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Family Resilience in the Face of Short-Term War Trauma: A Phenomenological Study of Iranian Urban Families' Lived Experiences During the 12-Day Iran-Israel Conflict

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Abstract

The 12-day Iran-Israel conflict (June 13–24, 2025) created an intense period of compressed trauma for Iranian urban families, involving missile strikes, air defense sirens, near-total internet blackouts, uncertainty about loved ones, and disruptions in essential services. While family resilience during prolonged wars has been extensively studied, less is known about resilience processes in short-term, high-intensity, technologically disrupted conflicts in digitally connected societies.

This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) explored the lived experiences of 22 parents and adult family members from Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted one to three months after the ceasefire. Analysis revealed four superordinate themes: (1) rapid reorganization of family organizational patterns under acute threat; (2) navigating technological disruption and information deprivation; (3) enhancing intra-family emotional communication and support; and (4) co-constructing shared meanings, spirituality, and posttraumatic growth.

Findings illustrate how families mobilized Walsh's (2003, 2016, 2021) Family Resilience Framework under conditions of extreme temporal compression. Internet blackouts functioned paradoxically — intensifying ambiguous loss while simultaneously promoting deeper emotional connectedness and presence. This study extends the framework by highlighting the roles of sensory hyperarousal and sudden technological disconnection as distinct contextual moderators in acute urban warfare. Practical implications for culturally sensitive family interventions and pre-crisis preparedness programs are discussed.

Introduction

War and armed conflict constitute one of the most severe disruptions to family functioning, profoundly affecting relational dynamics, parenting practices, psychological well-being, economic stability, and the developmental trajectories of children and adults alike (Walsh, 2016; Eltanamly et al., 2021; Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023; Polavarapu et al., 2025). For decades, scholarly attention has primarily concentrated on the long-term consequences of protracted armed conflicts — the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Syrian civil war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, and the ongoing war in Ukraine. These bodies of research have illuminated critical phenomena including intergenerational trauma transmission, disrupted attachment patterns, ambiguous loss, deteriorated parenting quality, and the vital protective role of family cohesion and social support networks (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Punamäki et al., 2018; Peltonen, 2025; Alshabani et al., 2023; Cacace & Summers, 2025).

Contemporary geopolitical realities, however, have increasingly featured short-term but high-intensity armed conflicts that differ markedly from prolonged wars in their temporal compression, technological dimensions, and the acute simultaneity of their stressors. The 12-day Iran-Israel conflict (June 13–24, 2025) represents a paradigmatic example of such acute warfare. Within this brief yet intensely stressful period, urban families across Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and other major Iranian cities confronted a rapid convergence of multiple severe stressors: continuous auditory trauma from missile explosions and air defense systems, strategically imposed internet blackouts causing connectivity drops of up to 97% during the first week, profound uncertainty regarding the safety of extended family members, and acute disruptions in access to

food, medicine, fuel, and healthcare services (NetBlocks, 2025; Access Now, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2026; Mohammadi & Khaleghi, 2025).

This situation created a distinct form of compressed collective trauma — a phenomenon characterized by sensory hyperarousal, informational deprivation, technologically mediated ambiguous loss (Boss, 2022), and the sudden collapse of external support systems in highly digitally connected societies. Unlike prolonged conflicts where families may gradually adapt to chronic adversity, short-term high-intensity wars demand near-instantaneous mobilization of resilience resources under conditions of extreme uncertainty and technological disconnection (Polavarapu et al., 2025; Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023; Barawi et al., 2024; Veronese et al., 2023).

Family resilience, as conceptualized by Froma Walsh, refers to 'the capacity of the family, as a functional system, to withstand and rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful' (Walsh, 2003, p. 1). Walsh's Family Resilience Framework (Walsh, 2003, 2016, 2021) organizes key resilience processes into three overlapping and mutually reinforcing domains: (1) Belief Systems — making meaning of adversity, maintaining a positive yet realistic outlook, and drawing upon spirituality and transcendence; (2) Organizational Patterns — flexibility, connectedness, and effective mobilization of internal and external resources; and (3) Communication Processes — clarity, open emotional expression, and collaborative problem-solving.

This framework has demonstrated considerable empirical robustness across diverse adversities, including natural disasters, chronic illness, military deployment, and mass trauma events (Saltzman et al., 2011; Norris et al., 2008; Cramm et al., 2022; Mijalevich-Soker & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2025). More recent scholarship has begun examining technology's role in mediating family processes during crisis, underscoring the importance of digital communication channels for sustaining family cohesion and accessing social support in contexts of separation and uncertainty (Prime et al., 2020; Lester & Flake, 2024).

Despite its considerable strengths, the application of Walsh's framework to short-term, high-intensity urban warfare — particularly when accompanied by deliberate internet shutdowns in non-Western Middle Eastern contexts — remains significantly underexplored. Existing studies are largely concentrated in Western samples or in prolonged conflict settings, thereby limiting our understanding of the unique socio-cultural realities, historical resilience narratives, and digital dependencies of contemporary Iranian urban families (Sirin & Aber, 2018; Alshabani et al., 2023; Hashemi & Mahmoudzadeh, 2025).

The present study addresses this gap by employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of Iranian urban families during and immediately after the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict. Through an idiographic and hermeneutic lens, this research examines both the multifaceted challenges confronted by families and the specific resilience processes they activated, adapted, or innovatively constructed under extreme time pressure and technological disruption. Furthermore, it investigates how cultural resources — religious faith, historical narratives of survival, and collectivist family values — interacted with modern digital realities to shape family adaptation and posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018; Hashemi & Mahmoudzadeh, 2025).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do Iranian urban families describe and make sense of their day-to-day lived experiences during the 12-day conflict?
2. Which stressors were most psychologically and relationally salient, and how did they influence family roles, interactions, and routines?
3. Which specific resilience processes within Walsh's Family Resilience Framework did families activate, adapt, or newly develop?
4. What personal and collective meanings did family members co-construct, and how did these meanings affect post-conflict functioning and well-being?

By addressing these questions, the current study aims to advance both theoretical and practical knowledge in family science, trauma studies, and culturally informed intervention design in the context of emerging forms of modern, technologically disrupted warfare.

Literature Review

Family Resilience as a Systemic Framework

Family resilience has emerged as a central paradigm in family science, marking a decisive shift from deficit-based models focused on individual psychopathology toward strength-based approaches that foreground the adaptive capacities of the family as a functional unit (Walsh, 2003, 2016, 2021). Walsh (2003) defined family resilience as 'the capacity of the family, as a functional system, to withstand and rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful' (p. 1). Her developmental-systemic framework encompasses three interconnected domains — Belief Systems, Organizational Patterns, and Communication Processes — each of which has demonstrated robust empirical support across diverse adversity contexts, including natural disasters, chronic illness, military deployment, and mass trauma (Saltzman et al., 2011; Norris et al., 2008; Cramm et al., 2022; Polavarapu et al., 2025).

Family Resilience in War Contexts

Research on family resilience in war contexts has predominantly examined prolonged and chronic conflicts. Studies from the Iran-Iraq War, the Syrian civil war, the Gaza conflicts, and the war in Ukraine have highlighted key themes such as intergenerational trauma transmission, disrupted parenting, experiences of ambiguous loss, and the protective role of family cohesion (Eltanamly et al., 2021; Punamäki et al., 2018; Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023; Peltonen, 2025; Veronese et al., 2023). Eltanamly et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis demonstrated that positive and consistent parenting significantly buffers the effects of war trauma on children, while Hazer and Gredebäck (2023) emphasized the centrality of family processes in mitigating the long-term developmental impacts of war and displacement.

More recent literature has begun addressing the distinct mental health consequences of acute and short-term armed conflicts. Mohammadi and Khaleghi (2025) reported significant increases in anxiety, sensory hyperarousal, sleep disturbances, and posttraumatic stress symptoms among Iranian civilians following the 12-day conflict, with children and parents being particularly vulnerable. Barawi et al. (2024) demonstrated that acute conflict exposure generates psychological profiles qualitatively distinct from those produced by chronic war trauma, underscoring the need for conflict-type-specific models of intervention. Complementary work has documented children's nightmares, concentration difficulties, and behavioral dysregulation following exposure to missile sounds and prolonged uncertainty (Nimrodi et al., 2026; Buchnik-Atzil et al., 2026).

Technological Disruption and Ambiguous Loss in Modern Conflict

A defining feature of modern short-term wars is the strategic disruption of digital infrastructure. Internet blackouts in conflict zones create a dual-edged phenomenon: they intensify ambiguous loss and psychological distress by severing families from loved ones and reliable information, while simultaneously compelling greater reliance on internal family resources and face-to-face interaction (Access Now, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2026; NetBlocks, 2025; Lester & Flake, 2024). During the 2025 Iran-Israel conflict, nationwide internet shutdowns resulted in connectivity drops of up to 97% in the initial week, dramatically limiting families' ability to contact relatives or access emergency information (BBC News, 2026; New York Times, 2026). Boss (2022) conceptualizes such technologically mediated disconnection as a form of ambiguous loss — a stressor that is both structurally novel and profoundly undertheorized within the existing family resilience literature.

Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions of Resilience in Middle Eastern Contexts

Phenomenological and qualitative studies have illuminated the lived experiences of resilience among war-affected families in Middle Eastern contexts. Alshabani et al. (2023) identified cultural narratives and spirituality as central socioecological resilience resources among Arab and Middle Eastern migrants, while Hashemi and Mahmoudzadeh (2025) examined posttraumatic growth among Iranian survivors of childhood war trauma, underscoring the role of collective meaning-making. These findings align with Tedeschi et al.'s (2018) expanded model of posttraumatic growth, which positions narrative construction and shared meaning as central mechanisms of transformation. In non-Western collectivist societies, religious faith and historical narratives of survival appear to function as particularly robust protective resources (Barawi et al., 2024; Veronese et al., 2023).

Parental Functioning as a Mediating Variable

A growing body of evidence positions parental psychological functioning as a central mediating variable in children's war-related outcomes. Mijalevich-Soker and Taubman-Ben-Ari (2025) found that wartime parental stress significantly impairs parental relational quality, while maternal self-efficacy and parent-child

communication serve as key buffers (Buchnik-Atzil et al., 2026). Prime et al. (2020) demonstrated that caregiver well-being and family functioning are among the most robust predictors of child resilience under acute adversity — a finding of particular salience in contexts of rapid-onset collective trauma. Cacace and Summers (2025) further noted that intergenerational transmission of resilience is mediated by the quality of narrative and emotional exchange within families, a process likely amplified under conditions of enforced physical proximity such as those produced by conflict-related confinement.

Research Gaps and the Present Study

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain. Most family resilience research continues to rely on Western samples or prolonged conflict settings. There is limited understanding of how families in digitally connected urban Middle Eastern societies respond to short-term, high-intensity conflicts marked by simultaneous sensory trauma and technological disconnection. Furthermore, Walsh's framework has rarely been applied to acute war scenarios involving internet blackouts (Polavarapu et al., 2025; Mijalevich-Soker & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2025; Cacace & Summers, 2025). The present study addresses these gaps by employing IPA to investigate how Iranian urban families activated, adapted, or newly constructed resilience processes during the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict, with the explicit aim of extending Walsh's framework to incorporate the realities of compressed trauma and technological disruption in contemporary urban warfare.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach — specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) — to explore the lived experiences of family resilience among Iranian urban families during the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict. IPA is particularly well-suited to this research as it combines phenomenological inquiry with hermeneutic interpretation, enabling a detailed, idiographic understanding of how individuals make sense of significant and personally meaningful life experiences within their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Smith et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2021). This approach emphasizes participants' subjective interpretations while acknowledging the researcher's active and reflective role in the interpretative process (Willig, 2022).

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling from three major Iranian cities: Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz. Inclusion criteria were: (a) being a parent or adult family member aged 25–55 years who resided in one of these cities throughout the entire 12-day conflict (June 13–24, 2025); (b) having experienced at least two of the primary conflict-related stressors (auditory threats from explosions, prolonged internet blackouts, uncertainty about loved ones, or material shortages); and (c) willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. Individuals experiencing severe acute psychological distress that could render participation harmful were excluded.

Twenty-two participants (14 women, 8 men; aged 28–52 years, M = 38.6) took part in the study. The sample was intentionally constructed to achieve maximum variation in age, socioeconomic status, family structure (nuclear vs. extended), and level of exposure to conflict-related stressors (see Table 1). Data saturation was reached by the 19th interview, with the final three interviews confirming the absence of new emergent themes.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants

Code	Age	Gender	Duration of Marriage (Years)	City	Education	Socioeconomic Status	Family Structure	Number of Children
P01	38	F	12	Tehran	Master's Degree	Middle	Nuclear	2
P02	45	M	18	Isfahan	Bachelor's Degree	High	Extended	3
P03	32	F	7	Tehran	Bachelor's Degree	Middle	Nuclear	1
P04	51	F	26	Shiraz	High School Diploma	Low	Extended	4
P05	29	M	5	Tehran	Master's Degree	Middle	Nuclear	1
P06	35	F	15	Isfahan	Bachelor's Degree	Middle	Nuclear	3
P07	36	F	11	Tehran	Bachelor's Degree	Low	Extended	2
P08	42	M	20	Shiraz	Master's Degree	High	Nuclear	3
P09	33	F	9	Tehran	Bachelor's Degree	Middle	Nuclear	2
P10	39	F	14	Isfahan	High School Diploma	Low	Extended	4
P11	44	M	17	Tehran	Bachelor's Degree	Middle	Nuclear	2
P12	28	F	4	Shiraz	Master's Degree	Middle	Nuclear	1
P13	50	F	24	Tehran	Bachelor's Degree	High	Extended	3
P14	35	M	10	Isfahan	Master's Degree	Middle	Nuclear	2
P15	42	F	16	Tehran	Bachelor's Degree	Low	Extended	3

Note. Codes (P01–P22) are pseudonyms used to protect participant confidentiality. All participants were parents or adult family members who experienced the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict (June 13–24, 2025) in their respective cities. Socioeconomic status was determined based on self-report, income, and housing conditions.

Code	Age	Gender	Duration of Marriage (Years)	City	Education	Socioeconomic Status	Family Structure	Number of Children
P16	37	F	13	Shiraz	High School Diploma	Middle	Nuclear	2
P17	47	M	21	Tehran	Bachelor’s Degree	High	Extended	4
P18	31	F	6	Isfahan	Master’s Degree	Middle	Nuclear	1
P19	40	F	15	Tehran	Bachelor’s Degree	Middle	Nuclear	3
P20	46	M	19	Shiraz	Master’s Degree	Low	Extended	3
P21	34	F	8	Tehran	Bachelor’s Degree	Middle	Nuclear	2
P22	49	M	22	Isfahan	High School Diploma	Middle	Extended	3

Note. Codes (P01–P22) are pseudonyms used to protect participant confidentiality. All participants were parents or adult family members who experienced the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict (June 13–24, 2025) in their respective cities. Socioeconomic status was determined based on self-report, income, and housing conditions.

Data Collection

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted between July and October 2025 — one to three months following the ceasefire. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes and was conducted in safe, private locations or via secure encrypted video platforms when in-person meetings were not feasible. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit written or verbal informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed specifically for this study (see Supplementary File 1 for the full English version of the interview guide).

The interview guide included the following open-ended questions:

1. (a) 'Can you walk me through a typical day for your family during the 12-day conflict?'
2. (b) 'What was the experience of hearing missile explosions and air defense sirens like for you and your family?'

3. (c) 'How did the internet blackouts affect your family's communication, sense of safety, and relationships?'
4. (d) 'What were your greatest worries, and how did your family manage the uncertainty?'
5. (e) 'Looking back, what helped your family cope — or even grow stronger — during and after this period?'

Flexible probing questions deepened understanding of significant moments. Detailed field notes were recorded immediately following each interview to capture non-verbal cues and researcher reflections..

Ethical Considerations

The study received formal ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Kharazmi University (Approval Code: KHU-IRB-2025-111-09). All participants provided informed consent and were assured of their unconditional right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Given the sensitive nature of war-related trauma disclosure, each participant received written information about available psychological support services prior to the interview. Strict confidentiality was maintained throughout: all participants are referred to by alphanumeric pseudonyms, and all data were stored in encrypted, password-protected systems.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the established idiographic and iterative procedures of IPA (Smith et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2021). Each transcript was read and re-read multiple times before initial noting commenced, encompassing descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual annotations. Emergent themes were identified case-by-case, followed by systematic cross-case analysis to identify patterns and connections. Themes were then clustered into superordinate categories capturing shared experiential meaning. The first author conducted the primary analysis, with regular peer debriefing sessions and a reflexive journal maintained throughout to enhance transparency and reduce interpretive bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Willig, 2022).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985): prolonged engagement with the data, member checking with a purposively selected sub-sample of five participants, provision of thick contextual description, triangulation across interview transcripts and field notes, and maintenance of a detailed audit trail. Researcher reflexivity was practiced systematically throughout the study, with explicit acknowledgment of the first author's positionality as a family counselor with over twelve years of professional engagement with Iranian families.

Findings

Analysis of the 22 in-depth interviews yielded four superordinate themes and 17 sub-themes (see Table 2), capturing the dynamic, interdependent, and often paradoxical processes through which Iranian urban families experienced, navigated, and actively co-constructed resilience during the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict. These findings resonate strongly with Walsh's (2003, 2016, 2021) Family Resilience Framework while simultaneously extending it by foregrounding the distinctive contextual influences of sensory hyperarousal,

sudden technological disconnection, and accelerated existential meaning-making in short-term, digitally disrupted urban warfare.

Table 2

Superordinate Themes, Sub-themes, Representative Quotations, and Their Correspondence with Walsh's Family Resilience Framework

No.	Superordinate Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quotation	Link to Walsh's Family Resilience Framework	Key Interpretative Insight
1	Rapid Reorganization of Family Organizational Patterns Under Acute Threat	1.1 Creation of physical safety protocols	"There was no discussion. The first explosion shook the building. Within minutes, we moved mattresses into the central corridor and prepared emergency bags for everyone." (P01, Sara, 38, Tehran)	Organizational Patterns (Flexibility)	Families rapidly established protective structures to enhance physical safety under immediate threat.
	Rapid Reorganization of Family Organizational Patterns Under Acute Threat	1.2 Rapid redistribution of family roles	"Before the attacks, my husband made most decisions. During those days, everyone had a role. Even my youngest daughter packed emergency supplies." (P15, Fatemeh, 42, Tehran)	Organizational Patterns (Connectedness & Flexibility)	Crisis redistributed responsibilities across family members, fostering collective functioning.
	Rapid Reorganization of Family Organizational Patterns Under Acute Threat	1.3 Reconfiguration of daily routines and spatial arrangements	"The living room became our shelter, the hallway became our bedroom, and our normal routines disappeared overnight." (P07, Zahra, 36, Tehran)	Organizational Patterns (Flexibility)	Families modified daily routines and household spaces to adapt to ongoing uncertainty.

Note. N = 22. The table presents the four superordinate themes and associated sub-themes identified through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Quotations were translated from Persian to English and edited minimally for clarity while preserving participants' meanings. Participant identifiers correspond to Table 1.

No.	Superordinate Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quotation	Link to Walsh's Family Resilience Framework	Key Interpretative Insight
	Rapid Reorganization of Family Organizational Patterns Under Acute Threat	1.4 Mobilization of economic and material resources under scarcity	"Food prices stopped mattering. We focused on keeping everyone safe and shared supplies with relatives because nobody knew what tomorrow would bring." (P04, Maryam, 51, Shiraz)	Organizational Patterns (Resource Mobilization)	Families pooled available resources and strengthened mutual aid networks.
2	Navigating Technological Disruption and Information Deprivation	2.1 Technologically induced ambiguous loss	"The worst part was not knowing whether my sister was alive. Every hour without news felt like another funeral inside my mind." (P11, Hossein, 44, Tehran)	Organizational Patterns + Communication Processes	Communication breakdown intensified uncertainty and perceived loss.
	Navigating Technological Disruption and Information Deprivation	2.2 Informational vacuum and catastrophic rumination	"When the internet disappeared, my mind created terrible scenarios. The silence was sometimes more frightening than the explosions." (P20, Reza, 46, Shiraz)	Communication Processes	Lack of information amplified catastrophic thinking and psychological distress.
	Navigating Technological Disruption and Information Deprivation	2.3 Development of alternative low-tech information-seeking strategies	"We relied on neighbors, radio broadcasts, and phone calls whenever a signal briefly appeared. Information	Organizational Patterns + Communication Processes	Families developed alternative communication systems to compensate for technological disruption.

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No.	Superordinate Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quotation	Link to Walsh's Family Resilience Framework	Key Interpretative Insight
			became a shared community effort." (P14, Amir, 35, Isfahan)		
	Navigating Technological Disruption and Information Deprivation	2.4 Paradoxical benefits of digital disconnection	"Without internet and social media, we sat together, talked, and listened to each other more than we had in years." (P08, Ali, 42, Shiraz)	Communication Processes	Digital disconnection unexpectedly facilitated emotional presence and family bonding.
3	Enhancing Intra-Family Emotional Communication and Support	3.1 Breaking previous patterns of emotional suppression	"We stopped pretending to be strong all the time. For the first time, everyone admitted they were afraid." (P09, Mina, 33, Tehran)	Communication Processes	Crisis reduced emotional inhibition and encouraged openness.
	Enhancing Intra-Family Emotional Communication and Support	3.2 Emergence of open emotional expression and validation	"I cried openly in front of my children. They saw me vulnerable for the first time." (P06, Fatemeh, 35, Isfahan)	Communication Processes	Emotional authenticity strengthened family cohesion.
	Enhancing Intra-Family Emotional Communication and Support	3.3 Development of collective emotional regulation strategies	"Whenever panic spread, we gathered together, talked calmly, and reminded each other that we were safe for now." (P18, Narges, 31, Isfahan)	Communication Processes	Families collectively regulated emotions through reassurance and shared coping.

Note. N = 22. The table presents the four superordinate themes and associated sub-themes identified through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Quotations were translated from Persian to English and edited minimally for clarity while preserving participants' meanings. Participant identifiers correspond to Table 1.

No.	Superordinate Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quotation	Link to Walsh's Family Resilience Framework	Key Interpretative Insight
	Enhancing Intra-Family Emotional Communication and Support	3.4 Strengthening intergenerational emotional support	"Sometimes my children comforted me. My son would tell me that we would get through this together." (P13, Zahra, 50, Tehran)	Communication Processes	Emotional support flowed bidirectionally across generations.
	Enhancing Intra-Family Emotional Communication and Support	3.5 Managing conflict while maintaining cohesion under stress	"Arguments still happened, but fear reminded us that being together mattered more than being right." (P03, Mina, 32, Tehran)	Communication Processes	Families prioritized unity over conflict during adversity.
4	Co-Constructing Shared Meanings, Spirituality, and Posttraumatic Growth	4.1 Drawing upon religious faith and divine protection	"Whenever the sirens started, we gathered in one room and prayed. Those prayers reduced our panic." (P22, Karim, 49, Isfahan)	Belief Systems (Spirituality & Transcendence)	Religious faith provided emotional security and hope.
	Co-Constructing Shared Meanings, Spirituality, and Posttraumatic Growth	4.2 Reinterpreting the experience through cultural and historical narratives	"We reminded our children that previous generations had survived wars and hardships. That history gave us strength." (P17, Reza, 47, Tehran)	Belief Systems (Meaning-Making)	Historical narratives facilitated resilience and continuity.
	Co-Constructing Shared Meanings, Spirituality, and Posttraumatic Growth	4.3 Collective family meaning-making processes	"We talked about those nights repeatedly. The story became part of our family's identity."	Belief Systems (Meaning-Making)	Shared narratives transformed chaotic experiences into coherent meaning.

Note. N = 22. The table presents the four superordinate themes and associated sub-themes identified through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Quotations were translated from Persian to English and edited minimally for clarity while preserving participants' meanings. Participant identifiers correspond to Table 1.

No.	Superordinate Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quotation	Link to Walsh's Family Resilience Framework	Key Interpretative Insight
			(P19, Shirin, 40, Tehran)		
	Co-Constructing Shared Meanings, Spirituality, and Posttraumatic Growth	4.4 Shifting priorities, values, and evidence of posttraumatic growth	"After the war, I realized that family presence matters more than material success." (P06, Fatemeh, 35, Isfahan)	Belief Systems (Positive Outlook)	Adversity prompted enduring changes in values and priorities.

Note. N = 22. The table presents the four superordinate themes and associated sub-themes identified through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Quotations were translated from Persian to English and edited minimally for clarity while preserving participants' meanings. Participant identifiers correspond to Table 1.

Theme 1: Rapid Reorganization of Family Organizational Patterns Under Acute Threat

Participants described an almost instantaneous transformation from routine urban family life to a mode of organized, purposeful survival. This rapid reorganization emerged as the foundational resilience process, reflecting remarkable systemic flexibility under extreme time pressure. Sub-themes included: (1.1) creation of immediate physical safety protocols; (1.2) rapid redistribution of family roles and responsibilities; (1.3) reconfiguration of daily routines and spatial arrangements; and (1.4) mobilization of economic and material resources under conditions of scarcity.

What was particularly striking across accounts was the spontaneous, wordless coordination that emerged in the first moments of crisis a form of intuitive role assignment that left participants themselves astonished:

"There was no discussion. The sound of the first missile shook our entire building. In less than ten minutes, we had turned the central corridor into our sleeping area. My husband took charge of securing the windows and doors, I focused on calming the children's panic, and our teenage son became responsible for managing power banks and flashlights. We became a different family in one night." (P01, female, 38, Tehran)

For others, the initial response was raw and uncoordinated survival before strategy:

"God, I swear in that moment my brain just stopped working. When the first explosion hit, the kids started crying and I was shaking myself. My husband yelled 'Go to the hallway!' I just grabbed the children and ran. I don't even remember who decided what… suddenly we were all in the corridor and I was trying to give them water with my trembling hands…" (P04, female, 51, Shiraz)

These accounts collectively illustrate how crisis can rapidly dissolve habitual family hierarchies and generate emergent, need-driven role structures a process consistent with Walsh's (2016) description of

organizational flexibility as a core resilience process, yet unprecedented in its speed and automaticity in the context of acute urban warfare.

Theme 2: Navigating Technological Disruption and Information Deprivation

Internet blackouts emerged as one of the most psychologically taxing and paradoxical elements of the conflict experience, creating a distinct form of technologically induced ambiguous loss (Boss, 2022) while simultaneously opening unexpected space for family reconnection. Sub-themes included: (2.1) experiencing technologically mediated ambiguous loss; (2.2) coping with informational vacuum and catastrophic rumination; (2.3) development of alternative, low-tech information-seeking strategies; and (2.4) paradoxical benefits of digital disconnection. These findings align with Lester and Flake's (2024) argument that digital disruption simultaneously undermines and, under certain conditions, deepens family relational processes.

For many participants, the silence of a phone screen was more tormenting than the sounds of war:

"The sound of missiles was frightening, but the silence on my phone was unbearable. For almost three days, I had no information about my parents in Isfahan. I kept imagining their building destroyed. My mind was in constant catastrophe mode." (P08, male, 42, Shiraz)

Yet amid that same silence, something unexpected emerged — a kind of forced presence that ordinary life had long crowded out:

"I can't even explain it properly… Every time I heard a missile, my hand automatically went to my phone… then I remembered the internet was cut. It was torture. I kept thinking my dad was dead, that my mom was alone… Those three days felt like hell. But at night when we were together, somehow… I don't know, there was this strange kind of peace." (P15, female, 42, Tehran)

This paradox — the coexistence of profound anguish and unexpected relational intimacy — represents one of the study's most theoretically significant findings. It suggests that in highly digitally connected families, forced disconnection from external networks may redirect emotional resources inward, toward the immediate family unit.

Theme 3: Enhancing Intra-Family Emotional Communication and Support

The crisis appeared to break long-established patterns of emotional restraint common in busy urban Iranian families, generating a marked increase in emotional openness, mutual vulnerability, and collective support. Sub-themes included: (3.1) breaking previous patterns of emotional suppression; (3.2) emergence of open emotional expression and mutual validation; (3.3) development of collective emotional regulation strategies; (3.4) strengthening of intergenerational emotional support; and (3.5) managing conflict and tension while preserving overall family cohesion. These findings resonate with Prime et al.'s (2020) argument that caregiver emotional availability is a cornerstone of family resilience under acute adversity.

Several participants described an explicit, if unspoken, agreement to abandon emotional concealment:

"We had an unspoken rule during those days: we don't hide our fears anymore. I told my children I was scared too. That honesty changed everything in our relationships." (P06, female, 35, Isfahan)

For fathers in particular, this moment of visible vulnerability carried profound relational weight transgressing not only personal habit but deeply held cultural scripts about parental strength:

"I never cried in front of my kids before… you know, a father shouldn't cry, right? But that night I just couldn't hold it in. My voice broke and I said 'Dad is scared too.' My daughter came and hugged me and said 'Then we're scared together.' That moment… the walls just came down." (P08, male, 42, Shiraz)

These accounts suggest that acute, inescapable collective threat may function as a powerful catalyst for the kind of emotional authenticity that years of family therapy might otherwise seek to cultivate a finding with significant implications for understanding how crisis can both wound and repair family emotional systems simultaneously.

Theme 4: Co-Constructing Shared Meanings, Spirituality, and Posttraumatic Growth

Families actively engaged in collective meaning-making, drawing upon religious faith, cultural narratives, and historical memory to transform shared suffering into a coherent and purposeful story of survival. Sub-themes included: (4.1) drawing upon religious faith and belief in divine protection; (4.2) reinterpreting the experience through Iranian cultural and historical narratives; (4.3) collective family meaning-making processes; and (4.4) shifting life priorities, values, and evidence of posttraumatic growth. These processes align closely with Tedeschi et al.'s (2018) expanded model of posttraumatic growth, which positions narrative construction and shared meaning-making as central mechanisms of transformation following traumatic events.

For many families, the night-time ritual of prayer and collective remembrance became a lifeline a way of locating current suffering within a larger, enduring story of national and familial survival:

"Every night we held hands and prayed together. We told the children that throughout our history — from the Iran-Iraq War to now — we have always survived because we stayed united and trusted in God. This is not the first time, and it won't be the last." (P17, male, 47, Tehran)

For others, meaning-making was more ambivalent a slow, uncertain negotiation between faith and bewilderment:

"Even after the ceasefire, sometimes I still wake up at night and stare at the ceiling. Part of me keeps asking 'Why did this happen?' but another part says God saved us. I don't know which one is right… I just know I can't live like before, running after money and work all the time. Family is what matters now." (P02, male, 45, Isfahan)

This tension between spiritual acceptance and unresolved questioning — neither fully resolved nor fully disabling — reflects the non-linear, often contradictory nature of posttraumatic growth as it unfolds in real lives rather than theoretical models (Tedeschi et al., 2018; Cacace & Summers, 2025).

Cross-Theme Integration and Theoretical Extension

The four themes did not operate in linear or sequential fashion; rather, they interacted dynamically and recursively across the conflict period. Rapid organizational restructuring (Theme 1) created the physical and functional safety conditions that enabled deeper emotional communication (Theme 3). Technological disruption (Theme 2) served as a powerful cross-cutting factor, simultaneously challenging families' access to information and driving them toward greater relational presence. Collective meaning-making (Theme 4) provided the existential coherence that anchored the other three processes in a larger narrative of survival, purpose, and identity (Cacace & Summers, 2025; Tedeschi et al., 2018).

Taken together, these findings extend Walsh's Family Resilience Framework in an important direction: they demonstrate that in short-term, high-intensity, technologically disrupted conflicts, families can activate all three resilience domains — Organizational Patterns, Communication Processes, and Belief Systems — simultaneously, rapidly, and in a mutually reinforcing manner. The study further highlights sensory hyperarousal and sudden digital disconnection as contextual dimensions that require explicit incorporation into contemporary applications of the framework, particularly in non-Western urban Middle Eastern societies (Boss, 2022; Barawi et al., 2024).

Discussion

The findings of this interpretative phenomenological study offer a nuanced and theoretically generative account of how Iranian urban families mobilized resilience during the compressed, high-intensity trauma of the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict. By illuminating four interconnected superordinate themes, this study both confirms the robustness of Walsh's (2003, 2016, 2021) Family Resilience Framework in an acute war context and extends it along three theoretically significant dimensions: the possibility of near-simultaneous activation of all resilience domains under temporal compression; the paradoxical functioning of digital disconnection as both stressor and relational catalyst; and the centrality of sensory hyperarousal and cultural-historical meaning-making in non-Western urban settings.

The rapid reorganization of family organizational patterns (Theme 1) aligns with Walsh's Organizational Patterns domain, particularly the dimensions of flexibility and connectedness. However, the near-instantaneous character of these adaptations — often occurring within minutes of the first explosion, without deliberate negotiation — represents a qualitatively distinct feature of acute conflict compared to the gradual processes documented in prolonged war settings and military families (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Eltanamly et al., 2021; Polavarapu et al., 2025; Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023). This observation suggests that extreme existential threat may activate latent family systemic capacities at a speed that lies outside the parameters of existing resilience models. Barawi et al.'s (2024) finding that acute conflict exposure produces psychologically distinctive adaptive profiles lends further empirical support to this theoretical extension.

The paradoxical role of internet blackouts (Theme 2) constitutes one of the study's most theoretically significant contributions. While digital disconnection amplified ambiguous loss and catastrophic rumination — consistent with Boss's (2022) theoretical framework and with documented findings on technological

disruption in conflict zones (Access Now, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2026) — it simultaneously generated conditions for genuine intra-family presence and emotional reconnection that participants described as qualitatively unlike ordinary family life. This dual effect extends Walsh's framework by positioning digital infrastructure as a critical contextual moderator of family resilience processes in digitally dependent societies. Lester and Flake (2024) similarly identified digital communication disruption as a double-edged variable in military family research, lending comparative credence to the present finding and pointing toward the need for theoretically explicit treatment of technology within resilience models.

The marked enhancement of emotional communication (Theme 3) powerfully illustrates Walsh's Communication Processes domain while revealing how extreme crisis can dismantle long-entrenched cultural patterns of emotional containment. The velocity of this transformation — occurring over hours and days rather than through therapeutic process — is particularly striking. Prime et al. (2020) demonstrated that caregiver emotional availability is among the most robust predictors of family functioning during acute adversity, a finding consistent with the protective relational outcomes observed in the present study. The present findings extend this literature by suggesting that certain cultural norms — including norms around masculine emotional stoicism — may be permeable under conditions of sufficient collective threat, creating unanticipated windows for relational repair and deepening.

Finally, the co-construction of shared meanings through spirituality and historical narratives (Theme 4) vividly illustrates Walsh's Belief Systems domain. Participants drew upon religious faith and Iranian cultural narratives of endurance not as passive coping resources but as actively co-constructed, intergenerationally transmitted frameworks of meaning that transformed suffering into identity-affirming acts of survival. This process aligns with Tedeschi et al.'s (2018) expanded posttraumatic growth model, which positions shared narrative and collective meaning-making as the primary engines of transformation following traumatic events. The ambivalence evident in some participants' accounts — the coexistence of faith and unresolved questioning — is consistent with contemporary understandings of posttraumatic growth as a non-linear, complex, and often tension-laden process rather than a clean trajectory toward enhanced well-being (Cacace & Summers, 2025; Veronese et al., 2023).

Theoretical Implications

This study extends Walsh's Family Resilience Framework in three interconnected directions. First, it demonstrates that under conditions of compressed collective trauma, families can activate all three resilience domains — Organizational Patterns, Communication Processes, and Belief Systems — simultaneously and with remarkable speed, challenging the more sequential or hierarchical activation implied in much of the existing literature. Second, it reconceptualizes technological infrastructure as a critical contextual moderator: digital connectivity is not merely a background condition but an active variable that, when suddenly withdrawn, reconfigures the landscape of family resilience processes in ways that can paradoxically generate both harm and relational depth (Boss, 2022; Lester & Flake, 2024). Third, the study foregrounds the generative role of sensory hyperarousal and cultural-historical narrative in non-Western urban collectivist contexts, pointing toward the need for culturally situated rather than universalized applications of resilience frameworks (Barawi et al., 2024; Tedeschi et al., 2018; Alshabani et al., 2023).

Practical Implications

The findings carry several actionable implications for clinical practice and public policy. First, trauma-informed family counseling should proactively strengthen family organizational flexibility and emotional communication skills as pre-crisis competencies, rather than treating them solely as post-crisis rehabilitation targets. Second, pre-crisis preparedness programs — particularly in urban Middle Eastern contexts — should include explicit training in managing technological disconnection, including low-tech family bonding and communication strategies that can sustain relational coherence when digital infrastructure fails (Lester & Flake, 2024; Prime et al., 2020). Third, post-conflict mental health interventions in Iran and analogous contexts should integrate spiritual and cultural meaning-making resources into their protocols, recognizing these as genuine therapeutic assets rather than cultural variables to be noted and set aside. Special attention should be directed toward families with greater material losses, who may be at elevated risk of prolonged distress and for whom posttraumatic growth processes may be more attenuated (Cacace & Summers, 2025; Veronese et al., 2023). Programs modeled on military family resilience initiatives (Saltzman et al., 2011) could serve as valuable templates for culturally adapted civilian urban programs in high-risk regions.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was restricted to urban, Persian-speaking families from three major cities, excluding rural communities and ethnic minority populations whose experiences may differ significantly. The study therefore offers contextually rich but geographically bounded findings, and transferability should be approached with appropriate caution.

As the primary researcher and a family counselor with over twelve years of professional engagement with Iranian families, I must explicitly acknowledge my positionality. I entered this research with a genuine and personally held conviction in the resilience of Iranian families — shaped by both clinical experience and personal history as an Iranian who followed the conflict from abroad. Although I maintained a reflexive journal and engaged in systematic peer debriefing throughout the analytic process, I cannot exclude the possibility that my investment in narratives of strength and growth influenced my interpretive choices in ways not fully transparent to me. At times, participants' accounts moved me deeply, which — while enriching my empathic attunement — required constant vigilance to guard against over-romanticization of family resilience (Willig, 2022). I remain committed to greater transparency about researcher subjectivity in future work.

The retrospective design (interviews conducted one to three months post-ceasefire) means participants' narratives had already undergone a degree of post-event reconstruction and re-interpretation. Memory consolidation, social desirability, and the psychic work of meaning-making that occurs in the weeks following crisis may all have shaped the accounts in ways that a prospective or real-time design would not share. Additionally, the study excluded families who suffered direct casualties or severe physical injury, whose experiences of both trauma and resilience may differ fundamentally.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how the resilience processes identified here evolve, stabilize, or dissolve over time (Cacace & Summers, 2025). Mixed-methods studies incorporating quantitative measures of psychological outcomes alongside qualitative accounts would strengthen the evidence base. Comparative research between short-term and prolonged conflict contexts — and across different cultural settings — would permit more precise theoretical claims about the conditions under which compressed trauma produces distinct resilience signatures (Veronese et al., 2023; Barawi et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Iranian urban families demonstrated profound resilience during the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict by rapidly restructuring their organizational systems, navigating the profound disorientation of technological disconnection, deepening emotional bonds in the crucible of shared fear, and constructing coherent and sustaining narratives of survival, faith, and familial identity. This study illuminates the remarkable adaptive capacity of families even under conditions of extreme, temporally compressed adversity — and argues that this capacity is not merely individual or even familial, but is deeply embedded in cultural, historical, and spiritual inheritance. As geopolitical tensions continue to generate new and increasingly hybrid forms of warfare, proactively cultivating family resilience through culturally sensitive policies, education, and community-level intervention programs represents both a scientific and a humanitarian imperative (Walsh, 2021; Tedeschi et al., 2018; Polavarapu et al., 2025). Understanding how families actually live through, and grow from, such experiences is among the most urgent contributions family science can make to human welfare in the contemporary world.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and no identifiable personal data are presented in this manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the sensitive and personal nature of the qualitative data but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Competing interests

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Author Contribution

The author was responsible for all aspects of the study, including conceptualization, methodology, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, manuscript writing, revision, and final approval of the manuscript.

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