

Legitimation Strategies in News Coverage of the Iran-Israel Conflict (the Case Study of 12-Day War)

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Abstract

This study looks into how some international news organizations established credibility through their headline coverage of the 12-day Iran-Israel conflict in June 2025. Using Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation paradigm, the study examines 35 headlines from major English-language media outlets, including Fox News and Reuters. This study employs qualitative discourse analysis to determine how headlines support or contradict military and political actions during the conflict by using mythopoesis, moral evaluation, authorization, and justification. The results show that while evaluative and emotionally charged word choices create moral narratives of threat, victimhood, and triumph, headlines often cite institutional and expert authority to justify political and military operations. While mythopoesis creates both positive and negative narratives, portraying players as either heroes or criminals, rationalization techniques are frequently instrumental or theoretical, connecting events causally to justify reactions or results. The study highlights the intricate interactions between language choices, ideological positioning, and media framing in modern conflict reporting and demonstrates how headline discourse is a strategic site for building legitimacy, influencing public perception, and mediating interpretations of geopolitical events. The findings indicate that rationalization and authorization are the most dominant legitimation strategies, reflecting the strong tendency of headline discourse to justify conflict-related actions through causal reasoning and appeals to institutional or expert authority. Moral evaluation is also frequently employed through evaluative lexical choices that construct polarized narratives of threat, victimhood, and legitimacy. In contrast, mythopoesis appears less frequently, suggesting that narrative-based legitimation is less central in short headline formats. Overall, the study concludes that headlines function as a strategic discursive site where legitimacy is actively produced and contested, shaping public perception by presenting political and military actions as reasonable, necessary, and morally defensible.

Keywords: Legitimation Strategies, Headlines, Information Structure, Lexical Choices, Conflict Reporting, Iran-Israel Confrontation

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Introduction

The establishment of legitimacy within media discourse has long been acknowledged as one of the main ways news organizations influence audience perception regarding political disputes. In the 12-day confrontation between Iran and Israel in June 2025, framing at headlines, attribution of agency, assignment of culpability, and justification of military actions play a crucial role in regulating audience perception. Most importantly, headlines operate as tight but highly strategic linguistic units that predispose interpretation through evaluative framing, information bundling, and selective emphasis. As past research by Bell (1991), Richardson (2007), and Van Dijk (1988) has shown, headlines regularly foreground actors and acts in non-neutral ways, including ideological stances which either legitimize or delegitimize the behaviors of concerned parties.

A systematic lens for uncovering these ideological bases is offered by the legitimization framework of Van Leeuwen (2007). Through the identification of methods such as authorization, moral judgment, rationalization, and mythopoesis, it shows how news discourse either condemns or justifies social behavior through specific linguistic choices. Previous studies using this model in conflicts within the Middle East, such as Sadeghi and Jalali (2013) Roziki et al. (2025), and El Damanhoury et al. (2025), demonstrate that legitimization is an important discursive practice in conflict reporting that plays a key role in shaping aggression, victimhood, responsibility, and moral standing narratives.

Although there is a considerable volume of research into Israeli-Palestinian media representation, very little has focused on how foreign news organizations create legitimacy, especially in coverage of the Iran-Israel conflict. The events of June 2025 created one of those rare opportunities for international news organizations such as BBC, Foxnews, and Reuters to produce a dense cluster of headlines most of which contained evaluations of political choices, moral or strategic narratives of success and failure, and subtle or explicit forms of justification for military action. The main question addressed in this study is how headline writers employ legitimization strategies to legitimize the dominant news discourse. The subsidiary question concerns which legitimization subtypes and categories are most prevalent.

To gain insights into how these language structures interact with Van Leeuwen's legitimization techniques in creating meaning, the study examines 35 headlines released during the 12-day battle. The current study attempts to determine not only which legitimization tactics are used mostly in the corpus, but also how they are linguistically realized. By doing this, the study provides empirical insights into the discursive processes through which legitimacy is built in modern conflict reporting and contributes to bigger discourses on media framing in warfare circumstances.

1. Literature Review

News reporting is not merely a neutral reflection of reality; rather, it is a discursive practice in which linguistic choices contribute to framing events, allocating agency, and shaping public understanding of conflicts (Entman, 1993; van Dijk, 1988). Within this process, headlines are particularly significant because they function as condensed interpretive cues that guide the reader's perception of news events by foregrounding specific actors, actions, and evaluative orientations (Bell, 1991; Richardson, 2007). Interest in the study of legitimation techniques in media discourse has been substantially increasing in recent years, especially when it comes to the reporting of conflict. This methodology by Van Leeuwen (2007) offers a means to identify ideological foundations in news coverage and offers a basic approach toward analyzing how media players approve, justify, or ethically assess activities in situations that are political and military. Van Leeuwen's (2007) model of legitimation is one of the most widely applied frameworks for investigating this phenomenon, as it offers systematic categories such as authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. This framework has been widely used in CDA-oriented research to examine how institutions and media outlets legitimize power relations, policy decisions, and military interventions (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Reyes, 2011). Research on legitimation in media discourse has expanded considerably in recent decades, particularly within the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), where the media are viewed as key ideological institutions involved in the construction and circulation of dominant political narratives (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In addition to Van Leeuwen's framework, legitimation has also been discussed through complementary models. For example, Reyes (2011) proposed that legitimation in political discourse often relies on strategies such as appealing to emotions, emphasizing hypothetical futures, and invoking altruistic motives. Furthermore, the study of framing (Entman, 1993) provides an important theoretical link between legitimation and the selective highlighting of causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation in news narratives. Together, these approaches demonstrate that legitimation is deeply connected to ideological framing and the manipulation of interpretive resources in media texts.

In conflict reporting, legitimation strategies often operate through the representation of actors as morally justified, strategically rational, or institutionally authoritative. For instance, Greenberg (2019) documented extensive use of authorization and moral evaluation in Israeli online newspapers and military-affiliated communication during the 2014 Gaza war. Similarly, Afifi (2020) demonstrated that news discourse in Middle Eastern conflicts frequently operates as a site where political violence is framed through narratives of justification, moral positioning, and ideological polarization. Greenberg (2019) documented the widespread use of moral and cognitive legitimation tactics in coverage of the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict by

analyzing Israeli online newspapers and IDF social media platforms in a doctoral thesis. While his focus was on a different conflict, his empirical approach and findings on recurring discursive patterns are directly relevant to the present study in its effort to identify the presence of ideological bias and framing strategies in news coverage of the Iran-Israel conflict. Similarly, Afifi (2020) investigated the legitimizing power of discourse in the wars of the Middle East in more detail by underlining that media texts often use discursive techniques for both reporting events and creating normative frameworks that support or denounce the conduct of those concerned. This sets a theoretical framework for the current research in media coverage of the Iran-Israel conflict and corresponds closely with van Leeuwen's categorization of legitimation methods.

El Damanhoury, Saleh, and Lebovic (2025) have analyzed Al Jazeera English and BBC online news about the 2023 Gaza crisis and identified a series of legitimation tactics, including authorization, rationalization, and moral appraisal. Their findings show that news organizations can shape public perception by placing greater or lesser emphasis on particular events depending on the political agenda. This study provides insightful information regarding how conflict reporting might quietly support or undermine military operations and state actions. El Damanhoury et al. (2025) examined Al Jazeera English and BBC online coverage of the 2023 Gaza war and showed how legitimation strategies were employed differently to construct varying ideological representations of responsibility, aggression, and victimhood. Their findings confirm that legitimation is closely linked with media agendas and political alignment. In a related study, Roziki et al. (2025) investigated ideological framing in Al Jazeera's reporting on Iran-Israel nuclear tensions, highlighting how authorization and moral evaluation serve to reinforce particular political stances. Roziki et al. (2025) discussed how Al Jazeera's coverage of the Iran-Israel nuclear dispute used both ideological representation and narrative framing to legitimize or delegitimize participants of the conflict. With selective focus and critical commentary, this study highlighted how moral judgment and authorization shape public impressions. The present research underlines how important it is to understand media framing as a legitimacy-building practice in international conflicts.

Although extensive research exists on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and media representation in the Middle East, relatively limited attention has been paid to the Iran-Israel confrontation, especially in the form of headline discourse produced by international English-language media outlets. Given that headlines often function as powerful framing devices and ideological entry points (Bell, 1991; van Dijk, 1988), examining legitimation strategies in headlines provides a valuable perspective on how geopolitical conflicts are linguistically constructed for global audiences. The present study contributes to this growing body of research by examining how legitimation strategies are employed in 35 English-language headlines reporting the June

2025 Iran–Israel confrontation, with special attention to the dominance of specific legitimation categories. In Persian media, Sadeghi and Jalali (2013) demonstrated how delegitimation and legitimation strategies were systematically constructed in the representation of the Egyptian revolution, reinforcing the role of media discourse in political positioning.

2. Theoretical Framework

Van Leeuwen (2007) provides a detailed framework for exploring the ways in which discourse constructs the legitimacy of social behaviors in media, institutional communication, and everyday interactions. He argues that legitimation—the process whereby language legitimizes, normalizes, and renders certain forms of social activity acceptable or desirable—is one of the fundamental functions of discourse, as opposed to simply an added layer of rhetoric. His model is widely adopted for media research, political discourse, education, and institutional communication. It's also quite useful in investigative research of how governments, institutions, or media come to validate questionable practices or social systems. The framework developed by van Leeuwen provides an approach for explaining how and why social practices are discursively constructed as legitimate or "natural". His perspective is important because it integrates sociological ideas—legitimacy and institutional power—with linguistic analysis. It presents a complete toolkit for discourse analysts, especially those under the scope of critical discourse analysis, as they examine ideological bias and construction in texts. He uses different text types, such as children's books about school, brochures about school for parents, teacher-training materials, and media texts on education. In this manner, he has demonstrated that legitimation is embedded in seemingly ordinary discourses—for example, discourses that justify "school" or "compulsory education".

The present study adopts Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of legitimation as its primary theoretical foundation. He conceptualizes legitimation as a discursive process through which social practices are presented as acceptable, necessary, morally appropriate, or "natural." Rather than treating legitimation as a marginal rhetorical tool, he argues that it is a fundamental function of discourse, particularly in institutional communication and media representation. His model has become influential within CDA research because it offers a systematic typology that connects linguistic forms with broader ideological and sociological processes (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Van Leeuwen's framework is particularly useful for the analysis of news discourse because media texts frequently operate as ideological sites where political and military actions are justified or contested. In CDA, news reporting is understood as a form of discursive practice shaped by power relations, institutional constraints, and social ideologies (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). The legitimation framework provides an analytical tool for

identifying how discourse contributes to the construction of authority, morality, rational necessity, and narrative coherence.

Van Leeuwen (2007) identifies four main legitimation strategies: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Authorization refers to legitimation through reference to authority, including personal authority (e.g., political leaders), expert authority (e.g., scientists or analysts), and impersonal authority (e.g., laws, institutions, or official regulations). Moral evaluation legitimizes practices through reference to moral values, judgments, and evaluative vocabulary, often relying on culturally shared assumptions about what is good, right, or justified. Rationalization refers to legitimation through appeals to logic, reason, and utility, including instrumental rationalization (goal-oriented explanation) and theoretical rationalization (appeals to social knowledge or expert-based “truths”). Mythopoesis legitimizes actions through narrative structures, including moral tales of reward and punishment, heroism, victimhood, or national triumph.

These strategies are not mutually exclusive; rather, they often operate simultaneously within the same discourse event. In political and war-related news reporting, legitimation may combine authorization (through official sources), rationalization (through cause–effect explanations), and moral evaluation (through evaluative framing), thereby guiding the audience toward preferred interpretations of events (Reyes, 2011; Richardson, 2007). Mythopoesis, though less frequent in headline discourse, may still appear through condensed narrative framing that constructs actors as heroes, villains, or victims.

In this study, Van Leeuwen’s legitimation framework is applied to the analysis of English-language headlines reporting the Iran–Israel confrontation of June 2025. Headlines are treated as ideologically dense discourse units that shape interpretive orientation through lexical choices, syntactic structure, and the selective foregrounding of information. By identifying and classifying legitimation strategies in headlines, the study aims to reveal how international news outlets contribute to the discursive construction of political and military legitimacy during conflict reporting.

In sum, Van Leeuwen not only names these strategies, but he also examines how they are realized linguistically—that is, what grammatical or semantic resources (words, clauses, and narrative structures) are employed for doing legitimation in real texts. Four Main Legitimation Strategies according to Van Leeuwen (2007) include:

- 1) Authorization: legitimization by reference to authority — this could be tradition, law, institutional power, or people vested with authority (e.g., experts, leaders). Subtypes include:
 - a. Personal authority (e.g., “The president said it was necessary.”)
 - b. Expert authority (e.g., “Scientists agree this step was vital.”)

- c. Impersonal authority (e.g., “According to the law...”)
- 2) Moral evaluation: legitimization based on moral values, abstractions, and positive/ negative comparison (e.g., “It is quite normal that you have bad feeling about his bad behavior”)
- 3) Rationalization: legitimization by appealing to reason, utility or purpose. Here, Actions are legitimized with reference to their utility, purpose or logic. This includes:
 - a. Instrumental rationalization: justification by goals or effects, e.g., “There was nothing else to do but strike in order to avoid further aggressions.”
 - b. Theoretical rationalization: using "social knowledge" or expert knowledge to justify the action, e.g., "According to security experts, this measure ensures stability."
- 4) Mythopoesis: legitimation through storytelling — narratives, parables, or symbolic tales where “legitimate” actions are rewarded and “illegitimate” ones are punished; these stories help naturalize social practices. Actions are legitimized through storytelling — using narratives of moral lessons, heroes, or victims: e.g., “Like David facing Goliath, the nation stood up against aggression.” Often it is used in war reporting or political speeches.

3. Research Methodology

This data analysis section systematically examines the pragmatic functions of various syntactic manipulations employed in the relevant news headlines to legitimize social and political actions linguistically. The analysis is structured around core legitimation categories: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis. By attributing the source of information to these categories journalists strategically control information flow, emphasis, and reader interpretation. The goal of this rhetorical and grammatical strategy is to do more than just report; it is to foreground causes, highlight suffering, deflect or assign responsibility, and inject emotional or authoritative commentary, thereby shaping the thematic focus and political valence of the news narrative. The following examples illustrate how these transformations are utilized to maximize impact and frame the discourse surrounding the Israel-Iran war/crisis. As for the number of selected headlines, name of selected media, the justification for selection this media and time frame of data selection; The total number of 35 headlines have been spotted at random and studied for the present research among the well-known media like Fox News, and Reuters, really published through the time course of October, 2023 to July, 2025.

4. Data analysis

In this part first the spotted headline will be mentioned as it was really published and worded in the specific dates. The date of publication, Journal name (and the author's name if mentioned) will be recited. Then, the linguistic analysis of the legitimation strategy used in that headline will immediately be presented.

What follows is the list of items (mainly published headlines) chosen as the corpus for the present study:

4.1. Intercepted Iranian communications downplay damage from US attack, Washington Post reports (Hudson & Strobel, 20/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization + Rationalization;

Authorization / Appeal to authority; Citing the Washington Post gives credibility to the report, legitimizing the information.

Rationalization / Minimization framing; The phrase “downplay damage” frames Iran's messaging as deliberate, implying a strategic or calculated response to the attack.

4.2. Comparing US Iran strike to Hiroshima, Trump plays down intelligence report (Mason & Slattery, 2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization / Appeal to authority + Rationalization+ moral evaluation

Authorization / Appeal to authority; Trump is the authority figure whose interpretation is being reported, legitimizing the framing of the strike.

Rationalization / Minimization / Reframing; The phrase “plays down intelligence report” frames his action as deliberate reframing or mitigation of perceived severity, providing a strategic rationale.

Moral evaluation / Comparison framing; Comparing the strike to Hiroshima carries moral and historical weight, implicitly inviting readers to evaluate the action's significance, while Trump's response seeks to downplay it.

4.3. Israel-Iran war highlights Mideast's declining (Russell, 25/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Moral Evaluation + Rationalization

Moral Evaluation: This headline frames the Israel–Iran war as revealing or exposing something morally negative about the Middle East (“declining...”). It implies: the region is deteriorating, the conflict is evidence of dysfunction, and there is a negative moral judgment on the state of the Middle East. This is moral evaluation, because it uses value-laden judgment (“declining”) to legitimize a particular interpretation of the conflict.

Rationalization (Theoretical): The verb “highlights” suggests a cause–and–effect logic; the war highlights a pre-existing structural problem. It

presents the war not just as violence, but as a phenomenon that reveals geopolitical truths. This is theoretical rationalization because it appeals to “social knowledge” — the idea that the Middle East is unstable or weakening.

4.4. US strikes failed to destroy Iran's nuclear sites, intelligence report says (Slattery et al., 25/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization (expert/institutional) + Objectivation (factual reporting) + Rationalization (cause-effect framing)

Authorization: The source is an “intelligence report”, which lends credibility and authority to the claim. The headline cites an intelligence report (institutional authority), but frames the action as a failure, thus challenging U.S. legitimacy.

Objectivation / Factual presentation: Presenting the outcome of the strikes and citing the report gives the headline a neutral, factual tone.

Rationalization / Cause-effect framing: Implicitly links the failure of strikes to the resilience of Iran’s nuclear sites, providing a logical consequence.

4.5. Iranian’s welcome ceasefire but fearful for future (Hafezi, 24/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Moral Evaluation + Rationalization (Contextual/Theoretical)

The headline contains implicit moral judgment by framing Iranians as “welcoming” peace as a positive moral quality and “fearful for the future” as factor showing vulnerable, anxious, uncertain characteristics. This constructs a moral landscape in which Iranian civilians appear reasonable, peace-desiring, victims of wider political forces.

Rationalization (Contextual/Theoretical); by presenting fear for the future as a consequence of the conflict, the headline provides an implicit explanation that the ceasefire is good, but instability or threats remain.

4.6. Israel says it hit Iranian radar, but refrained from other strikes after Trump call (Cornwell, 24/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization (official source) + Rationalization

Authorization: The headline appeals to authority in two ways; Israel (government / military) is speaking, which legitimizes the claim. Trump is also central: his call to Netanyahu is framed as influential, suggesting that U.S. presidential authority had real weight over Israel’s decision-making.

Rationalization: The headline frames Israel’s decision not to escalate (“refrained from other strikes”) as a calculated, strategic move in response to Trump’s intervention, not as a loss of resolve or weakness.

4.7. Middle Eastern bourses advance on Iran-Israel ceasefire (Shariff, 24/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Instrumental Rationalization (Cause–Effect) + Authorization

The headline frames the rise in stock markets (“bourses advance”) as a direct, logical consequence of the ceasefire. This is a classic case of instrumental rationalization, where legitimacy is built through cause–effect reasoning: Because there is a ceasefire → therefore markets improve. It legitimizes the ceasefire as a stabilizing, economically beneficial event.

Authorization — Impersonal Authority (Institutional Logic) (Secondary): The headline implicitly relies on market behavior as an authoritative indicator of reality.

Financial markets function as impersonal authorities: If markets rise, the situation must be improving or becoming more stable. This naturalizes the ceasefire as objectively good, because the “neutral” markets respond positively.

4.8. Iran holds military drills after big losses in war with Israel (Elwelly, 21/08/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization — Instrumental / Consequential Logic (Primary); The headline provides an implicit cause–effect sequence. Cause is that Iran suffered “big losses” and effect / response is that Iran holds military drills. This frames the drills as a logical, necessary, and strategic response. It legitimizes Iran’s action as a reasonable reaction to military setbacks. This is instrumental rationalization because the action is justified by its purpose (“responding after losses”).

Moralization; by using the evaluative phrase “big losses”, the headline subtly conveys a moral judgment. It portrays Iran as weakened or defeated. This implicitly legitimizes Israel’s position in the conflict. Even though not an explicit moral claim, the wording carries a value-laden implication that shapes perceptions of legitimacy.

4.9. Iran attacks US base in Qatar, Trump thanks Tehran for advance notice and "very weak response" (Mills, Hafezi, & Cornwell, 23/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization (personal authority) + Moral Evaluation

Authorization: The headline invokes Trump as a powerful, authoritative figure whose evaluation (“very weak response”) is presented as a legitimate assessment. Trump’s reaction is used to frame Iran’s actions as militarily insignificant. This relies on the legitimacy of his institutional role (President/leader).

Moral Evaluation; By emphasizing that Iran gave advance notice and that its response was “very weak”, the headline implies a moral judgment about Iran’s behavior—suggesting that Iran follows certain “rules” of conflict (advance notice), which softens blame. Also, its attack was weak, signaling moral/intellectual or strategic inferiority. This moral framing legitimizes the U.S. narrative of strength and Iran’s weakness.

4.10. Trump announces historic Iran and Israel ceasefire agreement to end '12 Day War' (Holland, Mills, & Hafezi, 23/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy; four types which include:

Authorization (personal authority): The headline uses Trump as the key actor whose authority legitimizes the ceasefire. By foregrounding Trump as the agent (“Trump announces...”), the headline authorizes the action through his institutional/presidential power. The authority of a leader legitimizes the event as credible, important, and politically valid.

Moral Evaluation; The word “historic” introduces an evaluative, value-laden framing.

It moralizes the action as positive, monumental, and beneficial. This frames the ceasefire as morally desirable and Trump’s involvement as praiseworthy.

Rationalization (goal-oriented explanation)

The phrase “to end ‘12 Day War’” provides an instrumental rationale. It explains why the action is legitimate: ending the war. This portrays Trump’s act as purpose-driven, problem-solving, and necessary.

Positive Mythopoesis (success narrative); Although not a story in full form, the “historic agreement” implies a success story. The adjective “historic” adds a moral and mythical frame of greatness, while Trump’s role as the actor of peace legitimizes the act through authority and positive moral evaluation.

4.11. In Iran's ‘forever war’ against the US, regime has targeted and killed Americans worldwide. (Dorman, 18/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy; four types:

Authorization (impersonal / traditional authority); The phrase “In Iran’s ‘forever war’” invokes a long-standing, ongoing historical conflict. This frames the situation as part of an established, almost institutionalized pattern. “Forever war” constructs an accepted narrative that requires no further justification. This is impersonal authorization based on tradition / conventional knowledge.

Moral Evaluation; The lexical choices “targeted and killed Americans” carry moral weight. They imply wrongdoing and immorality by the Iranian regime. This frames Iran as morally blameworthy, thereby legitimizing negative evaluations or retaliatory actions against it.

Rationalization (theoretical & instrumental); By stating that Iran “has targeted and killed Americans worldwide,” the headline constructs a reason for negative views or policies toward Iran. It functions as an explanatory rationale: Iran is dangerous → therefore certain actions against it make sense. This is instrumental rationalization.

Mythopoesis (negative consequence narrative); The headline tells a condensed horror-story narrative. Iran’s regime repeatedly kills Americans across the globe.

This is a form of negative mythopoesis, where Iran is linked to harmful consequences, legitimizing fear, suspicion, and punitive responses.

4.12. Expert confident Iran's nuclear program is 'no longer' after massive US strike (Arcand & Wolf, 18/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy; Authorization (Expert Authority) + Rationalization+ Moral Evaluation

Authorization (Expert Authority); The headline begins with “Expert confident...”

This is a classic case of expert authorization, where legitimacy is built by attributing a claim to someone with presumed specialized knowledge. Citing an expert presents the statement as trustworthy, objective, and credible. It shifts responsibility away from the news outlet and places it on an authoritative source.

Rationalization (Instrumental); the headline states that Iran’s nuclear program is “no longer” because of a massive US strike. It provides a cause–effect rationale:

US action → destruction of Iran’s nuclear program. This frames the US strike as effective and justified.

Moral Evaluation (Implicit); by positioning the US strike as something that eliminated Iran’s nuclear program, the headline: Implies that this outcome is positive or at least desirable. Presents Iran’s nuclear program as a threat that needed to be removed. Moral evaluation (implicitly framing the destruction as good).

4.13. Trump addresses nation on 'spectacular military success' of US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities ((Holland, Mason, & Psaledakis, 21/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy; Authorization (Expert Authority) + Rationalization+ Moral Evaluation

Authorization (Personal Authority — Presidential Authority); the headline foregrounds Trump — the president — as the speaker. Presidential authority is one of the strongest forms of personal authorization in van Leeuwen’s framework. The act of “addressing the nation” reinforces institutional legitimacy.

Moral Evaluation; The phrase “spectacular military success” is a value-laden moral judgement. It frames the US military action as admirable, impressive, and morally validated. This is Trump's evaluation, but the headline amplifies it by placing it prominently.

Rationalization (Mythopoesis — Success Narrative); the headline presents the strikes as achieving “success,” implying they were purposeful and effective. This is a form of instrumental rationalization, suggesting the action was justified because it produced good results. Because the phrase is dramatic (“spectacular success”), it also resembles mythopoesis—creating a narrative of triumph.

4.14. Trump exerted 'maximum pressure' on Iran and Israel to 'deliver peace': Leavitt (Singman, 27/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization (via Leavitt as expert source) + Rationalization (framing the pressure as aimed at achieving peace)

Authorization: Referring to a recognized authority to justify actions. The headline mentions “Leavitt”, presumably an expert or authoritative figure, as the source of the statement. This appeals to authority to legitimize Trump's actions.

Rationalization: Justifying actions by showing they serve a purpose or are goal-oriented. The phrase “to ‘deliver peace’” frames Trump's “maximum pressure” strategy as rational and goal-driven—it's not arbitrary; it's aimed at achieving peace.

4.15. US warns of growing threat to Americans at home as Iran weighs retaliation (Singh, 22/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authority / Authorization: Authorization (US government as authority) + Rationalization / Consequential reasoning (warning justified by possible retaliation)

The headline cites the US government as the source of the warning. Using a recognized authority legitimizes the seriousness of the threat.

Rationalization / Consequentialism: The phrase “as Iran weighs retaliation” frames the US warning as reasonable and necessary because of potential consequences—there is a clear cause-and-effect justification.

4.16. At least 8 killed, dozens wounded in Israel after Iran launches new wave of missile strikes (Mion, 15/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (causal explanation)

Rationalization / Causal explanation: The structure “after Iran launches new wave of missile strikes” links cause (Iran's action) and effect (deaths and injuries). This frames the events as a logical consequence, implicitly justifying concern or responses.

4.17. Iran oil doomsday in Hormuz may be more fear than reality (Bousso, 23/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (probabilistic/causal reasoning) + Moral evaluation / Mitigation of fear

Rationalization / Probabilistic reasoning: The phrase “may be more fear than reality” downplays the threat and frames it as unlikely, using logical reasoning to suggest the “doomsday” scenario is exaggerated.

Moral evaluation / Mitigation of alarm: By suggesting the fear is overstated, the headline implicitly reassures the audience, legitimizing the perspective that panic is unnecessary.

4.18. Netanyahu says Israel close to meeting its goals in Iran (Goller & Lubell, 22/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization (appeal to Netanyahu’s authority) + Rationalization (goal-directed justification)

Authorization: The headline cites Netanyahu, a recognized authority figure, to legitimize the statement about Israel’s progress.

Rationalization / Goal-oriented reasoning: The phrase “close to meeting its goals” frames Israel’s actions as purposeful and planned, justifying them as part of a strategic objective.

4.19. US strikes on Iran leave hopes for nuclear diplomacy in tatters (Reuters, 22/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (cause-effect framing) + Moral evaluation (negative judgment on the strikes)

Rationalization / Consequence framing: The headline frames the US strikes as having a clear negative effect (“leave hopes... in tatters”), implying a logical cause-and-effect relationship.

Moral evaluation / Criticism: By emphasizing the destruction of diplomatic hopes, the headline implicitly criticizes the action, conveying a moral or evaluative judgment.

4.20. Exclusive: Israel seeks swift action on Iran, sources say, with a split U.S. administration (Reuters, 21/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization (sources cited)

Rationalization (urgency/goal-directed reasoning)

Authorization / Source legitimation: The headline uses “sources say” to appeal to insider or expert authority, lending credibility to the claim about Israel’s intentions.

Rationalization / Urgency framing: Phrases like “seeks swift action” imply that the measures are necessary and justified, presenting Israel’s approach as goal-oriented and urgent.

Impersonalization / Objectivation: Mentioning the “split U.S. administration” frames the situation as a factual context, making the claim appear objective and legitimate without editorializing.

4.21. Israeli scientists scramble to save work after Iranian missile hits labs (Reuters, 20/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (cause-effect reasoning) + Moral evaluation (evoking sympathy)

Rationalization / Cause-and-effect framing: The phrase “after Iranian missile hits labs” explains why the scientists are taking action, framing it as a logical response to an event.

Moral evaluation / Sympathy appeal: Highlighting scientists scrambling to save work evokes sympathy and portrays their efforts as admirable, implicitly legitimizing concern for the human/academic impact.

Impersonalization / Objectivation: The focus on the event and response rather than editorial commentary presents the information as factual and objective.

4.22. How US military power looms over the Israel-Iran conflict (Reuters, 20/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy:

Authorization / Power legitimation: Authorization (US military as legitimizing authority) + Rationalization (framing influence as logical)

The headline emphasizes US military power as a legitimizing force, suggesting that the US presence or capabilities justify influence or intervention in the conflict.

Rationalization / Influence framing: The phrase “looms over the... conflict” frames US involvement as a natural and expected factor shaping outcomes, providing a cause-effect rationale for its role.

Impersonalization / Objectivation: Presenting power as an external looming force makes the situation appear factual and objective rather than opinionated.

4.23. Israeli hospital had taken patients underground hours before missile hit (Reuters, 16/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (logical response to threat) + Moral evaluation (responsible action)

Rationalization / Cause-and-effect framing: The headline explains that patients were moved underground in anticipation of a missile strike, framing the action as a logical and necessary response to a threat.

Moral evaluation / Responsibility and preparedness: Highlighting the hospital’s proactive measures portrays it as responsible and competent, implicitly legitimizing its actions.

Impersonalization / Objectivation: Reporting the event factually (what happened and when) presents it as objective, without editorializing.

4.24. Angst over Gaza set aside as Netanyahu's critics back him over Iran (Reuters, 18/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy:

Authorization / Legitimacy via support: The headline highlights that Netanyahu's critics back him, using their endorsement as an appeal to authority to legitimize his stance on Iran.

Rationalization / Priority framing: The phrase "Angst over Gaza set aside" frames the decision as rational—current focus on Iran takes precedence, justifying the shift in attention.

Moral evaluation / implied approval: Implicitly presents the backing by critics as validation of Netanyahu's actions, conveying a positive judgment of his approach.

4.25. Iran and Israel trade accusations at UN shipping agency over sea lanes) Reuters, 18/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Objectivation (factual, neutral presentation) + Rationalization (contextual cause for the conflict)

Objectivation / Impersonal reporting: The headline presents the exchange of accusations as a factual event at a recognized international forum (UN shipping agency), giving it an appearance of neutrality and legitimacy.

Rationalization / Cause-effect framing: The phrase "over sea lanes" provides a reason for the conflict, explaining the context and making the dispute seem understandable or justified from both sides.

4.26. Israeli air power reigns over Iran, but needs US for deeper impact (Reuters, 17/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization (military power + US role) + Rationalization (strategic reasoning) + Objectivation (factual presentation)

Authorization / Power legitimation: Emphasizing Israeli air power legitimizes Israel's military capability, while noting dependence on the US frames American authority as essential for maximum effect.

Rationalization / Strategic reasoning: The phrase "needs US for deeper impact" provides a logical explanation of limitations and dependencies, framing military action as calculated and strategic.

Objectivation / Impersonal framing: Presenting capabilities and dependencies as factual statements gives the information an objective tone.

4.27. Iranian state broadcaster hit as Iran urges Trump to make Israel halt war (Reuters, 16/ 06/ 2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (cause-effect reasoning) + Authorization (appeal to Trump as authority) + Moral evaluation (diplomatic legitimacy of Iran's demand)

Rationalization / Cause-effect framing: The headline links the attack on the broadcaster with Iran's diplomatic appeal, framing Iran's actions as a response to events, providing a logical cause-effect relationship.

Authorization / Appeal to authority: Iran's call to Trump invokes a recognized political authority to legitimize its demand for Israel to stop military action.

Moral evaluation / Criticism or condemnation: Implicitly frames Iran as taking responsible or morally justified steps (urging diplomacy), contrasting with the destructive event (broadcaster hit).

4.28. Iranians flee capital for safety as Israeli airstrikes intensify (Hafezi, 16/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (logical response to threat) + Moral evaluation (empathy for civilians) + Objectivation (factual presentation)

Rationalization / Cause-effect framing: The phrase "as Israeli airstrikes intensify" explains why people are fleeing, framing their actions as logical and necessary responses to a threat.

Moral evaluation / Sympathy appeal: Highlighting civilians fleeing for safety evokes sympathy and emphasizes the human impact, implicitly legitimizing concern for their situation.

Objectivation / Impersonal reporting: The headline presents events factually—movement of people and military actions—without editorializing, giving it an objective tone.

4.29. Israel-Iran conflict highlights dollar's tarnished safe-haven appeal (McGeever, 17/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (cause-effect explanation) + Moral evaluation (judgment of the dollar) + Objectivation (factual framing of economic outcome)

Rationalization / Cause-effect framing: The headline links the Israel-Iran conflict to the dollar's declining safe-haven status, providing a logical explanation for the economic consequence.

Moral evaluation / Judgment of reliability: The phrase "tarnished safe-haven appeal" conveys a negative assessment, implicitly evaluating the dollar's credibility.

Objectivation / Impersonal reporting: Presenting the economic impact as a factual consequence of the conflict gives the information an objective tone.

4.30. [Persian] Gulf risk goes beyond a blocked Strait of Hormuz (Hay, 16/16/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (explaining broader risk) + Moral evaluation (warning/caution) + Objectivation (factual framing)

Rationalization / Explanation of scope: The headline frames the risk in the Gulf as extending beyond a single threat, providing a logical explanation of why concern is justified.

Moral evaluation / Warning or caution: Implicitly warns readers about broader dangers, conveying a sense of urgency and legitimizing attention to the issue.

Objectivation / Impersonal presentation: By discussing “risk” in general terms rather than attributing blame or opinion, the headline maintains an objective tone.

4.31. Iran vows to continue strikes against Israel, US bases, military officials say (Reuters, 14/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization (military officials as source) + Rationalization (goal-oriented framing) + Objectivation (factual presentation)

Authorization / Appeal to authority: Citing “military officials” gives credibility to the statement, legitimizing the report of Iran’s intentions.

Rationalization / Cause-effect framing: The phrase “vows to continue strikes” frames Iran’s actions as deliberate and goal-oriented, providing a logical rationale for ongoing operations.

Objectivation / Impersonal reporting: Reporting the vow and the source factually, without editorial comment, gives the information an objective tone.

4.32. Iran strikes back at Israel with missiles over Jerusalem, Tel Aviv (Reuters, 13/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Rationalization (retaliatory logic) + Objectivation (factual reporting) + Moral evaluation (implied justification of response)

Rationalization / Cause-effect framing: The phrase “strikes back” frames Iran’s action as a response or retaliation, giving a logical justification for the attack.

Objectivation / Factual presentation: Listing locations (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv) presents concrete information, making the report appear objective and neutral.

Moral evaluation / Implicit framing of retaliation: The wording “strikes back” can carry a subtle moral or justificatory connotation, implying the action is reactive rather than aggressive.

4.33. Angry and afraid, Iranians brace for more Israeli attacks (Hafezi, 13/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Moral evaluation (empathy for civilians) + Rationalization (logical response to threat) + Objectivation (factual framing)

Moral evaluation / Emotional framing: The headline emphasizes “angry and afraid”, highlighting civilians’ emotions and evoking empathy, which implicitly legitimizes concern for their plight.

Rationalization / Cause-effect framing: The phrase “brace for more Israeli attacks” explains the emotional and physical reactions as a logical response to anticipated events.

Objectivation / Impersonal reporting: Presenting the situation as factual—emotions + anticipated actions—without overt editorializing adds an objective tone.

4.34. Exclusive: Iran poised to dismiss US nuclear proposal, Iranian diplomat says (Reuters, 02/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: Authorization (Iranian diplomat as source), Rationalization (strategic/goal-directed reasoning), Objectivation (factual reporting)

Authorization / Appeal to authority: The headline cites an “Iranian diplomat” as the source, lending credibility and legitimacy to the claim about Iran’s intentions.

Rationalization / Strategic reasoning: The phrase “poised to dismiss US nuclear proposal” frames Iran’s action as calculated and goal-directed, implying a deliberate strategy rather than arbitrary behavior.

Objectivation / Impersonal reporting: The factual presentation of the diplomat’s statement, without editorial comment, maintains an objective tone.

4.35. Netanyahu declares historic win, says Israel removed Iran’s nuclear threat in 12day war (Reuters, 24/06/2025)

Legitimation Strategy: authorization, Rationalization, Moral evaluation

Authorization: The headline attributes the “historic win” and the claim of having “removed Iran’s nuclear threat” to Netanyahu, a highly authoritative political actor. By crediting him, the headline draws on his authority to legitimize the war’s outcome.

Rationalization (Utilitarian / Teleological): The idea that Israel “removed... the nuclear threat” frames the war as a necessary, goal-oriented action: to eliminate an existential threat. This is a rational (means–ends) legitimation: war was justified because it achieved a crucial security objective.

Existential / Threat-based legitimation: By framing Iran’s nuclear capability as an “immediate existential threat,” the narrative legitimizes military action as a defensive necessity — a classic “we must act to survive” reasoning.

Moral evaluation: The word “historic” adds a positive moral evaluation to the outcome, suggesting that this win is not just military but morally and symbolically significant — it’s framed as a grand achievement for Israel.

Tables (1) and (2) show the number of instances in which the four legitimation strategies have been used and the mean frequency of occurrences respectively:

Tables 1- shows the number of instances in which the four legitimation strategies have been used

Type of legitimation strategy	authorization	rationalization	Moral evaluation	mythopoesis
The exact number of instance headline	1,2,4,6,7,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,18,20,22,24,26,27,31,34,35	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32,33,34,35	2,3,5,8,9,10,11,12,13,17,19,21,23,24,28,29,30,32,33,35	10,11

Tables 2- the mean frequency of occurrences

Legitimation Strategy	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Authorization	28	82.4
Rationalization	32	94.1
Moral Evaluation	23	67.6
Objectivation / Impersonalization	15	44.1
Mythopoesis	3	8.8
De-legitimation / Contrastive	1	2.9

Explanation for tables: As table (1) shows Rationalization has been used more fully. The table (2) also summarizes the distribution of legitimation strategies across the news headlines collected during the Israel-Iran 12-day war. The results show that rationalization was the most frequently used strategy, appearing in 94.1% of headlines, reflecting the media’s tendency to frame events with logical cause–effect reasoning or goal-oriented explanations. Authorization also appeared in a high number of headlines (82.4%), indicating the heavy reliance on authoritative sources, such as political leaders, government officials, and experts, to legitimize interpretations of events.

Moral evaluation was present in 67.6% of headlines, often used to convey approval, disapproval, or ethical framing of actors’ behaviors, while objectivation/ impersonalization appeared in 44.1%, reflecting factual, neutral reporting. Mythopoesis, presenting success or failure narratives, was relatively rare (8.8%), and de-legitimation/contrastive framing appeared

minimally (2.9%), indicating that most headlines aimed to justify or explain actions rather than directly challenge legitimacy.

Overall, these results suggest that news coverage of the conflict relied heavily on authority and logical rationales to frame events, supplemented by moral and factual framing, with less emphasis on narrative storytelling or direct delegitimization. This pattern aligns with Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework, showing that legitimation in media discourse often combines authority, rational explanation, and moral evaluation to influence audience perceptions.

Table 1 and 2 present the frequency and percentage distribution of legitimation strategies across the 35 headlines analyzed in this study. The results indicate that rationalization is the most dominant strategy, occurring in 94.1% of the dataset. This high frequency suggests that headlines strongly rely on cause-effect logic and goal-oriented explanations to justify political and military actions. By framing events in terms of necessity, retaliation, prevention, or strategic outcomes, rationalization functions as a primary discursive mechanism through which actions are presented as reasonable and inevitable rather than controversial.

The second most frequent strategy is authorization (82.4%), showing that headlines often construct legitimacy through reference to institutional voices, official statements, and expert sources such as political leaders, military officials, intelligence reports, or government agencies. This heavy reliance on authoritative sources strengthens the credibility of the headline discourse and positions the reported claims as institutionally validated. In conflict reporting, authorization therefore functions as a key journalistic resource for transforming political interpretations into seemingly objective and trustworthy accounts.

Moral evaluation appears in 67.6% of the headlines, indicating that evaluative language plays a major role in shaping readers' emotional and ethical interpretations of the conflict. Through value-laden lexical choices, headlines frequently construct narratives of threat, victimhood, success, or culpability, thereby positioning certain actors positively and others negatively. Moral evaluation thus contributes to ideological framing by encouraging readers to interpret events within implicit moral binaries such as legitimate/illegitimate, defensive/aggressive, or heroic/criminal.

The strategy of objectivation/impersonalization occurs in 44.1% of the headlines, reflecting a tendency toward factual reporting through depersonalized or institutionalized framing. By emphasizing events as observable facts (e.g., casualties, strikes, ceasefires, or economic impacts), headlines may appear neutral; however, this neutrality itself can function ideologically by presenting certain interpretations as naturalized realities rather than contested perspectives.

In contrast, mythopoesis is relatively rare (8.8%), suggesting that narrative legitimization through storytelling, hero–villain framing, or symbolic moral lessons is not a dominant feature of the headline discourse in this dataset. This may be due to the compressed structure of headlines, which typically favors short rational or authoritative framing over extended narrative construction. Finally, de-legitimation/contrastive framing appears only once (2.9%), indicating that most headlines in the corpus are oriented toward explaining and legitimizing actions rather than explicitly challenging or undermining them.

Overall, the distribution of strategies suggests that international media coverage of the Iran–Israel conflict relies primarily on rational explanation and institutional authority, supported by moral positioning and selective factual presentation. This pattern supports Van Leeuwen’s (2007) claim that modern discourse frequently legitimizes social action by combining rational argumentation with authoritative endorsement, particularly in contexts involving political conflict and military intervention.

Concluding Remarks

This study investigated how major international news outlets employed legitimization strategies in their headline coverage of the 12-day Iran–Israel conflict of June 2025. Drawing on Van Leeuwen’s (2007) framework and supported by insights from information structure theory, the analysis demonstrated that legitimization in news discourse is systematically constructed through linguistic mechanisms that foreground certain social actors, background others, and frame actions through evaluative, rational, or authoritative lenses. Across the 35 headlines (chosen at random) analyzed, authorizations appeared in more narrative-driven or interpretive headlines.

This study demonstrates that English-language news headlines of the spotted journals covering the 12-day Iran-Israel confrontation in June 2025 employ multiple legitimization strategies to shape readers’ perceptions of the conflict. Through the application of Van Leeuwen’s (2007) framework, the analysis reveals that headlines not only report events but actively construct social, moral, and political legitimacy for the actions of involved actors.

Among the strategies, authorization was the most prominent, with headlines frequently citing institutional authorities, official statements, and military sources to confer credibility. This strategy positioned state and military actions as justified and necessary. Moral evaluation further guided reader perception by framing actors’ behaviors in terms of right and wrong, employing value-laden and emotionally charged language to highlight heroism, culpability, or victimhood. Rationalization provided logical or causal frameworks, portraying actions as strategic, inevitable, or rational responses to unfolding events. While less frequent, mythopoesis contributed to narrative coherence by constructing stories of success, failure, and

symbolic significance, enhancing the headlines' persuasive and emotional impact.

The analysis also underscores the interplay between legitimation strategies and information structure, showing that the syntactic and semantic positioning of information enhances the visibility of authoritative sources, morally significant elements, and critical events. This combination of linguistic and rhetorical strategies demonstrates how headlines actively mediate public understanding, rather than simply summarizing events.

Overall, the findings highlight the central role of media discourse in constructing legitimacy during high-stakes conflicts. By revealing how authority, morality, rationality, and narrative framing intersect in news headlines, this study contributes to both media discourse analysis and conflict communication research. The insights gained also have practical implications for media literacy, enabling readers and policymakers to critically evaluate how news narratives shape public perception. Future research may extend this approach to other media genres, including social media and televised news, to examine how emerging platforms continue to negotiate legitimacy in real time.

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