

Language as Weapon: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Othering in Trump's US-Iran War Discourse

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Abstract

This research explores the systematic establishment of the Iranian regime as a threatening and illegitimate 'Other' in the wartime speeches of the U.S. president and the concurrent portrayal of the U.S. as a righteous nation which God has blessed to uphold the world order. This study adopts mixed-methods design, by using qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis and quantitative word-frequency analysis and is based on a corpus of 7,266 words across four speech genres and based on Van Dijk's (2006) Ideological Square. The analysis reveals four phases in the process of othering: triumphant, threatening, trivializing and absolute, which mirror the increasing military aspects of the conflict. The amount of negative labelling of the out-group rose by approximately five times, from 1.11% to 5.62%, and the dehumanizing expressions grew by nearly ten times throughout the corpus. The study also defines a new legitimizing process 'the liberation narrative' that has not been studied extensively in this regard, which is a way of discursively redefining military aggression as 'humanitarian intervention'. The main contribution of this research is the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to Trump's Iran-war discourse in a diachronic approach, rather than a synchronic one, and extending Van Dijk's framework for synchronic analysis to the diachronic one. A critical discourse analysis of wartime discourse reveals that the Othering process is part of how one constructs an in-group in a political discourse. The critical discourse analysis approach shows the Othering process is one of the ways in which an in-group is constructed in a political discourse during wartime.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideological Square, Othering, wartime rhetoric, in-group and out-group construction, political discourse, legitimization

1. Introduction

On 21 June 2025, Donald Trump stood in front of television screens and revealed that the United States military had obliterated the nuclear facilities in Iran. He did not frame the strikes as a geopolitical move but rather see himself as a moral player. Iran was termed as

‘the bully of the Middle East’ and the American pilots and their ‘magnificent machines’ were hailed as ‘great patriots’. Nine months later he called the Iranian regime ‘the most violent and thuggish regime on earth’ and compared it to ‘the cancer’ that had been ‘cut out’. As the conflict escalated, so did the arguments about it.

The present study is grounded in the premise that no language used in Trump's Iran-war speeches (2025–2026) is ideologically neutral. Every lexical choice, every label, and every constructed expression contributes to the formation of a particular ideological narrative that frames war not only as a feasible course of action but also as a morally legitimate one. As Chilton (2004) argues, language does far more than merely report events; it rationalizes violence, constructs enemies, and mobilizes public support. In this sense, words do not simply follow war; they precede, justify, and enable it.

Political warfare is fought by the use of words as well as weapons. The job Discourse does is to make the enemy, elevate the self, and reframe violence as a moral duty before the first shot is fired. The process ‘Othering’ is at the core of this study. This study analyzes four speeches made by Trump about Iran's war through the prism of Van Dijk's (2006) ‘Ideological Square’ and investigates how Trump's rhetoric in these speeches defined the Iranian regime as irrational, threatening, and illegitimate Other, and the U.S. as a rightful, god-sent custodian of the global order.

Substantial evidence in the literature supports this perspective on political framing. Van Dijk (2006) argues that political discourse is not merely a means of conveying information; rather, it serves to construct ideology, reinforce in-group and out-group identities, and legitimize the use of force as both ethical and necessary. The instrumentalization of *war discourse* is often achieved through sharp binary oppositions, such as *war* versus *peace*, *oppression* versus *freedom*, and *violence* versus *non-violence*, thereby marginalizing or excluding alternative perspectives (Oddo, 2011; Molodychenko, 2019). Likewise, Degaf and Ashfiya (2025) demonstrate that presidential wartime rhetoric was reinforced through religious narratives and the deliberate omission of civilian casualties to justify military action. Building on this body of research, the present study extends the analysis beyond a single speech or isolated event by examining four speeches delivered over a ten-month period of conflict, thereby providing a broader understanding of the ideological construction and legitimization of war in presidential discourse.

Trump's characterization of Iran as a “*wicked dictatorship*” or a “*thuggish regime*” is not unusual for a political leader advocating military action. However, it would be misleading to regard such labels as merely descriptive. As Van Dijk (2006) argues, language does not simply reflect reality; it actively constructs it. Labels such as “*fanatical*,” “*murderous*,” and “*cancer*” are not objective descriptions of a government but ideological constructions that shape public perceptions and political realities. By

portraying Iran through these pejorative representations, such discourse influences public opinion, narrows the space for diplomatic alternatives, and facilitates public consent for military intervention. Consequently, these linguistic choices have material as well as symbolic consequences. Wartime rhetoric is far from harmless; the US–Iran conflict resulted in substantial civilian casualties, including the reported deaths of more than 100 children in an airstrike on a school in Minab, Iran (Amnesty International, 2026). In this context, language is not merely symbolic; it has tangible political and human consequences.

The present study makes four original contributions to the existing literature. First, it offers the first systematic Critical Discourse Analysis of Trump's rhetoric throughout the US–Iran conflict, rather than examining a single speech or isolated communicative event. Second, it investigates four speeches representing different communicative genres, a formal address, a video statement, a press conference, and a prime-time address, thereby demonstrating the multi-generic nature of Trump's wartime discourse (Moustafa, 2021; Degaf & Ashfiya, 2025). Third, it traces the evolution of Trump's strategy of othering, documenting a shift from triumphant othering in June 2025 to absolute othering in April 2026. Finally, it deconstructs the liberation narrative through which Trump seeks to separate the Iranian people from the Iranian regime. This narrative of *freedom* constitutes a previously underexplored discursive strategy that legitimizes military aggression by framing it as a humanitarian mission of liberation.

Methodologically, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach by integrating qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis with quantitative lexical frequency analysis. The analysis is based on a purpose-built corpus comprising 7,266 words drawn from four official transcripts of Trump's speeches on the US–Iran conflict.

2. Literature Review

Language is inherently meaningful. Politically, it serves to help construct reality, give justification to violence, and gain public approval. The basic tenet of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is that language is a place of ideological struggle, rather than an object of information-sharing. Power relations (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993) are produced, normalized and contested in discourse, and this is particularly evident during wartime. In these contexts, discourse is not just about events; it legitimizes violence, builds enemies, and helps to create public support (Chilton, 2004). The term 'war talk' has been coined by scholars to refer to the ways in which war is 'necessary', 'just' or 'defensive' framed. It is a form of framing that reduces complex geopolitical realities to binary good versus bad narratives, creates a space for silencing alternative narratives, and builds domestic political support (Degaf & Ashfiya, 2025; Oddo, 2011). The political discourse can also serve as a tool of the elite, as Van Dijk (2006) claims, because the careful use of certain

words embellishes the political discourse and brings it into the realm of the normal. A three-dimensional model, developed by Fairclough (1995), sees individual speech acts as part of systems of power and involves three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. These frameworks all indicate that CDA is not only concerned with the structure of discourse, it is also interested in the relationship between discourse, power and consequence. When applied to Trump's rhetoric, the framework becomes very illuminating. AlBzour and Saadeen (2022) analyzed the five post-election speeches and identified that the enemy construction was the most significant one, with regard to discourse instances, as it covered 69.21% of the speeches. Together, these studies reveal that Trump's rhetoric is less of a political styling and more of an ideology in its own right, and one that influences millions of listeners' perception of political reality.

2.1 The Ideological Square and Political Others

The concept of 'othering' in discourse analysis is one of the areas that the Ideological Square (Van Dijk, 2006) continues to provide incisive analytical tools to explore. The basic idea is that political rhetoric highlights the good things about the in-group, or 'us', whilst denigrating the out-group, or 'them', and that positive qualities of the out-group and negative qualities of the in-group are not highlighted. This creates a binary opposition of 'self' and 'other' (Rashidi & Souzandehfar, 2010), where the former is good and the latter is bad. The effect of this is that the speaker's group is presented as good and the other group as threatening, even if their behaviour is not necessarily good or threatening, but is made so through the speech. This is especially true of Trump's rhetoric about Iran. Fairclough and Van Dijk (2021) use the Ideological Square to analyze how Trump's rhetoric about Iran (2019–2020) created the language and frame of Iran as irrational and dangerous, and how this preceded further military escalation. Several discursive tools are operative in Trump's June 2025 speech on Iran that mobilize the Ideological Square in wartime discourse, such as actor description, metaphor, exaggeration, euphemism, victimization and divine legitimization, are identified by Degaf and Ashfiya (2025). The most salient of their conclusions is that military action is not just reported; it is moralized, portrayed as a sacred duty and moral duty. Similarly, Molodychenko (2019) shows that Trump's 'us versus them' rhetoric creates a legitimate basis for animosity towards outsiders, including his rhetoric regarding Iran. These studies span the following explicit labelling, and calls to divine sanction can be traced back to the work of the Ideological Square.

2.2 Othering Iran: From Orientalism to War

Trump's claims of Iran's threat to the world are not unprecedented; they are part of a larger discursive history of making Iran into a threat. Said (1978) situates this tradition in the longstanding Western conversation of Orientalism, which has defined the East as

inferior, backward, irrational, and violent. The same is true regarding the successive generations of US involvement in the Middle East. The Western (Orientalist) discourse often characterizes Iran as irrational and barbaric, making the US measures, including sanctions and unilateral military intervention, legitimate (Balkan-Sahin, 2020). Adrang and Faraji (2021) provide evidence that Trump intentionally used labels like 'Iranian Regime' to foster 'Iranophobia' and Al-Rikaby, Naser, and Tan (2021) illustrate how Trump used a 'language of fear' to suggest Iran as the 'existential threat'. To put it directly, this is an Orientalist pattern, as identified by Mirza (2026) who says that Trump's 'Stone Age' language is indicative of a colonial mentality. In this tradition, Iran is not just a political rival but a threat that must be dealt with and ultimately destroyed. This trend is exacerbated by Trump's rhetoric during the Iran war. While the US used to talk about managing Iran as a threat, Trump talks about destroying Iran, calling it 'cancer', 'thuggish regime', and 'wicked dictatorship' that must be eliminated before it can 'destroy civilization'. This rhetoric was backed by material costs, and documented civilian casualties, such as an airstrike on a school in the town of Minab which killed over 100 children (Human Rights Watch, 2026; Amnesty International, 2026). These events are not unrelated to Trump's rhetoric of "othering." Van Dijk (2006) says that discourse is not only a representation of war but also a making of war possible and morally necessary.

2.3 War Talk, Legitimization, and the Liberation Narrative

Another important aspect has to do with the discursive legitimization of war. There are two main strategies used by 'war talk': Make the enemy of the state a threat and redefine military action as protective (Oddo, 2011). The 'hero-protector' is a central theme in Trump's rhetoric, in which military force is depicted as a noble defense (Elnakkouzi, 2023). This is to make soldiers into symbols of the nation and situate the leader as the supreme savior. Trump's Iran-war speeches take the form of a 'liberation narrative': in Trump's speeches, he doesn't speak to Iranians as a whole, but he divides the Iranian people and their government, and he sees the Iranian people as helpless victims waiting to be rescued, and the Iranian government as the place where evil resides. In February 2026, he spoke directly to the Iranian people and proclaimed: 'The time of your freedom is now. Such a structure allows him to describe military aggression as a 'rescue' of the nation, an act of devaluation of the government, an act of extolment of the nation, and a description of bombardment as 'rescue'. This is a story that is almost irresponsibly easy to contradict; it's one that can be easily argued against in the name of Iranian freedom. By ignoring the suffering of civilians this story creates a one-sided moral universe," write Degaf and Ashfiya (2025). In addition to Trump, Romaniuk (2026) notes that similar framing tactics were used by U.S. Defense Secretary Hegseth, too, using the same two devices: moral binarization and euphemistic abstraction. This study, however, directly

fills this gap by tracing this liberation narrative from the beginning to the end of four speeches spanning over ten months of conflict.

Although much has been written on Trump's political discourse, several limitations remain. Moustafa (2021) analyzes Trump's discourse pertaining to Iran during the period 2019–2020. However, this period predates the outbreak of the war and, therefore, provides limited insight into how Trump's rhetoric evolved during the actual conflict. The study most closely related to the present research is that of Degaf and Ashfiya (2025), who analyzed Trump's Iran speech of June 2025. However, their analysis is limited to a single speech and relies solely on qualitative analysis without quantitative substantiation. Similarly, Saadeen and AlBzour (2022) employ a multi-speech corpus using both quantitative and qualitative methods; however, their data are drawn from the 2020 U.S. election period rather than wartime discourse on Iran. Consequently, four important gaps remain in the literature:

1. No longitudinal study has tracked Trump's Iran-war rhetoric throughout the escalation phase (2025–2026), from the initial stage to the sustained phase of military operations. Consequently, the evolution of Trump's othering strategies has not been systematically documented.
2. Despite the distinct communicative demands of the four speech genres (televised address, late-night video statement, press conference, and prime-time address), no study has compared these genres to determine whether discursive strategies vary according to speech genre.
3. No study has combined Van Dijk's (2006) Critical Discourse Analysis framework with quantitative word-level analysis in the context of Iranian wartime discourse. As a result, there is insufficient empirical evidence to determine which othering strategies are most dominant.
4. No study has traced the liberation narrative, that is, the discursive separation of the Iranian people from the Iranian regime, across the complete set of four speeches spanning the ten-month conflict. Consequently, this important mechanism for legitimizing military intervention remains underexplored.

The present study is designed to address these four gaps. It provides a new account of Trump's wartime rhetoric and contributes to a deeper understanding of how political discourse facilitates war and legitimizes it as a morally justified course of action.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study is designed as a mixed method which is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative method in the context of critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on the socio-cognitive model of Van Dijk (2006). It offers a close qualitative reading of Trump's wartime speeches on Iran, along with a quantitative word-level analysis. The speeches are illustrative examples of presidential war speeches and should be analyzed for their ability to build the moral momentum and 'us versus them' polarization. Analysis is done in a systematic way by manually coding the sentences one by one within the context of the discourse, and not in the qualitative sense. The qualitative part investigates the detailed pattern of discursive strategies as expressions of the Ideological Square, whereas the quantitative part focuses on the patterns as a whole to confirm the qualitative results.

3.2 Corpus and Data Collection

The corpus includes four official speeches by US President Donald Trump on the issue of US-Iran conflict from 2025 to 2026.

1. National Address after US attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities (21 June 2025)
2. The Regime Change video statement (28 February 2026)
3. Press conference at Trump National Doral, Miami (9 March 2026)
4. The 4th Prime-time address will be on Operation Epic Fury (1st April 2026)

These speeches have been chosen as they covered the entire range of the conflict, from attack to military action. There are a total of 7266 words in the corpus. In Speech 3, any comments made by Trump were analyzed only, without any questions from journalists. Transcripts were provided by ABC News and White House documents, and reviewed via video to evaluate tone, pacing and delivery. News reports and United Nations statements were used for context but not analysed. There were no private data or individuals involved which meant there was no ethical approval required as all data used were in the public domain.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

Analysis was done on two levels (macro and micro) according to Van Dijk (1998, 2006). Before coding, the four transcripts were read a number of times to see if there were any patterns in the building of 'us' and 'them'.

3.3.1 Macro-Level Analysis

The four discursive moves identified by Van Dijk's Ideological Square, emphasizing in-group virtue, emphasizing out-group vice, de-emphasizing out-group vice, and de-emphasizing in-group vice, were identified at the macro level in each speech. The number of times each move is repeated throughout the four speeches is noted in Table 4.

3.3.2 Micro-Level Analysis

The micro-level assessment of the corpus employed six discursive strategies, namely, actor description, lexical variation, victimization and number game, hyperbole and euphemism, divine authorization and historical reference. Instances of each of the strategies were found by applying the analytical criteria from Van Dijk and previous research, and the frequency counts and illustrative examples taken from the data.

3.3.3 Word-Level Quantitative Analysis

All lexical items were placed in one of the following seven categories as shown in Figure 1: out-group negative labels; in-group positive labels; in-group pronouns; out-group pronouns; de-humanizing expressions; historical expressions; divine authorization expressions. Table 2 shows the number of times each category appeared per speech. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of 'othering' terms in each speech compared with the total number of words in each speech, allowing comparisons to be made between speeches and trends over time to be observed. Each speech and for the entire corpus, counts and percentages have been compiled.

3.5 Theoretical Framework

3.5.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA focuses on the interplay of discourse, power and ideology and explores the role of language in the creation and maintenance of social inequalities and relations of power (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993). Whereas previous ways of studying language have only described the structure of a discourse, CDA takes a step further to question the social and political roles that a discourse may have, especially in relation to the construction of dominance.

3.5.2 The Socio-Cognitive Model Developed by Van Dijk

The study is mainly based on the Socio-Cognitive Model developed by Van Dijk. The mental models of people (cognitive schemas that differentiate 'us' and 'them') underlie discourse, which does not directly reflect social structures (Van Dijk, 2009, 1998). This model also takes into account the shared beliefs and understandings that influence the

discourse forms that are produced and accepted in a particular group. In wartime, these common beliefs are used to defend state violence and to gain citizens' approval (Degaf & Ashfiya, 2025). The model is applied in the three interconnected levels: lexical choice, cognition and belief, social power. The construction of 'us versus them' is the primary analytical tool used in the study, and the Ideological Square is the focus.

3.5.3 The Ideological Square

The analytical instrument of the study is Van Dijk's Ideological Square. It shows the four coordinated moves of discourse, in-group emphasis, out-group emphasis, de-emphasis, and de-emphasis that make up a positive 'us' and a negative 'them.' (Van Dijk, 2000). This is part of Trump's speeches about Iran, which helps him demonize Iran as a threat and portray the USA as a righteous protector. Each of these four moves is achieved with certain rhetorical tactics: glorification ("our good"), dehumanization and "victimization" ("their bad"), trivialization and euphemism ("our bad"), and the suppression of the virtue of the out-group ("their good").

3.5.4 Discursive Strategies and Othering

Van Dijk (1993) identifies a range of discursive strategies through which *othering*, the representation of a group as different, inferior, or dangerous (Said, 1978; Van Dijk, 2000), is accomplished. The present study focuses on the following strategies as they manifest in Trump's discourse:

- **Polarization:** The construction of sharp moral distinctions between "*us*" and "*them*."
- **Victimization:** Representing the in-group as being harmed by the out-group.
- **Dehumanization:** Representing the out-group as less than human.
- **Legitimization:** Morally justifying in-group actions through appeals to ethics, law, or religion.
- **Glorification:** Praising the actions of the in-group.
- **Trivialization:** Representing the out-group as weak or insignificant.
- **Historical Reference:** Invoking past events to characterize the out-group negatively.

3.6 Relevance to the Present Study

Van Dijk's model is very well suited for analyzing Trump's Iran-war speeches and, in particular, the Ideological Square and the related discursive strategies. First, it is important to note that these speeches are clearly political and ideologically charged, and therefore good places to look at the building of 'us versus them'. Secondly, the

framework can be used for analysis at macro level, which is the broad ideological structure, and at micro level, which is specific lexical choice. Third, othering is directly related to this study's main research question about the discursive construction of Iran as a dangerous and illegitimate actor. Finally, the model is flexible enough to permit a mixed method design as there are clear indicators that can be studied qualitatively (e.g., negative labelling, intensified adjectives), but can also be measured quantitatively.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative patterns in Trump's Iran-war speeches reveal ideological structure as clearly as the language itself. Prior to the qualitative analysis of discursive strategies and ideological polarization, this section presents the corpus's quantitative findings across three components: corpus overview, raw frequency counts, and percentage distribution.

4.2 Corpus Overview

The corpus consists of four official speeches given by Donald Trump, covering the entire spectrum of the conflict, from announcing nuclear strikes to a prime-time address one month into a long campaign. The total number of words in the corpus is 7,266, with four speech genres, as listed in Table 1. There is no analysis of journalists' questions, because they are not a part of Trump's discourse, only his responses in the form of a press conference are analyzed.

Table 1

Speech Corpus Overview

Speech	Date	Genre	Total Words
Speech 1	21 June 2025	Formal Address	523
Speech 2	28 Feb 2026	Video Statement	1088
Speech 3	9 March 2026	Press Conference	2846
Speech 4	1 April 2026	Prime Time Address	2829
Total			7266

4.2 Frequency Analysis

Table 2 shows the raw frequencies of the seven lexical categories for the four speeches: out-group negative labels, in-group positive labels, in-group pronouns, out-group pronouns, dehumanizing expressions, historical references, and divine-authorization phrases. These categories were recognised and categorised based on Van Dijk's (2006) analytical framework as shown in Figure 1. The raw frequency count for lexical categories is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Raw Frequency Count of Lexical Categories

Category	Speech 1	Speech 2	Speech 3	Speech 4	Total
Negative Labels	5	24	8	20	57
Positive Labels	12	8	13	6	39
In-group Pronouns	19	56	29	30	134
Out-group Pronouns	19	31	21	23	94
Dehumanizing	1	8	1	7	17
Historical Ref	3	10	4	5	22
Divine Authority	9	8	0	6	23

The frequency data show some distinct patterns. There are 24 occurrences of negative labels in Speech 2 compared with 5 occurrences in Speech 1. In-group pronouns are more frequent in Speech 2 (56 instances) as would be expected in a liberation narrative, where Trump places the United States as the savior of the Iranian people. Of course, the exception here is Divine-authorization language which starts at zero in Speech 3, which seems reasonable given the shift from formal address to a press conference before journalists.

4.3 Percentage Distribution

Raw frequency counts may be misleading if speeches vary significantly in length because the longer the speech, the more words it is likely to contain. Table 3 thus displays the percentage distribution for each category, which is obtained by dividing the number of words in each category by the total number of words in each speech, thus allowing a proportionate comparison of the four speeches.

Table 3

Percentage Distribution of Lexical Categories

Category	Speech 1 %	Speech 2 %	Speech 3 %	Speech 4 %
Negative Labels	1.11	4.33	2.51	5.62
Positive Labels	2.67	1.44	4.08	1.69
In-group Pronouns	4.22	10.11	9.09	8.43
Out-group Pronouns	4.22	5.60	6.58	6.46
Dehumanizing	0.22	1.44	0.31	1.97
Historical Ref	0.67	1.81	1.25	1.40
Divine Authority	2.00	1.44	0.00	1.69

These patterns are further illustrated by the percentage data. The proportion of negative labels increases from 1.11% in Speech 1 to 5.62% in Speech 4, representing a fivefold increase and reflecting the increasing militarization of the conflict. This pattern demonstrates Trump's rhetorical shift from celebrating American achievements to delegitimizing Iran.

Similarly, the proportion of dehumanizing expressions rises from 0.22% in Speech 1 to 1.97% in Speech 4, representing an almost tenfold increase. This category includes highly ideologically charged terms such as "*thuggish*," "*fanatical*," "*murderous*," and "*cancer*." Such language does not merely criticize a government; it strips the targeted group of its humanity and reinforces ideological othering.

The use of in-group pronouns reaches its highest level in Speech 2, in which Trump addresses the Iranian people directly, portraying the United States as "*the people's liberator*" and the Iranian regime as "*the people's oppressor*." By contrast, the use of out-group pronouns increases steadily across all four speeches as the conflict progresses, reflecting the gradual intensification of Iran's construction as an adversarial *Other*.

It is also noteworthy that language of divine authorization is almost absent from Speech 3. Unlike the other speeches, Speech 3, the Doral press conference, contains virtually no references to "*blessing the troops*" or "*sanctifying the mission*." This pattern suggests that Trump's use of religious rhetoric is more characteristic of formal or ceremonial contexts than of press conferences, where he responds to journalists' questions regarding issues such as civilian casualties or the use of Tomahawk missiles. Overall, the quantitative findings corroborate the qualitative analysis presented in Section 4.2. The observed patterns are not merely interpretive but are empirically measured and consistently evident across all four speeches.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

4.2.1 Ideological Square in Trump's Iran War Speeches (2025–2026)

Ideological discourse, as Van Dijk (2006) proposes, is systematically organized around four interconnected strategies: emphasizing in-group virtue, emphasizing out-group vice, de-emphasizing in-group vice, and suppressing acknowledgment of out-group virtue. All four of Trump's Iran-war speeches exhibit these strategies.

4.2.2 Emphasizing In-group Good: The Construction of American Virtue

Across all four speeches, Trump constructs the United States and its military as divinely favoured, technologically superior, and morally exceptional, thereby providing a positive self-presentation that renders military action appear justified.

Following the strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, Trump declares in Speech 1 (21 June 2025):

“I’d like to praise the wonderful American patriots who flew those wonderful aircraft last night.”

This phrasing carries substantial ideological weight. The designation ‘great American patriots’ elevates military personnel to figures of national pride and moral character, while the phrase ‘magnificent machines’ reframes weapons of war as instruments of achievement rather than agents of violence. This corresponds to what Degaf and Ashfiya (2025) term ‘national self-glorification’, a discursive strategy through which military intervention is reframed as a source of national pride. Trump’s tone becomes still more affirmative in Speech 2 (28 February 2026), where he characterizes the intervention as a righteous, divinely sanctioned enterprise:

“It’s a noble mission, we pray for all service members who lay down their lives to ensure that Americans and our children will never be threatened by Iran with a nuclear weapon.”

Here, the term ‘noble’ establishes the interpretive frame through which the military action is to be understood, not as a political decision, but as a moral obligation. Invoking future generations extends this moral framing further, positioning the war not as advancing a political agenda but as protecting the innocent. Positive self-presentation reaches its apex in Speech 4 (1 April 2026), in which Trump states:

“Our enemies are losing and America, which has been winning five years under my leadership, is winning, and it is winning bigger than ever.”

This statement positions the United States as categorically superior to other nations, suggesting a distinctive standing within the global order (Rojecki, 2008). The phrase ‘five years under my leadership’ additionally introduces an element of personal glorification, attributing America’s success solely to Trump’s leadership.

4.2.3 Emphasizing Out-group Bad: The Construction of Iran as Enemy

The second strategy of the Ideological Square, emphasizing out-group vice, is the most consistently deployed across all four speeches.

In Speech 1 (21 June 2025), Trump characterizes Iran as:

“The bully of the Middle East, the world’s number one state sponsor of terror.”

Such labels serve a clear ideological function. The term ‘bully’ evokes a familiar moral narrative of oppression and victimhood, while the designation ‘world’s number one state sponsor of terror’ works to render military intervention as appearing both necessary and justified.

In Speech 2 (28 February 2026), Trump describes the Iranian regime as:

“This ‘very wicked, radical, dictatorship’ of ‘a vicious group of very hard, terrible people’.”

This exemplifies what Van Dijk (2006) terms negative lexicalization, the accumulation of negative adjectives (‘vicious’, ‘terrible’, ‘wicked’, ‘radical’) to intensify the out-group’s negative representation. The term ‘dictatorship’ further delegitimizes the Iranian government, positioning it as falling short of the in-group’s democratic values.

The construction of Iran reaches its most severe expression in Speech 4 (1 April 2026):

“This murderous regime also recently slaughtered 45,000 of its own people protesting in Iran... the most violent and thuggish regime on earth.”

The term ‘thuggish’ is especially notable here. The precise figure ‘45,000’ exemplifies what Van Dijk (2006) terms the number game, a strategy in which specific statistics lend an appearance of factual reliability while intensifying the emotional force of the negative out-group representation.

4.2.4 De-emphasizing In-group Bad: The Silencing of American Violence

The third strategy involves minimizing or omitting reference to the in-group’s morally objectionable conduct. Across all four speeches, Trump does not address Iranian civilian casualties or the destruction of civilian infrastructure. In Speech 1 (21 June 2025), the nuclear strikes are described in the language of precision and success:

“The US military carried out massive precision strikes on the three key nuclear facilities.”

The term ‘precision strikes’ foregrounds accuracy while obscuring the scale of resulting devastation. As Degaf and Ashfiya (2025) observe, such language conceals the possibility of civilian casualties and infrastructural destruction, thereby framing the attack as both necessary and ethically defensible.

When questioned during Speech 3 (9 March 2026) about an American missile strike on an Iranian girls’ school, Trump dismisses the matter entirely:

“I haven’t seen it and I will say the Tomahawk... is sold and used by other countries.”

This response exemplifies a discursive strategy of denial and deflection, implicitly disclaiming moral responsibility for the incident.

4.2.5 De-emphasizing Out-group Good: The Erasure of Iranian Legitimacy

The fourth strategy involves the omission of Iran’s legitimate political positions, security concerns and diplomatic efforts. Across all four speeches, Iran’s legal standing under international treaties, its regional security interests, and its prior diplomatic engagement are never acknowledged.

In Speech 2 (28 February 2026), Trump states:

“But Iran has, ‘decades and decades’ of times, rejected any chance to abandon its nuclear aspirations.”

The implication of persistent, unchanging rejection frames Iran’s position as inherently unreasonable, attributing any diplomatic failure exclusively to Iran, omitting, for instance, the 2018 US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani.

In Speech 4 (1 April 2026), Trump similarly dismisses Iran’s diplomatic efforts:

“The ‘regime’ refused to agree and kept their relentless quest of going towards the development of nuclear weapons.”

The phrase ‘relentless quest’ reframes Iran’s nuclear programme as an irrational obsession rather than a rational security calculation, a characteristic move within the broader discursive construction of othering.

Table 4

Cross-Speech Comparison of the Four Ideological Square Strategies

Strategy	Speech 1	Speech 2	Speech 3	Speech 4
Our Good	“Great American patriots”, “magnificent machines”	“Noble mission”, “greatest military”	“Greatest military”, “winning decisively”	“Never in history of warfare”, “extraordinary”
Their Bad	“Bully of Middle East”, “state sponsor of	“Vicious”, “wicked”, “radical	“Lunatics”, “terrorist regime”	“Murderous”, “thuggish”, “most violent

	terror”	dictatorship”		regime”
Our Bad Hidden	No civilian casualties mentioned	No humanitarian impact mentioned	School bombing deflected	No reference to war crimes
Their Good Hidden	No Iran diplomacy mentioned	No Iran diplomacy mentioned	Iran’s negotiations ignored	JCPOA withdrawal ignored
Othering Intensity	Medium	High	Medium-high	Highest

4.2.6 Discursive Strategies in Trump’s Iran War Speeches

Van Dijk (2006) identifies the micro-level discursive strategies through which ideological polarization is realized in political discourse. This analysis identifies six salient strategies across Trump’s four Iran-war speeches.

4.2.6.1 Actor Description

According to Van Dijk (2006), the description of social actors reflects an underlying ideological orientation. In-group actors are typically represented through positive, heroic, or morally affirming language, while out-group actors are represented through terms that strip them of legitimacy and, in some instances, of humanity.

Across all four speeches, Trump employs a consistent pattern of actor description. In Speech 1, American service members are described as ‘great American patriots’, military leadership as ‘brilliant military minds’, and a commanding officer as a ‘spectacular general’. By Speech 2, American troops are described as ‘courageous American heroes’; by Speech 4, they are characterized as ‘warriors’ who achieved ‘swift, decisive, overwhelming victories’ in an ‘extraordinary’ and ‘historically unprecedented’ campaign.

Iranian actors, by contrast, are consistently dehumanized. In Speech 1, Iran is described as ‘the bully of the Middle East’ and ‘the world’s number one state sponsor of terror’. In Speech 2, the Iranian regime is described as ‘a vicious group of very hard, terrible people’. By Speech 3, Iranian leaders are termed ‘lunatics’, and by Speech 4, the Iranian regime is characterized as ‘the most violent and thuggish regime on earth’.

This pattern of actor description is consistent with the broader tendency Van Dijk (2006) identifies within Western ideological discourse: the construction of a moral dichotomy between a rational, virtuous in-group and an irrational, malevolent out-group.

4.2.6.2 Lexicalization

Van Dijk (2006) describes lexicalization as the semantic process of selecting words that reflect and reinforce an ideological stance. Trump’s Iran speeches exhibit a consistent double movement: the elevation of the United States and the corresponding demonization

of Iran. Military operations are described in laudatory terms, ‘spectacular’, ‘magnificent’, ‘brilliant’, and the US military is characterized as ‘the strongest on Earth’ and ‘the greatest in the world’. In Speech 4 (1 April 2026), Trump asserts that American troops achieved ‘victories like few people have ever witnessed before’, situating the conflict within a broader narrative of US military history.

Iran, by contrast, is consistently described through negatively charged terminology. The term ‘regime’ itself connotes illegitimacy, while terms such as ‘terrorist’, ‘terror sponsor’, ‘fanatical’, ‘murderous’, ‘wicked’, and ‘thuggish’ recur throughout the corpus as descriptors applied to Iran and its associated actors. Iran’s nuclear programme is characterized as ‘an extremely destructive program’, its armed forces as a ‘menace’, its regional allies as ‘terrorist militias’, and its activities as constituting ‘bloodshed and mass murder’.

4.2.6.3 Victimization and the Number Game

Van Dijk (2006) defines victimization as the discursive representation of the in-group as the target of unjust harm by the out-group, frequently reinforced through the ‘number game’, the use of statistics to lend ideological claims an appearance of factual and emotional weight.

In Speech 1 (21 June 2025), Trump states:

“They have blown off our legs and arms with roadside bombs, they have killed our people. We lost over 1,000 people.”

The graphic imagery, combined with the specific figure of ‘1,000’, constructs a vivid narrative of American suffering.

In Speech 2 (28 February 2026), a temporal dimension is added:

“Over the past 47 years, the Iranian regime has been screaming Death to America, Death to America.”

The reference to 47 years frames Iranian hostility as sustained and historical rather than episodic.

By Speech 4 (1 April 2026), large numerical figures again feature prominently:

“This murderous regime... killed 45,000 of their own people... 45,000 dead.”

The repetition of the figure ‘45,000’ within a single passage exemplifies the deliberate use of numerical repetition to, in Van Dijk’s terms, dramatize harm and consolidate support for military action.

4.2.6.4 Hyperbole and Euphemism

Van Dijk (2006) observes that ideological discourse frequently deploys hyperbole and euphemism in tandem. Hyperbole exaggerates the in-group's positive attributes or the out-group's negative qualities, while euphemism minimizes the apparent severity of the in-group's own conduct. Both strategies recur throughout Trump's Iran-war rhetoric.

In Speech 1, Trump states:

“There's no military in the world that could have done what we did tonight; not even close.”

This hyperbolic framing intensifies further by Speech 4 (1 April 2026):

“In the history of warfare, there was never a clearer, more devastating large scale defeat in such a short time period in so many years.”

In both cases the authors portray American military operations as a once in a lifetime accomplishment. As Degaf and Ashfiya (2025) point out, this hyperbole glorifies violent acts and prevents critical reflection, making what could otherwise be considered a morally complex act, a moment for nationalistic celebration.

On the other hand, euphemistic language is used to reduce the perceived level of injury inflicted. In Speech 1, the term ‘massive precision strikes’ refers to nuclear strikes. Then, in Speech 3, Trump calls the entire war an ‘excursion’, which is an attempt to demean the conflict as a minor and temporary affair.

4.2.6.5 Divine Authorization

In his speeches related to Iran, Trump continues to use religious terms to justify military action. Appeals to higher moral authority work to justify the speaker, as stated by Van Dijk (2006). Trump ended Speech 1 (21 June 2025) by saying 'I wanna just say we love you, God... God bless the Middle East, God bless Israel, and God bless America. In Speech 2 (28 February 2026) he describes the war as a ‘noble mission’ and says: ‘We pray God to bless all of our heroes in the line of duty and pray that, with his guidance, the men and women of the Armed Forces will be victorious.’

The link between military action and God's will places the United States in the image of a God-chosen nation, a theme common to American nationalist rhetoric (Cauthen, 2004). Iran, on the other hand, is never similarly religiously framed in the corpus, establishing an unbridgeable moral distance between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’.

But this is not consistent throughout the corpus: As Table 3 shows, Speech 3 has no religious content at all, indicating that Trump's religious language is used mostly for formal and ceremonial purposes.

4.2.6.6 Historical Accumulation

Another common tactic in each of the four speeches is to evoke past events and events from the past to build the image of Iran as an ongoing threat and the United States as a historic victim. Trump lists a long string of events in Speech 2 (28 February 2026) which include Iranian involvement in the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000 that killed 241 American military personnel, and the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut that killed 241 American military personnel.

This is a culmination of decades of Iranian aggression, and therefore the military action in 2026 is not an out-of-the-blue and disproportionate counter-attack, but rather is one of many steps that Iran has taken over the years. This is a strategy that appears in all four speeches, and is also mentioned in Speech 4 (1 April 2026) about the assassination of General Soleimani and the expiration of the nuclear deal that Obama made with Iran.

4.3 Othering in Longitudinal Pattern

4.3.1 Escalation of Ideological Polarization across the 2025–2026 Iran Conflict

Finally, this study differs from previous research on Trump's rhetoric on Iran (Degaf & Ashfiya, 2025) in that it analyzes the evolution of change throughout the conflict rather than just a single speech. The analysis makes it clear that othering strategies are not simply ongoing, but intensifying over the course of 10 months and 4 speeches. With the data given in Tables 2 and 3, and the analysis found in Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, one can see that othering in Trump's Iran-war rhetoric isn't a constant process, but rather intensifies and expands as the war goes on.

Phase 1: Triumphant Othering - Speech 1 (21 June 2025)

The first speech is a triumphant othering, the chief purpose of which is not to justify an ongoing war but to celebrate a completed military action. Iran is designed as a vanquished and disgraced enemy. The positive labelling rate is highest (2.67%) while the negative labelling rate is low (1.11%). The rhetoric here is more celebratory than condemnatory; while the term 'bully of the Middle East' is politically charged, it is not used later in speeches, but rather in more general moral terms.

Phase 2: Threatening Othering - Speech 2 (28 February 2026)

The second speech demonstrates a marked escalation in discursive intensity. The use of negative labeling increases from 1.11% to 4.33%, while dehumanizing language rises substantially, from 0.22% to 1.44%. Expressions such as "*a vicious group of very hard, terrible people*" and "*wicked, radical dictatorship*" depoliticize the conflict by portraying Iran not as a political actor but as an existential threat. This speech also lays the foundation for the liberation narrative by distinguishing the Iranian people from the Iranian regime. In doing so, it broadens the moral justification for military intervention by framing it as an effort to liberate and protect the population rather than to target the Iranian people themselves.

Phase 3: Trivializing Othering - Speech 3 (9 March 2026)

The third speech adopts a different approach to 'othering' that focuses on Iran's 'diminishment' as a strong opponent is replaced by a weak and easily defeated one. The proportion of words that are divinely-authorized drops to 0.00%, reflecting the less formal tone of a press conference. Normalization of the continuation of the war is achieved by statements like Trump's, 'Iranians are not meant to fight against us', and his use of the term 'excursion' to describe the war.

Phase 4: Absolute Othering - Speech 4 (1 April 2026)

This is the culmination of these spiraling speeches, the fourth being the most extreme. Dehumanizing language is equally at its peak at 1.97%, and negative labelling at 5.62% across the corpus. The Iranian regime has been described as 'fanatical', 'murderous', 'the most violent and thuggish regime on earth' and a 'cancer that has long simmered'. This speech also features the most self-aggrandizing rhetoric, with Trump claiming to have personally killed General Soleimani and to have 'terminated Obama's Iran nuclear deal'. The same speech also has the most overt national pride and self-claims of success, with Trump stating that he 'killed General Soleimani' and 'terminated Obama's Iran nuclear deal'.

Table 5

Summary: The Trajectory of Othering

Phase	Speech	Date	Othering Type	Neg. Labels %	Dehumanizing %	Dominant Strategy
Phase 1	Speech 1	21 June, 2025	Triumphant	1.11%	0.22%	Glorification
Phase 2	Speech 2	28 Feb, 2026	Threatening	4.33%	1.44%	Dehumanization + Liberation
Phase	Speech	9 March,	Trivializing	2.51%	0.31%	Normalization +

3	3	2026				Trivialization
Phase 4	Speech 4	1 April, 2026	Absolute	5.62%	1.97%	Dehumanization + Personalization

The average of the average scores from Phases 1, 2, and 3 is used to determine the averages. The averages are computed based on the average of the average scores for Phases 1, 2, and 3.

This longitudinal pattern is both theoretically and practically significant. It extends Van Dijk's (2006) concept of the Ideological Square, which is typically applied to the analysis of a single speech, by demonstrating the development of ideological polarization over time. As the preceding analysis indicates, othering is neither static nor confined to a single discursive position; rather, it is an evolving process that is continuously adapted to changing political, military, and rhetorical contexts. As the Iran conflict escalated from the airstrikes of June 2025 to the broader war in April 2026, Trump's rhetoric evolved accordingly, from celebrating military success to constructing Iran as an existential threat, and from normalizing military action to advancing comprehensive moral condemnation.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to discover what occurred during one of Trump's most significant moments in an April 2026 prime-time address one month after full-scale military operations, in which he described the Iranian regime as 'the most violent and thuggish regime on earth' and as 'the cancer that has long simmered'. By April 2026, the dehumanization of Iran had progressed to the point where there was no need for a reasoned argument to support it; it was, after all, common sense. This is, as Van Dijk (2006) says, "how it works ideology". It has been the aim of this study to trace that emergent common sense one label at a time, across ten months of conflict. The growth of the discursification from the triumphant glorification of June 2025, the building up of existential threat from February 2026, and the casual normalization from March 2026, to the absolute moral condemnation of April 2026 is evident in the analysis. Iran was not a 'thuggish' country; it was constructed as such through a systematic and progressive process which has been traced, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in this study.

The findings indicate that Van Dijk's (2006) Ideological Square serves as the organizing principle underlying Trump's wartime rhetoric across all four speeches. The frequency of negative labeling increases from 1.11% to 5.62%, a fivefold rise that closely parallels the escalation of the conflict, while the use of dehumanizing expressions increases almost tenfold. Discursive strategies such as actor description, lexicalization, victimization, the number game, hyperbole, euphemism, divine authorization, and historical reference

collectively construct a coherent and mutually reinforcing ideological framework. The liberation narrative is developed most extensively across the four speeches, systematically separating the Iranian people from the Iranian regime and reframing military aggression as humanitarian intervention.

The present study extends Van Dijk's (2006) concept of the Ideological Square, which is primarily employed as a synchronic analytical framework, by demonstrating its applicability as a diachronic lens for examining the evolution of ideological polarization throughout an ongoing conflict. Furthermore, the proposed typology of othering, comprising triumphant, threatening, trivializing, and absolute othering, offers a new analytical vocabulary for the study of wartime political discourse. Future research may benefit from comparing how Iran or other political actors construct the same conflict from alternative perspectives or by employing larger corpus-based datasets to examine ideological patterns across a broader range of wartime communications.

The central finding of this study is straightforward: political discourse is never neutral. Rhetoric often precedes military action. The rhetorical choices, labels, and constructed representations of *the Other* employed by political leaders during wartime are among the most consequential decisions they make. The normalization of hostile discourse by a sitting president carries the potential to legitimize dehumanizing rhetoric that may, as Mirza (2026) cautions, contribute to narratives associated with genocidal violence. Accordingly, the critical examination of political discourse is not merely an academic exercise; it is an essential means of understanding how language shapes public opinion, legitimizes military action, and influences the course of contemporary conflicts.

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