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are being rehashed for Iran

A U.S. Media Deep Dive

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A U.S. Media Deep-Dive:

How Iraq-War Tropes Are Being Rehashed for Iran

When seven B-2 Spirit bombers lifted off from Whiteman Air Force Base on 22 June for "Operation Midnight Hammer," network anchors reached for a script first drafted over Baghdad in 2003. **Fox News** called the raid "*the largest B-2 operational strike in U.S. history,*" decorating its homepage with animated cross-sections of the GBU-57 bunker-buster and a ticker celebrating the bombers' flawless return (foxnews.com). Within hours, *The Washington Post* bannered President Trump's boast that Iranian sites were "totally obliterated" (washingtonpost.com). Cable chyrons, satellite loops, and cockpit-cam snippets flooded the feeds—high-definition echoes of the old "shock and awe" reels.

1. Re-inflating the existential peril

For the thirty days that preceded "Midnight Hammer," U.S. television recycled a single, ominous slogan: **Iran is "just weeks from breakout."** Administration officials leaked ever-shrinking timelines, and cable hosts dutifully amplified them until the phrase acquired the force of common sense. On **20 June**, CNN opened its 1 a.m. hour with the White House claim that Iran could finish a bomb "in a couple of weeks," then played a clip of IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi conceding *there is no evidence weapon-design work is under way*—only to pivot straight back to the breakout countdown. transcripts.cnn.com

The next morning on **MSNBC's "Morning Joe,"** Joe Scarborough—usually a Trump antagonist—announced that "*any president, even Hillary Clinton, would have felt compelled to take that strike,*" presenting force as bipartisan destiny. nypost.com Other prime-time panels echoed the line, citing "classified estimates" while ignoring the IAEA's public statement to the UN Security Council two days earlier that its inspectors "have seen no diversion of nuclear material toward a weapon." iaea.org

This choreography mirrors the pre-Iraq build-up down to its props. Then, aluminum tubes and forged yellow-cake memos were waved before

cameras; now, centrifuge tallies stripped of context summon the same specter of invisible WMD. Opinion pages like **The Jerusalem Post** even recycle the old moral: decisive bombing “prevents the single most destabilizing development in the region: a nuclear-armed enemy.” jpost.com Meanwhile Reuters notes that, despite restricted access since Israel’s strikes, the IAEA still can’t point to a weapon-making effort—only to gaps in monitoring created after Washington torpedoed the 2015 deal. reuters.com

In short, a threat manufactured through selective leaks and megaphoned by compliant anchors is doing the same ideological work “WMD” once did for Iraq: converting speculative danger into imminent catastrophe, and dissent into irresponsibility. The target changes; the narrative template remains.

2. Sanitising violence through technical spectacle

The **Washington Post**’s real-time updates on the Iran raid unfolded like a weapons-systems demo. A carousel of satellite close-ups zoomed in on the fresh, 30-metre craters at Fordow and Natanz, each frame captioned with tonnage, blast radius and bomber call-signs. When the official IRNA agency said dozens of technicians had been killed, the blog inserted the distancing tag “*Iranian state media says*”—as though the site’s still-smouldering rubble might be exaggeration—before pivoting back to a Pentagon briefer praising the strike’s “textbook coordination” with Israeli drones (washingtonpost.com). The effect was to quarantine human loss behind a curtain of doubt while giving full credence to the operation’s choreography.

Fox News completed the erasure by ignoring casualties altogether. Its blow-by-blow focused on “*advanced deception corridors*,” record-long B-2 flight times and a colour graphic of the GBU-57 burrowing through 70 metres of rock. Viewers learned the bomb’s fuse delay to the millisecond but nothing about the people crushed beneath the collapsed centrifuge halls. Violence had been repackaged as engineering theatre—the same optic that, two decades earlier, labelled Fallujah’s

civilian neighbourhoods “Objective Serpent” and “Objective Orca” on cable overlays of the Iraq war.

A parallel manoeuvre is playing out in coverage of Gaza. Since October 2023 the **Gaza Ministry of Health** has issued daily casualty tallies—55,000 dead and counting—but U.S. anchors habitually preface the figures with caveats such as “*Hamas-run ministry claims*” (<https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-news-hostage-s-aid-06-11-2025-5c84e29a249b988e1172cfcf4528cdc8>). The rhetorical move suggests partisan inflation even though Hamas, as Gaza’s de facto government, also runs the enclave’s hospitals, vaccination drives, highway repairs and public schools—precisely the administrative infrastructure that generates those death certificates. Dismissing the numbers because the issuer is “Hamas” is like discounting U.S. Census data because it is “Biden-run”; it confuses the political character of the leadership with the basic record-keeping functions any civil authority performs. Human-rights groups and the U.N. have repeatedly relied on the ministry’s statistics, noting their historical accuracy, yet the qualifier persists, allowing networks to sow doubt without presenting contrary evidence.

By branding one set of casualty reports “state media” (Iran) and another “Hamas-run” (Gaza), headline writers transform the civilian dead into suspect data, while military press briefings—replete with laser-guided acronyms—inherit the mantle of neutrality. The asymmetry keeps body counts off the moral ledger and leaves viewers with the impression that what can be measured in tonnage is concrete fact, whereas what can be measured in torn limbs remains speculative. In both arenas, the media’s choreography converts catastrophe into spectacle and bleaches the blood from the screen—an old trick perfected in Iraq, revived now for Tehran and Gaza alike.

3. The fetish of heroic hardware

If the war’s moral logic is shaky, its engineering still dazzles—and U.S. outlets lean hard on that dazzle. **Fox News** pushed out not one but two glossy explainers on the GBU-57A/B “Massive Ordnance Penetrator,” complete with CGI of the 13.6-ton shell corkscrewing through seventy metres of limestone before its time-delayed fuse blossoms underground.

One article broke down the bomb's vacuformed steel casing and "smart" tail-kit fins, the next marvelled at the 125-aircraft lattice of KC-46 tankers, EA-18G Growler jammers, RQ-170 surveillance drones, and Israeli F-35I escorts that shepherded the B-2s across three combatant commands

(<https://www.foxnews.com/world/operation-midnight-hammer-explained>; <https://www.foxnews.com/us/bunker-buster-missile-iran>).

The Washington Post followed with "inside the Situation Room" stills: Donald Trump hunched over a lightboard, stabbing a gloved finger at colour-coded target rings, the captions praising a "precision strike package" whose kill-chain stretched from Missouri to Isfahan (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-iran-situation-room-photos>). The photos offered no text on treaty law or civilian blast zones—only the iconography of command.

CNN filled its lower-third with a rolling "WEAPON OF THE DAY" ribbon and looped grainy cockpit infrared of Natanz moments before impact, the pilot's heads-up display blinking "ARM" in lime green (<https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2025/06/22/iran-strike-b2-footage>). Anchors bantered about radar-absorbent polymer and fuel-air ratios while a ticker at the bottom noted, almost as an afterthought, that Iranian agencies were "claiming casualties not yet verified."

Every frame told the same meta-story: American destruction is so exquisitely engineered that it transcends politics. Hardware becomes a character—majestic, heroic—while the people beneath it recede to abstraction. The audience is invited to inhabit the bomber's-eye view, feel the turbine hum, and admire a fuse delay calibrated to the millisecond. In that vantage point, the strike reads like a triumph of civilisation's ingenuity, not a policy choice with blood consequences. It is the legacy of the first Gulf War's "smart bomb" footage: show the crosshairs, omit the aftermath, and let the technology confer its own moral absolution.

4. Manufacturing consent by curating dissent

Dissent does surface—but it is staged, brief, and almost instantly submerged beneath the dominant soundtrack of inevitability. **Politico**

ran a tidy sidebar quoting Senator Rand Paul and Representative Thomas Massie, both libertarians, who complained that the president had bypassed Congress and violated the War Powers Resolution. Yet the same piece, in its third paragraph, assured readers that *"MAGA largely falls in line on Trump's Iran strikes,"* converting a constitutional dispute into a minor intramural note before reaffirming overall party unity (politico.com). The headline—*"Pro-Trump GOP rallies around Iran operation after brief wobble"*—performed the closing ritual: dissent acknowledged, then neutralised.

European push-back met a similar fate. Comments from Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign-policy chief, warning that the raid risked "regional conflagration" appeared three clicks below *The Washington Post's* crater slideshow, wedged between ads and a minute-by-minute timeline of Trump's flight to Mar-a-Lago (washingtonpost.com). By the time readers scrolled that far, prime-time segments had already elevated "independent" analysts from think tanks such as the **Foundation for Defense of Democracies**—whose board lists Raytheon's former chief lobbyist—and **CSIS**, which counts Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin among its top donors. These experts filled the screen with talk of "credible deterrence" and "surgical overmatch," never disclosing their institutions' funding pipelines.

The economics of access deepen the filter. Networks granted cockpit video and satellite stills must follow embargo terms that forbid airing them alongside graphic footage of casualties. Outlets that ask harder questions—about secondary sanctions on chemotherapy drugs, or about the legality of pre-emptive force—find the feed dries up. Producers, scrambling for visuals to hold ratings, return to the steady tap of Pentagon-approved imagery, which arrives pre-packaged with language cues ("precision," "neutralised," "time-critical target"). The cycle rewards those who keep to the choreography and quietly penalises those who break tempo.

Audience experience, therefore, resolves into a single harmonic mood-track: the president acts, the allies nod, the experts concur, and any contrary note is either quarantined in the margins or framed as naïve isolationism. By the time a viewer reaches the weather or sports, the war already feels pre-approved—as if public deliberation

had occurred somewhere off-stage and concluded in favour of the strike. In reality, deliberation never took place; what passed for debate was a managed display that allowed a flicker of discord only long enough to prove the system's "balance," then folded it back into consensus.

5. Algorithms, attention, and the invisibility of sanctions

Open any social-platform feed the day after the strikes and you will see Fox's looping CGI of a GBU-57 drilling into bedrock, satellite stills that look like burn-marks on the moon, and cockpit HUD footage bathed in lime-green night-vision. TikTok's "For You" scroll alone served billions of war-clips during the first 48 hours, a pattern the *Washington Post* has documented since the Gaza assault of 2023, when hashtags such as **#Israel** and **#Palestine** surged past eight billion views in a week (Washington Post). The same algorithmic bias now privileges the fiery glamour of bunker strikes over, say, an AP wire note that Treasury unveiled a fresh tranche of secondary sanctions on Iran's Atomic Energy Organization barely two days after the bombing (AP News).

That attention dividend feeds newsroom decisions. Editors hungry for clicks commission more weapons renders, invite more retired generals, and quietly sideline stories about hospital supply chains. The result: a high-decibel feed of "obliteration" imagery, while material suffering slides off-screen. In Isfahan, where the blast shockwaves cracked windows thirty kilometres away, pharmacists already ration anaesthetics and insulin. Local dailies have carried photographs of hand-written "No Insulin" signs taped to clinic doors, confirming a shortage first flagged months ago by Iranian reporters and later analysed by U.S. think-tankers as sanctions-driven (Iran Focus; Stimson Center).

Yet those stories rarely enter prime time. Disinformation trackers note that visually gripping-but false-clips of "missiles over Tel Aviv" or "Iranians cheering in Tehran" outperform sober NGO footage by 20-to-1 on X and Instagram, a disparity now so routine that Euroverify

devoted an entire memo to it during the first week of the Israel-Iran shooting war (Euronews). The major U.S. outlets, chasing the same engagement curves, echo that hierarchy: bunker cams lead; ward reports, if they air at all, arrive after the last commercial break.

The sanctions story therefore remains a faint background hum. FinCEN's June advisory warning banks to police Iranian "shadow tankers" barely registered beyond specialist pages (FinCEN Advisory). Treasury's blacklisting of five more nuclear-linked firms drew a two-sentence mention under cable crawls dominated by heat-signature replays. Meanwhile, Iran's Health Ministry says 300 essential drugs are in short supply and at least a hundred are no longer available—a statistic that has yet to make the evening broadcast lead.

Algorithms did not invent selective vision, but they turbo-charge it. Footage that flatters the hardware saturates the feed; images that indict the policy languish in low-traffic corners. In that incentive structure, the punitive machinery of sanctions—less cinematic than a B-2 silhouette—remains largely invisible, even as it throttles chemotherapy wards and neonatal clinics. Thus the attention economy completes the circle of consent: spectacular violence rises to the top of every scrollable stack, while the slow violence of economic siege slips quietly out of frame.

6. The fantasy of a grateful populace

Every 21st-century U.S. war script requires an arch-villain, and post-strike coverage has duly recast His Eminence, the Grand Ayatollah, Ali Khamenei in the role once filled by Saddam Hussein. **Fox News** built an entire news cycle on the claim—voiced by an Israeli parliamentarian—that it is "*outrageous to negotiate with an evil, jihadist regime*" and that any deal short of Khamenei's downfall would betray "the free world" (Fox News). On **NewsNation**, anchor Leland Vittert went further: "*Look up 'evil' in the dictionary and you see a picture of that guy, the Ayatollah,*" before asserting—without evidence—that Tehran has "*cheered more American deaths than any enemy since Hitler*" ([NewsNation](#)).

Cable panels adopted the trope wholesale. CNN's June 23 round-table invoked the 2003 mantra—"the Iraqi people will greet us as liberators"—now remixed as "millions in Tehran will welcome the end of the mullahs." Representative Cory Mills assured viewers that Iranians "hate their supreme leader more than they fear our bombs," a claim the anchor let sail by unchallenged (CNN Transcript). Opinion writers piled on: a Fox commentary hailed Trump for facing down a regime that "shoots protesters in the streets" and declared that the "great Iranian people" only await an American-made turning point (Fox News Opinion).

What's missing is any polling from inside Iran, where sanctions, not bombs, top public grievances, and where nationalist sentiment tends to spike after foreign attacks. Instead, two stock images substitute for evidence: exile elites like Reza Pahlavi, broadcast in studio lighting, and 2022's hijab-burning protest footage, looped endlessly as a visual shorthand for unanimous rebellion. By isolating the supreme leader as an almost metaphysical evil—and conflating his overthrow with national salvation—media coverage repeats the Iraq-era alchemy that turned "Saddam" into shorthand for an entire, supposedly grateful, populace. Once the villain archetype is secured, every sortie sounds like liberation and every casualty report reads like collateral on the road to freedom.

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