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# RECONTEXTUALIZING THE 2026 U.S.–IRAN CONFLICT IN WESTERN MEDIA DISCOURSE ON X: A CORPUS-ASSISTED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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*critical discourse analysis, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, social actor representation, legitimation, U.S.–Iran conflict*

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## Abstract

*Theo van Leeuwen's theory of recontextualization of social practice (2008) is adopted to examine how the recent Iran-U.S. conflict is represented in the Western digital media discourse such as X (formerly Twitter). The study seeks to analyze the discursive construction of social actors and social actions as well as the legitimation strategies that are adopted in digital conflict narratives. The study follows a qualitative research design using CDA as the underlying theoretical perspective and approach which is the corpus-assisted discourse analysis. The corpus is a collection of about 11,055 words from these posts on the official X accounts of top Western media news channels such as CNN, Fox News, The Washington Post, and Golden State Times between 7 March and 12 May. Lexical patterns and trends in political discourse were identified by conducting a corpus analysis using the Voyant Tools. Based on the findings, traces of representation of actors, strategic distribution of agency, ideological legitimations by moral evaluations and rationalizations in news has been revealed.*

## INTRODUCTION

The media is an integral part in the process of creating geopolitical realities and the shaping of public opinion on international conflicts. Digital media, like X (formerly Twitter), have emerged as important spaces for the production, circulation and contestation of political narratives, positions and even global events in real time for contemporary wars and political confrontations. Social media enables the quick and effective spread of information and also serves as platforms for political persuasion, setting agendas and reproducing ideologies. Media discourse is not a reflection of reality, but rather, according to Norman Fairclough (1995) creates social realities through practices of representation.

X plays a key role in today's political communication among these platforms, as it allows institutions, journalists, political leaders and their audiences to exchange information in real time via short textual messages known as “posts” (“tweets”). It uses real time interaction, reposting and mentioning, as well as algorithmic dissemination, creating a ground-base for the spread of news narratives, which can spread to audiences around the world in a matter of seconds. Thus, X has also turned from a social network into

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an important political digital discourse manufacturing, agenda setting and ideological opposition forum.

The heightened tension between Iran and the United States has produced massive media attention, both online and on social media, especially by western mainstream news channels and political experts on X. The depiction of war in such spaces is ideology laden as it helps to identify the actors, actions and provides sense of legitimacy. International conflicts often have polarized representations, where some actors are legitimate, and some delegitimate.

Therefore, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an approach that focuses on the dynamic between discourse, power and social structures, is an effective approach to investigate the ideological representations. Theo van Leeuwen (2008) among the CDA scholars created one all-encompassing socio-semantic model to explain the representation of social actors in discourse and the legitimation of social practices in discourse. van Leeuwen proposes that discourse is the way to respond to the question of "who can, and should, be represented and how" (2008). In his framework he finds some categories of representation: inclusion and exclusion, activation or passivation, collectivization or individualization, functionalization, legitimation, moral evaluation and rationalization. Legitimation, as explained by Van Leeuwen (2008) is about “why social practices should exist or why they should take the forms they do”.

Middle East conflicts revealed common ideologies of polarization and securitization plus selective representation. These have consistently demonstrated a tendency by Western media to emphasise state power, military authority and the voice of elites whilst neglecting humanitarian experiences and civilian perspectives (Said, 1978; Richardson, 2007). But most studies have concentrated on traditional news media, and little has been studied on conflict narratives in the production of calls for action through the social media environment, especially X, in which media institutions, political experts and audiences engage in their discourse production.

The data was gathered from posts on X published from 7 March through 12 May, from the official X accounts of top Western news media outlets such as: The Washington Post, CNN, Fox News, Golden State Times. The collected corpus is about 11,055 words of the texts pertaining to discourse of Iran - U. S conflict. Lexical patterns, frequencies and discourse trends in the data were explored and visualized via Corpus-based software, Voyant Tools.

Thus, this study aims to analyze how the digital media in the West represents the latest Iran–U.S. conflict in its discourse through the socio-semantic approach of Theo van Leeuwen on X. The study aims to analyze the discursive construction of social actors, the representation of social actions and the legitimation strategies in the construction of discourses in the Western digital media based on Corpus that is obtained from X post it related to the conflict. Special focus is placed on how Western discourse places Iran and the USA in conflict, security, stability and geopolitical power discourses.

**Statement of the Problem**

Today, conflicting narratives are generated and disseminated in digital environments where media organizations actively shape the geopolitical narrative and through platforms like X and Facebook. The Western media has dealt with the Iran – U.S. conflict in great abundance, but there has been little research that has examined that how the Western media discourses on X represents and legitimates the political actions of social actors with respect to the conflict. Furthermore, the socio-semantic approach of Theo van Leeuwen has yet to be investigated as a lens towards analyzing digital conflict discourse. This study examines how the representation of Iran and the U.S. conflict is produced by X using the social actor representation model and legitimation strategies in its discourse by Western media.

**Research Objectives**

1. To examine how selected Western news organizations represent social actors and social actions in their X posts concerning the 2026 U.S.–Iran conflict.

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2. To explore the legitimation and delegitimation strategies used in the selected Western media posts about the U.S.–Iran conflict.

**Research Questions**

1. How do selected Western news organizations represent social actors and social actions in their X posts concerning the 2026 U.S.–Iran conflict?
2. What discursive strategies of legitimation and delegitimation are employed in these posts, as interpreted through van Leeuwen's framework?

**Significance of the study**

The present study is important at theoretical, methodological and practical levels because it contributes in research based on digital media discourses regarding geopolitical conflicts. The study adds and builds up on Critical Discourse Analysis research on the emerging field of social media communication, cognition, and perception; a field where X (formerly Twitter) increasingly plays a significant role in the construction of global political perceptions and public opinion. It contributes to the application of van Leeuwen theory of recontextualization, which is underexplored in the area of the digital discourse of conflict. From a methodological point of view, the combined application of the two analyses, named corpus-assisted discourse analysis (using Voyant Tools) and socio-semantic analysis provides a combined analytical approach to investigate the matter of the ideological representation in the online media discourse.

**Literature Review**

The research on media discourse and geopolitical conflicts has been increasingly turning to digital settings, not only news media but especially to social media where news actors, politicians and audiences are involved in news-publishing processes. A recent study revealed that digital media not only transmitting news about conflicts, but that they are also ideologically produced by using different strategies of framing, representation and legitimation. CDA has thus become an important methodological strand that can be used to analyze how media discourse(s) influence perceptions of conflict, power and international relations.

In recent studies, digital platforms have come into special focus, as regards to conflict communication. Antonakaki and Ioannidis (2025) performed a cross-platform discourse analysis by using X, Telegram and Reddit datasets, regarding the Israel – Hamas conflict. The study used sentiment analysis and topic modeling to check the emotional aspects and the spreading of narratives in digital environments. The results indicated that X was a major platform for conflict amplification around the world, and that discourse patterns on social media depended on the affordances of the platforms. The study, however, is largely based on computational analysis and sentiment modelling and lacks critical analysis of the ideological representation and construction of actors in discourse. As a result, issues related to representational strategies and legitimation were under-researched.

Likewise, Ahmad et al. (2025) analyzed Donald Trump's tweets about the Iran–Israel conflict using the three dimensional model of CDA explained by Fairclough. The study illustrated the strategies political talk employed as manifested in the language used to with create power relations and ideological positioning. The results revealed the effectiveness of strategic use of words for the public perception of conflict and international relations. However, it specifically analyzed only political discourses and at the institutional level, the effect of these tales was ignored. The corpus is limited to a small number of social media posts due to representational limitations.

Geopolitical media portrayal has also been investigated in terms of conflict framing at the national level of each country. Aksar et al. (2025) compared the way the Taliban were portrayed in the media in

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American, Pakistani and Chinese newspapers and noted the considerable influence of national interests and geopolitical priorities in shaping media narratives. The study found that the Western media tended to focus on issues of security and human rights, stability and pragmatism. A major aspect of the study which focused on ideology difference in conflict representation was limited to newspaper discourse and only a few studies studied emerging social media discourses like X where institutional discourse is created in real time.

The study on the representations of Iran in Western media revealed ideological framings and processes of 'othering' which involved assigning Iran ideologies related to threat, instability, and geopolitical tension. These studies showed that there is generally a tendency to reenact binary opposition between the West and the Middle East in the mediatic representations. Yet, the bulk of these analyses were on documentary or film based materials or on the typical media texts.

The studies about media frames concerning Iran are continued with some recent media conflict research. Mustofa et al. (2025) adopted Theo van Leeuwen's social actor framework to analyze the news reports about Iran's attack on Israel and illustrated the news reports' presentation of actors' profile via inclusion, exclusion, and social categorization strategies. The study was able to support the effectiveness of van Leeuwen's socio-semantic model with regard to the identification of the ideological representation of the conflict actors. However, the studies focussed mainly on texts related to news and actor portrayal with little discussion of legitimation strategies like moral judgement and rationalisation.

Similarly, Ismail (2026) analyzed international headlines concerning the U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict using Critical Discourse Analysis and revealed that headlines employed agency, evaluative language, and other framing devices skillfully to paint a picture for their audience of the way they interpreted geopolitical events. The study focussed on the description of headline discourse, but took into account neither conflictual situations (such as social media) where the discourse is more immediate, interactive and participatory, nor the ideological function of the headlines in conflict communication.

**Research Gap**

While numerous studies are available, there are still some apparent gaps. First, existing studies have focused on either traditional news discourse or on political communication and not on the institutional media discourse on X. Second, even though there are many recent studies on conflicts based on Framing analysis, Sentiment analysis or Fairclough's analysis, not much work has been dedicated to the theory of recontextualisation and the representation of the socio-semantic in digital conflict discourse from the perspective of Theo van Leeuwen. This study examines the above-mentioned gaps in the present research which focuses on the recent Iran – U.S. conflict in Western media discourse on X from the perspective of Theo van Leeuwen's theory on recontextualization of social practice. The study uses a combination of corpus-assisted analysis (using Voyant Tools) and socio-semantic CDA, thus adding to what has already been done in the field of the analysis of digital conflict discourse.

**Research Methodology**

**Research Design**

This study is of qualitative type and is part of a wider research approach called CDA that aims to examine the Iran – U.S. conflict in the digital media political discourse of the West on X. The study specifically takes socio-semantic model of recontextualisation of social practice developed by Theo van Leeuwen as the analytical tool to analyse digital media narratives for the discursive representation of social actors, social actions and legitimation in the narratives. The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm as it aims to understand how language creates meanings, constructs perception as well as determining and revealing ideological standpoints in geopolitical discourses.

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The study uses both qualitative interpretation and techniques of the corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADs) to assist in the textual exploration process. Lexical frequencies, dominant keywords, co-occurrence and trends of discourse were identified using corpus tools before going into detail critical analysis.

**Research Approach**

The analysis of the study is approached from a Corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CADS) which is a combination of two methods; Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis. The use of corpus techniques helps to pick out lexical tendencies and thematic clustering in the data set, and CDA provides more detailed cultural interpretation of the construction of ideologies and the representational choices made. This mixture reinforces analytical rigor through gathering quantitative textual information and performing qualitative discourse interpretation.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected from 7 March 2026 to 12 May 2026 during the peak time of Iran-U.S. war. Posts directly concerning military escalations and diplomatic events, security concerns, regional stability, geopolitical reactions, and mentions of Iran and the United States were pulled out. The data was filtered to exclude posts that won't have made any sense on this context away from the conflict. The corpus of approximately 11,055 words constituted the main data set which is analyzed. The textual data is manually created and prepared in the form of a single corpus file in order to be explored for analysis by computer.

**Corpus Analysis and Data Processing Tools**

Voyant Tools, a web-based corpus analysis platform which is used for textual exploration and visualization, was used to process the compiled corpus. Voyant made it possible to determine the lexical frequencies, lexical distributions, concordances, collocations, and thematic relationships in the data set. To identify the dominant lexical items and the recurring discourse patterns, several visualization tools, such as a word cloud, term frequency analysis, collocate networks and concordance lines have been used.

**Analytical Framework**

The analysis is mainly guided by Theo van Leeuwen's (2008) re-contextualisation theory on social practice. There are three general areas with respect to which the analysis is undertaken:

**Representation of Social Actors:** With this category the modes of representation of actors through socio-semantic approaches as inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivation, collectivization/ individualization and functionalization is to be discussed.

**Representation of Social Actions:** At this level that modes of action are recontextualized and represented in discourse, such as in terms of reaction.

**Strategies of Legitimation and delegitimating:** Discourse analysis digs into the strategies behind the moral evaluation and rationalization of political actors and actions, as a way of legitimizing or delegitimizing.

In this study, through the lens of these analytical categories, the approach to Western media discourse helps to look into how geopolitical identities are formed, agency and responsibility ascribed, and ideological construction of Iran – U.S. conflict generated.

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**Sampling Technique**

Corpus is selected by purposive sampling. To ensure the dataset only contained posts pertinent to the Iran–U.S. conflict, only post titles which clearly tied to the conflict itself were added. Content that did not focus on aspects of the war from a military, diplomatic or political or security perspective was eliminated. Through purposive sampling, a relevant discourse data that was suitable with the research objectives and framework theory was selected.

**Ethical Considerations**

It obtains posts from verified media organizations on X that are publicly available and uses them for the study. The corpus did not contain any personal accounts, private communication nor confidential information. All analysis was based on publicly posted institutional discourse, therefore, no ethical issues related to privacy or informed consent arose in the process of the investigation.

**Theo van Leeuwen's Theory of Recontextualisation of Social Practice**

Theo van Leeuwen developed recontextualisation theory, suggest that discourses are not just natural representations of reality but the ways that social practices are "reconstructed" through the institutions' representation, ideological stance, and power relationships. Discourse is "the recontextualization of social practice" and social events, once they enter discourse, are transformed, he conceptualizes. In this process, some elements are emphasized, left behind, rearranged or added to other meanings, legitimations etc. Elements of social practice "may be omitted from the discourse or modified and additional elements like purposes, legitimations may be added" (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 9). In this way, discourse produces on what is socially going on, rather than just reporting what happened.

One of the major aspects of van Leeuwen's framework has to do with social actors that are represented. For him, it is discourse analysis that should be investigating "the ways in which social actors can be represented" (p. 23). Strategies of representation including inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivation, collectivization/individualization and nomination/categorization can be used to represent social actors.

Moral evaluation provides justification for actions via value systems, and evaluative language. Notably, in this process, Van Leeuwen gives great attention to 'evaluative adjectives' (p. 110). By contrast, rationalisation is an unattractive and undercurrent morality, as van Leeuwen says, "In the case of rationalization, morality remains oblique and submerged" (p. 113).

Taking all dimensions of the theory into account, van Leeuwen's theory offers a broad framework for exploring constructing and excluding reality, evaluating, and legitimating in the representation of discursive worlds.

**Methodological Relevance to the Present Study**

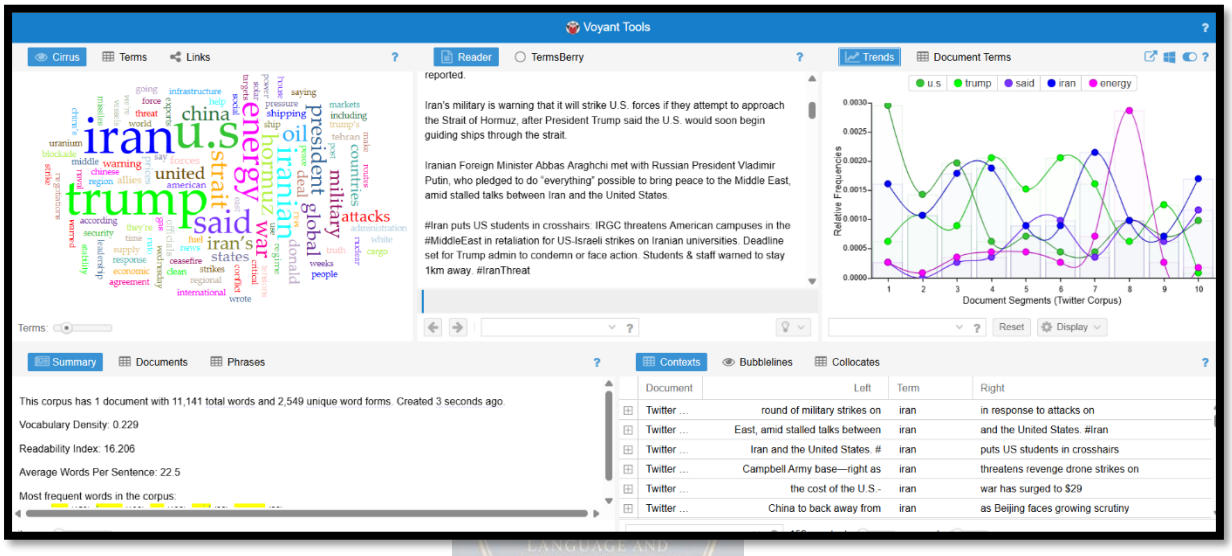
This study applies Theo van Leeuwen's approach of recontextualisation in an attempt to explore how the recent Iran-U.S. conflict exists in the discourse of the West in representational and legitimation strategies on the platform of X (previously Twitter). Given that the study focuses on a collection of data of around 11,055 words, collected from the X posts of prominent Western media outlets from 7 March to 12 May 2026, van Leeuwen's framework will serve as a suitable lens in examining, from a discursive perspective, how social actors and actions are presented within digital media discourse. It uses the framework to analyze the representation of social actors, such as the inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivation, collectivization / individualization and functionalization of social actors while, at the same time, analyzing the recontextualization and legitimatization of different types of social action, through moral evaluation and rationalization. The analysis of the media texts, using these socio-semantic categories, explores the geopolitical identities created by Western media, responsibility and agency attributed to specific actors, the media's focal actors, and the media-supported political stance in

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the conflict between Iran and the U.S. In this way van Leeuwen's framework allows the study to explore the ideological aspects of writing in the Western media
and to demonstrate how discourse on X contributes to a definition of aspects of conflict, security and geopolitical power.

## Analysis

**Figure 1:** ***Corpus initial interface produced through Voyant Tool***




This is the interface of Voyant Tools, a free online tool for textual and discourse analysis. The interface is subdivided into various analytical panels giving different views of the corpus. The Cirrus panel on the left contains a word cloud where the size of words like "Iran," "U.S.," "Trump," and "energy" indicate their frequency and prominence in the corpus. The central Reading panel displays original corpus texts for close reading and contextual understanding of words. The Trends panel on the upper right provides a graphical representation of the distribution and relative frequencies of selected terms across segments of the documents which researchers can use to trace the variation in the use of the chosen words and the evolution of topics.

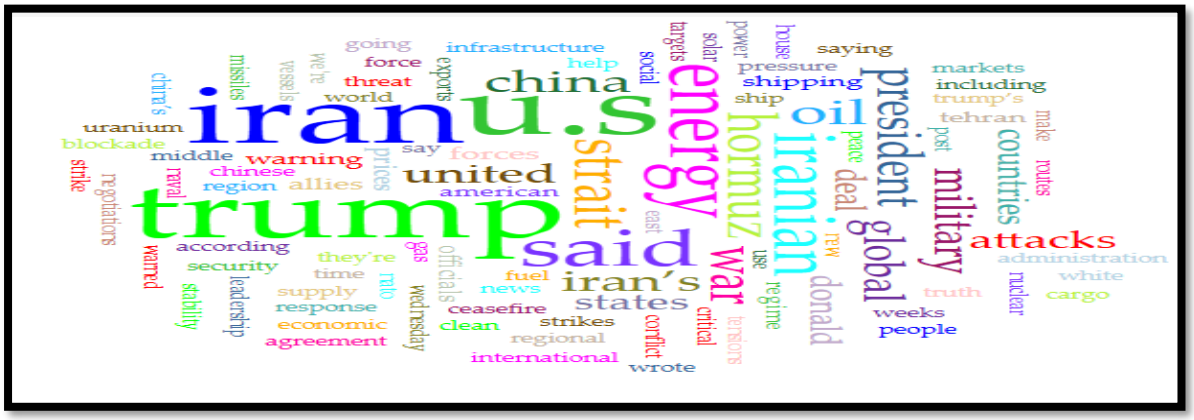
### Representation of Social Actors

The depiction of social actors is an important aspect of van Leeuwen's representation. van Leeuwen urges discourse analysts to abandon grammatical research and rather, "to look at the ways in which social actors can be represented" (p. 23).

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Figure 2

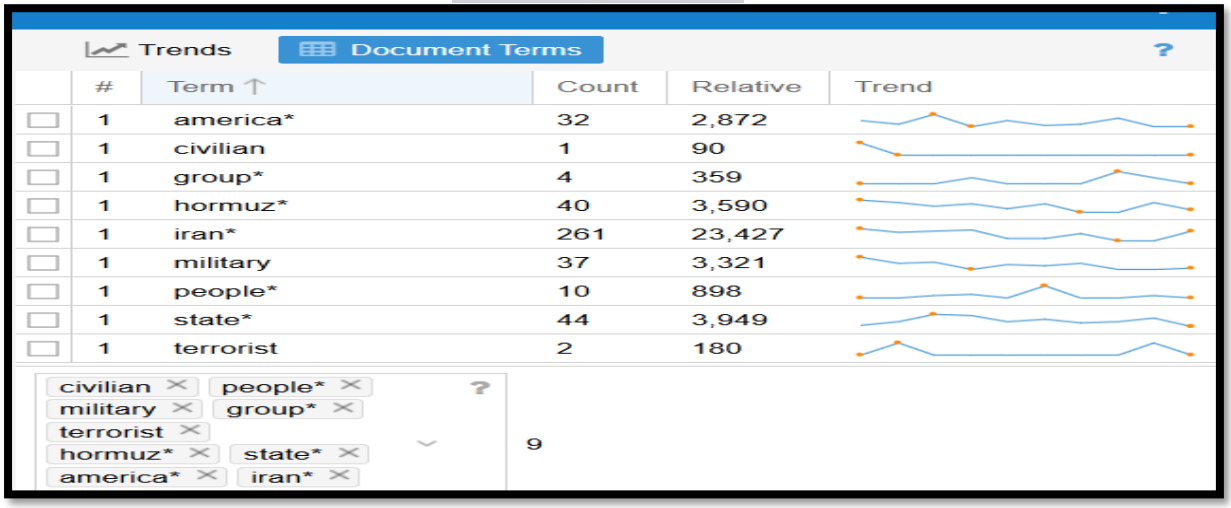
*Word cloud showing dominant actors and omissions*




**Inclusion and Exclusion**

By considering inclusion/exclusion in Van Leeuwen's manner, the word cloud displays a very selective piece of social performances as well as geopolitical realities. Most prominent in the images are "U.S," "Iran," "Trump," "military," "attacks," "said", "war" and "president" suggest that the discussion emphasizes the roles of state power, military authority, and political leadership as the key players in the conflict narrative. The political elite and the military act as key agents thus, humanitarian aspects are hardly recognized. Words connected to civilian, casualty, refugee, or ordinary citizen, are conspicuously missing, as van Leeuwen (2008) refers to as exclusion through backgrounding, in which some actors are "not referred to in relation to a given activity although they are nevertheless somewhere in the text".

*Figure 3: Lexical Frequency Distribution of Social Actors in the U.S.–Iran Conflict Corpus*




The unequal representation of the social actors in the discourse on the U.S.-Iran conflict is an evidence of Van Leeuwen's concept of inclusion and exclusion in this image. Van Leeuwen's approach to discourse sees acts of selection as an inherent part of the way that actors are represented within discourse and uses the logic of inclusion/exclusion to uncover ideologies. As a result, the conflict is framed in a strategic and security-based format, and prioritizing institutional narratives over humanitarian realities.

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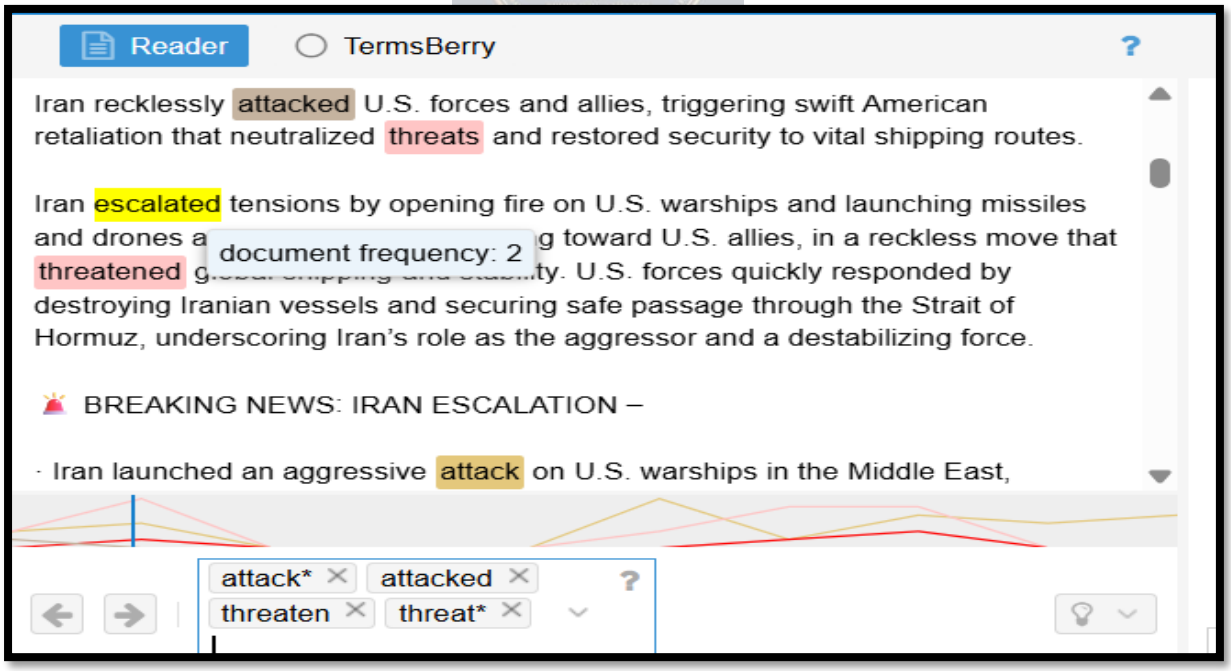
Table 1: *Word Frequencies by Discourse Category (U.S.–Iran Conflict Corpus)*

| Representation | Discourse Category | Lexical Item | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inclusion | State & National Actors | Iran | 261 |
| | | America / U.S. | 32 |
| | | State | 44 |
| | | Hormuz | 40 |
| Inclusion | Military & Security Actors | Military | 37 |
| | | Group | 4 |
| | | Terrorist | 2 |
| Exclusion | Civilian & Social Actors | People | 10 |
| | | Civilian | 1 |

As revealed in the frequency distribution, there is an obvious pattern of inclusion and exclusion with respect to the U.S.- Iran conflict discourse. Within this corpus, state and institutional actors are given priority, and the names Iran (261), State (44), Hormuz (40), Military (37) and America/U.S. (32) all appear with high frequencies, suggesting that state and institutional issues of power, territory and military are the main topics of the conflict. By comparison, terms like People (10) and particularly Civilian (1) are rare in use by civilian and humanitarian actors. As a result, the war is reframed as a problem of geo-politics and security, rather than a civil war where the civilian population and communities are suffering.

**Activation and Passivation**

**Figure 4:** *Voyant Reader Display of Action Verbs Representing Conflict Escalation*

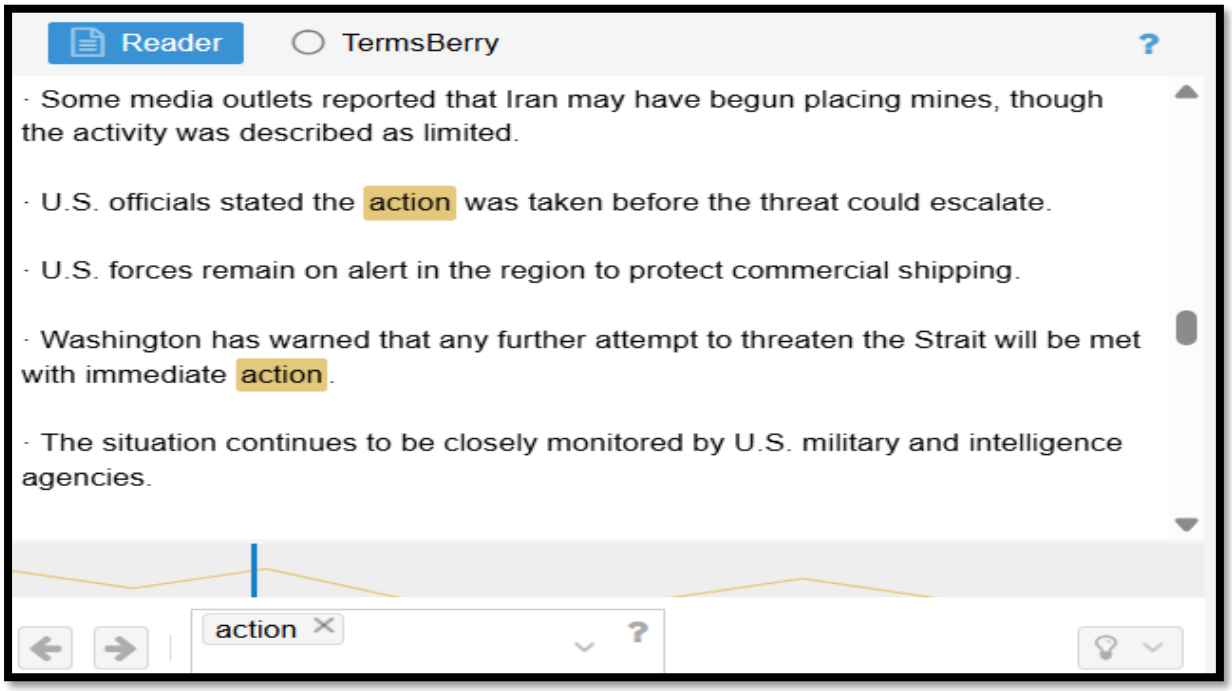



Activation as Van Leeuwen expressed it represented by the social actors themselves as active and responsible agents of actions is strongly reflected in the extract. According to van Leeuwen, "activation" would involve social actors being the active, dynamic forces in an activity (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 33). In the picture the name Iran is linked with action verbs like attacked, escalated, opening fire, launching missiles, and launched an aggressive attack. These lexical choices place Iran as the intentional aggressor

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and trouble maker. Iran's relation with aggression is repeated, which configures it as threatening and as an action that destabilizes. In a similar manner, the phrases “threatened global shipping and stability” exacerbate the impression of Iran as a current purveyor of threat, not just to the regional conflict, but to international security as a whole. This activation brings out the agency and blame squarely directed at Iran.

**Figure 5:** ***Voyant Reader Display of Action-Oriented Lexical Patterns in U.S. Conflict Narratives***

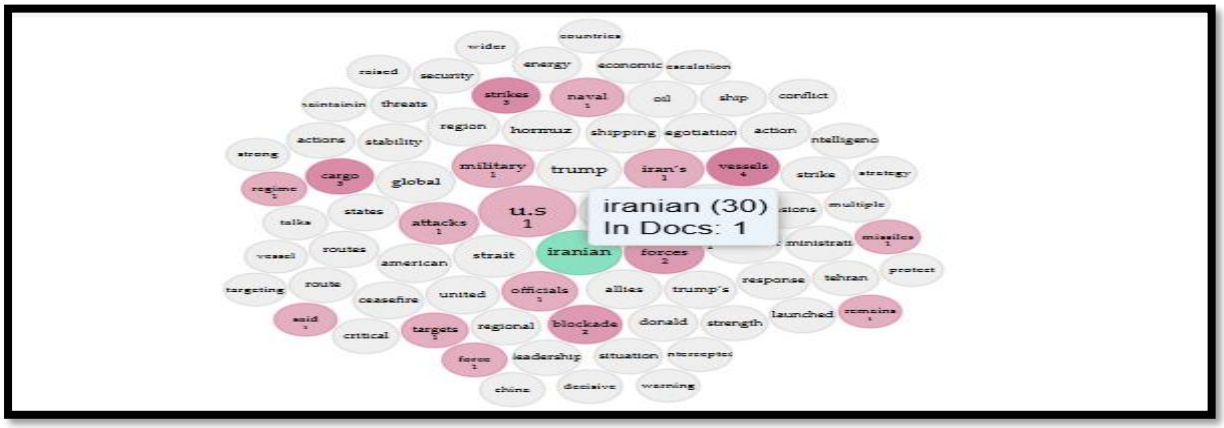



This produces a moral asymmetry: Iran is "acted" upon as the aggressor, first the U.S. is "passed" upon as the victim and finally it is "acted" upon again as the legitimate defender. Such representational decisions ideologically justify U.S. military action and render Iran as an object of illegitimacy for causing conflict and instability.

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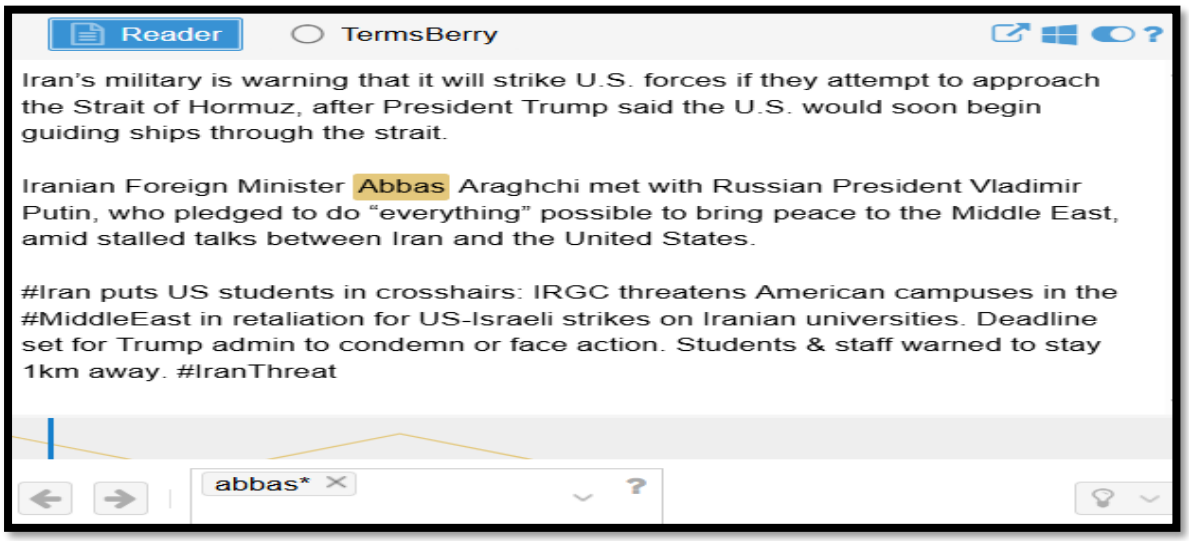
**Collectivisation and Individualisation**

**Figure 6: TermsBerry Network Showing Collectivised Representation of Iranian Actors**




The image clearly illustrates Van Leeuwen's notion of collectivization and individualization in his representation of social actors. According to van Leeuwen, the singularity, as one could imagine from the name, is the realization of individualization, while assimilation can be done by a mass noun or a noun denoting group of people" (p. 37). Visual network has a more dominant collectivized representation rather than individualized. adjectives like 'Iranian', by limiting their range of values to "regime," "attack," "forces," "officials," "allies," "military," "vessels," and "states," it treats actors as collective political or institutional entities rather than actors as unique individuals. Recurring use of national/institutional terms renders all kinds of actors into coherent geopolitical entities. Specially, the usage of the modifier "Iranian" signifies a collective counter used as a black umbrella that encompasses social and political complexities. In this collectivisation, the ideology of "us versus them" is reinforced as the state and military groups are treated as monolithic entities with unified intentions.

**Figure 7: *Voyant Reader Display of Individualised Geopolitical Actor Representation***



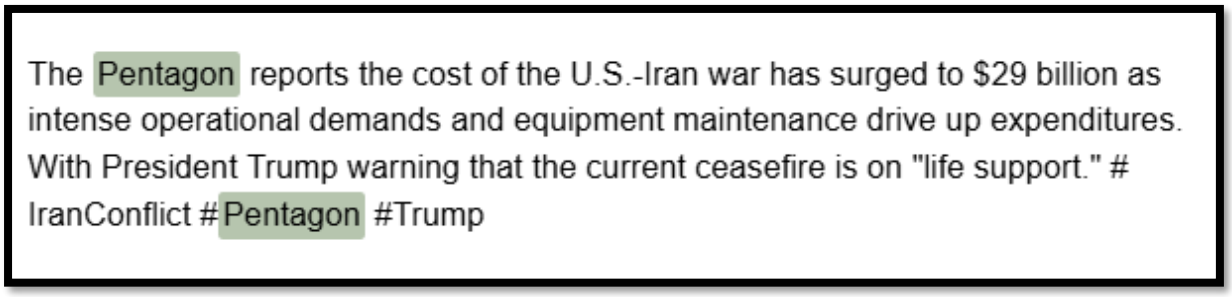

The only clear individualized actor name is "Abbas Araghchi". This use of a personal name makes it more individualized in diplomatic or leadership situations. This individual number is lost in the discourse of the dominant collectives: Iran, U.S. forces and allies. This is an imbalance that points to the emphasizing of institutional/national identity rather than human agency. For an ideological use, as

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suggested by Van Leeuwen, collectivisation makes it easier to be general and to assign collective responsibility and blame. In this context, Iran's repeated collectivisation as a protagonistic character seems to be responsible for forming a blueprint of the conflict as a battle between coherent geopolitical actors as opposed to different individuals who play their specific roles, have specific experiences, and have specific views of what is happening.

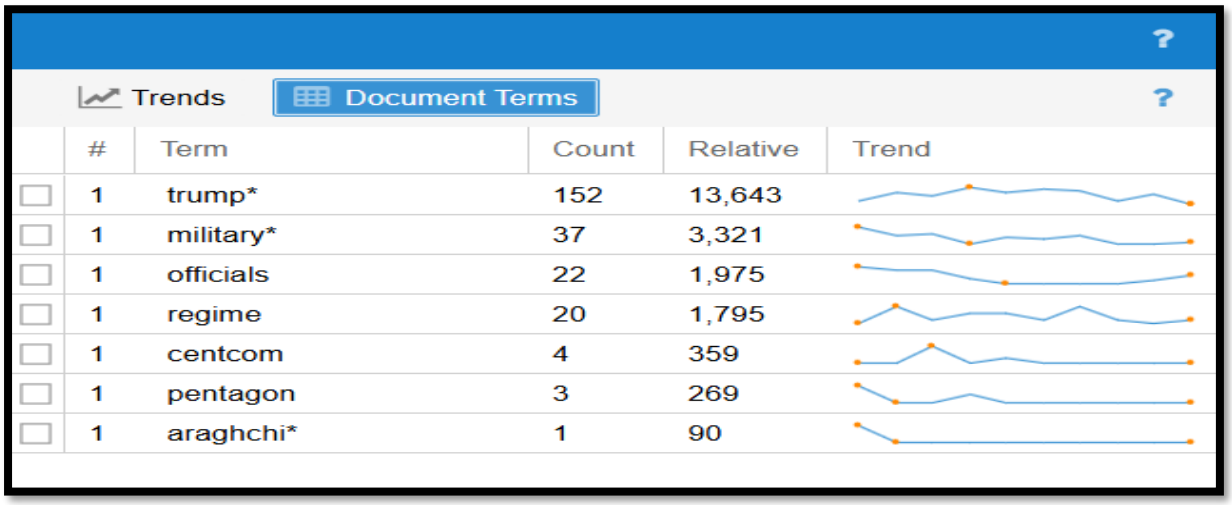
**Functionalization**

**Figure 8:** ***Institutional Actor Representation through Functionalisation***




Functionalization is used as a paradigmatic lens in this text, and social actors are depicted less in their personal identities and more in regards to their institutional and/or professional roles. Functionalization is social actors being depicted "in activity, in doing" (van Leeuwen, 2008). In this report, the institutional status of “The Pentagon” and authority figures like “President Trump” are emphasized by virtue of their official governmental and military institutions. The Pentagon is portrayed as a powerful defense entity that has to report and assess the economic cost of war, and Trump is displayed around the Executive Order; his job is to warn and oversee geopolitical security

**Figure 9:** ***Corpus-Based Frequency Analysis of Social Actor Representation***




| # | Term | Count | Relative | Trend |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | trump* | 152 | 13,643 | |
| 1 | military* | 37 | 3,321 | |
| 1 | officials | 22 | 1,975 | |
| 1 | regime | 20 | 1,795 | |
| 1 | centcom | 4 | 359 | |
| 1 | pentagon | 3 | 269 | |
| 1 | araghchi* | 1 | 90 | |

This functionalised representation lends credence and authority to institutional actors to validate the discourse. The word “the” and reference to “The Pentagon reports” creates an impression of objective fact, coming from a known defense source. In a manner similar, “President Trump warning” saves Trump as president: Trump is a strategic decision-maker during crisis management. By casting the conflict in institutional terms, the focus moves away from individual viewpoints, remodelling the Iran-

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U.S. war as an organized matter of state responsibility, national security and military administration, instead of as part of a humanitarian or political clash.

**Table 2:** ***Frequency of Key Social Actors (U.S.–Iran Conflict Corpus)***

| Category | Word / Expression | Raw Frequency | Relative Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Collectivised (National Group)** | Trump | 152 | 13,643 |
| **Collectivised (Military)** | Military | 37 | 3,321 |
| **Collectivised (Institutional Actors)** | Officials | 22 | 1,975 |
| **Collectivised (Regime)** | Regime | 20 | 1,795 |
| **Institutional (Military Command)** | CENTCOM | 4 | 359 |
| **Institutional\(Military Authority)** | Pentagon | 3 | 269 |
| **Individualised (Named Leader)** | Araghchi | 1 | 90 |

The frequency pattern reveals a strong tendency toward collectivization in discussions about the U.S.–Iran conflict. Social actors are mostly referred to by their collective political or military roles, such as Trump (152), Military (37), Officials (22), and Regime (20). Personal names are less prominent here. Military entities like CENTCOM and the Pentagon receive considerable attention, underscoring how state and security structures influence the narrative.

**Representation of Social Actions**

Van Leeuwen's theory is not focused on just the nature of individuals, but it is also an analysis of the modes of action representation. Social actions are 'seldom represented in their original form' and 'actions may be represented as processes, as states, or as abstract entities' by the process of linguistic transformation.

**Figure 10:** ***Representation of Conflict Escalation and Defensive Response*** **Reaction**

> Iran escalated tensions by opening fire on U.S. warships and launching missiles and drones across the region, including toward U.S. allies, in a reckless move that threatened global shipping and stability. U.S. forces quickly responded by destroying Iranian vessels and securing safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz, underscoring Iran's role as the aggressor and a destabilizing force.

The timing of the military acts as an instant reaction to the perceived aggression and instability is a strong reinforcement of Van Leeuwen's concept of reaction in the extract. According to van Leeuwen, "reactions may be general, via verbs such as 'react' and 'respond', or they may be specified as a particular kind of reaction" (van Leeuwen 2008 p. 58). In the text, Iran takes the proactive role, with the U.S. responding to Iran's actions: "escalated tensions," "opened fire" and "launched missiles and drones." But, the phrase "U.S. forces responded swiftly by sinking Iranian ships and guaranteeing unhindered shipping routes" makes military aggression appear less like action on its own than as a defensive and

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necessary measure in response to "threats." Adverb 'quickly' again gives a sense of urgency and sort of 'justified reaction'.

**Figure 11:** ***Representation of Reaction through Peace-Oriented Conflict Narratives***

> Trump Pushes Peace Through Strength. Trump's approach continues focusing on maintaining pressure on Iran while simultaneously pursuing negotiations aimed at restoring stability. Supporters of the administration argue the response demonstrated strength, deterrence, and America's commitment to protecting global shipping routes and U.S. naval forces

The extract depicts Van Leeuwen's notion of reaction, which is demonstrated through the idea that U.S. policy is a response to other instability, and is not necessarily aggression itself. According to van Leeuwen, the way to express reactions can be unspecified, such as verbs 'react' and 'respond', or 'a specified type of reaction, such as 'unlearn' and 'learn'" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 58). The American way is typified by their use of pseudo-action verbs in the reactive and strategic style discussed above, "maintaining pressure on Iran" and "pursuing negotiations aimed at restoring stability." As indicated in these expressions, the U.S. response is based upon an existing threat environment. The focus is not on starting conflict, but on deterring, controlling, and repelling instability by diplomacy, and measured use of force.

The discourse is also a morally legitimate representation of this reaction, linking it to positive values like, "peace," "stability," "protection," and "commitment. Ideologically the words "Peace Through Strength" operate; because in order to keep peace there is a need for military readiness and political pressure. Catchphrases such as "deterrence" and "defending global shipping lanes and the U.S. Navy" continue to set the tone of the U.S. response as rational and defensive. Van Leeuwen describes the reaction as 'deliberate' and 'legitimate', connecting it with protecting international security instead of the escalation of violence. This way, the use of coercive measures becomes the norm, it's framed as responsible action and a proper response to maintain peace and stability in the region.

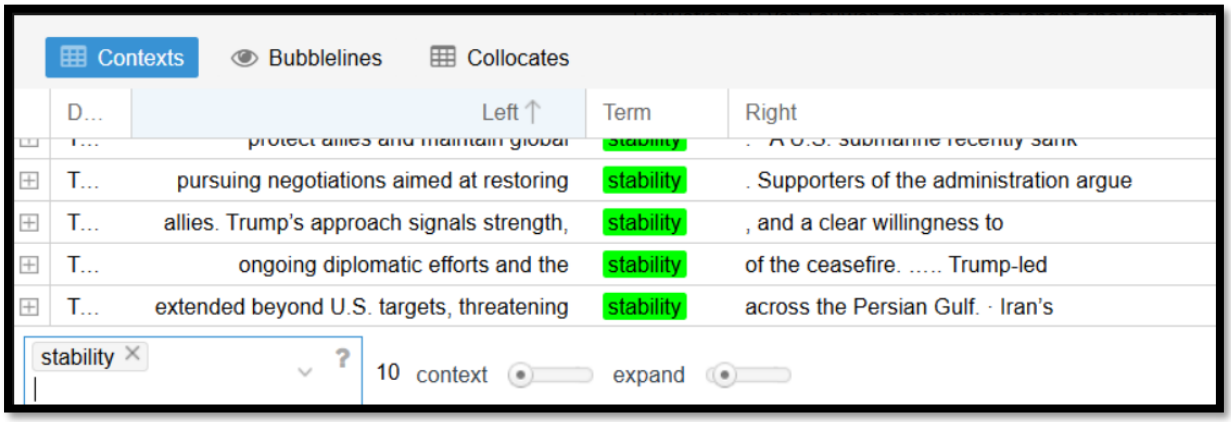
**Legitimation and Delegitimation**

One of the contributions in van Leeuwen (2008) is regarding legitimation. Legitimation is the "how to" of the answer to the question of "why social practices should exist or take the form they do" (p. 105) as stated in the article.

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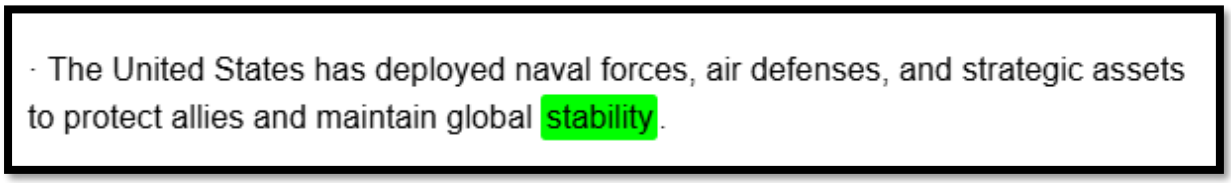
*Moral Evaluation*

**Figure 12:** ***Representation of Stability in Western Media Legitimation Narratives***




The repeated use of U.S. actions with the positive, moral terms - stability, diplomatic efforts, ceasefire, restoring stability. The image clearly demonstrates the moral nature of the evaluation Van Leeuwen represents. Morality legitimatizes acts by connecting them with socially accepted values (as van Leeuwen says), and, as he notes, "evaluative adjectives play a significant role during moral evaluation legitimation" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 110). Throughout the concordance lines, 'stability' is linked with such words and phrases as 'stability in negotiations for restoration of stability' and 'diplomatic talks in progress', as well as 'signals of strength and stability'. By means of such lexical patterns, a moral interpretation is created for the U.S and its allies as responsible actors who aim for peace, order and equilibrium in the region. It is not a discourse about an aggressive or expansionist purpose.

**Figure 13:** ***Moral Legitimation of U.S. Military Action through Stability Discourse***

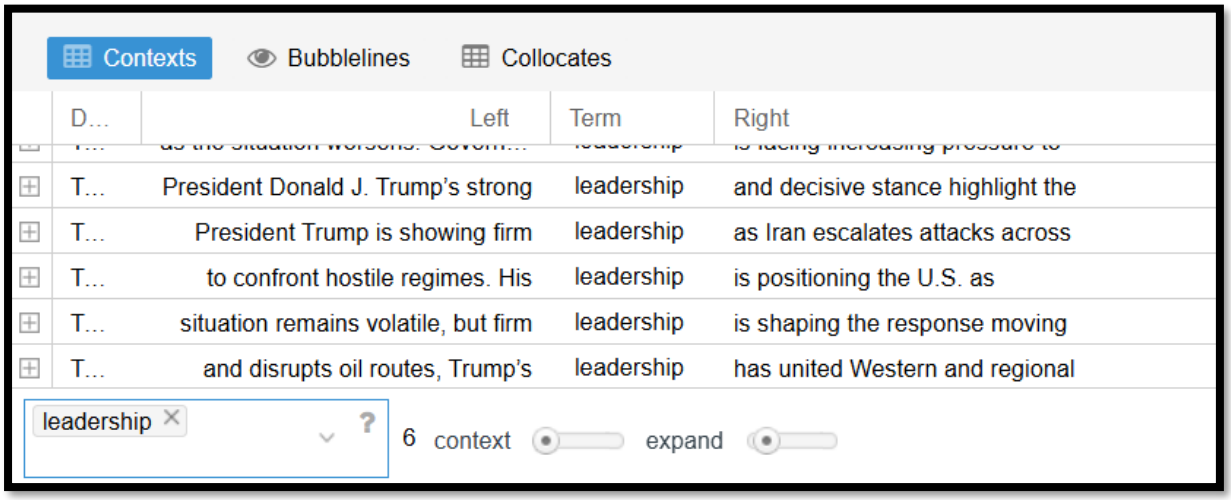



The extract very strongly upholds Van Leeuwen's moral evaluation as it validates the U.S. military actions by appealing to good, moral social ideals. Moral legitimation is done by "evaluative adjectives" and value-laden terms which associate acts with socially sanctioned norms, values and principles (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 110). The use of "naval forces, air defenses, and strategic assets" is nowhere depicted as some kind of aggressive "militarization", but as a morally virtuous action meant for the protection of "alleys" and for "global stability". Highlighted term "stability" serves as a positive moral value to express peace, order and international security. That leads to the discursive reconstruction of military presence in responsible, protecting rather than coercing ways.

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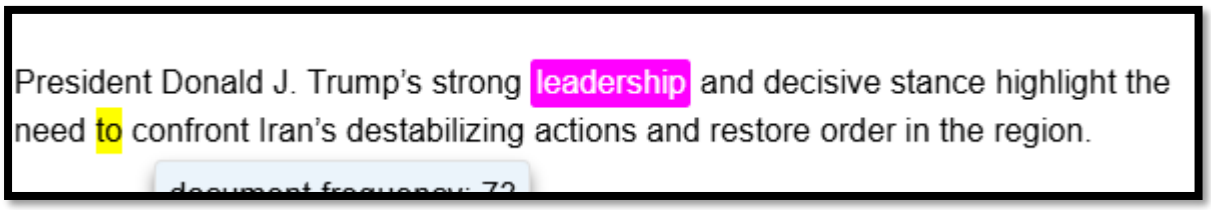
Rationalisation

**Figure 14:** *Voyant Contexts Display of Leadership-Based Rationalisation*




An image that does embody Van Leeuwen's notion of rationalisation is one that gives legitimacy to U.S. political and strategic moves using the language of logic, necessity, and effectiveness without moral judgment even being required. There is an "obliqueness and submerged morality" of rationalization, van Leeuwen explains, "in the case of rationalization" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 113). Already, the term "leadership" has been used over and over again in the concordance lines; "strong leadership," "firm leadership," "decisive stance," and "shaping the response" are just a few ways of characterizing President Trump's actions in these lines as purposeful and necessary. The focus is on ability, authority, and intentional choice, and the U.S. response is a rational response to increasing attacks and instability. The author gives no impression that it is in any way aggressive and suggest that this is an organized and practical way to deal with "hostile regimes" and order among the region.

**Figure 15:** *Rationalisation of U.S. Strategic Action through Leadership and Order Restoration Discourse*




The extract indicates that in Van Leeuwen's terms the rationality of the media discourse is the rationalisation of politics and strategy and these are being legitimised in the language of necessity, efficacy and problem-solving in the media. As "rationalization" threatens to become a "morally oblique and submerged" process (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 113), its troubling power poses a significant challenge to educational efforts anywhere. President Trump's "strength leadership" and "decisive stance" is not assessed emotionally or morally, but as realistic and essential reactions to the region's instability. The creation of the necessity to engage in confrontation with Iran's "destabilizing actions" implies unavoidability and strategic purpose. In the same way, "restore order in the region" characterizes the

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intent of the proposed actions as something that is deliberate and designed to create stability and control instead of escalation and aggression.

**Figure 16:** *Collocational Network of "Trump" Showing Rationalisation Strategies*




| Term | Collocate | Count (context) |
|---|---|---|
| trump* | president | 27 |
| trump* | iran | 27 |
| trump* | said | 19 |
| trump* | u.s | 14 |
| trump* | truth | 12 |
| trump* | social | 12 |
| trump* | warning | 10 |
| trump* | wrote | 9 |
| trump* | donald | 9 |

trump* 490 context

A collocation table of the third type, presenting Van Leeuwen's idea of rationalisation, illustrates how language framed Trump in denoting authority, strategic responses and necessity, but not necessarily definitive moral judgment. In the case of rationalization, morality still may be oblique and submerged," according to him (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 113). He is clearly in the zone of institutional authority and policy with words such as "president" (27), "warning" (10), "U.S." (14), "Iran" (27), and "said" (19). Warning" is one such collocate who puts political actions into the perspective of proactively advancing in the name of security. This language implies rather than suggesting acts of aggression, decisions that are reflective and a response to threatening behavior. Further, the constant reference to the state (as well as to the president or to what was said or written) appears to depict decision-making in a 'logical' and 'deliberate' manner. All of this makes us realize what instrumental rationalization is, as actions are valid because of what they are going to be used for and what should come out of them. This places U.S. Leadership as essential and logical to the storyline of the continuous battle.

## Conclusion

The present study examines the portrayal of Iran–U.S. recent conflict with regard to Western media representation on the social media platform X from the perspective of the socio-semantic approach by Theo van Leeuwen and Critical Discourse Analysis by capitalizing on corpus tools. The results show that the conflict is narrated in Western media based on selective representation and portrayal of social actors, active maneuvering of agency, and legitimation of the process through highlighting the securitizing characteristics of security, stability and geopolitical power.

The analysis illustrates that, overall, institutional and state actors are more visible, and humanitarian angles and civilian voices more marginal. Moreover, the representational moves of activation, collectivization, functionalization, moralization and rationalization are a part of the ideological construction of conflict narratives as well as the legitimization of certain positions in politics. The use of corpus tools and socio-semantic analysis opens up a world of discourse analysis possibilities for explaining and evaluating how digital media discourse is playing a role in the construction of geopolitical realities and the understanding of international conflict by the public, highlighting the need to critically analyze talk about international conflict in today's digital world.

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