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## Perceptions of War

***The Symbolic Architecture of Sixth-Generation Warfare: Reading the Iran–Israel–  
United States Confrontation and Its Regional Implications***

This paper was produced based on a discussion seminar held by the Politics and Society Institute and presented by Professor of Media Studies Dr. Bassem Al-Tweissi.



## Executive Summary

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched a joint military operation targeting Iran's nuclear facilities, military infrastructure, and command centers. Washington designated the campaign Operation Epic Wrath, Israel referred to it as Lion's Roar, while Tehran labeled its response Operation True Promise IV. Neither this confrontation, nor its predecessor nine months earlier in June 2025, constituted a purely military event. From the very first hours, both were accompanied by an unprecedented wave of fabricated videos and competing claims over victory and defeat, to the extent that tracking the evolution of competing narratives became as important as monitoring the military strikes themselves.

This paper argues that these developments represent more than another episode in the long history of information warfare between Iran and its adversaries. Rather, they mark the emergence of a new generation of information warfare, shaped by the convergence of three transformations that have never before appeared with such clarity: the relative erosion of the United States' long-standing capacity to "manufacture consent" for military action for the first time since the Vietnam War; the rise of an alternative Iranian model based on the decentralized production of a "manufactured reality" through digital platforms; and the transformation of generative artificial intelligence from a supporting tool in propaganda campaigns into an independent battlespace in which both public audiences and large language models themselves have become strategic targets.

The two confrontations, separated by only nine months, revealed that the world is entering a new era of information warfare, propaganda, and disinformation, in which digital media and artificial intelligence play roles comparable to those of missiles, drones, and even heavy aerial bombardment. Within weeks, social media platforms were flooded with fabricated videos depicting massive explosions in Tel Aviv, allegedly successful Iranian missile strikes against U.S. naval vessels, and satellite imagery purportedly showing extensive damage to American military bases in the Gulf. At the same time, competing narratives claimed that the Iranian regime was on the verge of collapse, that its nuclear infrastructure had been completely destroyed, that Tehran was preparing to surrender and seek a ceasefire, and that widespread defections and betrayals had emerged within the Iranian leadership.

This paper seeks to answer a set of questions that extend beyond the immediate military question of who struck whom and where. How have historical developments and the contemporary information environment transformed the rules governing media



confrontation and strategic communication? How have propaganda and information warfare evolved into coercive instruments that, in many instances, rival or even surpass the strategic impact of missiles and airpower? How did the three parties to the conflict employ emerging media technologies, artificial intelligence, and the weaponization of information during this confrontation? Has this confrontation indeed inaugurated a new generation of information warfare? Finally-and most importantly-what has fundamentally changed, and how has the concept of victory shifted from the battlefield to the arena of strategic narratives, such that success itself has become increasingly determined by the persuasive power of information campaigns rather than by outcomes on the battlefield?

The paper concludes that none of the three parties succeeded in establishing a universally accepted definition of victory. Instead, each constructed and promoted its own narrative of success from the very first day of the confrontation, largely independent of the actual military outcomes on the ground. It further argues that small and medium-sized states in the region, particularly Jordan, increasingly occupy the position of affected observers rather than influential actors within this contest of narratives. This reality underscores the urgent need to develop independent national capacities for detecting disinformation and constructing autonomous strategic narratives rather than merely reacting to the narratives advanced by major powers. The paper concludes by presenting a set of practical recommendations directed at policymakers in Arab states and at research institutions concerned with information security.

### **Historical Context: Decades of the Symbolic Engineering of Conflict**

The intensity of the current propaganda war cannot be understood in isolation from its historical roots, which extend back several decades. Any serious examination of the symbolic and propaganda architecture of the Middle East must begin with the recognition that the region encompasses four major historical national identities that have produced state-building projects of varying degrees of maturity. The Persian national project gave rise to the modern Iranian state, while Turkish nationalism culminated in the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye. Alongside these stand two national movements that have yet to achieve fully sovereign statehood despite possessing historically grounded political aspirations: the Kurdish and Arab national projects. The propaganda system observed today is therefore not a recent phenomenon but rather the continuation of a long-standing competition among competing national projects, each advancing its own narrative to justify its existence and legitimize its regional role.

The historical foundations of Iran's strategic discourse toward the United States can be traced to the 1953 coup against the government of Mohammad Mossadegh, an event



accompanied by an extensive American propaganda campaign that systematically exploited fears of communism. For nearly three decades thereafter, Iran served as a central pillar of U.S. strategic messaging in the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet bloc. During this period, Washington mobilized not only political elites and business leaders but also religious figures in support of its regional strategy. Following the success of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran constructed a vast and sophisticated apparatus for propaganda, media, and strategic communications. Iranian official discourse subsequently recast the United States as the "Great Satan," while American narratives increasingly portrayed the Islamic Republic as a radical, extremist, and anti-Western regime. During the 1980s, these developments facilitated a broader transformation in Western strategic communication, shifting the dominant narrative from the "communist threat" to the "Islamic threat." Meanwhile, the U.S. media transformed the hostage crisis into a nightly televised drama that embedded a lasting image of revolutionary Iran within the Western public imagination.

Subsequent developments further institutionalized this mutually reinforcing doctrine of strategic rivalry. The Tanker War of the 1980s, the Iran–Iraq War, and, most significantly, the emergence of Iran's nuclear program as a major international issue after 2002 collectively marked decisive stages in the evolution of competing narratives. During this period, American strategic communication, reinforced by Israeli and broader Western messaging, consolidated three enduring representations that became central to Western discourse: Iran as a regional and global nuclear threat; Iran as a danger to freedom of navigation in the Gulf; and Iran as the principal source of regional instability through its network of proxies and affiliated political and military organizations. These narrative frameworks are not products of the current confrontation. Rather, they have shaped international perceptions for nearly a quarter of a century. Throughout this prolonged period, media and propaganda have assumed an increasingly central role in defining the meaning of victory, legitimizing military and political costs, demonizing adversaries, and persuading domestic audiences that escalation represents a strategic necessity rather than a political choice.

### **Information Disorder as the Infrastructural Foundation of Contemporary Conflict**

This confrontation unfolded at the height of the global phenomenon of **information disorder**, which has intensified steadily since 2016, accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and was subsequently tested in major conflicts, including the Russia–Ukraine war, Israel's wars in Gaza and Lebanon, and even in the relatively limited India–Pakistan confrontation of the summer of 2025. Over the past five years, the contemporary information environment has been characterized by four mutually reinforcing features. First, it has become saturated with incomplete, inconsistent, low-value, fabricated, and misleading information. Second, false and harmful content has acquired extraordinary viral capacity, as



social media distribution systems repeatedly amplify misleading narratives hundreds of times through algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. Third, this viral information is typically coupled with highly charged emotional stimuli-including grief, anger, hatred, revenge, and pride-which significantly enhance both user engagement and dissemination. Fourth, the traditional boundaries separating truth from illusion, fact from entertainment, and information from opinion have progressively eroded, weakening the public's capacity for critical judgment and immersing audiences in a persistent state of informational instability.

The growing significance of this phenomenon is reflected in the **Global Risks Perception Survey** of the **World Economic Forum**, which draws on the assessments of approximately 1,500 experts worldwide. The survey ranks misinformation and disinformation among the world's most pressing risks, placing them immediately after direct geopolitical confrontation and ahead of interstate conflict in the short term, while identifying them as the fifth most significant long-term threat among the ten greatest global risks expected to shape the coming decades.

Against this backdrop, propaganda has evolved from a supporting instrument of conventional warfare into a core component of sixth-generation warfare. Contemporary conflict is no longer defined exclusively by military operations in their traditional sense. Instead, the weaponization of information and the struggle to shape collective persuasion, normalize preferred narratives, manufacture public acceptance, cultivate fear, induce despair, generate psychological shock, and demonize adversaries have become continuous strategic operations conducted through digital infrastructures. These processes are increasingly measurable, scalable, highly personalized, and capable of precision targeting at unprecedented levels.

Beyond algorithmic recommendation systems, audience-targeting technologies, automated bot networks, and artificial intelligence systems for content generation, one of the most sophisticated emerging tactics is what may be described as **GPT framing**-the strategic shaping of large language model outputs. Competing actors increasingly flood the digital information environment with carefully engineered content while employing **data poisoning** techniques within the open online ecosystems from which generative artificial intelligence models derive portions of their training data. The strategic objective of these operations is to distort reality at its source, thereby structurally biasing the knowledge generated by artificial intelligence systems upon which policymakers, analysts, and the wider public increasingly rely. Such systematic manipulation creates a condition of **cognitive dependency**, undermining societies' sovereign capacity to construct independent understandings of political reality and compelling them instead to consume an



artificially manufactured version of reality that advances the geopolitical interests of those exercising influence over the infrastructures underpinning large language models.

This increasingly disordered information environment has produced a new and persistent form of information warfare that has expanded continuously since the second decade of the twenty-first century and reached unprecedented intensity over the past five years. Although it reaches its highest levels during periods of strategic confrontation, this form of warfare is not organically tied to conventional military campaigns. Rather, it constitutes a permanent contest involving states, non-state actors, corporations, political leaders, business elites, media professionals, content creators, and ordinary citizens alike. In this sense, the present paper argues that contemporary information warfare has become the clearest manifestation of a **"war of all against all,"** in which every participant simultaneously functions as both a producer and a target of strategic narratives.

### **How Do Audiences Perceive War? The Narrative Construction Perspective**

Contemporary theories of warfare increasingly argue that wars are not won solely on the battlefield but also in the minds of audiences and in the ways societies interpret the meaning, causes, and consequences of armed conflict. War, therefore, cannot be reduced to military operations alone. It is equally constructed through the narratives produced around it: Who initiated the conflict? Who is defending whom? Who is the aggressor? What threat justifies the use of force? Who has prevailed? Ultimately, which version of victory should the public accept as legitimate? The Vietnam War remains one of the most illustrative examples of this dynamic. Although the United States enjoyed overwhelming military superiority and achieved numerous tactical successes until 1970, it failed to establish a persuasive political and moral narrative capable of sustaining domestic public support. Consequently, both American and international public consciousness came to regard the war as a profound U.S. defeat—not because every military engagement had been lost, but because the political meaning of the war had collapsed, its legitimacy eroded, and public support steadily declined. Perhaps the most revealing paradox is that the Paris Peace Accords were signed while American aircraft continued to conduct bombing operations, demonstrating that media narratives can shape collective perceptions of victory and defeat with considerable independence from battlefield realities.

War narratives therefore serve not merely to describe conflict but to justify it and reinforce the conclusion that participation is legitimate, necessary, and morally defensible. Governments require more than military capability; they also require strategic narratives capable of persuading their publics that war is understandable, justified, and aligned with higher national interests. Consequently, wartime narratives are typically constructed around



several core elements: identifying the parties to the conflict; defining the enemy and explaining why that adversary constitutes a threat; assigning roles and moral characteristics to each actor; articulating the nature of the danger; envisioning the desired end state; estimating the necessary means and expected duration of the conflict; and, ultimately, defining the meaning of victory itself. This process can be understood as unfolding through three interconnected stages. The first is **representation**, whereby events are depicted through particular linguistic and visual forms. The second is **framing**, in which these representations are situated within interpretive frameworks that guide audiences toward preferred understandings of events. The third is the formation of enduring **mental images** that become embedded within public consciousness and shape subsequent attitudes and behavior. For example, portraying Iran as an existential threat to Israel transforms military confrontation from a matter of strategic concern into an unavoidable necessity. This process reflects the central propositions of the classical media theories of **agenda-setting** and **framing**, which explain how media influence not only what audiences consider important but also how they interpret political events.

Public perceptions of war emerge as one of the principal outcomes of these narrative processes. Media organizations do far more than report armed conflict; they actively shape its cognitive representation by determining who appears as the victim, who is portrayed as the aggressor, who is granted the legitimacy of self-defense, and who is deprived of political or moral legitimacy. Through selective language, visual imagery, repetition, and editorial emphasis, war is transformed from a material event into a symbolic construction—a coherent story populated by heroes, enemies, threats, and desired outcomes. At this point, the narrative of war becomes nearly as consequential as the war itself, for it does not merely describe violence but also renders violence acceptable, justifiable, and sustainable.

The digital age has inaugurated a new era of warfare centered on the construction of public perceptions. Text, images, videos, and cognitive representations have merged into an integrated digital environment that continuously produces and reproduces strategic meaning. Within this environment has emerged what may be described as **the wars of images and representations**, a form of conflict that extends far beyond conventional battlefields into digital platforms where every user possesses the capacity to create, disseminate, reinforce, or challenge competing narratives. Twenty-first-century wars increasingly conclude without decisive military victories, compelling belligerents to invest heavily in shaping public perceptions and manufacturing images of success even when military and political outcomes remain ambiguous. This illustrates the strategic significance of wartime narratives: they can generate a perception of victory before victory has been



achieved, mitigate the political consequences of defeat, transform failure into heroism, or portray the continuation of conflict as a moral imperative.

In the age of information warfare and digital media, each belligerent constructs its own strategic logic of war and its own definition of victory. Iran's conception of war is largely grounded in principles of sovereignty and national dignity and is deeply influenced by how Iranian society interprets wartime developments. It is also shaped by the Islamic Republic's broader standing among Arab and Muslim audiences. By contrast, the American conception of war is primarily governed by calculations of national interests, strategic costs, and human casualties rather than by concerns over international reputation alone. Washington has historically demonstrated a willingness to accept reputational costs when doing so advances broader economic or strategic objectives. These distinct conceptions of war ultimately determine how each actor designs its propaganda strategies, communication campaigns, and information operations throughout the course of conflict.

### **Propaganda and Media Targeting Circles**

From the perspective of strategic propaganda and information operations, this conflict demonstrated an unprecedented expansion in the use of artificial intelligence and coordinated disinformation campaigns. Numerous monitoring reports documented the extensive employment of these capabilities by Iran, whose efforts extended well beyond domestic resources to include contracted European and Asian firms that contributed to the campaign. On **X (formerly Twitter)**, for example, community reports of AI-generated misleading content during March 2026 increased tenfold compared with the same month in 2025. AI-generated disinformation on the platform reached an unprecedented level during the third week of the conflict, recording its highest volume since generative artificial intelligence became widely accessible to the public, with more than 5,000 reports linked to AI-generated content.

An analysis of the twelve-day war, drawing upon 592 fact-checking investigations conducted by 50 verification organizations operating in 17 languages, found that 72 percent of identified disinformation supported the Iranian narrative, while 24 percent reinforced the Israeli narrative. Approximately 85 percent of misleading content appeared in video format; 17 percent consisted of AI-generated videos, while 71 percent relied on authentic footage that had been removed from its original context and repurposed to support false claims. Against this backdrop, Iran's reliance on generative artificial intelligence to accelerate its information warfare strategy is hardly surprising. A recent investigation concluded that the Iranian government coordinated a sophisticated deepfake campaign employing manipulated videos, identical comments, synchronized publication schedules, and standardized



hashtag networks. At the same time, independent fact-checkers, academic researchers, and media-monitoring organizations documented systematic disinformation, propaganda, and narrative manipulation originating from all principal actors-including Iran, Israel, and the United States government-as well as from non-state actors motivated primarily by financial incentives who exploited the conflict to maximize online engagement. During only the first two weeks of the most recent confrontation, *The New York Times* identified more than 110 distinct AI-generated images and videos circulating across digital platforms.

Across both confrontations, information warfare and strategic communication constituted the principal instruments through which all parties sought to shape the conflict. Narratives preceded military action, accompanied it throughout hostilities, and continued long after kinetic operations subsided. Whereas missile strikes, air operations, and drone attacks occurred intermittently, propaganda systems and information campaigns operated continuously. The strategic targeting of audiences was structured differently by each actor.

For the United States, the primary target audience was Iranian society itself, followed by American and broader Western publics. Official messaging consistently portrayed Iran as a threat to regional peace and security while framing military action as a necessary instrument of deterrence. Simultaneously, U.S. information operations sought to influence Iranian domestic opinion by encouraging political instability and fostering anti-regime sentiment, despite repeated official statements emphasizing that regime change was not the declared objective of the military campaign.

Israel organized its strategic communication around three principal audiences. The first was the Israeli domestic public, where the conflict was framed as a war of necessity and an unavoidable act of self-defense against an existential threat allegedly posed by an Iran committed to Israel's destruction. The second audience comprised Western publics, particularly those in the United States and Western Europe, whose continued political support remained strategically important. The third-and arguably most sensitive-target consisted of the Iranian public, where information operations sought to encourage internal instability and undermine public confidence in the political leadership.

Iran's strategic communication similarly focused on two principal spheres. The first was the domestic Iranian audience, regarded as the primary line of defense for preserving the regime's political legitimacy. The second encompassed Arab and Western audiences. Iranian strategic communication has consistently sought to maintain a prominent presence throughout the Arab information space, viewing it as a central arena within Tehran's broader regional political and strategic project. Considerable resources have therefore been invested in Arabic-language media and communication networks.



Iran's influence within the Arab media environment cannot be assessed solely through publicly reported financial expenditures. Rather, it is sustained through an integrated ecosystem combining state-owned media, allied broadcasting networks, digital platforms, production companies, training institutions, and extensive content redistribution mechanisms. Iranian messaging has derived much of its influence among Arab audiences by redefining the concept of **resistance** and associating it closely with Iran and its regional allies. This narrative has historically been challenged by competing Sunni Arab media, which have frequently portrayed Iranian strategic communication as an extension of its revolutionary ideology and sectarian ambitions.

The Iranian media infrastructure targeting Arab audiences is widely regarded as the largest regional communication network of its kind, exceeding the scale of any comparable Arab media system. Some estimates indicate that Iran supports approximately 90 Arabic-language satellite television channels, including 28 Iraqi channels affiliated with Iran-backed armed factions, alongside dozens of Lebanese, Yemeni, Bahraini, Kuwaiti, and Iran-based broadcasters. In addition, roughly 210 organizations operate under the umbrella of the **Islamic Radio and Television Union**, the majority of which target Arab audiences through satellite television, radio broadcasting, news agencies, digital media platforms, production companies, journalism training centers, research institutions, and specialized online outlets.

The second dimension of Iran's strategic targeting focused on Western audiences, particularly in the United States. Iranian messaging emphasized the alleged illegality of the military campaign, portraying the United States and Israel as the aggressors while presenting Iran as the victim of Zionist and imperialist designs whose military actions constituted nothing more than legitimate self-defense under international law.

Perhaps the most significant transformation revealed by these confrontations is that the individual-not merely the state or the media institution-has become a central actor in contemporary information warfare. Ordinary users now function simultaneously as disseminators of strategic narratives, fact-checkers, and direct targets of influence operations. When a single message shared by an ordinary user is amplified through thousands of similar posts by algorithmic recommendation systems, its cumulative influence may rival that of official government statements. This dynamic helps explain why all three principal actors invested heavily in mobilizing volunteers, digital activists, and decentralized social media accounts rather than relying exclusively on formal state communication channels.

### **Engineering Competing Narratives**



## 1. Constructing the Iranian Narrative: *The Victorious Victim*

Five principal propaganda frames can be identified as forming the backbone of Iran's strategic communication throughout the confrontation.

The first is the "**victorious victim**" frame, which portrays Iran's offensive and defensive military operations as evidence of military strength, operational competence, and strategic legitimacy. This narrative simultaneously advances the claim that Iran occupies the morally and legally justified position in the conflict. Independent monitoring reports documented AI-generated content depicting Supreme Leader **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei** as a martyr confronting Western aggression, while global anti-war demonstrations were reframed as expressions of solidarity with the Iranian regime. Repeated messaging further justified Iran's deterrence strategy by presenting its military capabilities and nuclear program as legitimate expressions of national sovereignty and indispensable instruments for defending the country against foreign aggression. Iranian information campaigns consistently portrayed the United States and Israel as incapable of inflicting decisive strategic damage, while depicting Iran as resilient, strategically effective, and ultimately victorious. AI-generated videos also circulated widely, falsely portraying successful Iranian attacks against Israeli military bases, combat aircraft, ports, and major cities despite the complete absence of independently verified evidence supporting such claims.

The second frame centered on the concept of an "**illegal war.**" Within this narrative, Israel was portrayed as the primary aggressor responsible for dragging the United States into an unlawful conflict. Iranian influence campaigns produced dozens of AI-generated videos, many adopting a satirical style that depicted U.S. President **Donald Trump** trapped in increasingly difficult situations while Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** appeared fearful or desperate as events unfolded.

The third frame emphasized "**humanitarian suffering and atrocities.**" Its principal objective was to intensify anti-Israeli sentiment by highlighting civilian suffering. Iranian communication campaigns incorporated genuine incidents, including attacks affecting a school and damage sustained by **Gandhi Hospital** in Tehran. These events were subsequently reframed through misleading narratives that described evacuation procedures and blast damage from nearby airstrikes as deliberate attacks targeting neonatal wards, thereby amplifying public fear, anger, and emotional mobilization within Iranian society.

The fourth frame focused on "**distraction and the amplification of internal divisions.**" Information campaigns sought to exploit perceived political fractures within the United States-between the Democratic and Republican parties, within the U.S. administration, and



among Israeli political and military leaders. Hundreds of social media posts, fabricated reports, and coordinated narratives alleged that American military involvement was intended primarily to divert public attention from the Epstein scandal and those allegedly implicated in it. Other narratives accused individuals close to the U.S. president of profiting through oil transactions or futures contracts before the outbreak of hostilities. Additional disinformation claimed the existence of deep disagreements between the Pentagon and the president, asserting that senior military officials repeatedly intervened to restrain presidential decision-making.

The fifth and final frame portrayed Israeli and American political leaders as **reckless decision-makers acting against the interests of their own societies**. This pressure campaign relied heavily on AI-generated videos depicting coffins draped with American flags, soldiers expressing regret over the war, and children pleading with their parents not to fight. These narratives directly challenged what has often been described as the American "**madman strategy**," seeking instead to portray Western leaders as irrational actors whose decisions unnecessarily sacrificed their own populations. Supporting these findings, research conducted by **Clemson University** identified a parallel network of accounts associated with Iran's **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)** that impersonated users from England, Scotland, and Ireland while disseminating locally tailored political content designed specifically for those audiences. The same investigation also documented a Spanish-language network impersonating users across the Americas, including accounts falsely claiming to operate from Texas, California, Venezuela, and Chile, illustrating the increasingly sophisticated and transnational character of Iranian influence operations.

## **2. Constructing the Israeli Narrative: From *Hasbara* to Automated Strategic Communication**

During Israel's military campaign in Gaza, Israeli technology specialists, working with the support of the military and in collaboration with reserve soldiers employed by major technology companies such as Google, Microsoft, and Meta, established what became known as "**The Studio**." This innovation hub served as a platform for connecting technical experts with artificial intelligence projects dedicated to information warfare and narrative control. Within this framework, developers built an Arabic-language artificial intelligence model capable of powering a conversational chatbot designed to scan and analyze text messages, social media posts, and other forms of Arabic-language digital content across ten different Arabic dialects. The system enabled analysts to identify the most effective methods for designing intervention campaigns intended to shape and redirect public narratives.



The model was reportedly tested following Israel's assassination of **Hassan Nasrallah**, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, in September 2024. During this period, the chatbot analyzed public reactions across multiple Arabic-speaking regions and distinguished among different Lebanese dialects to measure variations in public sentiment. These analyses reportedly assisted Israeli decision-makers in assessing whether domestic and regional public opinion might support or discourage the possibility of further military escalation.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Gaza war, Israel introduced a public-facing artificial intelligence application known as **Words of Iron**. Designed to mobilize volunteers and supporters of the Israeli narrative worldwide, the platform sought to amplify pro-Israeli messaging across digital media. Developed by the Israeli technology company **Akooda**, its creators described the initiative as an electronic equivalent of Israel's **Iron Dome**, designed not to intercept missiles but to defend Israel within the information domain. The application continuously aggregates large volumes of Israel-related content from diverse sources, including Israeli media outlets, before applying automated filtering and amplification mechanisms. Content deemed supportive of Israel is algorithmically promoted, while material considered hostile or damaging is systematically suppressed or challenged through coordinated engagement.

During the 2023–2025 Gaza conflict, Israel also developed several additional artificial intelligence initiatives dedicated to strategic communication and information warfare. Among the most prominent was **STOIC/Zero Zeno**, a digital influence campaign reportedly linked to an Israeli political marketing firm. The campaign employed generative artificial intelligence to produce comments, articles, and tailored multimedia content distributed across multiple online platforms. Its primary target audiences were located in the United States, Canada, and Israel, where the objective was to reinforce support for Israeli strategic narratives.

The most ambitious communication initiative undertaken by Israel to date, however, has been **Project 545**, a comprehensive strategic communication and public diplomacy program launched by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the end of 2025. The project derives its name from its allocated budget of **545 million Israeli shekels** (approximately **US\$145 million**), dedicated to strengthening Israel's global public diplomacy and expanding its international digital influence campaigns. Its principal objectives included mitigating the reputational damage associated with the Gaza war, reversing declining international support for Israel, and responding to the escalating strategic confrontation with Iran.

Project 545 rests on three interrelated pillars. The first focuses on **influencing the knowledge environment of large language models**, including systems such as ChatGPT,



by shaping the informational ecosystems from which these models derive publicly available knowledge. According to reports describing the initiative, specialized digital units work alongside American technology partners to strengthen the visibility of Israeli governmental websites, official publications, think tanks, and affiliated digital platforms within the broader online information ecosystem. The strategic objective is to increase the likelihood that these sources are treated as authoritative reference points during AI-generated knowledge production, thereby reinforcing Israeli interpretations of political and military developments while reducing the prominence of competing Palestinian and Iranian narratives.

The second pillar seeks to **shape algorithmic visibility** by employing artificial intelligence tools to optimize content dissemination and influence the recommendation systems of major social media platforms. Rather than focusing solely on message production, this strategy aims to maximize the algorithmic reach and persistence of preferred narratives across digital networks.

The third pillar centers on **strategic narrative production**. Through large-scale generation and dissemination of digitally optimized content, the project seeks to saturate online information environments-particularly those frequented by younger audiences-with highly shareable multimedia materials designed to normalize, reinforce, and expand the reach of Israeli strategic narratives. Together, these initiatives illustrate Israel's transition from the traditional practice of *hasbara*-public diplomacy and strategic explanation-to an increasingly automated model of influence operations driven by artificial intelligence, data analytics, and algorithmic amplification.

The project is complemented by another initiative known as **Project Esther**, which reportedly finances pro-Israel American social media influencers through contracts valued at as much as **US\$900,000 per individual**. In return, participants are expected to publish coordinated content according to predefined monthly schedules, typically ranging from 25 to 30 posts per person. Together, these initiatives illustrate Israel's evolution from the traditional model of *hasbara*, centered on explanation and public justification, toward a far more sophisticated system based on automation, AI-generated content, precision audience targeting, and direct intervention in the information environments produced by digital platforms and their underlying algorithms.

With respect to the strategic framing of the confrontation with Iran, four principal Israeli narrative frameworks can be identified.

The first is the **"existential threat" frame**, which rests on the proposition that Iran is not merely another regional adversary but an immediate existential danger to Israel and a nuclear threat to the international community. Within this framework, Israeli military



operations are presented not as acts of aggression or escalation but as necessary preventive measures. Accordingly, the **Israel Defense Forces (IDF)** described **Operation Lion's Roar** as a precise and complex preemptive strike directed against Iran's nuclear program. Previous scholarship indicates that Israeli strategic communication has relied on the existential threat narrative since the early 1990s. During this conflict, however, the frame was expanded from portraying Iran as a threat to Israel alone to depicting it as a threat to global security. The strategic objective was to construct a narrative in which Israeli military action appeared not only legitimate but also essential for protecting the broader region from Iranian ambitions. Framing the conflict in existential terms also serves an important political function by shifting attention away from questions concerning the legality of the war or its humanitarian consequences. Once a threat is defined as existential, preventive military action, targeted assassinations, extensive airstrikes, and the large-scale use of destructive force become more readily justified within the logic of self-preservation.

The second framework is the "**liberating the Iranian people**" frame, which deliberately distinguishes between opposition to the Iranian regime and hostility toward the Iranian population. This narrative seeks to reinforce the message that Israel's conflict is with the ruling political system rather than with Iranian society itself. Strategically, this distinction serves two complementary objectives: undermining the legitimacy of the government in Tehran while simultaneously appealing to Iranian citizens and opposition movements. On **1 March 2026**, and again on **10 March**, **Benjamin Netanyahu** addressed the Iranian people directly through posts on **X**, urging them to "take to the streets by the millions to finish the mission and bring down the regime." At the same time, Israel reportedly conducted one of the most sophisticated influence operations documented by the **Citizen Lab** at the **University of Toronto**. According to the investigation, the campaign relied on more than fifty coordinated inauthentic accounts on X that promoted regime-change narratives targeting Iranian audiences. These accounts employed AI-generated profile images, fabricated screenshots falsely attributed to **BBC Persian**, synchronized automated posting, and other forms of synthetic content. Although the network was originally established in 2023, its activities intensified significantly beginning in January 2025 and escalated in close coordination with Israeli military operations, reaching peak activity as hostilities commenced.

The third framework centered on the concept of "**decisive victory**." Within this narrative, the image of victory was constructed before military outcomes had been determined. From the opening day of the campaign, Israeli strategic communication consistently projected the expectation of operational success and strategic superiority, framing military developments



within a predetermined narrative of inevitable victory regardless of the evolving battlefield situation.

The fourth framework emphasized the **"moral legitimacy of Israeli warfare."** Israeli communication consistently sought to reinforce claims of ethical superiority by asserting that Israeli forces conducted precise operations directed exclusively against military objectives, whereas Iran deliberately targeted civilians. This narrative further portrayed Israeli military forces as disciplined and governed by carefully defined operational objectives, while depicting Iranian attacks as indiscriminate and lacking adherence to internationally accepted norms governing the conduct of war. Collectively, these four frames formed the central pillars through which Israel sought to shape both domestic and international perceptions of the conflict, reinforcing its strategic legitimacy while simultaneously delegitimizing its principal adversary.

### **3. Constructing the American Narrative: The Weakest Information Campaign**

Six principal propaganda frames characterized the United States' strategic communication throughout the confrontation.

The first was the **"destruction of Iran's nuclear capabilities" frame.** American messaging evolved from emphasizing the need to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons to asserting that Iranian nuclear capabilities had already been successfully destroyed. This shift sought to portray military action not merely as preventive but as decisively successful.

The second was the **"self-defense and defense of allies" frame,** which justified military operations as necessary measures to protect the United States and its allies-most notably Israel-from Iranian aggression. Within this narrative, military action was consistently portrayed as defensive rather than offensive, emphasizing deterrence and collective security.

The third was the **"limited and precise operation" frame.** American officials sought to maintain the perception that the campaign fell well short of a full-scale war, presenting it instead as a narrowly defined military operation directed exclusively against specific strategic objectives. Official communication therefore framed the intervention not as a war against Iran itself but as a carefully calibrated preventive strike targeting a dangerous nuclear program.

The fourth frame emphasized **"decisive victory and military achievement."** From the opening stages of the campaign, official statements projected confidence that the operation had achieved its principal objectives. This narrative was reinforced through expert



commentary, official imagery, and carefully selected video material intended to demonstrate operational success.

The fifth was the **"the regime, not the people" frame**, through which American communication consistently distinguished between the Iranian government and the Iranian population. Official messaging stressed that the United States opposed the ruling regime rather than Iranian society, portraying military action as ultimately serving the interests of the Iranian people by enhancing their security and future freedom. Unlike Israeli strategic communication, however, American officials generally avoided making regime change an explicit objective and refrained from consistently advocating the overthrow of the government in Tehran.

The sixth frame portrayed the American president as **"the leader who wages war to prevent a greater war."** This narrative represented an evolution from the traditional image of the president as a peacemaker who ends wars rather than initiates them. Instead, military action itself was reframed as an instrument of peace when undertaken by a leader who claimed to possess the unique ability to prevent a broader regional conflict or even a third world war.

Despite these carefully constructed narratives, American strategic communication proved significantly less effective-and considerably more vulnerable to criticism-than either its Israeli or Iranian counterparts. Since June 2025, the credibility of official U.S. messaging had been weakened by a succession of disputed claims, extending beyond repeated presidential statements concerning negotiations and the destruction of Iran's nuclear infrastructure to include similar assertions echoed by senior government officials and amplified by major media organizations.

This credibility deficit became particularly evident in the striking inconsistency between official political and media claims immediately preceding the Twelve-Day War, which asserted that Iran's nuclear facilities had already been completely destroyed, and the justification advanced less than nine months later for **Operation Epic Wrath**, which was presented as a necessary response to an imminent Iranian nuclear threat. The contradiction between these two positions generated substantial public debate and widespread criticism, raising questions about the consistency and reliability of official strategic communication.

More broadly, these developments suggest a recurring tendency within American wartime communication toward the strategic manipulation of information. This pattern can be observed at three distinct levels.

The first involves **misleading claims originating from the president himself**. American fact-checking organizations documented approximately twenty-two major public



statements made by the president after 28 February 2026 that were subsequently assessed as inaccurate or misleading. These included assertions that Iran stood on the immediate threshold of producing a nuclear weapon despite assessments from arms-control specialists indicating that available evidence did not conclusively support such a conclusion; claims that Iran would soon possess missiles capable of striking the continental United States; allegations that the **2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** had granted Iran the right to develop advanced nuclear weapons; statements asserting that the United States neither depended upon nor was economically affected by Middle Eastern oil; repeated claims that Iran had been defeated and was seeking a ceasefire; and subsequent declarations that Iran's nuclear capabilities had been completely eliminated.

The second level concerns **information management by other senior administration officials**, most notably White House Press Secretary **Karoline Leavitt**. Critics accused official briefings of minimizing or dismissing reports concerning civilian casualties resulting from American military operations, including incidents involving schools, hospitals, and other civilian infrastructure, while emphasizing exclusively the military objectives of the campaign.

The third level consists of **contradictory assessments produced by different American institutions themselves**. When **CNN** reported an assessment attributed to the **Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA)** indicating that Iranian nuclear capabilities had been delayed by only several months rather than completely destroyed, the White House immediately rejected the report, describing it as "completely inaccurate." Similar divergences emerged elsewhere. Reporting by *The New York Times*, drawing upon multiple intelligence sources, offered substantially more cautious evaluations of the military operation's effectiveness, while *The Washington Post* emphasized the absence of conclusive evidence supporting official claims of a decisive strategic victory. Likewise, analytical programs across several American television networks featured extensive criticism of the administration's public messaging, particularly regarding the broader regional consequences of military escalation and the apparent gap between official rhetoric and independently available evidence.

Taken together, these inconsistencies weakened the coherence of the American strategic narrative. Unlike the Israeli and Iranian information campaigns, which largely maintained internally consistent interpretive frameworks throughout the confrontation, the U.S. narrative frequently struggled to reconcile political messaging, intelligence assessments, and media reporting. This fragmentation ultimately reduced the credibility and persuasive effectiveness of American strategic communication at a time when narrative dominance had become an essential dimension of modern warfare.



## What Has Actually Changed? Three Major Conclusions

### 1. From Manufacturing Consent to Manufactured Reality

While Iranian strategic communication successfully capitalized on the political, moral, and symbolic capital generated by Israel's prolonged military campaign in Gaza, the confrontation also revealed what appears to be the first significant failure of American propaganda to reproduce the phenomenon of **manufacturing consent** since the Vietnam War.

The concept of **manufacturing consent**, first articulated by **Walter Lippmann**, subsequently enriched through **Antonio Gramsci's** theory of cultural hegemony, and later reformulated by **Edward S. Herman** and **Noam Chomsky**, rests on the premise that mass media function as mechanisms through which political elites and centers of power define the information environment available to the public. Within this framework, news organizations selectively transmit information, establish legitimate boundaries of debate, and construct a controlled plurality of viewpoints that ultimately reinforces prevailing political authority while creating the appearance of open democratic discourse.

This model operated with considerable effectiveness during the United States-led invasion of Iraq, when official narratives largely succeeded in shaping domestic and international public opinion. The present confrontation, however, suggests that this model has become significantly less effective. Rather than reproducing official American and Israeli narratives, many Western media organizations adopted a more cautious and skeptical stance toward governmental claims. More significantly, major American news organizations themselves increasingly became sources of scrutiny and contradiction rather than mechanisms for reinforcing the official narrative. In this respect, the current conflict represents a potentially historic turning point. Since the Vietnam War, the United States had repeatedly demonstrated an ability to contain domestic controversy and sustain broad public acceptance of major military interventions-including the invasion of Iraq. During this confrontation, however, that capacity appeared markedly diminished.

Israel's two-year military campaign in Gaza fundamentally reshaped the global information environment in ways that extended well beyond the conflict itself. Media practices evolved across numerous countries, while international public opinion-particularly among younger generations-underwent significant transformation. This structural shift can be understood as the product of three mutually reinforcing forces: **ideological change, demographic transformation, and technological disruption.**



Ideologically, growing international concern regarding humanitarian consequences altered the moral context within which subsequent military conflicts were interpreted. Demographically, younger audiences increasingly relied upon decentralized digital platforms rather than traditional news organizations as their primary sources of political information, making them less receptive to conventional state-centered messaging. Technologically, the rapid expansion of social media ecosystems and generative artificial intelligence fundamentally transformed the speed, scale, and decentralization of narrative production.

Iran successfully leveraged the accumulated moral and symbolic capital generated by the Gaza war to portray itself as the victim of an unlawful military campaign conducted jointly by Israel and the United States, framing the confrontation as part of a broader pattern of coercive violence directed against the peoples of the Middle East. As the traditional mechanisms of **manufacturing consent** became less capable of securing widespread acceptance of official Western narratives, Iranian strategic communication increasingly sought to occupy the resulting informational vacuum through what may be described as **manufactured reality**.

Unlike the earlier model, which relied primarily on persuading audiences to accept an official interpretation of observable events, manufactured reality seeks to shape the very environment within which reality is perceived. Rather than merely influencing public opinion, it constructs dense, rapidly circulating digital narratives that redefine what audiences experience as factual in the first place. Through coordinated social media campaigns, synthetic audiovisual content, algorithmic amplification, and networked digital dissemination, the objective shifts from generating consent to producing an alternative informational reality capable of dominating collective perception before competing interpretations can emerge. This evolution represents one of the most consequential transformations in contemporary information warfare, where strategic success increasingly depends not simply on controlling the narrative, but on controlling the informational conditions under which reality itself is constructed and understood.

## **2. The Iranian Transformation: From Religious Discourse to National Symbolism**

One of the principal reasons for the effectiveness of Iranian strategic communication during this confrontation was its adoption of new approaches, both in terms of technological tools and narrative content. Capitalizing on the opportunities offered by digital platforms—particularly **TikTok**—Iran moved beyond conventional state propaganda toward a communication style specifically designed for algorithm-driven media environments.



A notable illustration of this transformation was the song "**From Tehran to D.C.**", which represents a significant departure from earlier models of Iranian political messaging. Combining fast-paced Western musical styles, generative artificial intelligence, and concise political messages tailored for rapid digital consumption, the production deliberately incorporated cultural references familiar to American audiences. More importantly, it marked a shift in rhetorical strategy. Rather than relying on confrontational slogans, the campaign sought to cultivate empathy. The traditional revolutionary language of "**Death to America**" gave way to a narrative emphasizing shared human suffering, encapsulated in the message: "**We and you are both victims of war.**"

The campaign achieved remarkable visibility within the United States, reportedly attracting approximately **145 million views** during the first week following its release in mid-March 2026. It formed part of a broader series of short-form videos designed using an aesthetic resembling the globally recognizable **LEGO** style, including another production entitled "**I Don't Hate the American.**" Unlike earlier generations of Iranian propaganda, which emphasized direct hostility toward the United States, this new wave relied on emotionally accessible storytelling, culturally familiar visual language, and highly shareable digital formats. The transformation reflects a broader shift in Iranian strategic communication from overt ideological confrontation toward rapid emotional engagement designed for algorithmic circulation and user-driven redistribution.

This stylistic evolution was accompanied by the extensive deployment of AI-generated LEGO-style videos that appeared almost immediately after the outbreak of hostilities. These short-form productions were specifically designed for rapid dissemination across digital platforms, compressing complex military events into highly simplified visual narratives featuring fighter aircraft, missile strikes, urban destruction, and recognizable political figures such as U.S. President **Donald Trump**, Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu**, and senior Iranian and international leaders. The videos achieved widespread global circulation and illustrated a marked departure from the solemn and formal tone traditionally associated with Iranian state media. Instead of relying primarily on official statements, military communiqués, and ideological speeches, Iranian strategic communication increasingly adopted the native language of social media: irony, brevity, visual storytelling, music, humor, and emotional shock.

Equally significant was a transformation in the symbolic foundations of Iranian propaganda itself. Religious imagery rooted in Shi'a concepts of martyrdom—which had constituted a central pillar of official discourse for decades—became noticeably less prominent, while Persian national and historical symbols assumed increasing importance. Many of these nationalist symbols had previously been marginalized within the Islamic Republic because



of their association with Iran's monarchical past. Their reemergence reflects a deeper evolution within official Iranian strategic communication: a gradual transition from a predominantly religious propaganda system toward one increasingly grounded in national identity and historical civilization.

This growing nationalist orientation became evident through the repeated use of images depicting the Iranian national football team saluting the national flag, alongside prominent visuals of the new Supreme Leader, **Mojtaba Khamenei**, standing before an enormous Iranian flag. Public statements attributed to **Donald Trump**, warning that American military action could "erase Iranian civilization" if the government failed to comply with U.S. demands, unintentionally reinforced this shift by enabling Iranian communicators to redefine the conflict not simply as a struggle over the survival of an Islamic political system but as a defense of an ancient nation, a historic civilization, and a shared cultural identity.

The same nationalist logic also informed the symbolic treatment of the **Strait of Hormuz**. Rather than portraying control over the waterway primarily as an ideological or religious achievement, Iranian messaging increasingly framed it as a manifestation of national sovereignty and historical prestige. In doing so, contemporary Iranian propaganda demonstrates a broader strategic adaptation: replacing exclusively revolutionary religious symbolism with a more inclusive civic nationalism capable of resonating simultaneously with domestic audiences, regional publics, and international observers. This evolution illustrates how contemporary information warfare increasingly depends not only on technological innovation but also on the capacity to redefine collective identity through symbols that possess broader emotional and cultural appeal.

The confrontation also revealed the relative limitations of American and Israeli information campaigns in mobilizing **Generation Z** in Iran—the demographic that consumes and produces the largest volume of digital content and upon which both countries appeared to place considerable expectations as a potential catalyst for domestic political change. Although this generation has grown up amid a pronounced gap between an official political discourse that remains highly restrictive and a social and cultural environment that has become increasingly open, that gap did not automatically translate into receptiveness toward external strategic messaging. Instead, it appears to have fostered a more complex form of critical awareness, enabling many young Iranians to compare their domestic circumstances with developments abroad while simultaneously becoming more sensitive to foreign military action directed against their country.

The limited response of this generation to American and Israeli strategic communication can be understood within the context of an evolving domestic relationship between the Iranian



state and younger citizens. Over recent years, the Iranian authorities have demonstrated greater tolerance toward aspects of everyday urban life, including styles of dress, patterns of cultural consumption, unofficial music, youth language, and the expanding public visibility of women in major cities. At the same time, however, the state has retained the capacity to activate powerful expressions of national identity whenever the country faces external military pressure. Consequently, the distance separating the younger generation from the political establishment did not become the strategic opportunity anticipated by Iran's adversaries. Instead, the outbreak of war temporarily reinforced a broader sense of national solidarity centered on the defense of the country.

This shift was also reflected symbolically in official media. State television coverage of government-organized public gatherings included interviews with women who were not wearing the hijab—an image that had rarely, if ever, appeared previously in Iranian state broadcasting. Likewise, a large public billboard displayed in Tehran juxtaposed the image of **Rais Ali Delvari**, the historic leader of resistance against the British occupation of the Persian Gulf coast in the early twentieth century, alongside a commander of the **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)**. Depicted together with raised hands symbolically closing the **Strait of Hormuz**, the image fused historical memory with contemporary military symbolism, reinforcing a narrative that framed the current confrontation as the continuation of a long tradition of defending Iranian sovereignty.

Another notable transformation was the growing use of **humor, internet memes, animation, rap music, and short-form digital content** as instruments of psychological warfare. Iran effectively exploited satire by transforming strategic communication into highly shareable popular culture infused with recognizable elements of Western digital aesthetics. Rather than responding to competing narratives through direct factual rebuttal, satirical content sought to undermine the symbolic authority of opponents, reduce the psychological effectiveness of fear-based messaging, and recast American strategic narratives as objects of ridicule.

In this respect, Iranian information campaigns did not primarily seek to persuade American audiences of the factual accuracy of Iranian claims. Instead, they largely abandoned the conventional requirement of establishing credibility and focused on reshaping the communicative environment itself. Through humor and parody, the American information space was reframed as a theater of absurdity allegedly manipulated by what Iranian messaging portrayed as Israeli deception and strategic miscalculation. Satire thus became a mechanism not for proving truth but for destabilizing the authority of competing narratives.



From a broader historical perspective, satire possesses considerable strategic value because it redistributes symbolic power by challenging established sources of legitimacy. One of the most frequently cited historical illustrations of this phenomenon emerged during the **Protestant Reformation**, when pamphlets, cartoons, and satirical illustrations played a significant role in undermining the authority of the **Catholic Church**. That experience demonstrates how ridicule can weaken institutions whose legitimacy once appeared deeply entrenched. In the contemporary digital environment, memes, parody, and viral humor perform a comparable strategic function, serving not merely as forms of entertainment but as increasingly influential instruments within the wider architecture of information warfare.

### **The Failure of All Parties to Define Victory**

In an environment saturated with disinformation, competing narratives, and pervasive information disorder-and in the absence of decisive military outcomes-the contemporary battlefield no longer produces clear winners and losers in the classical sense. When military operations fail to generate an unequivocal strategic outcome, propaganda and information warfare assume a final and decisive function: constructing the public meaning of victory and defeat. Throughout this confrontation, each belligerent sought to establish its own image of victory from the very first day of hostilities, well before military results had been conclusively determined.

Iran emphasized the scale of its retaliatory strikes, portraying both Israel and the United States as unable to inflict decisive damage while presenting its own response as extensive, effective, and strategically painful for its adversaries. Within the Iranian narrative, the continued survival of the political system itself became the ultimate measure of victory. Control over, or the ability to threaten, the **Strait of Hormuz** was similarly elevated as the symbolic culmination of that success, representing not merely a military capability but a demonstration of national resilience and strategic leverage.

Israel, by contrast, grounded its narrative of victory in the precision of its military operations. Official communication emphasized the extensive destruction inflicted upon Iranian military infrastructure, the effectiveness of Israeli intelligence operations, and the successful targeting of senior political, military, and security leaders-including the Supreme Leader-as evidence of decisive strategic superiority. Victory, from the Israeli perspective, was defined less by territorial gains than by the degradation of Iran's strategic capabilities and leadership structure.

The United States constructed a third and distinct narrative of success. American officials argued that U.S. military operations had effectively halted Iran's nuclear program, prevented Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons, restored credible deterrence, and compelled Iran



to return to negotiations. Within this framework, diplomatic engagement itself became the final expression of victory, demonstrating that military force had successfully reshaped Iranian strategic calculations.

The confrontation therefore demonstrated that victory no longer awaits the publication of a final military communiqué, nor is it determined exclusively by battlefield outcomes. Instead, victory is increasingly manufactured on a daily basis through strategic communication and through the narratives that shape public understanding of war. Information campaigns no longer accompany military operations; they have become an integral arena in which the meaning of military action is continuously negotiated, contested, and reconstructed.

The conflict further revealed that digital platforms have evolved into permanent extensions of the battlefield. Unlike conventional fronts, these information frontiers never fall silent. Yet they are characterized not by clarity but by persistent informational instability. The overwhelming volume of fabricated content has created a paradoxical environment in which audiences increasingly doubt authentic information as readily as they believe falsehoods. The central challenge is therefore no longer limited to convincing people to accept misinformation; it increasingly involves encouraging them to reject verifiable truth itself.

This phenomenon has attracted growing attention among technology governance institutions. The **Meta Oversight Board**, for example, has argued that conflicts such as the Iran–Israel confrontation demonstrate the urgent need for clearer standards governing the identification and labeling of AI-generated content. Contemporary audiences now confront two parallel challenges simultaneously: fabricated content presented as authentic, and genuine material dismissed as artificially generated. Together, these dynamics substantially erode the public's ability to distinguish reliable evidence from manipulation.

The strategic function of contemporary information technologies consequently extends far beyond the dissemination of propaganda or the discrediting of adversaries. Their broader effect is the production of what may be described as a condition of **comprehensive cognitive ambiguity**, in which both citizens and institutions progressively lose the capacity to distinguish reality from simulation. As this condition accumulates, the information environment itself becomes fluid, blurring the boundaries separating facts from allegations, authentic footage from synthetic media, documentation from propaganda, and evidence from fabrication. Within an environment where virtually everything is perceived as potentially falsifiable, governments, armed groups, and political actors acquire unprecedented opportunities to challenge authentic evidence by dismissing verified images, videos, and documentation as fabricated products of artificial intelligence.



Perhaps the clearest illustration of this broader syndrome emerged within Arab public opinion. Rather than producing a shared regional interpretation of the conflict, the confrontation generated intense polarization regarding both its causes and its outcomes. Large segments of Arab audiences became simultaneously exposed to-and influenced by-the competing strategic narratives advanced by both Iranian and Israeli information campaigns. The result was not merely disagreement over military developments, but the fragmentation of collective interpretation itself, demonstrating that one of the principal objectives of contemporary information warfare is no longer simply to persuade audiences of a particular narrative, but to reshape the very conditions under which political reality is interpreted and understood.

### **Regional Implications: Jordan and Its Neighbors in the Crossfire of Narrative Warfare**

This confrontation raises a question that is no less consequential than its broader strategic dimensions: **where do small and medium-sized states in the region-particularly Jordan-stand within this battle of competing narratives?** Owing to its geographical location and direct proximity to the region's principal conflict zones, Jordan increasingly finds itself exposed to coordinated disinformation campaigns and strategic messaging that form part of the wider regional contest over narratives. Yet the Kingdom does not necessarily possess equivalent capabilities to counter these campaigns or position itself proactively within the information environment.

An examination of Jordan's media landscape suggests that the country's regional image is often shaped less by its own policies than by its sensitive geopolitical position between the three principal actors in the conflict. As a result, Jordan repeatedly becomes the target of information campaigns that seek either to cast doubt upon its political positions or to draw it into strategic equations that it neither initiated nor seeks to influence.

Perhaps the most significant observation is that small and medium-sized states increasingly occupy the position of **objects rather than producers of strategic narratives**. Rather than shaping the information environment, they frequently become targets upon which competing narratives intersect. The consequences extend well beyond the media sphere. The narrative that ultimately prevails regarding a state's position within a conflict directly influences its diplomatic leverage, its relationships with allies and adversaries, and its broader strategic standing. Consequently, merely reacting to Iranian, Israeli, or American narratives is no longer sufficient. Instead, states require independent national capabilities to monitor disinformation, detect influence operations, and construct autonomous strategic narratives that explain their national positions in their own conceptual language rather than through frameworks imposed by competing external actors.



## Policy Recommendations

The analysis presented in this paper leads to a number of practical recommendations directed toward policymakers in Arab states-particularly those neighboring the conflict zone-as well as research institutions and media organizations concerned with information security.

**First**, governments should establish permanent national units dedicated to monitoring disinformation and analyzing competing strategic narratives. These units should operate proactively rather than reactively, with analytical capabilities designed to identify evolving propaganda frameworks before they become widely established, rather than limiting their efforts to debunking individual falsehoods after they have already spread.

**Second**, sustained investment in media and digital literacy should become a national priority. The greatest danger posed by information disorder lies not merely in persuading audiences to believe falsehoods but in encouraging them to reject verified truth. Building long-term societal resilience against this phenomenon therefore requires systematic critical education rather than temporary public awareness campaigns.

**Third**, governments should closely monitor developments relating to the training, knowledge sources, and informational governance of large language models. The information environments that shape artificial intelligence systems have become an increasingly important dimension of national sovereignty because they influence how future generations-and policymakers themselves-will interpret political realities. Control over the knowledge ecosystems that inform these systems should therefore be regarded not simply as a technological issue but as an essential component of national information security.

**Fourth**, states should develop independent national strategic narratives that move beyond reacting to the communication strategies of major powers. Such narratives should articulate national positions using concepts and priorities rooted in domestic interests while remaining capable of communicating effectively with both domestic and regional audiences. In the absence of such narratives, the informational vacuum will inevitably be filled by the competing strategic communications of external actors, often at the expense of national interests.

**Fifth**, regional cooperation among research centers, media institutions, and policy organizations in countries affected by-but not directly involved in-the conflict should be strengthened. Such cooperation would facilitate the exchange of expertise in monitoring disinformation, improve analytical capabilities, and contribute to the development of a



shared regional knowledge base concerning the structure and evolution of transnational influence operations.

### **Conclusion: The Next War Will Be Fought First in the Realm of Perception**

This paper argues that contemporary warfare is undergoing a profound transformation. As military capabilities become more evenly balanced and political calculations increasingly prevent decisive battlefield outcomes, the center of gravity shifts toward a parallel struggle over collective perception. This contest is no longer directed exclusively by armed forces. It is increasingly shaped by political consulting firms, artificial intelligence developers, strategic communication specialists, networks of coordinated online accounts, and digital content creators operating across social media platforms.

More significantly, the target of this struggle is no longer limited to human audiences. Large language models themselves have become strategic objects of competition because they are rapidly emerging as influential sources of perceived authoritative knowledge for future generations. As a result, information warfare no longer ends when military operations cease; it persists through continuous competition over the informational ecosystems from which knowledge itself is produced.

If this confrontation demonstrates anything, it is that victory in sixth-generation warfare can no longer be measured solely by battlefield outcomes. It is increasingly determined by the ability to impose a persuasive interpretation of what victory actually means. In this emerging strategic environment, states that fail to construct and sustain their own autonomous narratives risk finding themselves, sooner or later, living within narratives authored by others.



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