

Policy Brief

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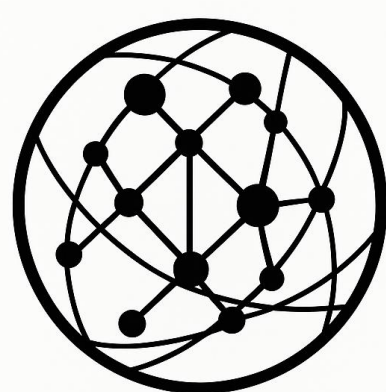
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Narrative Underperformance in the First Week of the U.S.–Israel–Iran War

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Key Judgments

- **The United States did not lose the battlefield in the first week of the conflict, but it appeared to lose narrative momentum in the information environment.**
- **High communication volume did not translate into narrative coherence.** U.S. messaging was dispersed across multiple institutions and formats, reducing perceived continuity.
- **Feed-compatible serial messaging proved more effective than episodic institutional releases.** Iran and Israel benefited from communication architectures that produced visible narrative progression.
- **Expectation asymmetry amplified perception effects.** In asymmetric conflicts, visible setbacks by the stronger actor receive disproportionate attention and can shape public interpretations of the war's trajectory.

1. Executive Summary

This policy brief examines information competition during the first week of the 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran war. It analyzes how differences in communication tempo, narrative structure, media-format compatibility, and expectation dynamics shaped perceptions of momentum and initiative in the information environment.

The United States maintained substantial communication activity during the period under examination. White House channels published articles, videos, and image galleries related to Operation Epic Fury, while Department of Defense platforms released operational updates, casualty announcements, and briefing.

However, communication activity alone did not translate into narrative dominance. Differences in communication tempo and structural messaging design significantly shaped how audiences interpreted events during the conflict's early phase.

Using a best-effort cross-channel estimate of official public outputs released between February 28 and March 6, the visible communication tempo of the principal actors can be approximated at roughly 1.2 : 1 : 2.1 (United States : Israel : Iran). In relative terms, Iran operated at the highest visible communication tempo, followed by the United States, with Israel operating at the lowest tempo among the three actors. These figures should be interpreted as indicators of communication tempo rather than archival totals.

The analysis suggests that actors whose messaging appears continuous, serially structured, and adapted to feed-based digital information environments are more likely to shape perceptions of initiative during the early stages of conflict.

Policy Brief**2. Analysis****2.1 Communication Tempo and Perceived Initiative**

In contemporary digital information environments, the frequency and rhythm of official communication influence how audiences interpret unfolding events. Actors that publish more frequently are more likely to appear active and responsive, which can create the perception of initiative even when battlefield outcomes remain uncertain.

Iran operated at the highest visible communication tempo during the conflict's first week. Sequential retaliation announcements and recurring official communiqués created a visible narrative of ongoing response. This serial structure reinforced the perception of momentum in the information environment.

2.2 Narrative Continuity and Structural Messaging Design

Israel's wartime communication architecture demonstrated strong narrative continuity. Operational update pages maintained rolling timelines that produced a steady flow of short updates resembling live operational feeds.

In contrast, U.S. messaging appeared structurally fragmented. Communication was distributed across multiple institutions, including the White House, the Department of Defense, and other government channels, which increased overall output volume but weakened perceived narrative coherence.

2.3 Media-Format Compatibility

Differences in communication format also shaped perception dynamics. Timeline-style updates, brief operational notices, and sequential communiqués circulate efficiently within feed-based digital media ecosystems.

Many U.S. communications retained a more traditional institutional format, including extended policy statements, press briefings, and formal announcements. While substantively informative, such formats are less compatible with high-velocity information streams and may therefore receive less sustained visibility.

2.4 Expectation Asymmetry

Expectation dynamics further amplified perception effects. In conflicts where technologically superior actors confront weaker adversaries, audiences often anticipate rapid and decisive outcomes.

Under these conditions, even limited setbacks or visible retaliation by the weaker actor can receive disproportionate attention in the information environment. During the first week of the conflict, successful Iranian retaliation events or localized damage were often interpreted as evidence that the stronger side was failing to impose control over the war.

3. Strategic Implications

The first week of the conflict illustrates how information competition can shape perceptions of war independently of battlefield outcomes. Three broader implications follow.

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- **Narrative tempo is becoming a strategic variable in modern conflict.** The frequency and rhythm of official communication increasingly shape perceptions of initiative and momentum.
- **Communication architecture matters as much as communication volume.** Actors that maintain continuous narrative structures, such as rolling updates or sequential messaging, are more likely to dominate real-time information flows.
- **Expectation asymmetry can magnify narrative vulnerability for stronger actors.** When public expectations assume rapid victory, isolated setbacks can disproportionately shape perceptions of overall performance.

4. Policy Recommendations

To compete more effectively in future information environments, U.S. wartime communication strategies should consider several adjustments.

- **Establish a unified wartime communication cell.** A centralized coordination mechanism could integrate messaging across the White House, Department of Defense, State Department, and combatant commands.
- **Adopt rolling update communication architectures.** Continuous operational timelines can create visible narrative continuity and sustain audience attention in feed-based media environments.
- **Synchronize cross-agency messaging.** Reducing institutional dispersion can strengthen narrative coherence without reducing communication volume.
- **Preserve credibility while increasing communication tempo and repetition.** Effective strategic communication must balance rapid messaging cycles with factual accuracy and institutional credibility.