

CONSTRUCTING "QUR'ANIC DIPLOMACY" AT KHAMENEI'S STATE FUNERAL: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SACRED TEXT, MEDIA FRAMING, AND GEOPOLITICAL SIGNALING

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Abstract

This study investigates how the notion of "Qur'anic diplomacy" was discursively constructed around differentiated Qur'anic recitations during the July 2026 state funeral ceremonies for Iran's late Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Rather than presuming that each recitation constituted an officially designed diplomatic message, the article treats the episode as a mediated discourse event in which sacred text, ritual sequencing, journalistic framing, and geopolitical knowledge interacted to produce political meaning. The corpus comprises six media texts published between 3 and 6 July 2026 and eight reported verse-delegation pairings, analyzed through Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis and van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach. A source-confidence protocol distinguishes verified event facts, reported textual pairings, media interpretations, and scholarly geopolitical inference. The analysis identifies three dominant semantic frames - resistance and steadfastness, calibrated affiliation, and admonition or distance - but shows that their diplomatic force depends on recontextualization rather than on lexical meaning alone. Cross-source comparison also reveals uneven evidentiary stability, most clearly in competing reports concerning Hezbollah. The article contributes the concepts of mediated symbolic diplomacy and evidentiary layering to research on religion, discourse, and international communication. It concludes that Qur'anic recitation can acquire diplomatic salience through ritual placement and media circulation, while claims of intentional state signaling must remain provisional without official documentation or systematic audiovisual verification.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; Qur'anic discourse; media framing; religious soft power; symbolic diplomacy; Iran

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana gagasan "diplomasi Al-Qur'an" dibentuk secara diskursif melalui pelaporan tentang bacaan ayat Al-Qur'an yang berbeda bagi sejumlah delegasi dalam rangkaian pemakaman kenegaraan Pemimpin Tertinggi Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, pada Juli 2026. Alih-alih mengasumsikan bahwa setiap bacaan merupakan pesan diplomatik resmi yang dirancang negara, penelitian memandang peristiwa tersebut sebagai peristiwa wacana termediatisasi yang mempertemukan teks suci, urutan ritual, framing jurnalistik, dan pengetahuan geopolitik. Korpus penelitian terdiri atas enam teks media yang terbit pada 3-6 Juli 2026 dan delapan pasangan ayat-delegasi yang dilaporkan. Analisis menggunakan model tiga dimensi Norman Fairclough dan pendekatan sosial-kognitif Teun A. van Dijk, disertai protokol tingkat kepercayaan sumber yang membedakan fakta peristiwa terverifikasi, pasangan ayat yang dilaporkan, interpretasi media, dan inferensi geopolitik akademik. Temuan menunjukkan tiga bingkai semantik dominan: perlawanan dan keteguhan, afiliasi diplomatik yang terukur, serta teguran atau jarak politik. Namun, daya diplomatik ayat tidak berasal dari makna leksikal semata, melainkan dari proses rekontekstualisasi. Perbandingan lintas sumber juga menunjukkan ketidakstabilan bukti, terutama dalam laporan tentang Hizbullah. Studi ini menawarkan konsep diplomasi simbolik termediatisasi dan pelapisan

evidensi sebagai kontribusi metodologis bagi kajian agama, wacana, dan komunikasi internasional. Klaim mengenai intensi politik negara tetap harus bersifat tentatif tanpa dokumentasi resmi atau verifikasi audiovisual yang sistematis.

Kata kunci: analisis wacana kritis; wacana Al-Qur'an; framing media; kekuatan lunak keagamaan; diplomasi simbolik; Iran

الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الكيفية التي تشكل بها مفهوم «الدبلوماسية القرآنية» خطابيا حول تالوة آيات مختلفة من القرآن الكريم أثناء مراسم الجنازة الرسمية للمرشد الأعلى الإيراني الراحل آية الله علي خامنئي في يوليو/تموز 2026. ولا تفترض الدراسة مسبقا أن كل تلاوة كانت رسالة دبلوماسية رسمية مقصودة، بل تتعامل مع الحدث بوصفه واقعة خطابية وسيطية تتفاعل فيها قدسية النص، وتسلسل الطقوس، والتأطير الإعلامي، والمعرفة الجيوسياسية لإنتاج المعنى السياسي. تتكون المدونة من ستة نصوص إعلامية منشورة بين 3 و6 يوليو/تموز 2026 وثمانية اقترانات مبلّغ عنها بين آيات ووفود. وتعتمد الدراسة نموذج نورمان فيركلاف ثلاثي الأبعاد في تحليل الخطاب النقدي والمنظور الاجتماعي المعرفي، لتيو فان دايك، مع بروتوكول لتقدير موثوقية الأدلة يميز بين وقائع الحدث المتحققة، والاقترانات النصية المبلّغ عنها، والتفسيرات الإعلامية والاستدلالات الجيوسياسية الأكاديمية. تكشف النتائج ثلاثة أطر دلالية رئيسية: المقاومة والثبات، والتقارب الدبلوماسي المحسوب، والعتاب أو المسافة السياسية. وتبين الدراسة أن الدلالة الدبلوماسية لا تنبع من المعنى المعجبي للآيات وحده، بل من إعادة سياقها داخل الطقوس والتغطية الإعلامية. كما تكشف المقارنة بين المصادر تفاوتات في ثبات الأدلة، ولا سيما في التقارير المتعلقة بحزب الله. وتقتصر الدراسة مفهومي «الدبلوماسية الرمزية الوسيطية» و«طبقات الأدلة» إسهاما في دراسة الدين والخطاب والاتصال الدولي، مع التأكيد أن نسبة القصد السياسي المباشر إلى الدولة تظل مؤقتة ما لم تدعمها وثائق رسمية أو أدلة سمعية بصرية منهجية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب النقدي؛ الخطاب القرآني؛ التأطير الإعلامي؛ القوة الناعمة الدينية؛ الدبلوماسية الرمزية؛ إيران

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sacred language rarely remains semantically confined to devotion when it enters a state ceremony. In funerals, inaugurations, commemorations, and other highly ritualized political events, scripture can simultaneously perform worship, collective memory, moral evaluation, identity work, and public communication. The interpretive stakes become especially high when different passages appear adjacent to different audiences. Under those conditions, political meaning does not arise from lexical content alone. It is produced through the interaction of wording, recitation, timing, audience, ritual sequence, institutional setting, and the geopolitical knowledge that observers bring to the event. Qur'anic discourse research

similarly shows that rhetorical force emerges from the interaction of linguistic form, communicative context, and interpretive framing rather than from isolated words or verses (H. Ahmad & Ghafar, 2025).

This problem became unusually visible during the July 2026 funeral ceremonies for Iran's late Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. International reporting documented the lying-in-state and multi-day funeral processions attended by Iranian officials, foreign dignitaries, and representatives of allied non-state movements (Reuters, 2026). At the Tehran farewell ceremony, several media outlets reported that different Qur'anic passages were recited as particular delegations approached the coffin. Iran International, The Guardian, detikHikmah, and India Today subsequently interpreted or discussed these recitations as possible political or diplomatic signals (International, 2026; Mukul, 2026; Sinaiee, 2026; Wintour, 2026; Yani, 2026). Crucially, however, the organizers publicly offered no authoritative explanation of a formal verse-selection policy. The analytical object is therefore not an established diplomatic code but a contested mediated event in which ritual adjacency was converted into a political narrative.

This distinction is important because contemporary political communication increasingly operates through symbolic, indirect, and multimodal forms. Public diplomacy is not limited to formal statements; states and political actors also communicate through ceremonies, architecture, images, cultural heritage, religious institutions, and strategic narratives. Hobbs et al. (2025) show how narrative forms can connect public diplomacy to broader grand strategy by shaping how audiences interpret a state's history, identity, adversaries, and future (Hobbs et al., 2025). In religious diplomacy, symbolic resources can be even more polysemic because their authority precedes and exceeds the immediate political event. Mamedov and Jackson (2025) demonstrate that states can mobilize Islam as a foreign-policy resource, while also risking criticism when religious symbolism is perceived as instrumentalized or politically inconsistent (Mamedov & Jackson, 2025).

The Iranian case is particularly relevant because religion, ideology, state institutions, and foreign-policy narratives are deeply intertwined. Ghardashkhani, Gözl, and Schwartz describe cultural production in the Islamic Republic as a field in which ideology is continuously produced, circulated, negotiated, and contested (Ghardashkhani et al., 2024). Rivetti (2024) further demonstrates that Iranian state narratives are transformed as they travel across ideological and national contexts; reception is therefore an active process of recontextualization rather than passive transmission (Rivetti, 2024). At the level of foreign policy, Kelkitli (2024), Akbar (2025), and Ziv (2024) show that religious authority, institutions, identity, and moral symbolism can function as resources of soft power (Akbar, 2025b; Kelkitli, 2024; Ziv, 2024). Yet these resources do not necessarily operate only through attraction. Religious symbols may also affirm allies, discipline ambiguous partners, draw moral boundaries, or intensify reputational pressure.

Existing scholarship nevertheless leaves three gaps that the funeral episode makes visible. First, studies of Qur'anic political discourse have largely examined exegesis, speeches, ideology, and institutional interpretation rather than the micro-sequencing of scripture within diplomatic ritual (Mursyid et al., 2024; Nasirin et al., 2025). Second, religious soft-power research typically focuses on institutions, networks, policies, and long-term image projection, leaving underexplored how a short ritual act can acquire geopolitical significance through media circulation (Akbar, 2025a; Mamedov & Jackson, 2025; Ziv, 2024). Third, media discussion of the July 2026 recitations often moved quickly from temporal co-occurrence - a verse being heard as a delegation approached - to claims of intentional diplomatic design. Such movement raises a methodological problem: how can Critical Discourse Analysis interpret political meaning without converting uncertain reporting into established fact?

This article addresses that problem by integrating discourse analysis with explicit source criticism. It asks three questions: (1) What lexical-semantic and rhetorical patterns characterize the most strongly supported verse-delegation pairings? (2) How did journalistic production, intertextual repetition, and framing construct the idea of "Qur'anic diplomacy"? (3) How did Iran's post-war geopolitical context make particular diplomatic interpretations plausible? The study makes two contributions. Conceptually, it proposes mediated symbolic diplomacy to describe political meaning that emerges through the interaction of ritual action, sacred text, media framing, and audience inference rather than through a conventional diplomatic statement. Methodologically, it proposes evidentiary layering, which separates verified event facts, reported textual pairings, media interpretations, and scholarly geopolitical inference. This prevents analytical confidence from exceeding evidentiary confidence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis, Recontextualization, and Ideology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is appropriate for this case because it links textual choices to processes of production, circulation, interpretation, and social power. Fairclough's (1992, 1995) three-dimensional model treats discourse simultaneously as text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). Applied to the funeral episode, the textual dimension concerns the semantic and rhetorical potential of the reported verses; discursive practice concerns how media sources selected, labelled, repeated, translated, and interpreted the recitations; and sociocultural practice concerns Iran's political-religious institutions, regional alliances, rivalries, and post-war strategic environment.

Van Dijk's (1998, 2006, 2008) socio-cognitive perspective complements Fairclough by explaining how audiences connect textual cues to contextual knowledge (van Dijk, 2008; Van Dijk, 1998, 2006). A verse does not name a modern state such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or Qatar, yet audiences can map scriptural contrasts onto contemporary actors through context models: socially shared knowledge about wars, alliances, ideological identities, and recent diplomatic behavior. This mechanism is essential to the present case. The political referent is often absent from the verse itself and supplied by the ritual situation and the audience's geopolitical schema.

Recontextualization is therefore central. Moving a Qur'anic passage from its scriptural and devotional environment into a state funeral does not erase its theological meaning; it adds a new layer of situational meaning. The analytical task is not to claim that scripture itself contains a fixed contemporary foreign-policy position, but to examine how particular semantic potentials become salient when a verse is placed next to a specific delegation, narrated by journalists, and circulated in a politically charged media environment. This distinction protects the analysis from theological reductionism while still allowing serious examination of political use and reception.

2.2 Religious Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, and Symbolic Signaling

The concept of soft power provides a second analytical axis. Nye (2004) defines soft power in terms of shaping preferences through attraction rather than coercion, but later work has shown that religious resources complicate this distinction (Nye, 2004). Religious authority can generate legitimacy, transnational identity, emotional resonance, and moral vocabulary, all of which may shape political behavior without functioning as conventional material power. Ziv (2024) emphasizes recipient responses to religious soft power, while Akbar (2025) shows how Iranian religious institutions can connect symbolic legitimacy to wider political networks (Akbar, 2025b; Ziv, 2024). Kelkitli (2024) similarly locates Iran within a regional

competition in which ideational, cultural, and religious resources coexist with hard-power rivalry (Kelkitli, 2024).

Recent work also warns against treating religious soft power as intrinsically benign or purely attractive. Mamedov and Jackson (2025) show that states may instrumentalize Islam to construct positive self-images while simultaneously producing negative representations of competitors (Mamedov & Jackson, 2025). The funeral case therefore requires a broader category than soft power alone. A Qur'anic passage interpreted as praise may strengthen affiliation, but a passage interpreted as rebuke may produce distance or reputational pressure. The concept of symbolic diplomatic power used in this study includes both affiliative and admonitory effects while avoiding the assumption that every symbolic act constitutes an official diplomatic instrument.

The ritual setting adds another dimension. State funerals compress grief, legitimacy, continuity, collective memory, and international visibility into a single performative space. Their diplomatic significance derives not only from speeches but also from attendance, protocol, spatial arrangement, visual hierarchy, and ceremonial sequencing. In such contexts, a short recitation can become politically consequential because it is embedded in a highly watched sequence and can be detached from the ceremony as a shareable media fragment. The passage then circulates as a strategic narrative even when the initial intention remains uncertain.

2.3 Complementary Scholarship from the Specified Google Scholar Sources

The analytical framework can be strengthened by scholarship represented in the specified Google Scholar sources without altering the empirical findings of this study. Research on Qur'anic stylistics emphasizes that meaning is produced through interacting phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical choices rather than isolated lexical items (Siregar & Agustiar, 2024). Related work on al-Jurjani's concept of *al-fasahah* likewise foregrounds the relational organization of eloquence and meaning (Obaidullah A. & Rohmah, 2022), while semantic research stresses that meaning is context-sensitive and may shift through social and cultural use (Salbiah & Idris, 2022). Comparative thematic analysis further shows how political and national meanings are organized through signs, themes, and contextual interpretation (Fajri, 2021). These perspectives support the present article's decision to treat the reported funeral recitations as contextually recontextualized discourse rather than as self-sufficient diplomatic propositions.

The same source environment also provides methodological parallels for examining ideology, representation, and symbolic politics. Studies of political rhetoric demonstrate that linguistic choices can carry political force in mediated public communication (Sofyan & Yuhamar, 2021), while Gramscian analysis shows how ideological power can be reconstructed through textual interpretation and historical context (Achmad, 2023; Hamdiyati, 2021). Semiotic studies of Palestinian and Arabic cultural texts demonstrate how signs acquire denotative, connotative, ideological, and resistance-related meanings through interpretive frameworks (M. I. Ahmad, 2021; Nazar et al., 2026; Siregar et al., 2024). Work on media discourse using van Dijk's model is particularly relevant because it shows how lexical, syntactic, rhetorical, and schematic choices can frame Hezbollah, Israel, conflict, and responsibility in ways that actively construct social reality (Zubaidah & Hasaniyah, 2025). This strengthens the rationale for separating textual occurrence from media interpretation in the present study.

A broader cluster of studies from the same scholarly corpus also reinforces the importance of mediation, genre, and symbolic form. Research on globalization and Arabic highlights the interaction

between language, culture, politics, and technological circulation (Fajri & Zulhelmi, 2023); literary-psychological analysis of Palestinian childhood foregrounds the communicative force of conflict-related cultural expression (Zulhelmi & Pamusti, 2022); and rhetorical analysis of lamentation illustrates how lexical and semantic organization intensifies affective meaning (Sumardi et al., 2024). Qur'anic grammatical analysis shows the value of close attention to formal linguistic structure (Shohib et al., 2024), while Peircean semiotic work emphasizes the relation among representamen, object, and interpretant in the production of meaning (Maghfirah et al., 2025). Recent rhetorical-hermeneutic and digital-semiotic studies similarly demonstrate that interpretation is shaped by textual form and circulation context (Anestia, 2025; Azizah et al., 2025). Studies of song meaning and social criticism further show that symbolic language can organize affect, evaluation, and moral positioning (Diantika et al., 2025; Hikmah & Purnamawati, 2026). Together, these studies justify an approach in which Qur'anic language, ceremonial placement, media framing, and geopolitical inference are analytically distinguished but examined as mutually constitutive layers.

2.4 Research Gap and Propositions

From this literature, three analytical propositions guide the study. First, diplomatic meaning is expected to be relational rather than purely textual: the same verse may acquire different political force depending on who is present and how the event is framed. Second, media framing is expected to amplify intentionality by converting ambiguous ritual co-occurrence into a coherent narrative of strategic signaling. Third, source inconsistency is expected to be analytically meaningful rather than merely a technical weakness, because discrepancies reveal how rapidly an interpretive frame can stabilize even when the underlying factual details remain uneven. These propositions are examined without assuming that Iranian organizers intentionally designed every reported pairing.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design and Corpus

The study employs a qualitative documentary design combining Critical Discourse Analysis with cross-source verification. The primary corpus consists of six media texts published between 3 and 6 July 2026, selected because they either documented the funeral event, identified specific verse-delegation associations, or explicitly interpreted the recitations as diplomatic communication. The corpus includes Reuters for event verification and five interpretive or comparative reports from Iran International, The Guardian, detikHikmah, and India Today. Peer-reviewed scholarship was used as contextual literature rather than as evidence that a specific verse was recited for a specific delegation.

The unit of analysis is the reported verse-delegation pairing together with the framing language used to describe it. Eight pairings were extracted from the corpus: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Hamas, Pakistan, Hezbollah, Houthi/Ansar Allah, and the Lebanese state delegation. Because the corpus is small and event-specific, the study does not claim statistical generalizability. Its purpose is analytical generalization: to develop a transparent framework for studying how sacred texts can become diplomatically meaningful in mediated political rituals.

Table 1. Primary media corpus and evidentiary function

Source	Date	Primary function in corpus	Evidentiary role
Iran International	3 Jul 2026	Saudi delegation and Qur'an 3:13	Pairing-specific report

Source	Date	Primary function in corpus	Evidentiary role
Reuters	4 Jul 2026	Funeral chronology, setting, dignitaries	Event verification
Sinaiee / Iran International	5 Jul 2026	Multiple pairings and public debate	Comparative pairing report
Wintour / The Guardian	5 Jul 2026	Gulf/Turkey/Hezbollah interpretations	Comparative and geopolitical framing
Yani / detikHikmah	5 Jul 2026	Seven verse-delegation pairings	Secondary comparative report
Mukul / India Today	6 Jul 2026	Diplomatic-message framing and Saudi case	Cross-media interpretation

3.2 Source-Confidence Protocol and Evidentiary Layering

To prevent interpretive overreach, each claim was assigned to one of four evidentiary layers. Layer 1 comprises verified event facts, such as the funeral setting and presence of foreign delegations. Layer 2 comprises reported verse-delegation associations. Layer 3 comprises media interpretations that assign diplomatic meaning to those associations. Layer 4 comprises scholarly geopolitical explanations of why a particular interpretation is plausible. The study does not treat movement from one layer to the next as automatic. In particular, a Layer 2 temporal association does not by itself establish Layer 3 intentionality.

Pairings were also classified by source confidence. High confidence indicates cross-source convergence on a specific verse or unmistakable wording across at least two reports. Moderate confidence indicates a detailed report with some corroborating context but incomplete independent confirmation. Low confidence indicates a single or derivative report without sufficient independent verification. Contested indicates direct conflict between sources. Confidence refers only to whether a pairing was reported consistently; it does not measure whether the organizers intentionally selected the verse as a diplomatic message.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in two coding passes. The first pass was descriptive: source, delegation, verse reference, reported wording, date, and confidence status were entered into a comparison matrix. The second pass was interpretive and followed Fairclough's three dimensions. At the textual level, coding focused on lexical fields, evaluative contrasts, agency, group labels, covenant language, victory, forgiveness, sacrifice, and gradation. At the level of discursive practice, coding focused on modality and intentionality markers such as "message," "signal," "rebuke," "deliberate," and "not accidental," as well as intertextual repetition across outlets. At the sociocultural level, the analysis examined how Iran's alliances, rivalries, religious-political structure, and post-war environment supplied context models that made particular readings plausible.

Negative-case analysis was built into the procedure. Pairings that conflicted across reports were not harmonized into a single "correct" version for analytical convenience. Instead, the contradiction itself was retained as evidence about media circulation and narrative stabilization. Strong thematic inference was restricted to higher-confidence pairings, while lower-confidence cases were used only as illustrations of evidentiary uncertainty.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, explicit confidence grading, separation of evidence from interpretation, and an audit trail linking each analytical claim to the source-comparison matrix. The study avoids attributing official intent where no official statement was identified. It also distinguishes translation and paraphrase from the Arabic wording of the Qur'an; English renderings are treated as interpretive aids rather than replacements for the Arabic text (Abdel Haleem, 2004). Because the research analyzes publicly accessible documents and media reports and does not involve human participants, interviews, private data, or intervention, human-subject ethics approval was not applicable. The principal ethical concern is representational accuracy, especially when discussing sacred texts and politically sensitive actors.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Event Verification and Evidentiary Stability

The first result is a distinction between what is strongly established and what remains interpretive. The funeral ceremonies, the public display of Khamenei's coffin, and the presence of foreign dignitaries are independently documented (Reuters, 2026). Multiple outlets also reported that different Qur'anic passages were heard as different delegations approached. However, both Iran International and India Today noted the absence of an official explanation for why specific passages were selected (Mukul, 2026; Sinaiee, 2026). Accordingly, the strongest evidence supports differentiated recitation and subsequent interpretation; it does not independently prove a centralized diplomatic code.

The second result is uneven stability across pairings. Saudi Arabia and Turkey show the clearest cross-source convergence. Qatar and Hamas are also comparatively stable, although the interpretive meaning assigned to their verses varies. Hezbollah is the most important negative case: The Guardian and Iran International associate the delegation with wording from Qur'an 5:56 referring to "the party of Allah," whereas detikHikmah reports Qur'an 3:139-140. Pakistan and the Houthi delegation remain less securely corroborated. These differences matter because a compelling overall narrative can coexist with unstable component facts.

Table 2. Reported verse-delegation pairings and source-confidence assessment

Delegation / group	Reported passage	Dominant semantic field	Confidence	Analytical treatment
Saudi Arabia	Qur'an 3:13	Battle, asymmetry, divine support, victory	High	Core analysis
Turkey	Qur'an 4:95	Contrast between those who strive and those who remain behind	High	Core analysis
Qatar	Qur'an 48:2	Forgiveness, completed favor, guidance	Moderate-high	Core analysis with caution
Hamas	Qur'an 33:23	Covenant, fidelity, sacrifice	Moderate-high	Core analysis
Hezbollah	Qur'an 5:56 vs. 3:139-140	Group identity / victory vs. steadfastness	Contested	Negative case; no single definitive pairing

Delegation / group	Reported passage	Dominant semantic field	Confidence	Analytical treatment
Pakistan	Qur'an 3:200 (reported)	Patience, steadfastness, vigilance	Low	Excluded from strong inference
Houthi / Ansar Allah	Qur'an 48:29 (reported)	Firmness and in-group solidarity	Low	Supporting example only
Lebanese state delegation	Qur'an 4:66 (reported)	Obedience, sacrifice, commitment	Moderate	Used cautiously

4.2 Textual Patterning: From Scriptural Semantics to Diplomatic Inference

The higher-confidence pairings cluster around three semantic orientations: resistance and steadfastness, calibrated affiliation, and admonition or political distance. These categories are not treated as fixed meanings encoded by the verses. They describe the interpretive frames that became available when scriptural semantics were placed next to specific political actors.

The Saudi case illustrates adversarial inference most clearly. Qur'an 3:13 depicts two groups meeting in battle and emphasizes divine support and victory. Lexically, the passage contains an antagonistic two-group structure and a victory predicate that can be detached from its historical referent and mapped onto a contemporary conflict. Its diplomatic salience was intensified by media references to the Battle of Badr and by the recent war context. The verse does not mention modern Saudi Arabia or contemporary alliances; the political reading emerges from indexical linkage between the delegation, the historical geography, and the post-war narrative. This is a classic case of recontextualization rather than direct denotation.

The Turkish case is built around evaluative comparison. Qur'an 4:95 contrasts al-qa'idun (those who remain behind) with al-mujahidun (those who strive), using a marked structure of preference and gradation. The verb faddala (to prefer or elevate) creates an explicit hierarchy between categories of action. Media commentary mapped this evaluative contrast onto perceptions of Turkey's cautious or limited material support. In van Dijk's terms, the verse supplies a semantic schema of differential commitment, while the contemporary referent is supplied by a context model constructed from regional political knowledge.

The Qatari case differs because Qur'an 48:2 foregrounds benefactive and restorative meanings: forgiveness, completion of favor, and guidance. The verbal sequence permits a more conciliatory reading than the battle or striving passages. Yet even here, diplomatic meaning is not self-evident. Wintour (2026) interpreted the passage as a message involving forgiveness, while other reporting described it more positively as appreciation. This variation demonstrates that the same lexical field can support competing political frames depending on the interpreter's assumptions.

The Hamas case illustrates affiliative sacralization. Qur'an 33:23 centers on believers who remain true to a covenant, with semantic associations of fidelity, endurance, and sacrifice. When placed next to a movement publicly associated with the regional "resistance" discourse, these meanings become readily available for political identification. The effect is strengthened by interdiscursivity: scriptural covenant language intersects with contemporary narratives of martyrdom, resistance, and loyalty. The political resonance is therefore contextually powerful even though the verse is not a modern political statement.

The Hezbollah discrepancy demonstrates why textual interpretation must follow source verification. Qur'an 5:56 contains the expression *hizb Allah* ("party of Allah") and a victory predicate, creating an obvious lexical link to the movement's name. Qur'an 3:139-140, by contrast, emphasizes not losing heart and the alternation of days among people. Both could be politically meaningful, but they support different arguments. Selecting one without acknowledging the conflict would allow the analyst's preferred interpretation to determine the evidence. The contested status therefore becomes a substantive finding about discursive instability.

Table 3. Linguistic cues and recontextualized political frames in the core cases

Case	Key lexical/rhetorical cue	Discursive affordance	Recontextualized frame
Saudi Arabia - 3:13	Two-group opposition; divine support; victory	Constructs asymmetry and evaluative opposition	Admonition / warning / self-positioning as resilient
Turkey - 4:95	qa'idun vs. mujahidun; faddala (preference/elevation)	Ranks degrees of commitment	Critique of insufficient commitment
Qatar - 48:2	Forgiveness; completion of favor; guidance	Enables conciliatory or corrective reading	Calibrated affiliation / conditional reassurance
Hamas - 33:23	Covenant; truthfulness; sacrifice	Sacralizes fidelity and endurance	Affirmation of resistance identity
Hezbollah - 5:56 (reported)	hizb Allah; victory	Direct nominal resonance with group identity	Strong affiliation - but pairing is contested

4.3 Discursive Practice: How the Label "Qur'anic Diplomacy" Was Produced

The media corpus shows that "Qur'anic diplomacy" was not simply observed; it was produced through a chain of framing practices. Reports used formulations such as "message," "signal," "subtle rebuke," "deliberate," and "not accidental." These lexical choices shift the epistemic status of the event. A descriptive statement - a verse was recited while a delegation approached - becomes an intentional statement - the verse was selected in order to communicate a diplomatic judgment. The shift is rhetorically powerful because intention is difficult to verify after the fact but easy to naturalize through repetition.

Intertextuality accelerated this process. Later reports often cited or echoed earlier interpretations, so the narrative of tailored diplomatic messaging became more stable than some of the individual pairings. This is especially visible in secondary reporting that presents a list of delegations and verses as an established system. Fairclough's concept of discursive practice helps explain the transformation: circulation is not neutral transmission. Selection, translation, headline design, source attribution, and repetition reconstruct the event.

The pattern also illustrates a broader feature of strategic narratives. Hobbs et al. (2025) argue that political storytelling organizes history, identity, and geopolitical purpose into coherent frames (Hobbs et al., 2025). In the funeral coverage, the recitations were assembled into a narrative of post-war accounting: allies were affirmed, cautious partners were evaluated, and rivals were warned. Whether or not this system existed in the organizers' intentions, it became socially consequential once the narrative circulated across media environments.

4.4 Sociocultural Practice: Religious Authority, Post-War Signaling, and Alliance Mapping

The diplomatic interpretations were plausible because they resonated with Iran's broader political-religious order. Ibrahim (2024) emphasizes the close relationship between religious authority and political institutions in the Islamic Republic (Ibrahim, 2024). Ghardashkhani et al. (2024) similarly show that ideological production in Iran operates through cultural forms that are continuously negotiated (Ghardashkhani et al., 2024). In such a system, Qur'anic recitation at a state ceremony can be heard simultaneously as worship and as a state-adjacent political sign, even when the boundary between the two remains ambiguous.

The funeral also occurred in a highly securitized post-war environment. Reuters (2026) described mass mourning, revolutionary symbolism, and continued geopolitical tension, while Wintour (2026) situated the funeral alongside contestation over the Strait of Hormuz and regional diplomatic positioning (Reuters, 2026; Wintour, 2026). These conditions supplied a dense context model in which audiences were primed to interpret ceremonial details strategically. The meaning of the recitations therefore depended partly on temporal proximity to war, ceasefire politics, and debates over which regional actors had supported, opposed, or hedged against Iran.

This context helps explain the apparent alliance mapping in the media narrative. Cases associated with Hamas and, in some accounts, Hezbollah were framed through fidelity and victory; Qatar was framed more ambiguously through forgiveness or reassurance; Turkey and Saudi Arabia were interpreted through evaluative or admonitory contrasts. The pattern resembles religious soft power but extends beyond attraction. It combines affirmation, moral evaluation, identity recognition, and possible reputational pressure. For that reason, symbolic diplomatic power is analytically more precise than soft power when describing the full range of reported effects.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 From Sacred Recitation to Mediated Symbolic Diplomacy

The central theoretical finding is that diplomatic meaning emerged through a multi-stage process rather than residing automatically in the Qur'anic passages. The first stage was ritual adjacency: a passage was heard while a delegation occupied a salient ceremonial position. The second was media framing: journalists and commentators linked the passage to the delegation and supplied an interpretation. The third was geopolitical uptake: audiences used knowledge of alliances, war behavior, ideological identity, and historical memory to evaluate the proposed link. This three-stage process is what the article terms mediated symbolic diplomacy.

The concept differs from conventional public diplomacy in two ways. First, the communicative act is not necessarily accompanied by an identifiable institutional sender or explicit message. Second, its force depends on ambiguity. The same recitation can remain devotionally legitimate while simultaneously inviting political inference. Ambiguity creates interpretive flexibility and, potentially, plausible deniability. However, this should not be romanticized as a deliberate strategy unless evidence of intentional design exists. The analytical value of the concept lies precisely in allowing political effects to be studied without prematurely attributing intention.

This approach also refines the relationship between religion and soft power. Nye's (2004) attraction-centered model is useful for understanding symbolic legitimacy, but the funeral cases show that sacred discourse may do more than attract (Nye, 2004). It may praise, classify, warn, shame, or establish moral

distance. Mamedov and Jackson (2025) similarly show that religious soft power can involve positive self-presentation alongside negative-other construction (Mamedov & Jackson, 2025). The funeral discourse therefore occupies a hybrid communicative zone in which attraction and symbolic discipline coexist.

5.2 Source Instability as a Discursive Finding

A second contribution concerns evidence. The contradiction in the Hezbollah reporting demonstrates that source instability is not merely a limitation external to discourse analysis. It is part of the phenomenon. Once the general frame of "tailored verses" became persuasive, individual details could be absorbed into that frame even when they were inconsistent. The narrative gained coherence at a faster rate than the evidence gained verification.

This observation has methodological implications for CDA. Critical interpretation is often strongest when it reveals hidden assumptions, ideological polarization, or relations of power, but strong interpretation can become vulnerable when the underlying event data are weak. Evidentiary layering addresses this problem by making claim strength proportional to source strength. Analysts can still examine how a disputed pairing circulates, but they must distinguish the fact of circulation from the truth of the pairing and from the organizer's intention.

The model also prevents circular reasoning. Without evidentiary layering, an analyst might infer that a verse was selected to rebuke a state because the geopolitical relationship is tense, and then use the verse as evidence that the relationship was being rebuked. By separating textual occurrence, media interpretation, and geopolitical inference, the method makes each inferential step visible and therefore contestable.

5.3 Implications for Qur'anic Discourse Studies

The findings also matter for Qur'anic discourse studies. Political recontextualization should not be confused with a claim that a sacred text has been reduced to propaganda. Qur'anic passages are semantically and theologically layered, and their meanings cannot be exhausted by a single contemporary event. Al-Suyuti's classical attention to Qur'anic sciences reminds scholars that interpretation involves context, textual relations, and established exegetical disciplines rather than free political substitution. The present analysis therefore studies what social actors do with verses in a specific communicative setting, not what the verses "really mean" in an absolute theological sense.

This distinction is especially important when translations circulate in news media. Translation can foreground some semantic elements while muting others. Media reports often quote only a phrase - for example, victory, striving, forgiveness, or the "party of Allah" - that aligns neatly with a political frame. Such selective quotation is a form of recontextualization. Future multilingual analysis should compare the full Arabic recitation, Persian commentary, Arabic-language regional reporting, and English translation to identify where political emphasis enters the chain.

5.4 Broader Implications for Political Communication

The episode illustrates how state rituals can operate as high-density communication environments. Meaning is generated not only through speeches but through who attends, who is absent, where people stand, what is heard, what is shown on camera, and how these elements are narratively connected afterward. A seemingly small ritual choice can become internationally salient when it is semantically rich, visually timed, and easily extractable for digital circulation.

The case also suggests that symbolic diplomacy should be studied as a distributed process. Even when the state controls the ceremony, journalists, influencers, religious commentators, and foreign audiences

participate in producing the final diplomatic meaning. The communicative outcome may therefore exceed, distort, or even contradict the organizer's intention. This distributed model is particularly relevant in digitally networked diplomacy, where a ceremonial fragment can be translated, captioned, reframed, and circulated globally within hours.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has five principal limitations. First, it does not possess a complete, timestamped primary audiovisual archive of every delegation sequence. Without such an archive, some pairings cannot be independently verified from the Arabic audio. Second, several media reports may be intertextually dependent on earlier reporting, so cross-source convergence does not always equal fully independent confirmation. Third, the corpus is small and event-specific and does not systematically sample Persian- and Arabic-language domestic media. Fourth, the study analyzes mediated interpretation rather than audience reception; it cannot establish how delegates themselves understood the recitations. Fifth, no official document identifying a verse-selection protocol was located, so intentional state design remains unproven.

Future research should therefore reconstruct the ceremony from original video, identify each recited passage directly from Arabic audio, timestamp transitions between delegations, and compare these findings with official schedules. A multilingual corpus could then examine differences among Persian, Arabic, English, Turkish, Urdu, and Indonesian framing. Audience-reception research with diplomats, journalists, or viewers could test whether the proposed political meanings were actually recognized. Comparative research could also examine whether similar scriptural signaling occurs at other Iranian state funerals, religious summits, military commemorations, or ceremonies in other religiously oriented states. Such work would allow the concept of mediated symbolic diplomacy to be tested beyond this single event.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined the reported use of differentiated Qur'anic recitations during Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's July 2026 state funeral as a mediated discourse event rather than as a self-evidently intentional diplomatic code. The most strongly supported pairings display semantic patterns involving victory, striving, covenant, forgiveness, and group identity. Yet these meanings became diplomatic only through recontextualization: ritual adjacency linked scripture to a delegation, media framing transformed adjacency into a message, and geopolitical context supplied the inferential bridge.

The study's main conceptual contribution is mediated symbolic diplomacy, which captures political communication produced jointly by ritual, sacred text, media circulation, and audience inference. Its methodological contribution is evidentiary layering, which separates verified event facts, reported verse pairings, media interpretation, and scholarly geopolitical explanation. This distinction is essential in fast-moving political events, where compelling narratives can stabilize before factual details do.

The evidence supports a cautious conclusion. Qur'anic recitation at the funeral acquired real diplomatic salience in public discourse, and several pairings were reported consistently enough to support close textual analysis. However, the stronger proposition that Iranian authorities systematically assigned a precise political message to every delegation remains unverified. For Scopus-oriented scholarship on religion and political communication, this distinction is not a weakness; it is the basis of analytical rigor. The most defensible claim is that sacred text became a powerful medium of symbolic diplomacy through a process of mediated recontextualization whose political effects can be studied even when institutional intention remains uncertain.

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