

## Policy Brief

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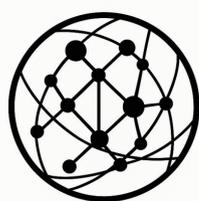
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## Terminal Platform Nodes and Narrative Competition in the U.S.–Israel–Iran Conflict

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### Executive Summary

The 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict illustrates the growing importance of digital information ecosystems in contemporary warfare. Alongside kinetic operations, state and nonstate actors compete to shape global perceptions through narratives circulating across social media platforms.

This policy brief introduces the concept of **Terminal Platform Nodes (TPNs)**, the final distribution points in the digital information ecosystem through which narratives reach mass audiences via algorithmically mediated feeds, recommendation systems, and viral amplification mechanisms.

Drawing on a dataset of **5,000 social media posts** collected across four major platforms: X, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, this analysis examines patterns of narrative competition, platform distribution, content formats, and engagement dynamics.

Three key findings emerge:

- a) **Narrative competition is concentrated at terminal platform nodes rather than message production networks.**
- b) **Platform architecture and algorithmic amplification strongly influence narrative visibility.**
- c) **A small fraction of high-engagement posts disproportionately shapes the information ecosystem.**

These findings suggest that contemporary information competition is increasingly determined by **control over platform distribution dynamics rather than message generation alone.**

### 1. Information Warfare and the Emergence of Terminal Platform Nodes

Traditional analyses of information warfare have focused on propaganda production, messaging strategies, and coordinated influence operations conducted by state or nonstate actors. Within this framework, strategic attention has primarily been directed toward the origin and content of messages.

The digital information environment, however, introduces an additional structural layer: algorithmically mediated distribution systems.

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In practice, narratives influence public perception only when they reach audiences through TPNs. These nodes represent the final stage of information diffusion and include: **algorithmically curated social media feeds, recommendation and ranking systems, trending and viral amplification mechanisms, and short-form video distribution platforms.**

At this stage, information transitions from elite messaging networks into mass public visibility.

Recent developments during the U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict illustrate this dynamic. Social media platforms have witnessed widespread circulation of misleading videos, manipulated imagery, and coordinated narrative campaigns. Once such content enters high-visibility algorithmic pathways, it can spread rapidly across platform ecosystems, amplifying narratives far beyond their original sources.

Understanding these terminal nodes is therefore essential for analyzing how narratives gain visibility, traction, and influence within contemporary information environments.

### 2. Dataset and Analytical Framework

The dataset scope covers 5,000 social media posts across four major platforms collected between February 28 and March 14, 2026.

The dataset includes posts from four major platforms: **X, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram.** Each entry contains metadata fields including: **narrative category, engagement level, content format, hashtags, and timestamp.**

This structure enables analysis of narrative competition at the distribution layer of the information ecosystem, rather than focusing exclusively on message production or origin.

By examining patterns of engagement and content diffusion across platforms, the dataset provides insights into how narratives propagate through terminal distribution infrastructures.

### 3. Platform Distribution

Platform activity within the dataset reveals significant asymmetries in narrative circulation.

**Table 1. Platform Distribution of Conflict-Related Social Media Posts (5,000 Samples)**

Platform	Share
X	50%
Facebook	24%
TikTok	16%
Instagram	10%

The results suggest that X functions as the primary arena for real-time narrative contestation, where political framing, conflict interpretation, and information competition unfold rapidly.

By contrast, short-video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram perform a distinct function within the ecosystem: visual amplification and viral dissemination.

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These differences indicate that contemporary information ecosystems operate as multi-platform environments in which each platform performs complementary roles within a broader narrative system shown in **Figure 1**.

**4. Narrative Competition**

Four primary narrative frames dominate the dataset.

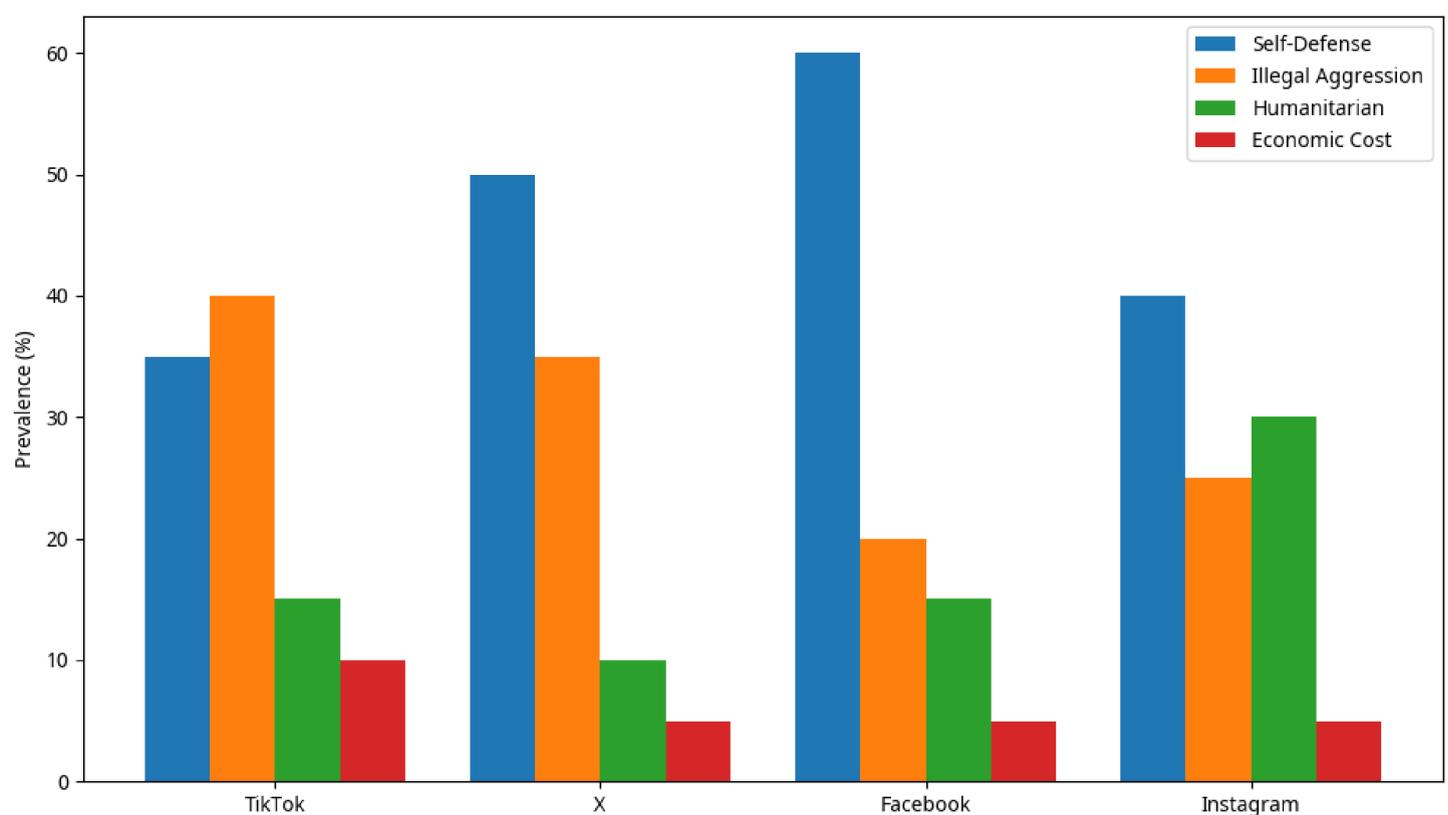
**Table 2. Distribution of Narrative Frames in the U.S.–Israel–Iran Conflict Information Ecosystem**

Narrative Frame	Share
Self-Defense	48.6%
Illegal Aggression	31.9%
Humanitarian Impact	13.8%
Economic Cost	5.7%

The first two categories account for approximately 80 percent of observed content, indicating that narrative competition is primarily structured around legitimacy framing.

Each side attempts to portray its actions as justified while delegitimizing its opponent’s conduct. Such legitimacy contests are a recurring feature of wartime information environments, where narratives frequently emphasize: **defensive justification, victimization, and moral legitimacy**.

**Figure 1** illustrates how narrative frames vary across platforms during the observation period.



**Figure 1: Narrative Prevalence Across Platforms (Feb 28 - Mar 14, 2026)**

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### 5. Content Formats and Algorithmic Visibility

Content format plays a significant role in determining narrative visibility within algorithmically mediated platforms.

**Table 3. Content Format Distribution Across Social Media Platforms**

Content Type	Share
Text Posts	38%
Short Video	33%
Images	18%
Long Video	7%
AI-Generated Media	3%
Infographics	1%

Two formats dominate: **text-based posts and short-form video**.

Short-form video content is particularly influential due to algorithmic prioritization mechanisms embedded within platform recommendation systems.

These systems frequently reward engagement signals, including shares, comments, and watch time, thereby amplifying content that generates strong interaction patterns.

As a result, content format becomes a strategic variable within information competition, shaping how narratives gain visibility and spread across audiences.

### 6. Engagement Dynamics

Engagement patterns within the dataset display a highly unequal distribution.

**Table 4. Engagement Distribution of Conflict-Related Social Media Content**

Engagement Level	Share
High	20%
Medium	50%
Low	30%

This pattern reflects a power-law distribution commonly observed in digital information environments. A relatively small proportion of posts generates disproportionately high engagement and visibility, shaping the broader narrative ecosystem. Consequently, narrative dominance is determined less by the volume of content produced and more by engagement concentration at specific high-impact nodes. These nodes constitute TPNs that ultimately determine which narratives gain widespread visibility.

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### 7. Strategic Implications

The findings generate several broader implications for policymakers.

- a) **Narrative competition increasingly occurs at the distribution layer.** Traditional counter-disinformation policies frequently emphasize message origin or state sponsorship. However, influence outcomes often depend on how narratives circulate through platform distribution systems. Policy frameworks should therefore recognize platform architecture as a central component of information security.
- b) **Short-form media is emerging as a central information battlefield.** Short-video platforms are becoming increasingly influential in shaping narrative visibility, particularly among younger audiences. Governments and institutions must therefore account for how platform design and recommendation systems influence the diffusion of wartime narratives.
- c) **High-engagement nodes disproportionately shape the information ecosystem.** Because influence follows a power-law distribution, a small number of viral posts can significantly reshape narrative environments. Monitoring efforts should therefore prioritize high-engagement nodes and viral amplification pathways, rather than attempting to track all content within the ecosystem.

### 8. Policy Options

Several policy measures could enhance resilience against manipulative narrative dynamics within digital information ecosystems.

- a) **Increase platform transparency.** Governments and regulatory bodies should encourage greater transparency regarding: algorithmic ranking systems, recommendation mechanisms, and content amplification dynamics. Such transparency would improve the ability of researchers and policymakers to analyze information diffusion patterns.
- b) **Develop high-engagement monitoring systems.** Analytical systems should prioritize the identification of viral nodes and high-impact posts, which disproportionately shape narrative environments. Targeted monitoring may prove more effective than broad surveillance of all platform content.
- c) **Promote cross-platform ecosystem analysis.** Information campaigns frequently operate across multiple platforms simultaneously. Policy responses should therefore adopt ecosystem-level monitoring frameworks capable of tracking narrative diffusion across platforms.

### Conclusion

The U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict illustrates how contemporary information competition increasingly unfolds within digital platform ecosystems. In these environments, TPNs serve as the final distribution points through which narratives achieve mass visibility and influence.

The findings presented in this brief suggest that narrative dominance is shaped less by message production than by the dynamics of platform distribution, algorithmic amplification, and engagement concentration. A relatively small number of high-engagement nodes can significantly shape the broader information ecosystem.

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For policymakers, this highlights the need to incorporate platform-level analysis into information security frameworks. Monitoring Terminal Platform Nodes and understanding their role in narrative diffusion will be essential for analyzing modern information warfare and for developing policies that strengthen the resilience of democratic information environments.