

# War of narratives

## How public perception of Iran is being targeted



An Israeli soldier takes photos with his phone in the occupied West Bank on March 2, 2023. ● NASSER ISHTAYEH/SOPA IMAGES

ANALYSIS

“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.” The preceding seems to be a saying by the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu from the 6th century BC. Former British prime minister Winston Churchill also said, “In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.” These ideas still form the backbone of every military action worldwide, with the United States and Israel standing as some of the strongest advocates of this mindset. Since the end of the Israeli-American war against Iran up to the writing of this piece, the Western media and propaganda apparatus have been casting the shadow of war over the region and Iran, laying out signs — both real and imagined — every hour to shore up their claims, news, speculations, and even rumors. The fact is, although given the conduct and stance of the US and Israel in the region, war and military strikes remain the most likely possibility in the Middle East, the reason this possibility is played up more conspicuously at times has a host of political and strategic motives. Clearly, this article does not intend to write off any possibility on Israel’s part, a regime that in the past month has carried out one of its most unpredictable attacks in the region by bombing Doha, Qatar’s capital.

Therefore, considering the US and Western support for Tel Aviv’s adventurisms in the region, ignoring the chance of a war would not be a sound analysis. But the key question remains: What is the end-game behind this relentless drumbeat of war and the distortion of Iranian military capability in the strategic equation?

Are deployments signs of war or political pressure tactic?

“The movement of the aircraft carrier Gerald Ford towards the Mediterranean,” “refueling aircraft en route to the Middle East,” “dozens of US Air Force planes refueling in the air flying towards the Middle East” — these news snippets are examples of coordinated coverage by American, Israeli, and European media in recent weeks. The repeated announcements about the deployment of new warships, aircraft, and troops to the Middle East, along with the buying, selling, and manufacturing of arms, have become daily news routines. For instance, Bloomberg reported recently that the Pentagon inked a \$123 million contract with Boeing to produce 14 large bunker-buster bombs. Twelve of these bombs have been used for the first time in the US’s attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities in Esfahan, Natanz, and Fordow. Moreover, recent months have seen frequent alerts about troop readiness in Europe, the US, and the region, as efforts to keep up the pressure of a looming war

over the Middle East and Iran continue without letup. For example, on August 1, the US Department of Defense issued a statement saying it would send additional military equipment to the Middle East in response to threats from Iran and its allied groups, aimed at beefing up the defense of US forces and Israel in the region.

How US, Israel exploit military strikes, sanctions

While troop movements and the shipment of arms and equipment are routine globally, this practice, dating back to Cold War traditions, has now been turned up by the US into a new weapon of threat — a psychological tool to beat down rivals, sell arms, and intimidate foes. Psychological, media, narrative, and soft warfare — or anything besides firearms that affects the enemy — are as critical, if not more, than conventional military weapons in today’s global conflicts. Moreover, while emphasizing that the psychological warfare launched against peace in the region does not necessarily rule out a real war, other signs of this psychological campaign appear in narratives about negotiations, Iran’s nuclear program, sanctions, and the snapback mechanism. From late April to late September 2025, the Trump administration claimed diplomacy and negotiations with Iran, but the results were far from diplomatic. Over



The most important goal of this psychological war is to shape the public perception of citizens, which is even more crucial than influencing decision-makers because changing the former inevitably forces change in the latter. For Israel and the US, managing Iranian domestic opinion is worth more than managing conflicts on the battlefield.

the past six months, the US invited Iran to talks, and Iran accepted negotiations despite the reimposition of maximum sanctions. Iran also agreed to acceptable terms within its national interests and held five rounds of talks, but at the start of the sixth round, with Trump’s approval, Netanyahu ordered air strikes against Iran. After the war, despite all breaches of laws and all breaches of its rights, Iran agreed to renewed cooperation with the IAEA, negotiated with Europe, and complied with their conditions. Yet, sanctions were snapped back and reimposed, giving fresh ammunition for ongoing psychological warfare on the Iranian populace. Persian-language media outside Iran played up the snapback as a complex, novel, and catastrophic phenomenon for domestic public opinion, with two clear objectives: instilling fear of the US and despair about Iran. Meanwhile, the reimposed sanctions are nothing new compared to the heavy, varied sanctions America has previously slapped on Iran. Although these resolutions and their details impose undeniable costs on the country and its people, two key facts should not be lost in media propaganda: Tehran has engaged with the West with maximum flexibility over the past six months, thus the blame is to be put elsewhere — in Washington, Brussels, and Tel Aviv. Secondly, the constructed narrative of the situation is far from the on-the-ground reality, and it is essential for people to grasp this difference. The most important goal of this psychological war is to shape the public perception of citizens, which is even more crucial than influencing decision-makers because changing the former inevitably forces change in the latter. For Israel and the US, managing Iranian domestic opinion is worth more than managing conflicts on the battlefield. The choice of June 2025 for the attack on Iran was based on the reading of think tanks and foreign ministries of Israel and the US of how profoundly this psychological war had sunk in with the Iranian people. Accordingly, their efforts were not merely about military aims or nuclear sites but a fundamental shift. A miscalculation in analyzing and interpreting Iran’s conditions, its people’s mindset, and field realities caused Israel’s regime to miss the mark in its original objectives and fail to achieve its goals afterward. Consequently, the psychological weapon remains in use under various titles and fields to turn around public perception. The media narrative peddling Israeli military superiority in the region is at odds with Tehran’s actual conditions and capabilities. Despite even losing 30 of its senior commanders, Iran managed to hit back hard by launching missiles at cities in the occupied territories within hours of the Israeli aggression. Thus, part of this psychological warfare seeks to shore up deterrence and reduce psychological pressure from Tel Aviv. Netanyahu has played up power amid fear as a tactic over the past two years. Also, one should not forget that regional countries, especially Persian Gulf neighbors, constitute another key audience of this psychological war. For various reasons, our neighbors tend to buy into the narrative of Israeli and US hegemony in the region to justify their indifference to Palestine’s fate and their own armory purchases. Past experience with American psychological warfare in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and some North African countries shows that countering this war is even more vital than dealing with open armed conflict. The US and Israel’s psychological war against peace in the region, backed by media power, will have more clout than actual military moves if not smartly countered with well-crafted narrative warfare.

The article first appeared in Persian on IRNA.



US President Donald Trump applauds on stage at the Al-Udeid Air Base in Doha, Qatar, on May 15, 2025. ● ALEX BRANDON/AP



# Israeli cabinet likely behind AI-generated disinfo campaign in Iran: **Researchers**



● brookings.edu

By Derek B. Johnson  
Reporter

## PERSPECTIVE

A coordinated Israeli-backed network of social media accounts pushed anti-government propaganda — including deepfakes and other AI-generated content — to Iranians as real-world kinetic attacks were happening, with the goal of fomenting revolt among the country’s people, according to researchers at Citizen Lab.

In research released this week, the nonprofit — along with Clemson University disinformation researcher Darren Linvill — said the so-called PRISONBREAK campaign was primarily carried out by a network of 50-some accounts on X created in 2023, but was largely dormant until this year.

The group “routinely used” AI-generated imagery and video in their operations to try to stoke unrest among Iran’s population, mimic real news outlets to spread false content, and encourage the overthrow of the Iranian government.

Israel’s military campaign in Gaza, launched following a coordinated attack by Hamas in October 2023, eventually expanded to include air strikes in Lebanon and Yemen.

In June, the Israel Defense Forces launched an attack against Iranian

nuclear facilities while also targeting senior Iranian military leaders and scientists for assassination. Those strikes expanded to other Iranian targets, like oil facilities, national broadcasters, and a strike on Evin Prison in Tehran.

In the early days of the conflict, the networks shared images and videos — of uncertain authenticity — claiming to show Iran in a state of chaos and instability.

One widely circulated video, likely altered with AI, depicted people standing in line at an ATM before breaking into a riot, accompanied by messages like “The Islamic Republic has failed!” and “This regime is the enemy of us, the people!”

But the bulk of Citizen Lab’s research focused on the period between June 13–24, 2023, during the “12-Day War” between Israel and Iran, and social media activity during and after a real June 24 Israeli air strike on Evin Prison. The facility is known for housing thousands of political prisoners.

The strike happened between 11:17 a.m. and 12:18 p.m. Iranian local time. By 11:52 a.m., accounts associated with the network began posting about the attack, and at 12:05 p.m., one posted an AI-generated video purporting to show footage of the attack, tricking several news outlets into sharing the content as genuine.

“The exact timing of the video’s posting, while the bombing on Evin Prison

was allegedly still happening, points towards the conclusion that it was part of a premeditated and well-synchronized influence operation,” wrote researchers Alberto Fittarelli, Maia Scott, Ron Deibert, Marcus Michaelsen, and Linvill.

Other accounts from the network began quickly piling on, spreading word of the explosions, and by 12:36 p.m., accounts were explicitly calling for Iranian citizens to march on the prison and free the prisoners.

Most of the posts failed to gain traction with online audiences, except for one. A message calling on “kids” to storm Evin Prison to free their “loved ones” also contained a video with AI-generated imagery. It managed to rack up more than 46,000 views and 3,500 likes.

“This second video about the Evin Prison, which shows the hallmarks of professional editing and was posted within one hour of the end of the bombings, further strongly suggests that the PRISONBREAK network’s operators had prior knowledge of the Israeli military action, and were prepared to coordinate with it,” researchers wrote.

Those posts and others by PRISONBREAK operators led researchers to believe the campaign — still active as of today — is being carried out by either an Israeli cabinet agency or a subcontractor working on behalf of



This second video about the Evin Prison, which shows the hallmarks of professional editing and was posted within one hour of the end of the bombings, further strongly suggests that the PRISONBREAK network’s operators had prior knowledge of the Israeli military action, and were prepared to coordinate with it.



Debris of the main entrance of the Evin prison, which was destroyed in Israeli strikes, is pictured in northern Tehran, Iran, on July 1, 2025.

● MORTEZA NIKOUBAZL/NURPHOTO

the Israeli cabinet.

The press office for the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C., did not immediately respond to a request for comment from CyberScoop.

## Despots, democracies fuel disinformation ecosystem

It’s not the first time the Israeli cabinet has been tied to an online influence campaign related to the Gaza conflict, nor would it be the first time the entity has reportedly tapped private industry to wage information warfare.

Last year, researchers at Meta, OpenAI, Digital Forensic Research Lab, and independent disinformation researcher Marc Owen Jones all tracked activity from a similar network on Facebook, X, and Instagram that targeted Canadian and US users with posts calling for the release of Israeli captives kidnapped by Hamas, criticism of US campus protests against Israeli military operations, and attacks against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

Meta and OpenAI both flagged STOIC, a firm based in Tel Aviv that is believed to be working on behalf of the Israeli cabinet, as behind much of the activity.

Citizen Lab’s report identified two other Israeli firms, Team Jorge and Archimedes Group, that sell disinformation-for-hire services to cabinet clients.

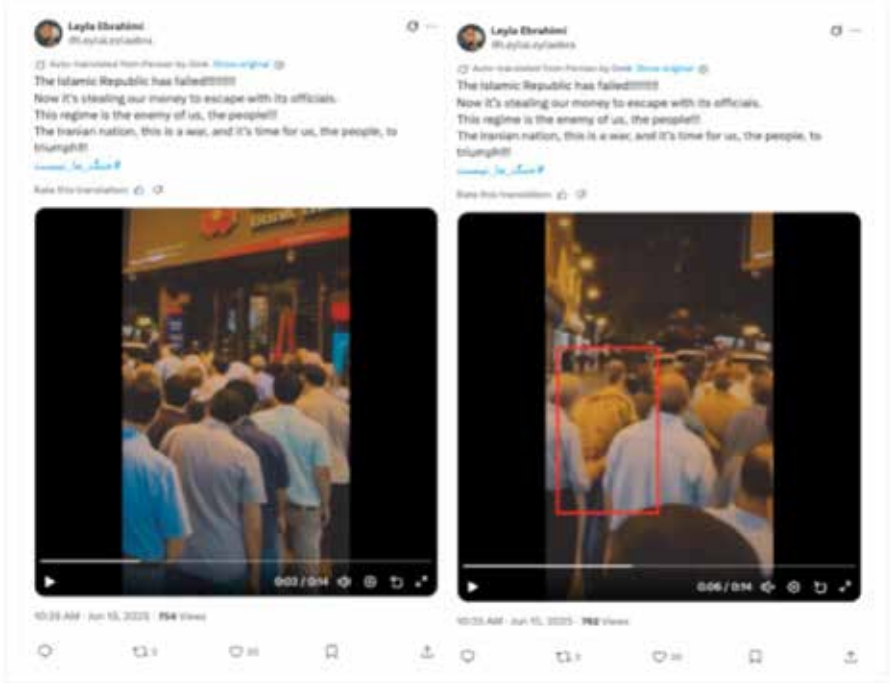
“Both companies offered their services to a wide array of clients globally, used advanced technologies to build and conduct their covert campaigns, and advertised existing or prior connections to the Israeli intelligence community,” Citizen Lab researchers wrote.

While Western threat intelligence companies and media outlets can present disinformation campaigns as mostly a tool of autocratic or authoritarian countries, researchers have warned that democratic governments and private industry are increasingly playing key roles in information warfare.

David Agranovich, Meta’s senior policy director for threat disruption, told CyberScoop last year that commercial marketing firms provide governments an additional layer of obfuscation when attempting to manipulate public opinion without leaving direct digital fingerprints.

“These services essentially democratize access to sophisticated influence or surveillance capabilities, while hiding the client who’s behind them,” Agranovich said.

The full article first appeared on CyberScoop.



An X post shared by the PRISONBREAK network on June 15, 2025, shows a video of people waiting in line at ATMs in Iran. The misshapen figure seen in the screenshot on the right is an indicator of the video being AI-generated.

● CYBERSCOOP

