Image Construction in Media Warfare: A Framing Analysis of Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth During The US-Iran War

Khairudin Murad, Abuzar Abdul Halim & Wan Arash Azzazi Johari
Centre of Media and Information Warfare Studies, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.
khairudinmurad@uitm.edu.my

Received Date: 03/07/2026 Accepted Date:10/09/2026 Published Date: 30/10/2026

Abstract

The US–Iran War has evolved beyond conventional military confrontation into the domain of media warfare, where competing narratives, perceptions and political images shape the understanding of the conflict. This framing analysis investigates the image construction of Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth as representative figures of Iranian diplomacy and American security discourse during the US–Iran War. Utilising a hybrid narrative review methodology, the study synthesises scholarly literature, news reports and social media content to analyse how media narratives construct, frame and communicate their public images. Guided by Strategic Narrative Theory and Media Framing Theory, the review examines how each figure is depicted as a symbolic embodiment of broader state interests, ideological positions and wartime objectives. The findings indicate that Araghchi and Hegseth exemplify competing geopolitical narratives that aim to establish legitimacy, influence public perception and shape interpretations of the conflict. The study underscores the role of image construction as a critical instrument in contemporary media warfare.

Keywords: *Image Construction, Media Warfare, Framing, Abbas Araghchi, Pete Hegseth, US-Iran War*

1.0 Introduction

The present US–Iran conflict is the result of decades of geopolitical rivalry which began with the 1953 coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, followed by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, disagreements concerning Iran's nuclear programme and ongoing competition in the Middle East region. Even though tensions have at times intensified through the use of sanctions, proxy confrontations and military incidents, the situation took on a new dimension on 28 February 2026 when the United States and Israel carried out coordinated strikes on Iranian military, nuclear and military-strategic targets [1]. This operation represented the most substantial direct military clash between the two sides in recent history and led immediately to retaliatory missile and drone attacks by Iran against US military bases in the Gulf region [2]. The fact that the conflict is now being fought not only by force but also through competing attempts to establish legitimacy, responsibility and public perception demonstrates this escalation.

Given this unstable situation, media warfare is becoming increasingly important in shaping the course of the conflict. In ongoing military confrontations, images and perceptions have now turned into strategic assets capable of affecting political legitimacy, public support and international opinion just as much as military power [3]. Political leaders, diplomats, and military officials are increasingly judged by their media visibility, how they communicate and the symbolic images they project in both traditional and digital media [4]. In the case of the US–Iran conflict, Iran's Foreign Minister and the United States Secretary of War became leading voices on their respective sides [5]. The public statements they made, the way they appeared in the media and their activity on social media have turned both of them into symbolic representations of their countries' interests, so that the creation of an image and the management of public perception have become central aspects of the media warfare in this conflict [6].

2.0 Literature Review

Media warfare is now at the centre of modern conflicts, extending the nature of competition beyond the battlefield to influence, establish legitimacy and affect public opinion. In the context of the broader US–Iran war, this review examines Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth to explore opposing narratives and how the media portrays them in shaping public understanding of the conflict. This literature review focuses on image building, strategic narratives, media framing, wartime communication and public diplomacy to examine how both sides are presented.

2.1 Image Construction as an Instrument of Influence

Political power is increasingly won and sustained through the strategic construction of public image. In view of this, the creation of an image has become a strong means of exerting influence and securing legitimacy, since it affects how political leaders are perceived and accepted by both domestic and international audiences [8]. By means of media coverage, public communication, symbolic actions and other political activities, leaders develop images that convey a sense of credibility, competence, authority and moral standing [9]. It is important to note that these strategies do not work alone; on the contrary, they interact with one another and overlap in order to reinforce the leader's desired public image. In today's information environment, image building goes beyond personal reputation and acts as a way of earning public trust, gaining support and giving legitimacy to political decisions, especially in times of crisis or conflict [10]. Furthermore, political images are constantly produced, reinforced and challenged through both traditional and digital media, with strategic narratives portraying leaders as protectors, diplomats, reformers or defenders of national interests [11]. As a result, the way leaders are represented constitutes a purposeful form of communication which influences public opinion, boosts political legitimacy and increases a leader's ability to influence audiences in an ever more competitive information environment [12].

Building on these primary concepts, Abbas Araghchi's media appearance in Al Jazeera's interview, "This is America's War" [13], which was published on 18 March 2026, shows how a political image can be deliberately shaped using narratives relating to diplomacy, national interest and defence. Instead of taking an aggressive stance during a war, Araghchi positions himself as a responsible statesman who is dedicated to protecting Iran's sovereignty and promoting compliance with international law. By stressing the importance of dialogue, legitimacy and resistance to outside interference, he presents himself as a diplomatic leader who is able to handle a crisis through strategic communication rather than by resorting to military action. As a result, by describing the United States as the main cause of instability in the region and Iran as a victim of foreign aggression, Araghchi strengthens his image as a defender of sovereignty and of regional security. This self-presentation boosts his political legitimacy by showing confidence, composure and moral authority, and allows him to be seen as a credible diplomatic figure rather than as a country that is itself an aggressor.

This variation in leadership styles becomes even more apparent when examining Pete Hegseth's portrayal in Reuters' report, "US Objectives in Iran Have Not Changed" [14], published on 19 March 2026, which reflects a completely different approach to political leadership, one based on decisiveness, military ability and strategic determination. During the briefing, Hegseth stresses the consistency of US war objectives and presents himself as a disciplined and confident leader who is determined to achieve well-defined goals even amid media attention and changing battlefield circumstances. By pointing out the decline in Iran's missile capabilities, its defence infrastructure and its naval assets while at the same time stopping the progress of its nuclear programme, Hegseth creates an image of strength, control and operational skill. His criticism of the media's accounts and his assertion that the campaign is still "on target and on plan" further strengthen the image of him as a firm wartime decision-maker. While Araghchi's image is based on diplomacy and legitimacy, Hegseth's is based on deterrence and military power. The contrast between these two kinds of portrayal shows how political leaders use different strategic narratives in order to gain legitimacy, influence public opinion and promote their nation's interests during times of international conflict.

2.2 Media Warfare and Perception Management

Communication warfare now dominates the landscape of modern conflicts, with governments and political actors fiercely competing to control public perception, influence attitudes and assert legitimacy through carefully calibrated strategic messaging [15]. At the centre of this struggle lies narrative warfare, involving the construction, dissemination and contestation of narratives that frame events, assign responsibility and define conflict [16]. Rather than relying solely on military superiority, actors seek an informational advantage by presenting themselves as legitimate, defensive and morally justified, while portraying adversaries as aggressors or threats [17]. Through traditional media, social media platforms, political speeches and diplomatic communication, narrative warfare operates as an effective instrument of perception management capable of influencing both domestic and international audiences [18]. Consequently, the battle for public opinion increasingly complements the battle for territory, making narrative control an essential part of contemporary messaging warfare [16].

As the dynamics of narrative warfare take centre stage, the distinct strategies employed by key actors become increasingly apparent. In this competitive information environment, Abbas Araghchi makes use of narrative warfare in order to promote a strategy based on sovereignty, legitimacy and resistance to coercion. According to a CNN article entitled “Iran’s Top Diplomat Hopeful for Negotiations Even Amid US Military Buildup” [19], Araghchi consistently stresses Iran's willingness to enter into “fair and just” negotiations with the United States, while opposing any talks that take place under the threat of military force or political pressure. In this way, Araghchi portrays Iran’s missile and defence capabilities as legitimate instruments of national self-defence, seeking to normalise Iran’s security posture and challenge narratives that depict the country as a destabilising force. At the same time, the Iranian Foreign Minister describes the United States as engaging in coercive diplomacy through military deployments and threats of force, thus shifting responsibility for regional tensions to Washington [20]. From this perspective, Iran is a rational, responsible actor committed to dialogue, while the United States is presented as the main cause of escalation [18]. This kind of strategic communication aims to enhance Iran's diplomatic standing, shape international opinion and challenge prevailing Western views of the conflict [21].

Contrary to Araghchi’s approach, Pete Hegseth promotes a line of argument which gives legitimacy to U.S. military action while undermining Iran's role in the conflict. He describes Iran as an opponent that has for a long time launched a "one-sided war" against the United States, especially in reaction to the justifications given by the U.S. media for its military operations in Iran; on this basis, Hegseth assigns responsibility for the conflict to Tehran and presents American actions as defensive and necessary [22]. The claim that President Trump is "concluding" rather than starting the war helps to bolster a story of strong and decisive leadership, a sense of strategic duty, and moral justification. Moreover, mentions of Iran's missile and drone capabilities serve to increase people's perception of the threat and help to maintain public support for military intervention [23]. Through this framing, the United States is portrayed as the guarantor of regional security and stability, while Iran is depicted as the main source of instability [24]. Together, the narratives put forward by Araghchi and Hegseth show how communication warfare extends beyond military operations into perception management, where competing parties aim to gain legitimacy, influence public understanding of the situation and shape interpretations of the conflict through strategic storytelling [25].

2.3 Wartime Communication and Public Diplomacy

In the dynamic landscape of geopolitical conflict, constructing public perception can be as decisive as achieving military victory. This article argues that crisis communication is a fundamental part of wartime strategy and public diplomacy, enabling governments and political leaders to cope with uncertainty, keep the public's trust and influence the international narrative. For crisis communication to be effective it is necessary to provide information promptly, to frame events strategically and to deliver a consistent message that justifies actions, combats misinformation and maintains credibility in rapidly evolving circumstances [26]. Beyond informing its domestic audience, crisis communication serves as a key tool of public diplomacy, allowing states to demonstrate legitimacy, defend policy decisions and win international support [27]. By means of press conferences, diplomatic statements, media interviews and digital platforms, political figures aim to influence how crises are interpreted

while reinforcing narratives that are in line with national interests [28]. As a result, crisis communication has now become an essential component of modern wartime strategy, where managing people's perceptions is often no less important than managing military operations [29].

The effectiveness of wartime communication largely depends on the competence and actions of political actors in executing strategy into persuasive, credible action in moments of uncertainty. In this light, Abbas Araghchi's communications concerning the Strait of Hormuz show how crisis communication can help to keep diplomatic credibility and maintain international legitimacy when tensions are rising [30]. Rather than using confrontational language, Araghchi positions Iran as a reasonable and responsible party that is committed to negotiation, to international law and to diplomatic dialogue. In its report of 22 June 2026, "Iran Agrees to UN Nuclear Inspectors' Return as Part of Agreement with US" [31], The Guardian stated that Iran is not merely giving in to US demands; instead, Tehran says it will co-operate only if the United States removes the sanctions, so that the return of the UN nuclear inspectors is conditional on such relief. By setting out Iran's position on conditional diplomacy backed by strategic pressure, Araghchi, who has a doctorate in political thought from the University of Kent, aims to reassure international audiences that Iran's actions are careful and considered responses to a complicated geopolitical situation and not arbitrary acts of aggression [32]. At the same time, his messaging supports Iran's sovereign right to defend its strategic interests while avoiding any language that might cause the crisis to escalate further [33]. Using this carefully adjusted communication strategy, Araghchi deals with uncertainty, projects a sense of stability and enhances Iran's image as a responsible nation in a turbulent conflict environment [34].

While Araghchi's method stresses diplomatic restraint and reassurance, Pete Hegseth's communication takes a crisis-management approach that focuses on reassurance, clarity and confidence [35]. Araghchi, on the other hand, concentrates on diplomacy and de-escalation; in contrast, Hegseth stresses the consistency of U.S. military objectives and the effectiveness of the current operations [36]. By continually stating that American objectives have not changed, the U.S. Army National Guard infantry veteran creates the impression of stability, control and strategic coherence even amid the uncertainties of war [37]. His thorough explanation of military targets, such as Iran's missile capabilities, its defence infrastructure and its naval assets, helps to eliminate ambiguity and shows operational transparency, as reported by Reuters, "Hegseth warns "more casualties" expected in Operation Epic Fury against Iran" [38]. Moreover, Hegseth's firm stance that the campaign remains focused and on schedule reassures the public and ends media speculation about expanding the mission [39]. Together, Hegseth strengthens the perception of leadership competence, military effectiveness and government credibility [39]. The different approaches taken by Araghchi and Hegseth together show how crisis communication serves not only as a way of providing information during wartime but also as a strategic instrument for shaping perceptions, maintaining legitimacy and promoting national objectives during the tensions.

2.4 Strategic Narrative Theory

As Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle point out, Strategic Narrative Theory is made up of three interconnected components: the system narrative, the identity narrative and the issue narrative. These three elements together determine how political actors create public images when conflicts arise. When there is a heightened level of confrontation between the United States and Iran, the system narrative shows how Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth understand the international order and where their respective countries stand within it. Araghchi frequently frames Iran as a sovereign nation defending itself against external pressure and unilateral intervention, portraying the conflict as a struggle against hegemonic power. By contrast, Hegseth often depicts the United States as the guarantor of regional peace and security and justifies American actions as necessary responses to apparent threats [30]. These opposing system narratives provide the broader context through which audiences come to understand the conflict and grant legitimacy to each side.

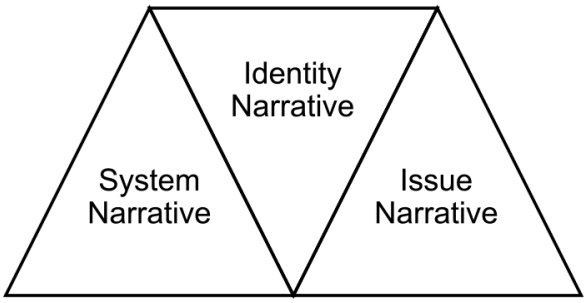


Figure 1. The Construct of Strategic Narrative Theory

Beyond the basic system narrative, the identity and issue narratives emerge as central factors in forming public images. Through identity narratives, Araghchi projects the image of a rational diplomat, defender of Iranian sovereignty and advocate of international law. Hegseth develops an image associated with military strength, national security and strategic deterrence [40]. These identity constructions influence how domestic and international audiences perceive their credibility, leadership and political roles [41]. Meanwhile, the issue narrative focuses on specific wartime events and policy debates, including military strikes, sanctions, nuclear negotiations, regional security and the Strait of Hormuz. Through selectively framing these issues, both actors seek to justify their respective positions and frame public interpretation of the conflict [42]. Consequently, Strategic Narrative Theory provides a useful framework for analysing the processes by which the media constructs and amplifies contrasting images of Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth, revealing how narrative competition operates as media warfare in the struggle for legitimacy, influence, and public support during the US–Iran War [21].

2.5 Media Framing Theory

Media Framing Theory, outlined by Claes H. de Vreese, emphasises that media organisations influence meaning by selectively highlighting certain aspects of reality. They present these aspects in ways that shape the audience's understanding of political events, actors and issues. De Vreese conceptualises framing as a process consisting of frame building and frame setting, with frame building referring to the production of media frames [43]. In this process, journalists, editors, political elites and gatekeepers shape how events are portrayed. Moreover, selection is a central mechanism that determines which information, actors, statements and events are included and which are omitted [44]. Media outlets selectively construct system narratives by portraying the international order and power relations between the United States and Iran. News platforms construct identity narratives by defining the characteristics and roles of Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth. These platforms also construct issue narratives by framing wartime issues such as military strikes, diplomacy, sanctions, nuclear negotiations and regional security.

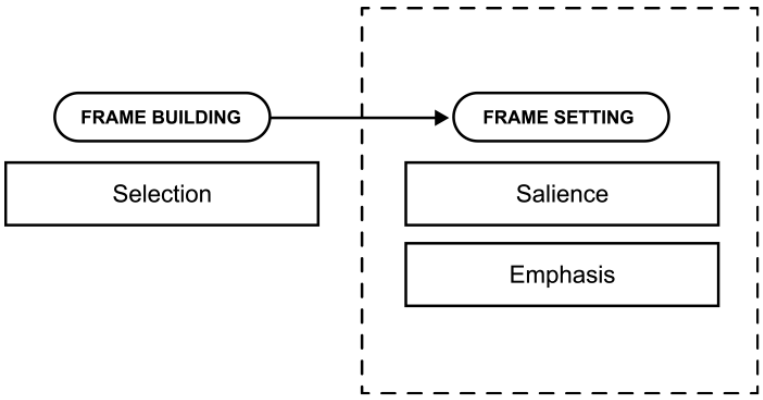


Figure 2. Frame Building and Setting on Media Framing Theory

The second process, frame setting, refers to the effects of media frames on audience perceptions and interpretations [45]. De Vreese [43] argues that frames influence public understanding through salience and emphasis. Salience occurs when selected information is made more prominent through repetition, placement, visuals, headlines and frequency of coverage. This increases its visibility and importance to audiences. On the other hand, emphasis shapes how audiences interpret the selected information by highlighting particular meanings, causes, evaluations and solutions. Amid the escalation of US–Iran hostilities, media coverage may make Araghchi's diplomatic engagements or Hegseth's security-oriented statements more salient. At the same time, it may emphasise them as symbols of diplomacy or deterrence. Thus, framing influences how audiences perceive the competing system, identity and issue narratives advanced by each actor. It additionally contributes to the construction of their public images and towards the broader contest for legitimacy and influence within contemporary media warfare.

2.6 Key Construct and Conceptual Framework

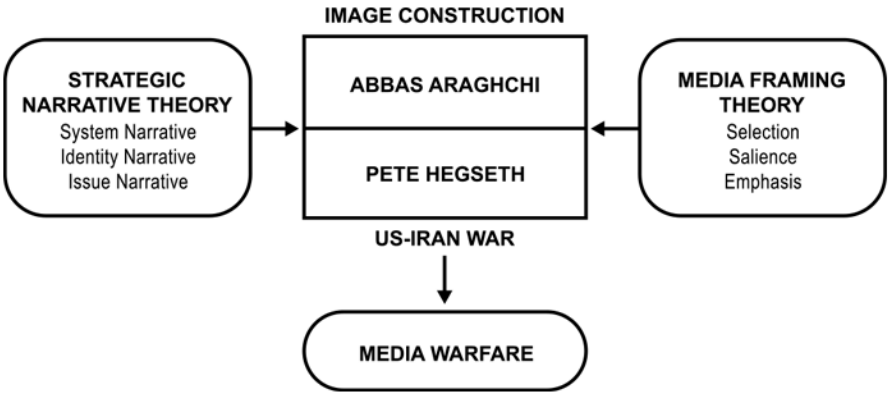


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework of Araghchi and Hegseth's Image Construction

This conceptual framework argues that the public images of Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth during the US–Iran War are formed by both strategic narratives and media framing. Strategic Narrative Theory helps explain how system, identity and issue narratives communicate broader meanings, define the conflict and shape how actors and events are understood [25]. At the same time, Media Framing Theory explains how media organisations select and highlight parts of these narratives, thereby influencing audience perceptions of each actor [46]. Through the selection and emphasis of specific details, the media construct the public images of Araghchi and Hegseth within the context of the conflict [47]. The framework indicates that image construction depends not only on the actors' own communication but also on media institutions' framing and dissemination of different narratives to the public [42].

Expanding on the link between strategic narratives and media framing, this conceptual framework indicates that media warfare happens through the way public images of Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth are built and challenged during the US–Iran War. Strategic narratives carry the main messages that both actors use to express their national positions, identities and views on the conflict [21]. Media framing then determines the selection, emphasis, and presentation of messages to the public. This process lets media organisations shape which narratives stand out, turning both actors into symbols of larger geopolitical goals [48]. As a result, building these images becomes a means of influencing credibility, legitimacy and public opinion. Positive media reporting can build trust and support for a state, while negative coverage can reduce confidence and legitimacy [49]. Thus, media warfare involves not only the dissemination of information but also active competition to shape public understanding and interpretation of the conflict.

3.0 Methodological Approach

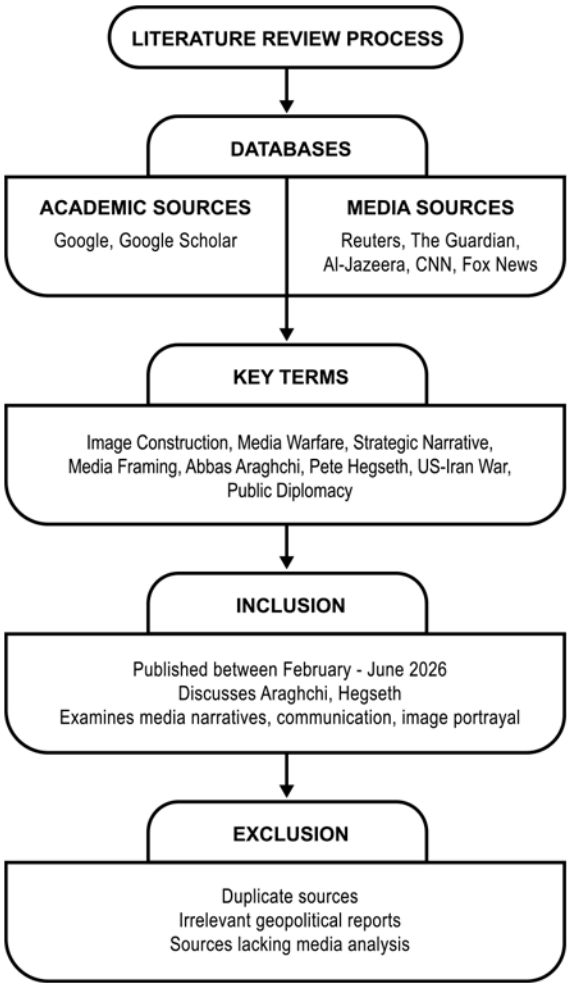


Figure 4. Narrative Review Process

Image construction of Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth during the US–Iran War reveal much about the intersection of media, politics and perception. This study employs a narrative review process to integrate academic literature and media sources to systematically identify, select, evaluate and synthesise evidence on their representation in this conflict. The review began by recognising relevant databases and media platforms, then by developing key search terms for image construction, media warfare, strategic narratives, media framing and public diplomacy. Sources were screened using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure they aligned with the research focus [50]. The selected materials were organised and analysed by themes to reveal common patterns, representations and narratives involving both war figures. Finally, the findings were brought together and interpreted using the chosen frameworks. This process helped build a clear understanding of how media coverage formed their images against the landscape of modern media warfare.

To select sources, the study conducted a focused search of academic and media reports to capture scholarly views and real-world portrayals of the US–Iran War. Academic sources were identified in Google and Google Scholar using keywords related to image construction, media warfare, strategic narratives, media framing and public diplomacy. In order to investigate the dominant portrayals of Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth, media reports were gathered from major international news outlets, including Reuters, The Guardian, Al Jazeera, CNN and Fox News. These outlets were chosen for their wide coverage of international events and their effect on global public opinion. By integrating academic studies and media reports, the review could examine both theoretical and conceptual ideas and practical examples, offering a broader picture of how political images and competing stories were framed and shared during the conflict [51].

The inclusion criteria for this narrative review encompassed academic publications and media reports published between February and June 2026 that addressed the US–Iran War, media narratives, strategic communication, image construction, media framing and public diplomacy related to Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth. Sources were required to provide a substantive analysis of communication strategies, public representation and media portrayals pertaining to the conflict [52]. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria removed duplicate records, sources unrelated to the US–Iran conflict, opinion-based articles lacking empirical evidence and sources that made no reference to either Araghchi or Hegseth. This process ensured that only relevant and useful sources were included in the final review.

4.0 Discussion

TABLE 1:
Comparative Analysis of Araghchi and Hegseth

	Framing Dimension	**Abbas Araghchi**	**Pete Hegseth**
1.	Core Identity	Diplomat	Warrior
2.	Narrative	Resistance	Deterrence
3.	Legitimacy Source	Sovereignty	Security
4.	Emotional Appeal	Resilience	Strength
5.	Symbolism	Diplomacy	Military Power
6.	Communication Style	Negotiation	Assertiveness

The US–Iran War reveals two distinct portrayals of public figures, each aligned with broader narratives of diplomacy and deterrence. Abbas Araghchi is framed as a diplomat who stands for resistance, sovereignty and resilience, portraying Iran as a nation defending its rights and independence through negotiation and patience [16]. In a report titled "Iran's Top Diplomat Says Nation's Power Lies in Defying Pressure: 'No to the Great Powers'", Fox News [53] describes Araghchi's focus on diplomacy and negotiation as a way of building political legitimacy based on international engagement, national sovereignty and Iran's sovereign principles [54]. By contrast, Pete Hegseth is presented as a warrior, stressing deterrence, security and strength, thus framing the United States as a stabilising force ready to take decisive action to ensure security [55]. Hegseth's association with military power and a direct communication style strengthens a narrative in which legitimacy derives from the capacity to protect and respond to threats [56]. These opposing images demonstrate the different strategies at work in the conflict: Araghchi stands for diplomatic resistance and sovereign legitimacy, while Hegseth represents military strength and authority based on security. Hence, portrayals of public figures can shape media narratives, transforming individuals into symbols that embody their countries' interests, values and approaches to conflict management [57].

4.1 Abbas Araghchi's Image Construction in Media Warfare

CNN's coverage of possible US–Iran negotiations persistently portrays Abbas Araghchi as a diplomat focused on communication, negotiation and conflict management during tense times between Iran and the United States The article describes Araghchi as Iran's main diplomatic representative, conveying Iran's position by official channels and political discussions rather than military threats [58]. By focusing on negotiations and diplomatic contacts, the report links Araghchi to pragmatic problem-solving and global diplomacy [30]. It is noted that he uses careful language and gives thoughtful answers, which reinforces the image of a skilled negotiator capable of dealing with complicated international issues. By emphasising diplomatic exchanges and dialogue, Araghchi is presented as a mediator between different interests and this underlines diplomacy as his main asset. In summary, the media depicts Araghchi as a calm and experienced diplomat who prefers negotiation and strategic engagement to confrontation.

Fox News builds on this diplomatic image by showing Araghchi as someone who defends Iranian sovereignty, focusing more on defending national interests than on negotiation [38]. The coverage highlights Araghchi's strong rejection of outside pressure and devotion to keeping Iran independent during mounting tensions with the United States and Israel [59]. By asserting Iran's right to control its own security and foreign policy, Araghchi is portrayed as a political leader who works to protect the

country's borders and push back against external influence. Araghchi maintains a careful communication style but is also shown to be firm and unwilling to compromise on national sovereignty. This view expands Araghchi's image beyond just a diplomat, making Araghchi a main spokesperson for Iran's resistance to outside control and a defender of the country's authority in a high-stakes region [30].

Al Jazeera's interview reinforces this image by presenting Araghchi as a leading voice for Iran's views on the world stage By calling the conflict "America's war," [13], Araghchi presents Iran as reacting to outside involvement and regional unrest, not as the aggressor [60]. The interview allows Araghchi to challenge other viewpoints and explain Iran's actions by drawing on national interests, international law, and regional security. Araghchi's calm and clear way of speaking strengthens Araghchi's status as a skilled and thoughtful diplomat [61]. By sharing Iran's concerns and policies, Araghchi appears as a strong representative of the Iranian government. Collectively, CNN, Fox News and Al Jazeera construct a unified portrayal of Araghchi as a diplomat, a defender of sovereignty and an international spokesperson, showing how different media shape Iranian leadership's public image during the US–Iran crisis [42].

4.2 The Construction of Pete Hegseth's Wartime Image

Reuters depicts Pete Hegseth as a warrior, highlighting his determination, perseverance and firm dedication to American objectives in the context of the conflict between the US and Iran. The media frames Hegseth as a firm defender of national security who values strength, consistency and determination by quoting him as saying that US goals "have not changed" [50]. It links Hegseth to a deterrence-based policy and states that military capability and operational readiness are essential to protect American interests and emerging threats. A direct, firm communication style further reinforces an image of confidence and leadership. Through its focus on military readiness and determination, the report presents Hegseth as a political figure who is concerned with security and power and willing to use military force when it is considered necessary.

The Guardian [62] extends this warrior image by showing Pete Hegseth as strong and assertive, highlighting his support for bold action and his strong belief in the United States' capacity to achieve its aims against Iran. The article depicts Hegseth as a political figure who backs a vigorous and decisive approach to conflict by referring to the claim that the Trump administration is 'finishing the war'. The way it frames Hegseth links him with confidence, determination and the display of power, thus reinforcing a leadership approach which places a priority on certain outcomes rather than on extended negotiations. His straightforward, unambiguous communication also signals clear American intent. This depiction enhances the image of Hegseth as a confident advocate of security who bases his position on military strength and a firm dedication to national objectives.

Fox News reinforces this image by portraying Pete Hegseth as a crisis communicator amid military escalation. Rather than focusing only on supporting military action, the report stresses the importance of informing the public, setting expectations and maintaining confidence amid uncertainty. By stating that further casualties might take place during Operation Epic Fury, Hegseth is shown as a leader who is open about the risks involved in the conflict [22]. The message underlines preparedness, situational awareness and strategic clarity, thereby giving the impression of authority and control in a rapidly changing situation. The article also points out his ability to explain military developments and strategic objectives, thus constructing the image of Hegseth as a capable leader in difficult circumstances. Reports from Reuters, The Guardian and Fox News together create a complex picture of Hegseth as a warrior, an assertive security advocate and a crisis communicator. This analysis shows how different media organisations shape public opinions during the US–Iran conflict.

5.0 Conclusion

The framing analysis points out that Abbas Araghchi and Pete Hegseth were constructed by the media as symbolic representatives of opposing geopolitical narratives during the US–Iran conflict [21]. Araghchi was consistently framed in terms of diplomacy, sovereignty, and strategic communication, presenting him as a negotiator, defender of national interests, and spokesperson for Iran on the global stage. By contrast, Hegseth was depicted through themes of military resolve, deterrence, strength and

crisis leadership, showing a security-oriented approach to conflict management. These portrayals extended beyond private characteristics to embody wider national narratives: Araghchi represented diplomatic resistance and sovereign autonomy, while Hegseth symbolised military power and strategic deterrence. Both figures thus emerged as visible embodiments of their respective states' strategic narratives within information warfare.

Extending these competing image constructions, the findings show that media representations of Araghchi and Hegseth operated as strategic instruments of influence, rather than simple reflections of personal communication styles or leadership traits [63]. Through selective framing and narrative construction, Araghchi was positioned as the embodiment of diplomacy, sovereignty and political resilience, whereas Hegseth was depicted as a symbol of defence readiness, strategic resilience and crisis coordination. These representations moulded public perceptions of the individuals and advanced the strategic objectives and policy positions of their respective states. As a result, image construction functioned as a mechanism for communicating, contesting and legitimising national interests before domestic and international audiences, underscoring the media's active role in narrative competition.

Collectively, the findings show that media warfare increasingly depends on image construction and digital storytelling to shape public perceptions of the US–Iran conflict and influence interpretations of its causes, actors and consequences [3]. Through framing and narrative dissemination, media organisations transformed Araghchi and Hegseth into influential political actors whose images conveyed broader geopolitical messages and strategically oriented objectives. These portrayals illustrate that contemporary conflicts are contested through perceptions, in which visibility, credibility and symbolic representation are critical sources of influence. Thus, image construction and digital messaging have become central instruments of media warfare, enabling states and political actors to shape legitimacy, influence audiences and project strategic discourse within an interconnected information ecosystem.

6.0 References

[1] Al Jazeera. (2026, February 20). *Iran says US military build-up "unnecessary and unhelpful", deal achievable.* https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/20/iran-says-us-military-build-up-unnecessary-and-unhelpful-deal-achievable

[2] Reuters. (2026, February 26). *Iran's Araqchi aims to reprise role as nuclear dealmaker.* https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-araqchi-aims-reprise-role-nuclear-dealmaker-2026-02-26/

[3] Yarchi, M. (2025). Strategic narratives as an image war tool. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy.* https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-025-00418-0

[4] Aaldering, L., & Vliegenthart, R. (2016). Political leaders and the media: Can we measure political leadership images in newspapers using computer-assisted content analysis? *Quality & Quantity, 50,* 1871–1905. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-015-0242-9

[5] U.S. Department of Defense. (2025, April 24). *Defense officials outline AI's strategic role in national security.* https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/4165279/defense-officials-outline-ais-strategic-role-in-national-security/

[6] The Times of India. (2026, June 26). *The battle beyond the battlefield: Narrative warfare and mind games in the US-Iran conflict.* https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/defence/international/the-battle-beyond-the-battlefield-narrative-warfare-and-mind-games-in-the-us-iran-conflict/articleshow/129864598.cms

[7] Lalancette, M., & Raynauld, V. (2019). The power of political image: Justin Trudeau, Instagram, and celebrity politics. *American Behavioral Scientist, 63*(7), 888–924. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217744838

[8] Klenk, E., & Gurol, J. (2024). The role of narratives for gaining domestic political legitimacy: China's image management during COVID-19. *Journal of Chinese Political Science, 29,* 201–224. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-023-09865-z

[9] Luebke, S. M., & Engelmann, I. (2023). Perceiving politicians as true to themselves: Development and validation of the perceived political authenticity scale. *PLOS ONE, 18*(5), e0285344. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0285344

[10] Semande, F. (2023). Political public relations and image management. *Journal of Public Relations, 2*(1), 38–49. https://doi.org/10.47941/jpr.1697
[11] Hartley, J. (2023). Strategic stories: Weaponized or worldmaking? *Global Media and China, 8*(1), 72–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364231153200
[12] Dellmuth, L. M., & Tallberg, J. (2021). Elite communication and the popular legitimacy of international organizations. *British Journal of Political Science, 51*(3), 1292–1313. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123419000620
[13] Al Jazeera. (2026, March 18). *'This is America's war': Iran's Foreign Minister Araghchi.* https://www.aljazeera.com/video/talk-to-al-jazeera/2026/3/18/this-is-americas-war-irans-foreign-minister-araghchi
[14] Reuters. (2026, March 19). *US objectives in Iran have not changed, Hegseth says.* https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-objectives-iran-have-not-changed-hegseth-says-2026-03-19/
[15] Hansson, S., & DePaula, N. (2025). Government communication on social media: Research foci, domains, and future directions. *Media and Communication, 13,* Article 10697. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10697
[16] Mehboob, M. A., Raza, A., & Ali, M. (2026). The mediating role of media in shaping public opinion against war: A conceptual analysis of agenda-setting and propaganda in the context of Iran–US conflict. *Journal of Media Horizons, 7*(6), 81–84. https://jmhorizons.com/index.php/journal/article/view/1616?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[17] Saari, D., Häkkinen, T., & Moilanen, P. (2024). A comprehensive analysis of narratives within NATO's doctrines. In M. Lehto & M. Karjalainen (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 23rd European Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security* (Vol. 23, pp. 744–751). Academic Conferences International. https://doi.org/10.34190/eccws.23.1.2240
[18] Freedman, L., & Williams, H. (2021). US–Iran, 2020: Changing the narrative: Information campaigns, strategy and crisis escalation in the digital age. *The Adelphi Series, 61*(493–495), 61–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/19445571.2021.2260268
[19] CNN. (2026, February 1). *Iran's top diplomat hopeful for negotiations even amid US military buildup.* https://edition.cnn.com/2026/02/01/middleeast/iran-diplomat-araghchi-interview-intl
[20] Türkcan, M. L. (2019). *The (in)effectiveness of coercive diplomacy: The US maximum pressure campaign on Iran.* TRT World Research Centre. https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/publications/report/the-ineffectiveness-of-coercive-diplomacy-the-us-maximum-pressure-campaign-on-iran/
[21] Norton, K., & Cooley, A. (2025). A comparative analysis of strategic narratives and persuasive language techniques within Iranian and US news media: The study of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. *Media, War & Conflict, 18*(1), 82–102. https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352241249065
[22] Fox News. (2026). *Pete Hegseth criticizes "fake news" coverage of Iran strikes, says only tragedies make front page.* https://www.foxnews.com/media/pete-hegseth-criticizes-fake-news-coverage-iran-strikes-says-only-tragedies-make-front-page
[23] The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (2023, April 24). *Iran's military drone program: Security implications and policy responses.* https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-military-drone-program-security-implications-and-policy-responses
[24] Samuel, A. T. (2025). Conjuring an enemy: US discourse and policy on Iran, 1979–88. *Middle East Policy, 32*(2). https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12793
[25] Miskimmon, A., & O'Loughlin, B. (2026). Strategic narrative: Its origins and evolution, its connection to public diplomacy, and some future paths. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy,* 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-025-00426-0
[26] Citrawijaya, O. R., Susanto, B. K., & Amalia, D. A. (2024). The role of communication strategies in crisis management: A comparative analysis across industries. *The Journal of Academic Science, 1*(6), 748–761. https://doi.org/10.59613/cej49p88
[27] Goldsmith, B. E., Horiuchi, Y., & Matush, K. (2021). Does public diplomacy sway foreign public opinion? Identifying the effect of high-level visits. *American Political Science Review, 115*(4), 1342–1357. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000393

[28] Manfredi-Sánchez, J.-L., & Smith, N. R. (2023). Public diplomacy in an age of perpetual crisis: Assessing the EU's strategic narratives through six crises. *Journal of Communication Management, 27*(2), 241–258. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-04-2022-0037

[29] Bjola, C., & Fjällhed, A. (2025). Public diplomacy in the crossfire: Decoding Ukraine's 'Strategic Self' during wartime. *International Affairs, 101*(6), 2059–2083. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaf179

[30] Aslam, S., Latif, F., & Irfan, H. (2026). A critical discourse analysis of strategic ambiguity in Abbas Araghchi's speeches as Iranian Foreign Minister. *Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works, 4*(1), 723–732. https://doi.org/10.71145/rjsp.v4i1.565

[31] The Guardian. (2026, June 22). *Iran says US talks could progress if further attacks avoided as Pakistan, Qatar and Lebanon condemn Israeli strikes.* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/22/iran-us-talks-progress-pakistan-qatar-lebanon-israel

[32] Council on Foreign Relations. (2026, March 12). *The Strait of Hormuz: A U.S.-Iran maritime flash point.* https://www.cfr.org/articles/strait-hormuz-us-iran-maritime-flash-point

[33] Divsallar, A. (2022). Shifting threats and strategic adjustment in Iran's foreign policy: The case of Strait of Hormuz. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 49*(5), 873–895. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1874873

[34] The Guardian. (2026, March 8). *'A very dangerous person': Alarm as Pete Hegseth revels in carnage of Iran war.* https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/mar/08/pete-hegseth-pentagon-trump-iran

[35] Gigliotti, R. A., & Alvarez-Robinson, S. (2025). The role of leadership communication in building crisis readiness and resilient leadership in times of disruption: An exploratory study. *Behavioral Sciences, 15*(9), 1260. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15091260

[35] Reuters. (2026, June 6). *US strikes Iranian sites after Iran launches drones in latest Gulf flare-up.* Defense News. https://www.defensenews.com/flashpoints/middle-east/2026/06/06/us-strikes-iranian-sites-after-iran-launches-drones-in-latest-gulf-flare-up/

[37] Brams, S. J., & Kilgour, D. M. (2014). Threat escalation and crisis stability: A game-theoretic analysis. *American Political Science Review, 108*(3), 551–565. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000300

[38] Fox News. (2026, March 9). *Hegseth warns "more casualties" expected in Operation Epic Fury against Iran.* https://www.foxnews.com/world/hegseth-warns-more-casualties-expected-operation-epic-fury-against-iran

[39] Al Jazeera. (2026, March 4). *Hegseth says more US forces arriving in Middle East as Iran war ramps up.* https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/4/hegseth-says-more-us-forces-arriving-in-middle-east-as-iran-war-ramps-up

[40] U.S. Department of War. (2026, May 5). *Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine hold a press briefing.* https://www.war.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4478065/

[41] Luebke, S. M. (2021). Political authenticity: Conceptualization of a popular term. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 26*(3), 635–653. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220948013

[42] Putri, N. S., Rizaldi, F., Simatupang, F. A., Nailah, I. A., & Natsir, M. (2026). Critical discourse analysis of international media framing of the Iran–United States conflict. *International Journal of Education and Literature, 5*(1), 180–188. https://doi.org/10.55606/ijel.v5i1.362

[43] de Vreese, C. H., & Lecheler, S. (2016). Framing theory. In G. Mazzoleni (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of political communication*. Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc121

[44] Hänggli, R. (2012). Key factors in frame building: How strategic political actors shape news media coverage. *American Behavioral Scientist, 56*(3), 300–317. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211426327

[45] Scheufele, D. A. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication, 49*(1), 103–122. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02784.x

[46] Zaklama, S. (2025). Exploring the foundations of media framing theory. *European Modern Studies Journal, 9*(1), 75–89. https://doi.org/10.59573/emsj.9(1).2025.7

[47] Azhari, A., Sunusi, S. L., Sudding, M. F., Musdalifah, M., & Sembiring, S. A. (2026). Framing analysis of Iran–United States conflict news coverage. *ELT Worldwide: Journal of English Language Teaching, 13*(1). https://doi.org/10.26858/eltww.v13i1.83973

[48] Acquaful, J. B. (2024). Framing geopolitical crises: A comparative study of U.S. and Middle Eastern media narratives, bias, and influence. *International ResearchScape Journal, 9,* Article 6. https://doi.org/10.25035/irj.09.01.06

[49] Zoizner, A. (2021). The consequences of strategic news coverage for democracy: A meta-analysis. *Communication Research, 48*(1), 3–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218808691

[50] Sukhera, J. (2022). Narrative reviews: Flexible, rigorous, and practical. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education, 14*(4), 414–417. https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-22-00480.1

[51] Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research, 104,* 333–339. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

[52] Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J. M., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S. E., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J. M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E. W., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S., … Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ, 372,* n71. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71

[53] Fox News. (2026, February 8). *Iran's top diplomat says nation's power lies in defying pressure: 'No to the great powers'.* https://www.foxnews.com/world/irans-top-diplomat-says-nations-power-lies-defying-pressure-no-great-powers

[54] Fox News. (2026, May 4). *Trump, Iran war, Hormuz Strait.* https://www.foxnews.com/live-news/trump-iran-war-hormuz-strait-may-4

[55] The Guardian. (2026, April 16). *Pete Hegseth says US strikes on Iran energy infrastructure are under consideration.* https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/apr/16/pete-hegseth-iran-energy-infrastructure

[56] CNN. (2026, March 24). *US-Israel-Iran Middle East war day 26: What we know.* https://edition.cnn.com/2026/03/24/middleeast/us-israel-iran-middle-east-war-day-26-what-we-know-intl-hnk

[57] Gözkaman, A. (2025). From discourse to legitimacy: Narratives as instruments of influence in international relations. *Global Discourse, 15*(4), 264–280. https://doi.org/10.1332/20437897Y2025D000000081

[58] CNN. (2026, February 1). Iran diplomat Araghchi interview. https://edition.cnn.com/2026/02/01/middleeast/iran-diplomat-araghchi-interview-intl

[59] Jasim, A. M., & Hussein, M. M. (2025). Wartime diplomacy in conflict zones: A discourse analysis of Abbas Araghchi's statements during the 2025 Iran–Israel War. *Humanities & Natural Sciences Journal, 6*(9). https://doi.org/10.53796/hnsj69/35

[60] Azran, T. (2004). Resisting peripheral exports: Al Jazeera's war images on US television. *Media International Australia, 113*(1), 75–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0411300110

[61] Al Jazeera. (2026, February 28). *Live: Israel launches attacks on Iran, multiple explosions heard in Tehran.* https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2026/2/28/live-israel-launches-attacks-on-iran-multiple-explosions-heard-in-tehran

[62] The Guardian. (2026, March 2). *Pete Hegseth claims Donald Trump is 'finishing' war with Iran.* https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2026/mar/02/pete-hegseth-donald-trump-finishing-war-with-iran-video

[63] Capano, G., Galanti, M. T., & Barbato, G. (2023). When the political leader is the narrator: The political and policy dimensions of narratives. *Policy Sciences, 56*(2), 233–265. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-023-09505-6