

BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD: U.S.-IRAN WAR OF NARRATIVES

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



For decades, U.S. media have played a critical role in shaping global perceptions of its wars and conflicts through their selection of sources, images, terminology, and priorities, often influencing how conflicts are interpreted. From Iraq and Afghanistan to Libya, shaping public perceptions became a key part of its broader exercise of power to legitimize intervention, reinforce strategic objectives, or sustain public support. The U.S.-Iran war, however, appears to be challenging this long-established pattern.

Despite its military and technological superiority, Washington has faced a more contested media environment, where its portrayal of military success has not translated seamlessly into global perceptions of victory. At the same time, Iran, despite its military and economic limitations, has demonstrated an ability to use social media, digital platforms, visual content, and alternative media ecosystems to challenge the dominant Western framing of the conflict. This creates an information environment where audiences no longer rely solely on a few Western media outlets to understand a war. The Iran conflict therefore offers an important case study of how the traditional Western monopoly over war framing may be weakening, and how the democratization of digital media allows weaker states to compete more effectively for global public opinion.

The U.S. Media and the Construction of a Narrative of Victory

The American narrative about the war has been strongly shaped by the Trump administration's language. Washington has repeatedly emphasized military achievements and the destruction of Iranian capabilities as indicators of success. This framing has also appeared in parts of the U.S. media, particularly outlets sympathetic to the administration, where battlefield destruction has often been presented as evidence of victory. Fox News, for example, reported in April that the Iran war was nearing "completion" as President Trump considered the next phase of the conflict and emphasized continued U.S. strikes against Iranian targets.¹

The administration's narrative has, nevertheless, faced significant scrutiny in the American media. Rather than presenting a uniform media position, U.S. reporting has offered competing interpretations of what constitutes victory. PBS NewsHour's fact-checking of President Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's claims of U.S. "victory" examined whether military achievements could legitimately be equated with the war's broader strategic objectives.² Reuters' reporting has similarly highlighted the difference between the military damage inflicted on Iran and the conflict's unresolved strategic consequences. In March, Reuters reported that Iran continued to defy U.S.-Israeli strikes, while analysts questioned the clarity of the American endgame and President Trump's ability to control the war's trajectory.³

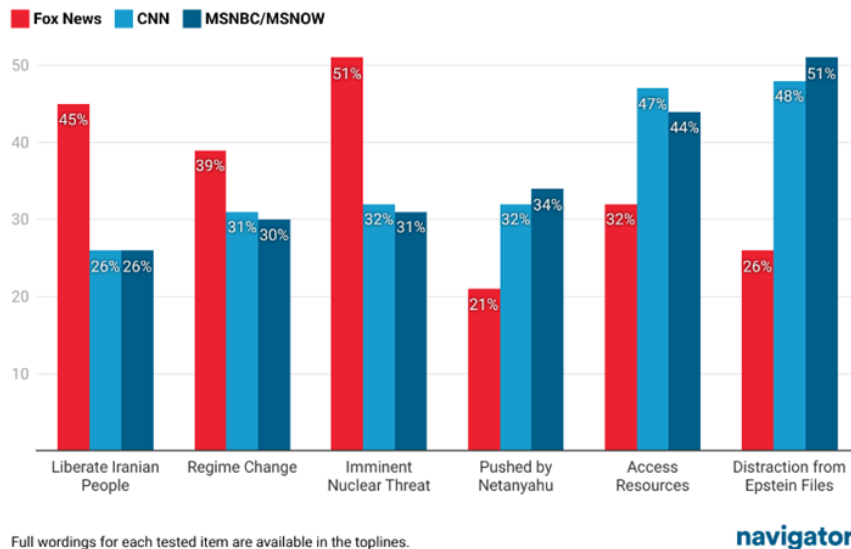
¹ Morgan Phillips, "Iran War Nears 'Completion' as Trump Eyes Deadline — What the Endgame Could Look Like," *Fox News*, April 6, 2026, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/iran-war-nears-completion-trump-eyes-deadline-what-endgame-could-look-like>

² Louis Jacobson and Amy Sherman, "Fact-checking Trump and Hegseth's Claims of U.S. 'Victory' in the Iran War," *PBS*, April 9, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/fact-checking-trump-and-hegseths-claims-of-u-s-victory-in-the-iran-war>

³ Matt Spetalnick and Nandita Bose, "Three Weeks in, Iran War Escalates Beyond Trump's Control," *Reuters*, March 21, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/three-weeks-iran-war-escalates-beyond-trumps-control-2026-03-21/>

Americans Watching Different Channels Have Different Ideas of Why Trump Conducted Operation Against Iran

Below is a list of reasons some say Trump decided to conduct a military operation against Iran. Please indicate which three you think are the main reasons he decided to conduct a military operation against Iran.



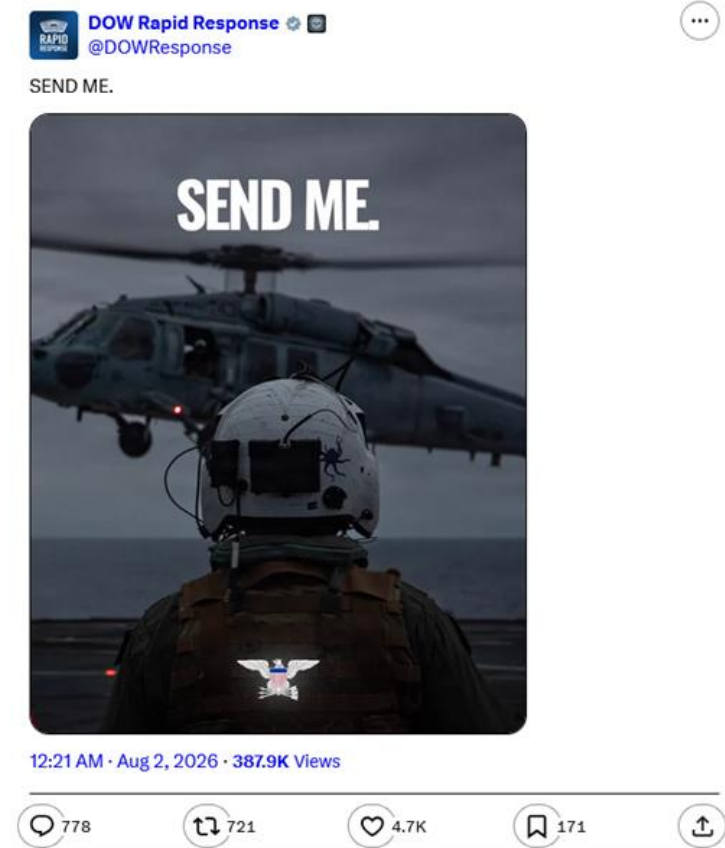
Source: Navigator Research⁴

The U.S. media narrative has also been accompanied by highly visual representations of American military power. The White House and the Pentagon have used social media content featuring popular cultural references and entertainment aesthetics to communicate about military operations. This approach aims to make complex military operations accessible to younger digital audiences while reinforcing an image of technological superiority and overwhelming American power. To reach out to a larger audience, the White House, in one of its videos, depicts US strikes targeting Iranian sites. The footage not only resembled *Call of Duty* but also combined actual strike clips with gameplay footage, including “killstreak” animations that recognize performance and imitate achievement.⁵ The video mixes real war footage with footage from the game ‘*Call of Duty*,’ with music and edits posted on the U.S. Central Command X account.

The problem with such a narrative is that military destruction is easier to demonstrate visually than political success. Images of aircraft, missiles, precision strikes, and destroyed targets can create an impression of military dominance, but they do not necessarily show that the adversary has accepted the victor's political terms. This distinction has become increasingly important as the war has continued without an uncontested political settlement.

⁴ Melissa Toufanian & Aidan Harty “Media Consumption and News on Iran War,” *Navigator Research*, March 30, 2026, <https://navigatorresearch.org/media-consumption-and-views-on-the-iran-war/>

⁵ Daniel Baldino, “A Deadly Strike, or Call of Duty Clip? How the US Government is Trying to Memeify the War on Iran,” *Conversation*, March 12, 2026, <https://theconversation.com/a-deadly-strike-or-call-of-duty-clip-how-the-us-government-is-trying-to-memeify-the-war-on-iran-277974>



Source: DOW Rapid Response X account⁶

Moreover, senior officials at the Pentagon have turned to Christian scripture on their official social media accounts to proselytize the war with Iran. Two Defense Department accounts on X shared images superimposed with the words “SEND ME.” The agency’s Rapid Response account posted the phrase on a picture of a service member observing a helicopter flying above an aircraft carrier. Chief Pentagon spokesperson Sean Parnell quoted Isaiah 6:8 in a post and added the all-caps phrase to an image of a soldier silhouetted in darkness promoted by the Department of War’s official account.⁷

In addition to military rhetoric and national security appeals, President Donald Trump has integrated religious themes to add a moral and spiritual aspect to his justification for the war. The Trump administration's use of religious symbolism during the conflict has also drawn serious backlash, calling out the strategy for ‘blatant Bible-thumping’ whilst suggesting a religious war against Iran.

⁶ Department of War, United States of America, Post on X Account, August 2, 2026, https://x.com/DOWResponse/status/2083634169595228553?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E2083634169595228553%7Ctwgr%5E32faf9d665e415ebe8709d1ac06ea92a5f3daf96%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Ftheintercept.com%2F2026%2F08%2F06%2Fpentagon-department-defense-isaiah-6-8-send-me-iran-war%2F

⁷ Austin Campbell, “The Pentagon Is Posting Cryptic Biblical Messages on Social Media,” *Intercept*, August 6, 2026, <https://theintercept.com/2026/08/06/pentagon-department-defense-isaiah-6-8-send-me-iran-war/>

This type of propaganda threatens to be exploited domestically and may also be employed by extremists to depict the conflict as a fight against Islam.

In one of his posts on Truth Social, President Trump posted an image of himself in a Jesus-like figure with a message criticizing Pope Leo XIV, a vocal critic of the US and Israeli military operation in Iran. The image, which was soon deleted, depicted President Trump in a religious painting healing a man.



Source: The Conversation⁸

The longer the conflict continues without a clearly defined political outcome, the harder it becomes to sustain a simple victory narrative. The conflict's trajectory illustrates the political messianism Trump has brought to the Oval Office, depicting politics as a struggle between good and evil. Many in the U.S. now refer to it as Trump's 'messiah complex.' The change in stance by the Trump administration—from a focus on military conflict to framing it as a battle between good and evil—has adversely affected the overall approval ratings of the U.S. engagement with Iran.

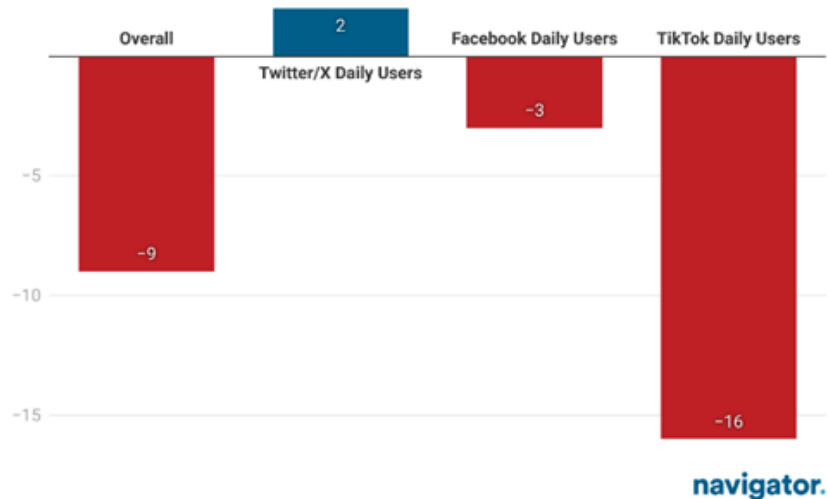
Reuters reported in August that only 35 percent of Americans supported the war, while 50 percent expected the Middle East to become more chaotic as a consequence of the conflict. The report also

⁸ Austin Sarat, "What Trump's Post as a Jesus-Like Figure Tells us About Political Messianism," *Conversation*, April 30, 2026, <https://theconversation.com/what-trumps-post-as-a-jesus-like-figure-tells-us-about-political-messianism-281415>

put the cost of the war to the United States at approximately \$37.5 billion and reported the deaths of 18 U.S. service members.'

Net Support for the Iran War Varies by Social Media Platform

Net Support: % who say they support the military operation in Iran minus % who say they oppose the military operation in Iran.



Source: Navigator Research⁹

The American media environment should therefore not be characterized as uniformly biased in favor of Washington. Rather, it has displayed competing frames. Administration-friendly outlets have often emphasized American military dominance and deterrence, while other major news organizations have focused more heavily on the unresolved political and strategic dimensions of the war. Therefore, while some parts of the U.S. media environment treated battlefield superiority as a measure of success, other outlets have questioned whether those gains have translated into a decisive political outcome.

Iran's Counter-Narrative

Iran has pursued a fundamentally different approach to the information war. Tehran has not needed to convince international audiences that it has militarily defeated the U.S. Instead, Iran sought to redefine victory. Rather than relying exclusively on formal government statements, Iranian messaging adopted the language and aesthetics of contemporary internet culture. To clap back at U.S. propaganda, Iranian creators have used satire, animation, and references to American politics and previous U.S. military interventions to connect the current war to broader historical grievances.

⁹ Melissa Toufanian & Aidan Harty "Media Consumption and News on Iran War," *Navigator Research*, March 30, 2026, <https://navigatorresearch.org/media-consumption-and-views-on-the-iran-war/>

The videos highlighted how they drew on issues including U.S. actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with other historical events, to reach audiences beyond Iran.

One prominent example is the emergence of Lego-style, AI-generated videos produced by Iranian creators. Calling it the 'Lego War,' these videos exploit political divisions in the U.S. and seek to influence the narrative surrounding the war, making the narrative itself a form of strategic success. These animations have increasingly become Iran's soft-power tool. One of the videos shared by the Iranian embassy in Ghana depicted President Trump sleeping in the Oval Office during a press briefing, posting it under the title 'He must be dreaming that he defeated Iran. Leave him sleeping.'



Source: Iran in Ghana X Account¹⁰

Iran's digital strategy has become prominent enough that international media have begun treating it as a distinct component of the wider conflict. Most of the Lego video content is credited to Explosive Mediaa, an Iran-based content creation company. The company, which calls the Iranian government one of its clients, has fewer than ten people and uses Lego-style graphics 'because it is a world language.'¹¹ The videos not only depict the failure of the U.S. in the war; they also pick on the cracks in the American political system, criticizing Trump's America First slogan as 'Israel First.'

¹⁰ Iran in Ghana, X Account, April 28, 2026, https://x.com/IRAN_GHANA/status/2048865734738968883?s=46&t=2YDZzVUNIE3rSSfXbEeCRg

¹¹ Matt Shea and Laurie Kalus, "We Spoke to the Man Making Viral Lego-Style AI Videos for Iran. Experts Say it's Powerful Propaganda," *BBC*, April 12, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjd8jrd1vnyo>



Source: Explosive Mediaa¹²

Official Iranian accounts have shared videos highlighting prominent White House scandals to support their narratives, including President Trump being manipulated by Jeffrey Epstein, and as a puppet under Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's control; Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth is caricatured as a Lego-like figure, shown intoxicated and linked to allegations of misconduct, and Pentagon infighting. These videos are set to catchy rap music that praises the Islamic Republic and frames it as defending itself against aggressors.

Media outlets such as the PBS NewsHour reported that the AI-generated memes and satire are used to mock President Trump and sway opinions about the war, as part of a larger strategy to leverage social media and influence the information landscape around the conflict.¹³

Iran has also attempted to broaden the narrative from regime survival to national survival. Rather than presenting the conflict exclusively as a confrontation between the Islamic Republic and the U.S., Iranian messaging has sought to frame it as an attack on Iranian sovereignty and national identity. In addition, the emotional dimension of Iran's narrative has further strengthened its appeal as it emphasizes civilian suffering, national mourning, destruction caused by American and Israeli strikes, and images of Iranian resistance.

¹² Lego Video, Explosive Mediaa Instagram Official Account, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DcKTFyVs5zB/>

¹³ Sam McNeil, "Pro-Iran Groups Deploy AI to Troll Trump, Influence the War Narrative," *PBS*, April 9, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/pro-iran-groups-deploy-ai-to-troll-trump-influence-the-war-narrative>

Iran's digital narrative seeks to transform the current conflict from a narrowly defined confrontation over nuclear capabilities or regional security into a wider story about sovereignty, interventionism, and resistance. The Iranian counter-narrative strategy has certainly found an interested audience, demonstrating considerable adaptability in narrative construction while transforming political messaging into content that fits the culture of social-media platforms.

Conclusion

The contrast between the two information strategies is revealing. Washington's communication emphasizes capability—advanced aircraft, precision weapons, military technology, and the destruction of targets, whereas Iran's communication emphasizes meaning—resistance, sovereignty, national identity, historical grievance, and survival. The former demonstrates what the U.S. can destroy; the latter explains why Iran has not been defeated. The broader lesson is that military superiority does not automatically translate into narrative superiority, redefining the terms of victory.

The U.S.-Iran conflict has shown that, unlike past wars, contemporary warfare is fought simultaneously through military operations and competing narratives. Since the beginning of the conflict, the American narrative has emphasized Iranian destruction and U.S. military dominance, a narrative reinforced by U.S. media. Tehran has sought to compete in the arena of perception by adopting memes, AI-generated animation, satire, nationalism, and emotionally resonant videos. The Lego-style videos are a particularly striking example of this approach.

The conflict has therefore become a contest between two competing narratives: the American portrayal of military dominance and deterrence, and the Iranian portrayal of resilience, sovereignty, and resistance.