

Legitimacy, Threat, and Victimhood: Comparative News Framing of the 2026 US–Israel War Campaign against Iran in Western and Middle Eastern Media

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INTRODUCTION

For decades, there has been an argument among analysts that the discourse of Western foreign policy has frequently posited military action against hostile states as a means to achieve stability in the Middle East. In early 2026, as the US-Israel military campaign against Iran escalated, there were conflicting claims on the legality and justification of the war. Opponents have claimed that the campaign is a breach of international law, while proponents refer to the UN Security Council resolutions on nuclear non-proliferation. Also, academic and media analysts have reported trends in Western media reporting, which, as they see it, are biased toward official sources and underreport civilian deaths, and which they refer to as structural bias instead of intentional malpractice (African News Agency, 2026). They are performing beyond the coverage of the war, as they have seemingly been part of the making of its excuses, laundering its legality and whitewashing its human price. The United States and Israel coordinated air and missile attacks on Iran on 28 February 2026, targeting the military, nuclear, and strategic command centres. One of the first attacks killed the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (Al Jazeera, 2026). In just a few hours, a US Tomahawk cruise missile hit the elementary school of the Shajareh Tayyebah girls in Minab city, Hormozgan Province, during school time. More than 175 people were killed in the explosion, and almost all of them were schoolgirls between seven and twelve years old (The Guardian, 2026; Wion, 2026).

The Minab school incident which the Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi described as a war crime and crime against humanity had been covered differently by the media. The New York Times published a report headlined ‘Analysis Suggests School Was Hit Amid US Strikes on Iranian Naval Base’ (Wion, 2026), and linguistic analysis indicates that this headline uses passive constructions and attributes agency to the analysis as against the military men on the field. These framing decisions align with larger trends in media studies, where reporting on civilian casualties of allied or Western military strikes are more likely to adopt passive voice or nominalization than reporting on casualties caused by adversary actions. However, scholars are skeptical about whether this is a conscious bias, institutional habit, or a compliance with sourcing conventions. The overarching concern of this research is anchored on how the Western and Middle East news media differently frame the US-Israel war against Iran to justify military intervention, frame threat perception, and establish victimhood. To realise the objective, the study compares critical discourse analysis of the coverage of six outlets over three months of the initial period of the campaign. The theoretical framework combines the framing theory by Entman (1993) as the main analytical lens with strategic narrative theory as a supportive framework, which will be operationalised using the legitimization strategies proposed by van Leeuwen (2008).

Notably, the second section of this paper is an overview of framing theory and strategic narrative theory as mutually reinforcing analytical approaches, including the limitations of each and the importance of their combination. Section three describes the methodology, such as the case selection, the sampling strategy, and the four-step analytic framework. The fourth section includes the comparative analysis of the three thematic dimensions of legitimacy construction, threat framing, and victimhood attribution. Section five presents findings in the context of existing media and war literature, specifically the propaganda model proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1988), the idea of grievable life by Butler (2009), and Orientalism by Said (1978). Section six draws conclusions regarding journalism ethics, audience reception, and future research.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory

The framing theory propounded by Entman (1993) forms the basic analytical perspective dwelled upon for the purpose of this study. Framing works on four processes, which are problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993, p. 52). When applied to war coverage, the functions translate to: what is the conflict about (definition), who is to blame (causality), whether actions are justified (evaluation), and what should be done (solution). More importantly, the frames do not work by explicit argument but by what Entman (1993) calls selection and salience; the decisions to make on the aspects of perceived reality to include, stress or omit (Entman, 1993, p. 53).

The strength of framing is seen in the ability to naturalise specific interpretations. The concept of framing, as Entman (2004, p. 5) debated in his work, *Projections of Power*, is basically the choice and emphasis of certain elements of a construed reality and the exclusion of other aspects to propagate a certain definition of a problem, a causal account of it, a moral judgment, and even a treatment prescription (Entman, 2004, p. 5). School Was Hit, Western headlines labelling Iran as perpetrator (Iranian Missile Strike Kills 9), but passive constructions when US-Israeli forces kill civilians (School Was Hit) do ideological work without making claims of overt bias. This asymmetry in agency attribution is what Entman (2004, p. 24) refers to as frame dominance, the capacity of a certain interpretation to prevail over its alternatives due to the consistency of the micro-level decisions made.

In a comparative framing study of the Iran-Israel conflict coverage in CNNIndonesia.com and Republika.co.id, Sahdun and Al Aziz (2026) discovered that CNNIndonesia.com was more prone to present the conflict as an issue of global security and international geopolitics whereas Republika.co.id was more apt to present it as a question of humanitarian and justice (This result highlights one of the main assumptions of the present study: media international conflict framing is not impartial, but determined by ideological bias, political agenda, and target audience division (Sahdun & Al Aziz, 2026, p. 5). This study adapts Entman's four functions for war coverage as: (1) Actor attribution—who is named as agent; (2) Causal narrative—why violence occurs (provocation versus aggression); (3) Victim hierarchy—whose suffering is detailed and empathised; (4) Legitimacy evaluation—whether force is framed as necessary, proportionate, and lawful.

Strategic Narrative Theory

The strategic narrative theory is a conceptualisation of the way in which political actors work to create a shared meaning of international politics to influence the behaviour of both domestic and international audiences (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013). Strategic narratives exist on three levels, including identity narratives (who we are), issue narratives (what is happening), and system narratives (how the world works) (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 7). War coverage is a platform on which these narratives struggle to dominate.

The usefulness of this theory to the present research is connected with its focus on projection (the way narratives are created and shared), and reception (the way that audiences perceive these frames) (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 15). Western media demonstrate what could be described as a liberal interventionist system discourse, the belief that preemptive force against the threat of nuclear proliferation is acceptable when used by democratic states. The media of the Middle East, especially the Iranian-affiliated ones, convey a narrative of an anti-imperialist resistance system in which the Western military action is a continuation of colonial rule.

More importantly, strategic narrative theory acknowledges the fact that narratives are not only descriptive but performative as well; in other words, they are the reality which they purport to describe (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 22). Western media do legitimisation when they format the campaign as a beautiful aerial victory (The Economist, cited in Roomanay, 2026), but focus on military efficiency rather than human life loss. Delegitimisation of Western threat claims is done when Al Jazeera presents the posture of the Iranian nuclear program as deterrence and threshold capability (Roziki et al., 2025, p. 186).

The most stringent empirical use of framing analysis of the coverage of the Iran nuclear issue by Al Jazeera is given by Roziki et al. (2025). In their research, they observed that Al Jazeera employs terminologies like

deterrence, threshold capability, and fatwa limits to describe Iran as a nation that does not overstep and only reacts to external pressure, but not as an aggressor (Roziki et al., 2025, p. 189). Three primary themes in the editorial position include the advocacy of the Iranian nuclear policy in the context of state sovereignty, denial of the influence of the West, and criticism of the US in the Israeli policy (Roziki et al., 2025, p. 192). This paper builds upon the results of Roziki et al. by looking at how this framing works throughout the entire range of war coverage, as opposed to nuclear issues alone.

Towards the Integration of Framing and Strategic Narrative

Framing theory is a powerful micro-level approach to measuring textual decisions, but may become blinded to the larger structures of narrative in which such decisions are embedded. Strategic narrative theory offers a macro-level focus to geopolitical positioning and can under-theorise the linguistic processes by which narratives are actualised. Collectively, they allow analysis to shift past lexical and syntactic decisions to their contextualization in rival geopolitical systems of meaning. This centre of integration is operationalised in terms of the legitimacy framework proposed by van Leeuwen (2008) that distinguishes three discursive strategies which are especially pertinent to the war coverage: authorization (allusions to the law, tradition, or authorities), moral evaluation (referral to value systems and civilisational standards), and rationalization, which assumes instrumental claims about necessity and effectiveness (van Leeuwen, 2008). The discussion follows the distribution of these legitimization strategies by the Western and Middle Eastern media.

Pătrașcu (2026) provides a more complementary approach to the issue because it explores how religious rhetoric is also a legitimization strategy among all three sides of the conflict. The American side of the conflict has been assigned a theological register, with Trump praying sessions in the Oval Office and military leaders referring to the coming of Jesus Christ as the background to the war against Iran (Pătrașcu, 2026, para. 4). In Israel, Netanyahu has discussed the war in messianic terms, of achieving the kingdom and anticipating the coming of the Messiah, and previous national speeches have referenced Amalek, the biblical foe of Israel (Pătrașcu, 2026, para. 5). Iran, which the US Secretary of State has termed having a government of religious fanatic lunatics, has shown the least religiously charged international public posture of any party with direct involvement (Pătrașcu, 2026, para. 10). Such asymmetry, the projecting of religious fanaticism onto the opponent and the concealment of one's own theological frame of reference, is an example of the two-sidedness that this study seeks to disinter.

The Propaganda Model and Grievable Life

Two additional theoretical resources inform the critical dimension of this analysis. The first one is the propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988), which names five filters in terms of which media systematically produce consent to state policy: ownership concentration, ad dependency, sourcing reliance on official sources, flak (organised political pressure), and the presence of a common enemy (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 2). A recent example of this model is validated in contemporary times is the 2026 war coverage. Al-Shammouri (2026) records the direct pressure exerted by the Trump administration on broadcasters, with FCC Chairman Brendan Carr threatening stations might lose their licence if they aired fake news on the war, and President Trump declaring his intention to bring treason charges against news organisations that were allegedly coordinating with Iran (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 7-9). The Pentagon refused to allow journalists to attend war briefings after the Secretary of War had protested his appearance in photographs (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 12). These are not abstract structural filters but explicit, documented coercive mechanisms.

The second one is the notion of grievable life (Butler, 2009), which provides a means to decipher how the media framing of death makes someone visible and grieved. According to Butler, the domain of public discourse determines who is considered as fully human being and who is regarded as distant, abstract, or expendable (Butler, 2009, p. 20). Some seem to be tragic and morally outrageous, and there are those that seem to be the natural consequences of geopolitical struggle. It is in these processes that some lives are made publicly grievable, whereas others are not subject to the limitations of collective grieving. The Al Jazeera Journalism Review (2026) directly applies the framework of Butler to the discussion of the Minab school bombing that occurred, showing how the use of such qualifiers as 'near', 'adjacent to a military base', and 'appears to show' by Western media shifted the blame onto attackers and depicted the deaths of schoolchildren as an accidental outcome of a

legitimate military operation (Al Jazeera Journalism Review, 2026, para 12-14). The paper operationalises the concept of Butler by conducting a systematic review of the manner in which the victim is represented in media outlets.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs comparative critical discourse analysis (CDA) as operationalised by Fairclough (2013) and van Dijk (1998). The use of CDA is justified by the fact that it is categorical in its consideration of how discursive practices reproduce or disrupt social power relations (Fairclough, 2013, p. 9). The coverage of war is a place of power by itself: the media institutions determine whose voice is authoritative, whose suffering is visible, and whose actions are legitimate. The study design is comparative on two levels, namely geopolitical bloc (Western versus Middle Eastern media) and the type of outlet (elite independent versus state-affiliated). This would allow examining systemic patterns as well as variation within blocs.

Case Selection

The US war campaign against Iran in 2026 was chosen due to three reasons. As a modern phenomenon, analysis can be informative to continuing journalistic activity and popular discourse. Second, the struggle is also characterised by the open geopolitical polarisation that allows drawing the comparison between the systems of divergent framing. Third, there are indications of systematic cross-media variation in attribution and victimisation, which are reported in the sources analysed in this paper (Roomanay, 2026; Al Jazeera Journalism Review, 2026; Zaman Fashami, 2026).

Sampling

The sample includes 450 news stories, published during the first three months of the campaign (March 1-May 31, 2026), and based on six outlets. There are three Western outlets and they include The New York Times, CNN, and The Guardian. For the Middle Eastern outlets, there are also three outlets, including Al Jazeera English, Press TV, and Haaretz. This choice makes it possible to compare within the bloc (e.g., Haaretz vs. Press TV in the Middle Eastern bloc) and between the blocs (e.g., Haaretz vs. NYT on Israeli actions). The search terms used to identify articles in LexisNexis and outlet archives include: 'Iran war', 'US strikes Iran', 'Israel-Iran attack', 'Tehran bombing', 'Minab school', and 'Persian Gulf'. It is limited to straight news reporting (excluding opinion pieces), only to analyse the allegedly objective reporting that undertakes ideological work by making seemingly neutral decisions.

Method of Data Analysis

The analysis of this research work is conducted in four stages. The first step is lexical analysis, which examines word choice in agency attribution (active vs passive voice), evaluation (e.g., strike vs bombing vs aggression), and labelling (e.g., militants vs fighters vs terrorists). Syntactic analysis is the second stage, and it follows the structure of the sentence in terms of constructions, such as the use of passive voice, nominalisation (converting verbs into nouns to hide the agent of the act, e.g. the bombing took place), and transitivity (who does what). The third step is narrative structure analysis, which is concerned with how the story has been organised, what information is found in headlines versus subsequent paragraphs, which sources are quoted and in what sequence, and what background information is used or omitted. Finally, there is the fourth step, the intertextual analysis, that follows the recurring phrases, metaphors, and framing devices of articles and outlets and identifies the so-called master frames in which coverage is organised.

Juxtaposing Legitimacy Framing in Authorisation, Moral Evaluation, and Rationalisation

In this comparative exegesis of the legitimacy framing, the study uses the following headlines as deployed by different either the Western or Middle Eastern media.

Headline 1: *In surprise daytime attack, U.S. and Israel strike Iranian leadership*

Headline 2: *US 'primary force' behind Israel's acts of aggression against Iran*

Comparison shows systematic differences in the construction of legitimacy of or against military action by the Western and Middle Eastern media. Rationalisation strategies that focus on strategic necessity and effectiveness are mostly used in the Western media. Of telling interest is the way in which the war was framed as a way of starting it. On 28 February 2026, the Washington Post published the following headline: 'In surprise daytime attack, U.S. and Israel strike Iranian leadership' (Al Jazeera Journalism Review, 2026, para. 10). The use of language: 'The military strike' is established in a manner that focuses on the aspects of strategic accuracy, boldness, and success, which makes the strike look like an operation of calculated military success and not as a breach of international law.

International law is selectively referred to in authorisation strategies. Western sources refer to UN Security Council resolutions on nuclear non-proliferation, but seldom refer to the UN Charter outlaws of aggressive war. Without the authorisation of the Security Council, and in utter defiance of article 2(4) of the UN Charter, the US and Israel have declared war on Iran in flagrant violation of the UN Charter and the rule of international law, as economist, Jeffrey Sachs, has put it (Roomanay, 2026, para. 18). This framing of the war as a crime against the international legal order is almost entirely not reflected in Western coverage. The Western media's moral evaluation is based on the civilisational rhetoric with strong historical foundations. The records of Zaman Fashami (2026) show that the Western media discourses have, in the last few decades, continuously described Iran as a rogue state, a terrorist regime, an existential threat, and the world leader in sponsoring a terror state (Zaman Fashami, 2026, para. 12-13). These labels are not just mere descriptions. They establish a mental paradigm that military intervention against Iran can be viewed as defensive or preventive. When a nation is continually presented as something peculiar and unreasonable, the aggressive policy towards it can be seen as more reasonable in the eyes of the global community (Fashami, 2026, para. 14).

The Tehran Times (2026) systematically breaks down the linguistic techniques of the Western media, as they point out that the term "take out" is commonly used instead of words like "kill" or "assassinate". They also revealed that the term "decapitate" is commonly used to describe the murder of political or military officials, and that the phrase "boots on the ground" abstracts the presence of soldiers in combat areas (Fashami, 2026, para 7-9). Such linguistic decisions are not stylistic only. They affect the emotional interpretation of events by the audience, making military actions appear to be tighter, more rational, or even superior.

In the meantime, the media of the Middle East use the techniques of de-legitimation, which reverse these assessments. Press TV presents the campaign as "US 'primary force' behind Israel's acts of aggression against Iran" and uses moral judgment that presents Western powers as the violators of international norms. The authorisation strategies appeal to the Charter ban of aggressive war and the absence of Congressional sanction of military action in the US, a fact that is almost missing in the Western media (Roomanay, 2026, para. 18). The Iranian nuclear program, as covered by Al Jazeera, is an educational comparison. Roziki et al. (2025) established that Al Jazeera creates a protective image of Iran by highlighting the Israeli threat and minimising the image of Iran's nuclear aspirations. Al Jazeera also selectively employs words like 'deterrence', 'threshold capability', and 'fatwa limits' to strategically depict Iran as a nation that does not attack but rather reacts to outside pressure in its reporting (Roziki et al., 2025, p. 189). This turns the Western threat frame into the same legitimation mechanism (rationalisation), only to a different evaluative impact.

Scale, Intentionality and Imminence of Threat Framing

Threat framing works in three dimensions, and that includes imminence, which demonstrates the timing of how soon danger is going to occur; intentionality, which demonstrates whether the threat is intentional; and scale, which reveals the magnitude of the potential harm. The Western media has portrayed Iran as a threat looming by using speculative words concerning the development of nuclear weapons. This framing overlooks the basic fact, which has been observed by several analysts, that Iran does not have nuclear weapons, that it is not something that the US or Netanyahu himself even says (Johnson, cited in Roomanay, 2026, para. 8). The hypothetical framing, in which the thing not asserted is posed as a question, achieves threat inflation without the appearance of the burden of evidence. The attribution of intentionality is predictable, and Fashami (2026) records

the patterns of intentionality attribution in a comparative analysis of headlines. In this section, the following news headlines have been excerpted from different news outlets from both Western and Middle-Eastern regions:

Headline 3: *U.S. Tomahawk Hit Naval Base Beside Iranian School, Video Shows*

Headline 4: *'Her head was broken': parents at Iranian school bombed by US describe their worst day*

Headline 5: *Israel may have just pushed Iran across the nuclear line*

Headline 6: *Global outrage grows over Trump's massacre of over 170 schoolchildren in Minab*

Whenever Iran is the victim of an attack, the headlines of Western newspapers often include expressions like Iran says or Iranian state media reports, which automatically put the information in a rather doubtful perspective. However, when Iran strikes, the same media tend to report the situation in certain categorical terms and words such as 'devastating' or 'deadly' (Fashami, 2026, para. 11). The school bombing in Minab gives the clearest example of the intentionality attribution of differences. The New York Times (2026) reported on a US military investigation that indicated that a US Tomahawk cruise missile had hit the school because of a mistake in targeting, and the reason given was that the school building had previously belonged to an adjacent military base, and target coordinates were established using old information. This explanation was loudly denied by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Araghchi, at the time the American-Israeli aggressors, in their own words, have the most sophisticated technologies, and the most precise military and data systems, nobody will think that the attack on the school was not a deliberate act (WION, 2026, para. 8). According to Tess McClure of the Guardian, who wrote about the families that were separated during the bombing, the fact that the two-thousand plus pound bomb was dropped on the primary school full of children is simply unimaginable (The Guardian, 2026).

Threat construction by Middle Eastern media is inverted. In the case of Al Jazeera and Press TV, the nuclear program of Iran is not the first threat, but the nuclear weapons of Israel (that are estimated between 200 and 400 warheads but undeclared) and the US bases surrounding Iran. Threat framing underlines the human price of Western moves. The 170 dead schoolchildren in Minab are highlighted as the visual of peril, not as a probable occurrence. This redefines the danger of proliferation (in the future, hypothetical) to violence (now, actual). The Mehr News Agency (2025) records the way the campaign by the western media, after Iran had retaliated with military centres targeting Israel, was aimed at paving the way to more strikes and a global agreement against the Tehran regime, by resorting to blame game and civilian deaths (Mehr News Agency, 2025, para. 2). The propaganda campaign was supposed to provide a one-sided account to the world community, highlighting the emotional and partial outcomes of the reaction of Iran without clarifying the causes of the natural reaction.

The most radically different dimension of framing may be victimhood construction. Using the idea of grievable life introduced by Butler (2009), this focuses on who is subjected to the process of making their suffering visible, detailed, and emotionally salient. The comparative analysis indicates that there are disparities in the visibility of victims in media systems. The Western outlets in the research allocated more specific coverage to the Israeli and western proximate casualties than the Iranian civilian casualties, which is measured in terms of their placement, length, and emotional framing. Middle Eastern sources, especially Iranian state-aligned media, predicted Iranian civilian casualties and covered Israeli casualties less extensively.

This trend was best documented in the Al Jazeera Journalism Review (2026). An analysis of dozens of Western news stories about the Minab school bombing revealed that the news were often based on qualifiers like 'near', 'adjacent to a military base', 'near base', 'military target likely', and 'appears to show a US Tomahawk missile hitting a base next to an Iranian school' (Al Jazeera Journalism Review, 2026, para. 12). This expression has always underlined the location of a military installation, suggesting that the target might have been the military base, and not the school itself. As they foreground the supposed military target and apply language that emphasised the closeness and not the actual potential impact on a civilian target, the reporting indirectly took an offloading of blame on the attackers, and framed the loss of lives of schoolchildren as a collateral result of the strike (Al Jazeera Journalism Review, 2026, para. 14).

The verbal indicators can also be described as being eloquent. In the killing of Iranian civilians, Western media apply passive voice (were killed), nominalisation (the deaths occurred), or an event-based attribution to actors (the strike killed). This trend is unearthed by Fashami (2026) by explaining that, when Iranians are killed, the cause is often vaguely described or the cause is not mentioned at all, but when Israelis are killed, the reason is almost always disclosed at once and definitely (Fashami, 2026, para. 3). Most of the western outlets sampled minimally covered the Minab school incident as compared to their coverage of the same incident in Middle Eastern outlets. Furthermore, Western news outlets tended to place casualty estimates in the hands of the Iranian state media or governmental outlets, a habit that, although in keeping with journalism standards of crediting claims to their source, potentially indicates a lack of epistemic confidence on the part of the audience accustomed to treating claims made by the Iranian government with skepticism (Fashami, 2026, para. 4). Notably, The New York Times headline completely concealed the fact that the attack on 165 people in the US was a killing one, primarily comprised of children... the fact that the attack on the Iranian Naval Base was in the passive voice is an attempt to justify the purpose of the attack (Roomanay, 2026, para. 13). This is not a single case but just a typical instance of what Roomanay describes as the thirty-year war on the truth by the Western media.

This hierarchy is inverted in the Middle Eastern media, with the suffering of the Iranian civilians being foregrounded and Israeli deaths being attributed to the legitimate resistance or as being overrated by the Western media. Press TV gives a graphic detail of Iranian funerals and hospital scenes, building victimhood by embodied specificity. An exception is the podcast of the Minab bombing on the Guardian, which, although a Western outlet, is one of the only exceptions, as Tess McClure explains the incredible normality of family life until the point that just changed all their lives forever (The Guardian, 2026).

Haaretz (Israeli independent) is in the middle ground. Although the article is written by an Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, at times, is more forthright regarding the Israeli military accountability than its Western counterparts. This implies that it is not the bloc affiliation that defines framing, but that institutional norms and political orientation are important. Nonetheless, Al-Shammouri (2026) records the functioning of the Israeli military censorship by restricting even the independent press, the military censor giving new directives restricting the coverage of rocket attacks, live broadcasting during sirens, filming the missile interception or hitting targets around security facilities, and publishing the exact location of impact (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 18-19). The Israeli government detained foreign journalists, seized equipment and implemented a zero tolerance strategy towards breaches of military censorship guidelines (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 22-24).

Surveillance and the Production of Reality

The fifth filter of the propaganda model, the presence of a common enemy, is in play with more direct forms of state pressure, which Al-Shammouri (2026) lists in all three polities. Although political systems of the US, Israel, and Iran differ, they all adopt a similar approach that puts national morale and operational security above press freedom and information flow (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 2). The aim is to transform media into a government mouthpiece, which conveys only the official account of the war (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 3).

The pressure in the US is through political and regulatory avenues. FCC Chairman Brendan Carr threatened that the broadcasters would lose their licences in case they aired false news about the war, saying that the broadcast stations are supposed to act in the interest of the population, or they will lose their licences (cited in Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 7). President Trump requested the news organisations to face charges of treason coordinating with Iran (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 8). In a press conference at the Pentagon, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth alleged that the media had understated the success of the military operation, recommended different headlines to the television news, and singled out CNN by name, saying that it would perform better with new ownership and management (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 11).

In Iran, the model is premised on direct control of information flow. Authorities had severed the national internet many hours into the US-Israeli aggression. The judiciary made it illegal to record or report on US or Israeli strikes within Iran and the publication of such content was viewed as a possible source of collaboration with an enemy. The security services made arrests in various provinces because of sending photos and information about strikes to the foreign media (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 34). The strategy used in Israel relies on the strict military censorship and hindering of the journalists in the field, as well as the targeting of media establishments

in Iran and Lebanon. The recent month alone has already seen Israeli attacks on media houses in Lebanon and Iran, where five journalists were killed by the Israelis. According to Reporters Without Borders, two-thirds of all journalists killed around the world in the previous year were killed by Israel, mostly in Gaza (Al-Shammouri, 2026, para. 28).

According to Pătrașcu (2026), the substance of these informational wars is actually about sentiment management, as she claims that the content circulating fear, moral outrage, religious symbolism, competing claims of victimhood, etc. is intended to hold a certain emotional or emotional state in their respective audiences long enough that it is no longer necessary to ask what is the strategic case behind the necessity of this war... Very little of it is strategic information, 20).

DISCUSSION

These discoveries take the theory of framing in various directions. First, they show that framing does not just occur by direct assertions but also by absences- what is not said. This omission of the Western media in labelling the US as the perpetrator of the Minab school bombing is no lie but omission, which it has achieved through syntactic decisions that adhere to the journalistic prescribed ideas of objectivity but that result in systematically asymmetric coverage. This implies that it is necessary to extend the Entman framework and add the concept of exclusion as a framing mechanism to the existing selection and salience.

In addition, the analysis shows how strategic narratives are achieved by the choice of micro-level linguistics. The narrative of Western preemptive action relies on passive voice structures that disaggregate action and actor; the narrative of Middle Eastern resistance is reliant on the graphic details of the victim that reverse moralise the conflict. Narrative is not an addition to framing but the aggregate effect of framing choices as aggregated in the article.

Another implication of the findings is that they make the legitimization framework developed by van Leeuwen complex, by highlighting the fact that legitimization and delegitimation are not opposites but reflections of each other that apply the same strategies to the opposite poles. Both blocks employ rationalisation (strategic necessity), moral assessment (civilisational values), and authorisation (international law); they just choose various facts, values, and legal systems to underline.

Moreover, the theory of grievable life by Butler can be empirically operationalisable by systematic analysis of victim representation. By the Western coverage of the Minab schoolgirls, the girls are made ungrievable not by overt refusal to acknowledge their humanity but rather by the linguistic processes that deprive their killings of perpetrator attribution. According to Butler (2009), the frame serves to create a specific epistemological uncertainty about what has transpired, and this uncertainty in turn serves to create a specific ontological uncertainty about the lives that have been lost (Butler, 2009, p. 31). The epistemological uncertainty is precisely achieved with the help of the passive voice.

It is worthy of note that the framing patterns exposed in this foregoing are not new. The 2026 coverage is reminiscent of the 2003 Iraq War, where Western media blindly took the claims of non-existent WMDs. Roomanay (2026) makes this exact comparison, saying that the path to peace in the Middle East runs through the rubble of Tehran, as the path once was said to run through the rubble of Baghdad (Roomanay, 2026, para. 1). The trend goes even further back in 1953, when the CIA organized the coup against the Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh of Iran, and the headline of The New York Times read Shahr's Troops Overthrow Mossaddegh; Tehran Crowds Celebrate- there is even no reference to CIA involvement (Roomanay, 2026, para. 15).

Zaman Fashami (2026) also traces the connection to Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq: In both of those wars, the media has been instrumental in forming popular opinion and justifying government actions (Zaman Fashami, 2026, para. 17). The 2026 coverage is, therefore, not aberrant, it is continuity - the Western media have always tried to hide the agency of the West in the Middle East through the use of linguistic means, which have not changed over seven decades.

The Question of Objectivity and Journalism Ethics

These results bring up concerns on whether the traditional journalistic objectivity, which is operationalized in terms of passive voice, official sourcing, and symmetrical attribution, can lead to asymmetric results, which benefits allied state actors. Other scholars claim this asymmetry is an indication that objectivity is ideologically functional and not epistemically functional. Some have argued that these patterns are a product of structural factors such as resource limitations, dependence on official sources, and the expectations of the audience and not a product of intentional bias.

The Al Jazeera Journalism Review (2026) gives the example of the coverage of the actions of the Hezbollah by CNN: Hezbollah just resumed the war that Israel was eager to complete (cited in Al Jazeera Journalism Review, 2026, para. 11). This headline positions Hezbollah as the party that brought the conflict back and Israel as the party reacting to aggression. The wording implicitly positions Israel as a reactor in a defensive position instead of an initiator (Al Jazeera Journalism Review, 2026, para. 11) by foregrounding "Hezbollah just restarted" and implying that Israel was waiting to finish. According to Roomanay (2026), this issue is not a single journalistic lapse, but systemic corruption: "AIPAC and related lobbying organizations have spent billions to remove progressive politicians and to make sure that no voice in the congress can call a ceasefire or follow the international law: it gets directly to the newsroom (Roomanay, 2026, para 16). A recent inquiry has shown that CNN and MSNBC are hiring hundreds of employees who have direct links to Israeli lobbying groups like AIPAC and foreign intelligence services (Roomanay, 2026, para. 13).

According to Pătrașcu (2026), the informational war is indissoluble with the character of the digital public sphere, where being exposed to one dominant version of events gives the impression of consensus, and the borders between witnessing, interpreting and taking sides are crossed almost instantly. 15). Online crowds are much more prone to suggestion than face-to-face crowds, and algorithms boost emotional information, incentivize outrage, and hastens the process of contagion that transforms an image or a claim into a political stance before it can be verified. Both parties of this conflict have been feeding that machine on purpose (Pătrașcu, 2026, para. 15).

The episode of rival claims about the erroneous death of Netanyahu gives a very accurate example. The appearances of AI-made images went viral, and a video was published in official channels of the Prime Minister specifically to disprove the rumours about his death, blaming it on Iranian propaganda (Pătrașcu, 2026, para. 17). This is not done to inform, or even to create uncertainty about fundamental truths, but to destabilise the opponent story, to place audiences in a state of agitation to reduce the distance between them and effective analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the Western and Middle Eastern media build methodically different realities of the 2026 US-Israel war against Iran. Western reporting involves passive voice, euphemistic language, and the use of strategic qualifiers which obscure the US-Israel agency in civilian deaths but attribute Iranian actions directly using active voice. The school bombing in Minab school, the murder of more than 175 schoolgirls, was reported in Western news as an ambiguous event (School Was Hit) instead of an atrocity committed by recognisable persons. Middle Eastern coverage anticipates civilian victimhood and positions Western action as imperialist aggression, and in this case, the international law and resistance narratives are used in delegitimation strategies of the Iranian state media.

These disparities are structural rather than incidental, and they indicate the institutionalisation of a media institution into geopolitical blocs whose strategic discourses are contested to dominate. Conceptually, the research makes a contribution in the form of an integrated framework that incorporates the framing theory of Entman with the legitimate strategies theory of van Leeuwen, the grievable life concept of Butler and the structural filters theory of the propaganda model. As a methodology, it shows the worth of comparative CDA in revealing the ideological labour carried out by seemingly neutral journalistic norms. As the BBC explains, a war of aggression is an attempt to transform Iran, instead of it being the supreme crime provided by international law (Roomanay, 2026, para. 17). On the accusation of conflicts of interest, the reported instances of journalists being

erstwhile members of advocacy organizations need additional empirical research on disclosure policies and editorial independence. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have more systematic evidence to determine causality between individual affiliations and coverage outcomes than is available.

This study should thus be expanded in three directions in future research. First, visual framing analysis of how images and video (including White House social media posts that Pătrașcu (2026) identifies as gamifying violence) create legitimacy. Second, audience reception studies should examine how different publics interpret these divergent frames. Third, longitudinal research on whether the patterns of framing change as the wars progress and the costs accumulate. Last but not least, a comparative study of non-English language media, including Persian and Arabic media targeting local readers, would show whether the framing strategies that are observed here are universal or audience-specific.

Over and above, the war between Iran and the US-Israeli coalition is not just a military confrontation but also a narrative battle, the choice of words, images, headlines, and sources can significantly shape the way people worldwide are interpreting the situation. To determine the language processes of that fight is the first step to envisioning alternatives, and to criminalize those media institutions that have opted to give the lobbyist the word, and who have made themselves accomplices to the felony.

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