

# Human mind as battlefield in war of humans

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## OPINION

For decades, the concept of war in global strategic discourse was defined by tanks, missiles, naval vessels, and air power. Military power meant the capacity for physical destruction, and superiority on the battlefield was measured by territorial occupation or the destruction of infrastructure. However, today's world has entered a phase in which the human mind has become the most important battlefield.

In the ongoing confrontation between Iran and the West, what has gained paramount importance is the ability to manage perception, control narratives, and influence the psychological calculations of the opposing side. This is precisely what is defined today in security literature as "cognitive warfare". Cognitive warfare is a war for dominance over minds — a battle whose objective is to alter societal perceptions, erode political will, and influence decision-making processes.

In such an environment, artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer merely an economic or industrial technology but has become part of the infrastructure of national power. Algorithms can now analyze public opinion, predict user behavior, and even influence collective emotions on a massive scale. For this reason, geopolitical competition among powers has gradually shifted from the classical military domain to the realm of data, perception, and digital governance.

### Iran and the logic of cognitive deterrence

One of the most significant developments in recent years has been Iran's effort to utilize cognitive warfare tools alongside military deterrence. Iran has understood well that in confronting the West's hardware superiority, sole reliance on classical military tools will



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not suffice. Consequently, managing public perception and increasing the psychological and political costs of war have become part of Iran's deterrence strategy.

This strategy is not limited to media operations but encompasses a set of communicative, cyber, cognitive, and technological tools. The targeted dissemination of narratives, the use of social media, information warfare, and even leveraging artificial intelligence capabilities to analyze public opinion are all comprehensible within this framework.

During recent crises, Iran has sought to convey the message that any extensive confrontation would not be merely a limited military operation but could transform into a widespread psychological, economic, and political crisis for the West. This issue gains particular significance in Western societies, where public opinion directly influences decision-making processes.

The reality is that Western governments are more concerned than ever about their cognitive vulner-

abilities. The proliferation of fake news, digital infiltration operations, and information manipulation has meant that cybersecurity is no longer limited to protecting infrastructure but has expanded to encompass the protection of social cohesion and public trust.

### AI and the future of security governance

The entry of artificial intelligence into the security domain has also altered the nature of threats. If in the past, the primary threat was limited to direct military attack, today, data manipulation, public opinion engineering, and cognitive operations can be as destructive as a military assault.

Recent studies at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute indicate that Europe and the United States are seeking to develop new frameworks for cyber governance and managing software vulnerabilities. The reason for this is growing concern about asymmetric wars in which state and non-state actors can use digital tools to create instability.

In this context, artificial intelligence has become a dual-use tool. On one hand, it can be employed to strengthen cybersecurity and analyze threats; on the other hand, it can become an instrument for generating extensive psychological operations. Advanced algorithms can now produce content that makes distinguishing reality from fabrication difficult, and this very issue has confronted the concept of truth in the public sphere with a crisis.

This transformation is not merely a technical matter but a geopolitical one. A country that can gain mastery over data infrastructure, communication platforms, and artificial intelligence algorithms will, in practice, possess a portion of future global power.

### Redefining Western doctrine against asymmetric threats

The West has now reached the conclusion that emerging threats cannot be contained solely through traditional tools. For this reason, the security doctrines of

the United States and Europe are being redefined. The increasing focus on cybersecurity, countering cognitive infiltration operations, and regulating artificial intelligence are all part of this process. Simultaneously, this transformation has created an important contradiction. Western governments, which have always championed freedom of information and an open internet, are now seeking to control information flows and regulate digital space more than ever before. This issue demonstrates the extent to which cognitive warfare has been able to transform traditional security equations. In such an environment, Iran must strive to define itself not merely as a military actor but also as a power capable of generating costs in the cognitive and perceptual domains. This very matter has shaped part of the new deterrence equation in the region.

Today's world has entered a phase in which wars are shaped in human minds before they are decided on the battlefield. Power is no longer dependent solely on the number of missiles and fighter jets but has also become dependent on the ability to manage perception, control narratives, and govern data.

In the confrontation between Iran and the West, cognitive warfare has become one of the most important dimensions of strategic competition. Iran seeks to use perceptual and cognitive tools to increase the political and psychological costs of war for the West, while the West is redefining its security and cyber structures to counter these emerging threats. This trend indicates that future wars will be, more than ever before, invisible, complex, and data-driven — a war in which the human mind may remain the most important battlefield.

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A memorial for the victims of the US-Israeli bombing of the Shajareh Tayyebeh primary school is constructed in Tehran, Iran, with AI-generated images of the victims displayed on the tables.  
MAJID SAEEDI/GETTY IMAGES



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