

Legitimization of Violence in the Political Discourse of Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu during the Gaza War Press Conference

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Abstract

Political discourse on Gaza often employs the language of peace to obscure practices of violence and domination. Within the broader field of discourse and ideology studies, this issue occupies a complex intersection between language, power, and moral justification, yet it remains underexplored as a collaborative construction between two state leaders speaking in a shared public forum. This article aims to examine how these leaders simultaneously deploy linguistic strategies to normalize warfare and legitimize coercion, rather than merely to produce persuasive or emotive speech. The study draws on qualitative data collected through content analysis of the video and transcript of a joint press conference, interpreted within Van Dijk's critical discourse framework that maps ideological structures at both macro and micro levels. The findings reveal a carefully orchestrated combination of authority, numerical framing, disclaimers, national glorification, hyperbole, and lexical choices that portray the in-group as moral saviors while silencing the suffering of the out-group. Such discursive patterns divert global attention from humanitarian crises toward policies that primarily serve hegemonic interests, reinforcing domination through language. The article recommends strengthening public critical literacy, enhancing transparency in humanitarian reporting,

and extending comparative studies across political contexts to better understand how discourse legitimizes violence in contemporary political communication.

Keywords: *Political Discourse, Ideological Square, Trump, Netanyahu, Critical Discourse Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has remained at the center of global attention and continues to be one of the most complex and prolonged political and humanitarian issues, capturing the concern of political and societies across the world. This is especially evident in the Gaza Strip, a territory that continues to be disputed by the two sides. The conflict escalated in 2005, when Israel withdrew its military forces from the Gaza Strip, which it had controlled since 1967. However, in 2007, after Hamas won the elections and took control of the Gaza Strip, Israel imposed a blockade and restricted land, sea, and air movements in Gaza (Amir, 2021). The tension between Israel and Hamas has since intensified and drawn global sympathy, particularly after October 7, 2023, when Israeli military counterattacks on Gaza killed more than twenty thousand Palestinians, including over eight thousand children; most of Gaza was reduced to rubble as part of Israel's declared objective to eliminate Hamas (Houlette, 2024; Moses, 2024). Israel is among the countries that maintain a special relationship with the United States; in fact, the first country to fully support the establishment of the State of Israel was the United States (Łapaj-Kucharska, 2023).

The Israeli-American relationship has grown increasingly strong, particularly during Donald Trump's presidency. This is evident in Trump's policies during the 2020 election period, which were widely perceived as favoring Israel and obstructing peace efforts (Viveash, 2021). In contrast, President Biden has been viewed as attempting to restore diplomatic balance and focus on resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the Palestinian issue. As emphasized by Cavari (2013), the United States positioned Israel as a strategic ally and demonstrated its commitment through economic and military support; further supported by Gilboa (2023) and Ramos & Hikmawan (2022), this support included the supply of advanced weaponry, joint military technology development, and regular

participation in joint military exercises. These developments are rooted in historical similarities, including shared immigration histories, common cultural and moral heritage, and a mutual aspiration for territorial control (Gilboa, 2023; Tal, 2021). Importantly, these structural ties provide the real-world context in which political discourse turns into concrete policy outcomes. As argued by Kafi and Degaf (2021), statements delivered in high-level diplomatic forums do not function merely as symbolic rhetoric; rather, they can legitimize, normalize, and even accelerate military cooperation and intervention. On February 4, 2025, President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held a joint press conference that was broadcast internationally.

The press conference became a source of outrage and controversy in both local and global media due to the political rhetoric employed by Trump and Netanyahu in addressing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Trump's statement, which gained significant traction on social media, sparked global condemnation for his suggestion to relocate Palestinians to another country: *"The United States will take over the Gaza Strip, and we will do a job with it too."* In this study, such utterances are treated not merely as provocative rhetoric but as discursive moves that potentially reframe coercive governance and population displacement as administratively reasonable and politically necessary, a process consistent with broader patterns of discursive legitimization in governance practices (Steffek, 2009). This situation underscores the need for critical discourse analysis to uncover how political actors use language to disseminate ideology and to persuade, influence, and control audiences to align with their beliefs. This aligns with Van Dijk's (2006) argument that political actors act not impulsively but on the basis of political knowledge, norms, values, and ideology. Ideology, as a collection of frameworks shaped by the interests of dominant or in-group members within society, is expressed through representations such as language, images, media, symbols, and narratives (Machin & van Leeuwen, 2016). Accordingly, the analysis goes beyond persuasion alone and instead examines how discourse constructs moral and legal justifications that render violent policy

choices legitimate, unavoidable, and detached from responsibility, a key mechanism in the discursive legitimization of coercive governance (Qowim & Degaf, 2024).

In the press conference, the United States and Israel were portrayed as nations committed to pursuing peace, as seen in their discourse: *"We will restore calm and stability to the region and expand prosperity, opportunity, and hope to our nations and for all people of the Middle East,"* *"We will win the peace,"* and *"We will own it and be responsible."* Such representations position the United States and Israel as peace-seeking mediators and legitimize Western involvement as positive and stabilizing forces (Ahmed et al., 2022). However, their framing of "peace" works as a way to legitimize domination and military intervention by presenting them as forms of humanitarian governance. When intervention is described in terms of restoration, prosperity, and responsibility, coercive control is reimagined as care rather than as violence. This discursive strategy was also employed by Trump to highlight the strength of the United States military system and to promote the sale of American defense equipment in India (Badarussyamsi et al., 2024). In this sense, discourse has real, material effects because it shapes what comes to be understood as policy common sense, a process also observed in empirical studies of political discourse and policy legitimization (Veronika & Degaf, 2024). Military power, geopolitical leadership, and the right to intervene are framed within a moral language of "stability" and "order," making interventionist actions appear natural and justified. In contrast, Gaza was symbolized as a threatening and condemned territory through labels such as *"a symbol of death and destruction for so many decades,"* *"it has been very unlucky,"* and *"hellhole."* This negative lexicalization does more than describe conditions on the ground. It portrays Gaza as unlivable and inherently failed, a framing that then makes exceptional measures such as takeover, occupation-like administration, or forced relocation seem like "solutions" rather than violations. These representations illustrate the ideological dichotomy between the in-group, which is consistently depicted positively, and the out-group, which is portrayed negatively, thereby reinforcing domination and justifying the actions of those in power. Crucially, this polarization also shifts responsibility. When "death and destruction" are

attributed either to Gaza's supposed nature or to the out group's inherent threat, the discourse downplays the in-group's role in civilian suffering and infrastructural collapse. The effects of military action are reframed as conditions the out group has brought upon itself. In this way, the discursive strategies identified here work to authorize intervention through moralized peace talk, to present coercive territorial control as a form of responsibility, and to move accountability away from state actors by treating suffering as a natural feature of the out-group's space and identity.

The controversy surrounding the triadic relationship among the United States, Israel, and Palestine is not unprecedented. For instance, Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel provoked divergent responses: Israel viewed it as a crucial step toward peace, whereas President Mahmoud Abbas and the people of Gaza condemned it as evidence of the United States abandoning its role as a neutral mediator (Cavari, 2020). Similarly, in a 2017 press conference following Trump's election, Netanyahu stated that Israel and the United States were working to achieve peace while condemning Palestinians for their hatred of Israel (Rafferty, 2017). The conflict between Palestine and Israel has persisted for decades, with fluctuating levels of violence and intensity each year, and remains deeply intertwined with the United States involvement. Previous United States presidents consistently supported a two-state solution despite numerous challenges; however, Trump diverged from this position by aligning himself with the Israeli right wing, which denied Palestinian aspirations and rights (Allin & Simon, 2017). These issues have attracted significant scholarly attention and have been examined through various analytical approaches, including discourse analysis.

Previous studies on the political discourse of Trump and Netanyahu have explored how discursive and linguistic strategies are used as instruments of power and tools for constructing positive self-images for political purposes. Trump capitalized on slogans such as *"America First"* and *"Make America Great Again"* to glorify his policies as acts of national restoration, while framing out groups such as Muslim immigrants and Islamic countries like Palestine and Iran as threats, using terms such as *"terrorism,"* *"radical,"* *"bombers,"* and

“dangerous” (Kadim, 2022; Khan et al., 2020). Furthermore, Trump adopted manipulative and persuasive discursive strategies to garner political support, demonizing Muslims and immigrants and presenting himself as an American nationalist sympathetic toward certain groups (Kadim, 2022; Khan et al., 2021). Netanyahu, meanwhile, described Israel’s military actions as a sacred mission for future generations and depicted his enemies, particularly Iran and Hamas, as destroyers of civilization, an approach consistent with Trump’s rhetoric that reinforces social hierarchies and marginalizes vulnerable groups (AlAsttal, 2024; Luo et al., 2022; Rababah & Hamdan, 2019). Such discursive strategies are used to sustain the dominance of powerful groups and to shape public consciousness in ways that serve political interests.

Van Dijk (2006) argued that discursive strategies serve ideological purposes in political contexts, consistently navigating the logic of polarization to present in-groups positively and out groups negatively, thereby shaping public opinion and strengthening ideological narratives. These ideological functions are systematically examined through the lens of critical discourse analysis, which focuses on social and political issues and seeks to explain how discourse structures operate within social interactions and hierarchies (Van Dijk, 2015). According to Wodak & Meyer (2009), critical discourse analysis reveals both hidden and explicit structural relationships related to domination, discrimination, power, and control through language use. The ways in which political actors use language and discourse are highly complex, and textual meaning cannot be effectively understood from a single perspective such as linguistics alone. Therefore, Van Dijk (1995) emphasized that critical discourse analysis is inherently multidisciplinary because discourse involves the interplay of linguistic, semiotic, and social dimensions. The framework proposed by Van Dijk (2006) which is widely used in critical discourse analysis, was adopted as the theoretical foundation for this study.

Van Dijk’s ideological square model accommodates both macro and micro levels of analysis to examine the dichotomy of *“us”* versus *“them”* in Trump and Netanyahu’s discourse during the 2025 press conferences. Van Dijk (2006) emphasized that ideology

encompasses not only the polarization between “*us*” and “*them*,” but also fundamental ideological categories such as identity, characteristic actions, aims, norms, values, and intergroup relations. He further noted that ideology is not inherently negative; rather, it can be interpreted positively or negatively depending on the perspective, values, and position of the group assessing it. At the macro level, Van Dijk (2006) identified four main ideological discourse strategies: emphasizing the positive aspects of the in group, highlighting the negative aspects of the out group, downplaying the negative aspects of the in group, and minimizing the positive aspects of the out group. At the micro level, ideology manifests not only in meaning but also in grammar, sentence structure, and rhetorical strategies that render discourse persuasive. Van Dijk identified twenty-five categories of political discourse analysis, including actor description, authority, and categorization. Numerous studies have applied this framework to analyze political discourse, particularly Trump’s discourse on nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and Islamophobia.

While previous studies have predominantly focused on single political actors constructing discourse to advance national interests, this study seeks to fill the gap by analyzing international diplomatic discourse, particularly in the context of the war in Gaza, as presented by two state leaders who jointly construct ideological narratives against a common enemy. This study aims to examine the power dynamics within the conflict and the discursive strategies employed by Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu in their discourse about the United States, Israel, and Gaza during the February 2025 press conference. It argues that the language used by public officials does not merely reflect their ideology but serves pragmatic functions such as implicit justification, peaceful self-presentation, and the concealment of responsibility. By employing Van Dijk (2006) *Ideological Square* framework, this study investigates how Trump and Netanyahu’s discourse presents the in group positively and the out group negatively. Furthermore, this approach enables the identification of rhetorical strategies such as authority, hyperbole, and disclaimers through which both leaders obscure violent actions and construct themselves as victims, thereby legitimizing their ideologies and moral stances.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study is based on the critical discourse analysis framework, focusing on uncovering hidden hegemony and ideology in the discourse of political actors through the language used by United States President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during their joint press conference in February 2025. The speech was selected because it represents the discourse surrounding U.S. military involvement in the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Amid the ongoing tension and humanitarian crisis in Gaza and across Palestine, the discourse of relocating Palestinians provides an ideal case study for analyzing how language functions to claim legitimacy, shape public opinion, and reflect political interests. Therefore, a critical discourse analysis approach is essential for examining both the hidden and explicit structural relationships that reveal how the text functions to achieve power, control, and ideological conformity through language use in this event. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this study relies on analytical generalization and approaches the press conference as a key discursive moment where dominant U.S.-Israeli ideological positions are openly expressed, made to seem normal, and circulated as domestic political cues that shape public perceptions of ideological alignment (Koplow, 2011; Leep & Pressman, 2019).

Data for this study were obtained from a video recording of the press conference published by WFAA on YouTube and the full transcript available on *The Times of Israel's* official website, focusing on Trump and Netanyahu's press conference on February 4, 2025. In the context of qualitative research, the data sampling does not involve statistical procedures, as this approach emphasizes depth of meaning rather than numerical representation. Considering the global impact of Trump and Netanyahu's press conference, the data set was selected using purposive sampling, containing quotations that exhibit hegemonic characteristics in the discourse on the war found in both Trump's and Netanyahu's statements. Focusing on a single joint press conference is methodologically appropriate because such events function as high-stakes political performances. In these settings, leaders deliberately shape and compress official positions, policy priorities, and

moral justifications for audiences at home and abroad. As Ekström (2016) and Bhatia (2006) note, political press conferences are not simply occasions for sharing information but strategic communicative spaces where power, ideology, and responsibility are carefully negotiated and put on public display. The collected data were subsequently categorized into three sections based on the focus of this research: Trump and Netanyahu's perspectives on Gaza, Israel, and the United States, to enable a more comprehensive analysis.

After all data were collected, the analysis involved categorizing it according to the ideological framework proposed by Van Dijk (2006). The analysis model extends across both the macro and micro levels. Polarized discourses concerning Gaza, Israel, and the United States were identified at the macro level through the presentation of positive self-ideology and negative other ideology. Furthermore, the language and stylistic expressions used in the discourse were analyzed at the micro level, focusing on aspects such as lexicalization, national self-glorification, victimization, numbers game, and authority. This approach provides an in depth and effective means of uncovering the implied meanings in political speeches, particularly how such discourse is employed to advance the interests of dominant groups. It is important to examine such discourse because it not only shapes public opinion but also legitimizes deviations from norms and violations of established rules.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Result

Ideological Square and Polarized Representation in Trump and Netanyahu's 2025 Press Conference

The “*our*” group is portrayed as a favorable center through polarized discourse in a political context. This strategy assists in achieving objectives that serve politicians' interests in mobilizing society (Bello, 2013). The focus of this analysis is Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu's press conference in February 2025, where they proposed relocating Palestinians to Egypt, Jordan, and potentially

other countries. Trump and Netanyahu clearly established a dichotomous representation of Israel and the United States as “*us*.” Trump highlighted the alliance between the two countries with the statement “*we had a great victory together four years ago*,” signifying their joint achievements in the past. Furthermore, Netanyahu publicly praised Trump’s policies that had benefited Israel during his presidency. As a result, the press conference categorized Gaza, Palestine, and Hamas as “*them*,” constructed through negative discourse.

The first strategy, which emphasizes the positive aspects of the in group, was reflected in Trump’s focus on the inherent strength and resilience of America and Israel, which he described as “*unbreakable*.” Trump also asserted that America was worthy of controlling the Gaza Strip by referring to his country as “*stable and strong*.” As he explained, they would be “*the great keeper ... not just for Israel, for the entire Middle East*.” This signified that the United States had succeeded in positioning itself as a judicious and wise actor for all countries involved, while simultaneously manifesting American hegemony through the discourse delivered in the press conference (Badarussyamsi et al., 2024). Trump and Netanyahu went on to describe the Israeli people as courageous in the midst of attacks and hostage situations, praising them with statements such as “*Israel has endured a sustained aggressive and murderous assault on every front*” and “*Israel has never been stronger*.” This construction aligns with previous analyses showing that Trump portrays Israel as a victim (Khan et al., 2020).

They depicted Gaza as “*an unlucky place*,” “*a threat to Israel*,” and “*Hamas’s military*,” representing the second strategy, which emphasizes the negativity of the out group. According to their narrative, Gaza is positioned as the territory of their enemy, Hamas. Since its election victory in 2006, Hamas has functioned as both the governing authority in Gaza and a resistance movement against Israel (Byman, 2024). The political discourse of Trump and Netanyahu labeled Hamas as “*disloyal to humanity*,” “*monsters*,” and “*terrorists*.” Consequently, both Hamas and Gaza,

which constitutes its territory, are perceived as out groups constantly portrayed in the worst possible terms by the in group. Trump went further than merely addressing the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza; he also supported the relocation of its population, stating, *"it should not go through a process of rebuilding and occupation by the same people that have really stood there and fought for it."* Netanyahu supported Trump's statement, adding, *"I think it's something that could change history, and it's worthwhile really pursuing this avenue."* They framed Gaza as a dangerous and uninhabitable place, aiming to shape public opinion that the relocation of Palestinians was a humanitarian solution rather than an act of coercion or disenfranchisement. Such discourse explicitly presents self-serving arguments to capture audience attention, while leaving counterarguments implicit (Van Dijk, 1995). This strategy is deliberately designed to engage the public through a communicative form of psychological persuasion (Ayalew Nigatu & Tadesse Admassu, 2023) allowing passive displacement to be framed as a trade-off for peace. In this context, Trump and Netanyahu implicitly undermine Palestinians' right of return and land ownership.

The statements that reveal the aggressive stance of Trump, Netanyahu, and their allies toward external groups essentially serve to obscure and downplay other forms of aggression. This represents the third strategy, which eliminates the negative aspects of the in group, as seen in Trump's statement: *"we starved Hamas ... and we starved them like they had never seen before; resources and support disappeared for them."* There was no mention of civilian casualties, including children, cases of malnutrition, or the destruction of infrastructure resulting from their military operations in Gaza. This omission indicates an attempt to conceal the worst consequences of their actions. Trump sought to shape public perception of who deserves to suffer and be punished by insisting that military strikes targeted only certain organizations described as the enemy and perceived negatively by parts of society. In reality, the damage caused was far more complex and tragic. Such

discourse relies on the assumption that the audience possesses limited understanding or awareness of the situation (Van Dijk, 1995). Netanyahu reinforced this stance by citing the number of Israeli casualties, stating, “*They beheaded men. They raped women. They burned babies alive. And they took 251 people hostages to the dungeons of Gaza.*” This statement appeared to emphasize factual rather than emotional claims, employing numerical narratives about innocent victims to enhance credibility and elicit public empathy (Kadim, 2022). On the other hand, since Hamas’s attack on October 7, 2025, Israel has continued to respond with extreme force, resulting in more than forty thousand casualties (AJLabs, 2025), including journalists who should be protected on the battlefield under international humanitarian law (Gunawan et al., 2023).

In his speech, Trump repeatedly insisted that Palestinians should leave the Gaza Strip, saying, “*they can live out their lives in peace and harmony, instead of having to go back and do it again,*” and “*we should go to other country.*” Following his description of Gaza as a “*horrible*” and “*dangerous*” place, Trump highlighted its potential, stating, “*I think the potential in the Gaza Strip is unbelievable.*” He also claimed that Gaza could become the “*Riviera of the Middle East,*” but insisted that if Palestinians remained, “*they’ve tried it for decades and decades and decades ... it didn’t work ... and you have to learn from history.*” This represents the fourth strategy, which diminishes the positive aspects of the out group. The Palestinians are portrayed as an obstacle to achieving peace and prosperity in Gaza, while the region’s potential is recognized only for political convenience. His statement lacks concrete evidence regarding the causes of Palestinian suffering, which include discrimination and hate speech (Rabab’ah et al., 2024). Moreover, Zionism and Israel often ignore the positive aspects of Palestinian society, instead maintaining the official label of “*terrorist*” to justify continuous repression (Massad, 2006). By implicitly labeling indigenous populations as threats, regimes may rationalize repressive actions such as violence and surveillance.

As Van Dijk (2015) noted, macro level analysis addresses power, domination, and inequality between social groups. It is important to recognize, however, that certain members of a dominant group do not necessarily possess more power than members of a subordinate group (Van Dijk, 2015). This is illustrated by the responses of many U.S. and Israeli citizens to Trump and Netanyahu's press conference, which largely reflected rejection of their policies. Furthermore, the majority of United Nations member states opposed Trump's actions and policies regarding the Israeli Palestinian conflict (Gilboa, 2008). Many scholars argue that the self-centered attitude of the United States, particularly under Trump's leadership, has caused America to begin losing its position as a global leader (Grinin & Korotayev, 2020). In the February 2025 press conference, Trump and Netanyahu used their power to construct a positive narrative about the United States and Israel, while producing a negative narrative about Gaza and its allies. Through this discourse, they sought to justify and maintain hegemonic dominance encompassing territorial, political, and even cultural control over nearly all parts of Palestine.

Microanalysis in Trump and Netanyahu's Press Conference

This section presents a microanalysis by examining the use of language, verbal interaction, and communication in discourse. Van Dijk (2006) divided ideological strategies into more detailed categories to explain how groups maintain power and dominance and how other groups are represented through language. These strategies promote positive self-representation and negative representation of external groups.

Authority

Van Dijk (2006) explained that this strategy reinforces the speaker's argumentation by referencing certain authorities to support their position. The

authorities cited in political discourse typically include prominent international organizations such as the United Nations, courts, religious institutions, or leading academics. These sources are considered to possess the capacity, expertise, and moral authority to lend an impression of reliability, objectivity, and legitimacy to political arguments.

Examples:

1. *"We accomplished all this with the indomitable spirit of our people and the boundless courage of our soldiers. The Bible says that the people of Israel shall rise like lions ... the roar of the Lion of Judah is heard loudly throughout the Middle East"*
2. *"The United States withdrew from the antisemitic UN Human Rights Council and ended all of the support for the UN Relief and Works Agency, which funneled money to Hamas, and which was very disloyal to humanity."*

In example (1), Netanyahu invoked religious authority by using a reference from the holy book to support his ideology and actions. Through this rhetorical use of religious authority, the positive self-presentation of Israel is strengthened by the implication that its future victory, particularly across the Middle East, has been divinely promised in the Bible. Additionally, the collective pronoun "we" in example (1) emphasizes unity between the Israeli people and their military forces while simultaneously establishing moral legitimacy for their military actions.

In example (2), by contrast, Trump referenced international humanitarian and human rights organizations negatively as part of his attempt to justify the legitimacy of his policies. By discrediting the credibility of such institutions, he positioned himself and the United States as morally upright and loyal to humanity, encouraging the public to perceive his decision as just and necessary.

Victimization and Numbers Game

Van Dijk (2006) explained that victimization refers to a polarized discourse in which the binary contrast between “*us*” and “*them*” is constructed by portraying the in group as victims suffering from the actions of the out group. According to Van Dijk, “*them*” are typically associated with threats, while “*we*” are represented as victims of those threats. The victimization strategy is closely related to the numbers game strategy, as both are used to evoke empathy, justify actions, and enhance credibility through emotional and numerical appeals.

Examples:

1. *“The Israelis have stood strong and united in the face of an enemy that has kidnapped, tortured, raped and slaughtered innocent men, women, children and even little babies.”*
2. *“... and ensure that Gaza never again poses a threat to Israel.”*
3. *“Hamas monsters savagely murdered 1,200 innocent people, including more than 40 Americans.”*
4. *“They beheaded men. They raped women. They burned babies alive. And they took 251 people hostages.”*

In example (1), Trump portrayed Israel as a nation suffering from Hamas attacks by mentioning the victims of Hamas’s violence, such as “*innocent men, women, children, and even little babies*,” to highlight the extraordinary cruelty of the out-group, as the Hamas attacks claimed many civilian lives rather than those of the IDF. Furthermore, in examples (2), (3), and (4), Netanyahu emphasized that Israel was in a vulnerable position, with Gaza portrayed as a continuous threat. He reinforced the notion of “*threat*” by presenting numerical figures “*1,200 innocent people*,” “*40 Americans*,” and “*251 hostages*” to enhance the credibility of his claims. Both Netanyahu and Trump employed violent rhetoric through lexical choices such

as “*kidnapped*,” “*tortured*,” “*slaughtered*,” “*beheaded*,” “*raped*,” and “*burned*,” vividly describing the brutality of the out-group. As political leaders addressing an international audience during a press conference on a conflict-affected region, their use of language and rhetoric served to influence public perception and justify their policies. The use of such extreme terms intensified the sense of suffering and strengthened the legitimacy of their appeals for global support and empathy.

Disclaimers

Disclaimers represent the second strategy identified in the discourse. According to Van Dijk (2006), this is an ideology-based strategy that constructs a positive self-image and expresses empathy before delivering the actual message, which ultimately portrays the out group negatively. Disclaimers do not necessarily reflect hesitation or acknowledgment of both positive and negative traits of the out group. Instead, they serve to emphasize the positive traits of “*us*” while focusing on the negative traits of “*them*” (Van Dijk, 2000).

Examples:

1. *“They have never had a chance at life, because the Gaza Strip has been a hellhole for people living there ... And by doing what I’m recommending that we do ... we think we’re going to bring perhaps great peace to long beyond this area.”*
2. *“I envision people living there, the world’s people ... Palestinians will live there, many people will live there. But they’ve tried the other, and they’ve tried it for decades and decades and decades ... It didn’t work. It will never work.”*

During the press conference, Trump repeatedly expressed concern for the lives of the people of Gaza, saying “*we want to give people a chance at life*,” “*so unfair to people*,” and “*Gaza Strip has been a hellhole for people living there*.” However, the

empathy displayed by Trump was primarily intended to preserve his influence, authority, and legitimacy. As illustrated in example (1), after expressing empathy, he shifted his focus to advocating the relocation of Palestinians to other countries, which he framed as an effective solution to ensure their safety and rebuild Gaza. He further proposed turning Gaza into an international territory involving “*the world’s people*,” and not exclusively Palestinians, as shown in example (2).

Trump’s statement in example (2) contains disclaimers through phrases such as “*they’ve tried*,” “*it didn’t work*,” and “*it will never work*,” implying that the Palestinian authorities are incapable of achieving peace and prosperity in Gaza. Such statements subtly reinforce hegemonic bias and undermine Palestinian claims to their land. This rhetorical strategy is framed by portraying the speaker as caring, tolerant, fair, and empathetic, as seen in the statements “*Palestinians will live there*” and “*this is not for Israel, this is for everybody in the Middle East – Arabs, Muslims. This is for everybody*.” Hence, this strategy exemplifies a disclaimer, as it combines positive self-presentation with negative other-presentation in a single discourse. Trump’s attitude, which appears empathetic on the surface, implicitly dismisses “*them*” after highlighting the benevolent and moral stance of “*us*”.

National Self-Glorification

According to Van Dijk (2006), national self-glorification is a form of positive self-presentation achieved through praise of a nation’s principles, history, and traditions. Within the context of war discourse, this strategy reinforces nationalism and strengthens public support for government policies.

Examples:

1. “*By the United States, with its stability and strength*”
2. “*We’re respected nation again*”
3. “*The horrors of October 7th would never have happened if I were president,*”

4. *"Successful partnership that brought peace and stability to the Middle East like it hadn't seen in decades."*
5. *"we've defeated some America's worst enemies."*

Trump frequently described the United States as the strongest and most stable nation, as illustrated in example (1). This belief underpinned his ambition to expand U.S. influence by taking control of Gaza and fostering economic development there, as expressed in his statement *"The U.S. will take over the Gaza Strip and we will do a job with it too."* In example (2), Trump emphasized the restoration of America's international prestige, claiming that the nation had regained global respect and power after what he viewed as a period of decline under previous leadership.

In example (3), Trump underscored his leadership as central to national success, asserting that peace would prevail under his administration and that Israel and Palestine could coexist harmoniously. Similarly, in example (4), he linked this ideal to his partnership with Netanyahu, suggesting that their joint leadership could bring enduring peace and stability to the Middle East. Furthermore, in example (5), Netanyahu glorified Israel by highlighting its ability to assist the United States in defeating common enemies.

These statements portrayed both leaders as figures of authority capable of executing strategic cooperation while underscoring the perceived superiority and moral virtue of their nations. Ideologically, such lexical choices function to marginalize external groups and reinforce a narrative of nationalism within U.S.-Israeli relations. Consequently, the discourse constructs polarization by framing war simultaneously as an act of self-defense and a manifestation of national pride.

Hyperbole

According to Van Dijk (2006), hyperbole is a figure of speech that deliberately exaggerates meaning. This strategy functions to amplify the positive attributes of the in group while minimizing or concealing its negative aspects. Conversely, the faults of external groups are often described in exaggerated terms to reinforce negative portrayals.

Examples:

1. *"Israel has never been stronger."*
2. *"Israel has endured a sustained aggressive and murderous assault on every front, but they fought back bravely."*
3. *"Israeli people have endured for generations, and they are absolutely unbreakable."*

In example (1), Netanyahu used the hyperbolic expression "*never been stronger*" to enhance positive self-presentation. The use of "*never*" conveys a sense of absoluteness, exaggerating the situation and suggesting that Israel has reached its peak of strength. This expression functions rhetorically to instill optimism, pride, and nationalism among listeners. Moreover, it reflects Israel's military dominance and state power.

In examples (2) and (3), Trump dramatized Israel's endurance by repeatedly emphasizing that its people have long struggled and remained steadfast in defending their country. He concluded his narrative by employing hyperbolic expressions that intensified the depiction of Israel's suffering under external aggression. Through this approach, Israel is positioned as a victim of external cruelty, while its military resilience is framed as both justified and admirable. Such framing contributes to the construction of moral legitimacy and mitigates public

criticism of Israel's military response, which is thereby presented as necessary and even heroic.

Lexicalization

According to Van Dijk (2006), lexicalization refers to the process through which speakers use specific vocabulary to express their ideas and ideologies.

Examples:

1. *"The Israelis have stood strong ..."*
2. *"People of Israel have such enormous respect for you,"*
3. *"Your leadership helped bring our hostages home."*
4. *"Palestinians living in Gaza ... frankly bad luck."*
5. *"Palestinian will live there ... but they've tried it ... it didn't work."*

The lexical choices made by Trump and Netanyahu concerning Israeli actors were used to construct a morally positive narrative throughout the press conference. In example (1), Trump employed emotional expressions such as "stood strong," along with other positively connoted words like "united," "endured," "salute," "endured for generations," and "unbreakable" to describe the Israeli people. Through these choices, the ideological strategy of positive self-representation was reinforced, depicting Israel as both powerful and morally upright, as well as a victim of external aggression. The lexicalization strategy thus served to legitimize the United States' support for Israel's resistance.

Examples (2) and (3) illustrate Netanyahu's deliberate use of positive lexical items to praise Trump as a favored member of the in group, employing phrases such as "enormous respect," "helped," "greatest friend," and "boldly confronted." Netanyahu contrasted Trump's leadership with that of Biden, whom he viewed as more inclined toward a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. Ideologically, Netanyahu sought to assert his competence as a leader in maintaining

national security, emphasizing Israel's stability through the unconditional support it received from the United States.

Conversely, in examples (4) and (5), Trump used lexicalization to depict the out group, Palestinians, as weak, unfortunate, and responsible for the ongoing instability in Gaza. He characterized them as *frankly bad luck* and reiterated that *it didn't work*, framing Palestinians as the main obstacle to peace and progress in the region. Such lexical choices strategically reinforced ideological polarization through the contrast between the moral virtue and strength of *us* and the perceived failure and inferiority of *them*.

Discussion

The press conference held by Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu in February 2025 sparked widespread outrage around the world due to its perceived violation of international law. The controversy stemmed from Trump's proposal that the United States take over and develop Gaza into the "*Riviera of the Middle East*", even suggesting that it become an international zone (Holland et al., 2025). For Netanyahu, however, the meeting served as an opportunity to gain political support amid growing domestic pressure. He referred to Trump as "*the greatest friend Israel has ever had in the White House*" and used the event to emphasize Israel's strength and its close relationship with the United States.

The application of Van Dijk (2006) ideological square model, at both the macro and micro levels, revealed how Trump and Netanyahu polarized the in group and out group through various discursive strategies, including authority, victimization, number games, disclaimers, national self-glorification, hyperbole, and lexicalization. These strategies were instrumental in constructing negative representations of Gaza, Palestinians, and Hamas. Fairclough (2015) argues that discourse is not merely representational but also a form of social action that often reflects injustice, domination, and racial discrimination.

Applying Van Dijk's (2006) ideological square at both the macro and micro levels make it clear how Trump and Netanyahu consistently divided the world into an in group and an out group through a range of discursive strategies, including appeals to authority, victimization, number games, disclaimers, national self-glorification, hyperbole, and lexical choices. At the macro level, this division took the form of a moral contrast in which the United States and Israel were presented as legitimate, defensive, and committed to peace, while Gaza, Palestinians, and Hamas were portrayed as threatening, dysfunctional, or morally lacking. These patterns worked together to produce negative representations of Gaza, Palestinians, and Hamas. Importantly, this ideological polarization was not treated as an abstract interpretation but was grounded in recurring micro level linguistic features that could be directly identified in the discourse itself.

At the micro level, ideological meanings took shape through concrete and observable language choices. These included evaluative terms such as "hellhole," "monsters," and "unbreakable," appeals to authority through religious references and the delegitimization of international institutions, and claims of victimhood supported by precise numerical details, patterns that have also been documented in critical discourse studies of Israel-Palestine representations in media coverage (Degaf et al., 2025). Rather than relying solely on contextual assumptions, these linguistic features operated as clear textual mechanisms through which ideological positions were enacted. Linking these micro level patterns to the broader ideological square shows that polarization arises from repeated and systematic language use, not from subjective interpretation. As Fairclough (2015) observes, discourse does more than describe social reality; it actively shapes it, often reproducing inequality, domination, and racialized power relations. In this sense, the present study anchors ideological interpretation in empirical linguistic evidence and illustrates how macro level power relations are sustained through everyday discursive practices that normalize domination and legitimize violence.

From a broader theoretical perspective, these findings can be understood through Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses, which emphasizes that state power is reproduced not only through direct coercion but also through ideological practices that secure consent and render domination normal and acceptable (Althusser, 2014). In this sense, the joint press conference functions as a diplomatic ideological state apparatus, where political discourse, religious symbolism, and moral framing work together to position global audiences as accepting military intervention as necessary, defensive, and morally justified. This ideological work does not replace coercive force but operates alongside it, reinforcing repressive state practices such as military action, territorial control, and blockade. The analysis thus demonstrates that ideological persuasion and material violence function simultaneously, shaping how power is exercised and legitimized rather than operating as separate or sequential processes.

In addition to portraying Gaza, Palestinians, and Hamas negatively, the analysis found that Trump also targeted his political rival, President Joe Biden. He criticized Biden's administration for its alleged failures in handling conflicts in Ukraine, Russia, and particularly Gaza. In contrast, Trump positioned himself as a proactive problem solver, constructing an image of a nationalist leader who sought to protect America and its allies while distinguishing himself from previous administrations and the established political elite (Raza et al., 2024). This aligns with prior research suggesting that Trump habitually compared himself to others, attributing systemic failures to earlier administrations and portraying his own policies as transformative and corrective (Béland et al., 2021; Kadim, 2022; Khan et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2022). Furthermore, Trump delegitimized international authorities such as the UN Human Rights Council and UNRWA, accusing them of betraying American and Israeli moral values. His withdrawal of support from these institutions was framed as a moral act intended to ensure ideological conformity. Luo et al. (2022) similarly found that Trump often celebrated actions that defied

public consensus while rhetorically positioning himself as a moral savior whose decisions had “*saved many lives*.”

Racial discrimination also appeared through the use of disclaimers. Trump began by expressing apparent empathy for Palestinians’ suffering but followed this with claims implying that Palestinians were responsible for Gaza’s instability and failure to achieve peace. Such discourse demonstrates that recognition of human values remained largely superficial, serving as a pretext for highlighting negative attributes of the out group (Van Dijk, 2006). In this context, language and rhetoric function as instruments of ideological power, enabling political actors to present biased ideas as reasonable and widely supported (Fairclough, 2015; Khan et al., 2020).

Another important finding concerns the religious dimension of Netanyahu’s rhetoric. During the press conference, he invoked biblical references to intertwine religion and politics, citing verses such as “*The Bible says that the people of Israel shall rise like lions*” and “*The roar of the Lion of Judah is heard loudly throughout the Middle East*.” This strategy positioned Israel as a divinely sanctioned entity with legitimate political and territorial claims, while denying such legitimacy to the out group. This reflects what Banchoff (2008) describes as the politics of ascription, the process of defining “*who is in and who is out*” based on inherited or religious identity. For instance, the case of Ethiopian Jews illustrates how ascribed identity functions as a prerequisite for political rights, such as *aliyah* (the right of Jews to immigrate to Israel and obtain automatic citizenship) and full political membership in the state. Linking political legitimacy to religion allowed Netanyahu to reinforce the moral superiority of the in group while excluding others from similar claims.

Netanyahu also frequently positioned himself as a proponent of peace. However, previous research has shown that the language of peace in Israeli political discourse often serves rhetorical purposes rather than literal ones. It is used to justify oppressive actions, maintain control, and legitimize violence against

Palestinians, particularly in discourse aimed at American and global audiences (Gavriely-Nuri, 2010; Ish-Shalom, 2008). Netanyahu declared, “*You want a different future, you've got to knock out the people who want to destroy you and destroy peace*,” equating peace with military action against perceived enemies. Gavriely-Nuri (2014) described this as oppressive peace discourse, which benefits only one side while disguising domination under the rhetoric of reconciliation. Historically, Israeli expansion has resulted in the fragmentation of Palestinian territory since the establishment of the state in 1948, leading to the destruction of more than 400 villages. These acts have been identified as forms of *spacio cide* and *genocide* (Ajour, 2025; Hanafi, 2009).

Spaciocide, as conceptualized by Hanafi (2009), refers not only to physical killing but also to the systematic targeting of Palestinian space, including homes, infrastructure, and everyday living environments. In legitimizing these practices, Trump and Netanyahu drew on the familiar language of the Global War on Terror, presenting military action against Hamas, which is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union, as both necessary and morally justified (Simonsen, 2019). Such framing, however, shifts attention away from the human consequences of the conflict, including the deaths of more than 34,000 civilians in Gaza and the deepening humanitarian crises marked by widespread disease and starvation (Byman, 2024).

Throughout the 2025 press conference, Trump's and Netanyahu's discourses of war and peace appeared in parallel. This pattern reflects a consistent ideological framing in which war is depicted as a moral duty and a necessary means to achieve peace (Gavriely-Nuri, 2014). Positive self-representation was reinforced through national self-glorification, portraying the United States and Israel as the most capable agents of stability and peace. Such nationalistic self-promotion is often associated with defensive and hostile attitudes and, in many cases, with support for violence against out groups (Berndsen et al., 2017; Li et al., 2023).

Trump and Netanyahu also employed hyperbole to magnify the threats posed by external groups and to depict Israel as a perpetual victim of aggression. This rhetorical exaggeration functioned ideologically to legitimize military responses as acts of self-defense (Kadim, 2022). Van Dijk (2000) observed that hyperbole in political discourse reflects ideological biases; what one group perceives as excessive may be regarded by another as truthful and justified. Lexicalization further reinforced this ideological divide. The use of positive lexical items in statements such as "*helped bring our hostages home*" and "*ended unjust sanctions*" constructed an image of competent and benevolent leadership. In contrast, Gaza and Palestinians were framed through negative lexical choices, for instance "*symbol of death*," "*unlucky*," "*hellhole*," and "*very troubled region*." Labeling, as Van Dijk (2000) emphasized, is never neutral because it reflects a speaker's attitudes, purposes, and ideological stance. When such labels are disseminated through influential institutions, they become dominant ideologies that shape social perceptions and normalize inequality (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak, 2014).

In the context of the February 2025 press conference, the dominant ideologies projected by Trump and Netanyahu contributed to the absence of decisive international action against human rights violations in Gaza. Their discourse effectively legitimized inhumanity by framing it as a necessary struggle for security and freedom. The creation of "*us*" as a collective of believers and freedom defenders contrasted sharply with "*them*," described as terrorists originating from prisons, mental hospitals, and criminal networks. Constructing Hamas not only as an enemy but also as a global threat enabled Trump and Netanyahu to reinforce a hegemonic worldview that justified extreme measures such as violence, human rights violations, and restrictions on civil liberties as morally legitimate. Parkin (1984) argues that every discourse contains hegemonic elements. Applying Van Dijk's model reveals that the rhetoric of Trump and

Netanyahu functions as a hegemonic tool designed to shape public consciousness and legitimize domination under the guise of ideological and moral necessity.

CONCLUSION

The discourse used by Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu to legitimize violence during the Gaza war went beyond ordinary political rhetoric and functioned as a carefully constructed ideological tool that masked aggression in the language of peace. While peace is often assumed to signal humanitarian concern in political communication, this study shows that, in this context, peace discourse operated as a mechanism for justifying domination and military intervention. Through the strategic integration of religious and nationalist narratives, acts of violence were reframed as moral obligations and even sacred duties, allowing aggression to be presented as ethically justified and divinely sanctioned. This analysis highlights the complex ways ideology operates in political language, revealing how discourse can naturalize violence, obscure responsibility, and legitimize coercive action under claims of moral righteousness. Moving beyond critical discourse studies that focus on individual political actors, this research advances the field by examining how ideological meanings are jointly produced in an international diplomatic setting, where two state leaders co-construct legitimacy, moral authority, and responsibility displacement through mutual affirmation and the construction of a shared enemy. Rather than functioning as isolated or parallel statements, Trump's and Netanyahu's discourses form a coalition-based configuration in which aligned lexical choices, coordinated appeals to religion and nationalism, and mutually reinforcing narratives consolidate a unified "us" against a common "them." At the theoretical level, this study extends Van Dijk's ideological square by demonstrating that macro-level polarization and micro-level linguistic strategies can operate across interconnected speakers, not only within individual discourse, while methodologically it shows how joint press

conferences serve as sites of ideological convergence where violence is collectively normalized and legitimized through coordinated discursive practices.

To consolidate these findings theoretically, the analysis can be read through Van Dijk's Ideological Square, which clarifies how ideological polarization is produced through coordinated macro-level positioning and recurring micro-level linguistic strategies that divide political actors into a moral "us" and a threatening "them." In the joint press conference, this polarization did not emerge from isolated statements but from a coalition-based discursive configuration in which aligned lexical choices, shared appeals to authority, and mutually reinforcing narratives worked together to legitimize military intervention and territorial control. Considered alongside Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses, the press conference also functioned as a diplomatic ideological apparatus through which state power was reproduced primarily through consent-oriented discourse rather than direct force. The language of peace, security, and moral responsibility positioned global audiences as accepting military violence and spatial control as necessary and legitimate, while simultaneously reinforcing the operation of coercive state practices. This analysis demonstrates that ideological polarization, discursive persuasion, and material coercion operate simultaneously in contemporary conflicts, reinforcing the close relationship between discourse, ideology, and political dominance in global communication.

At the same time, this study remains attentive to its own analytical positioning. Identifying ideological domination does not imply adopting a morally absolute stance or replacing one in-group and out-group division with another. Rather than attributing intentional malice or fixed ideological identities to Trump and Netanyahu as individuals, the analysis focuses on how specific discursive configurations operate within a particular political context to produce and normalize power relations. Consistent with Van Dijk's framework, ideological polarization is treated as an object of analysis rather than as a moral position

assumed by the researcher. Interpretation is grounded in clearly identifiable linguistic strategies, such as lexical choices, appeals to authority, patterns of victimization, and framing practices. This approach seeks to avoid reproducing the very moral binaries it critiques and instead exposes how such binaries are discursively constructed and sustained.

Finally, this study acknowledges that its focus on a single press conference involving two political leaders limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized across different actors, contexts, or historical moments. This limitation reinforces the importance of analytical reflexivity, as the findings are presented as context-specific interpretations of discursive processes rather than as universal moral judgments. Future research could expand the analytical scope by examining a broader range of political figures, historical settings, and geopolitical contexts to explore recurring patterns of ideological discourse in international politics. Comparative and longitudinal studies across political systems, media environments, or cultural frameworks would further deepen understanding of how discourse functions as a vehicle for constructing legitimacy, reinforcing moral hierarchies, and normalizing violence, thereby strengthening both theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of how political language sustains systems of power and exclusion in contemporary global society.

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