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Sacred Signaling in Funeral Diplomacy: Qur'anic Recitation and Relational Positioning at Ali Khamenei's State Funeral

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how different Qur'anic recitations at Ali Khamenei's state funeral corresponded with Iran's relational positions toward selected recipients. The main issue is whether variation in sacred treatment within the same ritual setting carries relational meaning without being assumed as intentional state signaling. The study integrates Ritual Action, Symbolic Signaling, and Relational Positioning through a qualitative embedded case study and structured cross-case comparison of Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Qatar, and Hamas, with Hezbollah retained as a contested evidentiary case. The findings show relatively strong correspondence for Hamas, partial correspondence for Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar, and an indeterminate result for Hezbollah. The study concludes that sacred symbols can acquire diplomatic meaning when ritual variation is interpreted alongside recipients' relational positions. However, the observed correspondence does not prove intentional verse selection or how recipients understood the recitations.

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INTRODUCTION

The state funeral of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in July 2026 brought together Iranian officials, foreign delegations, and representatives of political groups in a highly visible ceremonial setting. Several delegations reportedly received different Qur'anic recitations while standing before Khamenei's coffin. This study focuses on four delegate–verse pairings supported by the strongest comparative evidence: Saudi Arabia with Surah Ali Imran 3:13, Türkiye with Surah An-Nisa 4:95, Qatar with Surah Al-Fath 48:2, and Hamas with Surah Al-Ahzab 33:23 (Fajri, 2026). These differences are analytically important because distinct sacred texts were presented to different recipients within the same ritual setting, creating the possibility that symbolic variation carried relational meaning.

State funerals are not only spaces of mourning but also sites of diplomatic representation, protocol, hierarchy, and symbolic interaction. Rituals acquire political meaning when recurring patterns, recognized rules, and shared expectations make actions intelligible under conditions of uncertainty (Mälksoo, 2026). Structured international gatherings can also sustain relationships through repeatedly performed symbolic practices (Bueger, 2026). Khamenei's funeral can therefore be understood as a ritualized diplomatic arena in which sequence, ceremonial positioning, and differentiated treatment may become politically meaningful.

Diplomatic communication is not limited to speeches, communiqués, negotiations, or agreements. Religion in international relations also operates through performative, discursive, and relational dimensions, allowing sacred language and symbols to acquire meaning through context (Yang & Li, 2021). Studies of religious diplomacy likewise show that texts, gestures, and diplomatic encounters must be interpreted in relation to their recipients and political setting (Piwko, 2025).

Research on ritual and signaling helps explain why symbolic differences may be informative while also requiring caution about intention. Ritual efficacy depends on whether symbols become meaningful within a shared order rather than merely on their presence (Balzacq, 2026). Symbolic

performances may also communicate status when variations are visible and comparable within a structured diplomatic environment (Danielson & Hedling, 2022). However, interpreted meaning should not be equated with evidence of strategic intent (Kustermans, 2026).

Iran's foreign relations make this issue particularly relevant because religion, culture, security interests, and diplomatic needs often overlap. Tehran has used cultural resources as part of its external influence, while its regional relations continue to combine cooperation and competition depending on issue and timing (Akbar, 2023; RezaeeDaryakenari et al., 2025). Around the funeral period, several governments continued to pursue dialogue with Iran while responding cautiously to recent security tensions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, 2026a; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026). This variation makes situational relational positioning more appropriate than fixed labels such as ally or adversary.

The closest prior study is Fajri (2026), which examines the same funeral episode through Critical Discourse Analysis of six media texts and eight reported verse–delegation pairings. Fajri shows that diplomatic meaning is shaped through the interaction of sacred text, ritual placement, media framing, and geopolitical knowledge. The study also identifies uneven evidentiary stability across pairings, particularly in the Hezbollah case. At the same time, it cautions that intentional state signaling cannot be established without official verse-selection protocols or a more complete audiovisual reconstruction.

A gap therefore remains. Previous work has focused mainly on how diplomatic meaning is constructed through media and context, while Iran's relationships with individual recipients have not been systematically reconstructed using the same relational dimensions and then compared with symbolic variation. Ritual Action, Symbolic Signaling, and Relational Positioning have also rarely been integrated to examine whether differentiated sacred cues correspond with differentiated political relationships (Baert et al., 2019; Mälksoo, 2026). This study addresses that gap by comparing four delegation–verse encounters within the same ritual while reconstructing Iran's relationship with each recipient separately. Its novelty lies in shifting from isolated verse interpretation toward cross-case patterns between symbolic variation and relational positioning.

Accordingly, this study asks how differentiated Qur'anic recitations at Ali Khamenei's funeral relate to Iran's relational stance toward selected recipients during the funeral period. It argues that diplomatic significance is better assessed through cross-recipient variation and its correspondence with Iran's relationships than through isolated interpretation of individual verses. Any correspondence identified is treated as interpretive rather than intentional; the study does not infer deliberate praise, warning, or punishment without evidence of the verse-selection process.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative embedded case study with within-case analysis and cross-case comparison. Khamenei's funeral is treated as the bounded main case, while each delegation–verse encounter serves as an embedded unit of analysis. The study contributes theoretically by integrating Ritual Action, Symbolic Signaling, and Relational Positioning, and empirically by comparing multiple recipients within one ritualized diplomatic setting.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Ritual Action in International Relations

This study views rituals as patterned political actions whose meaning emerges from context. Rules, norms, and repetition help actors navigate uncertainty by making actions more recognizable to others (Mälksoo, 2026). In state funerals, mourning, protocol, public visibility, and the presence of foreign delegations unfold within a structured ceremonial setting. Qur'anic recitation is therefore examined as part of a ritual sequence in which differences among recipients can become analytically visible.

A funeral becomes a ritualized diplomatic arena when delegations follow comparable procedures, occupy identifiable ceremonial positions, and are publicly observed within the same event. Such rituals may sustain interaction even when relations remain strained, so attendance does not necessarily indicate reconciliation (Newby & Ruffa, 2026). Ritual Action is used here to assess ceremonial sequence, setting, repetition, visibility, and protocol, thereby establishing whether variations in recitation occur within a sufficiently comparable ritual context.

Symbolic Signaling in Diplomacy

Signaling refers to the transmission of information through observable actions or cues that can be interpreted within specific relationships. Symbolic performances may communicate status or relational standing when their variation is visible and comparable in diplomatic settings (Danielson & Hedling, 2022; Niklasson & Towns, 2023). This study does not assume that different Qur'anic recitations constitute official messages. Instead, Symbolic Signaling is used only after symbolic and relational evidence have been compared to assess whether differentiated sacred cues can reasonably be read as relational information.

Informative value does not prove deliberate design. Rituals may be expressive or informative without being consciously constructed to achieve a specific strategic objective (Balzacq, 2026; Kustermans, 2026). The analysis therefore separates observable variation, interpreted meaning, and organizer intention. Correspondence across cases is treated as evidence for a signaling interpretation, not as proof of a deliberate state strategy.

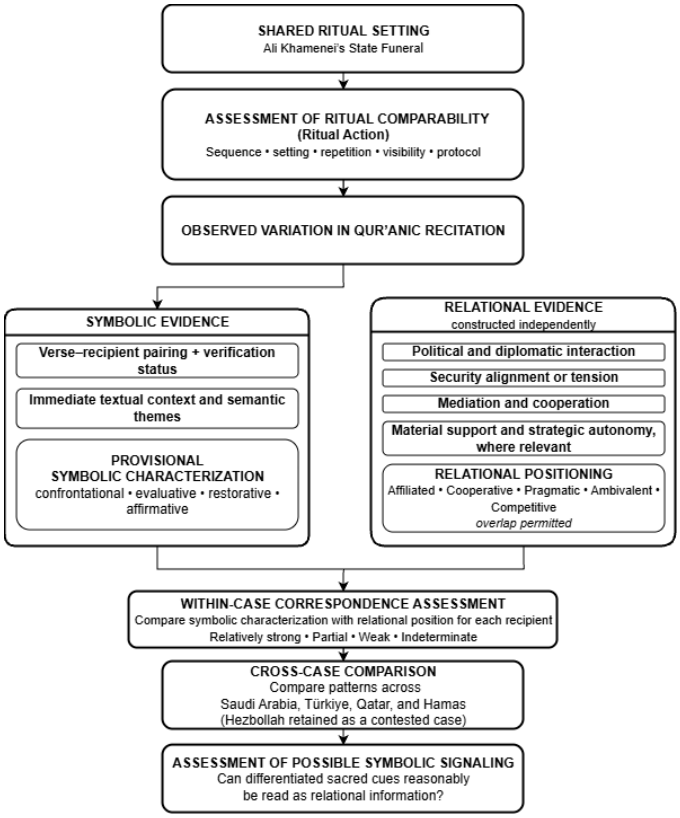
Relational Positioning

Relational Positioning avoids reducing foreign relations to fixed categories such as ally, partner, competitor, or enemy. Positioning Theory treats positions as fluid, overlapping, situational, and temporary (Baert et al., 2019). An actor may cooperate with Iran in one domain while experiencing tension in another, or remain politically close while retaining strategic autonomy.

For comparison, the study uses five analytical summaries: Affiliated, Cooperative, Pragmatic, Ambivalent, and Competitive. Affiliated denotes strong political or strategic closeness; Cooperative indicates repeated coordination; Pragmatic refers to functional cooperation driven by practical interests; Ambivalent captures simultaneous cooperation and tension; and Competitive reflects significant rivalry or security conflict. These are not standard categories from Baert et al. (2019), but study-specific analytical devices. Categories may overlap and are assigned only after relational evidence has been reconstructed independently from the Qur'anic material.

Integrated Analytical Logic

The framework begins by assessing ritual comparability within the shared funeral setting. Observed variation in Qur'anic recitation then forms the symbolic evidence stream, while Iran's political, diplomatic, security, cooperative, and strategic relations with each recipient are reconstructed independently as relational evidence. The two streams are compared within each case to assess correspondence, after which patterns are compared across cases. Symbolic Signaling is applied only at the final interpretive stage.



Picture 1 Analytical Framework of the Study

Source: compiled by the author.

Theoretical expectations remain open. Correspondence may be relatively strong, partial, weak, or indeterminate. Alignment between symbolic and relational evidence may indicate relational meaning, while inconsistency or insufficient evidence remains a valid finding. The framework is therefore used to explain patterns of correspondence, not to establish organizer intention or a causal effect of ritual on political relations.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design and Case Selection

This study employs a qualitative embedded case study design to examine variations in Qur'anic recitation within a single diplomatic event bounded by the same temporal and ritual context. An embedded case study allows multiple analytical units to be examined within one main case while preserving the context in which they occur (Grenier, 2023; Priya, 2021). Ali Khamenei's funeral constitutes the main case, while each delegation–verse encounter serves as an embedded unit of analysis. The study assesses whether symbolic variation within the ritual corresponds with Iran's relational position toward each recipient.

Cases were purposively selected based on three criteria: sufficient evidence to identify the recited verse, independently reconstructable relational evidence, and meaningful variation in Iran's relationships with the recipients. Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Qatar, and Hamas were selected as the four primary units. Hamas is retained as a contrast case because the analytical unit is the delegation–verse encounter rather than sovereign statehood, while relational dimensions are applied according to their relevance to each actor. Hezbollah is retained as a contested evidentiary case because available sources report different verses, preventing uncertainty from being resolved according to analytical expectations.

Data Sources and Evidence Verification

The study separates symbolic and relational evidence to prevent verse interpretation from predetermining the reconstruction of political relationships. Symbolic evidence includes verse identification, immediate textual context, semantic themes, and consistency across sources. Qur'anic meaning is limited to themes traceable to the text and credible translations without claiming a definitive

theological interpretation. Relational evidence includes diplomatic communication, security alignment or tension, mediation, cooperation, political or strategic alignment, material support, and strategic autonomy where relevant. Primary relational evidence covers January 1, 2026 through the funeral encounters, while earlier developments are used only when necessary to explain relational background.

Sources are used according to their evidentiary function. Audiovisual materials and official records are prioritized for observable events and stated positions, peer-reviewed research is used to reconstruct relationships and provide analytical context, and editorially reviewed media support documentation and triangulation. Official statements are treated as evidence of an actor's expressed position rather than as neutral descriptions of the relationship (Gaikwad & Herrera, 2023).

Verse–recipient pairings are cross-checked against their underlying sources. Reports derived from the same recording or primary source are treated as one evidentiary chain rather than independent corroboration. Verification is classified as High, Moderate, or Disputed. High indicates clear primary or audiovisual evidence, or at least two substantively independent credible sources. Moderate indicates detailed reporting and supporting evidence without complete primary verification. Disputed applies when credible sources provide unresolved conflicting identifications. Verification status reflects only the stability of verse identification, not the strength of diplomatic interpretation.

Analysis and Comparative Case Study Techniques

The embedded case study constitutes the research design, while directed qualitative content analysis with inductive refinement is used for within-case analysis and structured-focused comparison for cross-case analysis. Theoretical concepts guide the analytical domains without predetermining empirical categories, allowing relevant themes to emerge from the evidence (Alyaqoub et al., 2024; Assarroudi et al., 2018; Mende, 2022).

Symbolic and relational evidence are analyzed separately and contextualized through ritual features, including ceremonial sequence, setting, repetition, public visibility, and protocol. On the symbolic track, verified verses are examined through their immediate textual context and semantic themes. The identified semantic themes are subsequently summarized into provisional symbolic characterizations, such as confrontational, evaluative, restorative, or affirmative, which serve only as comparative analytical descriptors rather than fixed categories of Qur'anic meaning. On the relational track, evidence is synthesized into the study-specific positions Affiliated, Cooperative, Pragmatic, Ambivalent, and Competitive, with overlap permitted when supported by the evidence. These positions are analytical summaries rather than initial codes. Symbolic Signaling is applied only after symbolic and relational evidence have been independently established and contextualized by the ritual setting.

Each case is examined using the same analytical dimensions before structured-focused cross-case comparison is conducted (Ohnesorge, 2022). Within each case, semantic themes are compared with the independently reconstructed relational position. Correspondence is classified as Relatively Strong, Partial, Weak, or Indeterminate according to semantic clarity, consistency of relational evidence, interpretive distance, and conflicting evidence. Relatively Strong Correspondence requires alignment without major interpretive assumptions; Partial Correspondence indicates plausible alignment with remaining ambiguity; Weak Correspondence depends on broad themes or substantial additional inference; and Indeterminate is used when evidentiary uncertainty prevents adequate comparison. Correspondence is kept separate from verification status so that interpretive fit cannot increase evidentiary confidence.

Analytical reliability is supported through source triangulation, independent construction of symbolic and relational evidence, consistent analytical dimensions across cases, and explicit documentation of supporting and limiting evidence. Disputed information is retained rather than resolved according to theoretical fit, allowing the relationship between sources, analytical decisions, and findings to remain traceable (Closa, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Variations in the Recitation of the Qur'an Among Delegations

The tribute ceremonies for Ali Khamenei in Tehran followed a broadly comparable pattern for foreign delegations. Delegations stood before the casket, participated in a ceremonial sequence accompanied by Qur'anic recitation, and then proceeded to interact with Iranian officials. Although the ritual structure was relatively similar, the verses recited were not always the same. Al Jazeera and Iran

International documented these variations, while no official explanation was provided for why particular verses were associated with particular delegations (Motamedi, 2026; Sinaiee, 2026). The variation is therefore observable, but the selection process remains unknown.

The strength of verse identification differs across recipients. Saudi Arabia is consistently associated with Surah Ali Imran 3:13, while Türkiye is linked to Surah An-Nisa 4:95 and Hamas to Surah Al-Ahzab 33:23. Available reports support a *High* verification status for these three cases (Haidar, 2026; Mirmohammadsadeghi, 2026; Sinaiee, 2026). Qatar is linked to Surah Al-Fath 48:2, but its primary audiovisual basis is less complete, so the identification is classified as *Moderate* (Mirmohammadsadeghi, 2026). Hezbollah remains *Disputed* because sources connect its delegation to either Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:55–56 or Surah Ali Imran 3:139–140. The study therefore retains the disagreement rather than selecting the version that better matches Iran–Hezbollah relations (Fajri, 2026; Haidar, 2026; Sinaiee, 2026).

The verified verses were then examined only for semantic themes traceable to the Qur'anic text. Surah Ali Imran 3:13 concerns conflict, opposing groups, battle, and divine assistance. Surah An-Nisa 4:95 emphasizes struggle, sacrifice, involvement, and differences in status. Surah Al-Fath 48:2 contains themes of forgiveness, blessing, and guidance, while Surah Al-Ahzab 33:23 emphasizes promise, loyalty, steadfastness, and commitment (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, n.d.). These themes are not treated as direct political messages to contemporary recipients. They provide the symbolic basis that can later be compared with independently reconstructed relational evidence.

Table 1 Verified Verse–Recipient Pairings and Semantic Themes

Recipient	Recited Verse	Verification Status	Main Theme
Saudi Arabia	QS Al-Imran 3:13	High	Conflict, opposing groups, battle, divine assistance
Türkiye	QS An-Nisa 4:95	High	Struggle, involvement, sacrifice, differences in status
Qatar	QS Al-Fath 48:2	Moderate	Forgiveness, blessing, guidance
Hamas	QS Al-Ahzab 33:23	High	Promise, loyalty, steadfastness, commitment
Hezbollah	QS Al-Mai'dah 5:55–56 / QS Ali 'Imran 3:139–140	Disputed	Not specified

Source: Compiled by the author based on the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (n.d.), Motamedi (2026), Mirmohammadsadeghi (2026), Sinaiee (2026), Haidar (2026), and Fajri (2026).

Two findings follow from this stage. First, differentiated recitations appeared within a relatively comparable ceremonial structure, making symbolic variation more analytically visible. Second, evidentiary quality is uneven, meaning that political comparison is only defensible when the verse–recipient pairing is sufficiently stable. In terms of *Ritual Action*, the similarity of the ceremonial setting establishes the basis on which variation becomes recognizable rather than treating every recitation as an isolated event.

Iran's Relational Position Toward Recipients

Iran's relationship with each recipient was reconstructed independently from the Qur'anic material. *Relational Positioning* treats political positions as situational and potentially overlapping rather than as fixed labels of ally, partner, competitor, or adversary (Baert et al., 2019). The categories used here therefore summarize patterns observed around the funeral period rather than permanent identities.

Saudi Arabia combined severe security tension with continued diplomatic engagement. In March 2026, Riyadh condemned Iranian attacks on Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council territory and declared Iran's military attaché and several embassy staff personae non gratae (Saudi Press Agency, 2026a). Nevertheless, Deputy Foreign Minister Waleed Elkhereiji attended Khamenei's funeral in July 2026 and conveyed condolences from the Saudi leadership (Saudi Press Agency, 2026b). Hwang (2024) also points out that the normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations in 2023 did not immediately eliminate the antagonism between the two countries. Saudi Arabia is therefore classified as *Ambivalent-Competitive*: security rivalry remained substantial, but diplomatic engagement continued.

Türkiye displayed a more pragmatic pattern. A ballistic missile fired from Iran toward Turkish airspace was intercepted by NATO defenses in March 2026, prompting Ankara to seek clarification from Tehran (Gumrukcu & Toksabay, 2026). Nevertheless, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan continued to support mediation between Iran and the United States in May (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026). Omidi & Orhon Özdağ (2023) point out that Iran and Turkey can still cooperate amid friction because they share intertwined geopolitical and security interests. Savaş Yalçınkaya (2026) also describes the relationship between the two as a combination of cooperation and competition. Türkiye is therefore categorized as *Pragmatic-Ambivalent* rather than purely Cooperative.

Qatar also occupied an overlapping position. Iranian attacks on Qatar, including the Ras Laffan energy facilities, generated serious security tensions and were condemned by Doha as violations of sovereignty and regional stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, 2026b). However, Qatar resumed a mediating role in Iran–U.S. negotiations in June and participated in the *High*-Level Committee overseeing further talks (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, 2026a). Dersan (2023) points out that Qatar's closeness to Iran has not developed into full alignment and more closely reflects a hedging strategy, whereas Milton et al. (2025) position mediation as a key component of Qatar's foreign policy. Qatar is therefore categorized as *Pragmatic-Ambivalent* with a mediating role.

Hamas had the closest political relationship with Iran among the four main recipients, but closeness did not eliminate strategic autonomy. Iran continued to provide political and material support, while Hamas publicly urged Tehran not to attack neighboring countries and simultaneously acknowledged Iran's right to self-defense (Reuters, 2026). Alavi (2026) likewise distinguishes Iranian patronage from direct control over Hamas's strategic decisions. Hamas is therefore classified as *Affiliated with strategic autonomy*, showing that political closeness and material support do not necessarily imply subordination.

Across the four recipients, political proximity and diplomatic cooperation do not move in a single direction. Saudi Arabia preserved communication amid security rivalry, Türkiye cooperated on pragmatic grounds, Qatar returned to mediation after direct tension, and Hamas maintained autonomy despite strong affiliation. This pattern supports the central premise of *Relational Positioning*: relations may be overlapping, situational, and issue-dependent rather than reducible to fixed geopolitical categories.

Correspondence Between Semantic Themes and Relational Positions

The semantic themes and relational positions were compared only after both had been established separately. Correspondence does not imply that a verse was intentionally selected as a political message; it indicates how closely a verse's semantic themes can be compared with Iran's relational position toward the recipient and how much additional interpretation is required. The smaller the interpretive gap, the stronger the correspondence. This logic is consistent with *Symbolic Signaling*, which allows observable symbolic variation to carry information without automatically proving strategic intent (Balzacq, 2026; Danielson & Hedling, 2022; Kustermans, 2026; Niklasson & Towns, 2023).

Saudi Arabia demonstrates *Partial Correspondence*. Surah Ali Imran 3:13 contains themes of conflict, opposing groups, battle, and divine assistance, which broadly fit an *Ambivalent-Competitive* relationship characterized by serious security tension alongside ongoing diplomatic communication. However, the verse belongs to its own historical and religious context and does not directly refer to Saudi Arabia. The comparison therefore remains plausible but requires additional interpretation.

Türkiye also demonstrates *Partial Correspondence*, with a somewhat wider interpretive gap. Surah An-Nisa 4:95 emphasizes struggle, sacrifice, and degrees of involvement, while Türkiye's *Pragmatic-Ambivalent* position reflects engagement with Iran without full alignment. The shared idea of varying involvement creates a possible connection, but the Qur'anic concept of struggle cannot be directly equated with diplomatic engagement. The correspondence is therefore limited rather than direct.

Qatar similarly shows *Partial Correspondence*. Surah Al-Fath 48:2 emphasizes forgiveness, blessing, and guidance, while Qatar's *Pragmatic-Ambivalent* position with a mediating role reflects a relationship that moved from serious security tension back toward diplomatic engagement. The themes of forgiveness and guidance can be compared with this reopening of diplomatic channels, but the verse

is not confined to bilateral political relations and its pairing with Qatar has only *Moderate* verification. These constraints limit the strength of the correspondence.

Hamas demonstrates *Relatively Strong Correspondence*. Surah Al-Ahzab 33:23 emphasizes promise, loyalty, steadfastness, and commitment, which correspond more directly with Hamas's position as an actor affiliated with Iran while retaining strategic autonomy. Compared with the other cases, the relationship between semantic theme and relational evidence requires fewer additional assumptions, and the verse identification also carries *High* verification. The correspondence is therefore stronger, while still not proving deliberate verse selection.

Hezbollah remains *Indeterminate* because uncertainty occurs at the level of the underlying symbolic evidence. The two reported verse identifications yield different semantic themes. Selecting one version because it appears more compatible with Iran–Hezbollah closeness would allow relational knowledge to shape symbolic evidence and create circular reasoning. The disputed case is therefore retained as unresolved rather than forced into the comparative pattern.

Table 2 Semantic Theme Correspondence and Relational Position

Recipient	Relational Position	Interpretive Distance	Correspondence
Saudi Arabia	Ambivalent-Competitive	Moderate	Partial
Türkiye	Pragmatic-Ambivalent	Moderate-High	Partial
Qatar	Pragmatic-Ambivalent with a mediating role	Moderate	Partial
Hamas	Affiliated with strategic autonomy	Low	Relatively strong

Note: Hezbollah is excluded from the primary comparison because the identification of the recited verse remains disputed.
Source: the author's analysis based on symbolic and relational evidence constructed separately.

Across the four main cases, correspondence is not determined solely by political closeness to Iran. It also depends on semantic specificity, interpretive distance, and the stability of symbolic evidence. Hamas presents the most direct relationship, while Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar require greater interpretive mediation. The findings therefore do not support a fixed code in which affiliated actors receive loyalty themes, mediators receive reconciliation themes, or competitors receive conflict themes. A more limited conclusion is that symbolic variation can carry relational information when it appears in comparable contexts, but its meaning remains dependent on recipient, relationship, and evidentiary quality. Because the cases were purposively selected from a single event, the pattern is not generalized to all Iranian diplomatic practice.

Rituals, Symbols, and Relationships in Funeral Diplomacy

The diplomatic significance of Qur'anic recitation in this funeral does not arise simply from the presence of sacred text. Its analytical value comes from differentiated recitations appearing within a relatively consistent pattern of tribute. Comparable ceremonial procedures establish a shared baseline against which variation becomes recognizable. This is consistent with scholarship that places state funerals at the intersection of ritual, diplomacy, and political performance (Kuru, 2023).

Ritual Action clarifies why this shared structure matters. Ritual meaning is produced not only through symbols but also through rules, sequences, repetition, and protocol that make conduct recognizable and comparable (Mälksoo, 2026). In this case, procedural similarity provides the reference point that makes differences in recitation visible rather than treating each delegation's encounter as unrelated.

Relational Positioning then prevents those differences from being interpreted through the text alone. Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Qatar, and Hamas occupied different combinations of competition, pragmatic cooperation, mediation, affiliation, and autonomy. Because political positions are situational and overlapping, the same symbolic cue cannot be assigned a fixed diplomatic meaning independent of the recipient's relational context (Baert et al., 2019). The verses therefore become analytically relevant only when situated within those independently reconstructed relationships.

The correspondence analysis shows that symbolic treatment does not function as a simple diplomatic code. Hamas presents the most direct alignment, whereas Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar remain partial. Within *Symbolic Signaling*, the informative value of the ritual lies in the differentiated

cues that become recognizable within a common diplomatic setting. Balzacq (2026) describes this capacity in terms of *informative efficacy*: rituals can communicate recognizable meaning within a particular diplomatic order. Here, the informative value lies less in Qur'anic recitation itself than in differentiated recitation across recipients.

Taken together, the three approaches describe a sequential mechanism. A sufficiently comparable ritual structure first establishes a basis for comparison. Variation in recitation then becomes observable, but it does not acquire political meaning automatically. Meaning is assessed only after the semantic themes are placed alongside independently reconstructed relational positions. Sacred signaling is therefore used in a limited sense to describe the possible relational information generated through the interaction of ritual context, symbolic difference, and recipient relationship, not as evidence that every verse was deliberately crafted as a diplomatic message.

This interpretation also explains why attendance itself cannot be equated with reconciliation. Rituals may sustain interaction among actors who remain in conflict, and they need not always be consciously deployed to achieve a specific strategic goal (Kustermans, 2026; Newby & Ruffa, 2026). The presence of Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, or Qatar at the funeral therefore indicates participation in a diplomatic ritual, not necessarily political closeness.

Limitations of Interpretation and Alternative Explanations

The observed correspondence does not exclude alternative explanations. Qur'anic recitation is itself part of Iranian mourning practices; practices such as *majles-e tarhim* and *khatm-e Qur'an* provide spaces for prayer and remembrance of the deceased (Esmailnia et al., 2026). The mere presence of Qur'anic recitation therefore cannot be treated as signaling. The analytical focus is specifically on differentiated verses within a relatively comparable ritual structure.

Verse selection may also reflect programmatic considerations, the reader's own choices, or other factors not documented in public sources. Media framing can amplify political interpretations after the ritual, while apparent cross-source convergence may still depend on the same recording or original report. These possibilities limit how confidently variation can be attributed to a deliberate communication strategy.

Finally, the available evidence does not establish organizer intention or recipient reception. The study can identify reported verses, semantic themes, relational positions, and degrees of correspondence, but it cannot demonstrate that the pattern resulted from an intentionally designed verse-selection strategy or explain how delegations interpreted the recitations.

CONCLUSION

This study finds varying levels of correspondence between Qur'anic recitations at Ali Khamenei's funeral and Iran's relational positions toward selected recipients. Hamas shows Relatively Strong Correspondence, as themes of loyalty, steadfastness, and commitment closely align with its affiliated yet strategically autonomous position. Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar show Partial Correspondence, since the thematic and relational links remain plausible but require further interpretation. Hezbollah remains Indeterminate because the reported verse identification is disputed.

These findings show that sacred symbols may acquire relational value when differentiated within a comparable ritual structure and interpreted alongside recipients' political positions. Ritual Action explains how variation becomes visible, Relational Positioning captures situational and overlapping relationships, and Symbolic Signaling explains their potential informative value. However, correspondence does not prove deliberate verse selection or recipient interpretation. Future research should examine fuller audiovisual records, verse-selection processes, and evidence of audience reception.

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