

Cyber Conflict Case Analysis

While there are widely accepted guidelines for what is considered fair conduct within traditional warfare, the rise of information technologies has presented concerns about whether these guidelines are sufficient for the modern world (Boylan, 2013; Taddeo, 2012). Information systems and the internet's global connectivity make it where nations can engage in a new type of warfare known as cyber-warfare. Through cyber-warfare, one country can cause severe economic and societal damage to another nation without ever needing to be physically present. A prime and recent example of cyber-warfare is the current conflict between Israel and Iran. These two countries are currently engaged in back-and-forth cyberattacks that only seem to be escalating (Amer, 2021; Da Silva & Collier, 2021). Of particular note is how most of the attacks mainly affected civilians and how the escalations are now beginning to endanger lives, not just property (Armer, 2021). This case analysis will use the ubuntu ethical tool to demonstrate why the cyberwar between Israel and Iran is unjust because the nations' hostility toward one another is primarily unfounded and is not creating a net benefit for either society.

In her article, "An Analysis for a Just Cyber Warfare," Mariarosaria Taddeo (2012) discusses the unique ethical issues of cyber-warfare that are not covered by traditional just war theory (JWT) and how they can be addressed by applying information ethics. One specific shortcoming of JWT when applied to cyber-warfare is that damage is classified as destroying physical property or objects. However, in cyber-warfare, attacks can be completely virtual and cause no physical destruction at all. As a result, a nation may be able to justify most non-violent and non-physical cyberattacks with current JWT. Taddeo argues that the infosphere is one aspect of information ethics that could reconcile this issue. According to information ethics, the infosphere is an all-encompassing concept in which members have a baseline collection of rights.

Specifically, all members have the right to exist in the infosphere undisturbed. Furthermore, if a member of the infosphere interferes with this right, it loses its right to exist in the infosphere. In other words, an aggressor that violates the rights of another unjustly can have its rights overridden and will no longer fall under the protection of the infosphere's principles. When considering this aspect of information ethics with JWT, non-physical damage and violations can be more adequately analyzed as just or unjust.

Using the concepts of JWT and information ethics outlined above, the current cyber-warfare between Iran and Israel could be considered unjust. In particular, Iran's potential motivations for attacking seem to unjustly interfere with Israel's right to exist within the infosphere undisturbed. For several decades, Iranian leadership has consistently vowed to bring an end to the state of Israel (Evental, 2022). Iranian leaders justify this standpoint with their religious ideologies, claiming that Israel is an imperialistic state with the goal of expansion and secularization of the Middle East, and thus threatens the existence of Islam. This reasoning seems to indicate that Iran's cyberattacks against Israel are motivated by the potential to weaken the Israeli state and prevent its religious influence. However, the Muslim population of Israel has been consistently on the rise since the 1960s, indicating that the Israeli state is not actively pursuing the destruction of Islam (Jewish Virtual Library, 2023). As a result, Iran's animosity and cyberattacks on Israel are unjustified because they are not preventing imminent harm and, thus, not creating a net benefit to the well-being of the infosphere.

Furthermore, if Iran is motivated by protecting Islam, its goal of bringing an end to the Israeli state seems extreme and likely to end up causing more harm than good to the infosphere (Evental, 2022). Even if Israel was attempting to secularize the Middle East and harm the infosphere, total destruction of Israel may not be the most just way to neutralize the threat to

Islam. It is possible that at some point during cyber-warfare, Iran's attacks may neutralize Israel enough to where it could no longer accomplish its alleged mission. If this were to happen, Israel would no longer be interfering with the status quo of the infosphere. As a result, Iran attacking Israel any further after this point would be unjust because it is causing harm but no longer producing any net benefit.

The ubuntu ethical tool can also be used to analyze the current cyberwar between Israel and Iran if religions are viewed abstractly as members of the infosphere. Using Taddeo's ideas of the infosphere, each religion could be classified as an individual member of the infosphere. Furthermore, each religion would be a member of a subset of the infosphere that includes all religions. A separate subset of the infosphere encompassing secularism would also exist. Since secularism fundamentally differs from religion in terms of worldview, it is more likely to be unsympathetic toward all religions (Center for Inquiry, 2023). In this case, all religions have attributes in common and have a potential common enemy. This analogy can explain why it is in the best interest of religions to allow other religions to exist peacefully in the infosphere.

Because Israel is such a central part of Judaism, an attack on the Israeli state would also be an attack on Jews living within Israel, whether or not harming Jews is Iran's intention. Using ubuntu, interfering with the ability of Israeli Jews to practice their religion would be viewed as a threat to the freedom of Jews worldwide. Furthermore, Iran acting aggressively toward other members of the religious subset of the infosphere would betray the value of ubuntu that stipulates group members must look after other group members to ensure the freedom and safety of all in the group. Consequently, this aggression may cause Iran to lose support from other members of the religious community when they are attacked by a secular entity that is hostile toward religion in general. If Iran were to be respectful of all religions while attempting to

accomplish its goals, it could help ensure the longevity of its religion because it could create allies with other religious peoples who would be sympathetic when there are genuine threats and acts of persecution toward Muslims and the Iranian people.

A central issue of cyber-warfare that Michael Boylan (2013) brings attention to in “Can There Be a Just Cyber War?” is the difficulty of properly assigning blame for cyberattacks. Unlike traditional wars, where soldiers wear uniforms and fly their country’s flag while committing acts of war, cyberspace provides an unprecedented amount of anonymity to perpetrators of cyber-warfare. The vast reach and openness of the internet enable people and nations to use computers and networks in other physical locations as proxies for their traffic to obfuscate their true origins. One country may use this ability to attack one nation while blaming it on another. Boylan (2013) argues that it is unjust to engage in counter-cyberattacks without definitively knowing who the initial perpetrator is because the counterattacks may harm an innocent nation. With the current back-and-forth cyber conflict between Iran and Israel, neither country has officially acknowledged they are responsible for the attacks on the other (Amer, 2021; Da Silva & Collier, 2021). One could argue that claiming responsibility for the attacks could be seen as similar to the uniforms and insignia worn by soldiers. In this case, neither country may know who is attacking it, and thus counterattacks would be unjust.

Even if the issues of attribution were resolved, the cyber conflict between Israel and Iran remains an unjust war because of the current escalation and changing nature of the attacks. Boylan (2013) argues that JWT and the principle of proportionality can be used to justify counterattacks resulting in similar amounts of damage to the initial attack. However, the counterattacks between Iran and Israel are often not equal in magnitude, particularly Iran’s actions (Amer, 2021). For example, Iran’s response to an Israeli cyberattack that severely

inhibited the operations of railways across Iran was to attack the computer systems of a hospital in Israel. While Israel's attack on railway communications systems may have caused considerable damage to Iran's economy, it likely did not endanger the lives of Iranian citizens. In contrast, an attack on the computer systems of a hospital could pose a significant risk to the health and lives of the Israeli citizens that the hospital serves. In this way, Iran's counterattack was disproportionate and unjust.

The ubuntu ethical tool raises the notion that the infringement of individual group members impacts the well-being of the entire group. In a 2019 speech, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei claimed that Iran is not antisemitic in its goal to destroy Israel (TOI Staff, 2019). Khamenei justifies this statement by clarifying that he only sees the Israeli state as a threat to their religion, not the Jewish people. However, Iran's actions can be construed as antisemitic when taking the ubuntu ethical tool and Judaism's beliefs into account, regardless of Khamenei's justification. According to Judaism, Israel is a land promised to Jews by God, and thus, inhabiting and controlling the land is vital to their religion (Eckstein, 2023). As a result, launching a cyberattack aimed at weakening the Israeli state would likely be seen as an attack on Judaism and its Jewish citizens. Furthermore, when examined with ubuntu, a cyberattack harming the religious freedom of Jews in Israel could also be extended to an attack on the freedom of Jews worldwide.

The cyber conflict between Israel and Iran is unjust and appears to have no apparent benefit for either nation. The continual population growth of Muslims in Israel over the past 60 years indicates that Iran's fears of Israel threatening the existence of Islam are likely unfounded. If Iran is concerned about secularism wiping Islam from existence, it should show respect for its fellow religious members of the infosphere, including the Jews in Israel. The principles of

ubuntu can be used to demonstrate that it is helpful for the survival of all religions. If religions respect one another and understand their shared struggles, they may be more likely to help each other when they are in need. Otherwise, a specific religion may have no allies to back it up when a secular power threatens its existence. Therefore, these factors make Iran's attacks against Israel both unjust and potentially counterproductive. A shortcoming of this paper is that it may appear as one-sided in favor of Israel. This mainly stems from the difficulty of finding English language sources that covered the cyber conflict between Israel and Iran from an Iranian viewpoint. Many of the sources cited in this paper, such as the Times of Israel and Jewish Virtual Library, are likely to be biased in favor of Israel. As a result, this paper likely fails to fully consider the nuances of the motivations and actions of Iran. Therefore, it is difficult to judge exactly how much blame belongs to each country and how unjust their actions are.

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