

# Mitigating Harms From Crisis Events: Geopolitical Conflict



POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM  
RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB  
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## Manipulation and Harmful Narratives During the Start of the Iran War

### Crisis Background

On February 28, 2026, the U.S., together with Israel, launched Operation Epic Fury against Iran, sparking the Iran war. The war followed strikes in 2025 against Iranian nuclear facilities and has led to ongoing conflict.

The Iran war has served as a catalyzing moment on social media with posters expressing disdain for U.S. involvement, calling for peace, supporting the war, and questioning if the war is in the United States' best interests.

At times, valid criticisms are being exploited by bad actors to amplify hateful discourse, including anti-Arab hate, anti-Muslim hate, and antisemitism. Common narratives frame Islam as anti-American and Jewish actors are alleged to control the U.S. government, resulting in parallel surges of dehumanizing rhetoric targeted at American Arab, Muslim, and Jewish communities.

### Themes: Harmful Narratives

Many fringe and mainstream users perpetuate common antisemitic **conspiracy theories** which allege undue Jewish control of global affairs that extends beyond criticisms of U.S.-Israeli action. These conspiracies harm Jewish communities, including inspiring hatred and violence, and deepen societal divisions that make it difficult to engage in reasoned debate.

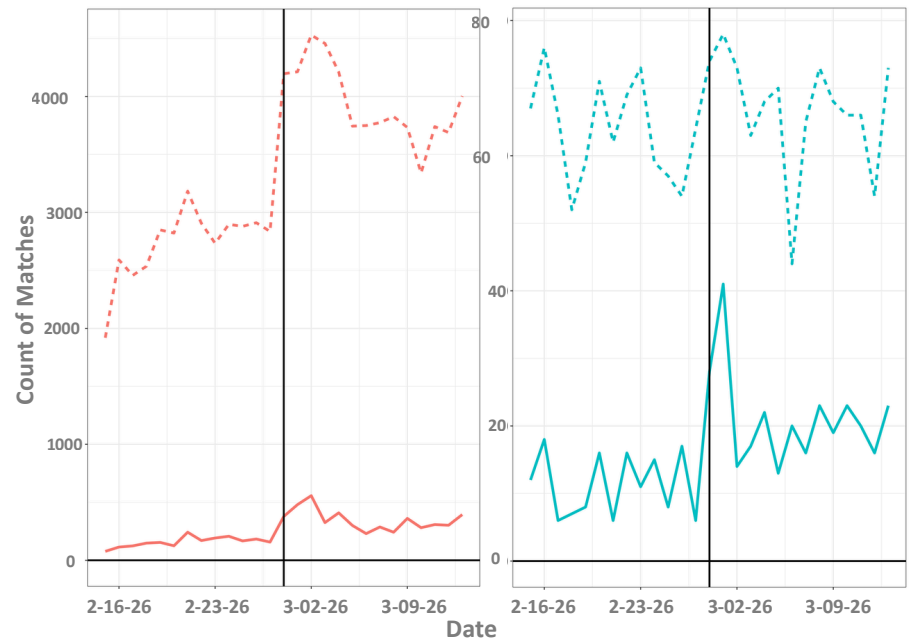
Many posts also engage in an **us vs. them framework** – artificially dividing people into opposing groups – to place blame for the war or amplify broader grievances against Arab, Muslim, and Jewish communities, often relying on xenophobic fears of “invasion” deemed as threatening to American values.

Finally, posters engage overtly in discriminatory rhetoric as well as dog whistles that rely upon **emotional manipulation techniques** to stoke anger, fear, and resentment of Arab, Muslim, and Jewish communities. A common fear-mongering example is using “terrorist” to refer to Muslim and Arab communities.

### Antisemitic and Anti-Arab/Anti-Muslim Rhetoric Before/After the Start of the Iran War

Antisemitic and anti-Arab/anti-Muslim posts increased following the immediate start of the Iran war. On Gab, **antisemitic content increased by 60%** and **anti-Arab/anti-Muslim content increased by 180%**, before stabilizing to pre-conflict levels thereafter. On Reddit immediately following the start of the war, **anti-Arab/anti-Muslim content dramatically increased by 210%** and then stabilized at a higher level, while **antisemitic content increased by 19%** before returning to pre-conflict levels. Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments were combined because hateful users rarely differentiate between these distinct groups in their posts.

● = Gab      ●●●● = Antisemitic Terms  
● = Reddit      ●●●● = Anti-Arab/Anti-Muslim Terms



### Preventing Manipulation

PERIL's evidence-based research shows that teaching about manipulative tactics is more effective than counterarguing with facts. A starting point is always to point out manipulation as a tactic of bad actors who are trying to persuade you. In addition, these three tactics can be addressed directly through evidence-informed responses:

**Conspiracy theories** can be reduced by fostering critical thinking, engaging in empathetic communication, and providing education on digital literacy.

**Emotional manipulation** can be mitigated by calling out tactics like moral outrage, scapegoating, or false dichotomies, checking reliable sources and evidence, and prioritizing critical thinking.

**Us vs. them narratives** can be mitigated by shifting focus from divisive labels to common goals while promoting empathy and shared interests.

PERIL analyzes harmful, salient, and fast moving narratives to inform violence prevention. In this series, we highlight prevalent manipulation strategies that appear in the aftermath of common crises.

Scan QR for more resources developed from PERIL's research.

