

## The War of Narratives: How Are Washington and Tehran Fighting Their Deepest Battle?



For decades, conflicting narratives between Washington and Tehran have fueled the long-running struggle over interests and influence between the two countries, shaping how domestic and global public opinion views each of them. The current war between them has also carried within it another parallel war, one that appears more central than armed hostilities themselves: the war of narratives.

What narratives do Washington and Tehran rely on? Where do they converge and where do they diverge? What duality exists between national narratives and those directed outward? What role have these narratives played in the current war? And how has the fragmentation of narratives within the Trump administration affected its ability to manage the conflict? This article attempts to shed light on these questions and others.

Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Shared Narrative

In their joint book “Republics of Myth: National Narratives and the U.S.-Iranian Conflict,” the authors argue Hussein Banai, John Tirman, and Malcolm Byrne argue that the conflict between Tehran and Washington has been shaped by the national narratives of both countries, not merely by interests and influence. The same applies to the narratives accompanying the current American-Israeli war on Iran, as these narratives work not only to shape domestic and global public opinion, but also to direct current political choices and shape the long-term historical memory of the war.

Over nearly seven decades now—since the first American intervention in the coup against Mohammad Mossadegh’s government and the events that followed that historical moment, especially the 1979 Islamic Revolution— a shared American-Iranian narrative has emerged that sees geopolitical realities from two different perspectives, yet converges in doubting the other’s intentions and distrusting its moves. American and Iranian narratives intersect in portraying their prolonged hostility through the image of an external enemy that poses a vital threat to national identity and national security, thereby justifying exceptional, and at times repressive, policies at both the domestic and international levels.

Indeed, the Iranian narrative draws its elements from a religious heritage built on the oppression and martyrdom of the Prophet’s household and apocalyptic prophecy, seeing American imperialism as a contemporary manifestation of those meanings. In its wary discourse about foreign interference in its internal affairs, it relies on a long history of Western domination and colonialism.

Meanwhile, the American national narrative is built on what is known as the “Frontier Myth,” a myth rooted in continental expansion that began in the 17th century from New England and spread across the frontier—the wilderness—in a divinely blessed mission to “tame the savages,” reaping spoils and the fruits of a sacred mission along the way. Although the doors of literal colonial expansion closed in the 19th century, American politicians retained traces of this myth in their conception of America’s role as the “world’s policeman,” tasked with enlightening “barbaric” peoples, especially in the Middle East, while at the same time reaping the spoils of oil and economic interests.

It is an idealized narrative that glorifies the self and sees itself, by virtue of its civilization and progress, as responsible for leading the world and civilizing less fortunate nations. It also sees itself as entitled to sovereign expansion and the securing of interests on the high seas. Iran, with its violent prophetic visions, became ideal material for testing this narrative.

The hostage crisis following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the shocking images and footage that accompanied it for American society, reinforced the

frontier myth within the Carter administration, which saw Iranians as “barbarians” and Iran as a dangerous place run by mad mullahs leading a theocratic regime in conflict with Western culture.

These shared and opposing narratives, saturated with moral and religious motives on both sides and representing a vivid example of the “clash of civilizations” principle, led American policymakers to view Tehran’s moves with suspicion and to brand it as deceitful, duplicitous, inclined toward violence, and openly hostile to America even in moments when Tehran had extended a hand to Washington and some of its rulers had shown openness to positive Iranian-American relations.

By contrast, Tehran developed a lasting sense that Washington was conspiring to change its regime, besiege its Islamic Revolution, and impose more sanctions to abort the “revolutionary Islam” it sees itself as representing. This sense of political victimhood, rooted in the symbolism of the killing of Imam Hussein and the historical injustice it represents, converged with a belief in the role Tehran plays in end-times prophecies, whereby, in its own view, it is tasked with fighting the injustice rampant in the world.

#### The American Narrative: Secular in Discourse, Religious in Motivation

Despite the claim that religion and state are separate in the contemporary history of the United States as a secular liberal democracy, its foreign policy—especially in dealing with the Muslim world—reveals a narrative that employs religious and moral preaching, framing the prolonged conflict with the peoples of this region in ideological theological terms.

In its conflicts in the region since the middle of the last century, Washington has consistently relied structurally—not incidentally—on a religious narrative that casts it as commissioned by God to wage military attacks on the “unenlightened” world, whose inhabitants are often Muslim. This pattern, which persisted through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Israel’s proxy wars, and now the war on Iran, has refuted the claim that the religious narrative is merely symbolic or individual.

The duality of a secular domestic discourse and a religious international one has deeper roots in modern American history. In its war with the Soviet Union during the last century, Washington invoked the binary of the free religious empire versus the atheist communist one to frame a geopolitical competition fundamentally based on interests and influence, within an ideological camp meant to mobilize popular support led by the religious establishment.

This framework rests on simplifying complex geopolitical concepts and conferring a sacred aura on the actions of political leaders, reducing internal opposition and justifying the crossing of legal boundaries.

Washington's open-ended war on terror after the September 11 attacks also offered a stark example of the religious/moral narrative, shifting from the language of national security and counterterrorism to fighting the "axis of evil" in a "crusade led by God's will," as George W. Bush described it .

This old colonial language, grounded in moral superiority and divine commission, raises suspicions of a structural contradiction between the declared appearance of U.S. policy as secular and rational and the reality of its being shaped by undeclared cultural and ideological factors that go beyond mere mobilization and domestic rallying in forming and driving its foreign policy.

In the context of the current war between Washington and Tehran, Pete Hegseth, the U.S. secretary of war, did not merely weave an ideological narrative portraying the war with Tehran as a crusade targeting revolutionary Islam in particular and deriving its legitimacy from divine will and the responsibility borne by believers in Christ to Christianize the world by force.

He went further, creating a parallel national narrative through which he classified Americans themselves into the good those standing with the Trump administration in its war against Tehran—and the evil—those who question it or criticize sovereign decisions and the way the conflict is being managed.

This parallel narrative appeared in Hegseth's repeated rebukes of major American press institutions that take a critical approach to military operations, question their goals, and doubt their results, accusing them of failing to adopt a patriotic line in their coverage. This narrative indicates a persistent attempt by the Trump administration to strip the opposition of legitimacy and impose a kind of simplistic moral binary that flattens the conflict, erases its complex dimensions and human cost, and reproduces a simplified moral universe in which critical thinking, strategic analysis, and reflection on ends and purposes are unwelcome.

### The Iranian Narrative for the Outside World: Mimicking the Other's Culture

During its war with Washington, Tehran used an intensive media camp by deploying social media to deliver its own narrative abroad, one that mirrored the culture and premises of Western peoples especially the American public while keeping its internal religious narrative at a distance, since the Trump administration considers that the key point in frightening people about Tehran.

Tehran's outward-facing media narrative relied on humanitarian, political, and cultural concepts popular in the United States and widespread across the global internet. It used Lego characters and hip-hop and rap music to cast doubt on Trump's character and his administration's decisions, portraying Trump as deceptive and subordinate to Netanyahu or Jeffrey Epstein, presenting a

narrative contrary to reality with which he deceives the American public. Through its entertaining propaganda material, it even attracts segments of the population not interested in international affairs.

Indeed, The Hill reported that the Iranian regime turns to a young generation raised in the world of the internet, intellectually aligned with the ruling system, most of whom belong to a content production company based in Iran called Explosive Media, to create media camps built on a sympathetic popular narrative belonging to the contemporary world and adopting its terminology and culture contrary to the Trump administration's claims that Iran's culture is priestly and mired in distant centuries.

Tehran thus bypassed the ruling elite in Washington and addressed the American people and European peoples directly. In a speech by Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian directed at Western peoples, especially Americans, he said that Iran harbors no hostility toward these peoples, but that the actions of their politicians and their plans to strike Iranian infrastructure constitute a war crime whose repercussions go beyond Iran and its vital interests. In his speech, Pezeshkian also questioned whether the "America First" slogan raised by the Trump administration is truly a priority for an administration that does the opposite of what it says part of a reciprocal war of narratives between the two sides.

The social media accounts affiliated with the Iranian government and its diplomatic missions around the world drew growing attention during the war. Over fifty days of hostilities between Washington and Tehran, the accounts recorded 900 million views and 22 million likes.

In 2016, the Revolutionary Guard established a digital media center for war affairs under the name "Qorb Baqiatallah Center" (QBA) and appointed one of its commanders to head it, in an effort to harness the digital revolution and social media platforms, which continue to flourish and prove their role in shaping global public opinion and leading the war of narratives.

The Iranian government allocated nearly \$55 million from its general budget to the center in 2023, an amount nearly three times the sum allocated to the Revolutionary Guard's planning and construction arm, known as "Khatam al-Anbiya Headquarters," which received only about \$20 million.

These media camps have unique importance in the current conflict. Entertainment-based media camps appear to have previously succeeded in provoking the Trump administration and pushing it toward reactive responses, such as the video showing Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro dancing to the song "Don't Worry, Be Happy," which was according to The New York Times a motivating factor behind the Trump administration's attack that led to Maduro's

abduction early last January.

### The Institutional Narrative in Operation Epic Rage

Throughout Washington's military operations against Tehran since the beginning of this year, a state of confusion has been evident in the American narrative. There is the temporary institutional narrative advanced by both the Pentagon and the deep state—which is itself a confused narrative—and, on the other hand, there is the personal narrative of President Trump, which diverges from the institutional narrative in an inconsistent way that at times reaches the point of contradiction.

The institutional narrative of the Trump administration, which some believe belongs to the political schools of the 19th century, starts from the principles of deterrence and political realism, in which overwhelming military power stands out as the basis of international relations, serving to secure Washington's interests on the one hand and create a favorable balance of power in vital regions on the other.

Theories of deterrence and political realism prevailed in the world of classical colonialism, then loosened their grip in the global order of the 21st century, at least in the declared narratives used to justify states' military operations, even if they remained present in other, more concealed forms. They were replaced by the theory of institutional liberalism, which views legal and institutional frameworks as key references for constraining state behavior, with peace agreements, international treaties, arbitration processes, and litigation before international institutions being used as alternatives to crude and direct military force.

Yet these theories have regained their luster under the right-wing government now running Washington, as the current and previous Trump administrations have adopted a policy of maximum pressure in dealing with Tehran. This policy has involved multiple tools, some economic, focused on sanctions packages and suffocating economic blockade, and others military. The current presidential term has been marked by Washington's two expanded and direct military operations against Tehran in 2025 and 2026, whereas the first term was limited to some military strikes targeting Iranian proxies and interests in the region, as well as figures such as Qassem Soleimani, in addition to multiple cyberattacks.

Trump showed clear contempt for the nuclear deal signed by Obama with Tehran in 2015, which had long been awaited internationally and brought together the United Nations and the 5+1 group Britain, France, and Germany, in addition to Tehran's traditional allies China and Russia. Trump described the agreement as disgraceful and rushed to withdraw from it as soon as he entered his first term.

Although Washington has tried to present itself as a fearsome deterrent that teaches its adversaries lessons without being touched, the initial justification for the current strike on Tehran relied on the narrative of preventive war a narrative that portrays the United States as a party compelled to attack and not responsible for launching an initial act of aggression against another state.

In the initial justification offered by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio for why the United States struck Tehran in late February of this year, he said that Tel Aviv had decided to launch a preventive attack on Iran, and that Iran would inevitably respond by striking American interests, forcing Washington to launch a preventive strike under the weight of that threat. Donald Trump repeated this narrative many times, insisting that Tehran would have targeted American interests had Washington not moved first.

This points to the absence of a clear and unified narrative framework within the Trump administration, amid a state of confusion and contradiction in the accounts and justifications being offered for managing the conflict.

#### Trump's Narrative: Singing Out of Tune with the Chorus

Trump, meanwhile, seeks to spread contradiction and create an element of surprise and uncertainty within what falls under a political theory known as the "madman theory," as he tends to display his personal control and his inclination to make extreme and harsh decisions that would force the adversary to accept negotiations under any terms to ward off an imminent evil.

It has seemed as though Trump changes his narrative regarding the war with Tehran on a weekly, if not near-daily, basis: from fighting a repressive regime that embraces reactionary slogans and wanting to change it and spread the foundations of Western democracy in Tehran, to "good and constructive" negotiations with the Iranian regime, which appears to be a respectable adversary with whom one can cooperate to reach a deal satisfactory to all parties.

And from combating an imminent threat to American and global national security posed by a state sponsor of terrorism abroad, to an economic narrative aimed at securing the Strait of Hormuz and preserving global energy security, President Trump hardly seems able to settle on any one narrative with which to address his domestic audience, let alone his allies abroad.

But the constant in Trump's rhetoric surrounding Operation Epic Rage, and the dominant backdrop to his policies and contradictory statements, is the principle of peace through strength. The American president favors swift military strikes that produce near-immediate results and add to his record of achievements. It is a war built on the theory of commercial nationalism, which drives Trump to

manage Washington's foreign policy and its war with Tehran as a business deal acceptable only if it yields direct and rapid economic results such as lower oil prices and increased arms and military-industrial sales, and unacceptable if its costs rise and it enters a phase of economic attrition.

In this context, Trump prefers to use the threat of force and overwhelming military action as a means of shortening the war and ending it quickly, rather than resorting to soft diplomacy, which has usually distinguished Democratic presidents.

On the other hand, Trump resorts to a jarring narrative in dealing with his European allies. He leans toward absolute sovereignty for Washington and its unilateral authority to decide on military action without being bound by NATO or international institutions; yet at the same time, he rarely misses an opportunity to scold European leaders and pressure them to join military operations against Tehran.

While Trump's rhetoric has been marked by boasting that Washington possesses the power needed to achieve its goals regardless of the positions of other countries—which Trump has repeatedly described as incapable of confrontation and forcing Washington to defend its own interests—the recent crisis with Germany emerged as an example of this contradictory narrative. Trump moved quickly to withdraw his forces from Germany after a dispute with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who opposed Washington's approach toward Tehran and resisted an American desire to drag Berlin into the ongoing conflict with Tehran.

Trump also threatened to raise tariffs on Berlin, sending a message to the German government that failing to cooperate in the manner dictated by Washington could expose its interests and security to American retaliation.

Thus, the temporary American narrative surrounding Washington's latest war on Tehran appears fragmented and lacking a single reference point. Rather, it is subject to the whims and agendas of its leading figures more than it expresses a comprehensive national and institutional framework on which the war's strategy and objectives are built.