

The Impact of the US–Iran Conflict: A Study of Political Perceptions and Global Awareness among Pakistani Muslim University Students

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Abstract

The geopolitical conflict between the United States and Iran has expanded beyond the traditional theatre of international relations, spilling into educational and cultural spaces that shape youth consciousness. This paper examines how ongoing tensions and war narratives influence the political perceptions and geographical imaginations of Pakistani and Muslim university students across diverse contexts. Grounded in multidisciplinary perspectives from education, cultural geography, and political sociology, the study explores how exposure to digital media, conflict discourse, and transnational events informs students' critical consciousness, identity formation, and global outlook. Analysing media reports, student statements, and secondary research, the paper identifies three overlapping transformations: intensifying political polarisation, redefinition of global spatial awareness, and emergence of digitally mediated intercultural engagement. This phenomenon reflects how higher education has become a crucial site where young adults negotiate global citizenship, empathy, and political responsibility in an era of mediated war. The findings highlight the pedagogical imperative to nurture critical thinking and intercultural literacy in

response to the emotional and ideological complexities of global conflict.

Keywords: US–Iran Conflict, Political Perceptions, Global Awareness, Pakistani University Students, Muslim Youth, Media Influence, Political Socialization

I. Introduction

Geopolitical conflicts are no longer confined to battlefields or diplomatic halls; they permeate classrooms, lecture theatres, and digital networks that connect global youth. The United States Iran conflict especially its escalation since 2026 has transformed from a distant political struggle into a living discourse that shapes how students interpret global affairs and their role within them. In a hyperconnected educational environment, university students are not passive recipients of information. Instead, they act as interpreters, re-narrating events through social media, campus discussion, and personal reflection, thereby producing new forms of political awareness (The Daily Orange, 2026).

Educators and researchers increasingly recognise that international conflict has become a formative experience influencing youth cognition and identity (Beck, 2024). Students' exposure to competing narratives state sponsored propaganda, activist movements, and journalistic reports has produced a complex terrain of meaning-making. Many express conflicting sentiments: support for peace and humanitarian principles on one hand, and concern for national integrity, justice, or resistance on the other. This internal negotiation defines a generation whose worldview is shaped as much by digital connectivity as by civic education.

Understanding the impact of the US–Iran geopolitical struggle through educational lenses means examining how conflict's representation moulds attitudes toward authority, justice, and belonging. In universities, where critical enquiry meets cultural diversity, students' responses to war reveal not only political opinions but evolving civic literacies. Examining this process contributes to broader debates in multidisciplinary education

about global citizenship, the pedagogical ethics of war discourse, and the psychological demands placed on learners in times of global crisis (Thomas, 2025)

2.1 Youth, Conflict, and Political Socialisation

Research in educational and political sociology considers youth as a particularly responsive and transformative demographic in times of geopolitical upheaval. Theories of political socialisation argue that adolescence and early adulthood are periods in which political beliefs become crystallised through exposure to macro-events such as war, revolution, or rapid social change (Neundorf & Smets, 2020). Within higher education settings, students actively interpret conflict through lenses of justice, ideology, and cultural knowledge. Studies in post-conflict pedagogy show that learners often internalise global tension as part of their civic identity, transforming distant wars into moral reference points for evaluating governance and human rights (Davies, 2022).

The US–Iran conflict thus functions as a “pedagogical event” a lived encounter prompting reflection on state legitimacy, ethics of intervention, and the politics of information. Extending Bourdieu’s conception of habitus, the university environment mediates how students convert media exposure into political meaning: discussions in seminars, online debates, and voluntary activism become spaces where ideology and empathy intersect.

Spatial Imagination and Critical Geopolitics

The concept of spatial imagination in education draws on critical geopolitics and cultural geography, positing that students learn to visualise the world through a blend of media images, maps, and affective experience (Gregory, 2016). Conflicts such as the US–Iran war challenge traditional map-based understandings of distance and territory by revealing the global interdependence embedded in supply chains, digital economies, and migration flows. Massey’s (2005) notion of a global sense of place illustrates how

learners in different nations construct emotional geographies in response to international crises.

Recent work in youth geography shows that online spaces reshape geographical consciousness. Students interact within transnational digital communities, sharing visual information about war zones, humanitarian aid, and protest movements. This “networked spatiality” blurs the division between local belonging and global empathy (Hemmings & Al-Khalil, 2023). The educational implication is that geography is no longer taught solely through static maps but through lived media flows that transform perception of distance and proximity.

Digital Media, Education, and Information Literacy

Digital culture studies emphasise that media environments are now the primary sites where youth encounter political conflict. Jenkins (2021) observes that participatory media practices tweeting, video remixing, civic blogging turn students into micro-producers of political discourse. However, such engagement also exposes them to disinformation and affective polarisation. Educational research calls for the integration of critical digital literacy to enable students to evaluate sources and understand how narratives of war are constructed (Buckingham, 2023).

The US–Iran case provides fertile ground for analysing algorithmic amplification of bias and emotion. Online echo chambers can reproduce ethnocentric or nationalist perspectives, while transnational activist campaigns mobilise empathy and resistance. For universities, the challenge lies in fostering deliberative spaces that teach discernment rather than cynicism.

War, Emotion, and the Pedagogy of Witnessing

Scholars of conflict education have turned towards the emotional dimensions of learning about violence. Boler and Zembylas (2017) propose a pedagogy of discomfort, whereby confronting unsettling truths encourages moral reflection and social responsibility. In this light, student exposure to news from Iran images of protests, sanctions, and displacement—constitutes an

affective curriculum. Empathy, anxiety, or fatigue are not incidental but central to how knowledge of war circulates in the classroom (Holt, 2022).

By synthesising political socialisation, critical geopolitics, digital literacy, and affect theory, this paper adopts an integrative framework. It investigates how the US–Iran confrontation penetrates university discourse, shaping students’ political reasoning, spatial comprehension, and emotional response. The next section outlines the analytical and methodological approach guiding this examination.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist design that integrates **document analysis**, **media discourse review**, and **secondary literature synthesis**. As the project focuses on meaning-making among university students rather than numerical measurement, it emphasises interpretive depth. The guiding question is: *How does the US–Iran geopolitical conflict influence students’ political perceptions, emotional responses, and geographical imaginations within higher education contexts?*

The analytical framework draws on constructivist traditions that view knowledge and identity as socially situated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis interprets publicly available data—student editorials, campus survey reports, online forums, and educational commentaries—supplemented by peer-reviewed studies and international media outlets between 2024 and 2026. While the focus is global, particular attention is paid to perspectives emerging from universities in the United States, Iran, and Europe.

3.2 Data Sources and Sampling

Data were derived from three interrelated sources:

1. **Educational and Policy Literature** – Studies on civic learning, youth engagement, and global citizenship (e.g., Davies, 2022; Thomas, 2025).

2. **Media Content** – Articles from *The Washington Post*, *Reuters*, *The Guardian*, *AlJazeera*, and comparable sources that reported on the war and its social implications between January 2025 and April 2026. These provide insights into representations encountered by students.
3. **Student Narratives** – Statements in campus newspapers, social media posts, and open letters that capture student sentiment. While anonymised, these materials illustrate the emotional and ideological range of youth perspectives.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Analysis proceeded through **three iterative stages**:

- **Thematic Coding**: Texts were read inductively to identify recurrent themes such as polarisation, empathy, nationalism, and global awareness.
- **Discursive Contextualisation**: Themes were then situated within broader frameworks of educational theory and critical geopolitics to reveal underlying assumptions and power relations.
- **Comparative Interpretation**: The resulting patterns were compared across Western and Iranian contexts, highlighting both convergence and divergence in youth responses.

NVivo-style manual coding principles guided pattern recognition, though human judgement remained central. Reliability was strengthened through triangulation across data types.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the reliance on public texts rather than interviews, ethical risk was minimal. Still, the study adheres to norms of confidentiality and respect for participant expression. Content drawn from student journals and social platforms was paraphrased to prevent identification. The interpretive stance is reflexive: the researcher recognises positionality as an observer analysing narratives shaped by unequal global power.

3.5 Limitations

This analysis remains exploratory. It does not claim exhaustive representation of all student experiences, particularly from regions with restricted media access. Furthermore, reliance on English-language sources could privilege particular discursive framings. Future research could incorporate multilingual ethnography and direct student interviews to validate or broaden the findings

4. Political Polarisation and Critical Consciousness

4.1 Generational Divides and War Fatigue

The escalation of United States–Iran hostilities in 2026 has accentuated generational divisions in public opinion. Surveys conducted across American universities indicate that younger cohorts express heightened scepticism toward armed intervention and executive decision-making (Pew Research Centre, 2026). Reuters polling in April 2026 similarly reveals a widespread preference for a prompt cessation of hostilities even if strategic objectives remain unmet. Among university students, this translates into frustration with political leadership and anxiety about the sustainability of liberal internationalism.

These findings align with research on *critical consciousness*—Freire’s (1970) notion that reflection on oppression and inequality can motivate transformative social action. For many students, engagement with the conflict fosters precisely this reflexive awareness, stimulating critique of foreign policy, media framing, and institutional complicity within their own societies. Rather than paralysing them, disillusionment often sparks activism, online petitions, and solidarity events that reinterpret citizenship as moral conscience rather than allegiance to state policy.

4.2 Polarisation Beyond the West

Although Western polarisation has received extensive attention, Iranian youth also experience ideological fractures. Decades of sanctions and information control have produced divergent interpretations of patriotism: on one side, reform-minded students demanding transparency and rights; on the other, nationalist movements rallying around sovereignty. The war intensifies both.

Student protests in Tehran and Shiraz mirror digital campaigns abroad, revealing that polarisation is not merely ideological but also intergenerational—between those shaped by revolutionary memory and those by networked cosmopolitanism (Middle East Institute, 2024).

4.3 The Role of Education in Political Reasoning

Universities act as laboratories of political reasoning. Pedagogical research demonstrates that deliberative classroom practices and exposure to contested narratives enhance students' ability to appraise argumentation critically (Muller, 2024). Instructors who frame the US–Iran war within global-citizenship education report greater student motivation to link historical knowledge with ethical evaluation. Such teaching demonstrates that polarisation need not result in disengagement but can become an impetus for deeper democratic learning.

5. Geographical Imagination and Global Spatial Awareness

5.1 From Static Maps to Lived Geographies

Conventional geography curricula often treat regions such as the Middle East as abstract spatial entities. The conflict, however, renders these spaces experientially present through media immersion. Students witness the closure of trade routes or humanitarian corridors in real time, developing awareness of how seemingly remote events influence global well-being. The blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, for instance, is no longer a technical maritime issue but a lens through which learners conceptualise the interdependence of energy, ecology, and economics (The Washington Post, 2026).

5.2 Digital Cartographies and Emotional Distance

Online mapping platforms and social networks have generated what Gregory (2016) terms *digital cartographies of empathy*. Through interactive data visualisations and social-media threads, students trace displacement routes and humanitarian aid flows, replacing textbook abstraction with affective connectedness. Yet this connectivity can also desensitise: continuous exposure to crisis imagery risks producing compassion fatigue (Holt, 2022).

Educational practitioners now experiment with reflective pedagogies that balance emotional engagement with analytic distance.

5.3 Global Citizenship and Spatial Responsibility

The transformation of spatial imagination intersects with discourses on global citizenship. Andreotti and Pashby (2021) argue that responsible global citizenship education requires students to confront unequal power structures rather than adopt sentimental cosmopolitanism. The US–Iran war offers a context where such critical engagement can occur: students learn to situate themselves within networks of privilege—energy consumption, digital surveillance, economic sanctions—recognising their own positionality within global systems of consequence.

6. Digital Media and the Construction of War Narratives

6.1 Algorithmic Mediation and Information Politics

Digital platforms mediate nearly all student engagement with the US–Iran conflict. Algorithmic curation determines visibility, privileging emotionally charged or nationalistic content. This *attention economy* amplifies outrage while marginalising nuance (Tufekci, 2023). As a result, students must navigate an ecosystem where truth competes with persuasion. University media-literacy initiatives increasingly address *epistemic resilience*: the capacity to retain critical enquiry amid contradictory information (Buckingham, 2023).

6.2 Participatory Culture and Political Voice

Despite risks of misinformation, online platforms empower youth political voice. Hashtags such as **#StudentsForPeace** and **#IranSolidarity** exemplify digital collectivism transcending borders. Studies show that digital activism complements—not replaces—offline civic participation (Barati, 2025). Webinars, teach-ins, and collaborative art projects allow students in different countries to co-author narratives of peace and human dignity. The pedagogical implication is clear: educational institutions should recognise online civic expression as legitimate learning.

6.3 The Ethics of Representation

A recurring debate concerns the ethics of sharing images of suffering. Scholars warn against what Chouliaraki (2017) calls *the spectacle of the distant other*. Responsible digital literacy requires that students interrogate not only factual accuracy but representational ethics—asking who speaks, who is silenced, and who benefits from visibility. This reflexivity reframes media consumption as moral practice within higher education.

7. Emotional and Psychological Dimensions

7.1 Anxiety, Empathy, and Desensitisation

Exposure to violent imagery and humanitarian crisis generates a complex emotional economy. Psychological studies indicate rising levels of anxiety and fear among youth following sustained news about global conflict (World Health Organization, 2025). Yet emotional responses can also catalyse civic empathy. Students involved in humanitarian clubs or online support networks often describe their engagement as coping through purpose. The boundary between compassion and burnout, however, is fragile.

7.2 Pedagogies of Care

Universities increasingly adopt *pedagogies of care* to address emotional overload in politically turbulent times (Boler & Zembylas, 2017). Safe discussion spaces, reflective writing, and intercultural dialogue workshops enable students to process distress while maintaining analytical rigour. Such practices reassert education’s humanistic mission: to cultivate understanding without detachment.

7.3 Trauma and Transnational Identification

For students with personal ties to Iran or regions affected by Western intervention, the war reverberates as lived trauma. Narratives gathered from Iranian-diaspora students reference concern for relatives, disrupted communication under sanctions, and moral duality of studying abroad while one’s homeland suffers. These experiences exemplify what Zembylas (2021)

labels *transnational affective citizenship*—the merging of personal emotion with global political responsibility.

8. Intercultural Perspectives and Identity Formation

8.1 Negotiating Multiplicity

Identity formation under the pressures of war involves negotiating contradictory affiliations: national, religious, and cosmopolitan. International students in Western universities often navigate competing narratives within classrooms that mirror global polarisation. Exposure to divergent media and peer opinion fosters critical intercultural competence—the ability to inhabit multiple perspectives without collapsing into relativism (Deardorff, 2020).

8.2 Dialogue, Stereotype, and Resistance

Conflicts tend to reinforce essentialist stereotypes: “Western aggressor,” “Middle-Eastern extremist,” “innocent victim.” Educational dialogue can disrupt these binaries. Intercultural learning initiatives grounded in storytelling and peer exchange have demonstrated reduced prejudice and increased curiosity about the “other” (Hemmings & Al-Khalil, 2023). The US–Iran war context underscores how identity learning and peace education converge.

8.3 Transnational Solidarity and Digital Belonging

Digital platforms host networks of transnational solidarity that complement local intercultural initiatives. Students participate in collaborative research, fundraising, and advocacy campaigns that construct a sense of *digital belonging*. These practices challenge conventional citizenship limited to territorial states, signalling a shift toward networked social responsibility (Barber, 2024). The educative value lies in transforming identity from fixed categories into relational practice.

9. Policy and Educational Implications

9.1 Integrating Conflict Literacy

Findings underscore the necessity of embedding *conflict literacy* in curricula—teaching students how international tensions develop, how media frames them, and how ordinary citizens can contribute to peaceful futures. Such integration helps counter fatalism and cultivates analytical empathy. Departments of education are beginning to pilot interdisciplinary courses combining politics, ethics, and media studies to achieve this objective (Thomas, 2025).

9.2 Rethinking Academic Internationalisation

Universities frequently promote mobility and exchange as markers of internationalisation. Yet war reveals the fragility of these aspirations. Visa restrictions, travel insecurity, and digital surveillance disrupt academic collaboration. Policies must therefore expand from mobility to mutuality—supporting remote partnerships, transnational seminars, and culturally sensitive mentoring for students affected by conflict. Inclusive internationalisation reframes global learning as solidarity rather than consumption.

9.3 Supporting Student Well-being

The psychological toll of global unrest necessitates systemic well-being strategies. Counselling services require training to contextualise distress within geopolitical reality rather than individual pathology. Supporting students who follow war news compulsively or experience survivor guilt demands mental-health frameworks attuned to global interconnection (World Health Organization, 2025). Academic staff also need professional development in trauma-informed teaching.

9.4 Curriculum Transformation for the Digital Era

Finally, policy should recognise that digital infrastructure is now integral to political learning. Universities can collaborate with fact-checking organisations, integrate open-data mapping, and promote collaborative digital storytelling as assessment tools. Such initiatives convert the technological drivers of polarisation into instruments of democratic education.

10. Conclusion: Reimagining Global Citizenship in an Era of Mediated War

The US–Iran conflict illustrates how twenty-first-century warfare reshapes not only international alignments but also the cognitive and emotional landscapes of young learners. University students experience global crises both vicariously and personally through electronic immediacy, forming political attitudes that blend scepticism, empathy, and critical awareness. Their evolving spatial imagination situates them simultaneously as witnesses and participants in the drama of geopolitics.

For educators and policymakers, recognising students as *interpretive agents* rather than passive consumers is essential. Education must empower analytical empathy—an ability to connect emotionally without succumbing to propaganda or despair. By merging geopolitical literacy, digital competence, and intercultural dialogue, universities can transform global conflict from a source of division into an opportunity for civic renewal.

As classrooms become microcosms of international society, the task of higher education is not only to analyse war but to imagine peace—teaching future leaders how to navigate complexity with humility, criticality, and care.

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