

Iran's Public Diplomacy in the Conflict with the United States: A Political Analysis of the Open Letter to U.S. Civilians

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian's open letter to the American people as an instrument of public diplomacy and strategic narrative during the Iran-United States conflict. Its novelty lies in analyzing an underexplored diplomatic form, namely a head-of-state open letter addressed directly to the civilian public of a rival state. Using a qualitative document-based case study, the study analyzes one purposively selected primary text supported by contextual news reports and recent scholarship, with observations focused on materials published in April 2026. The findings show that the letter constructs Iran's self-legitimation, delegitimizes U.S. policy, mobilizes historical memory, and separates the American government from the American people, implying that open letters can function as strategic political communication in contemporary geopolitical conflict

INTRODUCTION

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian's open letter to the American people constitutes an important political phenomenon because the message was directed not to the United States government as a formal diplomatic counterpart, but to American civilians as a foreign public. According to Reuters (2026), Pezeshkian emphasized that Iran harbors no hostility toward ordinary Americans, challenged the portrayal of Iran as a threat, and urged the U.S. public to reconsider the motives and consequences of continued confrontation. From a political studies perspective, this move is significant because it shows that contemporary interstate conflict is no longer conducted solely through official diplomacy, military signaling, or elite negotiations, but also through discursive struggles over legitimacy in the arena of international public opinion. In this sense, the open letter can be understood as a form of public diplomacy through which a state seeks to influence the perceptions of a foreign society by mobilizing moral claims, historical memory, and political persuasion.

Recent scholarship has increasingly defined public diplomacy not merely as image promotion, but as a narrative practice through which states construct legitimacy, identity, and political meaning. Hedling (2025) argues that strategic narratives occupy a central place in public diplomacy because they shape how actors, conflicts, and interests are interpreted by external audiences. Likewise, Arceneaux (2024) shows that strategic narratives help governments communicate the value of their policies and national positioning through coherent storytelling, while Hobbs et al. (2025) demonstrate that leadership storytelling can function as a bridge between immediate diplomatic messaging and broader grand strategy. Taken together, these studies suggest that political texts issued by state leaders should not be treated as incidental rhetoric; rather, they should be understood as deliberate communicative instruments aimed at influencing how foreign audiences interpret political realities, assign blame, and evaluate legitimacy.

In the specific context of Iran–United States relations, recent studies also show that the contest between the two countries has become deeply narrative-driven. Lin (2024) finds that the U.S. and Iranian embassies engaged in sustained competition on social media as a form of mediated public diplomacy. Norton and Cooley (2025) show that Iranian and U.S. media employed different persuasive techniques and strategic narratives in their coverage of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, while Salman and Burton (2025) argue that public diplomacy may operate through both positive and negative forms depending on how states build their own image and represent their adversaries before foreign audiences. However, the existing literature remains concentrated on embassy communication, digital diplomacy, media framing, and state storytelling in general. Much less attention has been paid to the open letter of a head of state addressed directly to the civilian public of an adversarial country as a distinct unit of analysis in public diplomacy. This absence is theoretically important because such a text condenses several political dimensions at once: the management of international image, the reconstruction of historical memory, the moral justification of state behavior, the delegitimation of the adversary's

policies, and the attempt to separate a foreign government from its citizens as a target audience.

This article therefore argues that Pezeshkian's open letter should be analyzed as a political act of public diplomacy rather than as a mere public statement. Its novelty lies in examining a relatively underexplored diplomatic form: a contemporary open letter by a national leader addressed to the civilian population of a rival state during an active geopolitical confrontation. The article also seeks to enrich the theoretical conversation on the relationship between public diplomacy, strategic narratives, and international political communication by showing how a single text can simultaneously construct self-legitimation, produce a differentiated image of the foreign public and foreign government, and frame conflict through a persuasive political narrative. On that basis, this study examines how Iran constructs its political narrative in the letter, how that narrative legitimizes Iran while delegitimizing U.S. policy, and how the distinction between "the American government" and "the American people" operates as a public diplomacy strategy within the broader conflict between Iran and the United States.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Diplomacy Theory

Public diplomacy theory explains how states communicate with foreign publics in order to influence perceptions, legitimacy, and political attitudes beyond formal government-to-government diplomacy. Recent scholarship no longer treats public diplomacy as mere image promotion; instead, it is increasingly understood as a persuasive communicative practice through which states construct credibility, identity, and political meaning in the international sphere. Hedling (2025) argues that public diplomacy should be understood through narrative practices, because persuasion depends on how states present themselves, define others, and frame political events for external audiences. In a related line of inquiry, Dong et al. (2023) show that government public relations and public diplomacy increasingly overlap in the study of how governments communicate strategically with domestic and foreign audiences, while Salman and Burton (2025) demonstrate that public diplomacy may take both positive and negative forms depending on whether a state seeks to build affinity, discredit an opponent, or do both at once. Empirical research also shows that public diplomacy now operates in highly competitive communication environments in which states address foreign audiences directly rather than relying exclusively on conventional diplomatic channels (Lin, 2024).

For the present study, public diplomacy theory is relevant because Pezeshkian's open letter addresses the American people directly, thereby bypassing formal interstate diplomacy and treating foreign civilians as a politically meaningful audience. The theory helps explain why such a letter should be read not simply as a statement of opinion, but as an attempt to shape foreign public perception, to cultivate moral legitimacy, and to redefine the relationship between Iran and the U.S. public. In this sense, the open letter can be analyzed as an instrument through which Iran seeks to distinguish between the American government and the American people, reduce hostility toward

itself, and influence how the conflict is interpreted abroad. This leads to the first analytical proposition of the study: Iran's open letter functions as an act of public diplomacy aimed at influencing foreign public opinion and strengthening Iran's political legitimacy before an external audience.

Strategic Narrative Theory

Strategic narrative theory is useful for explaining how political actors construct stories about the past, present, and future in order to justify policy, define threats, and shape political interpretation. Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2026) describe strategic narratives as stories used to frame political reality and legitimize policy choices, while Hedling (2025) emphasizes that strategic narratives are central to public diplomacy because they help produce persuasive and credible accounts of identity, interest, and conflict. In this respect, narrative is not peripheral to diplomacy; it is one of the key mechanisms through which states compete for interpretive power in world politics.

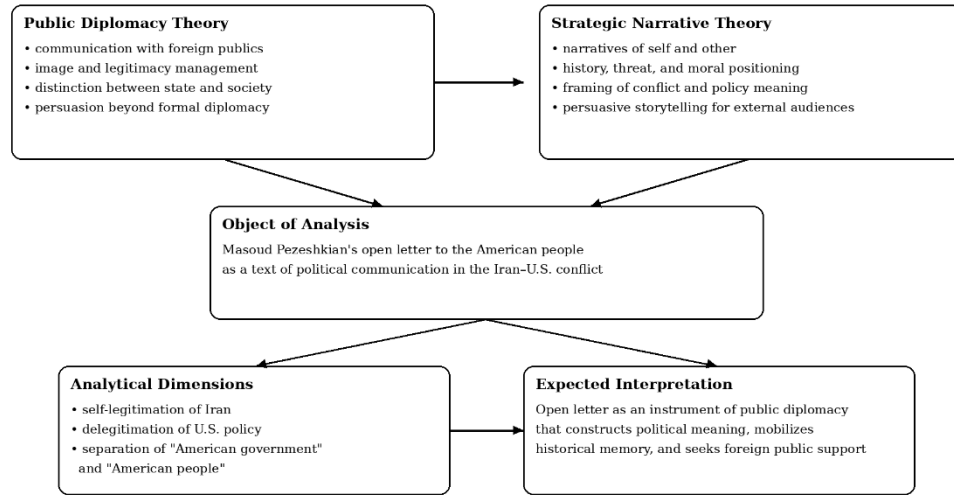
Recent studies confirm that strategic narratives are highly relevant to international political communication. Arceneaux (2024) shows that governments use storytelling to communicate the value of national policies and state positioning, whereas Hobbs et al. (2025) demonstrate that leadership storytelling can connect immediate diplomatic messages to broader strategic visions. In the Iran–United States context, Norton and Cooley (2025) show that Iranian and U.S. media employ different persuasive techniques and strategic narratives when representing the JCPOA, indicating that narrative contestation is central to how political meaning is constructed in this bilateral relationship. Together, these studies suggest that a political text such as Pezeshkian's open letter should be analyzed as a structured narrative that defines Iran's identity, frames the United States as a political actor, mobilizes historical memory, and attempts to persuade foreign readers to adopt a particular interpretation of the conflict. This leads to the second analytical proposition of the study: Iran's open letter operates as a strategic narrative that legitimizes Iran's position, delegitimizes U.S. policy, and reframes the conflict through the distinction between state elites and ordinary citizens.

Conceptual Framework

Because this study is qualitative and interpretive, it does not formulate statistical hypotheses. Instead, it uses a conceptual framework that integrates public diplomacy theory and strategic narrative theory. Public diplomacy theory provides the lens for understanding the letter as direct communication with a foreign public for the purposes of legitimacy, persuasion, and image management. Strategic narrative theory provides the lens for examining how the text constructs stories about Iran, the United States, conflict, victimhood, morality, and political responsibility. Combined, these two theories make it possible to analyze the open letter as a political communication strategy that targets foreign civilians, separates the American people from the American government, mobilizes historical and moral claims, and seeks to reshape international perceptions of the Iran–U.S. conflict.

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Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Source: developed by the author based on Public Diplomacy and Strategic Narrative scholarship.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design using a document-based case study approach. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the objective of the article is not to measure causal relationships statistically, but to interpret political meaning, narrative construction, and public diplomacy strategies embedded in a written text. The study focuses on how Iran communicates with a foreign public through political language, historical framing, and legitimacy claims. In this respect, the research is interpretive in nature and seeks to explain how meaning is produced in a particular diplomatic text within the broader context of the Iran–United States conflict.

The population of this study refers to political communication texts used by state actors as instruments of public diplomacy in the context of international conflict. However, because this article is designed as a focused qualitative inquiry, the sample is limited to one primary document, namely Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian's open letter addressed to the American people. The document was selected through purposive sampling because it represents a unique and relevant case: a contemporary open letter written by a head of state to the civilian public of a rival country during a period of geopolitical tension. This sample is considered theoretically significant because it enables the researcher to examine how public diplomacy and strategic narrative operate in a direct textual form rather than through social media posts, embassy statements, or news coverage. To strengthen contextual understanding, the primary text is read alongside supporting secondary materials, such as credible international news reports and recent academic studies on public diplomacy, strategic narratives, and Iran–U.S. political communication.

The unit of analysis in this study is the textual content of the open letter. Data were collected through document review, with emphasis on the official wording, political expressions, historical references, moral claims, and persuasive statements contained in the text. In order to ensure analytical consistency, the study uses qualitative content analysis combined with strategic narrative interpretation as the main data analysis tools. The analytical process consists of several stages. First, the text is read repeatedly to identify its general structure, tone, and central political message. Second, key statements are coded into thematic categories derived from the theoretical framework, including self-legitimation, delegitimation of the opponent, construction of foreign publics, historical memory, moral justification, and conflict framing. Third, these categories are interpreted through the lens of public diplomacy theory and strategic narrative theory in order to explain how the letter functions politically as a persuasive instrument directed at an external audience.

To enhance the rigor of the analysis, the study applies a theory-driven reading strategy in which the interpretation of the text is guided by clearly defined analytical dimensions. From the perspective of public diplomacy, attention is given to how the letter seeks to influence foreign public opinion, separate the American people from the U.S. government, and build Iran's image before an external audience. From the perspective of strategic narrative, attention is given to how the text organizes meaning through representations of self and other, historical references, claims of justice, and the framing of conflict. This dual framework allows the study to move beyond simple description and toward a more systematic explanation of the political functions of the text.

Overall, this methodology is designed to produce an in-depth and context-sensitive interpretation of Pezeshkian's open letter as a form of political communication. By combining purposive sampling, document analysis, and theory-informed qualitative interpretation, the study aims to explain how a single diplomatic text can operate as an instrument of public diplomacy and narrative contestation in contemporary international politics.

RESEARCH RESULT

Because this study uses a qualitative document-based design, the research results were obtained through systematic textual analysis rather than statistical testing. The analysis proceeded in four stages: first, repeated reading of Pezeshkian's open letter and relevant contextual reports; second, open coding of recurring political expressions and narrative markers; third, grouping the codes into broader analytical themes; and fourth, interpreting those themes through the lenses of public diplomacy and strategic narrative theory. The codes that appeared most consistently in the text were related to non-hostility toward the American people, the distinction between governments and peoples, the portrayal of Iran as non-aggressive, historical grievance, self-defense, delegitimation of U.S. policy, and the depiction of the United States as acting under Israeli influence. These findings are based on the text of the letter as reproduced by The Straits Times and summarized by Reuters and Al Jazeera.

Table 1. Analytical Procedure and Coding Steps

Step	Analytical activity	Focus of analysis	Output
1	Close reading	Overall structure, tone, and intended audience	Identification of the American public as the primary target audience
2	Open coding	Repeated words, claims, and rhetorical patterns	Initial codes such as “no enmity,” “manufactured threat,” “self-defense,” “1953 coup,” and “proxy for Israel”
3	Thematic grouping	Relationship among codes	Four main themes: positive self-representation, historical grievance, delegitimation of U.S. policy, and separation of people from government
4	Theory-driven interpretation	Public diplomacy and strategic narrative dimensions	Explanation of the letter as a public diplomacy instrument and strategic narrative text

The first major result is that the letter constructs a positive self-representation of Iran. Iran is presented as an ancient civilization that has not chosen aggression, colonialism, or domination, and the text explicitly states that the Iranian people harbor no enmity toward the American people. The letter also draws a sharp distinction between governments and the peoples they govern, suggesting that hostility is directed at policy rather than at society. This indicates that the text is designed to soften Iran’s image before a foreign audience and to build an affective opening for persuasion. Reuters similarly reported that Pezeshkian said Iran harbors no hostility toward ordinary Americans and rejected portrayals of Iran as a threat.

The second major result is the use of historical grievance and self-defense as key legitimizing devices. The letter identifies the 1953 coup as the turning point in Iran–U.S. relations and links subsequent distrust to U.S. support for the Shah, backing for Saddam Hussein during the 1980s war, prolonged sanctions, and recent military actions during ongoing negotiations. At the same time, the text argues that Iran’s military posture is a measured response grounded in legitimate self-defense rather than aggression. In narrative terms, this places Iran in the position of a historically injured but resilient actor responding to external coercion. Al Jazeera’s report reinforces this reading by noting that Pezeshkian framed Iran as having been attacked while diplomacy was still underway and emphasized the country’s right to defend itself.

The third result is the delegitimation of current U.S. policy. The letter repeatedly questions whether the war serves the interests of the American people and associates U.S. actions with civilian suffering, destruction of vital infrastructure, and damage to America’s global standing. Rather than framing

the conflict as an unavoidable security response, the text presents it as a politically manufactured confrontation lacking moral and strategic justification. In this respect, the letter does not merely defend Iran; it attempts to redefine the meaning of the conflict for an American readership by suggesting that the costs of war are borne by ordinary citizens while the benefits accrue elsewhere.

The fourth result is the explicit separation between the American government and the American people, combined with a proxy framing of U.S. action. The letter asks whether the United States has entered the war as a proxy for Israel and whether “America First” is genuinely guiding current policy. This is an important rhetorical move because it redirects responsibility away from the U.S. public and toward elite decision makers and foreign influence. By doing so, the text simultaneously reduces social distance with the American people and intensifies criticism of the U.S. government. This dual move is central to the political function of the letter.

Table 2. Main Findings from the Textual Analysis

Theme	Main textual indicators	Political meaning
Positive self-representation	Iran as ancient, non-aggressive, and respectful toward other peoples	Builds moral legitimacy and reduces perceived threat
Historical grievance	1953 coup, sanctions, external intervention, wartime memory	Frames distrust as historically grounded rather than ideological
Self-defense narrative	Defensive capability, response to aggression, negotiation disrupted by attack	Justifies Iran’s position as reactive and legitimate
Delegitimation of U.S. policy	War does not serve American interests, harms civilians, damages U.S. standing	Challenges the moral and strategic basis of U.S. action
Government-people distinction	Respect for Americans but criticism of U.S. policy elites	Targets foreign civilians as a persuadable audience
Proxy framing	U.S. acting for Israel, “America First” questioned	Recasts conflict as externally driven and politically manipulated

Taken together, the results show that the letter is not a neutral diplomatic message. It is a structured political text that combines image repair, moral argument, historical narration, and adversarial reframing in order to influence how the conflict is interpreted by a foreign public.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Pezeshkian's open letter operates as a hybrid form of public diplomacy. On one level, it is conciliatory because it explicitly denies hostility toward the American people and seeks to establish common ground with foreign civilians. On another level, it is confrontational because it strongly criticizes U.S. policy and portrays Washington as pursuing a war that does not serve its own citizens. This combination supports Salman and Burton's (2025) argument that public diplomacy may involve both positive and negative dimensions: positive in relation to the audience a state seeks to persuade, and negative in relation to the adversarial actor it seeks to discredit.

The government-people distinction found in the letter is especially important from a public diplomacy perspective. Rather than addressing the U.S. administration as the sole diplomatic counterpart, the text treats the American people as a politically meaningful audience whose interpretation of the war matters. This supports Hedling's (2025) view that public diplomacy is best understood as a set of persuasive narrative practices, and it is consistent with Lin's (2024) finding that Iran-U.S. competition increasingly unfolds in mediated spaces aimed at shaping public opinion. The difference here is that Pezeshkian's intervention takes the form of a long-form political letter rather than a platform-based social media exchange, which makes the case analytically distinctive.

The study also shows that historical memory is central to how the letter constructs legitimacy. By foregrounding the 1953 coup, sanctions, and intervention, the text places current conflict within a longer historical arc of external pressure. This is consistent with strategic narrative scholarship, which emphasizes that political actors shape contemporary legitimacy by telling persuasive stories about the past, present, and future (Hedling, 2025). It also aligns with Arceneaux's (2024) argument that governments use storytelling to communicate the value and meaning of their policy positions. In the Iran-U.S. context, this narrative strategy echoes findings by Norton and Cooley (2025), who show that strategic narratives are central to how Iranian and U.S. actors frame the meaning of conflict-related issues such as the JCPOA.

Another important point is that the letter does not rely solely on defensive claims; it actively seeks to redefine the moral center of the conflict. By asking whose interests are being served by war and by associating U.S. action with civilian suffering and reputational damage, the text attempts to shift the burden of justification onto the United States. This move is characteristic of strategic narrative competition, in which actors do not merely defend themselves but seek to impose an alternative interpretation of political reality. The result is a text that works simultaneously as a legitimacy claim, a counter-accusation, and an appeal to a foreign public's sense of political responsibility.

Overall, the discussion suggests that Pezeshkian's open letter should be understood as more than a reactive statement. It is an example of how a head of state can use a single text to perform several political functions at once: humanize the self, historicize grievance, delegitimize the opponent, and invite the foreign public to reinterpret the conflict outside official governmental narratives. The main contribution of the present study therefore lies in showing that the open

letter can function as a distinct instrument of public diplomacy and strategic narrative contestation in an active geopolitical crisis.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that Masoud Pezeshkian's open letter to the American people should be understood as a political act of public diplomacy rather than merely a public statement. The findings show that the letter performs several interrelated functions at once: it constructs a positive image of Iran as a non-aggressive and morally justified actor, mobilizes historical memory to explain the roots of the Iran–United States conflict, delegitimizes U.S. policy by questioning its moral and political basis, and strategically separates the American government from the American people in order to address foreign civilians as a persuadable audience. Through these narrative moves, the letter operates as a strategic communicative instrument aimed at shaping external perception, contesting dominant interpretations of the conflict, and strengthening Iran's legitimacy before an international public.

The study also confirms that public diplomacy and strategic narrative theory provide a useful analytical framework for examining political texts in situations of international tension. In this case, the open letter demonstrates that diplomatic communication is not limited to formal interstate channels, but may also take the form of direct narrative engagement with foreign publics. The main contribution of this study therefore lies in showing that an open letter by a head of state can function as a distinct medium of public diplomacy, particularly when it combines image management, historical framing, moral argument, and political persuasion within a single text. This finding expands existing discussions of public diplomacy, which have often focused more heavily on social media, embassy communication, and news discourse than on long-form political letters addressed to civilian audiences in rival states.

In terms of implementation, the results of this study suggest that researchers in political communication and international relations should pay greater attention to non-conventional diplomatic texts as sources of strategic political meaning. Open letters, speeches, and direct public appeals may serve as important materials for understanding how states communicate legitimacy and frame conflict beyond official negotiation settings. For policymakers and analysts, the study indicates that foreign-targeted political communication should not be treated as symbolic rhetoric only, because such texts may shape international opinion, influence moral interpretation, and reposition the image of a state in conflict. For this reason, governments, diplomatic institutions, and media observers should consider narrative framing and audience targeting as central components of contemporary geopolitical communication.

This study has certain limitations because it focuses on a single case and a single primary document. Therefore, future research is recommended to compare similar open letters, speeches, or diplomatic statements issued by leaders of other states in conflict situations, so that broader patterns of public diplomacy can be identified. Future studies may also combine qualitative narrative analysis with discourse analysis, audience reception analysis, or digital

media tracking in order to examine how such messages are received, circulated, and contested in transnational communication spaces. In this way, subsequent research can further enrich the study of public diplomacy by connecting textual strategy with public response and broader international political effects

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on a single case and focuses on one primary political text, namely Masoud Pezeshkian's open letter to the American people. While this allows for an in-depth interpretation of the letter's narrative and diplomatic functions, it also limits the generalizability of the findings to other leaders, countries, or conflict settings. Second, this study adopts a qualitative document-based approach, which means that it concentrates on textual meaning and political interpretation rather than on measuring audience reception or communication effects. As a result, the study cannot determine how the letter was actually perceived by American audiences, media institutions, or international observers. Third, the study mainly examines the letter as a finished political text and does not systematically analyze its circulation across digital platforms, media commentary, or diplomatic reactions, all of which may influence how the message is interpreted in practice.

Despite these limitations, the study opens several important directions for further research. Future studies may conduct comparative analyses of open letters, speeches, or public diplomatic statements issued by leaders in other international conflicts in order to identify broader patterns of narrative strategy and foreign audience targeting. Further research may also examine the reception dimension by investigating how such texts are interpreted by foreign publics, journalists, or policy communities through audience analysis, media framing analysis, or survey-based approaches. In addition, future scholars may combine qualitative narrative analysis with digital communication methods, such as social media tracking or discourse network analysis, to explore how diplomatic messages circulate, are contested, and are reinterpreted in transnational communication spaces. Such developments would help deepen understanding of public diplomacy not only as a matter of state-produced text, but also as an interactive process involving media systems, public audiences, and geopolitical contestation.

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