

NARRATIVE WEAPONIZATION: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A BATTLEFIELD IN THE IRAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT

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Abstract

This study investigated how Iran and Israel construct and disseminate competing digital narratives on X within the context of the ongoing geopolitical rivalry. Using computational discourse analysis combining automated sentiment analysis, descriptive engagement analysis, and qualitative interpretation of official X posts, the research analyzed tweets posted between 2021 and 2024 from six official state-affiliated accounts: Iran's Supreme Leader (@khamenei_ir), the Government of Iran (@Iran_GOV), and Fars News Agency (@EnglishFars), alongside Israel's Prime Minister (@netanyahu), the Government of Israel (@Israel), and the Israel Defense Forces (@IDF). A purposive sample of tweets related specifically to the Iran-Israel rivalry, regional military developments, and political messaging was collected and analyzed using Hume AI's expression measurement tool to identify emotional valence and narrative framing. The study suggests that both nations utilize emotional messages to shape international opinion, enhance domestic support, and present competing claims to legitimacy. The data of engagement indicate a high degree of asymmetry: Israeli accounts have a demonstrably wider global readership, and Iranian accounts are fully ideologically sealed in their supporters' circles, which has direct implications for the soft power and diplomatic legitimacy. The study has counterintuitive implications. It showed that a parallel asymmetry exists in the digital domain, which is determined by the architecture of the communication model employed.

Keywords: Diplomacy, International relations, Iran-Israel conflict, Narrative weaponization, New media, Soft power

INTRODUCTION

The nature of media conflict has been drastically altered by the new generation of information warfare, making it impossible to compare current events to conventional propaganda from the 20th century (Maass et al., 1989, Semin and Fiedler, 1988). The modern battle is no longer a physical one, but an integrated strategic communication campaign, where nation-

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states use digital infrastructure to mold narratives both at home and abroad to promote legitimacy and a positive image (Zhang, 2017). Social media have become key fields where the narratives of state actors are produced and spread with the aim of shaping public opinion and geopolitical discussion (Tusa, 2013). Today, deliberate manipulation of facts and messaging is an important aspect of modern interstate conflict, this “weaponization of information” is a strategy that has been adopted in many instances and has been used to influence political opinion, identity and interpretation (Lazar, 2023, Krieg, 2023).

The Iran-Israel conflict exemplifies this trend, where both nations have stepped up their military activities alongside a coordinated information campaign on digital platforms since the 2023 Israel-Hamas war and escalation into 2025 (Laila Rizky, 2025, Seung-Hyun, 2024). Iran has been using anti-Israeli rhetoric to unite its people around its policies and to project itself as the leader in the region, whereas Israel has been promoting and using security-oriented narratives that are geared to international markets (Roomi, 2023a). The parallel military and information escalations leave social media as a key arena of geopolitical competition (Corps, 2024).

This causes a Digital Power Imbalance, where social media is not just a mirror of the existing geopolitical power dynamics, but it creates and reinforces asymmetries in narrative power (Wahab, 2024). Platforms like X (previously known as Twitter) deliberately champion content that attracts high engagement, giving an edge to people with English language access and audience who are western oriented (Sah and Sahani, 2026). States that have a higher degree of penetration in international social media have unfair access to international legitimacy, regardless of the basis of their claims (Yaqub and Tabassum, 2025).

The Iran-Israel interplay is one such situation that shows empirically that such an asymmetry exists, but it remains theoretically under-explored. Traditional international relations theory is not well equipped to identify the differences between propaganda, diplomacy, and soft power in a platform fashion (Siddiqui, 2025). Both states compete in the narrative game, but it remains to be seen whether and how there are measurable asymmetries in the reach and engagement of audiences (Alim et al., 2025).

Empirical research in the field of digital conflict has been largely concerned with great power relationships (US-China, US-Russia), while the Iran-Israel information competition remains under-researched. Despite the presence of existing literature that recognizes that nation-states use social media for conflict, there are relatively few quantitative studies that

reveal the differences certain communication logics provide in terms of measurable asymmetries in relative visibility. The current methods are sentiment-based, which are good at determining the emotional tone, but not necessarily the communication strategies and their impact on international engagement. The need for research that establishes empirical connections between emotional framing strategies and engagement metrics, and between platform structural features and these asymmetries is urgent.

The purpose of the study is to explore how Iran and Israel use narratives on social media as a weapon and what mechanisms are involved in platform structures to increase asymmetry in narrative reach. Computational discourse analysis indicates that there are two types of communication logics: Iran's is ideological-moral and relates to regional solidarity, while Israel's is security-legitimacy and relates to international recognition. It also explores how and whether these different logics are reflected in engagement asymmetries (as measured by views, retweets, and likes) on X platforms. Table 1 shows how the study contributes to the existing literature.

Table 1: What Existing Studies Do vs. What This Study Does

Existing Literature	This study
Focuses on US–China and US–Russia information rivalry	Examines the Iran–Israel digital conflict
Studies propaganda and disinformation broadly	Analyzes emotional framing patterns systematically
Often descriptive or qualitative	Uses computational discourse analysis
Focuses on narrative construction	Links narratives to engagement outcomes
Rarely addresses platform-driven asymmetries	Develops the concept of digital soft power asymmetry

Source: Own Elaboration

The concept of digital soft power asymmetry is new to the digital conflict research field, and this research shows that the intensity of narrative (how emotionally charged content is) does not correspond with the penetration of narrative (how far it goes into the audience). Drawing from Nye's (2004) idea

of soft power, this study contends that digital platforms are important sites where states try to influence the international preference and legitimacy (Nye, 2019). The most recent conceptualization of digital diplomacy is that of using social media to further foreign-policy goals and shape the perceptions of global audiences (Manor, 2019). This study contributes to the theories of soft power, digital diplomacy, and strategic communication in the under-researched Middle Eastern conflicts by connecting emotional framing to measurable engagement outcomes and elucidating platform mechanisms that facilitate the emergence of asymmetries. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the emotional framing patterns in Iranian and Israeli official social media (X) construction of the past (2021-2024) and how do they differ in quantity?
2. What are the engagement asymmetries (views, retweets, likes) between Iranian and Israeli official accounts in these emotional framing patterns?
3. How do engagement patterns differ between official Iranian and Israeli X accounts, and how do these patterns relate to differences in their strategic communication approaches?

The next section reviews the related theories to the study. This is followed by the methodology section, which outlines the research design, data collection process, sampling strategy, and analytical tools used in the study. The subsequent section presents the empirical findings, focusing on sentiment patterns, narrative framing, and engagement asymmetries between the selected accounts. The discussion section then interprets these findings in relation to existing theories and highlights their implications for digital diplomacy and international relations. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing key insights, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

1 METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research Design

This study uses computational discourse analysis using combination of sentiment analysis and engagement metrics analysis. The study explores emotional valence as an indicator of strategic communication choices in tweets. Sentiment analysis acts as the analytical prism and engagement metrics (views, retweets, likes) were used as observable indicators of audience interaction and relative content visibility.

1.2 Data Collection and Sampling

The tweets of the six verified official X (formerly Twitter) accounts of the main governmental, political and military bodies of Iran and Israel were manually retrieved from 2021 to 2024. The accounts were chosen as the main English-language means of each state conveying official narratives to the world. The resulting English-language data set consisted of 306 native English tweets, with 142 tweets from Iranian accounts and 164 tweets from Israeli accounts. Only posts that were original, regarding interstate relations, regional security, diplomacy, military operations, or geopolitical developments were included, reposts, duplicate posts, multimedia-only posts with no substantive textual content and non-English tweets were excluded. The Iranian accounts are from the country's top political body (the Supreme Leader), the official government press office, and a major state-sponsored English-language news agency which has a large international reach. The Israeli accounts also include the main players in Israel's digital diplomacy ecosystem: the Prime Minister, Israel's official Government account and the Israel Defense Forces. The uneven geographic distribution of tweets is not the result of a set number of samples being set aside for each account; it is due to differences in posting rates over the course of the study. Later in the manuscript, there are posts in Hebrew and Persian (which were not subjected to computational sentiment analysis) included for illustrative purposes to communicate an idea of communication strategy.

1.3 Sentiment Analysis Tool

The emotional analysis was performed with an emotion measurement system based on text, which identifies emotional valence from linguistic features contained within textual data, provided by Hume AI. The unit of analysis was each English-language tweet, with no attempt to modify the text content of the tweets. Hume AI produced a valence score ranging from -100 (strongly negative emotional expression) to +100 (strongly positive emotional expression), which was then used to make comparisons between the levels of emotional expression in official communications. Emotional scores generated by Hume AI were used to measure overall evaluation of emotion, it did not automatically assign political positions or to determine the sentiment target. Discourse analysis of the content of the tweets was performed using a contextual qualitative interpretation of references to anti-Israel or anti-Iran narratives, not automated sentiment classification.

The average engagement scores for each account were then compared to see if there were any differences between the reach of the narrative across countries.

1.4 Computational Discourse Analysis

The study used computational discourse analysis which combines automated sentiment analysis and qualitative discourse interpretation and descriptive engagement analysis. The unit of analysis was the individual tweet. Emotional valence of each tweet was quantified by computational sentiment analysis, and engagement metrics (views, re-posts, and likes) were used for recording observable audience interaction. Qualitative interpretation was then carried out, which aimed to illustrate regularities in strategic narratives and rhetorical patterns. Themes were identified by iteratively analysing the content of the tweets and were informed by the literature on strategic communication, soft power and digital diplomacy, which led to the two categories of ideological, moral and security legitimacy. The categories were employed to interpret the impact of emotional framing on the overarching state communication strategy, and were not automatically classified categories.

1.5 Comparative Sentiment Mapping and Strategic Communication

Simultaneously, comparative sentiment mapping is conducted across content produced by state-affiliated coordinated communication networks and non-official users. Emotional framing patterns are analysed through the theoretical lenses of soft power, digital diplomacy, and strategic communication to assess how social media posts are adapted for domestic and international audiences.

Additionally, the analysis examined the use of affective linguistic forms associated with intergroup representation, which can be used to strengthen the national identity, weaken the legitimacy of the opponent, and shape international perception. Such a methodological combination allows for exploring greater depth in how X is being used not only as a medium of communication but as a strategic ground of psychological influence and geopolitical narrative.

1.6 Selected X Users/Official Accounts

Selected accounts were the main governmental and military actors that have played a role in the official English-language communication during the study period. They were selected for their institutional authority, regular activity, and their key position in disseminating the state narratives to the outside world. While there may be other governmental institutions involved in public diplomacy, the chosen cases offer a representative picture of governmental public diplomacy in each of the states.

Table 2 identifies the number of Iranian and Israeli official accounts of different organisations and/or governmental entities/apparatuses whose tweets are analysed using Hume AI's expression measurement feature:

Table 2: Official Iranian and Israeli Accounts

The Islamic Republic of Iran		
User Identification	Position	Account Handle on X
Ali Khamenei	Supreme Leader	@khamenei_ir
The Governmental Cabinet	The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran	@Iran_GOV
Fars News Agency	State-owned news agency administered by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps	@EnglishFars
The State of Israel		
User Identification	Position	Account Handle on X
Benjamin Netanyahu	Prime Minister of Israel	@netanyahu
The Governmental Cabinet	The Government and the Ministry of Affairs for the State of Israel	@Israel
Israel Defence Forces (IDF)	The armed forces of the State of Israel	@IDF

Source: Own Elaboration

The analysis delves into the methods used in the official Iranian and Israeli narratives, including strategies of emotional framing, and how these narratives affect international readers. The study does not identify cause-and-effect factors of audience engagement, but rather observes patterns of emotional expression and engagement in order to make sense of how alternative state actors assert their legitimacy, security, and ideologies in the digital information landscape.

1.7 Limitations

The study has a number of limitations. First, it was limited to X, while other platforms like Telegram are also a crucial element in Iran–Israel digital communication and could show different dynamics. Second, the analysis was only focused on English-language Tweets, and Hebrew and Persian were not included for methodological consistency. Third, the sample consisted of tweets from six official accounts from 2021–2024, and may not reflect the entirety of state-affiliated messaging. Therefore, the results are to be read with great care and should not be extrapolated to other platforms, languages, actors or conflict situations without additional comparative studies. Moreover, the systematic and consistent analysis of emotional valence with Hume AI involved the dataset, but the automated classifications were not independently coded by human experts. This is because the results must be understood as computational measures of emotional framing, not as actual measures of political intent.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The academic investigation of narrative weaponization, the theory of framing, and propaganda theory provides a holistic approach to understanding the tactical use of social media in the current geopolitical struggles, especially the Iran-Israel conflicts. These overlapping theoretical waves come together in order to shed light on how states strategically use digital narratives to package events, gain domestic backing, and influence foreign audiences.

2.1 Narrative Weaponization

Narrative weaponization has turned into a prominent approach in hybrid warfare. Opposed to the classical theories of war in which material

resources like military power take center stage, modern conflicts are fought in the realms of the mind created by the exploitation of mass perceptions (Nawaz, 2025, Putra et al., 2024). Theorists like Krieg and Freedman argue that narrative weaponization transforms the very concept of sovereignty, where control of frameworks of meaning-making is more important than control of territory alone (Avramov, 2024).

Digital platforms, such as X, Facebook, and YouTube, are used as the stage where the narrative is rapidly spread, with algorithms prominently furthering engagement and virality over truthfulness. These ecosystems have fertile environments where narrative weaponization can operate to take advantage of the structural characteristics of social media, such as speed, interactivity, and reach, to extend the conflicts beyond the physical space into global ideational competitions (Weinberg, 2023).

2.2 Framing Theory as an Operations System

Framing was described first by Erving Goffman and then developed by Robert Entman as a method of how certain elements of reality are emphasized to influence perceptions of the audience (Mehamli, 2025, Syahril et al., 2026). Frames provide ways of organizing popular understanding about complicated occurrences in simplified and resonant language (Santoso et al., 2024).

These frames get magnified through the interaction between state actors, non-state actors, and the actors in the social-media arena (Myhre and Berg-Nordlie, 2016). Another salient extension of the theory of framing to the digital age is the theory of cascading activation (Aruguete and Calvo, 2018, Landis and Allen, 2022). Zhang (2025) proves the ability of frames to spread in hierarchical forms when the narratives flown by states impact the media coverage that impacts the conversation between social-media users. The cascading model highlights the ability of platforms to reduce the time and space of narrative consumption to real-time feedback loops, registering more frames and less scrutiny exponentially.

2.3 Understanding Propaganda Theory: How Digital Narratives Shape Public Perception

Focusing on the manipulative interactions disclosed by the theory of framing, propaganda theory describes social-media platforms as arenas of mass opinion, determined by the mass information of numerous information channels (Chomsky, 1988).

The networked platforms can now allow state actors to coordinate propaganda across various channels, not to control the critical faculties of audiences but to overwhelm them using a firehose of falsehoods approach (Wang et al., 2023). This overload saturation kills social-media users with fast, affective, and frequently contradictory messages, which creates a state of cognitive dissonance leading to passive acceptance (Fuchs, 2018).

2.4 Digital Conflict: Hybrid Warfare to Diplomacy

Together these theories create a paradigmatic shift in modern conflict. Social media is now in the middle of the conflict between diplomacy, media communication, and warfare. Modern War is not a war of force, but a war of narratives that must be pursued, spread, and controlled through interconnected networks (Patrikarakos, 2020). This digital warfare breaks the old dichotomy between soft power diplomacy and information warfare. There is a growing trend in states to use a mixed discourse style, combining emotional appeals, the use of cultural symbolism, and ideological framing in order to acquire legitimacy both domestically and internationally (Haile, 2024). This theoretical triad, backed by data-driven analytics, has its roots in the concept of “beyond public diplomacy” as state actors customize, and weaponise narratives to address specific vulnerabilities in the global information ecosystem (Muller Mirza and Dos Santos Mamed, 2019).

Nye’s theory of soft power is an explanation of how states can shape others by attraction, legitimacy and credibility in their actions without resorting to coercion (Nye, 2019). In the digital diplomacy field, scholars like Bjola and Manor (2019) believe that social media has become a key tool for governments to communicate their national narrative, connect with foreign audiences, and promote their international legitimacy (Manor, 2019). This research builds on these ideas by looking at the ways in which emotional framing is manifested in the unequal distribution of narrative reach in interstate conflict.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Iranian Accounts Sentiment

In the analysis of tweets made by the official accounts of Iran, including Ali Khamenei (khamenei_ir), the Iranian Government (Iran_GOV), and Fars News Agency (EnglishFars), the data show that there is a low degree of self-

positivity that ranges from 1% to 10%. At the same time, these accounts feature an overwhelmingly negative orientation against Israel. As Ali Khamenei tweeted on 7 October, *“Dictatorial Zionists, you cannot recover from the defeat of October 7. You brought this calamity upon yourselves”*. This frames Israel as a defeated aggressor deserving punishment.

Figure 1: Tweet Khamenei.ir



Source: @khamenei_ir, X.com, 2026

Sentiment analysis shows that 49 -75 % of the emotive information on them is highly negative. For instance, the 7 May 2024 tweet was “Since creation of Israel, pure land occupied by vilest people, racists slaying, looting... Zionist enemy plots... delegitimized as a security threat ”. This statement has been using very strong pejorative terms, which put Israel and its people as illegitimate aggressors, trying to delegitimize the state by use of emotional language. This kind of framing supports a negative feeling and continues a story that Israel is an unfair occupier. This state of constant negativity is evidenced by the portrayal of Israel as committing mass violence, which portrays the Palestinians as oppressed, sparking the emotion of revenge. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of Iranian accounts.

Table 3: Emotional Framing Categories and Aggregate Engagement Metrics for Iranian Official Accounts

Account	Tweets	Replies	Reposts	Likes	Views	Self Positive	Anti-Israel Negative	Neutral
@khamenei_ir	10	7,473	18,576	64,100	4,585,000	10%	75%	15–17%
@Iran_GOV	34	282	1,112	4,305	200,961	7%	72%	18%
@EnglishFars	98	114	348	1,784	171,925	23%	48%	26%

Source: Own Elaboration

3.2 Israeli Accounts Sentiment

Conversely, the State narratives of Israel, especially those of the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu), the Israeli Government (Israel), as well as the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), portray a slightly high sentiment of self-affirmation of between 3 -12% across these pages. However, these sources portray a significantly negative framing of Iran, where 53% to 92 % of emotive content is framed very negatively. Israeli official narratives construct a self-image of legitimacy and responsibility while portraying Iran as an illegitimate security threat.

Figure 2: Tweet Netanyahu



Source: @netanyahu, X.com, 2026

The messages of the Israeli government emphasize the self-imposed status of the Israeli government as a protector of civilization against an existential threat from Iran. There is a common use of titles that include the “Islamic regime” and “characterized as posing existential threats” that keep on building the narrative that the Iranian leadership is a danger to the peace and security of the region. The tweet by the IDF, “This strike is part of the effort to damage the Iranian regime’s surface-to-surface missile production industry, which is intended to manufacture thousands of missiles in the coming years”. As Israeli military operations occurred prior to public disclosure of intelligence assessments, the IDF wanted to make it a defensive attack through their statement. The story, which is supposed to be morally justified, becomes a tactic of dominance and an advertisement of power. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of Israeli accounts.

Table 4: Emotional Framing Categories and Aggregate Engagement Metrics for Israeli Official Accounts

Account	Tweets	Replies	Reposts	Likes	Views	Self Positive	Anti-Israel Negative	Neutral
@netanyahu	10	49,759	82,369	411,100	29,941,000	24%	53%	23%
@Israel	64	81,866	79,566	379,656	34,025,000	3%	92%	7%
@IDF	92	131,169	209,109	1,068,500	130,814,100	10%	54%	36%

Source: Own Elaboration

These results highlight the relevant importance of narrative weaponization in modern conflicts, specifically through the channels of digital diplomacy and strategic communication on social media.

3.3 Emotional Tone Analysis

The Twitter activity that is filtered through both Iranian and Israeli official accounts can be seen to have a negative emotional tenor that is pervasive to support the strategic needs of such countries.

There is 49-75% negative content in Iranian accounts, including the accounts of Khamenei, the government of Iran, and of the English Fars. This sentiment is heavily accusatory of Iran, which represents Israel as a genocide aggressor and oppressor of Palestinian nationals. These sentimental statements aim to stir anger towards Israel and brotherhood with the Palestinians. This framing is also intensified through the anti-Western discourse, which supports the representation of an illegitimate, Western-funded colonial nation.

However, the Israeli sources, such as @netanyahu, @Israel, and IDF, have a similar degree of negativity, with 53- 92 % of their emotional output directed at Iran. The Israeli emotional framing is more of a defensive, alarmist position, which foregrounds the right of Israel to self-defence against an existential threat by the Iranian regime. This rhetoric appeals to fear and urgency, portraying Israel as a civil-defensible nation against a barbaric conqueror. These sentiments are also strategically designed to justify the use of Israeli military force, like air strikes and missile defense, as a morally right move. The Israeli tweets often highlight how accurate and

morally superior their attacks are, and they form part of a greater totality to protect Israeli citizens and the stability of the region.

Overall, although both actors use very negative emotional material, the difference is in the type of emotional appeals. The rhetoric of Iran is centered on the depiction of Israel as an illegitimate, genocidal oppressor to gain international support. Instead, the discourse of Israel focuses on how it portrays itself as a civilizer, which explains its actions as a defensive measure against an existential threat from Iran.

3.4 Engagement

The statistics reveal that Twitter posts by Israeli accounts are more engaging, securing more views, likes, retweets, and replies. This significant disparity in engagement rates indicates that Israeli tweets are more successful in reaching a wider audience, especially in the Western and pro-Israel realms. Conversely, the Iranian tweets are less viral, which is reflected in the lower rate of engagement. This implies that Iran is prolific in printing, but its stories are not disseminated as much on the world platforms, probably due to increased suspicion or opposition on international stages.

Figure 3: Tweet IDF



Source: @netanyahu, X.com, 2026

Figure 4: Tweet Iran_GOV



Source: @Iran_GOV, X.com, 2026

The comparison example of both tweets, where Israel and Iran are highlighting the same event, but it can be observed that the Israeli tweet has a more widespread international coverage, which is an indicator of a stronger involvement in the defensive Israeli narrative. On the other hand, Iran Post has a similar amount of emotional power; it has a lower level of engagement metrics, indicating a limited scope and a lower impact on the global community. This can be reasoned with differences in political orientation and audience preferences within the foreign environment. This sharp inequality highlights the power of narrative framing over international backing and coverage by demonstrating that posts made by Israeli social media pages always have a greater following worldwide than Iranian posts.

This disparity in engagement is a substantive and not a descriptive finding. Higher engagement can best be described as a proxy of observed engagement, the extent to which a built message cuts, sticks, and is intensified by an audience that goes beyond the immediate constituency of the sender of the message. In this metric, Israeli accounts gain much more international presence: the total impressions of the three accounts of the profiles belonging to @Netanyahu, @Israel, and @IDF were more than 160 million, whereas the total impressions of the three accounts belonging to the analyzed Iranian ones were approximately 5 million. This is not a mere measure of popularity, but rather a structural benefit in the global information space, where the algorithms of the Western platform, English content, and existing audience networks radically increase the communicative ability of Israel. Whereas Iranian tweets are mostly ideologically well-focused, they are effective in aligned circles but very weak in their ability to alter the world opinion. This implies that, in the digital sphere, the narrative power is not symmetrical even in cases when both the rhetorical intensity is similar.

3.5 Domestic Support Mobilization

The hashtags and posts of both the Israeli and the Iranian representatives on social media are an effective tool to engage domestic support; for instance, on the Yemeni issue, both countries were tweeting to gain domestic support.

The official account of Netanyahu (@netanyahu) tweeted with video on December 19, 2024,

החותים לומדים וילמדו בדרך הקשה, שמי שפוגע בישראל - משלם על כך מחיר כבד מאוד

(The Houthis are learning and will learn the hard way that whoever harms Israel pays a very heavy price for it). Netanyahu's statement employs deterrent language emphasizing consequences.

Figure 5: Tweet 2 Netanyahu

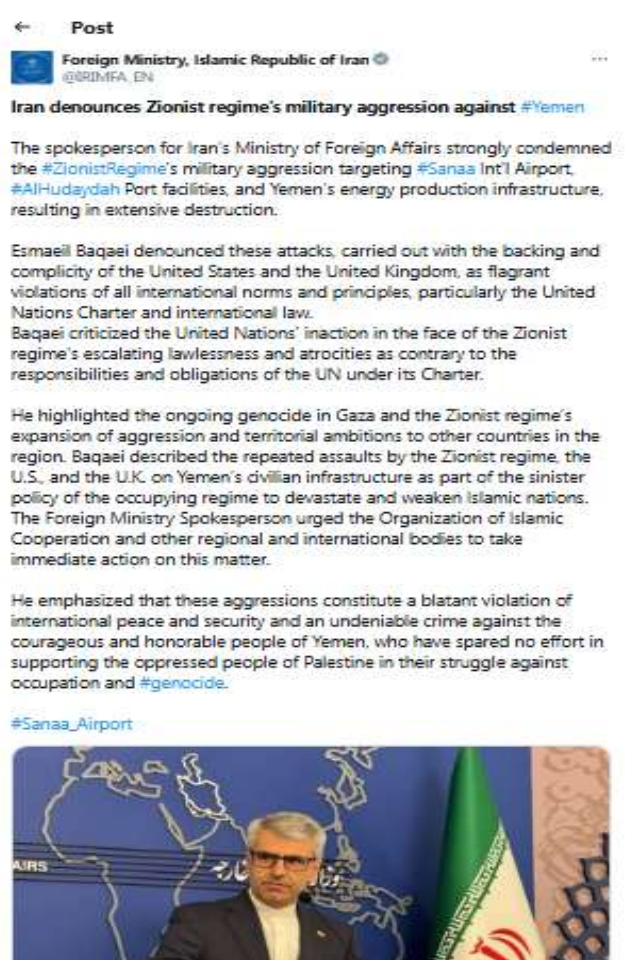


Source: @netanyahu, X.com, 2026

The aggressive and powerful tone is aimed at mobilizing support in the country to strengthen the national pride and cohesion in Israel. These metrics represent a high degree of activity among the Israeli users, which demonstrates strong support of the local audience. This can be seen as great acceptance by the masses, as the likes are remarkably high, and this is also backed by the fact that the message was not only read, but also has 1,290 reposts, which makes the message reach even more people. Moreover, the use of domestic language as a means of communication makes the issue more personal as specific terms and dialects encourage patriotism and a sense of belonging.

On the other hand, Iran was also discussing the same war and stressing their support for Yemen on December 26, 2024, and tweeted that, "Iran denounces Zionist regime's military aggression against #Yemen..."

Figure 6: Tweet Foreign Ministry Islamic Republic of Iran



Source: @EnglishFaras, X.com, 2026

The Iranian tweet appeals to national pride by showing Iran as a morally right country against Israeli aggression. It presents the problem of justice and opposition and urges the Iranians to stand with the position of the government and express solidarity with Palestine and Yemen. The continuous reposts and thousands of views on the Iranian accounts, especially on the Persian-language channels, prove that this tweet attracted the attention of the masses back home. Even more active interactions are observed in Persian platforms by Iranian accounts since they are well aligned with the messages of the government. This reveals the role that social media plays in mobilising people in Iran, as it enhances the spirit of anti-Zionism and the spirit of unity as Iranians converse against perceived foreign aggression.

The data challenges the assumption common in early social media scholarship that digital media forms democratize geopolitical voice by

giving all actors equal communication access. Whereas, the case of Iran and Israel demonstrates that equal access to a platform does not guarantee the equal audience interaction narrative penetration. This finding supports the theories of digital power in international relations that structural inequalities in the world are not neutralized online; they are encoded into algorithmic reach and engagement patterns. In digital conflict environments, the most consequential strategic variable is not what you say, but whom your message architecture is designed to reach, and whether the platform's structural affordances amplify or suppress that reach. The Iran-Israel case thus functions as a paradigmatic illustration of what might be termed "digital soft power asymmetry": a condition in which one actor's communicative infrastructure produces systematically greater international legitimacy, not because its claims are objectively stronger, but because its narrative model is more effectively optimized for the structural realities of global digital platforms. Iran's ideological-moral logic aimed at regional solidarity through emotional outrage and religious imagery, whereas Israel's security-legitimacy logic aimed at Western institutional audiences through defensive and rights-based rhetoric.

4 DISCUSSION

The findings point to analytically important information that the two states are not simply using social media in different ways: Iran and Israel do not act based on the logics of communication that are structurally different; they are the expressions of geopolitical identities and strategic needs. The same concept has already been highlighted in Krieg and Freedman, where they suggested that narrative weaponization is framing to influence the masses and achieve political objectives (Zarnadze, 2025). It has been empirically verified that both the Iranian and Israeli social media structures use these strategies.

The Iranian tweets were referred to as an ideological-moral narrative, where the content is flooded with moral indignation, symbolism, and anti-imperialist framing, and is aimed at an audience that is ideologically inclined instead of appealable neutrals. It creates great solidarity among communities with Iranian, Palestinian, and larger Muslim majority populations, but with little global amplification, which is a result of the rhetorical architecture of those models, which assume rather than develop ideological consensus. Israel, in its turn, adopts a security-legitimacy narrative paradigm, where the military operations are presented as the means of self-defense, as

proportionate, as well as morally justified reaction to the existential threat, a rhetorical logic tailored to the interests of Western democratic audiences, which value the international law, civilian protection principles, and security discourse. This model has a much more elevated engagement, expanded geographical coverage, and more resonance in the international institutions and media ecosystems, which create diplomatic legitimacy. It shows that digital narrative weaponization is not a mass practice but rather a situational strategic decision based on an ideological stance of each actor, the audience it targets, and the soft power calculus, which has important implications for the study of power in the information era, digital diplomacy, conflict communication, and other related areas.

Irani rhetoric exposes Israel as a genocidal aggressor and an imperialist regime that implies Western affiliation (Ilyas and Sajjad, 2024, Rouabah and Mullin, 2025).

On the contrary, the Israeli narratives describe Iran as a destabilising force that threatens the stability in the region, highlighting Iran's missile development and patronisation of terrorist proxies like Hezbollah and the Houthis (Leslie, 2022).

In general, Iran and Israel use social media tactically to reach specific foreign audiences; Iran appeals for anti-imperialism, and Israel to attract the favor of the West and Europe. This is in line with the existing literature that highlights how the countries have been determined to influence the international perception through digital diplomacy and narrative control (Sampson and Annor, 2024, Hedling and Bremberg, 2021).

The use of social media by both states serves to increase morale at home, strengthen national identity, and justify decisions made in policy through the use of emotionally fuelled content. The Framing Theory by Erving Goffman and Robert Entman argues that the media shape the way the masses perceive issues by highlighting and downplaying certain aspects of a story (Zaklama, 2025). In the case of Iran and Israel, the strategic framing of the social media platforms used by both states is aimed at shaping the domestic perception and the international attitudes to the existing conflict, creating different images of the state. The tweets of Iran focus on the stories of resistance, martyrdom, and religious power and portray Iran as the protector of Palestinians and the oppressed nations (Joffre, 2023). The tweets shared by the account of @khamenei_ir frequently portray Israel as a rogue state that ought to take advantage of Zionist and Western sentiments to mobilize internal support for whatever the government does (Numan, 2024). A strong interaction among the Persian-speaking communities in

terms of views and reposts is an indicator of how Iran successfully employed social media to develop internal unity and mobilize the citizens' support for its resistance agenda.

Conversely, the tweets of Israel predict a national defence discourse where the state activities are morally right and necessary in ensuring security (Tramontano, 2021). Tweets by governmental bodies portray Israel as a champion of democracy and human rights against foreign threats. The tweets of the IDF often focus on military actions with an emphasis on the moral restraint of Israel, but the necessity to defend (X, 2026)

In this way, Iran lays emphasis on national resistance or religious solidarity, whereas Israel prefigures self-defence and moral superiority. Both make use of emotional stories meant to rouse the masses' opinion so that their respective governments are guaranteed domestic backing.

The results also indicate that the two sides conduct parallel digital campaigns to legitimise one another in a framing, as mentioned by Edward Bernays and Noam Chomsky in propaganda theory that emphasizes moral and ideological aspects to shatter the legitimacy of the other. Iran declares Israel to be a terrorist nation, which emphasizes its conformity to Western imperialism (Sariolghalam, 2022). This narrative aims to delegitimise the actions of Israel in the international arena and make Iran the champion of Palestinian rights and anti-imperialism.

Israel, in return, refers to Iran as a rogue state due to its nuclear weapons and sponsorship of terrorist proxies. Delegitimation of Iran is given in the form of a regional menace and a threat to the existence of Israel (Roomi, 2023b). This policy aims at not just weakening the international legitimacy of Iran but also presenting Israeli actions as morally limited reactions to the Iranian aggression.

Both countries successfully use social media as a platform of legitimisation struggle, where the core of the campaign consists of emotional and ideological narratives. Moral framing and ideological foundations are among the main tools of forming international understanding, as presented in Van Bavel et al (2019), calling on emotional appeals in social media as the main tool used in discrediting opponents (Van Bavel et al., 2019). The results have brought Nye's idea of soft power into the digital communication context and highlight that international influence relies on platform affordances, audience networks, as well as algorithmic amplification, aligning with current academic studies on digital diplomacy (Manor, 2019).

4.1 Implications for Diplomacy and International Relations

The findings of this study highlight the transformative role of social media, particularly X, in contemporary diplomacy and international relations. The strategic use of digital platforms by Iran and Israel demonstrates that states now engage in a parallel battlefield where narrative control, emotional framing, and ideological positioning are as consequential as physical military actions. This development signals a shift in the traditional understanding of statecraft: influence is no longer limited to formal diplomatic channels, treaties, or military deterrence, but extends into virtual arenas where public perception, legitimacy, and reputational power are contested in real time.

For diplomacy, these insights underscore the necessity for states and international organisations to integrate social media monitoring and narrative analysis into their foreign policy strategies. Understanding how adversaries and allies shape sentiment, deploy moral rhetoric, and appeal to transnational audiences can inform more nuanced responses, conflict mitigation efforts, and negotiation tactics. The dual functionality of platforms like X, as both instruments of public diplomacy and arenas of psychological warfare, requires diplomats to adapt to a context where messaging can preemptively influence international opinion and mobilise domestic support.

In international relations theory, these findings support a reevaluation of power dynamics, emphasising soft power, digital diplomacy, and strategic communication as critical dimensions of contemporary conflict. Social media-driven narratives can accelerate polarisation, exacerbate ideological divides, and influence multilateral decision-making, making perception management a core component of state strategy. Moreover, the study illustrates that legitimacy is increasingly constructed and contested online, implying that international norms, alliances, and reputational authority are vulnerable to digital influence operations.

Overall, this study suggests that future diplomatic and security frameworks must incorporate digital narrative analysis, sentiment tracking, and coordinated counter-messaging as essential tools for managing interstate conflicts, sustaining credibility, and mitigating the risks of online escalation. The Iran-Israel case exemplifies the broader trend of social media as both a strategic instrument and a battleground in global geopolitics.

CONCLUSION

The current paper shows that social media, and especially X, has become a critical battlefield of strategic communication and narrative warfare between the conflicting states, in the case of Iran and Israel. The degree of emotional appeal, ideological context, and orchestrated symbolic and rhetorical content indicated that statements on digital platforms are not merely reactive but are also tools of forward action to influence both national and international perceptions. The engagement data further reveals that Israel's security-legitimacy framing demonstrably achieves greater visibility narrative penetration in global digital space, translating into a measurable soft power advantage. It is this imbalance rather than the presence of online aggression that makes this conflict special in the digital realm, and that scholars and policymakers need to consider.

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