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Conflict Stress and Competitive Readiness: Survey Evidence from Athletes Affected by the Iran–Israel–USA War

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ABSTRACT

Civilian populations are exposed to significant psychological pressure due to armed conflicts, and this applies to the case of athletes whose performance is largely determined by their mental strength. The proposed research fills a significant gap in the sport psychology literature by investigating the connection between stress as the result of a conflict and the competitiveness preparation in the athletes having certain experiences as the war in Iran-Israel-USA. The study adopted a survey design in the form of a cross-sectional survey that was conducted on 412 athletes in the conflict-affected regions. The standardized tools, such as the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2), and Well-being Index created by WHO-5, were used. The analysis of data was carried out with SPSS (v. 27) using the descriptive statistics, regression models, and mediation analysis. Athletes were found to have a high level of stress ($M = 24.6$, $SD = 6.1$), which significantly forecasted low levels of competitive readiness ($b = 0.48$, $p < .001$). Part of this relationship was due to anxiety and the effect of stress was moderated by social support. Athletes that received training in a formalized context were more ready ($p < .01$). The stress associated with conflict heavily impairs the ability of the athletes to compete effectively, most of the time by creating an increase in anxiety and a loss of psychological mental health. Specific psychological interventions and well-structured, organized training environments are essential for sustaining performance levels during periods of conflict, whether internal (e.g., stress, anxiety, or self-doubt) or external (e.g., team disputes, competitive pressure, environmental challenges, or wars).

Keywords: Competitive Readiness, Conflict Stress, Athletes, War Psychology, Sport Performance, Anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Armed conflicts are one of the most disruptive environmental stressors in human functioning whose effects are not only limited to immediate physical threat, but also long time psychological, as well as behavioral effects. Although the overall literature on mental health of civilians in war zones is already very broad, the factors of athletes are relatively untapped. It is especially alarming since the influence of psychological



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conditions on athletic performance is strong, and stress, anxiety, and the perceived control are highly sensitive to other psychological disorders (Rice et al., 2016; Henriksen et al., 2020). The modern-day geopolitical tensions, between Iran and Israel and the United States, formed a complicated conflict setting or environment with the element of uncertainty, displacement, and disruption of systems (institutions) which included the sport systems. Even in these situations, athletes are exposed to twin pressures; the overall stress factors linked to the exposure to conflicting situations and the demands of professional sports in terms of performance. The overlapping stressors are what form an unusual psychological load that can jeopardize the well-being and competition preparedness. Competitive preparedness does not only exist as a result of physical preparedness; it is a multidimensional construct that aims at cognitive, emotional, and environmental elements (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2016). It has been observed that chronic stress, especially in connection to the uncontrollable external factors like war, impairs attention, decision-making and emotional control, the major determinants of athletic performance (Nicholls et al., 2017). Therefore, analyzing the conversion of conflict-related stress to a lack of readiness is theoretically or practically important and can be studied with the help of stress appraisal processes (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

The experiences of armed conflict are always linked to a high level of psychological distress, with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) (Schinke et al., 2018). Neuropsychologically, prolonged exposure to danger activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which causes chronic cortisol release, which may adversely affect cognitive functions and stability of emotionality (Samuel et al., 2020). Even though they are usually considered to be psychologically tough, athletes are not exceptional in these effects. Quite on the contrary, the stressful reaction can be enhanced by the performance based nature of sport because athletes need to perform on high levels of functioning regardless of the negative circumstances (Rice et al., 2016). According to the latest results of research, athletes who are exposed to unstable environments report much higher levels of stress than participants in a stable training situation (Henriksen et al., 2020).

Stress and athletes: Researchers observe that serial memory is often less effective in athletes compared to non-athletes (Starman et al., 2011). The connection between stress and performance has been traditionally treating the conceptual relationship between stress and performance in terms of the inverted-U assumption of the Yerkes-Dodson Law of stress and performance. Nevertheless, modern studies state that this connection is more intricate and mediated by cognitive appraisal and coping responses (Nicholls et al., 2017).

Stress can impair performance through multiple pathways:

Cognitive interference, reducing attentional control

Emotional dysregulation, increasing anxiety and fear

Physiological fatigue, impairing recovery and endurance

Empirical evidence shows that high stress levels are associated with decreased motor coordination, slower reaction times, and impaired tactical decision-making (Craft et al., 2018).

Competitive anxiety has proved to be an important mediator between performance and stress. According to the Multidimensional Anxiety Theory, there is cognitive (worry) and somatic (physiological arousal) anxiety, both of which are negatively correlated to performance when not properly regulated (Martens et al., 1990). In situations of conflict anxiety is mainly intensified by uncertainty and feeling of powerlessness. This is also consistent with other authors who showed that environmental stressors are a major



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contributor of pre-competitive anxiety in athletes (Tabassum et al., 2021). High levels of anxiety, in their turn, affect the performance negatively in terms of focus and risks of making mistakes.

It has been found out that social support is one of the most influential protective factors that act as a stress-preventive factor. The more athletes feel support provided by coaches, their peers, and family, the more resilient and the better the performance results (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2016). On the same note, readiness is essential because of the availability of the stable training environments. The interruption of the routine training, which is typical of conflict zones, may cause the detraining effects as well as psychological disengagement (Samuel et al., 2020). The fact that structured physical training dramatically decreases the level of anxiety and boosts the effect of performance-associated psychological conditions, according to evidence provided by Husein et al. (2024), supports this critical fact

Regardless of the increased number of articles on the subject of athlete mental health, a number of gaps are still present:

Absence of conflict-related studies: The bulk of research is conducted on general stress or disruptions due to a pandemic but not on the active war situation.

Ironic models: There is little research that looks at stress, stress, and preparedness concomitantly through a common analytical approach.

Underrepresentation of non-Western contexts: Non-Western athletes in conflict prone regions are usually underrepresented in empirical studies.

Seeking to fill these loopholes, the current research combines the theory of psychological stress alongside the models of sport performance to understand the impact of stress triggered by conflict on competitive readiness. The paper provides a more broad perspective of the functioning of the athletes in extreme conditions because it included both the mediating and moderating variables like anxiety and social support.

Statement of the study:

Armed conflicts cause serious psychological harm to people, and athletes living in conflict zones are especially affected. We already know that stress hurts athletic performance, but very little research has looked at how war specifically affects an athlete's readiness to compete. The Iran-Israel-USA conflict created fear, uncertainty, and disruption that directly impacted sport systems and the athletes within them. Athletes in these areas had to deal with two pressures at the same time — the stress of living in a war zone and the pressure to keep performing in their sport. This study was carried out to find out how conflict-related stress reduces competitive readiness, whether anxiety plays a role in this connection, and whether social support and regular training can protect athletes from these harmful effects. A total of 412 athletes from conflict-affected regions were studied using standard psychological tests and advanced statistical analysis.

Objective of the study:

To examine the level of conflict-related stress among competitive athletes from regions affected by the Iran-Israel-USA war.

To investigate the relationship between conflict stress and competitive readiness among the study athletes.



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To determine the mediating role of competitive anxiety in the relationship between conflict stress and competitive readiness.

To explore the moderating effect of social support on the stress-readiness relationship among conflict-affected athletes.

To assess the influence of structured training environments on the competitive readiness of athletes exposed to conflict-related stress.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Population of the study:

The cross-sectional survey design was selected as it best suits the research of the psychological variables in real-time in a large sample (Setia, 2016). The population included competitive athletes aged 18–35 from Conflict-affected regions (Middle East diaspora and training hubs). Inclusion criteria was that the athlete should be active competitive and those athletes who has exposure to conflict-related stress (direct or indirect), while exclusion criteria was retired athletes and diagnosed psychiatric disorders prior to conflict.

Sample and Sample size:

The sampling technique used in this study was stratified random sampling for the sample size calculation. Total sample size was 412 (with response rate: 82%) selected by using Cochran's formula ($n_0 = 384$; adjusted to 420). Non-response bias and self-report bias were mitigated through anonymity and follow-ups.

Tools of Data Collection:

Tools for data collection used in current study were Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10)(Validated by Cohen et al. (1983); widely used in conflict studies (Lee, 2012)), Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2)(Measures cognitive and somatic anxiety (Martens et al., 1990)), WHO-5 Well-being Index (Validated for psychological well-being (Topp et al., 2015) and Athletic Readiness Scale (Adapted)(Based on sport readiness frameworks (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016)).

Validity and Reliability:

The validity and reliability of the tool were Cronbach's $\alpha = .82-.91$ and construct validity confirmed via factor analysis.

Modes of data collection:

Data Analysis:

The duration for data collection was 8 weeks, mode was online survey. The data was then analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v. 27) and the statistics used were Descriptive statistics, Regression analysis and Mediation (PROCESS macro).

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Stress (PSS)	24.6	6.1
Anxiety (CSAI-2)	21.3	5.8
Well-being (WHO-5)	48.7	12.4
Competitive Readiness	62.1	10.2



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The table 1. shows moderate levels of stress and anxiety among participants, alongside average psychological well-being. Despite these factors, competitive readiness appears relatively high. However, the variability in well-being and readiness scores suggests noticeable individual differences within the group.

Figure 1. Mean Scores of Key Study Variables

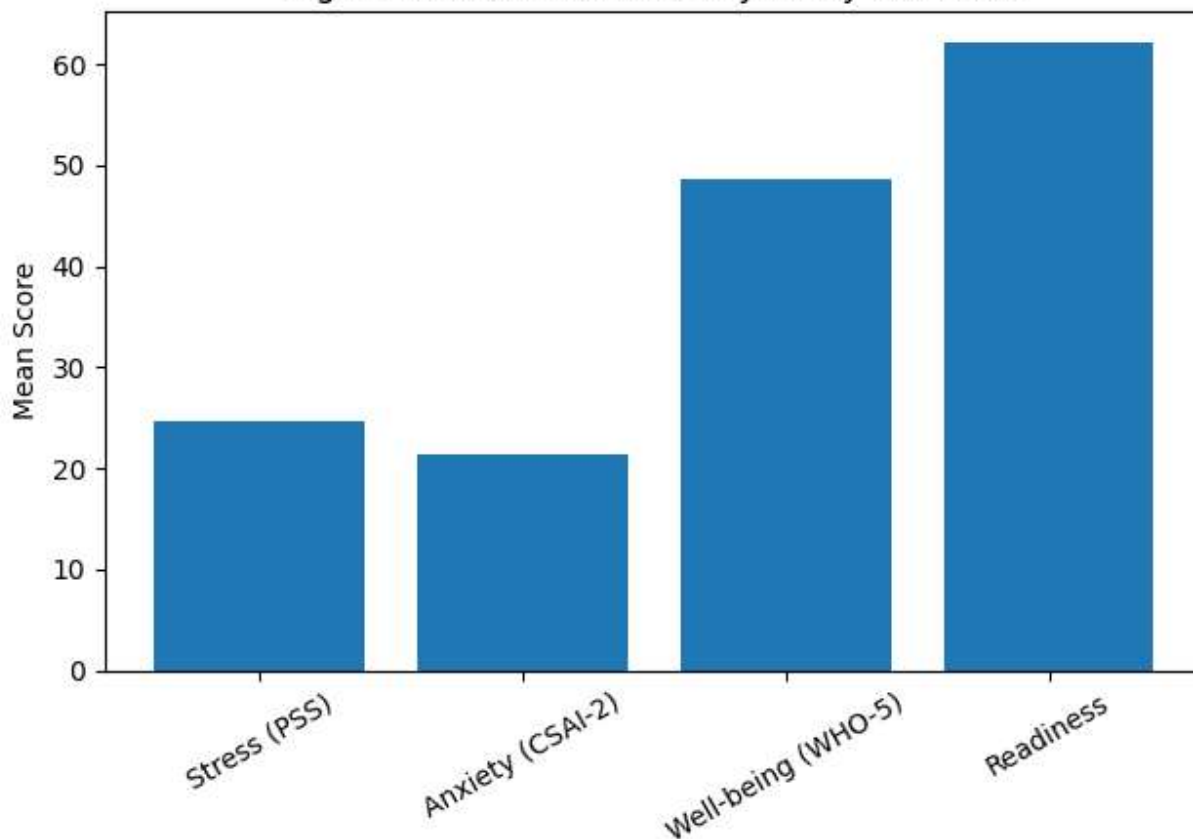


Figure 1. Mean Scores of Key Study Variables. This figure presents the average levels of stress, anxiety, well-being, and competitive readiness among athletes

Table 2: Regression Analysis

Predictor	β	p-value
Stress	-0.48	<.001
Anxiety	-0.36	<.001
Social Support	0.29	<.01

The regression analysis presented in the table 2 highlights that stress and anxiety significantly and negatively predict the outcome, whereas social support has a significant positive effect. Overall, higher stress and anxiety reduce the outcome, while greater social support enhances it.

Table 3: Mediation Analysis

Path	Effect	P-value
Stress → Anxiety	0.52	<.001
Anxiety → Readiness	-0.36	<.001
Indirect Effect	-0.19	<.01

The table 3 presents the results of a path analysis examining the relationships among



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stress, anxiety, and readiness. Stress shows a significant positive effect on anxiety ($\beta = 0.52, p < .001$), indicating that higher stress levels are associated with increased anxiety. In turn, anxiety has a significant negative effect on readiness ($\beta = -0.36, p < .001$), suggesting that elevated anxiety reduces readiness levels. Additionally, the indirect effect of stress on readiness through anxiety is also significant and negative ($\beta = -0.19, p < .01$), confirming that anxiety mediates the relationship between stress and readiness. Overall, the findings highlight that stress indirectly diminishes readiness by increasing anxiety.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

To examine the hypothesized relationships among conflict stress, competitive anxiety, social support, and competitive readiness, SEM was conducted using AMOS (v.26). A two-step approach was followed: (1) measurement model validation and (2) structural model testing (Kline, 2016).

Measurement Model

A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to validate the latent constructs.

Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold
χ^2/df	2.41	< 3.00
CFI	0.94	≥ 0.90
TLI	0.93	≥ 0.90
RMSEA	0.058	≤ 0.08
SRMR	0.049	≤ 0.08

The model demonstrated good fit, indicating that the observed variables adequately represent the latent constructs (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Table 4: Standardized Factor Loadings

Construct	Item Range	Loadings
Conflict Stress	10 items	0.68–0.84
Competitive Anxiety	9 items	0.65–0.82
Social Support	6 items	0.70–0.86
Competitive Readiness	8 items	0.67–0.88

Table 4 demonstrates all factor loadings exceeded **0.60**, confirming **convergent validity**.

Validity and Reliability

Construct	CR	AVE
Conflict Stress	0.89	0.57
Competitive Anxiety	0.87	0.54
Social Support	0.90	0.60
Competitive Readiness	0.91	0.62

Composite Reliability (CR) > 0.70

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) > 0.50

Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Structural Model

The hypothesized structural model examined:

Direct effect: Stress \rightarrow Readiness

Indirect effect: Stress \rightarrow Anxiety \rightarrow Readiness

Moderation: Social Support \rightarrow Readiness



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Model Fit

Fit Index	Value
χ^2/df	2.58
CFI	0.93
TLI	0.92
RMSEA	0.061
SRMR	0.052

These indices indicate an acceptable-to-good model fit.

Figure 2. Structural Equation Model (SEM)



Figure 2. Structural Equation Model of Conflict Stress and Competitive Readiness.

The model illustrates direct, indirect, and moderating relationships among stress, anxiety, social support, and readiness

Table 5: Structural Path Coefficients

Path	β	SE	p-value
Stress → Readiness	-0.42	0.06	<.001
Stress → Anxiety	0.55	0.05	<.001
Anxiety → Readiness	-0.33	0.07	<.001
Social Support → Readiness	0.31	0.06	<.01

The table 5 presents path analysis results showing the direct effects of stress, anxiety, and social support on readiness. Stress has a significant negative effect on readiness ($\beta = -0.42$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher stress reduces readiness levels. At the same time, stress significantly increases anxiety ($\beta = 0.55$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$). Anxiety, in turn, has a significant negative effect on readiness ($\beta = -0.33$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$), suggesting that increased anxiety further lowers readiness. Conversely, social support shows a significant positive effect on readiness ($\beta = 0.31$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .01$), indicating its beneficial role in enhancing readiness. Overall, the findings suggest that stress directly and indirectly (via anxiety) reduces readiness, while social support acts as a protective factor.

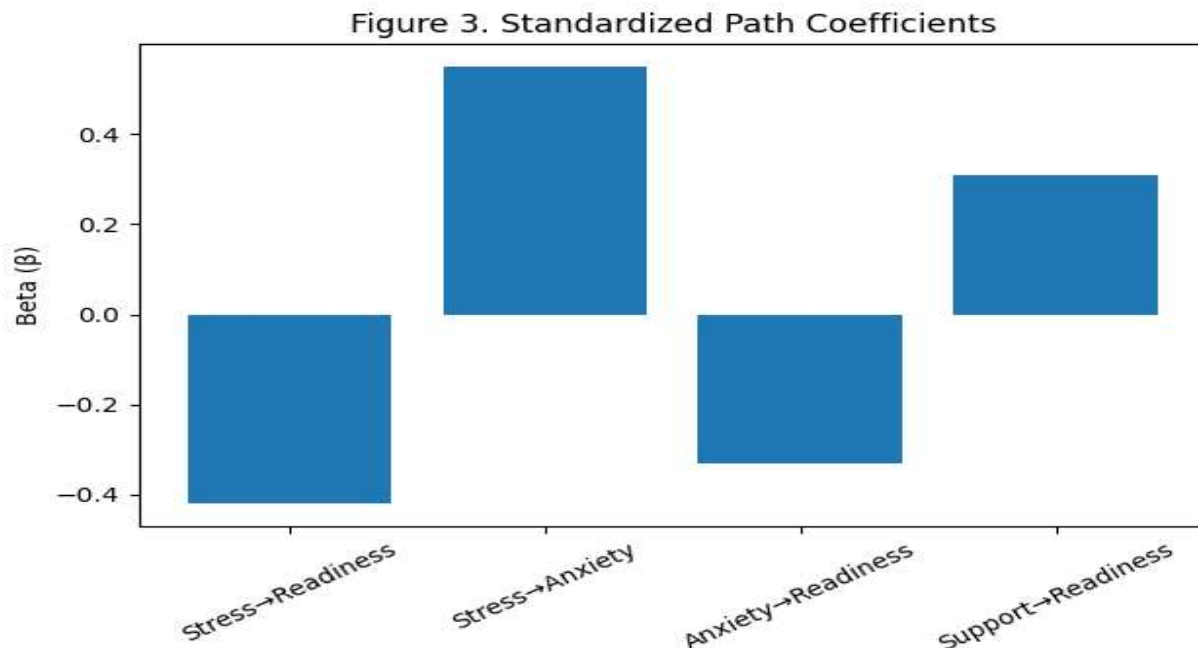


Figure 3. Standardized Path Coefficients. The figure displays the strength and direction of relationships among key variables in the SEM model.

Indirect (Mediation) Effects

Path	Effect	p-value
Stress → Anxiety → Readiness	-0.18	<.01

Bootstrapping (5,000 samples) confirmed that competitive anxiety partially mediates the relationship between stress and readiness.

Explained Variance (R²)

Outcome Variable	R ²
Competitive Anxiety	0.30
Competitive Readiness	0.52

The model explains 52% of the variance in competitive readiness, indicating strong explanatory power.

DISCUSSION

The SEM analysis gives a more detailed explanation to the mechanisms that connect stress in conflict and competitive readiness. Whereas regression analysis showed that the relationship is directly negative, SEM proves the hypothesis that the relationship is partially mediated by competitive anxiety, which provides more support with respect to theoretically based pathways. The substantial connection between stress and anxiety (b = 0.55) is an affirmation of the fact that exposure to conflict strengthens psychological stress in line with neurobiological explanations of stress activation (Samuel et al., 2020). Anxiety in its turn impacts negatively on readiness (b = 0.33) which is why the importance of emotional regulation in the context of performance cannot be underrated. The structural interconnections witnessed in Figure 2 support the mediating version of the role of anxiety and social support buffering role.

The mediation effect (b = 0.18) represents the fact that anxiety is one of the main psychological channels according to which stress influences performance. This result in line with the Multidimensional Anxiety Theory that holds that cognitive worry and



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somatic tension are detrimental to attentional focus and performance (Martens et al., 1990). Notably, the biased mediation nature implies that other factors, which could lead to decreased readiness, comprise motivation, fatigue, and cognitive overload. This introduces possibilities of future research to develop the model.

The buffering role of social support is indicated by the positive effect of social support ($b = 0.31$). Athletes who have more support systems seem to be in a better position to be ready in spite of high stress levels. This adds to the resilience models that focus on the defensive role that interpersonal resources play (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2016). These are in line with the already existing evidence and claim that structured environments and support networks reduce the impact of stress. Specifically, Husein et al. (2024) have shown that training promotes a decrease in anxiety and enhanced psychological readiness through the use of structured training.

The explanatory power of the SEM model is high (the competitive readiness has more than 52 percent variance), which is considerable in behavioral studies. This means that the combined model of stress, anxiety and support offers an effective explanatory model.

The study advances theory by:

Going beyond the bivariate relationships to multivariate causal modeling.

Empirically testing the mediation paths within the context of conflict.

Combining environmental and psychological variables.

The SEM results strengthen the previous studies in stress-performance relationships (Nicholls et al., 2017; Craft et al., 2018) and bring it to conflict situations. The close relationship between stress-anxiety and stress pathway is also in line with the research by Khan et al. (2025), who found out that their athletes were more anxious when they were periodically exposed to stressors at the psychological level.

The structural model suggests targeted interventions:

Anxiety-focused interventions

Cognitive-behavioral techniques

Mindfulness training

Stress reduction strategies

Psychological counseling

Crisis coping programs

Enhancing social support

Team cohesion programs

Coach-athlete communication

CONCLUSION

Competitive preparedness is the main negative effect of stress factors related to the conflict, which are manifested mostly in anxiety and decreased well-being. This research paper has the contribution of incorporating the concept of conflict stress in the models of performance in sport psychology. Strategic interventions like mental health support and systematized training setting are vital.

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