

The Ethics of Escalation: A Philosophical Analysis of the Iran-America Conflict

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Abstract

The recent escalation of tensions between Iran and America raises profound philosophical questions about the ethics of state-sponsored aggression, the morality of war, and the consequences of securitization. This article applies qualitative methods to analyze the conflict through the lens of philosophical theories, including just war theory, realism, liberalism, and constructivism. The paper examines the role of national interest, international cooperation, and human rights in shaping policy decisions and actions. The conflict highlights the tension between security and dignity, as securitization and militarization often come at the cost of human well-being. Through a case study analysis and discourse analysis of political rhetoric and media narratives, this article critiques the policy decisions and actions of both nations. Ultimately, this article argues that a nuanced understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the conflict is essential for promoting peace, justice, and human dignity.

Keywords: Iran-America conflict, just war theory, securitization, human dignity, constructivism

Introduction

The 2026 escalation of tensions between Iran and America has brought the world to the brink of a major conflict. The airstrike that killed Qasem Soleimani, a top Iranian military commander, has sparked a heated debate about the ethics of state-sponsored aggression and the morality of war. The conflict highlights the complex web of national interests, regional rivalries, and global governance that shapes international relations. The philosophical implications of this conflict are profound. The just war theory, which emphasizes the principles of *jus ad bellum* (right to wage war) and *jus in bello* (right conduct in war), provides a framework for evaluating the morality of military actions. However, the conflict also raises questions about the role of national interest, the limits of sovereignty, and the responsibility to protect human rights. The realist perspective, which prioritizes national security and interest, seems to dominate the policy decisions of both nations. The consequences of this conflict are far-reaching. The securitization of the region

has led to a surge in militarization, exacerbating human rights abuses and undermining human dignity. The international community is faced with the challenge of promoting peace, justice, and stability in a region fraught with tension. This article seeks to contribute to this debate by examining the philosophical underpinnings of the conflict and exploring the implications for human rights and dignity.

The ethics of escalation: Just War Theory and the Iran-America Conflict

The recent escalation of tensions between Iran and America raises fundamental questions about the ethics of state-sponsored aggression. The just war theory, a philosophical framework for evaluating the morality of war, provides a useful lens for analyzing the conflict. According to Michael Walzer, a prominent just war theorist, a war is just if it meets certain criteria, including just cause, right intention, last resort, and proportionality (Walzer, 2006). These criteria are designed to ensure that war is not taken lightly and that the use of force is justified and proportionate to the threat.

In the context of the Iran-America conflict, the question of just cause is contentious. The US claimed that the airstrike that killed Qasem Soleimani, a top Iranian military commander, was a necessary measure to prevent future attacks, while Iran saw it as an act of aggression (Borger, 2020). As Walzer notes, the problem of identifying a just cause is often complicated by competing narratives and interests (Walzer, 2006). The US narrative frames the strike as a defensive measure, aimed at preventing a potential attack on American personnel and interests. However, this narrative is contested by Iran, which argues that the strike was an unjustified act of aggression that undermines regional stability.

The principle of right intention is also relevant. Was the US intention to prevent future attacks, or was it to escalate tensions and assert dominance? (Kemp, 2020). The just war theory emphasizes the importance of right intention, but as Jean Bethke Elshtain notes, intentions are often mixed and difficult to discern (Elshtain, 2003). In this case, the US administration's rhetoric and actions suggest a mix of motivations, including a desire to assert dominance and deter future threats. However, the proportionality of the response is questionable, given the risk of escalation and humanitarian consequences. The principle of last resort is also critical. Did the US exhaust all diplomatic channels before resorting to force? The evidence suggests that there were alternative options available, including diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions and address concerns through international institutions (Sanger & Schmitt, 2020). The US decision to act unilaterally and militarily has undermined regional stability and exacerbated tensions.

The principle of proportionality requires that the harm caused by the war should be proportionate to the good achieved. In this case, the airstrike has led to a surge in tensions, risk of escalation, and humanitarian concerns (Amnesty International, 2020). The proportionality of the response is therefore questionable, and it is unclear whether the US has taken adequate steps to minimize harm to civilians. The just war theory provides a framework for evaluating the ethics of the Iran-America conflict. However, the application of these principles is complicated by competing narratives and interests. A nuanced analysis of the conflict suggests that the US decision to use force was premature and has exacerbated tensions, undermining regional stability and human rights.

Securitization and its consequences: A philosophical critique

The Iran-America conflict highlights the dangers of securitization, a process whereby security concerns are prioritized over other values, such as human rights and dignity (Buzan et al., 1998). Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, argues that security is not an objective fact, but a socially constructed concept that can be used to justify exceptional measures and suspend normal politics (Wæver, 1995).

In the context of the Iran-America conflict, securitization has led to a surge in militarization and a narrowing of policy options. The US designation of Iran as a "state sponsor of terrorism" and the subsequent sanctions regime have created a securitized environment in which diplomatic engagement is seen as a threat to national security (Graham, 2019). This has undermined efforts to address the nuclear issue and other regional concerns through diplomatic means.

The consequences of securitization are far-reaching. It has led to a rise in xenophobia and anti-Iranian sentiment, exacerbating human rights abuses and undermining the dignity of Iranians (Amnesty International, 2020). The securitization of the conflict has also legitimized authoritarianism and repression, as governments in the region use security concerns to crack down on dissent and opposition (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

From a philosophical perspective, securitization raises concerns about the erosion of democratic values and the prioritization of security over human dignity. As Judith Butler notes, the securitization of politics leads to a "frame of war" in which certain lives are deemed more valuable than others (Butler, 2009). This undermines the principles of equality and dignity that are fundamental to human rights.

National interest vs. human rights: The liberal-realist debate

The Iran-America conflict highlights the tension between national interest and human rights, a debate that has long been central to international relations theory. Realists, such as Hans Morgenthau, argue that national interest is the primary driver of state behaviour, and that states should prioritize their own interests over moral and ethical concerns (Morgenthau, 1948). In contrast, liberals, such as Michael Doyle, argue that human rights and international law should guide state behaviour, and that cooperation and diplomacy can lead to more peaceful and prosperous outcomes (Doyle, 1983).

In the context of the Iran-America conflict, the realist perspective has dominated US policy, with the Trump administration prioritizing national security and strategic interests over human rights concerns (Kemp, 2020). The US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the reimposition of sanctions have been justified on the grounds of national security, despite the humanitarian consequences for the Iranian people (Nebehay, 2018).

However, critics argue that this approach has undermined human rights and exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Iran. The sanctions have disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, including women, children, and the elderly, who rely on imports for basic necessities like medicine and food (Amnesty International, 2020). The liberal perspective argues that the US should prioritize human rights and diplomacy, and work towards a more cooperative and inclusive approach to addressing regional security concerns.

The tension between national interest and human rights is also reflected in the debate over the role of morality in international relations. As Kenneth Waltz notes, the pursuit of national interest often requires states to compromise on moral principles (Waltz, 1979). However, this does not mean that morality has no place in international relations. Rather, it highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between national interest and human rights.

Constructing enemies: Identity, norms, and discourse in the conflict

The Iran-America conflict is not just a geopolitical rivalry, but also a clash of identities and narratives. The construction of enemies is a key aspect of international relations, where states define themselves and their interests in opposition to others (Campbell, 1998). In the case of Iran and the US, the enemy image has been constructed through a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and ideological factors. The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis marked a turning point in US-Iran relations, with the US viewing Iran as a rogue state and a sponsor of terrorism (Keddie, 2003). The US has

consistently framed Iran as a threat to regional stability and global security, while Iran has portrayed the US as an imperial power seeking to dominate the region.

This enemy image has been reinforced through discourse and language, with both sides using rhetoric to demonize and delegitimize the other. The US has referred to Iran as a "rogue state" and a "major threat to global security", while Iran has labelled the US as the "Great Satan" (Hansen, 2006). This language has contributed to a securitized environment in which diplomatic engagement is seen as a threat to national security. The construction of enemies has also been influenced by identity and norms. The US has framed its actions as promoting democracy and human rights, while Iran has portrayed itself as a defender of Islamic values and regional resistance (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007). These narratives have been used to justify policies and actions, often at the expense of human rights and dignity.

The role of identity in shaping international relations is a key aspect of constructivist theory, which argues that states' interests and identities are shaped by their social and cultural context (Wendt, 1999). In the case of Iran and the US, the construction of enemies has been influenced by competing identities and norms, which have contributed to a cycle of hostility and mistrust. The consequences of constructing enemies are far-reaching. It has led to a surge in militarization and a narrowing of policy options, with diplomatic engagement often seen as a sign of weakness (Buzan et al., 1998). It has also contributed to a securitized environment in which human rights and dignity are often sacrificed at the altar of national security.

Towards a more just peace: Reconciling security and human dignity

The Iran-America conflict highlights the need for a more just peace, one that reconciles security and human dignity. The current approach, dominated by securitization and militarization, has exacerbated tensions and undermined human rights. A more just peace requires a shift towards diplomacy, cooperation, and a commitment to human dignity. One approach is to prioritize human security, which focuses on the protection of individuals and communities rather than states (UNDP, 1994). This approach recognizes that security and human dignity are intertwined, and that the protection of human rights is essential for achieving lasting peace.

Another approach is to promote regional cooperation and dialogue. The Iran-America conflict is part of a broader regional dynamic, involving multiple actors and interests. Regional organizations, such as the European Union, could play a key role in facilitating dialogue and promoting cooperation (Posch, 2019). A more just peace also requires addressing the root causes of the conflict, including the legacy of historical grievances and

the role of external actors (Sadjadpour, 2019). This could involve a truth and reconciliation process, similar to those used in post-conflict settings, to address past injustices and promote accountability. A more just peace requires a commitment to human dignity and the rule of law. This means prioritizing human rights, promoting democratic governance, and ensuring accountability for human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Conclusion

The Iran-America conflict is a complex and multifaceted issue, driven by competing interests, identities, and narratives. The securitization of the conflict has exacerbated tensions, undermining human rights and dignity. A more just peace requires a shift towards diplomacy, cooperation, and a commitment to human dignity. Prioritizing human security, promoting regional cooperation, and addressing root causes can help reconcile security and human dignity. Ultimately, a more just peace demands a commitment to human rights, democratic governance, and accountability. The path forward is challenging, but necessary. It requires courage, creativity, and a willingness to engage with complexity. By prioritizing human dignity and cooperation, the world can work towards a more peaceful and just future for all. The Iran-America conflict is a symptom of broader global challenges. Addressing these challenges requires a new approach, one that prioritizes cooperation, human dignity, and the rule of law. The world should work towards a future where security and human dignity are intertwined, and where conflicts are resolved through diplomacy and dialogue.

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