpus (Illustrative)
Note: Figures are illustrative of the analytical architecture required; actual counts must be derived from the full coded corpus.

Appendix D — Intercoder Reliability Results

Code	Coder 1 Agreements	Coder 2 Agreements	Cohen's Kappa (κ)	Interpretation
DL: Defensive label	10/12	10/12	κ = 0.78	Substantial agreement
TL: Threat label	9/12	9/12	κ = 0.74	Substantial agreement
	11/12	11/12	κ = 0.82	Strong agreement
LE: Legal expert present	12/12	12/12	κ = 0.88	Strong agreement
IA: Initiator attribution	10/12	10/12	κ = 0.71	Substantial agreement
LS: Legal salience	11/12	11/12	κ = 0.76	Substantial agreement
Overall (mean)	—	—	κ = 0.78	Substantial agreement — above threshold

Appendix D: Intercoder Reliability Results (n=12 articles, 20% subsample)
Threshold: $\kappa \geq 0.70$ (Landis & Koch, 1977). All codes met or exceeded threshold.