

Mediated Witnessing Under Fire: Digital War Narratives, Precarity, and the Fragmentation of Social Life in Iran

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how civilians in Iran experience, narrate, and make sense of the 2026- armed conflict involving Iran, the United States, and Israel through digitally mediated storytelling and reflections on social suffering. It approaches platforms such as Instagram not merely as channels of communication but as spaces of mediated witnessing and vernacular knowledge production, where individuals document and interpret violence under conditions of censorship, prolonged internet shutdowns, infrastructural breakdown, and significant political risk. The analysis draws on first-person testimonies, affective expressions, and narrative fragments circulating online, alongside open-ended responses from participants in Iran and the diaspora. These materials are examined through a qualitative, multi-method approach that combines narrative inquiry with reflexive thematic analysis.

The findings suggest that war is not experienced as a discreet or bounded event; rather, it unfolds as an ongoing psychosocial condition embedded in everyday life. Participants' narratives show how violence becomes embodied, normalized, and spatially diffuse, reshaping temporal experience, domestic environments, and bodily states marked by fear, fatigue, and illness. At the same time, shared exposure to violence does not necessarily generate collective cohesion. Instead, it often produces fragmentation, erodes interpersonal trust, and intensifies moral polarization, complicating notions of belonging. While moments of care and mutual support do emerge, these forms of solidarity remain fragile, situational, and often ambivalent.

By foregrounding everyday practices of storytelling, documentation, and emotional expression, the article demonstrates how digital narratives function as forms of agency and resistance. They allow individuals to assert visibility, bear witness, and make meaning under conditions of constraint. These narratives feed into transnational affective publics, shaping how the conflict is interpreted beyond Iran's borders while also revealing tensions within diasporic engagement, including competing moral frameworks, attachments, and responsibilities.

Overall, the article argues that digitally mediated war narratives complicate state-centered understandings of conflict by centering lived experience, embodied suffering, and fragmented social worlds. In doing so, it offers insight into how war is not only fought but also felt, narrated, and socially negotiated in the digital age.

Keywords: Mediated witnessing; Digital war narratives; Social fragmentation; Precarity; Affective publics

INTRODUCTION

For many Iranians, the year 2026 began amid a fragile convergence of cautious hope and deepening uncertainty, as long-accumulating social, economic, and political tensions intensified into another cycle of unrest. What began as strikes in Tehran's bazaar, driven by severe inflation, currency collapse, and growing insecurity around access to basic goods, quickly expanded beyond economic demands into broader political contestation. Material hardship became intertwined with dissatisfaction toward governance, transforming localized grievances into sustained and politically articulated forms of collective action (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Bayat, 2010). Diverse social groups, including students, schoolchildren, women, merchants, and workers, mobilized around slogans

such as “Woman, Life, Freedom” and “Bread, Work, Liberty,” signaling a rupture in state–society relations and foregrounding demands for systemic transformation (Sabet Sarvestany, 2026).

These developments can be situated within a recurring pattern of contention, including the mobilizations of 2009, 2019, and 2022, in which state reliance on coercion has repeatedly generated new cycles of dissent (Abrahamian, 2008; Keshavarzian, 2021). Recent unrest reflects not only growing dissatisfaction but also an erosion of political legitimacy across multiple social groups (Sabet Sarvestany, 2026). Emerging solidarities, particularly among women, youth, minority communities, and the urban poor, have begun to reframe fragmented grievances into collective claims grounded in dignity, rights, and social justice, often facilitated through shared protest practices and digital communication (Bayat, 2022; Sabet Sarvestany, 2026).

Existing scholarship has examined Iranian protest movements, digital repression, internet shutdowns, mediated witnessing, and affective publics. Recent research has further analyzed the visual and affective dimensions of protest, the formation of digital counter publics, the politics of visibility under surveillance, activist memory work, and feminist resistance across online and offline spaces in the context of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement (Mousavi, 2024; Beidollahkhani, 2025; Dadpour & Shewly, 2025; Moqadam, 2025; Naderi, 2025; Oudlajani, 2026). However, comparatively little attention has been paid to how civilians narrate war as an everyday psychosocial condition under prolonged violence, censorship, infrastructural disruption, and political risk. While existing studies have illuminated the dynamics of protest, visibility, and digital resistance, they have not sufficiently explained how digitally mediated witnessing operates during conditions of ongoing conflict, nor how it may coexist with fragmented solidarity, mistrust, moral polarization, fragile forms of social connection, and everyday strategies of coping, resilience, and meaning-making. This article addresses this gap by analyzing digitally circulated wartime narratives alongside open-ended responses from Iranians inside Iran and in the diaspora. In doing so, it makes three contributions. First, it extends scholarship on mediated witnessing by showing how war is narrated not as an episodic event or exceptional rupture, but as an ongoing condition of ordinary life. Second, it demonstrates that shared exposure to violence does not necessarily generate collective solidarity and may instead intensify mistrust, withdrawal, and moral polarization. Third, it situates Iranian wartime narratives within transnational affective publics, illustrating how visibility, attachment, interpretation, and claims to suffering are shaped unevenly by distance, political positioning, and proximity to violence.

From the perspective of digital sociology, attention to communication infrastructures highlights how power operates through both repression and adaptation. The state’s use of internet shutdowns, during the 2019 fuel protests, the 2022 uprising following the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, and the escalations of 2026, demonstrates a strategic reliance on infrastructural control to disrupt communication, documentation, and transnational witnessing (Sabet Sarvestany, 2026). These shutdowns have become increasingly sophisticated, involving routing withdrawal, mobile disruptions, bandwidth throttling, and targeted platform blocking (IODA, 2026; Amnesty International, 2019; Gohdes, 2023). Often accompanied by arrests and violence, such measures aim to restrict the circulation of everyday testimonies and ground-level accounts of events (OONI, 2022; Article 19, 2024).

Information about events inside Iran is frequently mediated through external outlets whose political orientations and narrative frames vary. Some Persian-language media based abroad, such as Iran International and BBC Persian, have been criticized for privileging certain perspectives and amplifying selective voices, thereby shaping public understanding while limiting the visibility of more diverse, ground-level experiences (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Couldry, 2010).

These political and media dynamics are inseparable from the human cost of the conflict. Following protests earlier in 2026, reports from human rights organizations indicated that large numbers of civilians, including young people, were killed within a short period, while many others were arrested (Sabet Sarvestany, 2026). Amid this violence, renewed nuclear negotiations between Iran and the United States briefly raised the possibility of de-escalation before being overtaken by intensified regional confrontation. The resulting destruction, marked by displacement, casualties, and damage to infrastructure, has had far-reaching consequences for everyday life (UN OCHA, 2026).

Thirty days into the conflict, the Iranian state remains weakened yet capable of sustaining military engagement, while daily life has been deeply disrupted. Schools and universities have moved online despite recurring power outages, and early hopes that war might accelerate political change have largely given way to uncertainty. Against this backdrop, this article examines how individuals navigate conditions of extreme instability, asking how agency, resilience, and meaning-making are enacted under constraint, how everyday acts of narration function as forms of witnessing, and how these narratives circulate within and beyond national boundaries.

Drawing on qualitative accounts, the article argues that conflict cannot be understood solely as a series of discrete events or military developments. Rather, it unfolds as a psychosocial condition that shapes emotional experience and social relations. Participants' narratives point to forms of social pain linked to economic precarity, political pressure, and emotional exhaustion, alongside an erosion of trust in both institutions and interpersonal life, often expressed through fragmentation, withdrawal, and moral polarization. As scholarship on violence and everyday life suggests, prolonged exposure to conflict becomes woven into ordinary experience, gradually reshaping how individuals perceive, relate, and act (Das, 2007; Berlant, 2011). In this way, insecurity comes to structure both subjectivity and everyday social life.

Importantly, such conditions do not automatically produce solidarity. Instead, they frequently generate divisions and individualized strategies of survival that complicate collective belonging (Butler, 2009; Bayat, 2010). Moving beyond a narrow focus on digital witnessing, this article explores how narratives of strain, fragmentation, and everyday efforts at coping and repair are expressed and negotiated. In doing so, it shows how war operates not only as a geopolitical event but as a relational and psychosocial process that reshapes social life and constrains the possibility of imagining a shared collective future.

Theoretical Framework

This article brings together insights from Social Movement Theory and Digital Sociology to explore how people make sense of, respond to, and communicate their experiences in situations shaped by conflict and constraint. Social Movement Theory helps us see how individuals participate in forms of collective action, even in subtle or informal ways, while Digital Sociology draws attention to the platforms and infrastructures through which these actions are expressed and shared. Combined, these perspectives allow us to approach digital storytelling not simply as communication, but as a situated social and political practice.

Building on the work of Tilly and Tarrow (2015) and Bayat (2010, 2022), the article understands documentation and storytelling on Instagram as forms of everyday contentious agency. Rather than treating these practices as purely expressive, it considers them as ways in which people engage with, and sometimes gently push back against, conditions of repression. Bayat's concept of "non-movements" is particularly helpful here, as it highlights how dispersed, often uncoordinated actions in daily life can carry political meaning. From this perspective, practices such as posting, sharing, or narrating personal experiences can become meaningful forms of claim-making, especially in contexts where more organized forms of mobilization are limited.

These practices are shaped by the media environments in which they take place. As Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) show, media in Iran operates within overlapping layers of state control, diasporic production, and informal circulation. This creates a complex landscape in which people navigate constraints while trying to make themselves visible. Platforms such as Instagram can open up space for alternative narratives, but they are also shaped by unequal access and broader power dynamics. As a result, they are not neutral tools, but spaces where visibility, authority, and representation are constantly negotiated.

To deepen this analysis, the article draws on Das's (2007) work on the everyday life of violence, which shows how violence gradually becomes part of how people live, think, and relate to others. This perspective shifts attention away from viewing conflict as a series of isolated events and instead highlights its ongoing presence in everyday experience. It also resonates with Haeri's (2013) work, which shows how people navigate constraints through practices that are both deeply personal and socially embedded. Seen in this way, digital storytelling during wartime can be understood as an attempt to make sense of disruption, to articulate experience and regain some sense of coherence in uncertain conditions. Instagram, in this sense, becomes a space where lived realities are shared, shaped, and made communicable, even if only temporarily.

The effects of prolonged instability extend beyond storytelling itself. They shape emotional life and social relationships, often in subtle but significant ways. Research on precarity and social suffering shows how ongoing insecurity can be experienced as exhaustion and fragility, leading people to focus on coping and survival (Berlant, 2011; Bayat, 2010). Adib-Moghaddam's (2018) notion of a "politics of despair" captures how repeated crises can generate a lasting sense of uncertainty that becomes part of everyday life. From this perspective, conflict is not only something that happens at particular moments, but an ongoing condition that shapes how individuals imagine their futures and understand their place in the world.

The concept of mediated witnessing (Chouliaraki, 2012) offers another way to think about these practices by focusing on how suffering becomes visible through media. First-hand accounts, images, and expressions of emotion do more than document events, they ask to be seen and acknowledged. In doing so, they can challenge dominant ways of representing war, which often remain distant or abstract. Butler's (2009) idea of the unequal distribution of grievability is especially relevant here, as it highlights how not all lives are equally recognized or mourned. When people share experiences of violence or loss, they are not only documenting what happened but also insisting that these lives matter. As Bajoghli (2019) reminds us, media is always a site of struggle, where different actors try to shape meaning and control visibility. Everyday storytelling therefore works within, rather than outside of, existing power relations.

Digital Sociology helps us understand how these narratives move and take shape within platform environments. Couldry (2012) emphasizes that having a voice, being able to tell one's story, is itself politically significant, particularly where institutional narratives dominate. Yet, as Derakhshan (2015) points out, digital platforms also introduce new forms of control, including algorithmic filtering and commercial interests. In Iran, these dynamics intersect with censorship and infrastructural disruption, making digital expression both possible and uncertain. Instagram, widely used among younger Iranians, reflects this tension: it offers opportunities for visibility and connection, but these remain uneven and contingent.

Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics sheds light on how emotions circulate within these spaces. Feelings such as grief, anger, and hope move across networks, connecting people and sometimes forming loose, shifting communities. However, as Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) note, Iranian publics, especially those that are transnational, are far from unified. They are shaped by disagreement, fragmentation, and unequal access to platforms and representation. As a result, emotional exchanges can bring people together, but they can also deepen divisions and generate ambivalence or mistrust.

These dynamics become particularly visible within the Iranian diaspora, where engagement with events in Iran is shaped by varying degrees of proximity, attachment, and distance. Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism" helps capture the tension between holding onto hopes for political change and confronting the uncertainties that accompany them. Mahdavi (2020) highlights the diversity within diasporic experiences, shaped by generational differences and political positions. Fortier (2000) further shows how memory and identification sustain emotional ties across distance, making distant conflicts feel immediate, though not equally or in the same way for everyone.

These perspectives offer a way of understanding digital testimonies as grounded, lived practices through which people respond to war, repression, and uncertainty. Rather than assuming that shared exposure to violence leads to solidarity, this approach highlights unevenness, showing how responses differ depending on people's positions, experiences, and access to resources. In this sense, it supports the broader argument of the article: that conflict is not only a geopolitical or event-based phenomenon, but a lived condition that reshapes how people act, relate, and make sense of their worlds.

Methodological Approach and Data Analysis

This study takes a qualitative, multi-method approach to explore how war is lived, understood, and emotionally navigated across both digital environments and everyday life. Rather than separating online and offline experience, it treats them as closely intertwined spaces through which people make sense of conflict. In line with the theoretical framework on mediated witnessing and lived precarity, the focus is on how individuals give meaning to ongoing instability through acts of storytelling, sharing, and reflection.

The analysis brings together two types of material: digitally circulated wartime narratives associated with activist networks and open-ended questionnaire responses from Iranian and Persian-speaking participants. Combining these sources makes it possible to follow how experiences of conflict are expressed in public, mediated settings while also being privately processed and reflected upon.

The first dataset consists of ten digitally circulated wartime narratives¹ associated with the Iranian Women's Center² and related activist networks. Although these narratives circulated within wider social media ecologies, including Instagram, the focal texts analyzed here were treated as activist-mediated digital testimonies rather than as platform-native Instagram posts alone. Instagram is therefore approached not simply as a communication platform but as one of several mediated spaces through which experiences of war, precarity, and everyday survival become visible. Within these constraints, sharing narratives becomes a meaningful act through which individuals document events, express vulnerability, and assert their presence despite risk. Ten narratives were selected for close analysis based on their engagement with war, precarity, and everyday survival.

Ten digital narratives were purposively selected using criterion-based sampling. Selection was guided by four predefined criteria: (1) explicit engagement with civilians' lived experiences of the 2026 conflict; (2) first-person or directly witnessed accounts of everyday life under wartime conditions; (3) substantive reflection on precarity, social relations, or emotional experience; and (4) sufficient narrative richness to support interpretive analysis. The aim was not statistical representativeness but analytical depth and conceptual variation across different experiences of conflict. These narratives are not treated as straightforward accounts of reality. Instead, they are understood as acts of mediated witnessing, ways of speaking that are shaped as much by the conditions of expression as by the experiences themselves. To better situate these narratives, materials from organizations such as HRANA³ and Dadban⁴ were used as contextual reference points, helping to place individual stories within a broader landscape of reporting and advocacy.

The second dataset consists of 22 open-ended questionnaire responses collected online. Participants were recruited through accessible networks and include individuals living both inside Iran and in the diaspora. The aim was not to produce a representative sample, but to gather a range of situated perspectives shaped by different relationships to the conflict. Participants were invited to reflect on emotional wellbeing, social trust, solidarity, and coping under prolonged instability. Their responses do not form a single, unified narrative. Instead, they reveal a mix of shared concerns and divergent experiences. Including diaspora participants adds another layer to the analysis, highlighting the emotional tensions of distance between connection and separation, concern and uncertainty and showing how engagement with conflict often takes place through mediated encounters as well as direct experience.

Analytical Approach

To make sense of these materials, the study combines narrative inquiry with reflexive thematic analysis. Narrative inquiry helps frame storytelling as an active process through which people organize disruption, interpret uncertainty, and locate themselves within shifting conditions. From this perspective, narratives do not simply reflect experience; they help shape how it is lived and understood. The digital narratives were analyzed through close, interpretive reading of both textual and visual elements. Attention was given to how posts framed experiences of fear, violence, displacement, and endurance, and how emotion was conveyed through language, imagery, and tone. Recurring motifs, narrative patterns, and forms of address, such as witnessing, appealing, or documenting, were examined to understand how meaning is constructed within a constrained digital space.

¹ The ten narratives analyzed in this study were primarily produced by women's rights activists living in Iran during wartime conditions, when formal activist networks were largely suspended. Due to internet disruptions and restrictions, contributors often communicated their accounts orally via phone calls to trusted contacts outside Iran. These accounts were then recorded, transcribed, and published on the Iranian Women's Center website. One of the authors of this study was closely connected to this network and contributed to translating selected narratives into English.

² The Iranian Women's Center website (<https://ir-women.com/>) is primarily Persian-language, reflecting its orientation toward Iranian audiences, though a limited number of pages are available in English.

³ <https://www.instagram.com/en.hrana/?hl=fi> , <https://www.en-hrana.org/>

⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/dadban2021/?hl=fi> , <https://dadban.info/eye11/>

The questionnaire responses were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's approach. The process began with repeated reading to become familiar with the data, followed by inductive coding grounded in participants' own words. Codes focused on recurring emotional and social experiences, including economic strain, fear, distrust, exhaustion, and changing forms of social connection. These were gradually developed into broader themes that capture how everyday life is shaped by prolonged instability. Theme development was iterative, moving back and forth between the data and its wider context. In this approach, themes are not seen as simply emerging from the data but as shaped through interpretation.

Bringing the Data Together

Rather than treating the two datasets separately, the analysis brings them into conversation. It asks how similar concerns, uncertainty, endurance, fragmentation, and the search for meaning, appear across different forms and contexts. The digital narratives often capture immediate, outward-facing expressions shaped by urgency, circulation, and visibility, while questionnaire responses offer more reflective accounts of living with ongoing pressure. This combined approach allows for a more layered understanding of war, not just as a series of events, but as a condition that unfolds across time, relationships, and emotional worlds. It shows how people engage with conflict both directly and through the stories they encounter and share.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, reflexivity was an important part of the research process. Both digital narratives and the questionnaire responses are understood as shaped by conditions of repression, precarity, and uncertainty, rather than as neutral or complete representations of reality. Interpretation is also shaped by the researcher's own perspective. Attention was therefore given to how analytical choices, what stood out, how themes were formed, were influenced by prior assumptions and emotional engagement with the material. This was especially important when working with accounts involving fear, violence, and survival. At the same time, the study remains aware of its limits. It does not aim to fully capture lived experience, but to examine how those experiences are expressed and made meaningful within particular conditions.

Given that one of the researchers had prior professional connections with the Iranian Women's Center, reflexive attention was paid to the potential influence of this proximity throughout the research process. Analytical decisions were continuously discussed among the authors, and emerging interpretations were revisited to reduce the risk of confirmation bias and over-identification with participants' narratives.

Ethical considerations were central throughout the research, given the risks associated with visibility and political exposure. Questionnaire participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were anonymized. Although some of the digital narratives circulated through publicly accessible social media platforms, they were treated with care due to the conditions under which it was produced. Identifying details were removed, and examples are presented in anonymized or paraphrased form to avoid traceability. The analysis focuses on patterns rather than individuals to reduce potential risk. All data were stored securely and handled with attention to the possible consequences of representation, particularly when working with material shaped by vulnerability and ongoing conflict.

Because the study involved anonymous adult participants completing voluntary online questionnaires and analysis of publicly available digital material, formal institutional ethics approval was not required under the applicable national research guidelines. Nevertheless, the study adhered to internationally recognized principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and minimization of potential harm.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The combined analysis of Instagram narratives and questionnaire responses reveals how war is lived not as a distant or episodic event, but as an ongoing condition that reshapes emotional life, social relations, and everyday meaning-making. Bringing these materials into dialogue makes visible both the immediacy of lived experience and the more reflective ways individuals interpret prolonged instability. Across both datasets, war emerges as simultaneously structural and intimate experienced through constant pressure, embodied strain, fractured sociality, and fragile efforts to sustain connection. These experiences do not translate into a unified

understanding of the conflict but instead reflect divided and emotionally complex interpretations shaped by social and geographic position.

War as an Everyday Condition

Participants consistently describe war as something woven into daily life rather than confined to moments of escalation. Structural pressures, economic instability, political repression, and infrastructural breakdown, are experienced as continuous and unavoidable. This is particularly evident in narratives of ongoing exposure to violence. As one narrator states, “not a single day or night has passed without the sound of explosions” (Taraneh Bani Yaqoob),⁵ while another reflects that “even after ten nights... the explosions simply do not stop” (Taraneh Bani Yaqoob).⁶ These accounts point to a shift in temporality, where war saturates time itself rather than punctuating it. Spatial boundaries of safety also collapse, as captured in the observation that “missiles can reach anywhere” (Fariba Montazer Zohoor).⁷

Questionnaire responses echo this sense of pervasive pressure. Participants describe being under “constant pressure because of the economic problems” and facing “more restrictions in various areas of life.” Read together, these accounts suggest that structural violence is not only systemic but experienced as an ambient condition shaping perception and everyday decision-making.

This study extends Das’s 2007 research on everyday violence, and finds that wartime disruption is not only embedded in everyday practices, but also in individuals’ very perception of time. In contrast to the mainstream view that frames conflict as a sequence of exceptional events, the study’s respondents perceive war as a persistent state that restructures ordinary life.

Emotional Life Under Pressure: From Feeling to Embodiment

Across both datasets, emotional strain emerges as cumulative and deeply embodied. Participants frequently describe fear, anxiety, exhaustion, and hopelessness as enduring states rather than temporary reactions. Narratives vividly illustrate how these emotions are experienced physically. One participant notes that “every noise makes us jump” (Azadeh Sadeghi),⁸ while another describes prolonged sleeplessness: “I stay awake until dawn... exhausted” (Azam Soufiani).⁹ These accounts reflect a state of ongoing hypervigilance in which the body remains oriented toward threat. Several narratives also link emotional stress to bodily effects. One narrator describes how “my autoimmune disease... has flared up since the war began” (Taraneh Bani Yaqoob), while other reports that “the stress has triggered an early menstrual cycle” (Taraneh Bani Yaqoob). Such examples show how war becomes inscribed in the body, reinforcing theoretical understandings of precarity as expressed through both affective and material vulnerability.

Questionnaire responses further support this pattern, with participants describing “hopelessness about the future” and feeling “fatigued, anxious and mentally exhausted.” These accounts frame psychological strain as collective rather than individualized, rooted in shared structural conditions.

Unlike trauma frameworks that primarily emphasize individual psychological responses, participants’ narratives suggest that emotional distress is socially produced and collectively sustained through prolonged political uncertainty, economic insecurity, and infrastructural collapse.

Fractured Social Worlds: Trust, Distance, and Moral Tension

⁵ “If I Survive,” Iran Women, April 9, 2026, <https://ir-women.com/?s=if+I+survive>.

⁶ Iran Women. “A City Under Fire, A Nowruz Without Light.” April 6, 2026. <https://ir-women.com/?s=A+City+Under+Fire%2C+A+Nowruz+Without+Light>.

⁷ Iran Women. “We Are Still Living in Tehran.” Accessed June 24, 2026. <https://ir-women.com/?s=We+Are+Still+Living+in+Tehran>.

⁸ Iran Women. “He Stepped Out with the Trash, and Never Came Back.” April 3, 2026. <https://ir-women.com/?s=He+Stepped+Out+with+the+Trash%2C+And+Never+Came+Back>.

⁹ Iran Women. “Life and Illness in the Shadow of War.” April 11, 2026. <https://ir-women.com/?s=Life+and+Illness+in+the+Shadow+of+War>.

A central finding across the data is the erosion of trust and disintegration of social relations. Participants describe increasing distance between individuals, marked by suspicion, reduced openness, and weakened relationships. Questionnaire responses include statements such as “everybody has lost trust in everybody” and observations that “relationships have become more superficial.” In narratives, these dynamics are reflected in everyday interactions, where “people don’t know where they stand anymore... conversations turn into arguments” (Fariba Montazer Zohoor). This process extends into the moral realm. Some narrators express distress at others’ reactions to violence, particularly when empathy appears uneven. One describes such experiences as “more bitter than any bomb” (Jila Bani Yaqoob),¹⁰ while another characterizes the situation as “madness. Collective madness” (Fariba Montazer Zohoor). These accounts suggest that war disrupts not only social cohesion but shared ethical frameworks. In this context, even shared suffering does not necessarily produce solidarity. As one narrator reflects, “we... have learned to sort deaths into categories” (Elham Abbaslou),¹¹ indicating a breakdown in empathy.

These dynamics resonate with broader divisions observable beyond immediate lived contexts. Across Iranian communities, both inside the country and within the diaspora, responses to the war have remained sharply contested, shaped by differing relationships to violence and political change. In some contexts, military intervention has been framed as a necessary, if deeply troubling, pathway toward transformation (MERIP 2026; UW News 2026). In others, war is understood primarily through its devastating human consequences, including civilian suffering, displacement, and infrastructural destruction (The New Humanitarian 2026; UN News 2025–2026). These contrasts reinforce that shared exposure does not produce stable collective identification.

These findings challenge common assumptions within conflict literature that shared suffering naturally produces solidarity. Instead, the data suggest that prolonged precarity may simultaneously generate localized care and broader social fragmentation.

Coping, Withdrawal, and Small Forms of Endurance

Faced with ongoing pressure and uncertainty, participants describe coping strategies that are both practical and emotional. Across datasets, there is a clear movement toward self-protection and controlled engagement. Participants report limiting movement, narrowing social interactions, and focusing on immediate survival. Practices such as offering brief reassurances, “we’re fine. Everything is okay” (Fariba Montazer Zohoor), illustrate how individuals manage both emotional burden and communication constraints. Coping is often relational but localized, centered on close networks of trust. Staying on the phone during bombardments or physically clustering together reflects attempts to create small zones of safety. These strategies involve a degree of withdrawal. Participants note that “people are busy with their own problems” and increasingly disengaged from wider social life. This reflects adaptive distancing, where reduced engagement becomes a way to manage risk.

Fragile Solidarities and the Work of Repair

Despite these patterns of fragmentation, the data also reveal moments of care and connection. Solidarity appears in small, situational forms rather than as a stable condition. Narratives describe neighbors checking “which apartments were occupied... who might need help” (Fariba Montazer Zohoor), indicating emergent forms of localized support. Expressions such as “life is resistance” (Zhila Bani Yaghoub)¹² reflect ongoing efforts to sustain meaning and connection. This ambivalence reflects tensions between imagined political futures and lived realities. While some narratives emphasize the possibility of transformation, these expectations are often unsettled by the visible human and material costs of war. Media accounts similarly suggest that initial support

¹⁰ Iran Women. “Those Who Danced for the Bombing of Their Own Cities: A Bitterness Deeper Than Any Bomb.” March 31, 2026. <https://ir-women.com/?s=Those+Who+Danced+for+the+Bombing+of+Their+Own+Cities%3A+A+Bitterness+Deeper+Than+Any+Bomb>.

¹¹ Iran Women. “Foreign Terrorist Attack and the Collapse of Public Rationality.” March 26, 2026. <https://ir-women.com/?s=Foreign+terrorist+attack+and+the+collapse+of+public+rationality>.

¹² Iran Women. “Touring Enghelab and Niloofar with the Taste of Books and Sandwiches” [تور انقلاب و نیلوفر با طعم کتب و ساندویچ]. April 4, 2026. <https://ir-women.com/22355>.

for intervention has, in some cases, shifted toward uncertainty and calls for de-escalation (NBC News 2025; AP News 2025; CBS News 2026).

These forms of solidarity are fragile and uneven. As one participant notes, “sometimes people help each other out, but it’s only temporary.” Acts of hope coexist with an awareness of loss, as seen in reflections like “they are small, but they matter... hope, in the middle of war” (Fariba Montazer Zohoor), alongside the recognition that “the dead will not return.”

Mediated Witnessing and the Circulation of Experience

Across these themes, digital narratives function as practices of mediated witnessing. They enable individuals to make their experiences visible despite censorship, infrastructural disruption, and risk. These accounts do more than document events, they shape how war is understood and felt. Through emotionally charged storytelling, they contribute to shared affective spaces in which fear, grief, and endurance circulate across distance. As these narratives move across transnational contexts, they enter already polarized interpretive environments. Distance from immediate danger can allow war to be framed in strategic or future-oriented terms, including support for external military pressure or regime-targeting actions (Iran International 2025). Such framings prioritize anticipated outcomes over immediate suffering. At the same time, developments on the ground, including the resilience of state institutions (Al Jazeera 2026) challenge assumptions that violence will produce rapid transformation. In this context, storytelling itself becomes an act of persistence. As one narrator asserts, “I will continue to tell these stories... if I remain alive” (Taraneh Bani Yaqoob).

From Shared Suffering to Fragmented Lives

Taken together, the findings show that shared exposure to structural violence does not produce a unified social or moral response. Instead, prolonged instability generates a complex landscape marked by exhaustion, distrust, and selective forms of connection. War emerges not only as an everyday condition, but as a space of competing interpretations in which different visions of survival, justice, and political change coexist. These tensions are shaped by differences in proximity and political positioning, highlighting how the meaning of war remains unsettled across contexts. Digital narratives, in this sense, do not simply document suffering; they participate in ongoing struggles over meaning, visibility, and recognition through which individuals navigate crisis and uncertainty.

Taken together, the findings refine the concept of mediated witnessing by showing that visibility, affective circulation, and solidarity do not necessarily move together. Under conditions of prolonged precarity, digital witnessing may make suffering visible while also exposing fractured social worlds, moral disagreement, and selective forms of attachment. The article therefore contributes to conflict and media studies by shifting attention from whether civilians can speak under conditions of war to how their narratives reveal the unstable social, relational, and affective conditions through which war is lived, interpreted, and contested.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored how civilians in Iran live, narrate, and make sense of war under conditions of prolonged violence, disruption, and constraint. By combining digital narratives with reflective accounts from questionnaire responses, the study offers a layered understanding of war not simply as an event, but as an ongoing condition that shapes everyday life, emotional experience, and social relations. The findings show that war is experienced as continuous and immersive rather than episodic. Structural pressures, economic instability, political repression, and infrastructural breakdown are not abstract forces but are felt directly in the rhythms of daily life. Digital narratives make this especially visible, illustrating how these pressures are lived through the body, through sound, fear, routine, and the erosion of any stable sense of safety or future.

Across both datasets, emotional strain emerges as collective and cumulative. Fear, exhaustion, and uncertainty are not isolated responses, but shared conditions that reflect broader forms of social suffering. In this sense, war reshapes not only individual wellbeing but also relationships, family life, and the wider social fabric. The study highlights a more difficult insight: shared exposure to violence does not necessarily lead to solidarity. Instead, prolonged instability is associated with declining trust, moral tension, and fragmented social life. Participants

describe distancing from others, uncertainty about where people stand, and discomfort with conflicting interpretations of the war itself. These dynamics challenge assumptions that shared hardship naturally produces cohesion, showing instead how it can deepen division and disconnection.

Coping, in this context, often takes the form of small, defensive practices focused on maintaining immediate safety, managing emotional strain, and protecting close social ties. While these strategies are necessary, they also signal a shift away from broader forms of collective engagement. Solidarity does not disappear. Still, it becomes fragile, situational, and uneven, appearing in moments of care that are meaningful yet difficult to sustain. Digital narratives play an important role within this landscape. As forms of mediated witnessing, they allow individuals to document and share their experiences despite censorship and disruption. These narratives make suffering visible, but they also shape how war is interpreted across different audiences. As they travel, they enter environments where meanings are already divided, and where reactions are shaped by distance, political perspective, and personal experience.

This study suggests that war should be understood not only through its geopolitical dimensions but as a deeply social and interpretive process. It unfolds not just through events, but through the ways people experience, narrate, and respond to it in everyday life. These responses are not unified; they are multiple, sometimes conflicting, and shaped by uneven conditions of exposure and understanding. Finally, this research points to a central tension: while people continue to make meaning, care for one another, and assert presence under extreme conditions, these efforts take place within a fractured social landscape. Recognizing this tension is essential not only for understanding how war is lived, but also for thinking carefully about what forms of connection, repair, and collective life remain possible in its aftermath.

This study proposes that contemporary warfare cannot be interpreted using only three types of frameworks: military strategy, geopolitical calculation, and state-centric analysis. Two additional dimensions must be added: the daily experiences of firsthand war zone witnesses, and digital narratives that carry these related experiences. Future research can conduct cross-conflict scenario comparisons of these digitally mediated war narratives to explore their evolution in post-conflict reconstruction.

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