



Rhetoric, Identity, and Hegemony: Constructing Khamenei's Counter-Hegemonic Discourse in the 2025 Iran–Israel War

Najahan Musyafak^{1*}, Abdul Karim², Wildan Azkal Fikri³, & Citra Orwela⁴

Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Semarang

Yayasan Pendidikan Islam NASIMA, Semarang

Universitas Sriwijaya, Palembang

Flinders University of South Australia

email. najahan_musyafak@walisongo.ac.id¹,

ABSTRACT

The Iran–Israel conflict in June 2025 demonstrated that contemporary geopolitical struggles take place not only in the military realm but also in the realm of discourse, where meaning, legitimacy, and ideological hegemony are produced and contested through political communication. Although the study of political rhetoric in conflict has advanced, research integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, rhetorical theory, and hegemony theory to examine the rhetoric of political-religious leaders, particularly during acute crisis episodes, remains limited. This study aims to analyze the construction of resistance discourse in Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's rhetoric during the conflict and to uncover the discursive mechanisms linking language to power and ideology. The study employs a qualitative approach based on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis method, supported by Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory and Antonio Gramsci's hegemony theory, for 12 of Khamenei's official public statements. The results show that at the textual level, Khamenei constructs Iran's identity as an opponent of Western domination through antagonistic diction and symbolic metaphors. At the level of discursive practice, this rhetoric is circulated by global media to reinforce the narrative of the axis of resistance. At the level of social practice, this rhetoric reproduces anti-imperialist ideology and forms a counter-hegemonic discourse. These findings have theoretical implications for expanding the integrative CDA model and practical implications for understanding the role of media in contemporary geopolitical conflicts.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, rhetoric of resistance, hegemony, Iran Israel conflict

INTRODUCTION

The Iran–Israel conflict that escalated into open confrontation in June 2025, following Israeli airstrikes on Iranian nuclear and military facilities in April and October 2024, marked a turning point in West Asia's security landscape, showing that contemporary interstate conflict unfolds not only militarily but discursively. The "twelve-day war" was thus also a battle of narratives contesting legitimacy, morality, and ideological standing before domestic and international audiences. Within this context, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's public statements, as Iran's supreme leader with ultimate authority over foreign policy, constitute the primary channel for shaping the state's official narrative, which is later reproduced across the regime's communication apparatus.

Studying Khamenei's resistance discourse is increasingly relevant given that recent scholarship consistently shows Iranian political rhetoric constructed through a binary opposition between Iran as the moral, oppressed party and Israel, the West as aggressor-hegemon. A parallel pattern appears in studies of the contested meaning of "terrorism" between Iran and the United States, demonstrating that differing interpretations of political events reflect discursive struggles and subjective interests rather than objective fact (Omid & Mobini, 2022).

Recent studies further confirm that the shift from proxy war to direct confrontation has intensified offensive rhetoric on both sides; Khamenei's vow to "punish" Israel exemplifies Iran's discursive defense posture amid escalation (Popalzay et al., 2025). Critical discourse analysis of global digital responses further shows Khamenei's rhetoric is not only state-produced but circulated, debated, and reproduced across digital media worldwide, simultaneously strengthening and delegitimizing the "axis of resistance" narrative (Ideological Warfare in the Digital Comment Section, 2026), justifying an in-depth Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reading of his rhetoric of resistance in the 2025 conflict.

The study of language and power in political communication is rooted in the CDA tradition, which treats language as a social practice that shapes, sustains, and transforms power relations (N. Fairclough, 2010). Political symbolism research emphasizes language, symbols, and representation as instruments of legitimacy and perception-shaping (Rahmani & Saeed, 2024), aligning with Bourdieu's (1989) notion of symbolic power. Digital populism studies add that antagonistic narratives and constructions of "the other" are strategically deployed to mobilize support and deepen polarization (Laclau & Mouffe, 2019).

Applying CDA to conflict-era political rhetoric has grown rapidly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Middle East escalation. Ushchyna & Szczyrbak (2025) show how Zelensky discursively constructed his leadership identity through lexical, grammatical, and stylistic choices, while Mennecke (2024)

reveals Putin's systematic discursive derogation of Ukrainian authorities, using labels such as "Kyiv regime" and "neo-Nazi," to legitimize invasion and construct an "enemy-other." Similarly, [Hamed & Alqurashi \(2025\)](#) find that Trump and Harris deployed crisis framing, nationalism, and emotional resonance differently in the 2024 US election. These studies converge on rhetoric's dual function: representing reality, constructing identity, and legitimizing power, yet this remains untested for non-Western political-religious leaders such as Khamenei.

Within the Iranian context, [Omid & Mobini \(2022\)](#) show that Iran-US disputes over "terrorism" reflect discursive struggle rather than objective fact, while other studies confirm the Iran-as-moral-party/West-as-hegemon binary has been consistently reproduced across decades ([Cingöz et al., 2024](#); [Dančo, 2024](#)). A computational study of Israeli delegitimization discourse shows that large-scale, language-model-based approaches can quantitatively detect symbolic-attack patterns ([Rivlin-Angert & Mor-Lan, 2025](#)), though at the cost of interpretive depth central to qualitative CDA.

These strands intersect in two tendencies: reliance on a single theoretical framework (pure Fairclough, purely computational, or purely lexical) without sustained inter-theoretical dialogue; and a focus on Western or post-Soviet leaders (Zelensky, Putin, Trump, Harris) rather than political-religious leaders like Khamenei, whose combined authority remains underexamined within CDA integrated with rhetoric and hegemony theory. [Donoghue \(2018\)](#) notes CDA's engagement with Gramsci's ideas remains superficial, underexploiting war of position and common sense for reading discourse clashes as hegemonic struggle, the point of departure for this study, which integrates Fairclough's CDA, Burke's rhetoric of identification, and Gramsci's hegemony to read Khamenei's rhetoric in the 2025 conflict.

Three research gaps motivate this study. Methodologically, research remains polarized between large-scale computational approaches ([Rivlin-Angert & Mor-Lan, 2025](#)) and single-layer qualitative approaches, leaving room for work integrating CDA's depth with rhetoric and hegemony theory. Theoretically, [Donoghue \(2018\)](#) shows that CDA-Gramsci engagement remains underdeveloped, while Burke's identification and symbolic action have been applied mainly to Western domestic, educational, and marketing contexts; no study integrates Fairclough, Burke, and Gramsci to analyze a single leader within one time-bound conflict episode.

Thematically, prior Khamenei studies, such as [Hovsepian-Bearce's \(2015\)](#) tracing of his ideological evolution from 1962–2014, Foucauldian analyses of Iranophobic discourse (2006–2024), and civilizational-stance studies, treat his rhetoric as a long-term phenomenon rather than a crisis-specific response, while [Omid & Mobini \(2022\)](#) show that meaning-making in Iranian discourse is highly context-dependent; none focuses on Khamenei's June 2025 "twelve-day war"

rhetoric.

This study thus analyzes twelve of Khamenei's public statements from the 2025 conflict, combining Fairclough's CDA, Burke's rhetoric, and Gramsci's hegemony (Itzhakov, 2023), a combination never before applied to his resistance rhetoric. It differs from prior work in five respects. First, thematically, it treats Khamenei's rhetoric as a response to a short, acute crisis rather than long-term ideology, unlike Hovsepian-Bearce (2016) or Iranophobia studies. Second, methodologically, it integrates three frameworks simultaneously, unlike single-lens Foucauldian (Rivlin-Angert & Mor-Lan, 2025), purely computational (Rivlin-Angert & Mor-Lan, 2025), or CDA-psychometric (Ushchyna & Szczyrbak, 2025) approaches.

Third, its twelve-statement corpus contrasts with the 50-speech, 18-year Iranophobia corpus or the 10,410-sentence, three-decade corpus of Rivlin-Angert & Mor-Lan (2025), enabling deeper analysis. Fourth, it layers Fairclough's three CDA dimensions with Burke's identification and Gramsci's war of position, rather than relying on single instruments such as derogatory labeling (Mennecke, 2024) or automatic classification (Rivlin-Angert & Mor-Lan, 2025). Fifth, it shows that ideological reproduction in geopolitical conflict occurs through Burkean symbolic identification, producing Gramscian hegemonic consensus and counter-hegemonic discourse, directly addressing Donoghue's (2018) call for deeper CDA-Gramsci elaboration.

The novelty of this research lies both in its object, Khamenei's unstudied 2025 rhetoric, and its integrated CDA–rhetoric–hegemony model, replicable for other political-religious leaders in geopolitical conflict. Guided by these gaps, this study analyzes the construction of resistance discourse in Khamenei's 2025 rhetoric using Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional CDA, combined with Burke's (1969) rhetorical identification and Gramscian hegemony, to reveal discursive mechanisms linking language to power and ideology (Bourdieu, 2018; Laclau & Mouffe, 2019).

Three interrelated objectives follow Fairclough's dimensions. First, at the textual level, it examines how antagonistic diction, symbolic metaphors, and collective pronouns construct Iran's identity as an actor opposing US–Israeli dominance, paralleling collective-identity studies (Rahmani & Saeed, 2024; Ushchyna & Szczyrbak, 2025). Second, at the level of discursive practice, it analyzes how the axis-of-resistance narrative is produced and circulated transnationally through global media, extending findings that conflict discourse transcends domestic audiences (Rivlin-Angert & Mor-Lan, 2025; Mennecke, 2024). Third, at the level of social practice, it examines how this rhetoric reproduces anti-imperialist ideology and legitimizes Iran's geopolitical position, consistent with discourse as resistance to domination through alternative narrative

production (Prisilia et al., 2025; M. T. Said, 2013; Cingöz et al., 2024).

Beyond these CDA-based objectives, the study tests the explanatory power of Burke's (1969) identification and symbolic action in reading how Khamenei builds symbolic closeness with audiences through a shared enemy, while operationalizing Gramsci's war of position and common sense, concepts Donoghue (2018) deems underelaborated in CDA, to explain how his rhetoric consolidates hegemonic consensus and counter-hegemonic discourse against Western domination. Integrating these objectives, the study addresses the identified gaps while offering a replicable CDA–rhetoric–hegemony model applicable to other political-religious leaders, including Zelensky (Ushchyna & Szczyrbak, 2025) and Putin (Mennecke, 2024), thereby enriching political communication and CDA scholarship.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is a qualitative study using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model (N. Fairclough, 2010) to analyze the construction of resistance discourse in Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's rhetoric during the twelve-day Iran–Israel conflict in June 2025. CDA was chosen because it views language as a social practice that not only reflects reality but also shapes power relations, ideology, and social identity (N. Fairclough, 2010). The study focuses on the resistance discourse in Khamenei's statements, while the subject is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's political and religious leader.

This study is a library-based research conducted in a digital setting, analyzing documents and transcripts published by international media outlets during the conflict period. The research data consisted of 12 public statements by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, obtained from transcripts of official speeches and from reports by credible international media outlets, such as Reuters, The Guardian, ABC News, Al Jazeera, France 24, Anadolu Agency, and Tasnim News Agency. Data collection was conducted using documentation techniques to identify, select, and classify statements directly related to the 2025 Iran–Israel conflict.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and cross-verification with English translations (Denzine et al., 2009). The units of analysis included words, phrases, clauses, metaphors, symbols, pronouns, and sentence constructions that represent collective identity, political legitimacy, representations of the enemy, and narratives of resistance and anti-imperialism.

Data analysis was conducted in stages, integrating rhetorical theory (Burke, 1969), CDA (N. Fairclough, 2010), and hegemony theory (Gramsci, 1995). The first stage uses Burke's rhetorical analysis through open coding to identify seven rhetorical aspects: the main theme of the statement, linguistic symbolism, grammatical structure, representation of identity and actors, political motives,

rhetorical context, and intertextuality.

The second stage applies Fairclough's three dimensions of CDA, which include textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, to reveal how discourse is produced, circulated, and linked to the broader socio-political context. The third stage uses Gramsci's theory of hegemony as an interpretive framework to explain how Khamenei's rhetoric constructs political legitimacy, reproduces anti-imperialist ideology, and produces counter-hegemonic discourse against Western domination. The integration of these three approaches enables a comprehensive analysis of the relationship among language, power, ideology, and resistance in contemporary geopolitical conflicts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's statements in response to threats from Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu during the 12-day conflict between Iran and Israel reflect a powerful, systematic, and ideological rhetorical construction. This rhetoric serves not only as a response to external geopolitical pressures but also as a means of articulating national identity and consolidating the legitimacy of domestic power. Within the context of political discourse, this leadership rhetoric plays a strategic role in framing the conflict as a moral struggle between the oppressor (imperialists) and the oppressed (Muslims), as explained in ideological discourse theory by [N. Fairclough \(2010\)](#) and [Van Dijk \(2006b\)](#).



Source: [\(Reuters Newspaper, 2025\)](#)

Figure 1. Ayatollah Khamenei's speech on June 26, 2025

To comprehensively analyze Khamenei's twelve statements, a structural-rhetorical approach based on Kenneth Burke's theory was adopted, employing seven rhetorical steps, including statement identification, linguistic symbolism, grammatical structure, implicit ideology, political motivation, rhetorical context, and intertextuality. These steps allow for the uncovering of complex layers of meaning within Khamenei's statements ([Burke, 1969](#)).

Table 1. Identification of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Statements

Statement	Indicators	Interpretation
The Islamic Republic delivered a heavy slap to the US's face.	Victory	Constructing Iran as a successful actor against global powers
Iran achieved victory over the Zionist regime.	Victory	Building a narrative of Iran's success in confronting Israel
The US entered the war to save the Zionist regime, but achieved nothing.	Anti-imperialism	The United States, as a hegemonic power, is supporting Israel
We will never surrender to the United States.	Sovereignty	Asserting Iran's political independence and resistance to external pressure
If aggression occurs again, the US will pay a heavy price.	Threats	Strategy warns of consequences for attackers
The Islamic Republic has access to key US centers in the region and can act whenever necessary."	Threats	Demonstrating Iran's military capacity and strengthening the image of national strength
The Iranian nation stood firm and was not defeated.	Sovereignty	Strengthening the Iranian nation's identity and resilience in the face of conflict
Resistance against the Zionist regime is a source of honor."	Resistance Narrative	Framing resistance as a legitimate moral and ideological act
America sought Iran's unconditional surrender	Anti-imperialism	The United States is a dominant force controlling other countries
The enemy failed to break the will of the Iranian people	Resistance Narrative	Emphasizing the collective resilience of the Iranian people in the face of external pressure
Iran's response demonstrated its power and determination	Sovereignty	Iran, as a sovereign nation, is defending its interests
The axis of resistance will continue its struggle	Resistance Narrative	Emphasizing the continuity of ideological struggle and transnational solidarity

Source: Compiled from various sources

Table 1 shows Iran's position on the presence of America and Israel as a threat and its anti-imperialist stance. The analysis found that Khamenei consistently uses antagonistic metaphors and diction, such as "America has been slapped in the face" and "Israel is a dog controlled by the US," to portray Iran as a moral force opposing Western hegemony. This symbolism reflects an effort to build domestic and regional solidarity through emotional, confrontational, and

historically charged language. This finding supports the view that language in Middle Eastern political discourse does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs identity, power relations, and legitimacy through a structured anti-imperialist narrative (Bourdieu, 1989; Turner & Said, 1981).

Table 2. Kenneth Burke's Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetorical Aspects	Focus of Analysis	Indicators
Statement Identification	Central issues and messages conveyed	Resistance narrative, victory, threat, sovereignty, anti-imperialism
Symbolic Language	Identification of symbols, metaphors, and ideological terms to construct political meaning	Metaphors, religious symbols, national symbols, and ideological terms
Sentence Structure	Language choices to reinforce ideology	Pronouns, modality, active/passive voice, repetition, affirmation
Implied Ideology	Construction of self-identity and opponents	Representations of "we," "Iran," "Muslims," "enemy," "West," and "Israel"
Political Motives	Ideological and political goals behind statements	Political legitimacy, mobilization of support, solidarity, resistance
Rhetorical Context	Relationships between actions, actors, and situations underlying the rhetoric	Iran–Israel conflict, external threats, political responses, resistance strategies
Intertextuality	References to narratives, history, ideologies, or other events to strengthen arguments	References: Palestine, Islamic Revolution of Iran, anti-imperialism, axis of resistance

Source: Compiled from various sources

Based on Table 2 above, this study identified the focus of Khamenei's statements, revealed through interpretations of several rhetorical aspects, which are described in detail as follows:

Analysis of Statements, Symbols, and Media Political Meaning

Khamenei's most striking statements were when he stated that "America has slapped them in the face" and that "US intervention will cause irreparable damage." This demonstrated an aggressive stance against external threats, particularly the United States and Israel, which are seen as entities seeking to dominate the Middle East region. This statement affirmed Iran's position as a party unafraid of international pressure. Other statements, such as "Israel is a dog controlled by the US" or "We will show no mercy," pointed to confrontation with the major powers considered Iran's main enemies.

Identification is a rhetorical mechanism that allows a leader to build a shared identity with an audience through shared symbols, values, and interests. Analysis of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's statements shows that the identification strategy is

constructed through an antagonistic construction between Iran as a representative of resistance and the United States and Israel as representatives of external threats. The statement that Iran had dealt a "harsh slap to America's face" and the warning that US intervention would cause "irreparable damage" served as symbolic acts that affirmed Iran's courage, steadfastness, and sovereignty in the face of global powers. Identification was built not only through shared values but also through the presence of a common enemy, thereby enabling the formation of collective solidarity (consubstantiality). Khamenei's rhetoric served as a symbolic instrument uniting Iranian society in a framework of resistance against US and Israeli domination.

From the perspective of [Fairclough's \(2010\)](#) Critical Discourse Analysis, this identification strategy is evident at the textual level through the use of collective pronouns such as "we," "the Iranian nation," and "the Islamic Republic," which consistently construct a unified national identity. In contrast, the United States and Israel are represented as aggressive actors threatening the nation's sovereignty and dignity. This binary representation of "us" and "them" demonstrates what [Dijk \(2013\)](#) calls ideological polarization, namely the tendency of political discourse to present one's own group positively (positive self-presentation) and the opposing group negatively (negative other-presentation). At the level of discursive practice, these statements are produced through official speeches and circulated by international media, thus expanding the narrative of Iranian resistance to a global audience. This finding aligns with [Wodak & Meyer \(2001\)](#), who explain that political discourse functions as a mechanism for the reproduction of identity and legitimacy through the production and distribution of meaning. Khamenei demonstrates to both domestic and transnational audiences the importance of an anti-hegemonic ideological orientation.

This identification strategy is further reinforced through the use of dehumanizing and absolutist language in representing the opposing party. The designation of Israel as a US-controlled entity and the assertion that Iran will not tolerate external aggression create a clear symbolic boundary between internal and external groups. This mechanism demonstrates identification through division, the process of establishing internal unity through the rejection of a common enemy. [N. Fairclough \(2010\)](#) views this practice as a form of ideological representation that works through language to legitimize certain political positions while delegitimizing the opposing party. At the level of social practice, this strategy reproduces the anti-imperialist ideology that has been the political foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1979 Revolution. Khamenei's rhetoric demonstrates a discursive practice that systematically produces collective identity, strengthens political legitimacy, and generates counter-hegemonic discourse in global geopolitical contestation.

Language is a symbolic action that represents reality and shapes how

individuals understand and respond to socio-political realities. In Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's rhetoric, linguistic symbolism is evident through the use of confrontational metaphors such as "America has been slapped in the face," "Israel is a dog controlled by America," and "axis of resistance." These symbols function as linguistic ornaments and rhetorical devices that construct specific political meanings. In this context, the "slap" metaphor represents a symbolic victory over a hegemonic power. At the same time, the representation of Israel as a US-controlled entity serves to delegitimize political opponents while strengthening Iran's image as an independent and sovereign actor. In the digital context, [Hariyanto et al. \(2024\)](#) show that symbolic representation in political communication can shape political hyperreality, influencing how the public understands identity, power, and conflict. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, Khamenei's linguistic symbolism reflects representational practices steeped in ideology and power relations ([N. Fairclough, 2010](#)). At the textual level, the use of antagonistic metaphors, terms such as "Zionist regime," "aggression," "enemy," and "resistance," demonstrates a representational strategy that constructs a binary opposition between Iran as a symbol of justice and resistance and the United States and Israel as symbols of domination and oppression. This finding aligns with [Prihartono & Suharyo \(2022\)](#), who explain that political discourse operates through mechanisms of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Through this symbolism, Khamenei constructs an interpretive framework that encourages audiences to understand conflict as a moral struggle. This argument is reinforced by [Ali \(2025\)](#), who found that symbols and narratives in digital media function as instruments for mobilizing collective identity and group solidarity.

At the level of discursive and social practice, Khamenei's symbols function as instruments for reproducing anti-imperialist ideology and forging transnational solidarity. ([N. Fairclough, 2010](#)). explains that political discourse gains power through the processes of production, distribution, and consumption that enable a narrative to become dominant in the public sphere. In this context, symbols such as "resistance," "national dignity," and "axis of resistance" are produced through official speeches and then circulated by international media, thus building a network of meaning that transcends Iran's territorial boundaries. The findings of [Prasetyo & Sofyan \(2023\)](#) strengthen this argument by showing that political discourse works as a mechanism for the reproduction of ideology and the legitimization of power through symbolic representations that are continuously reproduced in the public sphere. The symbolism of language in Khamenei's rhetoric shows that political language serves as both a means of communication and an arena for the struggle for meaning, legitimacy, and hegemony.

Sentence Structure in the Construction of Ideology and Political Identity

The sentence structure of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's statements demonstrates that the grammatical choices are not neutral but serve as rhetorical instruments to construct Iran's political legitimacy, collective identity, and ideological position. The statements "We will not surrender," "The Iranian nation has achieved victory," and "America has nothing to gain from this war" demonstrate the dominance of declarative sentences that are firm, definite, and leave no room for ambiguity.

This structure serves to build collective confidence in Iran's moral and political correctness. Rhetoric that uses absolute declarative forms tends to strengthen the identification process by encouraging audiences to accept the same values, beliefs, and goals as their leaders (Burke, 1969). This finding aligns with Hariyanto et al. (2024), who demonstrated that constructing assertive and symbolic political language can create a political hyperreality that strengthens group identity and the legitimacy of political actors in the digital public sphere.

From the perspective of Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis* (2010), Khamenei's sentence structure demonstrates representational practices that reproduce power relations by positioning actors within syntactic structures. At the textual level, Iran is consistently positioned as an active subject performing actions, such as resisting, responding, winning, and defending sovereignty. In contrast, the United States and Israel are represented as failing, aggressive, or dependent on other powers. This pattern demonstrates an agency attribution strategy that assigns positive capacity for action to one's own group and negative capacity to the opposing group.

Van Dijk (2006) refers to this practice as positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, namely the tendency of political discourse to portray one's own group positively and others negatively. This finding is reinforced by Prasetyo & Sofyan (2023), who found that linguistic structures in political discourse function as mechanisms for reproducing ideology and legitimacy through the unequal representation of actors.

Furthermore, the use of strong modalities such as "will," "will not," "must," and "definitely" indicates a high level of commitment to the stated political action. Modality is a linguistic device that serves to assert the speaker's authority and ideological position. Statements such as "We will not surrender" or "America will pay a heavy price" demonstrate categorical modality, leaving no room for negotiation or doubt. From Burke's perspective, this grammatical form serves to construct an image of strong, consistent, and trustworthy leadership. At the same time, this modality reinforces the narrative of resistance by portraying Iran as an actor with the political capacity and will to confront external threats.

At the level of social practice, grammatical patterns that emphasize collective subjects such as "we," "the Iranian nation," and "the Islamic Republic"

demonstrate a systematic effort to unite the state, society, and leader into a single symbolic identity. From Burke's perspective, this strategy reflects consubstantiality, a condition in which the leader and audience are perceived as sharing interests and identities. Fairclough (2010) views the use of collective pronouns as a discursive mechanism that reproduces particular social identities and political ideologies. Meanwhile, from Gramsci's perspective (2013), this grammatical construction functions to build ideological consensus and strengthen moral and intellectual leadership through language that emphasizes unity and shared struggle.

Khamenei's statement that "Iran will never surrender to intimidation by arrogant powers" demonstrates an ideological construct that positions Iran as a symbol of sovereignty and resistance to external domination. This statement is a symbolic act that not only conveys a political stance but also fosters identification between the leader and the people through shared values of courage, national dignity, and rejection of subordination. The term "arrogant powers" serves as an ideological symbol for the United States and its allies, without necessarily naming them directly. Through this symbol, Khamenei establishes a clear identity boundary between Iran as an oppressed but dignified party and external parties as representatives of domination. This choice of language demonstrates an ideologically charged representational practice, framing the conflict not as a simple geopolitical competition but as a moral struggle between sovereignty and domination. At the level of social practice, this discourse reproduces the anti-imperialist ideology that has been the political foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1979 Revolution.

Another statement, stating that "any aggression against the Iranian nation will be met with firm resistance," demonstrates how the concept of resistance is constructed as a national political identity. This rhetoric serves to build identification through a narrative of shared threat, requiring the public to identify themselves as part of a community defending its existence. This strategy strengthens internal solidarity because the audience is placed in the same position as the leader, namely as a subject who must resist an external threat. From Fairclough's CDA perspective, this sentence structure demonstrates strong, categorical modality, thereby creating a sense of certainty, legitimacy, and political authority. The use of the word "resistance" is not simply a military response, but rather an ideological category that frames Iran's actions as legitimate and moral.

The ideological dimension becomes even more apparent when Khamenei states that "resistance against oppression is a moral and religious obligation for Muslims" and that "the Iranian nation is at the forefront of the struggle against the system of global domination." These statements demonstrate that the rhetoric of resistance is not only rooted in nationalism but also derives legitimacy from

religious doctrine. Religion serves as a powerful symbolic resource for creating identification because it provides shared values, beliefs, and goals widely accepted by audiences. By linking resistance to religious obligation, Khamenei transforms a geopolitical conflict into a moral struggle with sacred dimensions. Fairclough (2010) explains that this kind of practice is a form of ideological articulation, namely, the use of language to connect political interests to a value system considered universal and legitimate.

At the level of social practice, these statements demonstrate the reproduction of an anti-imperialist ideology that consistently positions the United States and Israel as symbols of global domination. In contrast, Iran is positioned as a representation of resistance and justice. Khamenei's rhetoric demonstrates this process by framing resistance as natural, moral, and in keeping with Iran's national and religious identity. Symbols such as "resistance," "national dignity," "oppression," and "global domination" serve as rhetorical devices that unite the leader and audience within a shared framework of meaning. The ideology implicit in Khamenei's statements reflects his political stance on the Iran–Israel conflict and also serves as a mechanism for constructing collective identity and gaining political legitimacy. These findings align with Fairclough (2010), Gramsci (2013), and Prasetyo et al. (2025), who suggest that political discourse is an arena for the production of ideology and legitimacy that operates through language, symbols, and social representations. Political Motives and Rhetorical Context in Public Statements

Khamenei's statement that "the Iranian nation will never submit to intimidation by arrogant powers" suggests a political motive to bolster domestic legitimacy by mobilizing national identity. From a rhetorical perspective, language functions as a symbolic act that allows leaders to build identification between themselves and their audiences through shared symbols, values, and experiences (Burke, 1969). From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, this representation demonstrates how language is used to reproduce political legitimacy by portraying Iran as a moral, sovereign actor with the right to defend itself from foreign domination (Fairclough, 2010). The political motives implicit in this statement relate not only to state sovereignty but also to efforts to consolidate domestic support through narratives of nationalism and resistance.

The same political motive is also evident in the statement that "America has received a slap from the Iranian nation and will receive more if they continue their threats." The metaphor of "a slap" symbolizes victory, designed to build national pride and strengthen identification between the leader and the people. This symbol simplifies the complexity of geopolitical conflict into a narrative easily understood by the public: that Iran is capable of challenging powers previously considered dominant. This metaphor functions as an ideological tool that frames Iran as an active and powerful subject, while the United States is portrayed as a

failure. This representational practice reflects the mechanisms of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation commonly found in political and conflict discourse (Van Dijk, 2006).

Overall, Khamenei's rhetoric demonstrates that language is used as a strategic instrument to build political legitimacy, consolidate domestic support, and project Iran's power internationally. According to Burke (1969), language functions as a symbolic tool for building collective identification and solidarity, while, according to Fairclough (2010), this rhetoric is a discursive practice that reproduces anti-imperialist ideology and constructs Iran's position within global power relations. These findings support the argument that political communication not only reflects the reality of conflict but also actively shapes identity, legitimacy, and power through the production of structured discourse (Fairclough, 2010; Gramsci, 2013; Prasetyo et al., 2025).

Khamenei's statement that "Iran will never yield to intimidation by arrogant powers" emerged in the context of increasing military and diplomatic pressure on Iran during the Iran-Israel conflict in June 2025. The rhetorical context cannot be separated from the socio-political conditions underlying the production of the discourse. The statement was produced at a time when Iran faced threats of military attack, international pressure, and demands to halt its strategic programs. At the level of discursive practice, the statement was disseminated through official speeches and international media to build the perception that Iran remained steadfast amid external pressure. At the level of social practice, the discourse reproduced the historical narrative of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which, since the 1979 Revolution, has positioned itself as a force rejecting Western domination and foreign intervention.

The statement that "resistance is the identity of the Iranian nation" can be understood in the context of the regime's need to maintain social cohesion during periods of conflict. The production of discourse is always linked to specific social and institutional goals, including efforts to gain political legitimacy (Fairclough, 2010). In times of war and uncertainty, the rhetoric of resistance serves as a mechanism of national consolidation, uniting diverse social groups under a common collective identity. At the level of discursive practice, the concept of "resistance" is not only produced through Khamenei's speeches but also reproduced by state media, political organizations, and the axis of resistance network. As a result, the concept has become part of the dominant discourse order in Iranian politics.

The broader rhetorical context is evident in Khamenei's statement that "any aggression against Iran will be met with a harsh and inevitable response." This statement was delivered as Iran sought to demonstrate its military capabilities following attacks involving Israel and supported by the United States. In

Fairclough's framework, this discourse is directed not only at the domestic public but also at international audiences who become part of the process of text consumption. The rhetoric of threat serves as a political communication strategy to signal deterrence to opponents while strengthening Iran's bargaining position in international relations. Fairclough emphasizes that the production and distribution of texts are always intertwined with broader power relations.

Overall, the rhetorical context of Khamenei's statements demonstrates that the rhetoric of resistance arises from the interaction between the conflict situation, the state's political interests, and the need to build social legitimacy. Khamenei's statements can be understood as both a spontaneous response to the Iran–Israel conflict and a discursive practice aimed at maintaining the regime's legitimacy, strengthening collective identity, and positioning Iran as a symbol of resistance against America.

Discourse Intertextuality

Khamenei's statement that "the Iranian nation will never submit to intimidation by arrogant powers" demonstrates a strong intertextual connection with the discourse of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which historically used the term "arrogant powers" to refer to the United States and Western powers. This use of the term represents a form of recontextualization, reclaiming elements of revolutionary discourse within the context of the Iran–Israel conflict of 2025 to maintain its ideological relevance. The contemporary conflict is constructed as a continuation of Iran's historical struggle against foreign domination. Iran's efforts constitute a reproduction of the revolutionary narrative to maintain the ideological consensus underpinning the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Meanwhile, the statement that "resistance is the identity of the Iranian nation" demonstrates a connection with the narrative of resistance that developed within the Palestinian struggle, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and groups within the Axis of Resistance. This demonstrates interdiscursivity by combining various discourses of nationalism, religion, geopolitics, and anti-imperialism into a single political identity construct. Resistance is no longer positioned as a response to a specific conflict but rather as the permanent identity of the Iranian nation. The intertextuality Khamenei constructs is intended to strengthen national solidarity and expand Iran's legitimacy as a symbolic leader within a transnational resistance network.

A more explicit intertextuality is evident in the statement that "America has received a slap from the Iranian nation and will receive more if they continue their threats." The metaphor of "slap" revives a narrative of victory and national resilience that has repeatedly appeared in Iranian political speeches since the 1979 Revolution. This metaphor is a discursive practice that connects contemporary events with collective memories of Iran's past successes in resisting foreign

pressure. This metaphor serves a dual function: as a rhetorical expression and as an instrument for reproducing political legitimacy.

Based on Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei's statements during the 12-Day Iran-Israel War (June 2025), it is clear that these expressions are not simply responses to attacks or threats from the enemy. They are highly structured, symbolically imbued articulations of political communication that serve to reproduce power within an ideological framework. Statements such as "We have slapped America in the face" and "their intervention will bring irreparable damage" are not mere harsh metaphors. However, rather than representations of antagonism deliberately constructed to create a new political reality, the division of the world into a dichotomy of "oppressor and oppressed" is a classic tactic in crisis communication and resistance. In this context, Khamenei speaks not only as a head of state but as an ideological actor reclaiming the global discursive space dominated by Western narratives (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

Table 3. Taxonomy of Actor Ideological Narrative

Actor	Ideological Narrative
United States	Global stability and international security
Israel	Existential protection and national security
Iran	Resistance to Western hegemony

Source: Compiled from various sources

The symbolic language Khamenei uses serves a dual rhetorical function: to attack symbolically and to foster ideological solidarity. Phrases like "US-controlled dog" to refer to Israel are inextricably linked to the legacy of post-1979 Islamic revolutionary rhetoric, which positions Zionism as the latest manifestation of colonialism and global capitalism. In semiotic analysis, this is a floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 2019). It is a sign that can be interpreted broadly, both as an expression of ideological hatred of Imperialism and as an instrument for mobilizing popular emotion. The symbol of "slap" against the US represents a reversal of domination, a narrative strategy that demonstrates that what previously dominated can now be subdued. This aligns with Foucault's (1978) concept of reverse discourse, in which an oppressed group seizes language to challenge power structures.

The context in which this statement was delivered is inextricably linked to the conditions of asymmetric warfare, economic embargoes, sabotage of the nuclear program, and persistent diplomatic pressure. Khamenei does not adopt the rhetoric of victimhood typically employed in developing countries' diplomacy. Instead, he adopted an aggressive-subversive rhetoric that countered the enemy's narrative and seized moral supremacy through a morality of resistance. As Bourdieu (1989) explains, this is a form of symbolic power, namely the ability to

impose a way of seeing the world that differs from the dominant one. In this regard, Khamenei redefined who constitutes a "terrorist" and a "defender of humanity."

The Critical Discourse Analysis approach emphasizes that political language not only reflects social reality but also actively shapes and reproduces power relations in society (N. L. Fairclough, 1985). In this context, rhetoric that emphasizes narratives of resistance can function as a discursive strategy that strengthens collective identity while limiting space for domestic critique. (van Dijk (2006) shows that political discourse often operates through the construction of ideological identities that position one's own group as righteous and moral, while others are represented as threats or enemies. Meanwhile, Bourdieu (1989), through the concept of symbolic power, asserted that language can impose certain perspectives on social reality, thereby allowing dominant political narratives to shape public perceptions of legitimacy, conflict, and national identity.

Ultimately, Khamenei's statements during the conflict can be understood as a combination of political communication strategies, ideological projects, and discourse battles. From a critical discourse analysis perspective, political language not only reflects reality but also shapes collective identities and power relations within society (N. L. Fairclough, 1985; Van Dijk, 2006b). Khamenei's rhetoric functions as a form of counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges dominant Western narratives while positioning Iran as an active subject in global geopolitical dynamics (Cingöz et al., 2024; E. W. Said, 2014). Within the framework of political populism, this language also creates a militant collective identity through the symbolic opposition between "us" and "them," a rhetorical strategy often used to build political solidarity and legitimize power (Laclau & Mouffe, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's rhetoric during the Iran–Israel conflict in 2025 consistently constructs a discourse of resistance through three intertwined layers of analysis. At the textual level, Khamenei utilizes antagonistic diction, symbolic metaphors, and collective pronouns to construct Iran's identity as an actor opposing the dominance of the United States and Israel. At the level of discursive practice, this rhetoric is produced and circulated through global media to strengthen the narrative of the axis of resistance and expand ideological solidarity across borders.

At the level of social practice, Khamenei reproduces anti-imperialist ideology, legitimizes Iran's political position, and forms a counter-hegemonic discourse against Western domination. These three findings fully address the research objectives and confirm that political language does not merely reflect reality but actively shapes and reproduces power relations in society.

Theoretically, these findings expand the scope of Fairclough's CDA by demonstrating that ideological reproduction in contemporary geopolitical conflicts occurs through [Burke's \(1969\)](#) symbolic identification process, culminating in hegemonic consensus and Gramsci's counter-hegemonic discourse. Thus, this study makes an academic contribution by presenting an integrative analytical model that connects rhetorical theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, and hegemony theory to explain the relationship among symbols, discourse, and power in political communication. This contribution addresses [Donoghue's \(2018\)](#) criticism that CDA's engagement with Gramsci's notion of hegemony has so far been superficial.

In practical terms, these findings confirm that media and political communication play a strategic role in shaping meaning, collective identity, and the legitimacy of power amid conflict. They also demonstrate that contemporary media are no longer simply channels of information but rather arenas of contestation where hegemony and counter-hegemony are constantly contested.

Based on the study's findings and limitations, several suggestions are proposed for future research. First, in terms of data coverage, future research is recommended to expand the corpus of analysis beyond twelve statements in a single conflict episode, for example, by tracing Khamenei's rhetorical evolution across multiple crisis periods to examine the consistency and shifts in patterns of resistance discourse over time, as is the case with longitudinal approaches applied to studies of Iranophobic rhetoric and large-scale studies of political delegitimization.

Second, in terms of methods, future research could combine qualitative CDA with computational or psychometric approaches, such as large language model-based classification models or the LIWC procedure applied to the analysis of Zelensky's rhetoric, to quantitatively validate interpretive findings while expanding the scale of the data analyzed.

Third, in terms of the object of study, future research should expand reception analysis to explore how Khamenei's rhetoric is received, reinterpreted, or rejected by Iranian domestic audiences and the international community, given that this research is still limited to the level of text production and has not yet reached the level of audience reception.

Fourth, future research is also recommended to conduct a comparative study of Khamenei's rhetoric with that of other political leaders in similar conflict situations, such as Zelensky or Putin, to test the extent to which the integrative CDA–rhetoric–hegemony model offered in this study is generalizable to the context of political leaders with different ideological and cultural backgrounds.

Fifth, this study suggests that political communication practitioners, journalists, and policymakers in Indonesia, particularly in the context of Islamic

Public Relations and public diplomacy, should pay attention to how religious-political rhetoric can be strategically used to build legitimacy and collective solidarity without neglecting the principles of ethical and balanced communication.

REFERENCES

- Ali, M. N. (2025). Digital Activism and Collective Mobilization: A Narrative Review of Social Identity, Group Efficacy, and the SIMCA Framework. *Sinergi International Journal of Psychology*, 3(1), 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.61194/psychology.v3i1.691>
- Bourdieu, P. (1989). Social Space and Symbolic Power. *Sociological Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/202060>
- Bourdieu, P. (2018). Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste. In *Inequality: Classic Readings in Race, Class, and Gender*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315680347-10>
- Burke, K. (1969). Rhetoric of Motives. In *Rhetoric of Motives*. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520353237>
- Chouliarakis, L., & Fairclough, N. (1999). Critical Discourse Analysis: A framework. In *Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis*.
- Cingöz, M., Özkan, F., Alkan, Y. S., & İzol, R. (2024). Iran's axis of resistance through the lens of ontological security. *Third World Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2398613>
- Dančo, J. (2024). Iran's Anti-Western Rhetoric as a Sign of Potential Threat to the International Community. *Przegląd Strategiczny*, (16), 25–33. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ps.2023.1.2>
- Denzine, N. K., Lincoln, & S Y. (2009). *Handbook of Qualitative Research, ter. Dariyatno, Badrus Samsul Fata, Abi dan John Rinaldi*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Dijk, J. V. (2013). *Network Society*. SAGE Publications.
- Donoghue, M. (2018). Beyond Hegemony: Elaborating on the Use of Gramscian Concepts in Critical Discourse Analysis for Political Studies. *Political Studies*, 66(2), 392–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717722362>
- Fairclough, N. (2010). Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language / Norman Fairclough. In *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*.
- Fairclough, N. L. (1985). Critical and descriptive goals in discourse analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 9(6), 739–763. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(85\)90002-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(85)90002-5)
- Foucault, M. (1978). History of Sexuality Volume 1. In *The History of Sexuality*.
- Gramsci, A. (1995). *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. And trans. D. Boothman. Lawrence and Wishart.
- Hamed, D. M., & Alqurashi, N. (2025). Impact vs. vision: A critical discourse

- analysis of Trump and Harris' leadership rhetoric in the 2024 presidential election. *Frontiers in Communication*, 10, 1541513. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1541513>
- Hariyanto, D., Dharma, F. A., Yussof, I., & Muharram, F. (2024). The Hyperreality of Identity Politics on Social Media. *Communicatus: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, 8(1), 19–38. <https://doi.org/10.15575/cjik.v8i1.28356>
- Hovsepian-Bearce, Y. (2015). *The Political Ideology of Ayatollah Khamenei: Out of the mouth of the Supreme Leader of Iran* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315748351>
- Itzchakov, D. (2023). Ayatollah Khomeini's approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its longstanding ramifications. *Israel Affairs*, 29(6), 1094–1114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2023.2269701>
- Laclau, E. (n.d.). *On Populist Reason*. (Original work published 2005, Verso)
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (2019). HEGEMONY AND SOCIALIST STRATEGY†. In *Post-Marxism: A Reader*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474472593-004>
- Mennecke, O. (2024). “Kyiv regime,” “junta,” “neo-Nazis,” “ethnic Jew”: Discursive derogation of Ukrainian authorities and enemy-other constructions in Vladimir Putin's speeches. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 66(3–4), 323–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2024.2415798>
- Omidi, A., & Mobini, Z. (2022). A Discourse Analysis of the Conflicting Implications of Terrorism: The Iranian and US Perspectives. *Chinese Political Science Review*, 7(4), 484–502. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-021-00206-0>
- Popalzay, A. W., Mir, M. R., & Mol, R. (2025). From Proxy Warfare to Direct Confrontation: The Evolving Landscape of the Israel–Iran Conflict 2024–2025. *Chinese Journal of International Review*, 07(04), 2550017. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2630531325500179>
- Prasetyo, D., & Sofyan, N. (2023). Communication strategy of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) Bali in maintaining religious harmony in the Bali Province Region in 2022. *Symposium of Literature, Culture, and Communication (SYLECTION)* 2022, 3(1), 223. <https://doi.org/10.12928/sylection.v3i1.13967>
- Prihartono, R. & Suharyo. (2022). Analisis Wacana Kritis Model Teun A. Van Dijk dalam “#Debat Keren Papua-Budiman Sudjatmiko vs Dandhy Laksono” (Kajian Analisis Wacana Kritis). *Jurnal Wicara*, 1(2), 90–96.
- Prisilia, O., Andita, N., Zikri, F. D., & Muchith, C. (2025). Konstruksi Identitas Politik Melalui Representasi Media Digital. *Jurnal Penelitian Multidisiplin Bangsa*, 2(7), 1296–1302. <https://doi.org/10.59837/jpnmb.v2i7.681>
- Rahmani, H., & Saeed, A. R. (2024). The Power of Language: Exploring the Role of Language in Politics. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social*

- Science*, VIII(VIII), 2063–2073.
<https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8080152>
- Reuters Newspaper. (2025, June 27). *Supreme Leader, in first appearance since ceasefire, says Iran would strike back if attacked*.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/supreme-leader-first-appearance-since-ceasefire-says-iran-would-strike-back-if-2025-06-26/>
- Rivlin-Angert, N., & Mor-Lan, G. (2025). The Enemy from Within: A Study of Political Delegitimization Discourse in Israeli Political Speech. *Proceedings of the 2025 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, 16645–16658. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2025.emnlp-main.841>
- Said, E. W. (2014). Culture and Imperialism [electronic resource]—*Culture and Imperialism*.
- Said, M. T. (2013). *Hubungan Antara Intensitas Menonton Tayangan Sinetron Perilaku Hedonis Pada Remaja Asri (2013) Mahasiswa S1 Jurusan Ilmu Komunikasi Universitas Diponegoro*. 1–10.
- Turner, B. S., & Said, E. W. (1981). Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World. *Sociological Analysis*.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3711554>
- Ushchyna, V., & Szczyrbak, M. (2025). The language of power or the power of language?: Presidential rhetoric and leadership. *Journal of Language and Politics*.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.24051.ush>
- Van Dijk, J. A. G. M. (2006a). Digital divide research, achievements, and shortcomings. *Poetics*, 34(4–5), 221–235.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2006.05.004>
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2006b). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse and Society*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250>
- van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Ideology and discourse analysis. *Journal of Political Ideologies*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310600687908>
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. SAGE Publications, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020>