

The War beyond Weapons Information Warfare, Propaganda Systems, and the Battle for Perception in the 2025–2026 Iran–Israel–United States Conflicts

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Abstract

The direct Iran–Israel confrontation of June 2025 and the expanded Iran–Israel–United States war beginning on February 28, 2026, collapse the conventional separation between military operations, strategic communication, cyber conflict, platform governance, and public knowledge. This article examines three structurally different information-warfare systems: United States spectacularized military communication and adversarial press management; Israeli filtered legibility, which publicized offensive competence while restricting detailed representations of vulnerability; and Iranian coercive information closure at home combined with outward-facing narratives of martyrdom, resilience, and asymmetric retaliation. The analysis integrates the propaganda model, indexing theory, framing and securitization, strategic narrative theory, spectacle and hyperreality, the hybrid media system, information disorder, and emerging concepts of cognitive and epistemic warfare. Using qualitative process tracing and comparative frame analysis, it draws on official statements, international reporting, press-freedom documentation, digital-research findings, technical studies of internet disruption, and public-opinion data through June 30, 2026. It argues that information warfare was not ancillary to kinetic action but an operational environment in which military effects acquired political meaning. By late June 2026, battlefield outcomes had revised several pre-war perceptions: U.S. power appeared capable of extraordinary tactical reach but less able to convert force into political closure; Israel’s offensive intelligence superiority was reinforced while its image of defensive invulnerability weakened; and Iran’s conventional exposure was demonstrated alongside the regime’s capacity to survive leadership decapitation and impose regional costs. The conflict also accelerated an epistemic shift from “seeing is believing” to “seeing is contestable,” making verification institutions strategically consequential and shared reality itself a target of war.

Keywords: information warfare; strategic narratives; propaganda; Iran–Israel conflict; United States; cognitive warfare; synthetic media; censorship; hybrid media; public perception

1. Introduction

War has always involved deception, morale, censorship, rumor, and the political construction of victory. What is historically distinctive about the 2025–2026 Iran–Israel–United States conflicts is not the existence of propaganda but the degree to which communication became inseparable from targeting, force protection, deterrence, alliance management, domestic legitimacy, economic coercion, and the post hoc

definition of military success. Missiles and drones struck military, nuclear, governmental, energy, and transport targets; cyber operations penetrated networks and applications; states restricted journalists and public documentation; officials released highly curated imagery; and synthetic media circulated at a velocity that regularly exceeded professional verification. The conflict was therefore fought not only over material capability but over the conditions under which events could be known.

The analytical starting point is the direct Iran–Israel war of June 2025. Israel’s Operation Rising Lion began on June 13 with strikes on Iranian nuclear, missile, air-defense, command, and scientific targets. The United States entered the kinetic campaign on June 22 through Operation Midnight Hammer, striking Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan (Israel Defense Forces [IDF], 2025; Olay, 2025). The twelve-day conflict ended without a consensual account of victory. Israel and the United States emphasized precision, penetration, and severe damage to Iran’s military and nuclear infrastructure. Iran emphasized survival, missile retaliation, and the inability of its adversaries to secure regime collapse. The controversy over whether U.S. strikes had “obliterated” the nuclear program or delayed it for a shorter period exposed a central feature of modern war communication: battle-damage assessment is simultaneously an intelligence problem and a struggle over political credibility (Reuters, 2025a).

The 2025 confrontation became a rehearsal for a wider conflict. On February 28, 2026, U.S. and Israeli forces opened Operation Epic Fury and Operation Roaring Lion, respectively, against Iran. The campaign expanded across West Asia, produced Iranian retaliation against Israel and U.S.-associated regional sites, intensified conflict around the Strait of Hormuz, and generated intermittent ceasefires and negotiations without a durable political settlement by June 30 (IDF, 2026; Lopez, 2026; Reuters, 2026f). Official communication described precise aims and decisive power, yet the war’s continuation, shifts in the public articulation of objectives, and unresolved nuclear and maritime questions complicated those claims.

This article asks four questions. First, which international communication theories best explain the information warfare of the 2025–2026 conflicts? Second, how did the United States, Israel, and Iran organize and perform information power within their different political and media systems? Third, how did artificial intelligence, platform incentives, cyber operations, censorship, and internet disruption transform the shared battlespace? Fourth, which pre-war perceptions were altered when communication claims encountered military outcomes?

The central argument is that the conflict produced three distinct but interacting propaganda systems. The United States practiced **spectacularized strategic communication**: it converted military power into emotionally charged visual performance while attempting to discipline interpretations that challenged official claims. Israel practiced **filtered legibility**: it maintained a high volume of operational communication while narrowing the public visibility of penetrations, damage, and uncertainty that could weaken deterrence. Iran practiced **coercive closure and externalized resistance communication**: it restricted domestic connectivity and independent witnessing while projecting survival, martyrdom, and retaliatory capacity to transnational audiences. These systems differed in institutional form, but all treated public epistemology as an instrument of statecraft.

The article further argues that military outcomes functioned as “reality tests” for strategic narratives. Communication could frame tactical events, delay reputational damage, and segment audiences, but it could not indefinitely dissolve the consequences of prolonged war, civilian casualties, economic disruption, incomplete political objectives, or visible retaliation. By June 30, 2026, the most consequential result was neither the total triumph of one propaganda system nor the disappearance of factual reality. It was the fragmentation of audiences into competing evidentiary communities, each operating with different

sources, affective cues, and standards of proof. Information superiority thus became less a matter of making everyone believe one story than of preventing an adversary's story from becoming authoritative among strategically important publics.

2. Theoretical Framework: International Communication and the Information Battlespace

2.1 Propaganda systems, indexing, and elite sourcing

Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model remains relevant because wartime news depends heavily on official sourcing, security expertise, corporate media routines, and organized "flak" against dissenting interpretations. In the United States, where formal prior censorship is limited, structural dependence on military briefings, intelligence claims, authorized imagery, and elite debate can delimit the range of legitimate interpretation. Bennett's (1990) indexing hypothesis refines this point: news tends to reflect the spectrum of disagreement among powerful officials. When elite consensus favors force, critical reporting is constrained; when policy elites divide over objectives, legality, duration, or casualties, the media field expands.

Arquilla and Ronfeldt's (1993) early distinction between cyberwar and netwar anticipated this widening of conflict from platforms and weapons to organizational narratives and networked publics. Robinson's (2002) analysis of the CNN effect, and his later distinction between media empowerment and strategies of control (Robinson, 2014), further show that wartime media are neither mechanically subordinate nor independently sovereign: their influence varies with policy uncertainty, elite division, access, and institutional pressure.

The model cannot simply be transferred unchanged to Israel or Iran. Israel possesses competitive journalism and an adversarial public sphere, but these coexist with a formal military censor, security-based publication restrictions, and intense wartime pressures toward national cohesion. Iran combines state broadcasting, regulatory control, criminal sanctions, surveillance, selective connectivity, and a politically stratified media system. A comparative propaganda-systems approach therefore asks not whether propaganda exists—an analytically trivial question—but how ownership, law, access, coercion, professional norms, and platform infrastructure distribute the capacity to define reality.

2.2 Framing, securitization, and strategic narratives

Entman (1993, 2004) defines framing as the selection and salience of aspects of reality in ways that diagnose causes, evaluate morality, and recommend remedies. Wartime frames compress complex histories into simplified causal structures: pre-emption versus aggression, precision versus destruction, resistance versus terrorism, deterrence versus escalation, and survival versus defeat. Such frames are not merely descriptive. They distribute legitimacy and make some policy choices appear necessary while rendering alternatives irresponsible.

Securitization theory adds a performative dimension. Political actors do not only describe threats; through successful speech acts they seek authorization for exceptional measures (Buzan et al., 1998). In the conflicts examined here, nuclear danger, existential threat, religious duty, maritime freedom, national survival, and anti-imperial resistance were invoked to justify extraordinary violence or extraordinary control of information. The decisive issue was not whether a threat existed in some objective sense, but whether audiences accepted a particular construction of imminence, responsibility, and proportionality.

Strategic narrative theory is especially useful because it connects discrete messages to broader accounts of international order, national identity, and policy purpose (Miskimmon et al., 2013). The United States narrated itself as the uniquely capable guarantor of non-proliferation and freedom of navigation. Israel

narrated the campaign as pre-emptive self-defense against an existential project. Iran narrated the conflict as an externally imposed war against sovereignty and as proof that resistance could survive technologically superior attack. These narratives addressed domestic publics, allies, adversaries, diasporas, financial markets, and the historical archive simultaneously.

2.3 Spectacle, hyperreality, and militainment

Debord's (1994) society of the spectacle describes a social order in which relationships are increasingly mediated by images. Baudrillard's (1995) analysis of the Gulf War extends the critique to conflict: the mediated event can precede, organize, and partially displace public access to the material event. This does not mean that war is unreal. It means that for distant publics, war is encountered through interfaces, visual conventions, and institutional selection that determine what counts as reality.

Stahl's (2010) concept of "militainment" identifies the convergence of war, popular culture, gaming, and consumer spectacle. Precision-strike footage adopts the viewpoint of the weapon; maps and animations render destruction clean and intelligible; official videos employ cinematic pacing; and battlefield success becomes short-form content optimized for emotional circulation. Spectacle produces affective identification with technological mastery while displacing the bodies, uncertainty, and political aftermath that complicate the image.

2.4 Diffuse war, hybrid media, and transnational contra-flow

Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) describe "diffuse war" as conflict dispersed across media systems, everyday life, and continuous connectivity. The hybrid media system further explains how legacy news, official channels, influencers, encrypted networks, open-source investigators, diasporic media, and platform algorithms interact rather than operate in separate spheres (Chadwick, 2017). A military briefing may become a television headline, a clipped video, a partisan meme, an AI-generated remix, and a fact-check within hours. Authority is distributed, but not equally: states retain privileged access to operational information, while platforms control visibility and monetization.

International communication theory also requires attention to contra-flow. Global news has historically been shaped by Western agencies and broadcasters, but satellite television, diasporic networks, regional platforms, and state-backed international media have enabled counter-narratives to travel across borders (Thussu, 2007). In this conflict, Iranian, Arab, Israeli, American, Russian, Chinese, and transnational activist narratives circulated within partially overlapping publics. Narrative power was therefore polycentric: U.S. and Israeli institutions retained extensive agenda-setting capacity, but they did not monopolize the interpretive field.

2.5 Information disorder, synthetic media, and epistemic warfare

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) distinguish misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation; this typology remains necessary but insufficient for wartime conditions. The deeper strategic goal may not be belief in a single falsehood. It may be confusion, delay, exhaustion, distrust, or the destruction of confidence in verification itself. Deepfakes and cheap synthetic imagery intensify what Chesney and Citron (2019) call the "liar's dividend": genuine evidence can be dismissed as fabricated because fabrication is known to be widespread.

Computational propaganda describes the use of automation, data, and organized networks to manipulate attention and public opinion (Woolley & Howard, 2018). Yet the 2025–2026 conflicts demonstrate that the unit of analysis must extend beyond content to infrastructure. Internet shutdowns, app compromises, search ranking, content moderation, verification labels, revenue incentives, satellite connectivity, and state access rules shape what can be produced, encountered, and believed. Castells's (2009) concept of

communication power is therefore especially pertinent: power operates by programming networks and switching connections among them.

This article uses **epistemic warfare** to describe deliberate action against the social processes by which reliable knowledge is produced. Its targets include not only enemy morale but evidentiary institutions: journalism, scientific monitoring, inspection regimes, archives, open-source analysis, and the public's capacity to distinguish verified from merely viral claims. Cognitive warfare seeks to affect perception and decision-making; epistemic warfare goes further by degrading the conditions under which claims can be adjudicated.

3. Method, Sources, and Limitations

The study uses qualitative process tracing and comparative frame analysis. It reconstructs the communication sequence from the June 2025 confrontation through the expanded war of February–June 2026. Sources include official U.S. and Israeli military statements; International Atomic Energy Agency reports; international wire reporting; press-freedom documentation; technical and policy research on cyber operations and internet shutdowns; public-opinion surveys; and the four manuscripts supplied for this study, which provided a preliminary comparative vocabulary of spectacle, filtration, and closure.

The analysis treats official statements as primary evidence of strategic framing, not as neutral descriptions of battlefield reality. It triangulates claims wherever possible and distinguishes confirmed events from contested damage assessments. This is essential because the belligerents restricted information, casualty figures remained disputed, and many relevant operations were classified. Polling is interpreted as a measurement of attitudes at a given time rather than a direct measure of propaganda effects. Changes in opinion may reflect casualties, economic costs, partisan cues, military events, or pre-existing ideology as well as communication campaigns.

The evidence cutoff is June 30, 2026. At that date, Iran declined direct meetings with U.S. envoys, the status of the interim ceasefire remained uncertain, and disputes over nuclear restrictions and the Strait of Hormuz were unresolved (Reuters, 2026f). The article therefore evaluates a conflict still in progress. Its conclusions concern perception formation during an unfinished war, not a definitive strategic settlement.

4. The 2025 War as Communicative Rehearsal

The June 2025 war established the visual, institutional, and rhetorical repertoire later intensified in 2026. Israel's opening strikes demonstrated remarkable intelligence penetration and operational reach. Official communication immediately framed Operation Rising Lion as a precise, pre-emptive campaign against nuclear and missile threats (IDF, 2025). The language of pre-emption performed two functions: it placed temporality at the center of legitimacy—action was necessary before an allegedly imminent danger matured—and it represented attack as defense.

The U.S. entry through Operation Midnight Hammer was presented as a technologically exceptional operation involving stealth bombers, deception, long-range coordination, and massive ordnance penetrators. Pentagon communication emphasized complexity, secrecy, precision, and severe destruction (Olay, 2025). The communication product was inseparable from the operation: timelines, maps, aircraft imagery, and weapon specifications converted technical capability into political spectacle. Audiences were invited to see not only that targets had been hit but that only the United States possessed the reach to hit them in this manner.

The most consequential information dispute followed the strikes. President Donald Trump and senior officials used categorical language about “obliteration,” while a preliminary Defense Intelligence Agency assessment reported by Reuters indicated a potentially shorter setback and surviving material or capabilities (Reuters, 2025a). The disagreement was more than a technical debate. “Obliteration” implied closure: the military act had solved the nuclear problem. A shorter setback implied temporariness, the need for inspections, renewed diplomacy, or further force. Competing damage assessments therefore encoded competing theories of policy success.

The International Atomic Energy Agency’s position illustrated the importance of independent verification. Its reporting emphasized degraded nuclear safety and subsequent constraints on access, while avoiding the political certainty of either total destruction or negligible effect (International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA], 2025, 2026a). As access diminished, uncertainty itself became strategically useful. Washington and Jerusalem could emphasize severe degradation; Tehran could deny decisive loss and preserve nuclear ambiguity. The absence of authoritative inspection did not stop narrative production—it expanded the space for it.

The 2025 conflict also revealed the coming crisis of visual evidence. Alimardani and Gregory (2025) documented the rapid circulation of AI-generated and manipulated war imagery, warning that detection capacity lagged behind production. False images of attacks, aircraft losses, urban destruction, and crowds competed with real footage taken out of context. The informational objective was often not sustained deception but first-mover advantage. A fabricated clip that dominated the opening hours could shape fear, celebration, or diplomatic reaction before correction.

Cyber operations in 2025 provided a parallel rehearsal. Shah (2025) argues that much of the cyber activity was strategically persistent but operationally incremental: website disruption, data leaks, influence operations, and psychological signaling rarely transformed the battlefield by themselves. Their effects lay in demonstrating reach, generating uncertainty, and extending the conflict into civilian digital life. This distinction between coercive and cognitive effect would become central in 2026.

Both Israel and Iran also tightened control over reporting. Israeli restrictions limited detailed publication of missile impact sites and sensitive damage, while Iranian authorities constrained journalists and connectivity (Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], 2025a, 2025b). The 2025 war therefore established three durable lessons. First, the representation of precision was a strategic asset. Second, damage assessment was a contested political object. Third, synthetic media and restrictions on witnessing made the evidentiary field itself unstable.

5. The 2026 Information-War Architecture

5.1 The United States: spectacularized force and narrative instability

The U.S. communication model in 2026 combined spectacular visibility with selective opacity. At the opening of Operation Epic Fury, official messaging foregrounded reach, readiness, precision, and overwhelming force. Secretary Pete Hegseth described the mission as “laser-focused”: to destroy offensive missiles, missile production, naval and security infrastructure, and prevent nuclear weapons. He contrasted it with Iraq and Afghanistan, insisting that it was neither utopian nor endless (Lopez, 2026). This frame answered a domestic vulnerability before it fully emerged. The administration anticipated that audiences would associate a large West Asian war with open-ended intervention and therefore defined the campaign through negation: not nation-building, not democracy promotion, not another forever war.

The official visual system amplified this message. Images of carrier aviation, Tomahawk launches, stealth platforms, munitions, and command briefings portrayed war as controlled choreography. The grammar was recognizably spectacular: complex violence became an ordered sequence of technologically mediated actions. Such communication does genuine operational work. It reassures allies, intimidates adversaries, signals readiness to financial markets, and sustains troop morale. It also reduces uncertainty to a sequence of platforms and targets, inviting audiences to equate the visibility of action with the achievement of policy.

However, the declared objectives did not remain communicatively stable. Nuclear denial, missile destruction, naval degradation, deterrence, protection of bases and allies, freedom of navigation, and at times political transformation appeared with different degrees of emphasis. By mid-June, assessments suggested substantial damage to conventional capabilities but continuing Iranian leverage over missiles, nuclear material, proxies, and maritime disruption (Reuters, 2026d). Narrative instability should not be confused automatically with conscious deception; war aims may evolve in response to events. Yet changes in emphasis created a credibility problem because early messaging had promised clarity, limited duration, and decisive results.

The pattern recalls Hallin's (1986) account of Vietnam-era communication, in which an early sphere of consensus narrowed critical reporting until elite disagreement and battlefield contradiction enlarged the sphere of legitimate controversy. In 2026, the expansion occurred faster because leaked assessments, partisan media, courts, lawmakers, and platform-based counter-frames operated in real time.

The 2025 "obliteration" controversy became particularly damaging in this context. If the nuclear problem had been conclusively solved in June 2025, renewed nuclear justification in 2026 invited questions about the earlier claim. The contradiction illustrates a recurrent problem of spectacular war communication: categorical language maximizes immediate political effect but narrows future room for revision. Strategic ambiguity can preserve options; triumphalist certainty creates a falsifiable promise.

Press management formed the second side of the U.S. model. The Pentagon restricted photographic access to briefings, tightened credentialing rules, and intensified disputes with news organizations. A federal judge later blocked elements of restrictive credential rules, while press-freedom organizations documented an environment in which unfavorable coverage and reporting of casualties were treated as hostility rather than scrutiny (Associated Press, 2026a, 2026b; CPJ, 2026a; Reuters, 2026b). The administration's criticism of journalists, including accusations that casualty reporting or critical damage assessments aided adversaries, performed a classic "flak" function: it raised the institutional and reputational cost of dissenting frames.

This did not produce an Iranian-style information monopoly. American media remained plural, courts intervened, lawmakers disputed policy, and leaked intelligence assessments circulated. The distinction matters. Yet formal pluralism does not eliminate information warfare; it changes its method. The contest is waged through access, speed, source credibility, partisan segmentation, accusation, and repetition. Official actors seek not to silence every contrary claim but to classify it as unpatriotic, partisan, premature, or fake.

Domestic opinion indicates the limits of the spectacle. In April, 53% of Americans opposed the war and 34% supported it; many reported that they did not understand the administration's objectives (YouGov, 2026a). Pew's late-March and April surveys found Americans more likely to believe the war made the United States less safe than safer, while assessments of nuclear risk were divided (Silver et al., 2026). By late June, only 25% said the United States had won, 22% said Iran had won, and 41% said neither had

won; 54% retrospectively said the war was wrong (YouGov, 2026b). These figures do not prove propaganda failure in a simple causal sense. They demonstrate that spectacular communication could not indefinitely override duration, cost, ambiguity, and partisan distrust.

5.2 Israel: filtered legibility and deterrence communication

Israel's information strategy is best understood as filtered legibility. The state did not create a blanket blackout. It communicated continuously through the IDF, government ministries, spokespeople, briefings, videos, operational maps, and multilingual social media. This high-volume output portrayed offensive competence, intelligence penetration, precision targeting, leadership decapitation, and air superiority. In deterrence terms, visibility was indispensable: an adversary must see capability and believe resolve.

At the same time, detailed visibility of Iranian success was restricted. The Israeli military censor and wartime directives limited publication of exact impact locations, interception performance, sensitive infrastructure damage, and material that could facilitate adversary targeting. Restrictions on live broadcasting during attacks and on filming near security sites extended the principle from institutional journalism to public witnessing (CPJ, 2026a). Operational security provides a legitimate military rationale. The same image that informs a domestic audience can help an adversary correct aim. But censorship also has a strategic-narrative effect: it prevents the enemy's ability to penetrate Israeli defenses from becoming fully legible to domestic and international audiences.

Filtered legibility therefore produces a systematic asymmetry. Israel's offensive reach is rendered in detail; its vulnerability is rendered in generalities. The public can know that missiles arrived, sirens sounded, or damage occurred without knowing the complete operational pattern. This is not simply concealment. It is the management of deterrence as a visual economy. A state whose security doctrine depends on technological superiority cannot allow every successful penetration to circulate as an iconic image of exposure.

The strategy extends beyond formal censorship into the ecology commonly described as *hasbara*, or public explanation and advocacy. In the platform era, *hasbara* involves rapid multilingual framing, influencer networks, diplomatic amplification, search visibility, content clipping, and direct audience engagement. The objective is not necessarily to persuade committed adversaries. It is to stabilize allied support, provide ready-made frames to journalists and politicians, and prevent hostile interpretations from becoming the default account during the first news cycle.

The limits of the model arise from the hybrid media system. Formal censorship can discipline domestic broadcasters more effectively than it can control satellite imagery, diasporic accounts, foreign correspondents, open-source investigators, and smartphone footage. Restriction may also create a credibility paradox: the more aggressively the state limits evidence of damage, the more audiences infer that hidden damage must be substantial. Silence becomes indexical evidence. Rumor flourishes precisely where authoritative confirmation is unavailable.

The trajectory of Israeli public opinion illustrates the interaction between narrative and outcomes. Pew fieldwork in April and early May found that 66% of Israeli Jews believed the war would make Israel safer, and large majorities supported the U.S. and Israeli decision to attack (Silver et al., 2026). This was an early-war perception shaped by confidence in offensive performance and the promise of threat removal. A large post-agreement survey reported in June presented a sharply different mood: majorities or overwhelming majorities believed Iran had emerged as the winner, Israel's long-term security had weakened, and the government had failed or only partly achieved its aims (Times of Israel, 2026). Methodological differences caution against treating the surveys as a perfect time series. Nonetheless, the

contrast is analytically significant. As the war's duration and costs became more visible, the deterrent narrative shifted from pre-emptive mastery toward contested strategic return.

Israel's information warfare thus achieved substantial short-term effects. It displayed offensive dominance, maintained social discipline, and constrained tactical intelligence leakage. Yet it could not permanently reconcile two realities: extraordinary capacity to strike deep inside Iran and continuing exposure to retaliation. The war reinforced the perception of Israeli offensive intelligence superiority while weakening the prior perception that layered defense and deterrence could insulate Israeli society from sustained regional war.

5.3 Iran: coercive closure, martyrdom, and outward-facing resistance

Iran's information system differed in degree and kind. After the opening attacks, the state imposed or intensified a near-total internet shutdown, restricted independent documentation, threatened unauthorized reporting, and maintained a tiered connectivity system favoring approved institutions and channels. Reuters reported that connectivity sharply collapsed and that compromised applications were used to deliver anti-regime messages; subsequent reporting described prolonged exclusion of most citizens from the global internet and the expansion of privileged access for selected users (Reuters, 2026a, 2026c). Technical studies estimated null-routing on an extraordinary scale, indicating that the shutdown was not merely congestion but an infrastructural act of control (Aceto et al., 2026; Jahromi & Jaskolka, 2026).

Internet shutdowns in wartime have overlapping functions. They obstruct adversary intelligence collection, reduce geolocation of strike effects, complicate cyber intrusion, and prevent panic or mobilization. They also silence witnesses, inhibit journalism, isolate families, disrupt commerce, and render the population dependent on state-approved information. The Iranian blackout should therefore be understood as both defensive cyber policy and coercive narrative governance.

The result was not an absence of communication but an asymmetrical distribution of voice. State broadcasters, official social accounts, aligned outlets, and selected international channels continued to communicate. Ordinary citizens and independent journalists faced severe barriers. This tiered system resembles the logic identified by King et al. (2013) in another authoritarian context: censorship is often less concerned with eliminating every criticism than with disabling collective action and unsanctioned coordination. During war, the capacity to compare experiences across cities and communities is itself politically dangerous.

Iran paired domestic closure with external noise. Its outward-facing communication emphasized martyrdom, national continuity, retaliatory capability, civilian suffering, resistance to imperial aggression, and the moral illegitimacy of U.S.–Israeli attack. Leadership losses were converted into narratives of sacrifice and succession rather than collapse. Missile and drone launches became proof of endurance. Damage to adversary bases or cities was magnified as evidence that technological superiority could not guarantee immunity.

The emotional architecture was distinct from U.S. spectacle but equally deliberate. U.S. messaging aestheticized technological action; Iranian messaging sacralized suffering and revenge. Funerals, religious symbolism, images of children, historical grievance, and anti-colonial language transformed material loss into moral capital. This frame traveled beyond audiences sympathetic to the Iranian regime because it intersected with wider anger over Gaza, U.S. intervention, and perceived Western double standards. The strategic achievement was not universal admiration for Iran. It was the partial separation of attitudes toward the Iranian state from attitudes toward its resistance to external attack.

Iranian and pro-Iran networks also used synthetic media, memes, coordinated accounts, and ideologically targeted messaging to exploit U.S. domestic divisions. Reporting in March and April documented AI-generated videos and images designed for viral circulation, including content that mocked U.S. leaders, exaggerated battlefield success, and connected anti-war sentiment with broader distrust of political elites (CSIS, 2026b; The Guardian, 2026a, 2026b). Such communication illustrates the “audience-specific” character of contemporary influence. The same state can use religious-nationalist messaging for domestic and regional audiences, anti-imperial discourse for the Global South, and anti-establishment cues for polarized Western publics.

Iran’s model nevertheless contained a profound contradiction. Coercive control can suppress visible dissent, but it depletes credibility. When citizens know that connectivity is being withheld and casualties or damage are selectively reported, even truthful official claims become suspect. Authoritarian propaganda may preserve behavioral compliance without producing genuine belief. A December 2025 University of Maryland survey found strong reported approval of the state’s missile response and its maintenance of civilian life after the twelve-day war, suggesting a rally effect and perceived resilience (Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland [CISSM], 2025). Yet survey research under conditions of repression and restricted information must be interpreted cautiously. Regime survival and public trust are not equivalent.

The military outcome by June 2026 complicated the pre-war image of Iranian brittleness. Iran suffered deep penetration, leadership decapitation, infrastructure loss, and severe conventional degradation. It did not, however, collapse. It retained sufficient capacity to retaliate, disrupt maritime traffic, sustain bargaining leverage, and compel prolonged negotiation (Reuters, 2026e, 2026f). Iranian strategic communication could therefore anchor itself in an observable fact: survival. It transformed survival from a minimal condition into a claim of victory.

6. The Shared Transnational Battlespace

6.1 AI-generated war and the collapse of visual presumption

The conflicts marked a qualitative escalation in synthetic war media. During the 2025 confrontation, AI-generated images and videos already moved faster than verification (Alimardani & Gregory, 2025). In 2026, production became cheaper, more realistic, and more politically segmented. Fabricated footage claimed aircraft shoot-downs, destroyed bases, rescued personnel, mass demonstrations, and civilian atrocities. Real footage from other conflicts was relabeled; authentic images were dismissed as AI-generated; and stylized animation compressed complex events into emotionally unambiguous morality plays.

The strategic effect can be described as a “deepfake kill chain”: generation, dissemination, algorithmic amplification, elite uptake, and cognitive consequence. Generation requires little expertise. Dissemination uses coordinated or opportunistic accounts. Platform recommendation systems reward novelty, outrage, and visual intensity. Elite uptake—by officials, journalists, or influencers—confers legitimacy. Even after correction, the original content may retain greater reach and emotional force.

A widely circulated false clip claiming rockets had downed a U.S. aircraft reportedly reached tens of millions of views, prompting X to threaten revenue suspension for creators who failed to label AI-generated war content (The Guardian, 2026c). This response revealed the platform’s contradictory position. Monetization and engagement systems helped create the incentive for fabrication; governance intervened after virality. The architecture rewarded speed first and accuracy later.

The damage exceeded individual falsehoods. As synthetic content became expected, visual evidence lost presumptive authority. The “liar’s dividend” allowed actors to deny authentic documentation and supporters to retreat into partisan certainty (Chesney & Citron, 2019). The epistemic burden shifted from the producer of a contested claim to the audience, which generally lacked forensic tools, time, or contextual knowledge. In this environment, professional verification, metadata, satellite analysis, geolocation, and corroboration became strategic resources.

6.2 Cyber operations as psychological signaling

Cyber operations were integrated with kinetic and influence campaigns. At the opening of the 2026 war, attacks on Iranian applications and websites delivered anti-regime messages, while connectivity fell to a small fraction of normal levels (Reuters, 2026a). Badgi and Williams (2026) argue that the convergence of cyber operations, influence, electronic warfare, and kinetic strike created an information vacuum in which the meaning of technical disruption was as important as the disruption itself.

Cyberattack claims communicated reach even when their material effects were limited. A defacement told citizens that the state could not protect its own digital perimeter. A data leak implied institutional penetration. A distributed-denial-of-service attack temporarily erased an adversary from public view. Iranian-aligned hacktivist groups similarly used disruptions, leaks, and symbolic targeting to demonstrate that retaliation could occur outside the conventional battlefield. Research on more than 250,000 Telegram messages from over 178 groups showed a large, adaptive ecosystem coordinating narratives and operations, though claims frequently exceeded verified impact (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2026a).

The key analytical distinction is between physical consequence and communicative consequence. Many cyber incidents did not disable core military systems. They still generated anxiety, imposed verification costs, and created news events. Cyber operations became “performative attacks”: actions designed partly for the publicity of penetration. Their success was measured not only in downtime but in fear, humiliation, and agenda capture.

6.3 Platform power, monetization, and the temporal politics of truth

Platforms were not neutral conduits. Their ranking systems determined which claims reached mass audiences; their labels and moderation policies shaped credibility; their monetization systems created markets for war spectacle; and their application programming interfaces affected the ability of researchers to detect coordinated manipulation. Benkler et al. (2018) emphasize that network propaganda is produced by interaction among political actors, media institutions, and technological architectures. The 2026 conflict confirms that no single actor controls the field, but some actors control crucial switches.

Time was the central platform variable. Official military accounts could publish instantly, while journalists required confirmation. Falsehoods could be produced faster than fact-checks. Corrections rarely reproduced the emotional intensity or reach of the original. The result was a temporal asymmetry: propaganda occupied the interpretive space before evidence arrived. Strategic communication increasingly sought not permanent belief but control of the first hours, when markets moved, allies responded, and public emotion crystallized.

This temporal politics also rewarded categorical language. “Destroyed,” “intercepted,” “eliminated,” “victory,” and “failed attack” are platform-efficient; probabilistic assessments are not. The language of intelligence—confidence levels, partial evidence, unresolved indicators—travels poorly in comparison. As a result, institutional incentives pushed officials and influencers toward certainty even when the underlying evidence remained uncertain.

6.4 Regional suppression of witnessing

The information war expanded across West Asia as governments restricted filming, detained journalists or citizens, constrained commentary, and encouraged self-censorship. CPJ documented killings, injuries, detention, obstruction, outlet damage, and censorship across multiple states during the conflict (CPJ, 2026a). A later assessment found that emergency restrictions in Gulf states risked becoming permanent and that journalists increasingly avoided politically sensitive reporting (CPJ, 2026b).

The stated rationale was operational security: images of interceptions, bases, or impact sites could help belligerents. Yet broad prohibitions also shielded governments from scrutiny over hosting foreign forces, defense performance, civilian risk, and diplomatic alignment. Regional states thus became secondary information belligerents. Even when they were not principal combatants, they governed what could be seen of the war on their territory.

The suppression of witnessing has long-term consequences. Zelizer (2004) argues that war images function as testimony and collective memory. When documentation is criminalized or connectivity is severed, the archive itself is damaged. This is epistemic violence: future accountability is weakened because the evidentiary record was prevented from forming.

7. Military Outcomes as Narrative Adjudicators

Strategic narratives do not float freely above material events. They interpret events, but events constrain what can plausibly be said. The 2025–2026 conflicts demonstrate four mechanisms through which military outcomes adjudicated information claims.

First, **duration tested decisiveness**. U.S. and Israeli communication repeatedly emphasized speed, precision, and overwhelming force. These claims were credible at the tactical level: both states demonstrated long-range strike capacity, intelligence penetration, and the ability to destroy high-value targets. However, the continuation of conflict into negotiations, ceasefires, renewed threats, and unresolved disputes weakened the inference that tactical dominance produced strategic closure. A short operation can be narrated as a self-contained success; a prolonged war invites cumulative questions about aims, costs, and exit.

Second, **retaliation tested invulnerability**. Israel's air defenses and U.S. regional systems intercepted large numbers of incoming threats, but interception is probabilistic, expensive, and subject to saturation. Successful Iranian penetrations—however limited relative to total launches—carried disproportionate narrative weight because they contradicted an image of impermeable defense. The communication significance of one visible impact could exceed the operational significance of many interceptions.

Third, **survival tested regime-change expectations**. Leadership decapitation and infrastructure destruction created the possibility of Iranian political collapse. Yet the regime maintained command continuity and coercive capacity. This did not erase Iran's losses; it revised the perception that a technologically superior opening strike would necessarily trigger regime disintegration. Survival became a strategic resource and a narrative fact.

Fourth, **verification tested claims of nuclear resolution**. The IAEA's limited access to affected facilities prevented definitive public adjudication of nuclear damage and material status (IAEA, 2026a, 2026b). In the absence of inspection, categorical claims of total elimination were politically vulnerable. Air power can destroy infrastructure, but nuclear knowledge, dispersed material, underground facilities, and political intent are not identical targets. The conflict therefore reinforced a distinction often lost in political rhetoric: degrading a program is not the same as resolving the proliferation problem.

The relationship was reciprocal. Military operations were designed partly for their communicative effects. Leadership strikes signaled penetration. Attacks on naval or missile infrastructure demonstrated escalation dominance. Missile salvos signaled persistence. Disruption of the Strait of Hormuz converted geographic leverage into a message to global markets. The battlefield was therefore an engine of symbolic production, while the symbolic value of targets influenced battlefield selection.

8. Changed Perceptions by June 30, 2026

8.1 U.S. power: from hegemonic closure to tactical supremacy without political finality

Before the expanded conflict, U.S. military power retained an image of unmatched global reach. The operations confirmed that material advantage. The United States could assemble carriers, long-range bombers, precision weapons, intelligence, air defenses, logistics, and allied basing at a scale unavailable to Iran. What changed was the perception that such superiority guarantees political closure.

The war distinguished **capacity** from **credibility**. Capacity concerns what a state can destroy. Credibility concerns whether threats, promises, and declared outcomes are believed. The 2025 “obliteration” dispute, changing 2026 objectives, domestic opposition, and the unsettled June negotiations weakened the credibility of categorical victory claims. By late June, public opinion showed limited belief that the United States had won (YouGov, 2026b). The emergent perception was not U.S. military weakness but a narrower proposition: even overwhelming tactical power faces diminishing political returns when objectives are multiple, adversaries retain asymmetric leverage, and publics distrust open-ended commitments.

8.2 Israel: offensive mastery alongside defensive exposure

Israel’s reputation for intelligence and offensive precision was strengthened. The depth of penetration into Iranian command structures and the ability to strike across distance confirmed exceptional capabilities. Simultaneously, the war revised the image of defensive invulnerability. Iranian retaliation, persistent sirens, infrastructure risk, economic disruption, and censorship of impact details made vulnerability a central feature of public experience.

The result was a dual perception: Israel could reach almost any target in Iran, but it could not prevent Iran from imposing costs. Deterrence became less absolute and more reciprocal. The June contrast in Israeli opinion—from early confidence that the war would improve security to later pessimism about strategic results—indicates that offensive spectacle did not fully compensate for social exposure and uncertain political return (Silver et al., 2026; Times of Israel, 2026).

8.3 Iran: from presumed brittleness to costly resilience

Iran’s conventional weaknesses were exposed more dramatically than before. Its air defenses, command networks, military infrastructure, and senior leadership proved penetrable. Yet the pre-war expectation that such penetration would produce rapid collapse was weakened. The regime survived, reorganized, retaliated, maintained domestic control, and retained bargaining instruments.

This changed perception should not be romanticized as Iranian victory. Survival under severe attack coexisted with mass casualties, damaged infrastructure, economic hardship, repression, and weakened conventional forces. The shift was from a binary model—either deterrent strength or collapse—to a model of **costly resilience**. Iran appeared capable of absorbing extraordinary punishment and still denying its adversaries a clean ending. Its strategic communication succeeded where it connected to this observable endurance; it was least credible where it denied domestic suffering or exaggerated battlefield triumph.

8.4 Missile defense: from shield mythology to probabilistic protection

Pre-war public discourse often treated layered missile defense as a shield. The conflict made visible that

defense is a statistical and economic contest. Interceptors can achieve high success rates while some threats penetrate. Adversaries can vary trajectories, combine missiles and drones, use decoys, and exploit saturation. Defenders incur high costs per interception and must protect many sites.

Information warfare amplified both sides of this reality. Israel and the United States publicized interception success to sustain confidence. Iran publicized every penetration to demonstrate vulnerability. The revised perception was not that missile defense failed, but that it reduces harm rather than abolishes it. This distinction has major implications for deterrence, civil defense, and public expectations.

8.5 Nuclear coercion: from one-strike solution to recurring uncertainty

The 2025 strikes were narrated as a potentially definitive solution to the Iranian nuclear problem. Renewed conflict and continued uncertainty by 2026 undermined the “one-strike solution.” The IAEA’s inability to verify all affected sites and material meant that knowledge claims remained dependent on national intelligence and political interpretation (IAEA, 2026a, 2026b).

The changed perception was that military action can impose substantial delay and cost but may also reduce transparency, incentivize dispersal, harden political resolve, and weaken inspection. The paradox is central: a strike intended to eliminate uncertainty can generate a less inspectable nuclear environment. Communication that equates destruction of facilities with destruction of capability obscures this distinction.

8.6 Gulf security: from protective umbrella to risk-bearing entanglement

For Gulf states, U.S. bases historically represented protection and strategic partnership. Iranian retaliation and regional restrictions on reporting highlighted the reverse side: bases also create targeting exposure and pressure governments to police public discussion. The security umbrella became perceptually ambivalent—simultaneously shield and lightning rod.

This does not imply a wholesale regional break with Washington. It indicates greater incentives for hedging, mediation, dispersed security relationships, and caution about automatic alignment. The information politics of basing became as important as its military function. Governments had to reassure citizens, restrict sensitive imagery, and explain why foreign military presence enhanced rather than endangered national security.

8.7 Social media: from citizen witness to contested sensorium

The Arab uprisings encouraged an image of social media as a democratized witnessing system. The 2025–2026 conflicts replaced that optimism with a more ambivalent perception. Smartphones and platforms still enabled documentation outside state channels. They also enabled industrial fabrication, decontextualization, monetized outrage, and coordinated manipulation.

The public learned that a video could be authentic, synthetic, old, geographically misidentified, selectively edited, or real but strategically framed. “Seeing is believing” gave way to “seeing requires verification.” This increased the value of professional journalism and open-source methods at the same moment that governments and platforms restricted access to the data those methods require.

8.8 Propaganda: from message control to management of epistemic fragmentation

Classical propaganda imagined a sender transmitting a coherent message to a mass audience. The conflict revealed a different environment. Audiences were fragmented by language, ideology, geography, platform, and partisan identity. States did not need one narrative to dominate globally. They needed different narratives to stabilize different coalitions.

The U.S. message of precision and non-proliferation worked most effectively among audiences predisposed to trust American security institutions. Israeli existential framing consolidated much of the

Israeli Jewish public early in the war but had little persuasive force among Palestinians. Iranian resistance messaging resonated with anti-interventionist and anti-imperial publics while failing to generate trust among many citizens subject to domestic repression. Propaganda success was therefore modular, not universal.

9. Discussion: Toward a Theory of Outcome-Constrained Information Warfare

The case supports an **outcome-constrained** theory of information warfare. Communication is constitutive of war because it defines aims, targets, legitimacy, morale, and victory. Yet it is constrained by outcomes because bodies, destroyed infrastructure, economic costs, surviving adversaries, and unresolved negotiations generate counter-evidence. States can delay, filter, or segment this evidence; they cannot eliminate it indefinitely.

Three propositions follow.

First, propaganda systems are institutionally specific. American spectacle depends on a commercial and partisan media ecology in which persuasion is achieved through saturation, emotional branding, and elite contestation. Israeli filtered legibility depends on the fusion of democratic communication with formal security censorship and a deterrence-centered doctrine. Iranian coercive closure depends on infrastructural control, criminal sanction, and privileged channels, while compensating for low domestic credibility through transnational resistance narratives. Comparative analysis must therefore avoid treating “state propaganda” as a single mechanism.

Second, information warfare increasingly targets **epistemic infrastructure** rather than only beliefs. Internet shutdowns disable testimony. Platform algorithms privilege emotional content. attacks on journalists raise the cost of verification. Restricted access to nuclear sites weakens authoritative assessment. Deepfakes contaminate the status of visual evidence. These actions alter not simply what people believe but how belief can be justified.

Third, military and communicative effects are co-produced. A strike is selected partly for what it will signal; a press release changes the political meaning of the strike; adversary retaliation revises the original signal; and public opinion feeds back into operational freedom. The unit of analysis should therefore be the **operation–representation circuit**, not the military act or media text in isolation.

The conflict also complicates deterministic claims about propaganda. The most closed system did not necessarily produce the most belief; the most technologically sophisticated communication did not secure public consent; and the most visible battlefield success did not automatically create a durable perception of victory. Trust remained a scarce strategic asset. Systems that maximized control often damaged trust, while systems that permitted contestation risked losing message discipline but retained mechanisms of correction.

For communication scholarship, the case suggests a convergence of several traditions. The propaganda model explains structural sourcing and flak; framing and securitization explain moral and policy authorization; spectacle theory explains the aesthetic conversion of violence; hybrid media theory explains circulation across institutional boundaries; computational propaganda explains automated amplification; and epistemic-security analysis explains attacks on verification. No single theory is sufficient because contemporary information warfare is simultaneously political-economic, rhetorical, affective, technological, and infrastructural.

10. Conclusion

The 2025–2026 Iran–Israel–United States conflicts were wars beyond weapons because communication did not merely accompany force; it organized the field in which force became meaningful. The United States transformed military reach into spectacle and sought to preserve decisiveness through narrative saturation, but categorical claims encountered prolonged war, press resistance, and public skepticism. Israel displayed offensive competence while filtering evidence of vulnerability, sustaining deterrence in the short term but facing a growing gap between tactical achievement and perceived strategic security. Iran sealed much of its domestic information space while projecting martyrdom, resilience, and asymmetric reach abroad, preserving regime continuity at the cost of deepening the crisis of trust between state and society.

Across all three systems, the most important target was not a specific opinion but the architecture of perception. Governments regulated access, platforms monetized attention, AI generated pseudo-evidence, cyber operations produced psychological effects, and restrictions on journalists damaged the record available for accountability. The conflict therefore advanced a form of epistemic warfare in which shared reality became strategic terrain.

By June 30, 2026, several pre-war perceptions had changed. U.S. military supremacy remained visible, but its capacity to convert destruction into political finality appeared limited. Israeli offensive superiority remained formidable, but defensive immunity appeared unattainable. Iran's vulnerabilities were undeniable, but so was its capacity for costly survival and regional disruption. Missile defense appeared protective rather than absolute; military strikes appeared capable of degrading nuclear infrastructure but not conclusively resolving nuclear uncertainty; and social media appeared as both witness and weapon. Every belligerent attempted to install its preferred memory before the conflict ended: who initiated, defended, protected civilians, demonstrated strength, and won. Censorship, synthetic media, and partisan evidence have made a common historical account harder to construct. Future war communication therefore depends on protecting independent journalism, scientific monitoring, open-source verification, archives, platform transparency, and lawful witnessing. In the contemporary battlespace, defending the capacity to know is collective security.

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