MORALIZING WAR AND CONSTRUCTING ENEMIES IN TRUMP'S 2025 IRAN SPEECH

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Abstract

The growing intersection of political communication and ideological persuasion raises concerns about how language is used to legitimize state violence. Although previous research has addressed themes of populism and nationalistic rhetoric, limited attention has been given to how wartime speeches function as discursive practices that construct moral legitimacy for military intervention. Addressing this gap, this study investigates how Donald Trump's June 2025 Iran speech constructs the enemy, moralizes war, and normalizes pre-emptive military violence. Using qualitative critical discourse analysis, the study examines both the transcript and delivery of the speech through Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of discourse, focusing on the ideological square and micro-level strategies such as actor description, metaphor, hyperbole, euphemism, presupposition, religious authority, victimization, and lexicalization. The findings show that the speech constructs a polarized moral framework in which the United States and its allies are represented as morally virtuous and divinely sanctioned, while Iran is framed as an irrational and existential threat. Military aggression is legitimized through hyperbolic glorification, religious invocation, euphemistic framing of destruction, and the strategic omission of civilian suffering, presenting war as a moral necessity rather than a political choice. While limited to a single case and not supported by corpus-based analysis, the study contributes to the literature on wartime political discourse by extending Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model to contemporary conflict rhetoric and identifying a morally framed adaptation of the burden argument, shifting from economic to security and ethical justification. These findings underscore the ideological power of political language in shaping public consent for military action and highlight the need for sustained critical scrutiny of wartime political communication.

Keywords: political discourse; ideological legitimation; wartime rhetoric; critical discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary global politics is increasingly shaped by the rhetorical power of political leaders whose discourse does not merely inform but mobilizes, legitimizes, and polarizes (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Prasch, 2021). On June 21, 2025, United States President Donald Trump delivered a nationally televised address following coordinated airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. More than a strategic military announcement, the speech constituted a discursive performance laden with ideological constructs, moral claims, and symbolic power. It framed the attack not only as a defensive act but as a righteous mission, drawing heavily upon nationalistic, militaristic, and religious narratives to justify state violence and consolidate support. This phenomenon reflects a broader pattern in global leadership where discourse is employed not only to articulate policy but also to construct strategic narratives that influence public opinion, justify coercive action, and reproduce power relations (Montiel et al., 2021; Niyazova & Niyazov, 2021). In the digital era, such rhetoric is further amplified by new media environments that enable political figures to bypass traditional filters and directly shape the consciousness of both domestic and global audiences (Kampf, 2016; Degterev, 2019). Trump's speech exemplifies the convergence of political rhetoric and ideological warfare, making it an essential object of critical discourse analysis.

In his address, Iran was constructed as the principal antagonist in the Middle East, labeled as "the bully," "the world's number one state sponsor of terror," and an enduring threat to American and Israeli lives. Conversely, the United States and Israel were depicted as moral actors, defenders of peace and stability, and as nations favored by divine sanction. This rhetorical construction aligns with a broader strategy of binary opposition that positions political actors in moral contrast: righteous defenders versus evil aggressors. Such constructions are a common feature in political discourse where religion is used to legitimize violence and justify state actions (Lusthaus, 2011; Koch, 2015). Framing political violence within a religious or moral narrative allows leaders to portray preemptive military action as not only necessary but virtuous, embedding their policies within a divine or ethical framework (Flynn, 2008; Magil, 2022).

The notion of preemptive warfare, particularly when articulated through language that invokes divine accountability or moral obligation, has long served to justify military campaigns that might otherwise face significant ethical scrutiny (Pettys, 2010; Kumar, 2014). In this context, Trump's appeal to divine blessing, "We love you, God" and "God bless Israel and America", functions as a discursive strategy that elevates the United States and its allies to a moral high ground while simultaneously delegitimizing the enemy. The fusion of nationalism, religious rhetoric, and moral justification reinforces the legitimacy of violence as a means of preserving a perceived divine order or ethical responsibility (O'Boyle, 2017; Bentzen & Gokmen, 2023). Moreover, this strategy reflects a broader pattern in international relations, where moral argumentation increasingly plays a central role in shaping public discourse and justifying the use of force, especially when military

action is presented as a preventive measure to avoid greater harm (Harris, 2005; Orford, 2013; Rathbun & Pomeroy, 2022).

Empirical developments following the speech suggest that such rhetoric is far from inconsequential. According to a statement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025), the intensity of recent military attacks between Israel and Iran has already triggered population movements in both countries. Reports indicate that residents have begun fleeing areas such as Tehran, with some crossing into neighboring states, while others in Israel have sought refuge in different parts of the country or abroad. The agency has called for urgent de-escalation, warning that the continuation of the conflict could result in a new wave of humanitarian crisis in a region already hosting millions of refugees and internally displaced persons. As noted by High Commissioner Filippo Grandi, "Once people are forced to flee, there's no quick way back – and all too often, the consequences last for generations" (UNHCR, 2025). These developments underscore the performative and material power of political discourse. When articulated by a global hegemon such as the United States, such rhetoric has the capacity to shape public perception, justify military action, and exacerbate geopolitical instability in ways that go beyond symbolic influence.

Van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing political communication by conceptualizing discourse as a product of the dynamic interaction between language, cognition, and society. Political discourse is not simply a medium for transmitting information, but a crucial site for the enactment and reproduction of ideology. Ideologies are socially shared belief systems that guide how social actors represent themselves, others, and the world. These ideologies are enacted through discourse structures such as metaphor, presupposition, actor description, and thematic emphasis. A central concept in this theory is context models, or the mental representations individuals form about communicative situations, which determine what is relevant, appropriate, and ideologically aligned in specific contexts (Van Dijk, 2009; Abdel-Raheem, 2020). These models serve as cognitive filters that connect individual mental processes with broader social and institutional structures.

A key analytical tool in Van Dijk's model is the ideological square, which systematically emphasizes the positive attributes of the in-group while highlighting the negative traits of the out-group (Jalalian Daghigh & Guo, 2024; Aboh et al., 2025). This form of polarization is pervasive in political speech and is often used to construct narratives of legitimacy and moral superiority. The theory also introduces a multi-level model of discourse analysis that includes macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure, enabling scholars to examine both the thematic organization and the linguistic details of political texts (Ronda et al., 2024; Saputri & Suratnoaji, 2015). Furthermore, Van Dijk emphasizes the role of social cognition, defined as shared knowledge and group beliefs that influence how discourse is produced, interpreted, and accepted by audiences (Guillem, 2009; Kupolati & Boluwaduro, 2018). These principles demonstrate how political language operates not only as a tool for persuasion, but as a

mechanism for shaping collective perception, sustaining power relations, and naturalizing ideological dominance.

While existing literature on Donald Trump's rhetoric has extensively addressed themes of populism, discursive incivility, and nationalism, relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which Trump's speeches function as discursive mechanisms of wartime legitimation. Specifically, there remains a lacuna in research concerning the ideological construction of military conflict through speech acts that seek not only to inform but to moralize and polarize. Previous studies have primarily focused on Trump's rhetorical performance in domestic contexts, exploring how he mobilizes legitimacy through strategies such as authorization, rationalization, evaluation, and mythopoesis, particularly in relation to controversial policy decisions like the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Molodychenko, 2019; Nourani et al., 2020; Abuelwafa, 2021; Elnakkouzi, 2023). His use of crisis narratives has been shown to foster ontological insecurity and justify preemptive measures framed as necessary responses to perceived threats (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). Additionally, scholars have highlighted Trump's construction of binary oppositions, such as "us" versus "them," as a mechanism to morally justify hostility toward external actors (Molodychenko, 2019), alongside his employment of the hero-protector narrative, which frames the use of military force as a noble act of national defense (Elnakkouzi, 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights into Trump's broader rhetorical style, they have not fully examined how his discourse functions to construct legitimacy for wartime action at the level of ideological formation.

To address this gap, the present study is guided by three research questions: how Trump's June 2025 Iran speech discursively constructs Iran as an enemy through ideological polarization; what rhetorical and linguistic strategies are employed to moralize war and legitimize pre-emptive military violence; and how religious references, victimization narratives, and lexical choices contribute to the normalization of state violence. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative critical discourse analysis based on Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, examining both the transcript and delivery of Trump's speech. The analysis focuses on macrostructural polarization through the ideological square and micro-level discursive strategies, including actor description, metaphor, hyperbole, euphemism, presupposition, authority, victimization, and lexicalization.

The analysis indicates that the speech constructs a highly polarized moral framework in which the United States and Israel are portrayed as morally virtuous and divinely sanctioned actors, while Iran is framed as an irrational and existential threat. Military violence is legitimized through hyperbolic glorification, religious invocation, euphemistic framing of destruction, and the strategic omission of civilian suffering, thereby presenting war as a moral obligation rather than a political choice. This study contributes to the literature by extending Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework to contemporary wartime rhetoric and by identifying a morally framed adaptation of the burden argument that

shifts its traditional economic orientation toward security and ethical justification. While the study is limited to a single presidential speech and adopts a qualitative case-based approach that does not aim for broad generalization, it offers in-depth insight into wartime legitimation discourse. This article is organized as follows: the next section outlines the methodological framework and analytical procedures, followed by the Findings and Discussion sections, and concludes with a summary of implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

METHOD

This qualitative study uses critical discourse analysis to examine the ideological structure of United States President Donald Trump's speech delivered on 21 June 2025 following military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. This speech was purposively selected as the unit of analysis because it represents a rare and explicit instance of a presidential wartime address delivered immediately after a pre-emptive military strike, making it a salient case for examining how political discourse constructs moral legitimacy for state violence. Unlike routine policy speeches or campaign rhetoric, this address directly responds to an ongoing military operation and is therefore representative of wartime legitimation discourse rather than domestic political communication. Delivered during a moment of heightened international tension, the speech offers an ideal case for exploring how language is employed not only to inform but also to justify state violence, invoke moral authority, and reinforce ideological control. Its function in shaping national and international perception underscores its significance as a discursive event.

The primary data include the original video recording of the speech published by MSNBC on YouTube and the full transcript published by Al Jazeera on 22 June 2025. These two sources were deliberately combined to allow triangulation between verbal content and paralinguistic delivery. The video was used to observe paralinguistic features such as intonation, emphasis, and pacing, while the transcript provided accurate textual representation for detailed linguistic analysis. The transcript served as the primary analytical text, while the video functioned as a supplementary source to confirm emphasis and rhetorical salience, rather than as an independent dataset. These sources were consulted in parallel to ensure fidelity to the original message. Additional materials, including statements from international organizations and media coverage, were reviewed solely to establish geopolitical and humanitarian context, but they were not subjected to systematic linguistic analysis and did not form part of the primary dataset. While the speech involves no direct human participants, it addresses multiple audiences including American citizens, international allies, and geopolitical rivals, all of whom are central to understanding the discourse strategies deployed.

The analysis draws on the socio cognitive model of ideological discourse developed by Teun A. van Dijk (2006). This framework was selected because it explicitly links linguistic structures to cognitive processes and ideological power, making it particularly suitable for examining how wartime political discourse constructs in group virtue, out

group threat, and moral legitimacy. Van Dijk's model is especially relevant to the present study because it provides analytical tools such as the ideological square and discourse micro-strategies that directly address polarization, moralization, and legitimation, which are central to the research questions.

Analytically, the study followed a qualitative, interpretive procedure rather than a coding-based or corpus-driven approach. The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, the speech was read and viewed repeatedly to identify its dominant themes and ideological orientation. Second, macrostructural elements were examined, focusing on thematic emphasis and ideological polarization through the ideological square, including positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, mitigation of in-group violence, and omission of out-group legitimacy. Third, microstructural analysis was conducted by closely examining discursive strategies that recur throughout the speech, including actor description, metaphor, hyperbole, euphemism, presupposition, norm expression, appeals to religious authority, victimization, lexical choice, and numerical framing. These strategies were identified inductively from the text and then interpreted deductively through Van Dijk's theoretical categories, ensuring alignment between empirical observations and theoretical constructs.

Particular attention was given to how the speech constructs legitimacy for pre-emptive military action, moralizes violence, and suppresses alternative perspectives. In line with the Findings and Discussion, the analysis also examined how burden semantics, traditionally associated with economic discourse, are recontextualized into a moral and security narrative without introducing analytical categories beyond those evidenced in the data. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis by acknowledging that interpretation in critical discourse analysis is inherently theory driven and situated. The researchers approached the data from a critical discourse perspective informed by existing scholarship on ideology, war rhetoric, and political communication, and analytical claims were grounded in explicit textual evidence and established theoretical concepts rather than personal evaluation in order to minimize interpretive bias.

Ethically, the study relies exclusively on publicly available materials, including a televised speech and an openly accessible transcript, and involves no confidential data, human subjects, or private communications. All sources are appropriately cited and no institutional ethical clearance was required. This methodological approach nevertheless has certain limitations, as the analysis focuses on a single speech by one political actor, which limits the generalizability of the findings across political systems or leaders. In addition, the qualitative and interpretive nature of critical discourse analysis means that the findings are not statistically generalizable and remain open to alternative readings. However, the aim of the study is not broad generalization but theoretical and analytical depth, offering a detailed case-based insight into how wartime political discourse operates as a mechanism of ideological legitimation.

FINDINGS

Ideological Square in Trump's June 2025 Address

Van Dijk (2006) explains that political discourse often follows a structure of ideological polarization, organized through the ideological square. This framework consists of four key strategies: emphasizing the positive traits of the in-group, highlighting the negative traits of the out-group, downplaying the in-group's negative actions, and ignoring the positive aspects of the out-group. Donald Trump's June 2025 speech, following the United States' airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, exemplifies this structure in constructing a clear binary between "us" (the United States and its allies) and "them" (Iran).

The first strategy, emphasizing positive self-presentation, dominates much of the speech. Trump refers to the military operation as a spectacular military success and asserts that "there's no military in the world that could have done what we did tonight, not even close." He describes the aircraft as magnificent machines and the pilots as great American patriots. Praise extends to military leadership, with General Dan "Razin" Caine called a spectacular general, and the attack described as "an operation the likes of which the world has not seen in many, many decades." These rhetorical choices function as discursive strategies that elevate the national self-image by emphasizing competence, coordination, and divine favor. The depiction of military precision and technological prowess reinforces a national identity rooted in competence and operational excellence (Hooghe & Marks, 2021; Baydhowi et al., 2024). Simultaneously, religious references such as "We love you, God, and we love our great military. Protect them." invoke the idea of divine favor, drawing on the myth of divine election that positions the nation as uniquely chosen and protected (Cauthen, 2004; Appiah, 2009).

The second strategy, emphasizing the out-group's negative traits, constructs Iran as the primary antagonist. Trump calls Iran the bully of the Middle East and the world's number one state sponsor of terror. He recounts graphic and emotionally charged acts attributed to Iran, such as blowing off their arms, blowing off their legs, and killing our people. Iranian leadership, particularly General Qassem Soleimani, is blamed for widespread death and regional instability. The statement hundreds of thousands throughout the Middle East and around the world have died as a direct result of their hate reinforces a representation of Iran not as a political rival, but as a global menace. This construction reflects earlier research showing how United States political discourse regularly employs strategies that legitimize aggressive foreign policies by depicting Iran as a fundamental threat to global security (Balkan-Sahin, 2020). Such portrayals are amplified through entrenched media narratives that essentialize Iran as anti-modern, irrational, and hostile to Western values (Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013). Within the broader trajectory of United States foreign policy, Iran has long been positioned as part of an ideological and strategic enemy axis, sustaining a discourse of existential threat (Kaussler, 2013; Koreivaite, 2013).

The third strategy involves minimizing or obscuring any negative consequences of the in-group's actions. There is no reference to Iranian civilian casualties, infrastructural damage, or international legal implications. Instead, Trump repeatedly uses sanitized and militarily neutral language such as "massive precision strikes" and "completely and totally obliterated" to describe the destruction of nuclear facilities. This rhetorical strategy effectively omits the humanitarian framing that is central to the principles of international humanitarian law (IHL), especially considering that the operation involved large-scale attacks on sovereign territory. According to IHL, states are obligated to consider civilian protection, adhere to the principle of proportionality, and avoid attacks expected to cause excessive incidental civilian harm relative to the anticipated military advantage (Clarke, 2012; Schmitt & von Heinegg, 2023). Yet, the omission of such considerations reflects a broader trend observed in military discourse where humanitarian impact is routinely downplayed or excluded (Tammi, 2022; Ji & Pupcenoks, 2024). The absence of any reference to civilian suffering not only undermines the spirit of IHL, but also influences public perception by constructing a one-sided narrative that prioritizes military success over human cost (Barber, 2010).

The fourth strategy suppresses any acknowledgment of legitimate positions or positive traits of the out-group. There is no mention of Iran's security concerns, its legal right to nuclear energy under international agreements, or any prior diplomatic efforts. The speech omits the historical complexity of U.S.–Iran relations and ignores Iran's geopolitical motivations. Instead, Iran is portrayed solely as an irrational and violent regime, with Trump stating, "If peace does not come quickly, we will go after those other targets... most of them can be taken out in a matter of minutes." This framing casts the threat as moral, existential, and urgent, leaving no space for mutual understanding or alternative narratives. Such representation contradicts scholarly analyses that highlight Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology as a response to security dilemmas and regional threats (Eneyo et al., 2022), as well as its legal entitlement to peaceful nuclear energy under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (Dupont, 2014). The deliberate exclusion of this context serves to dehumanize the out-group and justify one-sided military solutions.

Collectively, these discursive strategies construct a moral dichotomy that portrays the United States and its allies as protectors of global order, while Iran is positioned as a threat to humanity. The U.S. employs positive self-presentation by highlighting its moral leadership, while simultaneously engaging in negative other-representation of Iran as a rogue and irrational actor (Balkan-Sahin, 2020). This dichotomy is deeply rooted in the ideology of American exceptionalism, which presents the U.S. as uniquely virtuous and justified in its unilateral actions to "defend" global order (Rojecki, 2008). As van Dijk (2006) argues, such ideological polarization serves to reproduce dominance and legitimize coercive or violent policies under the guise of ethical necessity. The rhetorical patterns in Trump's June 2025 address not only support a particular worldview but also function to manufacture consent, delegitimize opposition, and entrench narratives of moral superiority that preclude mutual understanding or diplomatic complexity.

Ideological Microstructures in Trump's June 2025 Address

Van Dijk (2006) identifies various micro-strategies in ideological discourse that operate at the level of meaning, argumentation, and rhetoric. These strategies reinforce positive self-representation and negative other-representation. In Trump's June 2025 address, these discursive tools are employed to legitimize military action, amplify group polarization, and construct a persuasive narrative of moral superiority.

Actor Description

Van Dijk (2006) emphasizes that the description of social actors in discourse reflects underlying ideological structures. Members of the in-group are typically portrayed using positive or neutral language, while the out-group is constructed through negative, often dehumanizing descriptions. These linguistic choices help sustain ideological divisions and justify actions taken by the in-group against the out-group.

> Examples:
> "Iran, the bully of the Middle East… the world's number one state sponsor of terror."
> "The Iranian regime"
> "Blowing off their arms, blowing off their legs"
> "Great American patriots who flew those magnificent machines"
> "Brilliant military minds"
> "The wonderful job [the Israeli military] has done"

The speech repeatedly labels Iran using derogatory terms such as "regime," "bully," and "terror sponsor," stripping it of political legitimacy and portraying it as an inherent threat. Violent imagery like "blowing off their arms, blowing off their legs" further paints Iran as barbaric and inhumane. In contrast, American and Israeli figures are associated with moral valor and competence. The American military is praised as "great patriots" operating "magnificent machines," while Israeli forces are commended for "the wonderful job" they have performed. These opposing characterizations construct a polarized narrative in which the in-group embodies rationality, order, and moral superiority, while the out-group is reduced to a violent and irrational enemy. This dichotomy reinforces ideological legitimacy for military intervention.

Metaphor

Van Dijk (2006) highlights metaphor as a persuasive semantic and rhetorical strategy that enables abstract, complex, or emotionally charged ideas to be framed in concrete and familiar terms. In ideological discourse, metaphors often shape how the audience conceptualizes political actors and actions, legitimizing in-group narratives and delegitimizing the out-group. In political rhetoric, metaphors can also evoke emotional responses that justify violence or amplify moral judgments.

Examples:

"Iran, the bully of the Middle East"

"Gone a long way to erasing this horrible threat to Israel"

"Spectacular military success"

"Magnificent machines"

Trump's speech employs metaphor to simplify geopolitical conflict and frame it within a moral binary. Referring to Iran as "the bully of the Middle East" invokes a familiar narrative of oppression and victimhood, casting Iran as an aggressive force preying upon weaker actors. This metaphor strips Iran of political legitimacy and frames the U.S. and Israel as justified defenders. The military operation is described as "erasing this horrible threat," a metaphor that evokes imagery of cleansing or purification, which implicitly positions violence as a corrective or morally restorative action. Meanwhile, describing American aircraft as "magnificent machines" and the attack as a "spectacular military success" aestheticizes violence, distancing the audience from its destructive consequences. These metaphors serve to moralize military action and align it with national pride and divine justice, thus reinforcing the ideological framing of the in-group as protectors of peace and order.

Hyperbole and Euphemism

Van Dijk (2006) identifies hyperbole and euphemism as prominent rhetorical strategies in ideological discourse. Hyperbole, as a form of non-literal or figurative language, exaggerates the positive qualities of the in-group or intensifies the negative attributes of the out-group in order to elicit admiration or fear. Euphemism, on the other hand, works to soften or obscure the morally problematic aspects of the in-group's actions, aiming to deflect criticism and sustain a favorable public image. These strategies are central to the ideological process of framing military aggression as both necessary and virtuous.

Examples:

"An operation the likes of which the world has not seen in many, many decades"

"Completely and totally obliterated"

"Massive precision strikes"

The phrase "completely and totally obliterated" is an unmistakable instance of hyperbole. Through the repetition and intensification of the destruction's totality, the speech constructs an image of overwhelming power and absolute success. This rhetorical amplification is not intended to provide an objective military assessment but to evoke awe and a sense of finality. If Trump had merely stated "the targets were destroyed," the statement would have conveyed basic information without the emotional or ideological charge. The hyperbolic form instead dramatizes the event and reinforces the portrayal of American military superiority.

Similarly, the description of the airstrikes as "an operation the likes of which the world has not seen in many, many decades" magnifies the scale and uniqueness of the mission. The choice of wording implies an almost mythic level of achievement, aligning the event with historical military milestones. This portrayal invites a sense of collective pride and positions the operation as a defining moment of national strength, rather than as a controversial military intervention. Such framing fulfills an ideological function by glorifying violence and discouraging critical reflection.

In contrast, the phrase "massive precision strikes" serves as a clear example of euphemism. The word "massive" conveys a sense of scale, while "precision" evokes a controlled, targeted action that suggests technical accuracy and moral responsibility. This combination of terms masks the potential for civilian casualties and the destruction of infrastructure, framing the attack as both necessary and ethically justified. A more direct or dysphemistic alternative such as "heavy bombing that destroyed entire facilities and endangered civilians" would likely provoke discomfort and moral concern among the audience. Euphemism, in this context, functions as a rhetorical strategy to soften the reality of violence and protect the in-group's image. When combined with hyperbolic expressions elsewhere in the speech, this kind of language sustains a narrative that presents American military action as heroic and morally unimpeachable, thereby obscuring the complex ethical dimensions of preemptive warfare.

National Self-Glorification

Van Dijk (2006) highlights national self-glorification as a semantic strategy of positive self-presentation in political discourse, particularly when leaders aim to elevate the status of their own nation. This strategy functions to emphasize the in-group's moral virtue, exceptional competence, and historical significance, often through highly evaluative and emotive language. In contexts involving military action, such glorification not only promotes national pride but also implicitly contrasts the in-group's excellence with the perceived inferiority of the out-group.

> Examples:
> "There's no military in the world that could have done what we did tonight,
> not even close"
> "a spectacular military success"
> "Great American patriots"
> "Brilliant military minds"

Trump declares that "there's no military in the world that could have done what we did tonight, not even close," a statement that elevates American military strength to an unmatched and almost mythical level. Referring to the strike as "a spectacular military success" does more than report an outcome; it casts the action as an extraordinary achievement worthy of global admiration. Military personnel are described as "great American patriots" and planners as "brilliant military minds," terms that construct an image of moral dedication, competence, and national heroism. These lexical choices

function ideologically to glorify the in-group while reinforcing narratives of American exceptionalism.

Such positive portrayals become especially powerful when viewed in conjunction with the speech's negative characterizations of the out-group. Iran is labeled "the bully of the Middle East" and "the world's number one state sponsor of terror," forming a sharp contrast to the noble depiction of the United States. The simultaneous use of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation polarizes the conflict into a moral binary, in which American violence is framed not as aggression but as virtuous intervention. National self-glorification, therefore, serves a crucial ideological role in legitimizing military force while deflecting ethical criticism. It aligns patriotic sentiment with policy endorsement and turns acts of war into expressions of national identity and pride.

Authority

Van Dijk (2006) explains that appeals to authority serve as argumentative strategies used to strengthen a speaker's stance through references to institutions, individuals, or entities regarded as morally or intellectually superior. In ideological discourse, these references help to legitimize claims and reduce opportunities for opposition. Authorities invoked may include international organizations, experts, the legal system, or religious figures, depending on the ideological and cultural context. Such appeals are powerful because they suggest that the speaker's position is supported by forces that transcend everyday political debate.

Examples:

"We love you, God"
"God bless the Middle East. God bless Israel, and God bless America."

In the conclusion of the speech, Trump explicitly invokes God as the ultimate authority, proclaiming "We love you, God" and offering blessings for "the Middle East," "Israel," and "America." These religious invocations elevate the military operation to a sacred mission, implying that it is divinely approved. Instead of grounding legitimacy in legal or strategic rationale, the speech draws from religious language to portray the action as morally righteous and spiritually justified. This use of religious authority is a rhetorical move that strengthens positive self-presentation by suggesting that the United States acts under divine guidance and with divine favor.

At the same time, the absence of similar recognition for the out-group subtly implies that adversaries such as Iran stand outside the realm of divine approval. In this way, the speech does not merely argue for the legitimacy of military action but frames it as aligned with sacred values. This ideological framing discourages dissent and reinforces the binary opposition between a morally enlightened in-group and a demonized other.

Presupposition and Norm Expression

Van Dijk (2006) defines presupposition as a pragmatic strategy in which speakers embed assumptions into their statements, allowing ideological meanings to be accepted as given without explicit argument. These assumptions often go unchallenged because they appeal to what is considered shared knowledge or common sense. Norm expression, on the other hand, refers to explicit or implicit statements about what is right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, according to the values of the speaker's group. In political discourse, both strategies are instrumental in legitimizing actions and moral positions while framing opponents as deviant or irrational.

Examples:
"Iran must now make peace"
"This cannot continue"

The statement "Iran must now make peace" presupposes that Iran has been the sole actor obstructing peace, and that the United States has always been oriented toward peace. This assumption erases any historical complexity or prior U.S. aggression from consideration. If the phrase were altered to "Both countries must work toward peace", the moral burden would be shared, and the audience might question the justification of unilateral military action. Trump's formulation instead presents the U.S. as a rational enforcer of peace, in line with the strategy of positive self-presentation and the delegitimization of the out-group.

In the expression "This cannot continue", Trump delivers an implicit norm that the present situation is intolerable and that force is the only moral and necessary response. The phrase not only communicates urgency but also closes off alternative solutions such as negotiation or diplomacy. A counterfactual like "This situation requires international dialogue and de-escalation" would invoke a completely different value system, one that emphasizes cooperation rather than coercion. The original formulation assumes that escalation is not just inevitable but justified. These expressions thus encode both presuppositions about blame and norms about appropriate action, reinforcing a discourse in which U.S. military intervention is framed as the only moral and logical course.

Victimization and Number Game

Van Dijk (2006) explains that victimization is a discursive strategy in which in-group speakers present themselves as targets of injustice, violence, or hardship, usually caused by the out-group. This framing elicits sympathy, moral outrage, and solidarity, often serving to justify retaliatory measures. Closely related is the number game, a rhetorical strategy that uses statistics or quantitative estimations to enhance credibility and objectivity. In political discourse, numbers are often mobilized to legitimize ideological claims, particularly when the speaker aims to emphasize the scope of suffering or threat.

Examples:

> "We lost over a thousand people, and hundreds of thousands throughout the Middle East and around the world have died as a direct result of their hate."
> "They have been killing our people, blowing off their arms, blowing off their legs with roadside bombs – that was their speciality."

Trump presents the United States as a nation that has suffered deeply due to Iranian aggression. The figure "over a thousand people" refers to American casualties, while "hundreds of thousands throughout the Middle East and around the world" extends the impact of Iran's alleged actions on a global scale. These quantitative claims function not only to dramatize the scale of harm but also to suggest factual credibility, even though no sources or verifications are provided. This numerical framing supports the narrative of victimhood, reinforcing the moral urgency and legitimacy of military retaliation.

Moreover, vivid descriptions such as "blowing off their arms, blowing off their legs" intensify the emotional dimension of victimization and contribute to the dehumanization of the Iranian enemy. The blend of emotional storytelling with precise-sounding numbers exemplifies how ideological discourse constructs a compelling justification for violence. These strategies operate together to portray the in-group as under siege and morally justified in defending itself. Victimization garners empathy and moral high ground, while the number game gives the impression of rational, data-driven assessment, strengthening the persuasive power of the speech.

Lexicalization

Van Dijk (2006) identifies lexicalization as a stylistic and semantic strategy through which speakers choose specific vocabulary to reflect ideological positions. Word choice in political discourse is rarely neutral. It serves to frame social actors and actions in a way that aligns with the speaker's worldview. This can involve assigning negative labels to the out-group while using laudatory terms for the in-group, reinforcing positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation as core ideological practices.

Examples:

the Iranian regime
the bully of the Middle East
the world's number one state sponsor of terror
horribly destructive enterprise
great American patriots
magnificent machines
spectacular military success

Throughout Trump's June 2025 address, lexical choices are strategically deployed to construct a morally charged narrative. Iran is referred to as the Iranian regime, a term that not only designates its government but also implies illegitimacy and authoritarianism. Further lexical items such as the bully of the Middle East and the world's number one state sponsor of terror reinforce a vilified image of Iran, characterizing it as a hostile and

uncivilized force. The phrase horribly destructive enterprise intensifies this framing, presenting Iran's nuclear program not as a geopolitical concern but as an existential evil.

In contrast, the American military is described using celebratory and valorizing terms. U.S. soldiers are referred to as great American patriots, the aircraft used in the mission as magnificent machines, and the overall operation as a spectacular military success. These lexical choices elevate the in-group as heroic, competent, and righteous. Had Trump used more neutral alternatives such as U.S. troops or military strike, the emotional and ideological weight of the message would have been diminished. Lexicalization in this context enables the construction of a stark binary between good and evil, reinforcing the ideological legitimacy of American military action while denying the out-group any moral complexity.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine the ideological architecture of Donald Trump's June 2025 speech in the aftermath of U.S. military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. Drawing on Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, the analysis revealed how the speech employed a range of discursive strategies to construct a polarized narrative between a virtuous in-group (the United States and its allies) and a demonized out-group (Iran). The ideological square was evident in the way Trump emphasized the strength, morality, and divine favor of the in-group while presenting the out-group as irrational, violent, and morally bankrupt. On a more detailed level, the speech made strategic use of actor description, metaphor, hyperbole, euphemism, national self-glorification, appeals to divine authority, presupposition, norm expression, victimization, the number game, and lexicalization. These strategies worked collectively to naturalize military aggression, frame it as morally necessary, and preempt critical scrutiny by embedding it in emotionally resonant and symbolically charged language. The interpretation of these patterns is informed by a critical discourse perspective that views language as a site of ideological struggle, acknowledging that analytical attention is necessarily shaped by the theoretical lens adopted.

The ideological impact of the speech can be explained through its capacity to shape public perception using moral framing. Representing Iran as a brutal and irrational actor responsible for widespread suffering enables Trump to construct a moral justification for preemptive strikes (Ríos, 2023). Simultaneously, his hyperbolic and celebratory praise of the U.S. military, along with invocations of God's blessing, elevates the act of war into a sacred national duty (Franch, 2018). The omission of any reference to civilian casualties or diplomatic alternatives reflects a deliberate discursive strategy to suppress complexity and construct a one-sided narrative of moral clarity. In this sense, the speech functions not merely as political rhetoric but as an ideological mechanism that renders military violence logical, urgent, and virtuous (Solopova & Naumova, 2021). Although contextual materials such as media reports and organizational statements were not subjected to systematic linguistic analysis, their inclusion as background sources reinforces the interpretation that

the speech emerged within an intensified geopolitical and humanitarian context, lending further significance to its moralizing rhetoric.

Interpreting these findings more deeply, it becomes clear that Trump's speech functions as a discursive act of wartime legitimation. His language does not merely inform the public of military developments; it constructs a moral universe in which the United States is framed as the guardian of global peace and divine order, and where violence is not only permissible but ethically imperative (Oddo, 2011). The invocation of victimhood through vivid and graphic language further amplifies the emotional stakes, while statistical references to casualties enhance the perception of objectivity and necessity (Yasmin, 2024). This convergence of emotional narrative, religious appeal, and numerical credibility functions as a powerful ideological force that masks the asymmetry of the conflict and renders the U.S. response unchallengeable in the eyes of many listeners. The result is a discursive landscape where alternative perspectives, diplomatic engagement, or ethical concerns are rendered invisible (Van Dijk, 2005). While the analysis does not quantify the frequency of these strategies, their recurrence across different segments of the speech indicates a consistent ideological pattern rather than isolated rhetorical choices.

When situated within the broader landscape of Trump-related rhetorical scholarship, this study affirms and extends existing findings while addressing a notable gap. Previous research by Homolar and Scholz (2019), Molodychenko (2019), Nourani et al. (2020), Abuelwafa (2021), and Elnakkouzi (2023) has illuminated Trump's consistent use of populist antagonism, discursive incivility, and binary oppositions to construct legitimacy, particularly in domestic political contexts. These studies highlight his reliance on strategies such as authorization, rationalization, evaluation, and mythopoesis, especially in connection with controversial policies like the withdrawal of the United States from the Iran nuclear deal. For instance, Homolar and Scholz describe how Trump's crisis narratives foster ontological insecurity, thereby legitimizing preemptive policy decisions. Molodychenko and Nourani et al. examine his construction of moral polarities between the in-group and the out-group, while Elnakkouzi focuses on how the hero-protector narrative frames military leadership as morally redemptive and nationally essential. The present study extends this scholarship by demonstrating how these rhetorical tendencies intensify and acquire a moral and religious dimension in a wartime context, where the stakes of legitimation are significantly higher.

This study contributes a deeper understanding of how rhetorical strategies intensify in the context of wartime discourse to construct legitimacy for international military action. While the themes of national exceptionalism and moral opposition remain present, they are supplemented by stronger appeals to divine authority, emotive victimhood, and the invocation of religious duty. In Trump's June 2025 speech, the glorification of the military is heightened through hyperbolic praise and sacred references, transforming the language of policy defense into one of sanctified violence. The hero protector role becomes intertwined with divine favor, a pattern consistent with broader tendencies in civil military discourse to moralize war and elevate soldiers as embodiments of national virtue

(Molendijk, 2024). Meanwhile, the use of metaphorical expressions and euphemistic framing, combined with statistical references to casualties, constructs war not only as necessary but as morally righteous and emotionally urgent (Villalobos & Sirin, 2017). These findings highlight how wartime discourse operates within a broader socio-political context marked by heightened insecurity, media saturation, and moral polarization, amplifying the persuasive force of ideological language.

The study also supports and extends Van Dijk's 2006 socio-cognitive theory of ideological discourse. Van Dijk posits that ideologies are enacted and reproduced through discursive strategies such as actor description, metaphor, authority claims, norm expression, and polarization. All of these strategies were present in Trump's speech, validating Van Dijk's model as a robust tool for dissecting high-stakes political rhetoric. For instance, the ideological square was clearly observed as Trump emphasized the moral heroism of the United States and Israel while portraying Iran as a violent and irrational adversary. Appeals to authority were also evident through invocations of divine will rather than traditional institutional sources, as in We love you, God, and we love our great military. Protect them which supports Van Dijk's assertion that different ideologies invoke different types of authority to justify their claims.

However, not all of Van Dijk's strategies were explicitly present in the speech. For example, the burden topos, which often appears in anti-immigration discourse to frame others as economic burdens, did not appear in its conventional form. Nevertheless, a contextual reading reveals an implicit burden framing in how Trump characterizes Iran. When he states We lost over a thousand people, and hundreds of thousands throughout the Middle East and around the world have died as a direct result of their hate, he portrays Iran not just as an adversary but as a global source of suffering. Similarly, his statement They have been killing our people, blowing off their arms, blowing off their legs with roadside bombs – that was their speciality constructs Iran as a moral and security burden for the international community. This reflects an adaptation of the burden (topos) from a financial frame to one centered on security and morality. While Van Dijk does not elaborate this variation in detail, the findings of this study suggest that such a transformation is ideologically significant and worth further scholarly attention. At the same time, alternative interpretations remain possible, as such statements could also be read as conventional wartime exaggeration rather than deliberate burden construction, underscoring the interpretive openness inherent in qualitative discourse analysis.

In addition, strategies such as disclaimers, consensus building, and counterfactual argumentation, which are commonly found in parliamentary or dialogic discourse as outlined by Van Dijk (2006), were not prominent in this speech. This absence may be attributed to the performative and unilateral character of presidential wartime addresses, which are designed more to assert executive authority and mobilize public sentiment than to negotiate differing viewpoints. Theoretically, this research affirms the relevance of Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model in explaining how language functions as an instrument of ideological control and political legitimation, particularly during military crises. It also

opens new avenues for extending the model, especially in terms of how burden semantics may be recontextualized from economic concerns to issues of global security and moral urgency.

The findings of this study carry important implications for both public discourse and academic inquiry. In an increasingly mediated political environment where leaders can bypass institutional checks and communicate directly with mass audiences, the ideological power of language becomes especially consequential. Political rhetoric is not merely descriptive; it often relies on war metaphors, emotional appeals, and moral framing to shape public perception and to render aggressive or preemptive actions appear necessary and justified (Alyeksyeyeva et al., 2021; Al-Tarawneh et al., 2024). In this context, public literacy in discourse analysis and ideological critique is crucial, as it enables audiences to recognize and critically engage with language that seeks to legitimize violence or suppress alternative perspectives (Nasution et al., 2020; Kim, 2022).

From an academic perspective, this study points to the need for further research into how wartime discourses operate across different political cultures, media platforms, and geopolitical contexts. It also underscores the importance of institutional mechanisms that can hold political leaders accountable for the ethical consequences of their speech, particularly when rhetorical escalation contributes to humanitarian suffering or international instability. These implications reaffirm that discourse is not merely symbolic or rhetorical in nature; it has tangible effects on how conflicts are understood, justified, and ultimately accepted by the public (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). To improve clarity and accessibility, future studies may also benefit from the use of visual or tabular summaries that synthesize key discursive strategies and illustrative examples, complementing narrative analysis while preserving analytical depth.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that presidential wartime speeches are not simply reactions to geopolitical crises but carefully constructed discursive performances that play a central role in legitimizing state violence. Addressing the study's research questions, the analysis demonstrates how Donald Trump's June 2025 Iran speech constructs Iran as an enemy through ideological polarization, frames war as a moral and religious duty, and presents pre-emptive military action as an ethical necessity rather than a political choice. Through the lens of Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, the findings illustrate how rhetorical strategies such as military glorification, victimization, hyperbole, euphemistic language, selective lexical choices, and the omission of civilian suffering work together to create a moral narrative in which the United States appears as a divinely guided protector of global order, while Iran is positioned as a dangerous and illegitimate adversary.

Beyond answering the research questions, this study contributes to broader discussions in critical discourse analysis and political communication by showing how ideological legitimation becomes more intense in wartime contexts. By identifying a morally framed adaptation of the burden argument that shifts from economic reasoning

to concerns of security and ethical urgency, the study extends Van Dijk's framework and highlights the role of social cognition in shaping public acceptance of violence. At a practical level, these findings speak to the importance of discourse literacy in an era of where political leaders communicate directly with large audiences. For policymakers, journalists, educators, and the public, being able to recognize how moral language, religious references, and emotional appeals are used to justify violence is essential for engaging critically with political rhetoric and for encouraging ethical accountability in public communication.

At the same time, this study is shaped by certain limitations. Its focus on a single speech by one political leader means that the findings cannot be generalized across all political contexts, and the interpretive nature of qualitative discourse analysis leaves room for alternative readings. These constraints, however, do not diminish the value of the study; rather, they point toward meaningful directions for future research. Comparative analyses across leaders and geopolitical settings, corpus-based or mixed-methods approaches, and studies of audience reception could deepen understanding of how wartime discourses circulate and gain legitimacy. Ultimately, this study underscores a broader point: political language does more than describe conflict. It helps make violence imaginable, acceptable, and even morally justified, which makes critical engagement with wartime rhetoric not only an academic task but a civic and ethical responsibility.

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