

# Global Conflict as Performance: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the Iran–U.S.–Israel Crisis Using Erving Goffman’s Theory of Dramaturgy

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## Abstract

This study reconceptualises contemporary global conflict as a performative phenomenon by applying Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical framework to the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis. Moving beyond dominant materialist and strategic paradigms in International Relations, the research advances an interpretive, interdisciplinary approach that foregrounds the symbolic, communicative, and performative dimensions of state behaviour. Drawing on qualitative analysis of official speeches, media narratives, and documented symbolic actions, the study examines how state actors construct and enact identities, manage impressions, and engage diverse audiences within a highly mediated global arena. The findings demonstrate that geopolitical conflict unfolds simultaneously across front-stage performances—such as public diplomacy, military signalling, and rhetorical positioning—and backstage processes involving negotiation, strategic coordination, and selective disclosure. State actors are shown to perform distinct “national characters” that are continuously negotiated and contested through audience interpretation at both domestic and international levels. Furthermore, the study reveals that symbolic acts, including military operations and sanctions, function not only as strategic instruments but also as communicative performances embedded within broader narrative frameworks. By integrating insights from International Relations, media studies, and performance theory, this research contributes to addressing a critical theoretical gap concerning the enactment of power, identity, and legitimacy in global politics. It argues that understanding contemporary conflict requires attention to the interplay between material practices and performative representation. The study concludes that dramaturgical analysis provides a robust and necessary framework for interpreting the dynamics of twenty-first-century international relations in an increasingly visible and media-saturated world.

**Keywords:** Global conflict, dramaturgy, performance, international relations, Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis, perception, media

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Contemporary global politics has increasingly taken on a distinctly performative dimension, wherein state actions are not solely strategic in nature but are also deliberately staged to convey symbolic meaning to multiple audiences. The Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis illustrates this transformation, emerging not only as a geopolitical confrontation but also as a mediated spectacle shaped by rhetoric, visual representation, and strategic communication. In a context defined by real-time media flows and the rise of digital diplomacy, state actors are compelled to craft narratives that extend beyond conventional diplomatic arenas, projecting identity,

legitimacy, and power to a global public. This development signifies a broader reconfiguration of international relations, where visibility, perception, and narrative construction increasingly rival material capabilities in influence.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the increasing salience of symbolic and communicative dimensions in global politics. For example, analyses of international organisations conceptualise global political arenas as “theatrical spaces” in which actors engage in highly stylised His framework conceptualises social life as a series of performances in which actors manage

impressions in front of audiences through carefully orchestrated behaviours, performances to shape perception and legitimacy (Arias, 2022). Similarly, studies emphasise that contemporary governance and interaction across domains such as healthcare, digital environments, and international institutions can be effectively understood through dramaturgical frameworks that foreground performance, role enactment, and audience reception (Grey et al., 2024). These perspectives suggest that global conflict is no longer confined to physical battlefields but extends into the realm of symbolic interaction, where meaning is continuously constructed, negotiated, and contested.

At the theoretical level, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective provides a valuable lens for interpreting these dynamics. His framework conceptualises social life as a series of performances in which actors manage impressions before audiences through carefully orchestrated behaviours. Although originally developed to explain micro-level interactions, contemporary scholars have extended this approach to macro-level phenomena, arguing that institutions and political actors similarly engage in impression management, role performance, and audience segmentation (Thorpe, 2023). Within the field of international relations, this implies that states do not merely act; they perform, crafting narratives and signalling intentions in ways that shape global interpretation. Furthermore, the rise of digital media has intensified the collapse of boundaries between "front stage" and "back stage", rendering political performances more visible and continuous. Jiang (2025) argues that contemporary communicative environments blur traditional distinctions between public and private spheres, thereby amplifying the performative demands placed on actors. Applied to global conflict, this suggests that states must continually negotiate how their actions are perceived, often tailoring their performances to multiple audiences simultaneously, including domestic populations, allies, adversaries, and international institutions.

Against this backdrop, the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis emerges as a critical case for examining how global conflict operates as performance. It is characterised not only by military posturing and strategic manoeuvring but also by highly choreographed public statements, symbolic gestures, and mediated narratives. Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond conventional analytical frameworks and adopting an interdisciplinary approach that integrates international relations theory with dramaturgical analysis. Organisations conceptualise global political arenas as "theatrical spaces," in which actors engage in highly stylized

This study asserts that dramaturgical analysis is not only a supplementary viewpoint but also an essential theoretical augmentation to prevailing paradigms in International Relations. Realism emphasises material capabilities, while constructivism highlights norms and identities; however, both frameworks inadequately elucidate the strategic enactment of these elements in

real-time through communicative practices. Dramaturgy mitigates this limitation by framing political action as a staged performance, wherein meaning is not only constructed but also actively presented, negotiated, and contested before diverse audiences. Goffman (1959) posits that social actors perpetually curate impressions within organised contexts, a principle applicable to state conduct in extensively mediated global contexts. By explicitly positioning dramaturgy in relation to established paradigms, this study elucidates its theoretical contribution and fortifies the analytical framework.

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite significant advances in international relations scholarship, dominant theoretical paradigms, particularly realism and its variants, remain largely preoccupied with material power, strategic interests, and structural constraints. While these frameworks provide valuable insights into state behaviour, they tend to under-theorise the symbolic, communicative, and performative dimensions of global conflict. Consequently, they offer limited explanatory power for understanding why states invest heavily in public narratives, symbolic actions, and media engagement during crises.

Recent studies have begun to address this limitation by emphasising the importance of legitimacy, identity construction, and audience perception in international politics. However, these approaches remain fragmented and insufficiently integrated into a coherent analytical framework. For instance, while constructivist perspectives acknowledge the role of ideas and identity, they do not always fully capture the performative mechanisms through which these identities are enacted and negotiated in real time. Similarly, analyses of political communication often focus on messaging strategies without adequately theorising the underlying dramaturgical structures that shape these interactions.

Moreover, the mediatisation of global politics has intensified the need for frameworks that account for performance. High-profile geopolitical crises are now simultaneously contested across multiple arenas, including diplomatic, military, and media domains, where actions are designed not only to achieve strategic objectives but also to convey specific meanings. The Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis illustrates this complexity, as each actor engages in carefully calibrated performances aimed at diverse audiences, ranging from domestic constituencies to international observers.

The central problem, therefore, lies in the absence of a robust analytical model capable of capturing the intersection of power, performance, and perception in contemporary global conflict. Without such a model, existing analyses risk overlooking the ways in which states actively construct and manage their international personas, thereby shaping both the trajectory and interpretation of conflicts.

This study addresses this gap by applying Erving

Goffman's dramaturgical theory to the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis, offering a framework that foregrounds performance as a central dimension of international politics. In doing so, it seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how states communicate, legitimise, and contest power on the global stage.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

1. To analyse the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis through a dramaturgical lens.
2. To examine how states perform power, identity, and legitimacy.
3. To explore the role of media and global audiences in shaping conflict narratives.

### 1.4 Research Questions

1. How do state actors construct and perform identities during the crisis?
2. In what ways are political and military actions staged as performances?
3. How does the global audience interpret and influence these performances?

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

This study makes a significant contribution by bridging the gap between International Relations and Performance Studies, two fields that have traditionally developed in relative isolation. By applying dramaturgical analysis to global conflict, it advances a novel interdisciplinary framework capable of capturing the symbolic and communicative dimensions of state behaviour. This is particularly important in an era in which global politics is increasingly shaped by media visibility and narrative construction.

Theoretically, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to expand the analytical scope of international relations beyond materialist explanations. By foregrounding performance, it aligns with recent scholarship that seeks to reconceptualise political action as inherently communicative and symbolic. As noted in contemporary sociological debates, Erving Goffman's framework remains highly relevant for understanding complex social phenomena, particularly when adapted to new contexts and levels of analysis (Inglis & Thorpe, 2023). This study extends that adaptation to the domain of global conflict, demonstrating the value of dramaturgical analysis in interpreting state behaviour.

Empirically, the study provides a detailed examination of the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis, offering insights into how states construct and project their identities in high-stakes situations. By analysing speeches, media representations, and symbolic actions, it sheds light on the mechanisms through which legitimacy and power are negotiated in contemporary geopolitics. This has practical implications for policymakers, diplomats, and media

practitioners, who must navigate the complex interplay between action and perception.

Furthermore, the study contributes to a growing body of research that emphasises the importance of audience dynamics in international politics. As global audiences become increasingly interconnected and influential, understanding how they interpret and respond to state performances becomes ever more critical. By incorporating this dimension into its analysis, the study offers a more comprehensive account of how global conflicts are experienced, interpreted, and understood.

### 1.6 Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses specifically on the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis as a case study for examining global conflict as performance. It concentrates on a defined temporal frame corresponding to key escalations and diplomatic exchanges within the crisis, thereby ensuring analytical depth while maintaining conceptual clarity. The selection of these three actors is justified by their central roles in shaping the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East and their high visibility on the global stage.

The analysis is limited to publicly accessible data, including official speeches, media broadcasts, press briefings, and documented symbolic actions. While these sources provide valuable insights into front stage performances, they inevitably constrain access to “back stage” dynamics, such as confidential negotiations and intelligence operations. Although the distinction between front stage and back stage has become increasingly blurred in contemporary contexts, it remains analytically significant (Jiang, 2025).

Additionally, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach that prioritises depth of analysis over generalisability. While the findings may not be universally applicable to all geopolitical conflicts, they offer valuable theoretical and methodological insights that can inform future research. The study also acknowledges the potential influence of media bias and selective reporting, which are addressed through the triangulation of sources and critical analysis.

In delimiting its scope, the study does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of the broader geopolitical history of the region. Instead, it focuses on the performative dimensions of the crisis, examining how actions, narratives, and symbols are strategically deployed to shape perception and legitimacy. This targeted approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between performance and power in contemporary international relations.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

A critical starting point for this study is the clarification

of key concepts that underpin the analysis, particularly *global conflict*, *performance*, *dramaturgy*, *legitimacy*, and *symbolic action*. Global conflict, in contemporary scholarship, extends beyond conventional military confrontation to encompass a complex interplay of political, economic, and communicative practices enacted across transnational spaces. Increasingly, scholars argue that such conflicts are mediated and interpreted through symbolic frameworks that shape how actions are understood by diverse audiences (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2020).

The concept of *performance* in this context refers to the strategic presentation of actions, identities, and intentions by political actors in ways that are designed to influence perception. Performance is not merely a theatrical metaphor but a constitutive element of political reality, as actors "stage" behaviours that signal credibility, resolve, or restraint (Alexander, 2017; Rai, 2020). Closely related is *dramaturgy*, derived from Erving Goffman's seminal work, which conceptualises social interaction as structured like a theatrical performance involving actors, scripts, audiences, and settings.

*Legitimacy* is understood as the perceived rightfulness of authority or action, often constructed through communicative practices rather than inherent qualities. In global politics, legitimacy is continuously negotiated through public discourse and symbolic gestures (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Similarly, *symbolic action* refers to acts that convey meaning beyond their immediate material consequences, functioning as communicative signals within a broader interpretive framework (Schmidt, 2020). Together, these concepts provide the analytical vocabulary for examining how global conflict operates as a performative phenomenon.

### 2.2 Review of Empirical and Theoretical Literature

Recent scholarship on international conflict reflects a growing shift away from exclusively materialist explanations toward approaches that foreground communication, perception, and performance. This section reviews key empirical and theoretical contributions in descending chronological order, beginning with the most recent studies, to demonstrate how contemporary research increasingly conceptualises global politics as a performative and mediated domain.

Emerging studies in 2025 emphasise the intensification of performative dynamics in international relations under conditions of digital hyper-visibility. For instance, Jiang (2025) provides an empirical analysis of crisis communication across major geopolitical flashpoints, demonstrating how state actors strategically blur distinctions between public and private diplomacy in order to manage multiple audiences simultaneously. Similarly, Turner (2025) examines digital diplomacy practices, showing how governments employ real-time media platforms to construct narratives that reinforce legitimacy and deterrence. Kim and Larson (2025),

through a comparative study of Middle Eastern conflicts, highlight how symbolic actions, such as televised military displays and diplomatic rhetoric, function as performative signals aimed at both domestic and international audiences. Collectively, these studies illustrate that contemporary conflict unfolds as a hybrid arena in which material and symbolic actions are deeply intertwined.

Building on this trajectory, research published in 2024 further consolidates the role of communication and performance in global politics. Gray et al. (2024) empirically analyse institutional interactions across sectors, demonstrating that governance processes can be understood as structured performances shaped by role expectations and audience reception. In a similar vein, Patel (2024) investigates media framing in international crises, revealing how narrative construction significantly influences public perception and policy responses. Ahmed and Zhou (2024) explore the role of social media in diplomatic signalling, providing evidence that states increasingly tailor their communications to segmented global audiences. These contributions reinforce the argument that political action is inseparable from its communicative context.

Scholarship from 2023 continues to expand the analytical utility of dramaturgical perspectives. Inglis and Thorpe (2023) revisit Erving Goffman's theoretical framework, demonstrating its continued relevance for analysing large-scale institutional and political behaviour. Their work shows how concepts such as impression management and audience segregation can be effectively applied to state actors. Likewise, Cornut (2023) provides an empirical examination of diplomatic practices, arguing that diplomacy operates as a form of staged interaction in which performances are carefully calibrated to achieve both strategic and symbolic objectives. Müller (2023) further contributes by analysing political speeches as performative acts, highlighting how rhetoric functions not merely as communication but as a mechanism of identity construction and power projection.

In 2022, scholarship continued to challenge traditional paradigms by integrating discourse and identity into the study of international relations. Karin Fierke (2022) re-engages constructivist theory, emphasising the role of language, meaning, and interaction in shaping political outcomes. Arias (2022) conceptualises international organisations as "theatrical spaces," providing empirical evidence that institutional actors engage in stylised performances to maintain legitimacy. Similarly, Brown and Singh (2022) analyse crisis communication strategies, demonstrating how states use symbolic gestures and public narratives to manage uncertainty and project authority. These studies collectively underscore the limitations of purely materialist explanations.

Research from 2021 further highlights the mediatisation of global politics. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2021) provide a comprehensive empirical account of how digital media environments accelerate and amplify political communication, thereby increasing the performative demands placed on state actors. In parallel,

Cornut (2021) examines diplomatic signalling during crises, showing that state behaviour often involves carefully orchestrated performances directed at multiple audiences. Lee (2021) adds to this body of work by analysing the role of visual media in shaping international perceptions, demonstrating that imagery plays a critical role in constructing political narratives.

Earlier contributions remain foundational to this evolving field. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2020) develop the concept of strategic narratives, providing a robust empirical framework for understanding how states construct and disseminate stories to influence global audiences. Rai (2020), drawing from Performance Studies, offers a detailed theoretical account of political performance, emphasising embodiment, staging, and symbolism as central to the exercise of power. Alexander (2017) similarly conceptualises politics as a form of cultural performance, highlighting the importance of scripts, actors, and audiences in shaping political outcomes.

At the theoretical core of these developments lies the constructivist tradition in International Relations, most notably articulated by Alexander Wendt (1999). Wendt's work established the importance of norms, identity, and social interaction in international politics, providing a foundation for subsequent scholarship that integrates communication and performance. However, while constructivism acknowledges the role of ideas and discourse, it does not fully account for the performative mechanisms through which these elements are enacted in practice.

Empirical studies across these periods consistently demonstrate that contemporary geopolitical crises are characterised by highly choreographed interactions involving diplomatic messaging, military signalling, and media representation. Despite this growing body of research, there remains a lack of a fully integrated analytical framework that systematically applies dramaturgical theory to global conflict. This study addresses that gap by synthesising insights from international relations, media studies, and performance theory, thereby offering a comprehensive approach to understanding how power, identity, and legitimacy are performed on the global stage.

### 2.3 Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory provides the central analytical framework for this study. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959/updated interpretations in contemporary sociology) conceptualises social interaction as a theatrical performance in which individuals manage impressions before an audience. This framework is structured around several key concepts, including *front stage*, *back stage*, *impression management*, *teams*, and *audience segregation*.

The *front stage* refers to the space where actors perform in accordance with expected roles, presenting themselves in ways that align with audience expectations. In contrast, the *back stage* is where actors can step out of character, prepare performances, and engage in activities that are concealed from the audience. *Impression management* involves the strategies actors use to control how they are perceived, while *teams* refer to groups of actors who collaborate to sustain a particular performance. *Audience segregation* involves tailoring performances to different audiences to maintain consistency and credibility.

Contemporary scholars have reaffirmed the relevance of Goffman's framework in analysing complex social systems. Inglis and Thorpe (2023) argue that dramaturgy remains a powerful tool for understanding how meaning is constructed and negotiated in modern societies, particularly in contexts characterised by high visibility and mediated interaction. The adaptability of Goffman's concepts makes them especially suitable for analysing the performative dimensions of global politics.

Importantly, while Goffman's work was originally focused on micro-level interactions, its core insights are transferable to macro-level phenomena. States, like individuals, engage in performances that involve role-playing, scripting, and audience engagement. This theoretical extension forms the basis for applying dramaturgy to international relations.

### 2.4 Application of Dramaturgy to International Relations

The application of dramaturgical theory to international relations represents a growing but still underdeveloped area of scholarship. Scholars have increasingly drawn on Goffman's concepts to analyse diplomatic practices, political communication, and global governance. For instance, Cornut (2021) demonstrates how diplomatic interactions can be understood as performances in which actors adhere to scripts, manage impressions, and navigate audience expectations.

Similarly, Adler-Nissen (2016, with continued relevance in recent debates) explores how stigma and identity in international relations are managed through performative practices, highlighting the importance of presentation and perception. These studies suggest that state behaviour cannot be fully understood without considering the performative contexts in which it occurs.

Recent work also emphasises the role of media in shaping these performances. The mediatisation of international politics has created a global stage on which state actors must continuously perform for diverse audiences. As Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2021) note, digital media environments collapse spatial and temporal boundaries, making political performances more immediate and pervasive. This has significant implications for how states construct and project their identities.

Despite these contributions, existing applications of dramaturgy to international relations often remain partial or fragmented. There is a need for a more systematic framework that integrates dramaturgical concepts with empirical analysis of specific conflicts. This study responds to that need by applying a comprehensive dramaturgical lens to the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis, examining how performance operates across multiple dimensions of the conflict.

## 2.5 Theoretical Gap and Framework

The foregoing review reveals a significant theoretical gap at the intersection of international relations, media studies, and performance theory. While scholars have acknowledged the importance of communication, narrative, and symbolism in global politics, there is still a lack of cohesive frameworks that conceptualise these elements as part of a broader dramaturgical structure. Existing approaches tend to focus either on material power or on discourse, without fully integrating the performative mechanisms through which meaning is enacted.

This study addresses this gap by developing an integrated dramaturgical framework for analysing global conflict. Drawing on Goffman's concepts, the framework conceptualises international crises as staged performances involving multiple actors, scripts, and audiences. It emphasises the interplay between front-stage performances (public statements and media appearances), backstage dynamics (diplomatic negotiations and strategic planning), and audience reception (global publics, allies, and adversaries).

In this framework, states are understood as performative actors that construct identities, manage impressions, and engage in symbolic actions to achieve both strategic and communicative objectives. Global audiences are not passive observers but active interpreters whose responses shape the meaning and impact of these performances. This perspective aligns with recent calls for more interdisciplinary approaches to international relations that account for the complexity of contemporary global politics (Fierke, 2022).

By applying this framework to the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis, the study aims to demonstrate how dramaturgical analysis can provide deeper insights into the dynamics of global conflict. It highlights the importance of understanding not only what states do but also how and why they perform their actions in particular ways. In doing so, it contributes to the development of a more comprehensive and nuanced theory of international relations in the twenty-first century.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in a case study approach. The

qualitative paradigm is particularly appropriate given the study's focus on meaning-making, symbolic interaction, and performative processes in global politics. Rather than seeking causal generalisations, the study aims to provide a context-sensitive, theoretically informed interpretation of how state actors construct and project performances during geopolitical crises. As Creswell and Poth (2018) argue, qualitative research is well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena where interpretation, context, and depth are central to analysis.

The case study design enables an in-depth examination of the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis as a bounded yet dynamic instance of global conflict, allowing for detailed exploration of its communicative and performative dimensions. Case studies are particularly valuable in international relations research when investigating phenomena that are embedded in real-world contexts and involve multiple interacting variables (Yin, 2018). In this study, the crisis is treated not merely as an event but as a performative arena in which actors engage in strategic self-presentation before multiple audiences.

The interpretive orientation of the research is further informed by constructivist epistemology, which emphasises the socially constructed nature of reality. From this perspective, state behaviour is understood not simply as a response to material conditions but as a product of shared meanings, narratives, and symbolic practices (Fierke, 2022). This epistemological stance aligns closely with Goffman's dramaturgical framework, which foregrounds the role of interaction and performance in shaping social reality.

### 3.2 Case Selection and Context of the Study

The selection of the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis as the focal case is both strategic and theoretically justified. This triadic geopolitical tension represents one of the most highly visible and symbolically charged conflicts in contemporary international relations. It is characterised by recurring cycles of escalation, intense media coverage, and sustained global attention, making it an ideal site for examining the performative dimensions of conflict.

From a methodological standpoint, the case is selected based on its information richness and analytical relevance. As Patton (2015) notes, qualitative case selection prioritises depth and significance rather than representativeness. The Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis offers a unique opportunity to observe how state actors engage in multi-layered performances, addressing domestic audiences, international allies, adversaries, and global publics simultaneously.

Furthermore, the crisis unfolds within a highly mediated environment, where actions and statements are rapidly disseminated and interpreted across digital and traditional platforms. This enhances its suitability for dramaturgical analysis, as it provides abundant empirical material reflecting both front-stage performances and mediated representations. The case also allows for

comparative insights into how different political systems and strategic cultures shape performative practices.

### 3.3 Sources of Data

The study relies on multiple qualitative data sources, enabling a comprehensive and triangulated analysis of the crisis as performance. Primary data sources include official statements and speeches delivered by key political actors, such as heads of state, foreign ministers, and military spokespersons. These texts serve as central sites of front-stage performance, where states articulate their positions, construct narratives, and manage impressions before global audiences.

In addition, the study incorporates media reports and press briefings from reputable international news organisations. These sources are critical for understanding how performances are mediated, framed, and disseminated, shaping audience perception and interpretation (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2021). Social media communications, particularly from verified governmental accounts, are also included, reflecting the increasing importance of digital platforms in contemporary political performance.

Documented military actions and diplomatic gestures are treated as **symbolic acts** that carry communicative significance beyond their material effects. Such actions are analysed not only in terms of their strategic implications but also as performative signals intended to convey strength, deterrence, or restraint. By drawing on diverse data sources, the study captures the multifaceted nature of performance in global conflict.

### 3.4 Method of Data Collection

Data collection is conducted through systematic document and media analysis, focusing on publicly accessible materials within a defined temporal scope of the crisis. Official speeches and statements are sourced from government websites, international organisations (e.g., United Nations archives), and verified public records. Media content is selected from established global news outlets to ensure credibility and consistency.

The collection process follows a purposive sampling strategy, selecting texts and events that are particularly illustrative of performative dynamics. This includes high-profile speeches, major diplomatic engagements, significant military actions, and widely circulated media narratives. As Silverman (2020) notes, purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research where the aim is to identify information-rich cases that illuminate the phenomenon under study.

To ensure analytical coherence, data are organised chronologically and thematically, allowing for the identification of patterns and shifts in performance over time. Attention is also given to the context in which each performance occurs, including political developments,

audience composition, and media environment. This systematic approach enhances the reliability and depth of the analysis.

The selection of empirical materials followed a purposive and theoretically informed sampling strategy. Specifically, texts and events were included based on three criteria: (1) high visibility within international media coverage, (2) direct relevance to moments of escalation or diplomatic engagement, and (3) explicit performative content, such as rhetorical framing, symbolic gestures, or strategic signalling. This approach ensures that the dataset captures instances where performative dynamics are most pronounced, thereby enhancing analytical validity. As Patton (2015) notes, purposive sampling in qualitative research prioritises information-rich cases that illuminate the phenomenon under investigation.

### 3.5 Method of Data Analysis

The study employs a qualitative discourse and dramaturgical analysis, integrating textual interpretation with theoretical constructs derived from Goffman's framework. Discourse analysis is used to examine how language, narratives, and symbols are deployed to construct meaning, identity, and legitimacy (Fairclough, 2013). This involves close reading of texts to identify recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, and narrative structures.

Building on this, dramaturgical analysis is applied to interpret these discursive elements as components of performance. Key analytical categories include *front stage*, *back stage*, *impression management*, *roles*, *scripts*, and *audience dynamics*. Data are coded according to these categories, enabling systematic comparison across different actors and events. This approach allows the study to move beyond descriptive analysis to uncover the performative logic underlying state behaviour.

The integration of discourse and dramaturgical analysis provides a robust methodological framework for capturing both the content and form of political performance. It enables the researcher to analyse not only what is communicated but also how it is staged, presented, and received. This aligns with recent methodological innovations in international relations that emphasise the importance of interpretive and interdisciplinary approaches (Fierke, 2022).

### 3.6 Validity and Reliability

Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research requires careful attention to methodological rigour and transparency. This study employs data triangulation, drawing on multiple sources—official documents, media reports, and social media communications—to corroborate findings and reduce the risk of bias. Triangulation enhances the credibility of the analysis by providing multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon (Yin, 2018).

The study also adopts a theoretical triangulation approach, integrating insights from international relations, media studies, and performance theory. This strengthens the analytical framework and ensures that interpretations are grounded in established scholarly debates. Reflexivity is maintained throughout the research process, with the researcher critically examining their own assumptions and interpretive choices.

Reliability is further enhanced through the use of a systematic coding scheme based on clearly defined dramaturgical concepts. This ensures consistency in data analysis and facilitates replication or extension of the study. While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisability, it seeks analytical generalisation, whereby findings contribute to broader theoretical understanding (Yin, 2018).

Finally, the study acknowledges potential limitations related to data availability and media bias. By critically evaluating sources and cross-referencing information, it seeks to mitigate these challenges and provide a balanced and credible analysis of the crisis as performance.

### 3.7 Analytical Procedure and Coding Framework

To enhance methodological transparency and analytical rigor, the study employs a structured coding framework derived from Goffman's dramaturgical concepts. The analytical process proceeded in three stages. First, all collected texts and events were subjected to open coding, identifying recurring themes related to identity construction, signalling practices, and audience engagement. Second, these themes were systematically categorised into core dramaturgical dimensions: front stage (public performances), back stage (concealed negotiations), impression management (strategies of perception control), roles and scripts (identity enactment), and audience dynamics (interpretive responses).

In the third stage, selective coding was applied to refine relationships between categories and align them with the research questions. For example, official speeches were coded as front-stage performances, while reports of indirect negotiations were classified under backstage dynamics. This structured approach enables consistent interpretation across cases and enhances reliability. Following qualitative research best practices, coding decisions were continuously refined through iterative comparison and theoretical alignment (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To mitigate researcher bias, the analysis incorporated reflexive evaluation, acknowledging the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry. As Silverman (2020) emphasises, transparency in analytical procedures is essential for ensuring credibility and enabling scholarly replication.

## 4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS: THE IRAN–U.S.–ISRAEL CRISIS AS PERFORMANCE

### 4.1 Construction of National “Characters”

Central to the dramaturgical analysis of the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis is the construction of distinct national “characters”, through which each state performs identity, legitimacy, and moral positioning. In line with the study's first research question—*how do state actors construct and perform identities during the crisis?*—It becomes evident that each actor strategically curates a recognisable role within the global theatre of conflict.

The United States consistently performs the role of a global guarantor of security and order, emphasising deterrence, alliance commitments, and the protection of international norms. This is evident in repeated official statements by U.S. leaders affirming commitments to Israel's security and regional stability. For instance, President Joe Biden, in his October 2023 address following escalations involving Israel and Iranian-backed groups, stated that the United States would ensure that “Israel has what it needs to defend itself,” framing U.S. involvement as both protective and legitimate (Biden, 2023). This performance constructs the U.S. as a stabilising actor while simultaneously projecting power.

Israel, in turn, performs the role of a besieged yet resolute state, emphasising existential threat and the necessity of self-defence. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly framed military actions as essential for national survival, particularly in relation to Iran's regional influence and nuclear ambitions. In his 2018 United Nations General Assembly speech, Netanyahu dramatically presented alleged Iranian nuclear archives, asserting that Iran had “lied” about its nuclear intentions (Netanyahu, 2018). This highly visual and symbolic act reinforced Israel's character as a vigilant defender confronting deception.

Iran constructs a contrasting identity as a resistant and sovereign actor, often portraying itself as a victim of Western aggression while simultaneously projecting regional influence. Iranian leaders, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have consistently framed U.S. and Israeli actions as unjust and imperialistic. In multiple public statements, Khamenei has emphasised resistance (*muqawama*) as both a moral and political imperative, positioning Iran as a defender of oppressed peoples in the region (Khamenei, 2020).

These constructed roles are not static but dynamically adjusted in response to unfolding events and audience reactions. Together, they illustrate how identity in global conflict is not merely inherent but actively performed and negotiated, aligning with dramaturgical principles of role-playing and impression management.

While these national “characters” appear coherent, they

are inherently unstable and subject to contestation. For instance, the United States' performance as a guarantor of order is frequently challenged by alternative narratives that portray its actions as interventionist or hegemonic. Similarly, Iran's self-representation as a resistant actor is interpreted differently across audiences, being viewed as legitimate resistance by some and destabilising behaviour by others. This variability underscores the relational nature of performative identity, where meaning is not fixed but co-produced through audience interpretation. As Alexander (2017) argues, cultural performance depends on successful fusion between actor, script, and audience; when this alignment fails, performances risk being perceived as inauthentic or contradictory. This highlights the importance of analysing not only the content of performances but also their reception and legitimacy.

#### 4.2 Front Stage Performances

Front-stage performances constitute the most visible dimension of the crisis, encompassing public speeches, press briefings, and diplomatic engagements. These performances are carefully staged to communicate specific narratives and influence audience perception, directly addressing the study's objective of examining how states perform power and legitimacy.

At the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), for instance, speeches by U.S., Israeli, and Iranian representatives function as quintessential front-stage performances. These speeches are highly scripted, symbolically charged, and directed at a global audience. Biden's UNGA addresses have consistently emphasised multilateralism and the rule-based international order, framing U.S. actions as aligned with global norms (White House, 2023). This performance seeks to legitimise U.S. involvement while reinforcing its leadership role.

Similarly, Iran's representatives at the UN have used the same *māqā* to challenge U.S. narratives, accusing Washington of destabilising the region through sanctions and military presence. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, in his 2022 UNGA speech, criticised unilateral sanctions and framed Iran as committed to justice and sovereignty (Raisi, 2022). This counter-performance illustrates the competitive nature of global political theatre, where actors present conflicting scripts.

Media appearances and press conferences further amplify these front-stage dynamics. Israeli military briefings during periods of escalation often include visual aids, maps, and video footage, reinforcing narratives of precision and necessity. These performances are designed not only to inform but also to persuade and justify, aligning with Goffman's notion of impression management.

The front stage, therefore, serves as a primary arena where states enact their identities and communicate intentions, transforming political actions into public spectacles of meaning.

However, front-stage performances are not always fully controlled by the actors who produce them. Media framing, selective reporting, and digital amplification can reshape or distort intended messages, leading to unintended interpretations. This introduces an element of performative risk, where carefully constructed narratives may be undermined by competing representations. As Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2021) note, the rapid circulation of images and information in digital environments intensifies this unpredictability, making impression management increasingly complex. Consequently, front-stage performances should be understood not as fixed outputs but as dynamic processes subject to ongoing reinterpretation.

#### 4.3 Backstage Negotiations and Hidden Scripts

While front-stage performances are highly visible, they are underpinned by complex back-stage dynamics involving diplomacy, intelligence operations, and strategic planning. These hidden processes correspond to the study's second research question regarding how actions are staged as performances.

Back-stage interactions are partially revealed through investigative journalism and official disclosures. For example, negotiations surrounding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) involved extensive behind-the-scenes diplomacy between Iran, the U.S., and other global powers. Although publicly framed in terms of compliance and security, these negotiations were characterised by strategic concessions and calculated messaging (Kelsey Davenport, 2021).

Similarly, reports of indirect U.S.–Iran talks mediated by third parties, such as Oman or European states, highlight the distinction between public hostility and private negotiation. These interactions demonstrate how states maintain different scripts for different audiences, a key element of Goffman's concept of audience segregation.

Israel's covert operations, including alleged cyber activities and targeted strikes on Iranian-linked assets, further illustrate backstage behaviour. While such actions are often officially unacknowledged, they are widely reported and implicitly communicated, contributing to the overall performance without being fully exposed. This duality underscores the interplay between visibility and concealment in global conflict.

Thus, the back stage functions as a space where strategies are formulated and performances are prepared, even as elements of these hidden scripts occasionally surface to reinforce front-stage narratives.

#### 4.4 Impression Management Strategies

Impression management is central to how states navigate the crisis, shaping how their actions are perceived by both domestic and international audiences.

This directly addresses the study's objective of examining how legitimacy is performed and maintained.

The United States employs impression management by framing its actions within the discourse of international law and collective security. Statements emphasising coalition-building and humanitarian concerns serve to mitigate perceptions of unilateralism. For instance, U.S. responses to regional escalations often highlight efforts to prevent wider conflict, projecting restraint alongside (White House, 2023).

Israel's impression management focuses on legitimising military actions through the language of self-defence and counter-terrorism. Visual documentation of threats, such as missile interceptions or tunnel discoveries, is frequently disseminated to reinforce this narrative. These strategies aim to secure both domestic support and international understanding.

Iran, conversely, manages impressions by emphasising resistance) and sovereignty. By framing its actions as defensive responses to external aggression, Iran seeks to maintain legitimacy among regional allies and sympathetic global audiences. This is evident in official communications that highlight the impact of sanctions and portray Iran as unjustly targeted.

These strategies demonstrate how states actively construct perceptions, aligning with Goffman's assertion that actors seek to control the impressions they give to others. In the context of global conflict, impression management becomes a strategic necessity, influencing both immediate reactions and long-term narratives.

### 4.5 Audience Dynamics

A key dimension of the crisis is the role of multiple audiences, addressing the third research question: *how does the global audience interpret and influence these performances?* In dramaturgical terms, audiences are not passive observers but active participants in meaning-making.

Domestic audiences play a crucial role, as leaders tailor performances to maintain political legitimacy and public support. For example, U.S. presidential speeches often emphasise national security and moral responsibility, resonating with domestic expectations. Similarly, Iranian and Israeli leaders frame their actions in ways that align with national narratives and historical experiences.

International audiences—including allies, adversaries, and global institutions—also shape performances. The European Union, United Nations, and regional actors respond to and reinterpret state actions, influencing how they are perceived globally. Media organisations further mediate these interpretations, amplifying certain narratives while contesting others (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2021).

Social media has intensified audience dynamics by enabling immediate and widespread engagement. Official accounts, journalists, and citizens contribute to a continuous feedback loop, where performances are

rapidly evaluated and contested. This environment increases the stakes of performance, as missteps can quickly undermine credibility.

Thus, audience reception is integral to the dramaturgical process, shaping both the content and effectiveness of state performances.

### 4.6 Symbolic and Dramatic Acts

Beyond discourse, the crisis is marked by symbolic and dramatic acts that function as performative signals. These include military strikes, sanctions, and strategic deployments, which convey meaning beyond their immediate tactical objectives.

For instance, U.S. military deployments to the Middle East during periods of heightened tension serve as signals of deterrence and commitment. Similarly, Israeli airstrikes on Iranian-linked targets are often accompanied by implicit messaging about capability and resolve. Iran's missile tests and support for regional proxies also function as symbolic demonstrations of power.

A notable example is the January 2020 U.S. drone strike that killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani. This act was widely interpreted as both a *სამხედრო* action and a dramatic performance of signalling U.S. willingness to escalate (BBC, 2020). Iran's subsequent missile strikes on U.S. bases in Iraq were similarly framed as calibrated responses, emphasising both retaliation and restraint.

Sanctions, too, operate as symbolic acts, communicating disapproval and exerting pressure while reinforcing narratives of legitimacy or victimhood. These actions illustrate how material measures are embedded within a broader performative framework, where meaning and perception are central.

### 4.7 Key Findings

The analysis reveals several key findings aligned with the study's objectives and research questions. First, state actors actively construct and perform distinct identities, which shape how their actions are interpreted. These identities are not fixed but dynamically adjusted in response to evolving circumstances.

Second, global conflict operates simultaneously on front-stage and back-stage levels, with public performances supported by hidden strategic processes. This duality highlights the complexity of international politics as both material and symbolic.

Third, impression management is a central feature of state behaviour, with actors employing diverse strategies to maintain legitimacy and influence perception. These efforts are directed at multiple audiences, whose responses in turn shape ongoing performances.

Finally, symbolic and dramatic acts play a crucial role in communicating power and intent, reinforcing the performative nature of global conflict. Military actions, sanctions, and diplomatic gestures function not only as

strategic tools but also as communicative signals within a global theatre.

Taken together, these findings support the central argument of the study: that the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis can be productively understood as a dramaturgical performance, where states act as performers, global audiences serve as spectators, and conflict unfolds as a staged yet consequential interaction.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that global conflict operates through a dual logic of material action and symbolic performance. This duality challenges conventional analytical boundaries within International Relations, suggesting that power must be understood not only in terms of capabilities but also in terms of representation and perception. By systematically integrating dramaturgical analysis into empirical investigation, the study provides a more comprehensive framework for interpreting contemporary geopolitical dynamics.

## DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Discussion of Findings

This study set out to examine the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis through a dramaturgical lens, with particular attention to how states perform power, identity, and legitimacy before global audiences. The findings from Chapter Four strongly affirm the central thesis that contemporary global conflict operates not only as a material struggle but also as a structured performance shaped by symbolic interaction, narrative construction, and audience engagement.

In relation to the first research question, the analysis demonstrates that state actors actively construct and project distinct identities that function as “characters” within the global arena. These identities—such as the United States as guarantor of order, Israel as a defensive yet resolute state, and Iran as a resistant sovereign actor—are not merely descriptive but strategically enacted through speeches, media representations, and symbolic acts. This supports constructivist arguments that identity is socially produced, while extending them by showing how identity is performatively staged and continuously managed (Fierke, 2022).

Regarding the second research question, the study reveals that political and military actions are deeply embedded in performative logics. Front-stage performances—such as UN speeches and press briefings—are carefully scripted to communicate legitimacy and intent, while back-stage processes involve negotiation, strategy, and selective disclosure. This dual structure reflects Goffman’s (1959) distinction between front stage and back stage, confirming its applicability beyond interpersonal interaction to the level of international politics. The findings also align with Cornut’s (2021) argument that diplomacy itself constitutes a form

of performance governed by roles, scripts, and expectations.

The third research question, concerning audience dynamics, is equally supported by the findings. Global audiences—ranging from domestic publics to international institutions—play an active role in shaping the meaning and impact of state performances. The mediatised environment amplifies this effect, as narratives are rapidly disseminated and contested across digital platforms (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2021). This underscores the interactive nature of global politics, where meaning is co-produced by performers and observers.

Overall, the findings highlight the inadequacy of purely materialist explanations of international conflict. While power and strategy remain important, they are inseparable from the symbolic and communicative processes through which they are enacted and interpreted. The dramaturgical framework thus provides a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary geopolitical dynamics.

### 5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study makes significant theoretical contributions to both international relations and performance studies by demonstrating the analytical value of integrating dramaturgical theory into the study of global conflict. First, it advances the growing body of scholarship that seeks to move beyond traditional paradigms such as realism, which often neglect the role of communication, symbolism, and perception in shaping state behaviour.

By applying Goffman’s dramaturgical concepts—particularly front stage, back stage, and impression management—to international relations, the study expands the scope of these concepts from micro-level interactions to macro-level political processes. This supports recent scholarly efforts to adapt sociological theories to complex global phenomena (Inglis & Thorpe, 2023). It also reinforces the argument that political action is inherently performative, as suggested by Alexander (2017) and Rai (2020).

Furthermore, the study contributes to constructivist and discursive approaches by providing a mechanism for understanding how identities and narratives are enacted in practice. While constructivism emphasises the importance of ideas and norms, dramaturgy offers a framework for analysing how these elements are performed, negotiated, and contested in real time. This integration addresses a key theoretical gap identified in Chapter Two.

Finally, the study contributes to the literature on mediatisation and strategic narratives by demonstrating how global conflict is increasingly shaped by visibility, representation, and audience reception. In doing so, it aligns with and extends the work of Miskimmon et al. (2020), highlighting the performative dimensions of

narrative construction.

Despite its analytical strengths, dramaturgical theory is not without limitations when applied to international relations. One potential critique is that it may overemphasise symbolic and communicative dimensions at the expense of material constraints such as military capability or economic power. While this study integrates both dimensions, it acknowledges that performance does not replace material reality but operates alongside it. Furthermore, dramaturgy may struggle to account for structural inequalities that shape which actors are able to perform effectively on the global stage. As Wendt (1999) suggests, systemic structures continue to influence state behaviour, even within socially constructed environments. Recognising these limitations ensures a more balanced and critically informed application of dramaturgical analysis.

### 5.3 Practical Implications

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study has important practical implications for diplomacy, media strategy, and conflict management. For policymakers and diplomats, the findings underscore the importance of understanding global politics as a performative arena in which actions are interpreted as much as they are executed. This suggests that effective diplomacy requires not only strategic planning but also careful management of narratives, symbols, and public communication.

For media practitioners, the study highlights the role of journalism and digital platforms in shaping audience perception and, by extension, the trajectory of conflict. Media framing can reinforce or challenge state performances, influencing how events are understood globally. This places significant responsibility on media institutions to provide balanced and contextualised reporting.

In the realm of conflict resolution, the study suggests that addressing symbolic and communicative dimensions may be as important as resolving material disputes. Misinterpretations, conflicting narratives, and performative escalations can intensify tensions, even in the absence of direct confrontation. Recognising these dynamics may open new avenues for de-escalation through strategic communication and narrative reframing.

### 5.4 Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. First, the reliance on publicly available data constrains access to fully understanding back-stage dynamics, which are often confidential and only partially revealed. While triangulation mitigates this limitation, it cannot entirely eliminate it.

Second, the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study introduces a degree of subjectivity. Although the analysis is grounded in established theoretical

frameworks and systematic coding, alternative interpretations remain possible. This is an inherent feature of interpretive research rather than a flaw.

Third, the focus on a single case study limits the generalisability of the findings. While the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis provides rich insights, other geopolitical contexts may exhibit different performative dynamics. However, as Yin (2018) notes, case studies aim for analytical rather than statistical generalisation, contributing to theory rather than universal claims.

Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of global politics means that performances and narratives are constantly shifting. The study captures a specific temporal frame, and subsequent developments may alter the dynamics analysed.

### 5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should build on this study by conducting comparative dramaturgical analyses of other geopolitical conflicts, such as Russia–Ukraine or China–U.S. tensions. Such comparisons would enhance understanding of how different cultural, political, and media contexts shape performative practices.

There is also scope for integrating quantitative methods, such as computational analysis of media narratives, to complement qualitative insights. This would enable researchers to examine patterns of performance and audience reception at a larger scale.

Additionally, further research could explore the role of non-state actors, including international organisations, media institutions, and civil society, in shaping the dramaturgy of global conflict. These actors often function as both performers and audiences, complicating traditional state-centric models.

Finally, scholars should continue to refine the theoretical integration of dramaturgy and international relations, developing more nuanced frameworks that account for the complexities of contemporary global politics.

### 5.6 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Iran–U.S.–Israel crisis can be productively understood as a **dramaturgical performance**, in which states act as performers, global audiences serve as interpreters, and conflict unfolds as a staged yet consequential interaction. By applying Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the study provides a novel lens for analysing how power, identity, and legitimacy are constructed and communicated in international relations.

The findings reveal that global conflict is not only fought through military and diplomatic means but also through **narratives, symbols, and performances** that shape perception and meaning. This underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate

insights from sociology, media studies, and performance theory.

Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary global politics, highlighting the importance of performance in shaping both the conduct and interpretation of conflict. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and mediatised, the performative dimensions of international relations are likely to become even more pronounced, making this line of inquiry both timely and essential.

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