

The Cyber Quran as a Semiotic Shield: Mediatization of Obedience and Crisis Communication in Iran's State Discourse on X

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Abstract

This study explores the tension between the sacred religious doctrine and its digital mediatization, focusing on how Quranic verses are adapted to social media algorithmic logic during geopolitical crises. Through qualitative content analysis, it examines how the Iranian cyber regime transformed the X platform into a crisis communication infrastructure using defensive-integrative cyber hermeneutics. By decontextualizing sacred texts, the state constructs a semiotic shield that externally regulates mass emotions amid military pressure and internally enforces loyalty standardization during the 2026 power succession. Employing Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, the study analyses official @IRIMFA tweets and public comment threads. Although platform interactivity generates asymmetric resistance through negotiated and oppositional readings, these critical voices do not dismantle state power. Instead, they compel authorities to adopt a kinetic, adaptive, and circular soft-war strategy, revealing a complex dynamic of contested yet resilient discursive hegemony.

Keywords: *Cyber Qur'an, Encoding/Decoding, Defensive Hermeneutics, Platform X, Semiotic Shield.*

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Introduction

The theological idealism that portrays the Qur'an as a transcendental text—free from political ambition and serving solely as a universal moral and spiritual guide—immediately collapses when confronted with the realities of digital pragmatism on the X platform. Normatively, the holy book is regarded as a source of cosmic peace and an ethical anchor that transcends above sectarian interests and power struggles.¹ However, the empirical reality in cyberspace reveals a stark contrast: Iran's digital authorities have

¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in The Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung* (Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2002), 74.



reduced the sacred text to a kinetic political commodity and a semiotic shield used to legitimize elite interests amid crisis.² The selective fragmentation of QS. al-Nisā' [4]:59, when isolated from its broader context, is no longer employed to guide the public's eschatological consciousness. Instead, it has been tactically co-opted as an instrument of domestic bureaucratic discipline and a tool for engineering cyber allegiance, particularly to secure loyalty during a precarious succession period.³ This sharp clash between the sanctity of religious doctrine and the profanity of its mediatization raises a serious academic question: How are sacred texts compelled to submit to the logic of social media algorithms, transforming from a passive theological corpus into a highly conflictual infrastructure of soft war?

Previous research has predominantly regarded digital media as a space for the instrumental expansion and negotiation of religious identity in cyberspace. Broadly speaking, three main trends characterize the relationship between technology and religious narratives. First, digital media serves as a tool for top-down da'wa and the transmission of religious teachings.⁴ Second, cyberspace functions as an arena for identity negotiation, the emergence of new forms of religious authority, and the contestation of contextual interpretations.⁵ Third, there is the digital transformation of religious reception, experience, and online worship practices.⁶ Amid these trends, the specific

² Göran Larsson, *Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 110.

³ Wizarat Umur Kharijah [@IRIMFA], "A'lām-e Bay'at-E," X (formerly Twitter), March 9, 2026, <https://x.com/IRIMFA/status/2030834072113533247>.

⁴ Mohammad Hidayaturrahman and D.I Ansusa Putra, "The Role of Technology and Social Media in Spreading the Qur'an and Hadiths by Mubalig," *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 27, 2020): 45–64, <https://doi.org/10.22515/dinika.v4i1.1858>.

⁵ Bouziane Zaid et al., "Digital Islam and Muslim Millennials: How Social Media Influencers Reimagine Religious Authority and Islamic Practices," *Religions* 13, no. 4 (April 8, 2022): 335, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040335>; Fathorrahman Fathorrahman et al., "The Qur'anic Perspective On Identity Construction In Social Media," *Al Irsyad: Jurnal Studi Islam* 5, no. 1 (March 15, 2026): 57–72, <https://doi.org/10.54150/alirsyad.v5i1.879>; Ridho Agung Juwantara, Rezki Putri Nur Aini, and Dwi Noviatul Zahra, "Tafsir Al-Qur'an Di Medsos: Nadirsyah Hosen's Resistance to the Politicization of the Quran in Indonesian Social Media," *Ulul Albab: Jurnal Studi Islam Jurnal Studi Islam* 21, no. 2 (December 29, 2020): 312–36, <https://doi.org/10.18860/ua.v21i2.10187>.

⁶ Norah Abokhodair, AbdelRahim Elmadany, and Walid Magdy, "Holy Tweets: Exploring the Sharing of the Quran on Twitter," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4, no. CSCW2 (October 14, 2020): 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3415230>; Muhammad Mundzir et al., "Mediatization of Hadith And The Spirit of

process by which theocratic states condense the Qur'an's functions into a defensive-kinetic semiotic shield during geopolitical crises—and how this construction is asymmetrically deconstructed by audiences in comment sections—remains underexplored. This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing the X platform as a site of circular contestation, where the ruling power's projection of hegemonic codes collides directly with the audience's oppositional decoding practices.

This study critically examines the mediatization of the Qur'an in cyberspace by analyzing the dialectic between state-sponsored encoding and audience decoding on the X platform in response to geopolitical crises. It aims to address a theoretical gap in digital religion studies through three objectives: (1) to deconstruct how transcendental texts are re-engineered into layered semiotic shields that consolidate psychological control over the masses and legitimize political succession during crises; (2) to map the anatomy of audience asymmetrical semiotic resistance in comment sections, assessing the extent to which plural public readings (*al-jānib al-talaqqī*) can disrupt the state's monolithic system of representation; and (3) to conceptualize a model of defensive-integrative cyber hermeneutics as a new theoretical framework for understanding the evolving nature of religious authority in the cyber age—characterized not by strict binary but by a circular and adaptive in its maintenance of discursive hegemony.

This study argues that the circulation of religious discourse on the X platform does not follow a deterministic, linear path but operates through a sociocultural circuit characterized by contestation between the state's encoding of dominant-hegemonic codes and the audience's fragmented decoding.⁷ Iranian cyber authorities attempt to fix the Qur'an within a dominant-hegemonic coded structure to create a semiotic shield for domestic stability and psychological defense. However, this strategy significantly weakens once the discourse enters digital transmission channels. The interactivity of comment sections transforms the sacred text into a fluid signifier open to alternative interpretations.⁸ In this environment, public meaning-making shifts from passive reception to negotiated or even oppositional readings. Consequently, digital space

Da'wah Moderation in Infographic Content of Online Media," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 22, no. 64 (2023): 55–79.

⁷ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: University of Birmingham, 2005), 122.

⁸ John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992), 36.

becomes a discursive battlefield where autonomous reader agencies organically deconstruct the theocratic projection of absolute sacred authority.

Method

This exploratory qualitative study employs qualitative content analysis to examine the circulation and reception of the Qur'an on the X platform. The approach views digital media not as a neutral transmission channel but as a discursive battlefield where the theocratic state's power clashes with the autonomous agency of audiences in the production and deconstruction of sacred meaning.⁹ The data corpus is divided into two main categories: (1) production data (encoding), consisting of official posts from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@IRIMFA) containing Qur'anic fragments issued during the geopolitical crisis in early 2026; and (2) reception data (decoding), consisting of user-generated comment threads responding directly to these official posts.¹⁰ Data were collected through the X platform's Application Programming Interface (API). Purposive sampling was then applied using the following inclusion criteria: organic (non-bot) account activity and clear expression of the commenter's interpretive stance.

The data analysis applies Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model within a framework of content analysis.¹¹ The process unfolded in two main phases. First, the dominant-hegemonic code projected by Iranian authorities was reconstructed, with particular attention to how transcendental Qur'anic texts were decontextualized and reconfigured as a semiotic shield for domestic stability. Second, public comments were qualitatively categorized according to Hall's three interpretive positions: the hegemonic position (full acceptance of the state's narrative), the negotiated position (acceptance of the theological content while questioning its political application), and the oppositional position (outright rejection, framing the verse as a tool of elite political manipulation). This analytical framework maps the asymmetrical clash of textual codes in digital space, allowing measurement of the degree of discursive "meaning leakage" experienced by the state in response to active audience interpretation.

The Genealogy of Resistance and the Mediatization of Crisis: The Geopolitical Context

⁹ Philipp Mayring, *Qualitative Content Analysis: A Step-by-Step Guide* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2022), 48.

¹⁰ Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

¹¹ Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 122.

The escalation of conflict between Iran, the United States, and Israel in 2026 marked the culmination of long-standing historical tensions dating back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This confrontation originated when Iran, under Ayatollah Khomeini, severed its ties with Western influence and consolidated power by positioning Shia identity as a cornerstone of cultural and religious resistance.¹² Throughout modern Iranian history, the narrative of Imam Husayn's martyrdom at Karbala has repeatedly served as a powerful instrument for mobilizing the population against perceived oppression—whether during the Pahlavi regime and its SAVAK intelligence apparatus or in the response to international sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program.¹³ This historical pattern has established a permanent posture of resistance that merges political sovereignty with spiritual authority under the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist).

The crisis reached its peak in 2026 when a joint U.S.-Israeli strike resulted in the death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This event triggered a 40-day national mourning period known as *Arba'een*, a traditional Shia ritual cycle intended to renew collective loyalty and reinforce social cohesion amid an existential threat. During the ensuing power transition, the Assembly of Experts selected Mojtaba Khamenei as the successor to ensure regime continuity.¹⁴ Concurrently, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) adopted an assertive “offensive defense” doctrine across the region, signaling a more confrontational posture in the post-Khamenei era.

Within Iran's socio-cultural landscape, the Qur'an and clerical fatwas have functioned as unifying forces that transcend sectarian boundaries in defense of national sovereignty. Following Khamenei's martyrdom, jihadist sentiment fostered an unprecedented alignment between senior Shia clerics in Qom and Sunni clerics in border regions such as Sistan-Baluchestan, forming a unified front against external military aggression.¹⁵ In this context, the Qur'an operated as a “constitution of resistance,” legitimizing national defense through the religious obligation of strongly emphasized obligation (*wājib mu'akkad*). This development transformed the sacred text into a dynamic political instrument for consolidating national identity under the threat of global aggression. This dynamic was prominently displayed on the X platform through the official account of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@IRIMFA). Although the ministry

¹² Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 160.

¹³ Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 215.

¹⁴ Rufat Ahmadzada, “Iran After the War: Regime Change or Survival?,” *Small Wars Journal*, March 23, 2026, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2026/03/23/irans-future-remains-uncertain/>.

¹⁵ Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

formally operates in the diplomatic domain, its digital activities demonstrate close integration with the IRGC's strategic information agenda and the broader ideology of resistance.¹⁶ The Iranian case thus offers a compelling lens through which to examine how real-world geopolitical crises are rapidly converted into digital information wars, with the sacred authority of the Qur'an deployed as a primary diplomatic and ideological weapon.

Encoding Martyrdom: The Qur'an as a Framework for Legitimizing Ideological Sovereignty

The encoding of martyrdom in cyberspace represents a re-politicization of sacred texts through deliberate theological framing aimed at securing threatened claims of sovereignty. This process illustrates how authorities use digital platforms to construct a dominant-hegemonic code designed to control the boundaries of public interpretation during a crisis. By seizing control of cyber discourse, the state seeks to steer audiences toward a preferred hegemonic reading of sacred death.¹⁷ Iran's cyber apparatus addresses geopolitical vulnerability by isolating and repurposing specific Qur'anic fragments—QS. al-Aḥzāb [33]:23, QS. Ali Imrān [3]:169, and QS. al-Aḥqāf [46]:13—removing them from their original historical contexts. Through techniques of thematic selection, textual fragmentation, and aesthetic instrumentalization, authorities reframe military setbacks as metaphysical victories, presenting the Supreme Leader's martyrdom as confirmation of transcendent truth. These strategies of verse selection and decontextualization transform the Qur'an into a dynamic instrument of digital sovereignty.

The deployment of sacred texts in this context is inherently political. Analysis of the data reveals three primary mechanisms of Quranic framing used to legitimize ideological sovereignty in Iranian cyberspace. First, thematic selection. Iranian authorities deliberately choose verses that emotionally resonate with themes of loyalty and martyrdom. In one official post, a fragment of QS. al-Aḥzāb [33]:23 is isolated to portray the death of Ali Khamenei not as a loss, but as the fulfillment of a divine covenant:

¹⁶ Talinn Grigor, "Public Spheres: The Politics of Public Space in Postrevolutionary Iran," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art in a Global Framework*, ed. Amelia Jones and Jane Chin Davidson (New Jersey: Wiley, 2023), 199–211.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," in *CCCS Selected Working Papers: Volume 2*, ed. Ann Gray et al. (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 386.

*Bismillāhir-raḥmānir-raḥīm. Min al-mu'minīna rijālun ṣadaqū mā 'āhad Allāh 'alaih, fa minhum man qaḍā naḥbahu wa minhum man yantaḥiru... Bā qalbī mālamāl az dāgh va andūh, shahādat-e 'Alī-gūneh-ye rahbar-e farzāneh...*¹⁸

(“Among the believers are men who have been true to their covenant with God; some of them God has already chosen, and some of them are still waiting...” With a heart filled with grief and sorrow at the martyrdom of the revered leader, Ali Khamenei...) By emphasizing the phrases *mā 'āhad Allāha* (those who fulfilled their pledge to Allah) and *man qaḍā naḥbahu* (those who have fulfilled their vow), the interpretation shifts focus from military failure to spiritual success. This decontextualization detaches the verse from the Battle of the Confederates and recontextualizes it within contemporary events, positioning the Quran as a transcendental validator of state ideology.

Second, textual fragmentation occurs when verses emphasizing immortality are selectively excerpted to counter narratives of military fragility. In a postdated March 2, 2026, authorities cited QS. Ali Imrān [3]:169:

*"Wa lā taḥsabanna allaḏīna qutilū fī sabīllāhi amwātan, bal aḥyā'un 'inda rabbihim yurzaqūn..." shahādat-e jam'ī az farmāndehān-e sarāfrāz va mujāhedān-e rāh-e 'izzat va amniyat...*¹⁹

(“Do not think of those who are killed in the way of Allah as dead; rather, they are alive with their Lord, being sustained...” The collective martyrdom of distinguished commanders and mujahideen on the path of honor and security...)

This selective excerpting creates a semiotic effect of “presence in absence.” By emphasizing *bal aḥyā'un* (indeed, they are alive), the state reinforces psychological cohesion among domestic audiences and regional allies, such as Hezbollah. This strategy transforms security crises into theological assurances, thereby mitigating perceptions of vulnerability.

Third, aesthetic instrumentalization involves using Qur'anic verses as anchors for mass psychology to promote *istiqāmah* (steadfastness) and collective calm. A viral post by Esmaeil Baqaei featured a fragment from QS. al-Aḥqāf [46]:13:

¹⁸ Wizarat Umur Kharijah [@IRIMFA], “Payām-e Tasliyat-e Sayyid 'Abbās Arāghchī,” X (formerly Twitter), March 1, 2026, <https://x.com/IRIMFA/status/202800944445954330>.

¹⁹ Wizarat Umur Kharijah [@IRIMFA], “Payām-e Tasliyat-e Vazīr-e Umūr-e Khārijah-Ye Jumhūrī-Ye Islāmī-Ye Īrān,” X (formerly Twitter), March 2, 2026, <https://x.com/irimfa/status/2028386972293578965?s=63>.

"Inna allāzīna qālū rabbunā Allāhu summa istaqāmū falā khaufun 'alaihim wa lā hum yaḥzanūn..." hīch bīm va andūhī bar ānān nīst²⁰

(Indeed, those who say, "Our Lord is Allah," and then remain steadfast—there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.)

The selective focus on *lā khaufun 'alayhim wa lā hum yaḥzanūn* functions as a crisis-communication tool, leveraging the Qur'an's authority to project stability amid external aggression. In this context, the sacred text shifts from a static legal-moral reference to a dynamic political instrument, carefully edited to sustain national resilience and maintain discursive hegemony.

The transformation of sacred texts in Iran's digital space signifies a fundamental shift: from *tafsīr* as a methodological and epistemological endeavor to the Qur'an as an instrument of political articulation. From a sociological perspective, the strategies of verse selection and decontextualization—particularly the emphasis on clauses such as *mā 'āhad Allāh* ("those who fulfilled their pledge to Allah") and *bal aḥyā'un* ("indeed, they are alive")—represent a form of *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (opinion-based interpretation) adapted to address contemporary geopolitical realities. Iranian cyber authorities largely set aside classical exegetical tools such as *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) and *munāsabah* (textual coherence), instead recontextualizing verses to serve the state's immediate narrative.²¹ This process reveals a distinctly political mode of interpretation in which the sacred text is no longer treated as a static legal or doctrinal source but as a dynamic, fragmented discourse mobilized to legitimize sovereignty. Consequently, the authority of the Qur'an undergoes mediatization, with its meaning reproduced through the logic of digital platforms to construct contemporary narratives in a transcendental register.

This mediatization transforms methodological truth—traditionally centralized—into a fluid and interactive form of digital knowledge production. Once disseminated on the X platform, the state's claim to singular interpretation is inevitably decentralized by the platform's emphasis on speed, interactivity, and algorithmic circulation. Theological claims now coexist with immediate public responses from netizens.²² Religious knowledge, mediated through tweets, shifts from a one-way doctrine to a discursive stimulus that

²⁰ Wizarat Umur Kharijah [@IRIMFA], "Inna Allāzīna Qālū Rabbunā Allāhu," X (formerly Twitter), April 8, 2026, https://x.com/irimfa_spo/status/2041594262081470619?s=63.

²¹ Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *Maḥmūd Al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsāt Fī 'Ulūm Al-Qur'an* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Saqāfi al-Arabī, 2014), 100.

²² Gary R. Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 49.

invites negotiation, resistance, and alternative interpretations. In this environment, the model of singular interpretive authority undergoes organic deconstruction as the platform's infrastructure naturally accommodates a plurality of contested meanings.

However, beneath the seemingly democratic surface of digital interactivity lies a strategic transformation of power. A fragile, profane crisis is reframed as untouchable theological sacredness. Through the logic of social media algorithms, sacred verses are no longer engaged as contemplative moral texts; instead, they function as a semiotic shield that diverts public attention from empirical setbacks toward metaphysical compliance.²³ This dynamic signals a subtle devaluation of traditional religious authority. Social media has democratized access to the text to such an extent that state actors can repackage divine revelation into a kinetic, pragmatic, and visually consumable commodity. In the contemporary digital ecosystem, the Qur'an is not only read for understanding but deliberately "staged" as an instrument of mass psychological cohesion and discursive hegemony.

While previous studies have documented the broader transformation of religious authority due to new media in the Muslim world,²⁴ the distinct contribution of this research lies in revealing the tactical fragmentation of Qur'anic verses as a deliberate cyber survival strategy during acute military crises. Conventional scholarship often frames the digitalization of religion as an expansion of access or a horizontal democratization of interpretation. This study advances the discussion by demonstrating a more calculated mechanism: a spatial transmutation on the X platform, whereby sacred verses are selectively decontextualized into semiotic tools designed to mask military vulnerability. The findings reveal a notable contemporary anomaly—contrary to the common assumption that social media weakens state control, Iranian authorities have effectively harnessed digital algorithms to sustain theological hegemony.

²³ Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 217.

²⁴ Fouad Ahmed Atallah, "Digital Mediation and Fatwa Authority in Contemporary Islam: A Critical Islamic Legal and Media-Theoretical Framework," *Religions* 17, no. 3 (March 11, 2026): 350, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17030350>; Rüdiger Lohlker and Soleh Hasan Wahid, "The Transformation of Islamic Religious Authority," *Religions* 17, no. 4 (April 17, 2026): 493, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17040493>; Zhuldyz G. Zhorabek et al., "Digital Post Islamism and the Cognitive Transformation of Islamic Belief: A Comparative Study," *Pharos Journal of Theology*, no. 106.5 (November 2025), <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.522>.

The Logic of Succession: The Textuality of the Qur'an in Constructing New Authority

The encoding of political succession in cyberspace represents a distinct form of re-politicizing sacred texts. It operates through theological framing to ensure a smooth transfer of power during periods of crisis. This process demonstrates how authorities leverage digital platforms to construct a dominant-hegemonic narrative aimed at controlling public interpretation of leadership transitions. By dominating cyber discourse, the state steers audiences toward a preferred hegemonic understanding of the succession process.²⁵ Iran's cyber apparatus works to neutralize potential domestic unrest by isolating a fragment of QS. al-Nisā' [4]:59 ("Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you") and linking it to narratives surrounding Ali Larijani's martyrdom. Through techniques of verse selection and fragmentation, authorities affirm theocratic-constitutional sovereignty and managerial continuity. They reframe potential perceptions of political fracture as evidence of metaphysical compliance, transforming the oath of allegiance to the new leader into a religious imperative.

The leadership transition to Sayyid Mojtaba Hosseini Khamenei on March 9, 2026, exemplifies how the Qur'an was employed as a tool for domestic political stability. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs prominently cited QS. al-Nisā' [4]:59 (*Aṭī'ū Allāha wa aṭī'ū ar-Rasūla wa ulī al-amri minkum*) to demand absolute obedience from both diplomats and the public toward the new Supreme Leader.²⁶ This framing elevates the succession from a mere political decision to a religious obligation, equating obedience to the new leader with obedience to God and the Prophet. In times of crisis, the verse functions to delegitimize opposition: any rejection of Mojtaba Khamenei is portrayed as a deviation from core Islamic-theocratic principles. Thus, the Qur'an serves as a bridge between Shia leadership tradition and the urgent need for national unity under the new theocratic order.

This construction of new authority is further reinforced by honoring moderate establishment figures such as Ali Larijani, thereby projecting continuity amid external threats. In a condolence message dated March 18, 2026, Sayyid Abbas Araghchi described the deceased as:

²⁵ Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Representation*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE Publications, 1997).

²⁶ Wizarat Umur Kharijah [@IRIMFA], "A'lām-e Bay'at-E."

*Shahīd Dr. Lārijānī az barjasteh-tarīn chehreh-hā-ye siyāsāt-e Īrān va namād-e i'tidāl, 'aqlāniyat va zharf-andīshī-ye rāhbardī būd... Faqdān-e chunīn shakhshiyatī zāye'eh-ī bozorg va jubrān-nā-pazīr barāye neẓām-e Islāmī ast.*²⁷

(Shahid Dr. Larijani was one of the most distinguished figures in Iranian politics and a symbol of moderation, rationality, and thoughtful leadership... The loss of such a personality is a great and irreparable loss for the Islamic Republic.)

By labelling Larijani a “martyr” and pairing the announcement with Qur’anic references, the state transforms personal loss into a narrative of strengthened resilience. Official statements emphasize that reliance on the intellectual legacy of such martyrs will enable the new leadership to continue foreign policy with “greater precision and cohesion” (*bā diqqat va insijām-e afzūntar*). This digital narrative portrays Mojtaba Khamenei’s leadership as supported by a continuous chain of committed figures, thereby reinforcing public confidence in systemic stability.

The effectiveness of Iran’s digital diplomacy on the X platform illustrates how the concept of *ulī al-amr* (those in authority) is perpetuated through modern media to wage and win the global war of narratives. In its official declaration of allegiance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated:

*"Vazārat-e Umūr-e Khārijah va kulliyeh-ye dīplūmāt-hā-ye Jumhūrī-ye Islāmī-ye Īrān dar dākhil va khārij az keshvar, bā a'lām-e bay'at bā sevumīn rahbarī-ye mu'azzam... 'ahd-e khūd rā barāye istimrār-e talāsh-e bī-shā'ibeh dar rāstā-ye pīshbard-e manāfi'-e millī tajdīd mī-kunand.*²⁸

(The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Diplomatic Corps of the Islamic Republic of Iran, both within and outside the country, having declared their allegiance to the 7th Supreme Leader... renew their pledge to continue their unwavering efforts in the pursuit of national interests)

Through this sophisticated encoding, the government aims to preserve a singular, unified concept of leadership that resists fragmentation by opposing narratives. The Qur’an thus transitions from the private religious sphere into the public domain as a political commodity, deployed on a large scale to project ideological resilience. By integrating verses of obedience into the succession narrative, Iranian authorities have created a representational system capable of consolidating domestic power while signaling stability

²⁷ Wizarat Umur Kharijah [@IRIMFA], “Payām-e Tasliyat-e Sayyid ‘Abbās Arāghchī,” X (formerly Twitter), March 18, 2026, <https://x.com/irimfa/status/2034194542702805084?s=63>.

²⁸ Wizarat Umur Kharijah [@IRIMFA], “A’lām-e Bay’at-E.”

to international audiences. This strategy underscores the effectiveness of religious-soft power as a tool of discursive defense amid military and diplomatic pressures.

The strategic deployment of QS. al-Nisa [4]:59 during Iran's political succession reflects a broader shift in interpretive models—from viewing the Qur'an as a substantive theological text to treating it as a functional, contextual tool for ideological legitimization. Hermeneutically, the isolation of the phrase *ulī al-amri minkum* (those in authority among you) and its immediate application to Sayyid Mojtaba Hosseini Khamenei demonstrate how the elasticity of sacred meaning is exploited to resolve a crisis of constitutional legitimacy. Iranian cyber authorities treat interpretation not as a search for divine will but as a political instrument for enforcing bureaucratic discipline and domestic compliance. This pragmatic approach side-lines classical debates on the criteria for legitimate leadership (*imāmah*), reducing the verse to an indisputable transcendental obligation that demands loyalty from military and state elites.²⁹

However, once this singular hegemonic interpretation is introduced into the infrastructure of the X platform, it immediately clashes with the decentralized logic of social media. Within digital religious ecosystems, diplomatic oaths intertwined with verses of obedience do not exist in isolation. Instead, they become open codes subject to public interpretation, negotiation, or rejection.³⁰ The platform's horizontal structure undermines the state's control over narrative unity. Sacred texts, tightly encoded by authorities, become vulnerable to fragmentation through audience reception. What begins as rigid theocratic obedience at the elite level thus dissolves into a contested discursive commodity within digital networks.

This contestation surrounding the *ulī al-amr* clause reveals a mechanism of textual bureaucratization, whereby the sacred verse is repurposed to test and enforce loyalty within the structures of modern theocracy. When the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' framing enters the cyber public sphere, grassroots fragmentation of meaning exposes the limits of top-down religious imposition. Sociologically, the digital space functions as a proving ground for the resilience of national integration and bureaucratic cohesion amid international military pressure. In this environment, Quranic interpretation no longer

²⁹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (London: Oneworld Publication, 2001), 86.

³⁰ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction: The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 12.

produces uniform doctrinal consensus but operates as a fluid arena of negotiation, where cyber loyalty is continuously tested and reproduced to sustain state sovereignty.³¹

Although the sacred text is actively presented as an anchor of bureaucratic stability and psychological reassurance, its mediatization reveals inherent tensions. Previous studies have examined how sacred texts legitimize power; however, the distinct contribution of this research lies in revealing the Qur'an's role as an instrument of collective psychological defense on social media during acute military aggression. While conventional scholarship often views verses of obedience as static legal or doctrinal tools,³² this study demonstrates a functional transformation: on the X platform, fragments of QS. al-Nisā' [4]:59 is tactically deployed as a crisis-communication infrastructure. This adaptive mechanism aims to contain public panic, maintain mental stability, and preserve national cohesion by framing political succession in transcendental terms—effectively turning the verse into a central weapon in the soft war.

Decoding the Message: The Struggle for Meaning and Digital Resistance in Comment Sections

The analysis of decoding processes in cyberspace marks a critical turning point where the state's control over a singular narrative begins to fragment in the face of audience agency. The effectiveness of sacred verse mediatization is determined not only by the state's ability to construct dominant codes but also by how these theological signs are received and reinterpreted by a public with diverse socio-political backgrounds.³³ On the X platform, comment sections have become vibrant arenas of discursive contestation. The Qur'an—originally presented by authorities as an instrument of national cohesion—undergoes significant dispersion and reinterpretation. State actors no longer hold absolute power to enforce uniformity of meaning; instead, the sacred text is drawn into three distinct spheres of reception according to Stuart Hall's framework: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional.

³¹ Bryan S. Turner, "Religious Authority and the New Media," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (March 1, 2007): 117–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075001>.

³² M. Ilham Kamil et al., "Epistemic Distortion in Qur'anic Interpretation: Hustle Culture and Digital Religious Narratives on Instagram," *KURIOSITAS: Media Komunikasi Sosial Dan Keagamaan* 18, no. 1 (April 25, 2025): 64–83, <https://doi.org/10.35905/kur.v18i1.13142>; Ibrahim N. Abusharif, "Religious Authority, Digitality, and Islam: The Stakes and Background," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 8, no. 1 (May 2023): 109–19, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jims.00010>.

³³ Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 122.

One example of a dominant-hegemonic reading appears in comments from the Afghan account @afghanHaseen, which refers to Ali Khamenei as “the white-bearded hero” and asserts that “America and Israel will never be your friends.” Such responses demonstrate how the Qur’an, when deployed as a tool of transnational propaganda, effectively taps into shared memories of foreign intervention. These users fully internalize the state’s narrative and reinforce Iran’s image as the vanguard of global Islamic resistance. In this way, scripture-based digital discourse functions as a universal language that fosters cross-border solidarity and a unified political identity among Muslim audiences beyond national boundaries.

However, this hegemonic narrative faces significant challenges from radical oppositional readings. Accounts such as @farva***-co dismiss the government’s condolences as a “theatrical performance” and allege internal betrayal behind the leader’s death. Similarly, @nous***51345876 condemns Khamenei as a figure who “slaughtered people in the streets,” viewing his death as a form of justice for the oppressed. For these users, the state’s use of Qur’anic verses constitutes religious manipulation intended to legitimize a violent and repressive regime. These oppositional voices reveal that, despite the Qur’an’s high religious authority, its meaning in the digital sphere remains fiercely contested—often overshadowed by audiences’ personal and collective experiences with state policies.

A third pattern reflects a negotiated reading, characterized by low engagement despite wide algorithmic reach. The limited likes and comments on posts announcing Mojtaba Khamenei’s succession suggest a cautious, skeptical stance among many Iranians, particularly given the heavy surveillance during the national mourning period. While users may acknowledge the theological significance of the cited verses, they withhold open emotional or political endorsement of the new leadership. This restrained response indicates that the success of Iran’s digital propaganda depends not only on algorithmic dissemination but also on fragile levels of public trust, which appear to be eroding.

The fragmentation of audience decoding in the comment sections of the X platform signals a profound shift in Qur’anic studies—from mono-vocal textual authority toward the polyvocal plurality of reception (*al-jānīb al-talaqqī*). Once sacred verses are released from state-sanctioned singular interpretation, public meaning-making is no longer dictated solely by the text’s intrinsic structure but emerges from the dialectical interaction between the text and the reader’s lived socio-political experience. This digital phenomenon supports contemporary hermeneutical views that the Qur’an remains inherently open to

multiple meanings (*ḥammālun li-wujūh*) when engaged by diverse human consciousnesses.³⁴ Consequently, public readings—whether hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional—actively dismantle any claim to a single, fixed sacrality. In the cyber ecosystem, the Qur’an no longer functions as a finalized theological doctrine but as a living, dynamic discourse whose meanings are continuously deconstructed and reshaped by audience agency.

This diversity of public interpretation reveals the deconstruction of the monolithic system of religious representation constructed by the state. When sacred texts enter digital platforms, they cease to function as static theological reflections and instead become fluid discursive signs open to alternative interpretations. The Iranian government’s attempt to project national stability through Qur’anic verses is thus immediately contested by audience agency, which reframes these messages as political manipulation.³⁵ Through the interactivity of comment sections, social media transforms from a mere channel for sacred messages into an arena of semiotic resistance, where the state’s symbolic dominance is openly challenged and renegotiated.

It is precisely this dialectical tension between the state’s theological framing and the pluralistic, resistive responses of audiences that gives rise to a new model of defensive-integrative cyber hermeneutics. This framework demonstrates how transcendental texts—ranging from verses on martyrdom to those demanding bureaucratic obedience—are repurposed as a layered semiotic shield. Externally, decontextualized verses serve as instruments of mass emotional regulation, converting geopolitical vulnerability and foreign military pressure into collective psychological resilience.³⁶ Internally, they function as mechanisms to standardize loyalty and ensure compliance among diplomatic and military elites during sensitive power transitions. In this way, the state harnesses the logic of cyber algorithms to transform religious texts into dynamic political commodities that simultaneously bolster external soft-war defense and guarantee domestic theocratic-constitutional stability.

Although much of the literature on digital religion portrays new media primarily as a democratizing force that weakens traditional religious and state hegemony, this defensive-integrative hermeneutic model reveals a more complex reality. Conventional studies often assume that the proliferation of voices in cyberspace inevitably undermines

³⁴ Abū Zayd, *Mafhūm Al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsāt Fī ‘Ulūm Al-Qur’an*, 120.

³⁵ Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2003), 14.

³⁶ John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 88.

centralized narratives.³⁷ In contrast, the present findings demonstrate that oppositional and negotiated readings do not necessarily erode state authority; rather, they compel authorities to adapt by developing more dynamic and defensive theological framing strategies. This study therefore offers a novel perspective: the digital space does not simply create a binary polarization between domination and resistance. Instead, it functions as an arena of asymmetrical negotiation in which sacred texts are continuously deconstructed and simultaneously reproduced as instruments of sovereignty and resilience amid geopolitical crises.³⁸ Cyber interactivity, in this context, does not eliminate discursive control but transforms rigid institutional structures into more adaptive and circular “soft war” strategies.

Conclusion

The common assumption that the digitization of the Qur’an on social media automatically leads to a democratization of interpretation and a weakening of theocratic control is not supported by this study. On the contrary, the findings reveal that the Iranian cyber apparatus has effectively repurposed the X platform into a sophisticated crisis communication infrastructure through a model of defensive-integrative cyber hermeneutics. By isolating and decontextualizing selected verses—ranging from the glorification of martyrdom to the doctrine of obedience to *ulī al-amr*—the state has constructed a layered semiotic shield. Externally, these textual fragments function as instruments of mass emotional regulation, mitigating public panic amid foreign military aggression. Internally, they serve as tools of textual bureaucratization, enforcing loyalty within the diplomatic apparatus and military elite during a sensitive political succession. Although comment sections enabled asymmetric semiotic resistance from autonomous audiences, these oppositional voices did not dismantle state authority. Instead, they prompted the regime to evolve from rigid institutional control into a more kinetic, adaptive, and circular soft-war strategy to preserve national sovereignty.

This study’s findings arise from the effective integration of qualitative content analysis and Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding theory, which successfully mapped the complete circuit of religious narratives from state production (encoding) to audience reception (decoding). However, the research has notable spatial and temporal limitations. It focuses exclusively on textual data from the X platform during a specific geopolitical

³⁷ Abusharif, “Religious Authority, Digitality, and Islam: The Stakes and Background”; Kamil et al., “Epistemic Distortion in Qur’anic Interpretation: Hustle Culture and Digital Religious Narratives on Instagram.”

³⁸ Turner, “Religious Authority and the New Media.”

crisis, potentially overlooking dynamics on visual and audio-visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Future studies should address these limitations by adopting mixed-methods approaches that incorporate cross-platform algorithmic analysis and in-depth interviews with digital actors. Such research will be essential for evaluating the broader applicability of the defensive-integrative cyber hermeneutics model across different media environments and its role in shaping cyber-religious authority in the Islamic world amid ongoing and future geopolitical crises.

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Data Availability Statement:

The authors ensure that the datasets necessary to replicate the conclusions of this work are presented in their entirety within the article [and/or] its supplementary information.

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The author(s) declare no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently of any commercial or financial relationships with the media organizations or platforms analyzed in this study.

Ethical Approval:

Ethical approval was not required for this study as it relies entirely on the analysis of digital content that is within the public domain. Data was collected solely from public accounts on X with unrestricted public access. The data collection process adhered to the platform's Terms of Service and API guidelines. To further ensure ethical standards and protect user privacy, any potentially identifiable information, such as user handles and specific metadata, has been anonymized in the final reporting.

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