

A close-up portrait of Qasem Soleimani, a man with grey hair and a beard, smiling. He is wearing a dark military uniform with gold epaulettes and a red medal on his chest. The background is black.

QASEM SOLEIMANI

The Wayfarer  
who Ended  
ISIS

"Qasem Soleimani is the hero who rescued the Middle East from the evil and greedy clutches of the American and Zionist Israeli imperialism. They obviously could not but to target this redeemer of the oppressed for elimination. The timely and eye-opening book here discernably straightens out misconceptions about Soleimani as it divulges the genealogy, and the real culprit, of international terrorism."

— **Abdillah Toha**, former Vice President of the Executive Committee of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

Foreword

**Zuhairi Misrawi**

Indonesian Moderate Muslim  
Scholar

**Irman Abdurrahman,  
Alfian Hamzah &  
Musa Kazim**

## The Path of Love and the Scourge of ISIS

Universally respected by friends and foes alike, the “shadow commander” of Iran’s secretive Quds special forces is the face of armed resistance in defeating ISIS and in reshaping the Middle East. For ceaselessly thwarting their ambitions, schemes and conspiracies, the United States and its allies regard him as an “evil genius”. Obfuscation and bifurcation are critical tools of subjugation in the post-truth world, especially in the tumultuous region where seeds of discords, grips of greed, and tentacles of tyranny hide under the cry for liberty and in the guise of democracy. And yet, should the long agonising history of the Middle East be able to provide counsel and clarity, an entirely different picture may emerge of a thoroughly selfless multi-faceted “commander of the hearts” who resists oppression, fights against injustice, and purely devoted to the ideals of the Islamic revolution.

General Qasem Soleimani is an embodiment of the notion of a complete person – a renowned strategist, an astute charismatic revolutionary, and a spiritual wayfarer whose life incessantly bears witness to divine love. The book is an invitation to think critically and conscientiously on the complex inextricable interplay of actors, structures, and powers of the interminable conflicts and enduring catastrophe in the Middle East. But more importantly, it is an attempt in all modesty to do justice to the distorted portrayal of the general and to present that particular aspects of Soleimani – his genius, his humanity, and his path of love.

---

*"An amazing book. Enriched with riveting narrative, it helps us understand the map of Middle Eastern conflicts, the fine historical details behind the formation of ISIS and Soleimani's distinguished role in fighting its scourge, and what the philosophy of true struggle is.*

*I enjoyed this book immensely. "*

- Dina Y. Sulaeman, Director of Indonesia Centre for Middle East Studies

*"This book is a profound work, laden with data and insights, capable of portraying the martyr clearly so that we can capture his message and derive inspiration from him in the broadest possible way. Soleimani is a figure that needs to be emulated by all of us, that life must be lived through and be filled with love, devotion, sacrifice, sincerity, and loyalty."*

– Zuhairi Misrawi, Nahdlatul Ulama Scholar



: Penerbit Imania

: penerbitimania

: @penerbitimania

Biography

ISBN: 978-602-7926-55-4



9 786027 926554

**GENERAL QASEM SOLEIMANI**

# **The Wayfarer Who Ended ISIS**

Irman Abdurrahman,  
Alfian Hamzah &  
Musa Kazim

Foreword  
Zuhairi Misrawi

**General Qasem Soleimani:  
The Path of Love and the Scourge of ISIS**

Authors: Irman Abdurrahman, Alfian Hamzah & Musa Kazim

All rights reserved

Editor: Tofik Pram

Layout: Tisa Anggriani

Cover Design: Yudi Irawan

Content Design: Abdul Rauf

Imania Publishing (Pustaka IIMaN Group)

Jl. Purnawarman Blok A No 37

Bukit Cirendeui, Pondok Cabe,

Tangerang Selatan 15419 | 0851-0000-7692

Etera\_imania@yahoo.com | www.pustakaiman.com

13.5 X 20 cm; Code XJ-07

ISBN: 978-602-7926-55-4

First Edition, June 2020

Distributed by Mizan Media Utama (MMU)

Jl. Cinambo (Cisaranten Wetan) No. 146,

Ujungberung, Bandung 40294

Ph. (022) 781 5500, Fax. (022) 780 2288

E-mail: mizanmu@bdg.centrin.net.id

Jakarta: Ph. 021-7874455, 021-78891213, Fax. 021-7864272.

Surabaya: Ph. 031-8281857, 031-60050079, Fax. 031-8289318

Medan: Ph. /Fax. 061-7360841.

Makassar: Ph. /Fax. 0411-873655.

Yogyakarta: Ph. 0274-885485, Fax. 0274-885527

Banjarmasin: Ph. /Fax.: 0511-3252178

SMS Service:

Jakarta: 081299870008, Bandung: 08888280556

Medan: 081396827878/085762767068,

Bali: 08873414370, Surabaya: 088803124884

Mizan Online Bookstore: www.mizanstore.com

WA: 085781817817

## The Last Will and Testament of the Martyr Qasem Soleimani

*Oh God, thank You for transferring me from one loin to the next, from one century to the next, and from one family to the next, until You bestowed on me the blessing to live during a time when I could see one of Your most prominent friends who is close to and a companion of the Infallibles, Your righteous servant – the Great Imam Khomeini. And, I thank You for letting me be his soldier.*

*If I did not have the blessing to be the companion of Your Great Messenger, Muhammad al-Mustafa, and if I did not live during the period of the oppression of Ali bin Abi Talib and his immaculate and wronged children, You helped me tread the same path on which they laid down their lives – which are worth all the universe and its creatures.*

*Oh Dear God, Oh Wise and Unique Creator, my hands are empty, and so is my backpack. I rush to You without any provisions, hoping that You will treat me to Your banquet of pardon and generosity. I do not have any provisions with me, for what provisions does a poor man need in the presence of a generous Lord?*

...

*... I have brought with me two closed eyes, which contain a treasure in addition to their impurities. That*

*jewel is tears shed for Fatimah's Hussein, tears shed for the Household, and tears shed in defence of the oppressed, the orphans and the innocent who were caught in the claws of oppressors.*

*My God, I have nothing in my hands. They have nothing to present, nor do they have the power to defend. However, I have stored something in my hands, which I am hopeful about, that is a continuous movement towards You. When I reached out my hands towards You, when I put them on the ground and on my knees for Your sake, and when I carried weapons in order to defend Your religion, these are the wealth that I carry in my hands and I hope that You have accepted them.*

*My God, my legs are frail and have no stamina. They do not have the courage to cross the bridge that crosses over Hell. My legs tremble even when crossing an ordinary bridge. Woe to me, as Your path [the bridge over Hell] is thinner than a hair and sharper than a sword. Nonetheless, I harbour some hope that I may not tremble and that I may find salvation.*

*I set foot in Your sanctuary and circled around Your House [the circumambulation of the Holy Ka'ba]. I ran bare-footed in the shrines of Your friends and between the shrines of Hussein and Abbas. I bent and hugged my knees in long trenches. And, I ran, jumped, crept, wept, laughed and made others laugh, cried and made others cry, and fell and picked myself up in*

*defence of Your religion. I hope that You will pardon them due to these jumping, crawling, and these holy shrines.*

*Oh God, my head, my wisdom, my lips, my nose, my ears, my heart and all parts of my body harbour the same hope [of martyrdom].*

*Oh most Merciful, most Compassionate God, accept me and accept me in purity. Accept me in a way that I will be worthy of seeing You. I do not want anything other than meeting You. Heaven for me is being next to You, Oh Allah.*

## CONTENT

FOREWORD.....	9
PART I: FIERCE RECKONING.....	26
The Shadow Passes .....	26
Between Escalation, The Long Game, and World War III .....	45
Show Time .....	67
Calls of War .....	88
PART II: THE SOLDIER FROM THE KERMAN MOUNTAINS .....	101
From Kerman to Tehran (1979-1998): The Professional .....	101
Lebanon (1998-2019): One of Us .....	111
Iraq (2004-2011): A Patient Listener .....	135
Iraq and Syria (2011-2019): The Nail in The Coffin .....	156
Palestine: The Martyr of al-Quds .....	199
PART III: THE PARADOX OF QASEM SOLEIMANI .....	214
Testimony of Love of A Sufi Wayfarer .....	215
First Story .....	279
Second Story.....	282
ENDNOTES .....	289



## FOREWORD

### **QASEM SOLEIMANI'S REVOLUTION OF LOVE**

Zuhairi Misrawi, Nahdlatul Ulama Scholar

**T**he tale of Qasem Soleimani is a saga that will endure for eternity. His life and martyrdom are to beget and breed more Soleimanis in his stead. As his remains were brought from the country of his death Iraq to his country of birth Iran, millions mourned together and poured to the streets to pay condolence to him and to show respects to his memory and heroism. I found myself completely at a loss before this deeply heartrending and at the same time awe-inspiring epic.

This is more than a story recorded in golden ink for inside Soleimani's heart there is coruscating fire of love that through his noble death set ablaze his country and even the world in the fierce flames of divine love. A harvest perhaps in hindsight as he had planted the seeds of love in

hearts of people wherever he found them in his lifetime. All stories about Soleimani exude inspiration and motivation to always consider love as the fundamental principle in wading through life. Anyone who spreads love in his lifetime, then he will be loved even after his death. Luqman al-Hakim, a legendary sage referred to in the Quran, reported to have said, "Whoever loves others, he will be loved."

Soleimani was a sort of person who positioned love at the epicentre of his life and as his way of life. The stories that were told by friends and closest people are very instructive. He showed immediate displeasure upon being afforded the service befitting his status and actual rank of a general, and yet found delight in being recognised merely as an ordinary person who serve his faith and country. He felt extreme aversion, on the brink of repugnance, towards

being looked upon as a general to be feared and dreaded as he knew he might often had to lead his soldiers to their deaths on the battlefield. Evidently, his relationship with those who served with him had always been satiated with overflowing warmth, sincere egalitarianism, and replete with a sense of belonging to a big family. Never had he wanted to distance, nor built a high wall of separation with those around him.

During several of my visits to Iran, it is not hard to notice that Soleimani was extremely popular. On 30 November 2017 his prestige went sky high upon reporting to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatullah Ali Khamenei, announcing the successful crushing of ISIS in Iraq and Syria by the al-Quds Force under his command. At that juncture of time, he could have run for the office of the president of the Islamic republic, and would have effortlessly won in a landslide having his

popularity was just slightly below that of the supreme leader (*rahbar*) himself.

But Soleimani was beyond the reach of the worldly temptation to exploit his fame to seize top position of power in the Iranian government. He instead felt disposed to remain focused on serving the *rahbar* and the *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist), to protect the Islamic republic from the threat of enemies in the region and beyond, and to strengthen partnership with strategic allies in a number of countries such as Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

The fruits of labour of his devotion and sincerity to his work are amply rewarded as Iran successfully managed to expand its regional influence and power to an unprecedented level in contemporary history. The resistance movement (*harakat al-muqawwamah*) supported by Iran also reap the benefits of the new realignment of

powers and was able to demonstrate its strength before the United States (US) and its allies. The Hezbollah is steadfastly growing even stronger as it has become an effective, ever powerful non-state actor in Lebanese politics and defence. In Yemen, the Al-Houthis have demonstrably grown in capacity and capability to resist the invading force of Saudi Arabia, even able to show their cat's paws by launching deadly attacks inside the country of the Saud dynasty. In the occupied lands, Hamas and the resistance movement in Gaza are also able to launch missiles at Israel, sending a message to the Zionist regime that the Palestinians are not waning but still capable of mounting attacks and are prepared to face various pressures from the apartheid state.

Moreover, the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad had praised Soleimani highly for successful assistance in preventing the

country being overrun by ISIS and other terrorist groups. Together with the Iranian Al-Quds Force, Soleimani, whose specialty out of many is ground battle, was able to confront the brutal ISIS forces with high confidence.

In one region in Syria, he managed to rescue Christians from a siege by ISIS forces. He left his helicopter into the midst of the residents, and led the youth and residents to fight ISIS. For his efforts, Christians thanked and prayed for him in a number of churches. His bravery, humanity and good deeds will not be forgotten by the Christians there. Soleimani inextricably and inevitably became the symbol of resistance against the ISIS terrorists' fanaticism, brutality, and inhumanity.

As a follower of the Twelve Imams Shia branch of Islam, Soleimani's love for the Prophet Muhammad and his family is beyond doubt. But when he was on the battlefield, he also

befriended Muslims from the Sunni school of thought. He wanted to make a point through his actions that the core teachings of Islam are love and brotherhood. Therefore, fellow Muslims must work hand in hand in dealing with those who want to divide and colonize Muslims. On the battlefield, he provides protection for the Sunnis from ISIS threats, and thus able to build unity between Sunnis and Shiites, especially in Iraq and Syria. Soleimani, again, inextricably and inevitably became a symbol of brotherhood, love and Islamic unity.

And hence it is for this particular reason alone, I dare say, that those who paid their last respects to the general were gushing by millions from Iran, Iraq, and even other parts of the globe. It is a testament to Soleimani, a spiritual wayfarer extraordinaire, who reserved his mark at the pantheon of heroes for all time, attained his long

yearning to be reunited with God, and one of few whose prayers of martyrdom were granted by the Almighty.

It is precisely this love for martyrdom, *shahadah*, that had escaped political calculations and had evaded arithmetic of artifice of the US policymakers and strategists, as well as its top leadership including President Donald Trump himself.

By assassinating Soleimani in a cowardly manner through remotely controlled unmanned drones, Trump and his stooges had hoped that it would also simultaneously extinguish the flame of resistance in the Middle East. Trump wanted to spread terror and cultivate fear in the region but the outcome of this craven, spineless airstrike against Soleimani was exactly the opposite.



Soleimani's dedicated work in the path of love inside and outside Iran had helped the creation of an arc of Iranian influence across the region and, more importantly, had raised Islamic and universal awareness on the importance of opposing colonialism and imperialism, most notably of the US and its allies. Iran and all of its strategic partners are politically and spiritually committed to remain and to continue the struggle through the "axis of resistance" against the power of global arrogance who wanted to savagely ravage the Middle East. Resistance has become a path that knows no return, and the only available option in the face of subjugation.

As the annals of history of the region have demonstrated, the US and its imperialist allies have repeatedly and relentlessly pushed the countries in the Middle East to the verge of destruction and collapse. They have managed to

incite divisions, generate conflicts, and even engage wars amongst the countries in the region while encouraging predominance of the Zionist regime to continue its colonialism and expand its occupation of Palestine.

The *shahadah* (martyrdom) of Qasem Soleimani, reiterates enormous spiritual significance of the meanings of the word in its Arabic (الشَّهَادَةُ, *aš-šahādah*) and Greek (μάρτυς, *martyr*) origins which encapsulate both bearing witness to the truth and the act of sacrificing life for the sake of affirming the truth. His day of martyrdom, according to the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Imam Khamenei belonged to one of the days of Allah (*Ayyam Allah*), divine days that awaken the nation and culminate in victory akin to that of Prophet Musa's resistance against the oppressive Pharaoh that concluded in triumph. Instead of marking the beginning of defeat,

Soleimani's martyrdom was indeed a dawn of ultimate victory that God is to bestow upon Iran, the resistance movements, and the Islamic world at large.

The martyrdom of Qasem Soleimani is a political attestation to the fact that the increasing imperialist domination of US capitalism is no longer uncontested or unchallenged. It adds to revelation and growing realisation of the true nature of the US hegemonic presence in the Middle East. The entrance of the United States to the region to succeed and to fill the void left by Britain as the global colonial power that had lost its prominent dominating role after World War II, has been traditionally viewed as eschewing colonial ambitions, championing the rule of law, and seeking economic growth and political stability. That self-aggrandising claims blind itself from the facts of the US malignant role in

supporting repressive and corrupt monarchies, buttressing blood-thirsty authoritarian regimes, endorsing the exploitative practices by American oil companies and other multinational corporations, promoting secular and materialistic lifestyle, destabilising internationally recognised governments, conducting periodic military interventions, and most importantly, arming and bankrolling a militaristic and expansionist Israel's Zionist apartheid regime. One way to achieve sovereignty and lasting peace in the Middle East is to end US domination and imperialist interventions in the region. The airstrike that killed a high-rank Iranian official Soleimani and a popular Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the two symbols of victory against ISIS terrorists, on their way to visit the Iraqi prime minister caused a violent furore in Iraq as well. Iraq which have suffered from decades of war,

American sanctions and American-instigated bitter sectarian conflicts on top of the two US-led invasions and prolonged military occupation, felt humiliated as its sovereignty was so massively and blatantly violated. Hence the calls and protests against the presence of US forces and bases in Iraq became louder and harder to ignore. The eviction of the United States from Iraq by Iraqis would be a devastating blow to its imperial ambition and a victory to the justice-seeking resistance movements which was paved away through Soleimani's sacrifice.

And furthermore the martyrdom of Soleimani, most importantly, is to leave an indelible legacy and a significantly powerful mark on the political landscape of the Middle East and spiritual plain of the Islamic world: his path of love. It was this path of love that quelled the ISIS scourge and ended its reign of terror, and it was

also this true path of love that brought about the unmasking of seduction of Thanatos in perverted religious teachings, increased awareness of the fragile primacy of humanity, and surging realisation of a simple truism common to all religions: that love triumph over evil by the very nature of what love is.

The path of love, taken by Qasem, is a road that invites extreme polarisation – a path that works on both laws of attraction and of repulsion because love attracts love and repulses hate; it pushes towards similarity and resemblance, and its power causes the lover to assume the form of the beloved, and transfers the qualities of the beloved to him. Those who walk on the path of divine love attracts a just, righteous, loving, God-seeking group of people, and at the same time repulses the opposing other: the arrogant dominating oppressors.

Love is not blind but inseparable from right, truth, and justice. The road in the path of love thus may still be long and arduous as the cruelty of terror, the peril of subjugation, and the evil of oppression continue to lurk and to expand through the imperialist tentacles of the tyrannical US and its colonial allies.

The book in your hands, *General Qasem Soleimani: The Wayfarer Who Ended ISIS (General Qasem Soleimani: The Path of Love and the Scourge of ISIS)*, by Irman Abdurrahman, Alfian Hamzah, and Musa Kazim is a very profound work, backed with very reliable data. It describes the figure of the martyr so clearly, that we are able to capture its message and inspiration as much as possible. Soleimani is a figure that needs to be emulated by all of us because life must be lived through and filled with devotion, sacrifice, sincerity, and loyalty.

When Qasem Soleimani was speaking at the conference commemorating the martyrs of the 10<sup>th</sup> Kerman province, he had underlined five things that are parts of the path of love: *jihad*, morals, spirituality, worship, and loyalty. For him, meaningful jihad is one that is strengthened by morals, spirituality, worship, and loyalty to the principles of *wilayat al-faqih*. He elaborated that *jihad* is one of the means to break the spiritual and political deadlocks: it is the path of spiritual freedom from the chains of carnal slavery as much as liberation from the yoke of colonialism and oppressive tyranny.

Ultimately, the path of love has a noble purpose, because this path is not for one's own sake, but for the wider public good. The path of love is the path of humanity that must be fought sincerely with hope that it will please Allah. That is the figure of Qasem Soleimani, who must be



emulated by us all. In the end, life has a very noble purpose: the establishment of virtue, truth and humanity.

## **PART I: FIERCE RECKONING**

### **The Shadow Passes**

At the dawn of 3 January 2020, Iran's over the horizon radar operators observed an unusual increase in flight activity at a number of US bases in the Middle East. As per the procedure, they hurriedly put special markings on the movements of the opponent's air assets and reported them swiftly for further analysis.

“MQ-9 Reaper is airborne from the Ali Al-Salam Military Base in Kuwait... Helicopters from Al-Taji and Ayn Al-Assad in Iraq... F-15 jets are 40-50 kilometres from Baghdad, high speed towards the Airport, then changed direction...”

Also included in the report were the results of monitoring the opponent's communication lines where they heard an MQ-9 drone was directed to execute a mission but failed because

of obstacles in the weapons system. Unfortunately, the data analysis also had no idea of what mission it was exactly.

What was in Baghdad? Why was the US so busy at this time of night?<sup>1</sup> Their hunch said America is preparing for something bad.

That was exactly what happened. All the increase in flight activity was part of the most frightening covert hunting operation for the US in the Middle East.

Their target, according to intelligence, could be seen in Baghdad Airport. He was quiet, like a shadow. But his impending sudden death would awaken the radar operators and millions of Iranians in grief, as well as edged the world closer towards World War III.

That night, the US would kill Qasem Soleimani, Iran's most charismatic general and the

most credible figure in defeating ISIS and Al-Qaeda throughout the Middle East.

The importance of the night's event was evident from the operation which was authorized and monitored directly by – none other than – US President Donald Trump. A live picture of the airport's current situation, which was recorded by a drone and transmitted via satellite, allowed Trump, who was in Florida, to excitedly watch the unfolding event.

This is not at the same level as the storming of the hideout of ISIS terrorist Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi, or the cruise missile attack on Syria's T-4 airbase a year earlier, which was Trump's first authorized military order. This is far more extreme, violating all international norms and civility.<sup>2</sup> The last party to do such a thing – in July 1914 – had plunged the world into the First World War.<sup>3</sup>

The Head of the CIA Coding section Gina Hapsel, one of the initiators of extreme waterboarding interrogation techniques, was listening live at Langley. She might also be worried. If the operation had failed, it is likely that she will be fired by Trump. In the White House situation room, a number of senior security officials were no less nervous.

\*\*\*

Soleimani has indeed been hunted for a long time. His death was almost an obsession for the US; had been hoped for too often, attempted many times, but never succeeded.

In September 2019, for example, the US had tried to kill Soleimani in Kerman, Iran. Details released by the Iranian Intelligence Ministry described that "Jewish and Arab" assets were digging tunnels toward a mosque where Soleimani would be present in the mourning

assembly for Ashura. It was to be blown up, imitating the *modus operandi* of ISIS in Syria.

A decade earlier, in February 2008, in a joint-operation between the CIA and Mossad, a rare opportunity to kill Soleimani (“an opportunity on a silver tray”, said an Israeli officer) appeared outside an apartment in Damascus, Syria. However, the US cancelled the operation at the last moment because of fear that Tel Aviv would not be able to bear Iran's retaliation.<sup>4</sup>

Soleimani was formally accused of masterminding many attacks on US military and diplomats in a number of countries, mainly in Iraq and Afghanistan, which resulted in more than 600 US soldiers returning home in coffins. While this accusation portrays him as “bloodthirsty” and, therefore, justifies the US for hunting him down, other versions of Soleimani's “sins” never reached the American public.

For the past three decades, Soleimani had disrupted many US geostrategic projects in the Middle East. He convinced Russian President Vladimir Putin to join the Syrian War in 2015 – a strategic move which later proved to accelerate the destruction of ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and countless terrorist groups considered as “moderate” by the US, Europe and Gulf countries.<sup>5</sup>

In Tehran, some described Soleimani’s lobbying skill as unusual for a field general. It was based on in his personal spiritual faith. Some say he was a true holy warrior, soldiers who walk in the corridors of love. “Soleimani fell in love with Allah, and Allah rewarded him by making everyone susceptible and fell in love with him,” said Ali Akbar Raefipour, an Iranian strategic thinker, who has long been observing Soleimani.

One can debate this, but the fact is as bright as the sun above Medina: no Iranian can move the

hearts of so many Middle Easterners like Soleimani. Soleimani befriended and became brothers with many Sunnis in Palestine and Afghanistan. He also befriended the seculars in Syria, Christians and Shiites in Lebanon and of course the Shi'a majority in Iraq.

This is quite paradoxical considering his background as the highest ranking general in Iran, said Iran's Sepahbod. The fact is that the US could not achieve the same thing even after building a high-walled military base and holding bloody occupations, while simultaneously talking about democracy, freedom and progress.

Soleimani's smiles and charisma on many battle fronts also gave Iran's resistance model support all the time. It seems to be more dignified and reasonable, than American-style democracy and freedom that seems to offer nothing in the Middle East but more chaos.



On the battlefield, his expertise in educating, protecting, and encouraging friends – with a little financial assistance and 'antique' weaponry from Tehran – gave the power to change the course of war. In Yemen, soldiers wearing sarong and *Ansarullah* clasps – popularly known as the Houthis – were able to knock out countless drones and even Saudi Arabia's Apache attack helicopters overnight.

Houthi missiles, produced under license from Tehran, often defeated the Saudi air defence system, which relied on expensive US weapons. In Houthi's hands, all heavy US combat vehicles, including Abrams tanks, are like crackers that can easily be ignited with a lighter.

For the US, the assassination of Soleimani that night was at once a kind of reminder to the world, especially Iran, about who has the bigger muscles. The White House, especially since Trump

came to power, has diligently rolled back the 'soft approach' legacy left by Barack Obama, the previous president, amid fears Iran will become completely separated from Western influence, became a *de facto* world nuclear power, and that there was nothing more they could do to turn things around.

Trump, who believes himself to have mastered the art of the deal (coincidentally this is also the title of one of his best-selling books while still being a property tycoon and fashionable celebrity), had tried his luck by tearing up the JCOPA treaty.<sup>6</sup> He also applied maximum pressure using layered economic sanctions, which in fact was an open economic war against Tehran.

But all these efforts hit a dead end. Sanctions, though hitting the lives of many people in Iran, are like vitamins that strengthen Iran's domestic production. Iran is driven to escape from

dependence on oil exports. In terms of security, the US trump card in the Middle East, Tehran is unshakeable as a regional power with a myriad of proven achievements.

In June 2019, for example, Tehran shot down a Global Hawk, the most sophisticated, largest and most expensive surveillance drone (priced at US \$ 220 million, more expensive than F-35 fighter jets) known to have been owned by America. That success established Iran as the most complete collector of US drones without ever spending a dime. The best part is that the drone was taken down by an air defence system that was entirely made in Iran, which is a big achievement for a country that has been subjected to world sanctions since 41 years ago.<sup>7</sup>

A simpler explanation of why the US was pursuing Soleimani came from Trump. The President, during a Republican fundraising

session, said he was tired of hearing Soleimani rant. He saw the 62-year-old general as nothing more than a flea that should have been snuffed long ago. "How much longer can we stand to hear the ravings of this bastard?" Trump said mimicking his discussion with US security chiefs at the White House.

Trump seemed to still be offended by his first clash with Soleimani in June 2018. At that time, Soleimani reminded Trump to watch his language. He said Trump's threat to President Hasan Rouhani, that the US will not hesitate to punish Iran with "something no country has ever felt before", is no different from the kind of talk made by people in casinos or bars.

"Try to ask around," said Soleimani.

*We are used to hardship ... We are a nation that is happy with martyrdom. We are the nation of Imam Husain ... But if you are brave, then come*

*on! We await. The war will end with the loss of all your capabilities. You may start a war, but Iran will decide when it will end.*

\*\*\*

As the clock struck one at Baghdad Airport, US assets managed to identify Soleimani: fresh, bearded, looking like actor Sean Connery, getting off a commercial flight from Damascus.<sup>8</sup> They must have seen him being welcomed by a number of Iraqi security officials, including his close friend, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the architect of the Iraqi resistance movement in fighting ISIS. Soleimani had a diplomatic passport from his position as official adviser to the Iraqi government in the fight against extremism.

That day, he was also a special guest. His first agenda in the morning was to meet Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi. In his bag, he carried a letter containing Tehran's response to the regional

tension reduction initiative proposed by the Saudis and facilitated by Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

When Soleimani left the airport, the US realized that the planned attack would be an overkill. Soleimani was accompanied by four bodyguards. Exiting the airport, he and Al-Muhandis got into a car. His bodyguard joined the car behind. There is no super tight and excessive security.

This fleeting, seemingly vague security had kept the security people in Tehran in the dark until the end of the operation.

Then, as Trump said, everything is developing fast.

“Sir, they have approximately one minute to live, Sir,” said a staff member reporting the countdown to the attack.

There was a short pause before the operator reported back: “They're gone, sir.”

At least two Hellfire missiles hit the Soleimani entourage. Nothing remained intact. Everything burns.

Like a scene out of a Hollywood action movie, the reconnaissance team who had been trailing behind hurried over and pulled a fragment of Soleimani's body out of the burning car. They took pictures to confirm the target's identity once more.

Before leaving, they picked up a mobile phone and a number of documents that they considered could be “harvested”. They might want to know who Soleimani is communicating with. His family? The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei? Its strategic assets in the US?

That last possibility is enough to haunt the US. Especially since in 2018 Soleimani openly said that Iran was in “places that are very close but unimaginable” to the US. At that time, a video

spread from Iran containing a copy of Soleimani's handwritten letter to Trump, with the stationary of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which miraculously landed on the desk of the White House security officials.

When Iraq was still trying to confirm news of Soleimani's death, the US already make declarations. A number of detailed ambush stories, including audio recordings of conversations in the White House tactical control room, flowed into the mainstream news media.

On Twitter, Trump alerted the American public with a post that only contained photos of the US flag, as if to send a message of superiority. Then a number of follow-up chats appeared to garner domestic support.

“General Qasem Soleimani,” Trump said, “has killed or injured hundreds of Americans for a



long time and is planning even more killings ... but he finally met his demise.”

In a special press conference session after news of Soleimani's death worldwide, he boasted that the attack in Baghdad was “precise”, “flawless”, and aimed at “the number one terrorist in the world”.

US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, a former head of CIA, was involved in the campaign. On Twitter, he posted a video of supposedly Iraqis’ joy over Soleimani's death. He seemed to want to revive the memories of the world at moments of Iraqi public celebrations when Saddam Hussein was toppled by the US invasion in 2003.

However, there was no explanation from the White House that can help the American public realize there is something wrong behind the assassination of Soleimani. If Prime Minister Adil

Abdul Mahdi was to be trusted, the night's assassination was more like a dreadful ambush.

In an emergency session of the Iraqi parliament on 5 January 2020, Adil revealed that before the drone attack, Trump called and asked him to help bridge US and Iran relations that were declining following the riot at the US Embassy complex in Baghdad. Because of that request, Adil said, Iraq then opened a communication channel and thus Soleimani departed to Baghdad. "I was supposed to meet Soleimani that morning," he said.

Like the radar operator in Tehran, Adil's story was unable to correct the US version of the narrative which had already hardened in the minds of the world public. What the US had not thought was the successive blunders waiting right round the corner.

One of them that happened quickly was the unanimous decision by the Iraqi parliament to revoke the legal umbrella for the presence of US troops in Iraq. In parliament, when the vote was held, the names Soleimani and Al-Muhandis echoed and the US was cursed.

This was a severe slap in the face for Washington. Years ago, they came to Iraq to bring democracy. But now they were being rebuked through democracy.<sup>10</sup>

Days passed. US Embassy officials in Baghdad saw more heat after Iraqis hung two gigantic pictures of Soleimani and Al-Muhandis in the two large buildings opposite the Embassy. The subsequent Iraqi response was intentional and intended to make US soldiers continuously anxious: Baghdad wanted to build a monument dedicated to Soleimani and Al-Muhandis at the site of the US drone attack.

US seemed to become aware that Soleimani is still undermining them even after his death.

In Iraq, the government asked Tehran to allow them to parade the body of Soleimani in Baghdad, including around the Green Zone where US people have offices, and in the holy cities of Iraq. This is a form of their thanks to Soleimani whose sacrifice saved Iraq from the full occupation of ISIS.

Iran gave the green light. Soleimani became the first Iranian whose body was paraded like that in Iraq.

Soleimani's death brought Iraq and Iran into a phase that had never been seen before. The issue of sectarianism, the standard style of Western media coverage when explaining the ups and downs of relations between the two countries, is now only a story of the past.<sup>11</sup>

There is no one better to summarize all US instant blunders than Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, who is believed by many to be one of the best orators in the Arab World. In a lecture in memory of Soleimani on 5 January 2020 in south of Beirut, he quoted a fragment of a speech by the heroine of Karbala, Zaynab bin Ali, to illustrate the ignorance of the US to kill Soleimani.

“You don't know whose blood you have shed,” he said.<sup>12</sup>

In Iran on the same day, when a plane carrying Soleimani's body landed at the iconic airport of Mehrabad, Tehran, the depth of public grief looked as though it can tear through the sky.

### **Between Escalation, the Long Game, and World War III**

Washington was in damage control mode as unpleasant developments happened in Iraq. Mainstream media took on the role of reporting the asynchronous statements of key White House people about the reason Trump authorized the Soleimani assassination. Many seemed to deliberately point the finger of blame at Trump and his rash personality, and the alleged murder was merely a tool to divert attention from the US domestic political crisis.

Media coverage also questioned Trump's authorization of the attack without any consideration from Congress, as if the US is an example of a functioning democracy, as if there had never been an illegal invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and many more lists of US military abnormalities and expeditions on Muslim lands.

Later, Trump's tweet that threatened Iran not to take revenge ("The US has expensive and shiny weapons," he stated) may indicated that the security people in the US began to doubt their initial analysis – that Iran could do nothing – and focus more attention on the various possibilities of Iranian retaliation.

Will Tehran play the escalation game, replying to the US hard blow with harder and intensifying blows – which they believe the US has an upper hand with their extensive experience, and more capable weapons that can shock and awe?<sup>13</sup> Or will Iran swallow the bitter blow and continue to calmly play the attrition game; leading the US to engage in a long and tiring fight – do they believe the US still has the stamina?

Although there is no instant answer to these two questions, Trump's open threat to destroy 52 of Iran's historic sites if Tehran attempt to retaliate

makes many circles, even within Iran, to ponder at the largest of all questions: is this the start of the World War III? Can the Islamic Republic survive? Will Iran be preparing to face the big challenge, like Husain in Karbala, at the risk of the destruction of all the physical achievements of the Republic after 41 years since the revolution? Will the Iranian public remain in their homes once sanctions suffocate and the economy drops should war breaks out? Does Iran worry about the allies in the resistance movements which may become abandoned if Tehran is cornered?

This is hard for Tehran. The historical context of all these doubts gave Washington the belief that there is always a way to defeat Iran. Without elaborating further, as a Republic, Iran is an 'anomaly' in Islamic history.

After the death of the Prophet, the government of the Muslims increasingly wallow in



defeat. Of the four caliphs following the Prophet, for example, only Abu-Bakr died without being killed. In Shi'a itself, all Imams from Ali ibn Abi Talib to Muhammad Al-Askari have been killed, poisoned, or imprisoned. Only Muhammad Al-Mahdi, believed to be unseen, survived all that.

But Tehran is not an easy opponent to be led towards darkness. Instead, they were able to take advantage of their opponents' lockdowns. Like wrestlers, they present an equally classy and shocking response; a theatre of resistance that is open for the world to see.

The first response came from the *rahbar*, the popular designation for Khamenei. In his condolences to the Iranian public, he promised *intiqam shakt*, 'a fierce reckoning'.

"Years of sincere and courageous struggles against the demons and villains of the world, as well as the hope of dying in the Path of Allah, have

brought our beloved Soleimani to the highest position," he said as he announced three days of mourning. He then called Soleimani as the international face of the resistance movement, an example of the growing figure in Islamic education and the thoughts of Khomeini. "The blood of Soleimani," he added, "has been shed by the most wretched man on the face of the earth ... But a great reckoning awaits the wicked."

On the same day, Khamenei appointed Ismail Qaani as Soleimani's successor. Qaani is a veteran general of the IRGC. He is short, with glasses, has a long experience in Afghanistan. With the look and smile on his face, people easily saw him as a "naughty version" of Soleimani.

And Qaani knows how to ease the tension in the theatre. "Iranians, please be patient," he said in his first media statement. Strengthening Khamenei's message, he said the

ultimate retaliation for Soleimani's death was the expulsion of the US from the Middle East. "Soon you will be seeing the bodies of US soldiers floating in the region."<sup>14</sup>

Washington knows exactly the weight of Khamenei's promises, but there are allies who pressingly needed to be calmed down.<sup>15</sup> Iran's retaliation, if it happens, will open the door to war and, even if the US still has a greater chance of winning, at least as many people believed, a minor apocalypse will still occur.

"The war with Iran is no joke," said Mohammad Marandi, head of the American Study Centre at Tehran University. "The war will destroy all oil and gas facilities in the Gulf countries. Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Jeddah, Riyadh, Doha, Manama, Tel Aviv and Haifa will be evacuated. US bases will be the target of attacks and the US naval

fleet will sink. There is no oil tanker that can move.”

A number of messengers hastily landed in Tehran. Oman's diplomat was the first to land. Then Qatar sent Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdurrahman Al-Thani directly. Tehran welcomed the Qatar envoy, but not Oman's as he came with the 'US message of peace'.

A few Iranian journalists later reported that Qatar had come to offer US \$ 3 billion of "blood money" because one of the drones involved in the assassination of Soleimani was launched from a US base in Qatar. Iranian officials dismissed the news.

In Tel Aviv, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quickly distanced himself. He said the Soleimani assassination was a US and Iranian

affair, and Tel Aviv believed the US knew how to solve it.

In Riyadh, the Saudi Kingdom sent a message that they felt as if they had been stabbed by the murder of Soleimani. This is because the US, according to a Royal official, told AFP that the attack was kept a secret. As a result, Riyadh, which is a key US ally in the region, was kept in the dark until the news of the murder of Soleimani shocked the world. Another matter is that the murder occurred precisely when the Saudis tried to ease tensions in the region by building bridges of understanding with Iran. Media reports say Riyadh is trying to play the role of a fire fighter in the midst of all this trouble. King Salman, for example, took the time to call the Iraqi President Barham Salem directly and asked his partners to cool things down and jointly prevent an escalation. The crown prince, Prince Mohammad

bin Salman, had the task of calling Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi with the same message. Asharq al-Awsat reported that Salman sent Prince Khalid bin Salman, his younger brother and Minister of Defence, to Washington and London to voice the same message.

Senior diplomat at Iran's National Security Council, Amir Abdollahian, said the succession of envoys approaching Tehran brought the message that the US was willing to lift all economic sanctions provided Iran cancelled its retaliation plan. He said "the Americans even offered to discuss which targets were the right targets for Iran's retaliation, but Iran refused the whole offer."

The Secretary of the National Security Council of Iran, General Ali Shamkhani, reiterated Tehran's plans regarding an imminent retaliation. "So far," he said, "there are 13 retaliation

scenarios drafted by the Council,<sup>16</sup> and even one that is considered the weakest will be a historic nightmare for America.”

As if deliberately creating tension, he asked the public to be patient.

*For the time being, there is no detail we can disclose, but we promise the heroic Iranian nation that this retaliation operation is not a one-off operation, because based on Khamenei's direction, all resistance forces must join in avenging Soleimani's death.*

However, he then hurriedly said the decision-making process at the Council was entirely based on security considerations and international norms. He seemed to want to send a message that Tehran's response was fully

measured and dignified, a different class from US treachery.

The information was confirmed by Hussein Dehghan, one of Iran's key security officials. In a special interview with CNN on 5 January 2020, a rare moment that Iran apparently used to echo messages directly to the American public, he said Iran would be picky about its target.

“Let me say one thing: our leader officially announces that Iran never wants war and does not seek war,” he said referring to Khamenei. “America,” continued Dehghan, “was the first to start a war and therefore they should receive a commensurate reaction to their actions.”

On the same day, Dehghan spoke to the American public. Tehran announced new directions for its nuclear development program: to go their own way, as they prefer. There will no longer be any remains of Tehran being subject to



restrictions in the JCOPA, including in terms of the level of uranium enrichment and any research related to nuclear.

“From today onwards, the direction of developing Iran's nuclear program is entirely needs-based,” an official statement stated. Although this position briefly widens Iran's prospect of becoming a nuclear state, the fact that Tehran has not withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), suggests they still commit to the civil nuclear program.

Iran's Parliament pushed the retaliation a step further. On 7 January 2020, they issued a resolution that established all US military personnel as “terrorists”. This resolution, none like it throughout the world, is more wide-reaching considering the previous resolution was limited to targeting the US Central Command in the Middle East. The resolution naturally provides

legal space for the Iranian military to hunt down US security personnel everywhere, and also for anyone considered to have relations with the US military.

This theatre of retaliation prepared by Iran hits its target. Iran won the hearts of the world. Words of condolence flooded into Tehran. In places outside Iran, demonstrations and statements of solidarity resounded strongly. Demonstrations and solidarity actions emerged in Kashmir, Pakistan, India, London, Nigeria, Venezuela and many more.

In Syria, Russian commandos took time to brought flowers to the *ta'ziyah* (mourning ceremony) for Soleimani at the Iranian Embassy. Among those who came was General Alexander Chaiko, the commander of all Russian troops in Syria. In Moscow, people placed garlands at the door of the Iranian Embassy and took the time to

drive in front of the US Embassy with yapping sirens and windshields full of Soleimani photo patches.

But, the worst nightmare for the US was on the streets of Iran. Instead of being apathetic and anxious, millions of Iranians took to the streets, as if there were no more US to be feared, as if they were ready to face all forms of US hostility for another 100 years. Meeting public requests, the government decided to parade Soleimani's coffin in five historic cities: Ahvaz, Mashhad, Tehran, Qum, and finally in Kerman – the general's hometown.

In Ahvaz, a small town west of Tehran, near the Iraqi border, which was the area for Soleimani's *jihad* during his youth, it was reported that at least four million people took to the streets when the Soleimani coffin reached the city. Footage from a military helicopter shows the

small town of 1.2 million people straining with mourners. The Karun Bridge, an icon of the city, looked like a sea of people in black clothing.

In Mashhad, the second largest city in Iran after Tehran, there were far more mourners. Some have been tending to the streets since dawn, jostling for space to see the bus carrying the Soleimani coffin passing by for the last time.

The public grief in Tehran is far more phenomenal than Khomeini's funeral ceremony.<sup>17</sup> Almost every inch downtown is full of people. Old, young, male, female, youths and toddlers looked faithfully waiting for the arrival of Soleimani's coffin.<sup>18</sup>

They seemed to want to thank Soleimani for the last time, and also the Iranian military, which allowed them to sleep well every night. "Write in history that we all slept soundly when our general

died," stated a poster brought by a woman who took to the streets with her hood half-open.

More than anyone, Soleimani played a role in keeping Iran's enemies at bay, and because of that all that is visible to Iran's progress can come into being. Many were moved because of their love of his personality, tenderness and simplicity.

They called him "Commander of the Heart" and were moved by his sociable nature. They still remember that anyone can intercept and ask Soleimani to take a photo.

Many also sympathized because Soleimani, more than any soldier in Iran, was so concerned about the families of the martyrs. There are many photos and videos that show him embracing and kissing the orphans as if they were his own family. "I am your uncle," he said in a letter to a child whose father had died on the battlefield.

The Soleimani family itself is far from public radar. Perhaps because of the secrecy related to his work, the Iranian public could only find out little about his family after he died – from photographs scattered when many officials came to mourn. Soleimani, according to a number of photos, lived in a modest house in Tehran with his wife and two children, with a living room that looked more like a place of study and has absolutely no expensive furniture except photographs of heroes, official clothes of his friends who died on the battlefield, and a number of paintings and calligraphy, including a wood carving similar to those that can be found in Jepara, Central Java.

However, Soleimani's personality is only half of the story. Arguably the reason many people loved him is that he was never interested in

politics and practically was never involved in any local intrigue and feud.

A Friday preacher in Tehran, on the day of Soleimani's death, recalled how many people, including himself, persuaded Soleimani to enter the political arena, as a presidential candidate. Soleimani's success in reversing the direction of war in Syria has indeed boosted his popularity. A survey conducted by the University of Maryland in October 2019, showed that 82 percent of Iranians liked Soleimani<sup>19</sup> – more than enough to win any political contestation.

“Go forward, and you will win,” the preacher recalled. Soleimani offered an inspiring answer.

*I am more fit to be a candidate of bullet and death.  
I have been looking for my future killer on various  
fronts over the years, but I have not found it.*

Even during his burial, he managed to make Iranians to love him further.

In a will whose copies were widely circulated, Soleimani advised his wife that he be buried like an ordinary person. "My wife," he wrote in the handwritten will.

*I have chosen my burial place in the Shuhada Cemetery in Kerman. Mahmud (apparently a close relative of Soleimani) knows this location. I want my headstone to be simple. Just write, 'Soldier Qasem Soleimani' without the title and praises.*

In Tehran on 6 January 2020, people prepared to pray for the body of Soleimani. Ali Khamenei, who directly led the prayer, could not hide his tears. Many have speculated, the *rahbar's* tears, were the final seal for Tehran's fierce reckoning.



Iranian grief is long. The sea of people who remained along the road seemed to have breathed a second life to the Islamic Revolution.

In Kerman, a small town southeast of Tehran, there were reportedly two million mourners. The city with a population of 600,000 was strained, but they offered everything they have. Many said that on the day of the funeral, shops give free food and drinks for mourners from outside the city. "You are Soleimani's guests," became a phrase that is often heard.

Then tragedy struck. While Kerman tried its best to be a good host, the sea of mourners was beyond the capacity of the city. By late afternoon on Tuesday, 7 January 2020, Iranian television came down with shocking news: the jostling in the area around the cemetery, an arid region near the slope of a rocky hill, had claimed lives. Initially, only a few victims were named, then the numbers

rose over the hours. Footage broadcasts by state-owned television station IRIB showed people were packed to the far hills facing the Soleimani cemetery area.

The government had decided to postpone Soleimani's funeral until the masses are calm.

Amid the depth of Iranian grief for Soleimani and those killed by being trampled on in Kerman – the state television announced at dusk that 56 people have been killed – Khomeini's phenomenal expression that "Iran is a nation that weeps easily" seemed to be ringing again. But, as Khomeini said, it was from this cry that Iranians could overthrow tyranny and gave birth to the Islamic Revolution.

This time, that same night, before people put Soleimani's body into the ground, the world would see how the tears of the Iranians had the power to overthrow US arrogance. And as Khomeini also have said, *"America hich galati*

*bikonad nametawonan*” (America could not do anything after that).

### **Show Time**

In Iran, government monitors captured the overflow of support from the grieving public, along with the people's desire that the government provide commensurate retaliation to the US for Soleimani's assassination. On the TV channel Ofogh, for example, a young cleric called the studio and encouraged the government not to hesitate to respond.

“Before us is a country whose population and land are so massive, but don't have a single hero. All American heroes are cartoon characters – all are fiction,” said the young cleric Shahab Moradi.

Clearly, the tragedy in Kerman placed a huge burden on the shoulders of the government: They must respond.

However, the question has not changed: what retaliation is appropriate for the US? Expressing anger, even though it can momentarily calm the heart, is far from enough. The world will surely question the difference between the Islamic Republic and its opponents. People will also wonder what is the point of retaliation if things do not improve afterwards for the Islamic Republic and for Muslims as a whole. Can Iran design creative forms of retaliation: fewer actions but with larger results?

In matters of feelings such as retaliation, the name *Islam* in the Islamic Republic of Iran demands that Tehran always tread on the path of religion. The principle itself is clear, but the path is difficult: retaliation as much as possible must

avoid unnecessary death, must have a strong moral and legal basis, and still leave enough gap for opponents to realize the scope of their mistakes. Even in retaliation, Islam requires people to leave an opportunity for reconciliation and self-improvement.

Then there are more serious derivative questions: what is the use of brutal and bloody retaliation if the opponent's decision to kill Soleimani is triggered by misperception? What is the use of taking the lives of the enemy soldiers if their place can easily be replaced by other soldiers? What is the use of destroying the US base if in the end the attack will heighten the anger of the neighbours in the region, who may feel that the US is more capable to bring peace and normalcy? What would a war on Trump serve if he can easily be replaced with another

figure who may still consider Iranian blood as cheap?

After all, the Islamic Republic of Iran had helped the Hezbollah to win victories in Lebanon with dignity? In the 33 Days War, Hezbollah's decision to always send warnings before launching missiles and rockets into enemy territory naturally led to a real victory. Strategic cities in Israel, including Haifa, are practically paralysed without the need for hundreds of missiles. Civilians in Haifa at that time had to hide in bunkers out of fear because they believed Nasrallah's words.

Hezbollah's warning that the escalation would lead to further missile strokes, passing through Haifa, Tel Aviv, and cities farther from the Lebanese border, succeeded in making Israel aware of the huge costs of warfare if it continued.

Israel had to swallow its own ego and the war immediately stopped.

Tehran is apparently still on a straight path. The National Security Council and the Iranian parliament, for example, play their respective roles in sending signals so that the world does not panic; Tehran's retaliation will only target US military personnel and installations. They have also clarified their final target: for the US to be ousted from the region. With that big target, they want to send a message that the retaliation this time is to teach the US how valuable Soleimani's blood is.

But, can Iran help the US to see clearly the verses of the Qur'an: "And do not even think that those who died in the Way of Allah are dead?"<sup>20</sup>

The Iranian military tried it on the field. Outside the public's knowledge, as later told in detail by the IRGC Air Force Commander, Brigadier

General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, Iran is planning a shock and awe attack on the US, in the form of precision missile strikes on US bases in Iraq.

While the public did not know of this, the US satellites could easily see everything. Just like when Iran attacked ISIS headquarters in Syria and the headquarters of the Kurdish Iranian rebels PDKI (Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan) in Iraq, the military used missile transport trucks whose movements were easily identified clearly by US assets using satellites and were automatically visible to anyone to see.

Iran wants the US and the world to see that their attack is a declaration of war, just as the US declaration of war by killing Soleimani. By making everything visible, Iran also wants to hit US arrogance; that Iran can retaliate and the US cannot do anything to stop it.



On the other hand, Tehran seems to want to give the US an exit, a small way out. The US can evacuate the base, evacuate its troops, or choose to defend its base with everything they have.

The military chose Kermanshah as the missile launch site. The US can find it easily. Iranian missile transport trucks were seen parking in a shooting range which they had used often. The chosen missile class can also be clearly seen from satellites: the Fateh and the Qiam.

Fateh missile is common in Iran. Its classification is Tactical Ballistic Missile. Having many variants, Fateh's lowest class is capable of carrying up to half a ton of explosives. Mass produced since 2000, these missiles are abundant in city defence bases throughout Iran. Its cost of production is cheap, said to be around US \$ 100,000 per unit. For comparison, Russia sells the Iskander-M (Fateh class ballistic missiles) for US \$

3 million per unit, while China sells that class to Turkey in 2000 for US \$ 1.5 million per unit.<sup>21</sup> The price difference is easy to understand given the very exclusive nature of missile technology, which is only controlled by a small number of countries. Those who produce them will sell on the market for big profits.

Iran is different. Missiles are a matter of life and death and are their strategic defence component. That is why their production does not follow the path of capitalist economies. There are no procurement and research projects involving outside 'partners'. There is no purchase of any foreign components or hire of foreign experts. There is no tender. Above all, there are no US dollars involved at all. The entire missile production chain, from component procurement, research, manufacturing, storage and so on, is

carried out by the military or military companies themselves.

With this closed-loop model, the cost of missile production is practically low because everything is done in-house. State finances are also not burdened because all expenditures go back to the state treasury in various forms of taxes.

It is different with the Qiam. This is Iran's strategic sledgehammer. Much bigger but has many variants like the Fateh. This short-range ballistic missile is capable of carrying explosives up to nearly two tons and reaching targets up to 800 kilometres.

As is the fate of almost all of Iran's "antique" weapons, the two missiles have passed through a violent development phase.

Initially, many outside the Iranian public looked down on it; the two missiles were

considered non-existent and often laughed at, before they finally stunned people with Iran's ballistic missile attack on ISIS terrorist headquarters in Dayr al-Zur, Syria, in June 2017. At that time, Iran fired six Qiam and Zolfaghar missiles, a fourth-generation variant of the Fateh, right into an ISIS base, in retaliation for armed terror in Tehran that killed 18 people in the same month.

This precision attack targeted the command centre and ammunition depot. The visible element is evident from the presence of the Saeqeh, an Iranian re-engineered version of the US' RQ-170 (Sentinel), which records each second of the missile hitting the target. This is the first time since the end of the Iraq-Iran War, when Iran has fired missiles outside its territory.

One year later, in September 2018, Iran again showed off Fateh's ability to target the

headquarters and training centre of the PDKI in Koya, about 60 kilometres east of Erbil, Iraq. Drone video footage published by Iran shows Fateh's level of precision; it fell right in a room on the second floor of the PDKI headquarters. Dozens of high-ranking PDKI officials who were at a meeting at the time – reportedly with Israeli intelligence too – were immediately killed.

Armed opposition groups that often undermine Tehran are suddenly cut off by a generation. Another missile targeted the PDKI training centre which was two hundred meters away from the first target. This attack was Iran's retaliation for armed terror in a military parade in the city of Ahvaz which killed 25 people.

But this is America. Is there any simple conflict with the US? Japan is the last country that has the guts to directly attack an US military base. "Fighting with America is fighting with the whole

world,” said Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Japanese naval force in the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. Japan at that time felt it could bear the risk even though it eventually had to swallow the brutal memories of US retaliation: the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Iranian desire to avenge Soleimani's assassination is easily seen as a frenzy or desperation given that, as Japan used to be, Iran does not have nuclear weapons to make America think twice on retaliating. Beyond that, when it comes to weapons, the military budgets of the two countries are vastly different.

According to the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, Iran's military budget in 2017 was “only” US \$ 15 billion. In comparison, the US military budget, the largest in the world, reached US \$ 650 billion in the same year.

However, Iran's retaliation plan is not without a good basis. After the Iraq-Iran War which killed many of the Revolution's best men, Tehran reorganized its defence framework.

The scenario: The Islamic Republic must survive even if it has to come face to face with a superpower. This is not made up. The two main opponents are the US and Israel. Each of them has ballistic missiles that are capable of reaching all of Iran. They also have a strategic stockpile of warheads (nuclear with explosive power above one megaton), have aircraft carriers and submarines whose missiles are able to reach Iran from Mediterranean waters. Finally, the US has a number of platforms for F-35 stealth fighter jets that might be able to freely mess up Iran's air defences.

With all these considerations, Iran from the beginning chose ballistic missiles as the ultimate

strategic weapon. This choice is considered more realistic and pocketbook-friendly rather than, for example, the procurement of a shiny jet fighter that clearly costs money and still ends up being dependent on producing countries.<sup>22</sup> Previous war experience also showed Saddam learned restraint after a successful Iranian missiles struck Baghdad.

There are other considerations why Iran prioritizes ballistic missiles: Iran's potential opponents are already in sight. Of the 28 major US bases outside of Iran's borders, all are within a radius of under 2,500 kilometres. Israel alone is only about 1,500 kilometres away.

The Iranian military planners then had a simple thought: they only needed to make a US base, from which the US could project its attacks, non-functional using ballistic missile attacks. When the base, including its runway, warehouse



and weapons, are hit by missile blasts, the US – which is very dependent on its tactical air force – must fly further to be able to initiate attacks.

In other words, the ability of the US to attack is decreased by itself and Iran's defence assets automatically have a greater chance of survival. For Israel, they simply shake up Israeli cities with heavy rain of missiles.

If the statement of Iranian military officials can be believed, Tehran is at the top five world missile forces along with the US, Russia and China. Tehran is recorded to have a collection of rockets, ballistic missiles and cruise missiles of various types. In terms of cruise capability, the Soumar, Iranian ballistic missiles that can be fired from submarines, is said to be able to hit targets from a distance of 2,500 kilometres, reaching strategic cities in Europe.

As for the damage, Iran has many choices. The Shahab-3 medium-range cruise missile (SRBM), for example, is said to have the power to scorch 50-90 percent of Israeli cities. The biggest and deadliest, Iran-owned since 2011, is the Khorramshahr-2. At US \$ 400,000 apiece, reportedly the most expensive, the missile can hit targets within a radius of 2,000 kilometres. The missile is also capable of carrying nearly two tons of explosives, with a level of precision of 5-10 meters and the speed to hit the target of Mach 15, or equivalent to 14 to 15 times the speed of sound.

Only storage space can limit Iran in the production of missiles, boasted an Iranian general in the past year. "We often wondered about where else to keep them. We can produce missiles as easily as we make candy," he said.<sup>23</sup>

In terms of defence, military planners in Iran make great use of the country's unique geographical conditions. Iran however has the strategic depth of an abundance of land, mountains, hills and granite valleys; something its opponents do not have in the Middle East, including Israel.

The strategic landscape factor minimizes the possibility that a foreign country has the guts to launch a ground force attack on Iran, as it is like a natural fortress that increases the chances of Iran surviving a nuclear attack.<sup>24</sup> Iran just needs to learn to build underground defence bases. From this thought came creation of the "missile cities" in Iran.

Iranian missile cities are far from the typical picture of underground missile bases, such as the US and Russia Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) silo facilities, both in the Cold War era and

afterwards. As the name suggests, this is a city in almost all aspects.

These cities have very wide and interconnected roads, said to reach thousands of kilometres, with a depth of up to 500 meters below the ground and maybe more. They have high ceilings, quite flexible for the movement of heavy vehicles that launch missiles (Transporter Erector Launchers). Their construction has been strengthened in such a way with various modern techniques.

Here is the most important part: these missile cities are believed to be able to withstand nuclear attacks. Some say, this is the most powerful protection facility that humanity has ever known. That is because there are no methods of nuclear explosion that can sufficiently reach the depths of the city, much less to destroy the weapons and many strategic defence assets

stored inside. Reportedly, the largest part of Iran's strategic missile mass assembly plant, along with its tactical launch vehicle, is located inside the missile cities.<sup>25</sup>

Another capability of the missile cities is that if an enemy nuclear strike destroys the missile launch portal, and part of the city is buried, the giant drilling machine inside can quickly dig the portal hole in any chosen place, so that the missile launch vehicles have room to launch counter-attacks. Even if the enemy fired a dozen one-megaton nuclear warheads, it was still possible for the city to recover from its damages quickly, and immediately launch counter missiles.

With such sophistication and strategic capability, Iran automatically enjoys the mechanism of the principle of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) against any opponent. Simply put, MAD is a scenario where an opponent and

Iran will end up equally destroying each other. It is a kind of virtual war armour; this defensive deterrent belongs only to countries that have nuclear weapons. It is unique that Iran is listed as the only country that has MAD armour even though it does not have any nuclear warhead and only with conventional counter-forces.

Many people doubt all of Iran's claims and capabilities, consider it nothing more than cheap propaganda. But it must also be acknowledged that after the Iraq-Iran War, no missile or rocket has been fired by an enemy at Iran until for 41 years after the Revolution.

What has been happening is that Iran repeatedly irritate its opponents while remaining safe. In 2011, Iran hacked the most sophisticated US assault drone, the RQ-170. Still a mystery until now, Iran managed to land a drone dubbed the "Beast of Kandahar" in one piece.

An infuriated US, having its best technology fell into the hands of opponents, had threatened to break through Iranian airspace to re-take or destroy it by force so that it could not be used. But Tehran threatened to strike back at the US bases. Washington backed down and only limited to asking for the drone back from Iran, which was refused.

This was not a one-off lucky incident. There have been many incidents that show Iran can hurt opponents and walked away unscathed afterwards.

For example, in July 2019 Iran seized a British tanker that crossed the waters of the Persian Gulf – in plain sight of an escorting British warship - in retaliation for London's seizure of an Iranian oil tanker in Gibraltar. In March 2007, Iran had also successfully captured dozens of British

SAS special forces that broke through its waters in the Persian Gulf.

In September 2019, the mysterious drone attacks on the Aramco oil processing facilities were also linked to Iran. Even though America was quick to garner world support and accused Iran of being behind the attack, there were still no enemy retaliation inside the Iranian territory. "The hit-and-run era is over," said Khamenei, reminding Iranian opponents since 2018.

### **Calls of War**

Despite all its defence deficiencies, Iran only needs to complete a few small details before executing an attack on the US bases in Iraq.

First are the phone calls. Iran phoned its counterparts in Iraq and reported on the plan except the exact time and bases that would be targeted. It is like a courtesy call and polite request



before entering someone's house. Iran seems to realize, even though the blood of Soleimani has cemented the Iran-Iraq fraternity to a level never seen before, launching missiles into the airspace of a sovereign country could lead to unpleasant publications.

Some consider these phone calls as initial warnings from Iran so that the US could use the chance to exit provided by Tehran. Iran may know that Iraq will proceed to report the incoming attack to the US, considering that the US is still an "official guest" of Baghdad.

The calls made the US more certain that an attack would come, and had time to prepare. As told by a US soldier who was in Ayn Al-Assad, a base which later became the target of an Iranian missile attack, the base was busy preparing since a few days before the attack came.

On the day of the Iranian attack, all the soldiers entered the bunker before midnight, and only a few were guarding the outer perimeter. The US also flew at least nine drones to oversee the base, activate the air defence system, and implement a number of things they thought could knock down Iranian missiles.

At this point, Iran has won a step. At the very least, they can force opponents to hide in bunkers, deep in anxiety and uncertainty even before Iran fired the missiles.

In the early hours of 8 January 2020, Iran had indeed targeted Ayn Al-Assad (literally means Eye of the Tiger), the largest US military base in the Middle East, which is located farthest from the Iranian border and has the most security because it holds the best US air assets, including the helicopters and drones that have attacked Soleimani. Trump's visit to the base in 2018 marks

the magnitude of the US military's confidence in the security and protection at the base.

General Ali Hajizadeh said that Tehran initially had planned to target Al-Taji Camp, about 30 kilometres outside Baghdad, because the war machines at the base were also involved in the assassination of Soleimani. But because the base was too close to Baghdad, and the possibility of an attack will disturb the city residents, Tehran cancelled the plan.

In the midst of these crucial preparations, Iran did not forget the theatrical elements in its attacks. The inaugural missile attack on Ayn Al-Assad occurred at 1.30 AM, the same time as the US drone attack on the Soleimani convoy in Baghdad. The attack was rapid, marked by a salvo of 15 ballistic missiles, a combination of the Fateh and the Qjam.<sup>26</sup>

After the attack, an Iraqi amateur video recorded and spread the shock and awe moments from the Iranian missiles. Only then did Tehran complete the funeral of Soleimani. Iran seems to want to send a message that they know the best way to bury their hero: after his death is avenged.

US soldiers on Ayn Al-Assad said Iranian missile attacks are nearly indescribable. Missiles came at two to three times the speed of sound, with one-ton warhead each. There are 13 points hit by missiles. Everything was done with precision.

Iran sent the Fateh to damage buildings and other base facilities, including a drone operator's control room. The Qiam were tasked to damage the runway. The kinetic effect of the Qiam collision is believed to have damaged the runway structure so that it cannot be used again unless there are serious repairs.

As predicted, the US media and experts failed to read Iran's veiled messages and underestimated the retaliatory attack. Much of the media coverage focused on the attacks being limited to damaging physical facilities and more importantly, according to them, there were no fatalities.

"All is well," Trump said later. But, for some experts, such as Viping Narang, a weapons and chemical engineering expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the US was just lucky.

"For me, the most important point of this attack is how precise the Iranian SRBM [Short Range Ballistic Missile] really is," said Viping. "Iran should also be surprised and relieved. Their revolution in accuracy is real and no longer a US monopoly. This attack has broad implications for modern conflict and limited warfare."

Other observers described the Iranian attack as the end of the era of US base projected power in the Middle East. To return to the previous era, the US can only rely on air power from more distant bases, or on aircraft carriers which also had to park further to avoid Iranian ballistic missiles.

Others can only admire the calm, clear, and brilliant minds of the Iranian military planners. They are considered to have given a perfect retaliation to the US; on the one hand showing off Iran's SRBM accuracy, on the other hand defusing a situation that could explode at any time by intentionally minimizing casualties on the part of US soldiers.

The US itself chose to hide its wound. Only a week after the Iran attack, possibly after cleaning up so that the base conditions were not too 'terrible', they gave reporters access to

directly look at Ayn Al-Assad. CNN coverage, for example, showed battered, scorched and pockmarked bases everywhere. A crater marks the missile's impact point in the middle of the base, deep and large enough to park cars.

In Tehran, celebrations were everywhere.<sup>27</sup> In a brief statement, the military said that they were keeping their promise. The good news also contains further warnings: if Washington chooses to exacerbate the problem, Iran will target more US bases. At the same time, the message was directed to the Gulf countries which hosted the US bases.

A press conference by Hajizadeh, the Iranian general who orchestrated the historic attack, which was broadcast by Iranian TV, was like an official ceremony in the midst of public excitement. Standing against the background of the Iranian flag and the flag of resistance groups

in the region – Hezbollah (Lebanon), Ansarullah (Yemen), Al-Hashad Al-Shaabi (Iraq), Hamas (Palestine), Fatimiyyun Brigade (Afghanistan) and Zaynabiyyun Brigade (Pakistan) – Hajizadeh asked Iranians not to be anxious and be more calm about the future. "Iran's military power and superiority has reached a level where enemies can no longer threaten," he said.

According to Hajizadeh, Tehran from the beginning calculated the possibility of an apocalyptic scenario. "We have suspected that America will retaliate and we are ready to retaliate," he said. "However, this is the first time America has been hit directly after the Second World War, but America chose to refrain and the war did not happen."

He said, Iran had prepared 100 missiles ready to fire before starting the attack on Ayn Al-Assad. The initial attack, he added, was originally



not intended to kill massively, but merely to destroy equipment and war machines at the base.

28

Iran, he said, is more than capable of killing up to 500 victims on the US side, and is even ready to kill 5,000 victims within 48 hours if an escalation happened. However, that is not the important point. The attack, he said, was just a hard slap, a marker for the start of a larger operation to end the US presence in the region. "The blood of our martyrs," he said, "is far more valuable than US aircraft and bases, even more than Trump's life."

Hajizadeh also revealed other details. He said, the US had been preparing after the dishonourable murder of Soleimani. He said there were 12 drones and a number of fighter jets protecting Ayn Al-Assad, but none could stop Iranian missiles. "America always brags about

missile defence systems and other war equipment, but in fact we see how surprised they are.”

The Iranian missile attack, Hajizadeh continued, finally brought relief to the US soldiers who had to endure days of exhaustion waiting for Iran's revenge. "America used propaganda and media warfare to push its policies and they are not really strong enough to face a country like Iran," he said." I suggest that America voluntarily leave the Arab countries."

In short, Iran successfully dictated its wishes and the US chose not to strike back. However, there is still another detail from Hajizadeh's story that explains why America is holding back.

According to Hajizadeh, the missile attack coincided with electronic warfare (EW) that targeted the American drone and jet fighter aviation systems. It is conceivable, if it really

happened, that Iran's missile attack coincided with a brief instant darkness on the monitor screens of the White House operations control room. It was like a blackout was created by the Iranians. Sightless and with limited information from the field, Washington did not dare to take greater risks.

At the White House, many reporters were bemused and can only bit their fingers. There was no immediate response from Trump. Trump's scheduled speech was even delayed for a day.

When Trump greeted the American public the next day, it was even more disappointing. On television, Trump and the senior US generals lined up behind him looking like classroom bullies who had been hit by an unexpected opponent.

With a snort that was clearly heard in the microphone, Trump tried to calm the American public. He said everything was fine. The base was

indeed damaged, he said, but can be fixed immediately. Without mentioning details, he said the US would ensure Iran would not become a nuclear nation. The US, he said again, hoped that Iran could soon be like other "normal states" and the US was ready to work together. All of Trump's threats to Iran, including his fanfare about the decisive attack that would be the end of the Islamic Republic, seemed lost in the wind.

When Iran's first missile hit the Ayn Al-Assad base, the world knew that no Spider-Man could save the US image as an unrivalled force. But, in contrast to the popular US superhero, the world has not yet known many personalities and heroism that can rise above one Qasem Soleimani.

## **PART II: THE SOLDIER FROM THE KERMAN MOUNTAINS**

### **From Kerman to Tehran (1979-1998): The Professional**

QASEM Soleimani was born in Qanat-e Malek, a mountain village in Kerman Province, southeast of Iran, on 11 March 1957. His father was a poor farmer, wallowing in 900 toman debt (around USD 700 at that time). This happened to many poor farming families in Iran when the agricultural sector was privatized following the policies of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi regime, opening up the sector to foreign capital.

Soleimani recalls how almost every night his family could not sleep. They are always worried. Government agents could detain their father at any time because of debt.<sup>29</sup>

At 13 years old, Soleimani decided to try his luck in the city of Kerman. He went with a family relative named Ahmad. "Our bodies were very small at the time. Wherever we come, no one wants to hire us," Soleimani later recalled. One day, the two of them finally got a job as construction workers at Khajoo, far on the outskirts of Kerman. They were paid two tomans per day.

After eight months of work, saving money, and living frugally in a foreign city, Soleimani and Ahmad decided to go home. Unfortunately, winter came and heavy snow covered the road. Both were advised to find a driver named Pahlavan, who was said to be a good driver in the snow.

The journey home with Pahlavan seemed to have left its mark on young Soleimani. Along the way, the driver kept cursing at the Shah. A rare courage at that time, considering that SAVAK, the

brutal and cruel secret police of the Shah's regime, was ready to arrest anyone who harboured rebellious sentiments.

“Children your age should learn and play, not work in a foreign city,” said Pahlavan as Soleimani recalled. “I spit on him [the Shah] for the life he gave us.”

At the dawn of the Islamic Revolution, Soleimani returned to Kerman. This time he got a job as an employee at the city's water supply company. After working for hours, he used to train physically by lifting weights. He also diligently attended religious lectures delivered by a traveling cleric, Hojjat Kamyab, who was reportedly a student of Khomeini, the future leader of the revolution. The spirit of revolution grew inside Soleimani.

The revolution broke out in 1979. Shah Reza Pahlavi was deposed. Power was transferred to the children of the revolution led by Khomeini.

Popular resistance committees joined forces to form the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Force (IRGC) or the *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami*. Later on, the IRGC was one of the branches of the Iranian Armed Forces with the special task of guarding the ideal values of the Revolution: The Islamic Republic; the Supreme Spiritual Leader who is an inseparable part of the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*; and the liberation of oppressed nations.

Some reports say Soleimani joined the IRGC at the beginning of the Revolution. At that time, he was only in his 20s. His first task was to stop an ethnic Kurdish uprising in northwestern Iran when the Islamic Republic was rocked by Iraqi aggression.<sup>30</sup>



However, there are also reports that say Soleimani only joined the IRGC when the Iraqi military succeeded in occupying Khorramshahr, a port city in Iran bordering Iraq. The liberation of Khorramshahr was one of the turning points of Iran in the eight-year war. The city has even become an icon in poetry and *nashid* in memory of the martyrs of the Iraq-Iran War.

Soleimani himself recalled that his first task in the war was a 15-day mission to bring water to the forefront of the battle. He was known to be brave, often even assigned behind enemy lines, one of which was to gather intelligence.

Iraqi radio at that time reportedly called Soleimani "the goat thief" because, he always brings home a goat from enemy territory.

The war then catapulted the name Soleimani. From a company commander who led the villagers from Kerman, he was promoted to

commander of the division before the war was over, and then the IRGC commander in Kerman after the war.

But, apparently that was not what he was looking for. On many occasions he always said that he is only an ordinary soldier who came from a poor family and a dishonourable tribe. Before advancing to the battlefield, he always took the time to hug and kiss his men. He is often seen crying and apologizing to his colleagues who died. He always felt he should be the one to die.

The Iraq-Iran War is the most brutal war in the history of the Islamic Republic. The outnumbered Iranian army must face the latest Saddam Hussein war machine supplied by the West and Arab countries, including chemical weapons. More than half a million Iranian troops have died in this war.

But, Soleimani survived. People called him “The Living Martyr”: a soldier who lives like a martyr even though his heart is still beating. He had faith that someone would never get *shahadah* if he did not live like a *shahid*.

An IRGC official recalled that, after each battle, Soleimani was always seen sitting alone in a corner of the tent. “He was very quiet, thinking about his colleagues who died.”

Soleimani continued to be like that even though he had held the rank of general. When delivering the body of his colleague, Major General Hassan Shateri who was killed by an Israeli missile in Syria on 12 February 2013,<sup>31</sup> Soleimani chose to be alone, not sitting in the ranks of high-ranking IRGC officers. He kept his face down in his black jacket and shirt, occasionally rubbing his eyes, crying.

Soleimani was seriously injured in an operation during the Iraq-Iran War but he did not give up. "He ran away from the hospital. Instead of returning home, he instead returned to the fighting," recalls Sheikh Jalal al-Shagir, an Iraqi cleric who was close to Soleimani.<sup>32</sup>

The Iran-Iraq War not only gave Soleimani a reputation and promotion but also relations; loyalties. Many Iraqi Shiite and Kurdish militias who helped Iran in fighting Saddam became his close friends. Among them was Jamal Ja'far Muhammad Ali al-Ibrahim or better known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Later, Soleimani rewarded their loyalty. In 2014, the ISIS terrorist group emerged from the chaos that followed the US invasion of Iraq. It was Soleimani who first came with reinforcements. This time, he no longer just a company or division

commander, but a Quds Force Commander, an elite IRGC unit, and as an Iranian top general.

It was his background, the harshness of life, and the experience of war – all of which had shaped Soleimani. He is a humble commander; not beneath socializing with his juniors. In many video documentations, he always seemed to smile, talk casually, and joke with the common people. His words often did not come from a war commander, but from a Sufi.

“He was a humble person when he met the fighters,” said Sheikh Jalal. “His ways made them love him, not seeing him as an Iranian general. They saw him as a fellow warrior. He is also closer to Sufism, very different from the harsh character you usually find in war commanders.”

In battle, he never lacked courage despite his age. He did not hesitate to be on the front lines to oversee the operation; without weapons in

hand; without a bulletproof vest on his body. But, most of all, experience makes him a master strategist, who had victories on three different fronts over the US, Israel and ISIS-Al-Qaeda: Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.

“How can you not be inspired when your leader, who may be your grandfather's age, is just wearing a shirt, walking around the battlefield, amidst whistling bullets,” said John Maguire, a former CIA official in Baghdad who once met Soleimani. “His appearance was not what you expected of a guerrilla leader in general. He is neat, a capable man with significant command skills, a professional.”<sup>33</sup>

As soon as the US invaded Iraq, they soon discovered a formidable enemy: Qasem Soleimani. He is not those who take refuge in caves. He is also not a shadow commander. But, a real general. A master of strategy who never

hesitate to meet the enemy to negotiate for strategic purposes – a quality that you will not find in a conservative-extremist commander.

“Mr. Trump, the gambler! You are very aware of our strengths and abilities in this region. You know how strong we are in asymmetrical warfare. We await you. We are real people on the battlefield ... You may start a war, but we will determine the end,” Soleimani said in a speech in Hamedan, Iran, on 26 July 2018<sup>34</sup>, responding to US President Donald Trump’s threat to deal Iran with “suffering that has never been experienced by anyone”.

### **Lebanon (1998-2019): One of Us**

HIS voice is heavy. Wrinkles appeared throughout his face. In a black bomber jacket, he looked confidently speaking to Jane Corbin of BBC Two. Danny Yatom, 74, has a brilliant career in the

military, intelligence, and Israeli politics. He was a member of the Sayeret Maktal commando to the post of deputy commander, once headed the central command of the armed forces, a Mossad chief, and a politician in the Knesset.

“The philosophy of the Islamic Revolution is that the world must become a Shia caliphate,” Danny said in a documentary about Qasem Soleimani, “Shadow Commander: Iran's Military Mastermind” which aired on BBC Two on 14 March 2019. “But there are two obstacles for Iran. One, the US which they call the Great Satan, and the other is Israeli democracy which they call the Little Satan.”

The fall of Shah Reza Pahlavi and Saddam's failure to overthrow the Islamic Republic in an eight-year war was a disaster for Israel. The Zionist State had placed hope on the shoulders of the Shah's regime: oil and arms businesses.



But Israel's darkest investment in the country of Persia was SAVAK, the Shah's secret police who was responsible for the persecution, torture and murder of the dictator's political rivals.<sup>35</sup> One of the triggers of the Revolution was the actions created by the CIA and Mossad,<sup>36</sup> so SAVAK was called by TIME magazine as "the most feared and hated state institution in Iranian history".

After the Revolution, Iran did not have time to clean up because it was invaded by Saddam's military. In the midst of chaos in Persia and Mesopotamia, Israel was fishing in murky water. In 1982, Israel invaded southern Lebanon. This invasion intersected with the civil war in the Land of Cedar (where Israel was also active in supporting one of the warring parties) so that the upheaval and warfare lasted for almost two decades.

Aggression – what Israel called Operation Peace for Galilee – later proved to be a blunder. This aggression released the resistance energy that has been buried in the Lebanese Shiite community. Hezbollah – the most formidable and fierce enemy of Israel in the region today – was born as a consequence of aggression. The birth of Hezbollah is not a projection of Iranian strength or ambition to build a Shi’a caliphate, as Danny Yatom had imagined.

“Had the enemy not take this step (invasion), I do not know whether something called Hezbollah will be born,” Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said. “I doubt that.”<sup>37</sup>

Iran, which is still limping after an all-out war against Saddam, was not the main factor behind the birth of Hezbollah, although its formation has received religious approval from Khomeini. Hezbollah raw materials – ideology,

culture, and resistance energy – have existed in Lebanon for hundreds of years.

Iranian Shiites are not newcomers to Lebanon, and vice versa. The traces of Iranian and Lebanese Shiite relations can be traced to the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century when the Safavid Dynasty brought in Shiite clerics from Jabal Amil, a mountainous region in southern Lebanon. The Shiite community that lives in Jabal Amil is said to be the oldest in history after the Shiite community in Medina.

A reciprocal relationship exists. Later, some Lebanese students took religious education in Qum, Iran. They even settled there, integrated with society, and married Iranians. Some of the Lebanese students also went to Najaf, the centre of religious teaching in Iraq. Here, they interacted with Iranian scholars, especially Khomeini. After opposing the Shah's policy of giving immunity to

US soldiers in Iran in 1964, Khomeini had long settled in Najaf.

One of the scholars who could become the face of Iran-Lebanon historical interaction is Musa Sadr. He is of Lebanese blood but was born and raised in Iran. He is the cousin of Muhammad Baqr Sadr, an Iraqi cleric who shares Khomeini's views on *Wilayat al-Faqih* (the guardianship of the Islamic jurist). This concept also originated among others from the philosophical view of Baqr Sadr. That is why for Lebanese Shiites, *Wilayat al-Faqih* is not a foreign or imported concept.

In 1959, Musa Sadr came to southern Lebanon after receiving an invitation from the Shiite community to become their religious leader, replacing Abdul Husain Sharafuddin al-Musawi – another great Iraqi scholar of Lebanese blood. Faced with the marginalization of the Shiite community by the Lebanese government, Musa

Sadr established a socio-political organization in 1974: The Charity Movement (*Harakat Amal*).

In line with Baqr Sadr and Khomeini, Musa Sadr developed religious teachings that did not merely deal with science and worship. For all three of them (and many other Shi'a clerics in Lebanon, Iraq and Iran), religion is also a resistance to oppression and the enforcement of justice. This view reflects the history of Husain ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib, the grandson of the Messenger of Allah and at the same time the Third Imam of Shi'a Muslims. Husain's martyrdom became a revolutionary paradigm for Shi'ite Muslims.

Amal later became the forerunner of Hezbollah. Hezbollah figures such as Abbas al-Musawi, Muhammad Yazbek, Hussein al-Khalil, Ibrahim al-Amin al-Sayyid, and Nasrallah were Amal's cadres who later parted ways with the movement and founded Hezbollah in 1985.

The strategic partnership of Iran and Hezbollah (and even later with resistance militias in Iraq) is a consequence of social, cultural and religious relations that naturally grow and continue to develop throughout the course of history. The Israeli invasion in 1982 took these deeply rooted relations to a new level: resistance to the Israeli occupation, not only in Lebanon but also in Palestine.

The patron-client approach or the proxy sponsorship model will not be able to describe Iran's relations with Hezbollah (and also with the resistance militias in Iraq).<sup>38</sup> The proxy sponsorship model emphasizes the subordination of the proxies (usually non-state actors) to the sponsors (usually countries) who have more power, especially in matters of funds.

However, Iran and Hezbollah share ideal values based on a long history of ideological,

religious, social and cultural relations. Both also share a long-term strategic interest in facing existential threats in the form of US hegemony, Israeli aggression and terror.

That is why groups of "jihadists" funded by Arab countries are easily manipulated so they can fight with each other. These groups are only bound by short-term interests: the sponsors' funds. They will go to the direction where the funding flows.

The US is comfortable to use the proxy sponsorship model to describe Iran and Hezbollah relations because that model is perfectly coupled with the term "sponsor of terror". With such a comparison, Washington could easily blame Iran for whatever the "Iranian proxy" did in the region.

For example, in April 2019, the Trump administration included the IRGC on the list of terror organizations. This is the first time

Washington has labelled another official state institution with the label "terror organization". Sanctions were imposed on the IRGC and its high-ranking officers, including Soleimani. These include the prohibition of any country and organization in the world from dealing with the IRGC and the prohibition of traveling abroad for certain names in the IRGC chain of command.<sup>39</sup>

Washington is trying to link the IRGC with acts of terror allegedly carried out by "Iranian proxies", such as Hezbollah. They also listed terrorist acts in a number of countries suspected of involving Hezbollah. American investigative journalist, Gareth Porter, has long studied most of these allegations, such as in Argentina, Bulgaria, Washington, India and Saudi Arabia. As a result, Porter found no strong evidence linking the action to Hezbollah, and especially the IRGC.<sup>40</sup>



In a speech, Nasrallah firmly stated that Hezbollah was not an Iranian "mercenary". The relationship of this organization with Iran is based on ideological similarities and goals.

"They believe there is no such thing as an ideology. Their mistake lies in their view that these resistance groups are Iranian mercenaries. Because Iran offered money to these people (Hezbollah), these people became mercenaries. (Americans) must know these resistance fighters, along with supporters, family, community, and whoever is with them (all these people) are ideological, humanitarian, nationalists. They have a purpose. They are ready to defend that goal and are ready to sacrifice lives for that purpose," Nasrallah said.<sup>41</sup>

Nasrallah's statement above is in line with IRGC's view. Narges Bajoghli, a professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced

International Studies, once quoted an IRGC commander in his article: "What Americans do not understand is that the groups we support in the region are not our mercenaries. America thinks everything is about money. They think we can buy loyalty like they do."<sup>42</sup>

Of course, Iran's training, weapons and financial assistance to the Hezbollah cannot be underestimated. However, the autonomy of Hezbollah elites in decision making became a significant factor in maintaining the existence and even developing Hezbollah's posture from being merely an armed militia to becoming a national political player with regional influence.

As a non-state strategic partner for Iran, Hezbollah has close relations with the Quds Force. This elite IRGC unit has a special task: responsible for extraterritorial, intelligence and unconventional warfare operations.

Such a task is actually common for special forces in many countries. In the US, for example, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) has such duties, including among others "involving outsiders and helping local actors to fight against the government. The assistance includes training, organizing, recruiting, and directing operations."

43

The traces of JSOC and CIA involvement in training, funding and directing militias in a number of countries have become common knowledge. The US used most of the militias to overthrow the legitimate government. On the contrary, the Quds Force supported the militias which were born out of the consequences of aggression and occupation. The Quds Force is also involved at the request of a legitimate government, such as in Iraq and Syria.

When Soleimani replaced Ahmad Vahidi as Commander of the Quds Force in 1998, Nasrallah had led Hezbollah for six years and solidified the insurgency further. Since then, Soleimani has built closer friendships than his predecessors with Hezbollah officials, especially Nasrallah and his military commander, Imad Mughniyah.

Soleimani never awaited the arrival of Hezbollah commanders in Tehran like sponsors awaiting proxy reports. He often comes directly to Lebanon. He even tried to learn Arabic – and quickly mastered it. Some of Iran's strategic partners in Arab countries feel more familiar with Soleimani because of this language problem.

“We don't feel the atmosphere of formality, not at all,” Nasrallah said of Soleimani. “He's one of us, like a brother.”<sup>44</sup>

Soleimani did not hesitate to show love and respect for Hezbollah fighters. He treated them

like fellow countrymen: visiting the families of the martyrs and visiting their graves. In 2015, for example, he was seen reading the Qur'an alone in the graves of Hezbollah martyrs, including the tomb of Jihad Mughniyah,<sup>45</sup> the son of Imad Mughniyah whom he considered as his own child.

46

Regarding this custom, Soleimani once said, "When I see the children of martyrs, I always want to smell their perfume, and thus I become mortal."<sup>47</sup>

According to Nasrallah, Soleimani is part of the Islamic Republic of Iran system. Soleimani moves not as an individual but as a representation of a country's policies. Whenever he came to Lebanon, Nasrallah said, Soleimani had never demanded that Hezbollah serve Iran's political interests. He only asked what Iran could help in important moments, such as the 2006 Israeli

invasion – again very contrary to the “proxy sponsorship” picture.

Soleimani is also very non-protocol. Nasrallah said that when Israel invaded Lebanon in 2006, Soleimani immediately moved to Damascus from Tehran. From the Syrian capital, he said he would go to Beirut even though Hezbollah did not recommend it for security reasons. Soleimani never receded and managed to enter Dahiye, a suburb in southern Beirut.

“He could have just helped us from Damascus,” Nasrallah continued. “But, he said, “I will either live or die with you.”

Nasrallah acknowledged the Quds Force under the leadership of Soleimani helped the Hezbollah in difficult periods, especially from the late 1990s until the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon in 2000. At that time, many thought that the resistance was over. “But

Soleimani agrees with us that this is just the beginning, and Lebanon remains under threat from Israel.”

Since then, the Quds Force has played a role in improving Hezbollah's deterrence capabilities. Soleimani shuttles back and forth between Tehran and Beirut to help improve Hezbollah's weapons capability, especially rockets.

Six years later, the predictions of Soleimani and Nasrallah were proven. On 12 July 2006, Israel bombarded Lebanon. Thanks to the built-in rocket capability, Hezbollah was able to survive and even alarmed Israel, the strongest military force in the region.

After Israel stopped the invasion following a UN resolution in August 2006, Soleimani did not stop moving. He became a facilitator connecting humanitarian assistance to Lebanese citizens to

rebuild their houses razed to the ground due to Israeli air bombardments.

Soleimani himself had an interesting story about the 33-day War.<sup>48</sup>

Before the Israeli invasion, Hezbollah carried out cross-border operations and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers: Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser.<sup>49</sup> Israel made this abduction *casus belli* (a pretext for war) to attack Lebanon – a claim which was later accepted by many parties.

Soleimani has another version. He said, Israel had long has plans to attack Lebanon, especially in the south. Hezbollah and Iran have anticipated the plan, but do not know the exact time. The abduction of the two Israeli soldiers – which also killed eight and injured two others – was only a routine action by Hezbollah. Nasrallah has long promised families of prisoners in Israeli jails that Hezbollah will release them. The



abduction was aimed at getting Israeli soldiers who would then be exchanged with Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners. The kidnapping operation was called "*Amaliyah al-Wa'd al-Sadiq*" (Operation Keeping Promises).

In 2006, according to Soleimani, Israel had a strategic advantage to kill Hezbollah. US forces are scattered throughout the region. Around 150 thousand in Iraq and 30 thousand in Afghanistan. That does not include thousands of others who have long been present at a number of bases in Turkey, Qatar, Saudi and Bahrain. The deployment of US troops in the region will certainly make it difficult for Quds Force or Syrian manoeuvres to help the Hezbollah.

Soleimani also explained the purpose of the invasion. Israel wants to change the demographics in southern Lebanon, or in other words drive the Shi'ite community from there. That is why the

Hellfire missiles are aimed specifically at the enclaves of the Shi'ite community.

We certainly remember how the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, described the Israeli invasion with the phrase "birth pangs of a new Middle East". For Soleimani, this phrase shows the true purpose of the Israeli invasion: destroying Hezbollah and expelling the Shi'a community from southern Lebanon.

A number of analysis and reports supported Soleimani's explanation. A week after the war, veteran American journalist Seymour Hersh wrote that the US and Israel had discussed plans for an invasion at least two months before Hezbollah kidnapped the two Israeli soldiers.<sup>50</sup>

Conal Urquhart from The Guardian also reported that, in a closed testimony session before the Winograd Commission (a commission formed by Tel Aviv to investigate the Israeli

invasion), Prime Minister Ehud Olmert acknowledged Israel had prepared an invasion at least four months before the Hezbollah action on 12 July 2006. Urquhart – and also Israeli media Haaretz – obtained leaked copies of Olmert's testimony.<sup>51</sup>

Soleimani specifically praised Imad Mughniyah for Hezbollah's tactical victory in the 33-day war. He said, Mughniyah was a commander who was very concerned about the details of planning operations and often even supervised the direct execution of operations. Soleimani's statement shows Hezbollah is very autonomous from Iran.

“I do not know what title is appropriate to describe Imad (Mughniyah) the martyr,” Soleimani said. “I wondered if I could use the title 'general' (for Imad). But he seems to have surpassed that title.”

Some analysts stated that Hezbollah lost this war because it suffered greater casualties and material losses than Israel. But even the Winograd Commission concluded that the Israeli military failed to fulfil the objectives of the invasion.

While still in power, President George W Bush also sneered at Hezbollah's claim of "divine victory". "How can you claim victory when you will be temporarily replaced by the Lebanese army and international forces," Bush said in his speech at the White House on 14 August 2006. But in his memoir *Decision Points* (2010), Bush finally acknowledged that: Israeli military performance is less convincing; the war had reduced Israeli military credibility; Israel failed to take advantage of the opportunity to finish Hezbollah; and that Israeli air strike targets turned out to have no strategic value.

Two years after the Israeli invasion, Nasrallah fulfilled the promise. Hezbollah forced Israel to exchange five Lebanese prisoners and 200 skeletons of Palestinian and Lebanese fighters for the two bodies of the Israeli soldiers kidnapped on 12 July 2006. Among the Lebanese prisoners released in this exchange were Samir Kuntar, a Druze member of the PLO.<sup>52</sup>

Soleimani and Mughniyah's relationship is also very close. Mughniyah was killed by a car bomb in Damascus on 12 February 2008. The CIA and Mossad planned and executed this murder.<sup>53</sup> Before that date, the CIA and Mossad actually had a chance to kill Mughniyah. But, at a crucial time, Mughniyah was seen with Soleimani, who at that time was not a US target. The CIA also asked Mossad to cancel the execution.<sup>54</sup> Only on the next occasion was the execution carried out by

planting a bomb in the spare tire in the back of the SUV driven by Mughniyah.

Mughniyah's death apparently did not weaken Hezbollah's military capabilities. After 33 days of war, Hezbollah is getting better. This group has seats in the Lebanese parliament and cabinet. UN resolutions also failed to disarm Hezbollah. In fact, they now have a strong ally in the government of Lebanese President of Christian Maronite origin, Michel Aoun, a retired general who once led the Lebanese armed forces.

Hezbollah's strength and capability have also been honed in the wars in Syria and Iraq against terrorist groups sponsored by Arab countries and the US. At these battlefields, the Hezbollah alliance with Iran was increasingly solidified. They also found new strategic partners: the Lebanese army, the Syrian army, the Russian army, the Iraqi insurgency grouped in the People's

Mobilization Force (*Al-Hashad Al-Shaabi*), and the Ansarullah insurgents in Yemen.

### **Iraq (2004-2011): A Patient Listener**

IN March 2015, David Petraeus returned to Iraq after seven years serving his duties as the Commander of Multinational Forces. In Petraeus's journey as a soldier, Iraq is where his career skyrocketed. Entering Iraq as a two-star general in 2003, this New York-born soldier left the Mesopotamian country with four stars on his shoulders plus the top position of Commander of the US Central Command. Then in his civilian career, Petraeus had a chance to taste the CIA Director's chair.

In Petraeus's curriculum vitae, Iraq should be written in gold ink. Unfortunately, reality speaks differently. "It is impossible to return to Iraq without some kind of feeling of loss of

opportunity,” he said during a meeting with a number of Iraqi academics in Soleimani, Kurdistan region, Iraq.

He said, the US made a mistake in Iraq, which caused the country to be ravaged by chaos after chaos: sectarian conflict; ethnic conflict; political feuds; and Al-Qaeda and ISIS terrorism. But Petraeus always has an excuse. He blamed most of the US's mistakes on Iran, the country in Iraq's backyard.

Specifically, Petraeus recalled a figure behind the US nightmare in Iraq. He is Major General Qasem Soleimani, Commander of Iran's Quds Force.

“Yes, Hajj Qasem, our 'old friend',” he said in an interview with *The Washington Post* reporter Liz Sly. “I have some thoughts when I look at the photos, but most of them might not be suitable for publication.”<sup>55</sup>



We might be able to imagine anything bad in Petraeus's mind about Soleimani. In "Shadow Commander: Iran's Military Mastermind", we can at least know one of them. Petraeus called Soleimani "a diabolical evil human being", or "super-evil man." Likewise, Petraeus still praised Soleimani as a capable commander with qualified skills. "A decent enemy," he continued.

Nothing is more attached to Petraeus's memory except the incident in 2008, when the Green Zone – where the Embassy and the US forces were centred – was violently attacked by resistance militias. At that time, according to Petraeus, he received a message from Soleimani that was sent via Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's mobile phone.

"General Petraeus, you must know, I, Qasem Soleimani, control Iran's policies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan," Soleimani stated

in the message, as Petraeus said. For Petraeus, the message showed Soleimani's desire to meet him. He claimed to reject Soleimani's offer by answering, "Go pound sand,"<sup>56</sup> which is an expression for "Get lost!"

In *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (2013), Michael Gordon notes another message from Petraeus and Soleimani. This time it happened on the mobile phone of Hadi al-Amiri, an Iraqi politician and leader of the Badr Organization. Soleimani asked Petraeus to free Qais Khazali, the leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, one of the resistance militiamen who were detained by British troops after heavy fighting in Basra. Petraeus again refused to deal with Soleimani. He said, he was a four-star general while Soleimani was only a two-star. A demeaning excuse because

Petraeus certainly knows that Iran's highest military rank is a two star.<sup>57</sup>

The former Italian Ambassador in Baghdad, Marco Carnelos, has a different story. According to him, instead of Soleimani who was eager to meet with US commanders in Iraq, it was US officials that kept trying to convey a message to Soleimani and his colleagues.

“During more than two years in Baghdad, I was asked several times by US officials to deliver messages to Shi’ite militias and, for the most part, ask for dialogue with Iranian officials. This request was systematically rejected by the two Iranian ambassadors I contacted, both IRGC members and apparently taking orders from Soleimani,” Carnelos said.<sup>58</sup>

Since the invasion and occupation of Iraq – that in turn toppled Saddam, one of the fierce enemies of the Islamic Republic – US officials have

always blamed Iran for the chaos in Iraq. The US has accused Iran of being responsible for the deaths of hundreds of its soldiers. Most of them died from roadside bombs called "sent by Iran to Iraqi militias". Some accuse the Quds Force of having a role in triggering the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict in Iraq because Iran supports Shi'ite-dominated militias.

Very rarely do policy makers in Washington try to look more honestly at Iran's position in the Iraqi context. As a neighbour of Iraq, Iran has its own anxiety about the US invasion. The aggressive US military manoeuvres since 2001 which crushed Afghanistan (also neighbouring Iran), Iraq, and then Syria, have forced Tehran to think that they were waiting for their turn.

In his memoir, *A Time to Lead: For Duty, Honour and Country* (2007), Petraeus' senior, General Wesley Clark, recalled his two visits to the

Pentagon, the Ministry of Defence's headquarters, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. On his first visit, less than two weeks after 9/11, he wrote that a senior general at the Pentagon said to him, "We will attack Iraq, and a decision has been made." Six weeks later, Clark returned to the Pentagon and asked the general, whether plans to attack Iraq could still be considered. The general's answer really surprised Clark.

"Oh, it's worse than that! This is a memo from the Office of the Minister of Defence (Donald Rumsfeld) that explains this strategy. We will attack seven countries in five years," the general said, detailing three of them: Iraq, Syria and Iran.

59

This is the first time the US imperialist scheme has been acknowledged by a high-ranking US military officer. Clark later tried to dismiss the

memo as not a policy. He thought it was just a passing thought in the Pentagon circle.

Petraeus's colleague, General Stanley Allen McChrystal, a former JSOC commander, was able to understand Iran's position better. McChrystal said, as Iraq's neighbours, Iran wants a friendlier Baghdad, or at least not controlled by Saddam 2.0. "Maybe this (US aggression) could be considered a threatening period for Iran," McChrystal said. "Iran is worried about the US presence and the instability that followed Saddam's downfall." <sup>60</sup>

On the other hand, amid the onslaught of US sanctions, Iran hopes that Iraq will become more stable; more open. Because, Mesopotamia promised trade routes for Persia. Conversely, the Iraqi people also benefit from opening access to Iran. The increasing number of pilgrims from Iran to holy cities like Karbala and Najaf is helping the local economy. Not to mention that Iraq – which

long suffered from economic sanctions after the Gulf War I in 1990 (sanctions that only ended in 2010) – depends on imports of food and energy from Iran.<sup>61</sup>

On the political side, Iran seeks to maintain stability in Iraq. For this task, Soleimani sought to reach consensus with many parties, especially when Shi'ite factions did not get along well enough to agree on a particular issue.

Unlike many assumptions, Soleimani did not impose Iran's will. He let Iraqi leaders make decisions.

In the election of the prime minister's name after the election, for example, Soleimani only asked that the proposed name be accepted by all parties, be it political factions, religious authority held by Ayatullah Ali al-Sistani, protesters on the streets, or even the US. Soleimani was well aware that the US was able to destabilize Iraq, and

therefore it was important for the Iraqi prime minister to maintain good relations with the US.

“Major General Qasem Soleimani was very patient, and never lost control. He continued to try to reconcile Iraq, both its allies and those who opposed it and sided with the US. He usually embraced those who shouted at him to calm the situation and continue the dialogue,” said Elijah Magnier, head of the international bureau of Al Rai TV.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, Soleimani must face the reality of armed conflict in Iraq. As US occupation continued from city to city, insurgency ensued. In cities with Shi’ite-majority populations, such as Basra, Najaf and Karbala, the al-Mahdi Army (*Jaysh al-Mahdi*)<sup>63</sup> became the most active militia to attack multinational forces. In Sunni cities, the main insurgency came from the *Jamaah al-Tawhid*



*wa al-Jihad* group led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a former Afghan mujahidin from Jordan.

*Jamaah al-Tawhid* then changed its name to *Tanzhim Qaidah fi al-Bilad al-Rafidayn* – or commonly abbreviated as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – after swearing loyalty to al-Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden in 2004. In 2006, AQI gave birth to the Islamic State of Iraq, which later became the forerunner to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, or Daesh in Arabic).

Another problem arose when the al-Zarqawi militia not only attacked US forces. AQI also launched a series of terrorist acts, mainly suicide bombings. They target Shi'a mosques, Shi'a religious celebrations, and public facilities in areas with a majority Shi'a population. In a letter written to the Al-Qaeda leadership, al-Zarqawi stated that the aim of AQI was to trigger a Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian conflict in Iraq.<sup>64</sup>

In an instant, terror swept through Iraq.

At the same time, the US trained, armed and funded the Special Police Command Unit under the Iraqi Interior Ministry to deal with the AQI insurgency and affiliated Sunni militias. Most of the members of this unit – the so-called "Liwa al-Theeb" or the Wolf Brigade – are Shi'ites. The Wolf Brigade was also accused of being involved in what was called a "death squad": killing, kidnapping and torturing Sunni militants and Sunni citizens who were thought to have links to insurgency.<sup>65</sup>

A vicious cycle of sectarian violence ensued.

Violence culminated when a bomb destroyed the al-Askari Mosque, one of the Shi'ite shrines in Samarra, about 125 kilometres north of Baghdad, on 22 February 2006. No group openly claimed responsibility. But the US accused AQI as

the culprit. As a result, the heat of sectarian violence is increasingly difficult to cool down even though al-Sistani has asked his followers to hold back.<sup>66</sup>

In quelling Sunni insurgency, the US also formed a militia group called the "Sunni Awakening Movement" (*Harakat al-Sahwah al-Sunniyah*) or "Sons of Iraq" (*Abna al-Iraq*). This group contains tribal leaders, Saddam's former officials and military officers, and even extremist militants who were former members of AQI. As a result, AQI weakened because many militants who joined the "Sunni Awakening Movement" were paid by the US. Later, the "Sunni Awakening Movement" became a stepping stone for the return of Al-Qaeda in the form of ISIS.<sup>67</sup>

Sectarian violence in Iraq, especially during the 2006-2008 period, is reported to have killed tens of thousands of lives and displaced some 1.5

million. In conflicts like this, the question of who started it will not be fully answered. The fog is too thick. The causal factors are multi-layered and acted upon by the Iraqi politicians' manoeuvres that elbow each other on the basis of sectarian preferences.

For the US, the sectarian war is a reason for extending the period of troop deployment in Iraq. In fact, the Pentagon added 20 thousand more soldiers in 2007. The US argued, if their troops leave, the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict will become increasingly bloody.

In fact, before the Anglo-American invasion, there has never been an open feud between the two groups, let alone a civil war. Iraq is basically a tribal society. The largest tribes in Iraq have Sunnis and Shi'ites. Inter-marriages takes place between them.<sup>68</sup> Until early 2003, at least 20 percent of

Baghdad's population was the result of Sunni and Shi'a marriages. They are called "Sushi".<sup>69</sup>

US aggression and occupation changed all that. Investigative journalist Dahr Jamail, who has been covering Baghdad for eight months, has a story that illustrates how US policy aims at dividing Iraq based on sectarian preferences.

In the first weeks of the occupation, a US military commander came to Baquba, the capital of Diyala Province, about 40 kilometres northeast of Baghdad. Baquba is a city with a mixed Sunni-Shi'ite population. The commander requested a meeting with a number of tribal leaders and religious leaders. During the meeting, the leaders were confused when the US commander asked them to sit separately according to their religion. Sunni on one side, Shi'a on the other.

Such methods continued when Paul Bremer, head of the US Provisional Authority in Iraq,

formed the Iraqi Government Council. Consisting of 25 seats, the Council is divided into 60 percent for Shi'as; 20 percent for Sunnis; and 20 percent for Kurds who are mostly Sunni. According to Jamail, since then, Iraqi leaders and politicians have begun to think and identify themselves based on their schools of Islam and ethnicity.<sup>70</sup>

Since the beginning of the invasion, the US has actually been aware that every occupation causes resistance. To strengthen the grip of the occupation and put out the fire of resistance, the US chose the classic way: divide and rule. This method was successful in many places, especially in Latin America.

The figure behind that success is James Steele, a former army colonel. Steele listed his name as one of the counter-insurgency champions in the civil war in El Salvador (1979-1992).

There, he created a militia consisting of local anti-communist groups and foreign mercenaries. These militias were released to carry out a series of terror: arresting, torturing, and killing people who were considered affiliated with leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (abbreviated FMLN in Spanish).

In 2004, Steel was sent to Iraq as a civil contractor hired by the US as an advisor to Iraqi security forces. Steel reports directly to Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld. Every day, he works with the Commander of the Multinational Forces, General Petraeus. Petraeus himself is not new to Steel. While still a major, Petraeus visited him in El Salvador in 1986, and even lived in the Steel's house.<sup>71</sup>

Dividing the Iraqi people into sectarian and ethnic groups is a way for the US to divert attention from the occupation. Both Shi'ites and

Sunnis feel threatened by each other. Shi'ites ultimately depend on the Wolf Brigades, and Sunnis regard al-Zarqawi's terror group as their protector.

In the midst of such chaos, Soleimani has a duty in Iraq. During this period, he was rarely in Iraq, and more often made Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis his contact.<sup>72</sup> In 2006, he had to concentrate on Lebanon, helping the Hezbollah to face the Israeli invasion.

In dealing with sectarian conflicts, Soleimani seeks to establish relations with all actors in Iraq, both Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish. This is different from the views of Western media, "Soleimani is not a fanatic," Carnelos said. "He is a patient listener, facilitating dialogue with many links, qualities that the US, Israel and Arabs lack." <sup>73</sup>

He was shown to have close relations with the commanders of Kurdish-Iraqi Peshmerga



forces and even Kurdish politicians such as Talabani. Soleimani was the first to arrive with reinforcements when Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, was almost overwhelmed by ISIS in 2014.

The Iraqi People's Mobilization Force (*al-Hashad al-Shaabi*) who received Soleimani's aid and advice (and which was formed by the *fatwa* of Ayatullah al-Sistani's to confront ISIS) also does not consist solely of Shi'ites. There are 40,000 Sunnis who reinforce this force, which the Western media often called as only "Shi'a militias".<sup>74</sup>

Qais Khazali, a former Mahdi Army commander, had told US intelligence who interrogated him in 2008 that Soleimani had never been involved in the operational activities of the Iraqi militia. In his investigation, journalist Gareth Porter also found that the IEDs (improvised

explosive device) – roadside bombs – that is said to have killed many US troops in Iraq, did not come from Iran. The bomb originally came from Lebanon, but the militias later produced it themselves inside Iraq. IED technology such as EFP (Explosively Formed Penetrator) itself has been around for decades. As a result, US accusations that Iran is behind the death of US forces in Iraq are not strong enough.<sup>75</sup>

The accusation was levelled by the Bush administration in 2007. The allegation was repeated by the Trump administration in 2019, and became one of the reasons for killing Soleimani in 2020.

Regardless of whether Iran is involved in insurgency against US forces in Iraq or not, there is a false moral assumption behind the question. The philosopher Noam Chomsky explains it as follows.

“Assume that Iran is assisting an insurgency in Iraq. I mean, didn't the US helped the rebels when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan? Did we think something is wrong with that? I mean, Iraq is a country that was invaded and is under military occupation. You cannot seriously discuss whether someone else is interfering there or not. The assumption underlying this discussion is that we (the US) own this world. So, if we invade and occupy another country, then it is a criminal offense for anyone who disturbs the occupation.”<sup>76</sup>

With all the complexity of the conditions in Iraq, Soleimani was basically successful in his mission. US forces numbering more than 170 thousand finally withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011. After the withdrawal of US troops, violence in Iraq reduced dramatically. According to Iraqi Body Count website records, after the withdrawal

civilian deaths due to violence in Iraq is about 4,000 people, or down 650 percent compared to 26,000 civilian lives who died in 2007, which was when the US increased the number of troops to about 20,000 soldiers.

However, the emergence of ISIS in Iraq in 2014 became a US excuse to re-send troops. As of the end of 2019, there are still more than 5,000 US troops in Iraq.

### **Iraq and Syria (2011-2019): The Nail in the Coffin**

A Shi'a commander stops the meeting of the People's Mobilization Forces or *al-Hashad al-Shaabi* (hereinafter will be called al-Hashad) because the time of prayer comes. The congregation prayed. But a Sunni commander did not budge, not joining the ranks.

“Why don't you join?,” said the Shi'ite commander.

"I do not offer prayers," said the Sunni commander.

"What do you mean, you don't offer prayers?" asked the Shi'a commander.

"If I pray," the Sunni commander answered, "I will fight with Daesh against you." <sup>77</sup>

The story above is told by Cyrus Malik, a security consultant for a humanitarian organization working in Iraq and Syria. Cyrus wanted to illustrate that the situation in Iraq after the withdrawal of US troops was very different. Sectarian violence has subsided to its lowest. In fact, al-Hashad, which is often written by Western media as only "Shia militias", in fact has Sunni commanders and tens of thousands of Sunni fighters.

In addition to the story above, Malik wants to explain that there is another Sunni voice; different from what has been touted in

Washington and the Western media. There is a different voice than what has been delivered by Syrian rebels, extremist groups, Iraqi Sunni politicians, Saudi officials, Qatar, or the United Arab Emirates. The different voices did not shout loudly of the monster of Shi'ite revival and Sunni oppression.<sup>78</sup>

Ahead of the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, what was termed the "Shia Crescent" was indeed developing. This term refers to what is imagined as a Shiite "political revival" that stretches from Iran, Iraq, Syria, to Lebanon; forming an uninterrupted land corridor.

For the first time since the Fatimid Caliphate millennia ago, Shi'as came to power in an Arab country: Iraq. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is no longer just an armed militia but also a political force that has national and regional influence. Although not Shi'a, the government in Damascus has a special

clique with Iran and Hezbollah. Syria became a lifeline that allowed Hezbollah to keep breathing amid the strangulation of Israeli air strikes during the 2006 war.

The term "Shi'a Crescent" was first coined by King Abdullah of Jordan. The bait was immediately annexed by commentators. One of them is Vali Nasr. In 2007, the Iranian-born American scholar wrote *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*.

Nasr's main thesis is that sectarian identity will play a very significant role in defining political alliances, both at national and regional levels. In fact, Nasr further stated that sectarian identity would not only affect the behaviour of political actors but also the Middle Eastern people in general.

Not all analysts agree. Although acknowledging sectarian factors play a role, they

say political factors are more dominant. The tendency to frame the conflict and politics in the Middle East exclusively within a sectarian framework, in their opinion, only replicates the colonial political scheme of the region.

In a report, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh once revealed that Washington had plans to create a Sunni versus Shi'a feud in the region. US funds – some of which are without budget approval from Congress – flowed to extremist groups close to Al-Qaeda through Arab governments, such as the Lebanese government under Prime Minister Fouad Siniora (served 2005-2009).<sup>79</sup>

Former Vice-President Joe Biden (presidential candidate in 2020) once expressed a plan to create a "Sunni state" in Iraq in 2007, when he was still a candidate for Vice President.<sup>80</sup> Under the scheme, Iraq will be divided into three states



– or at least autonomous regions: Kurds in the north, Sunnis in the west, and Shi'ites in the south.

This plan came to the fore again as Iraqis demanded a total withdrawal of US troops following the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis on 3 January 2020. The stated goal was to protect the Sunni community from Shi'ite domination. But, its main purpose – and this is not stated explicitly – is to cut the land corridor from Iran to Syria, Lebanon, and to the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>81</sup>

In a speech during the 2007 Ashura memorial, Nasrallah implicitly stated that the rise of Shi'a to power in Iraq was not a "grand design" of the Shi'a, as implied by the discourse revolving the "Shi'a Crescent". Nasrallah actually considered the government in Baghdad as a burden to the "axis of resistance" because it is unable to

overcome sectarian conflict and is too close to the US. For Nasrallah, the victory over Israel was the real resurrection, not just for Shi'ites but for all Muslims. What happened in Iraq actually weakened "Shi'ite politics", instead of showing a Shi'ite "political revival".<sup>82</sup>

Ali al-Fayyad of the Consultative Centre for Strategic and Documentation Studies, a Hezbollah think tank, said Iran's policy and also the "axis of resistance" were actually Sunni policies in the region: resistance against Israel and the US. A polling, which was carried out by Zogby International in late 2006, for example, showed that almost 80 percent of the population in the region considered Israel and the US to be the biggest threats, while less than 6 percent cited Iran.

"At the heart of Iran's foreign policy, there are two main issues: Palestine and facing

Washington's hegemonic scheme in the region," al-Fayyad said. "These two issues are not exclusively Shia's. In fact, both are issues for the majority of Sunni Arabs. In this sense, Iran's foreign policy is Sunni's."<sup>83</sup>

But, the "Shia Crescent" had already snowballed. At the end, the snowball was claimed to have hit Sunni interests. "The rise of Shiism has marginalized and oppressed Sunnis". That is the card played by some Iraqi Sunni politicians, especially after the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki implemented a "de-Ba'ath-ization" policy or the suppression of former Saddam officials and their assets.

It is no accident that most of the ex-Ba'ath politicians are Sunni because after more than two decades in power, Saddam oppressed Shi'ites. But at that time, there was no discourse that Sunni oppressed Shi'a.

Some Sunnis also easily see al-Maliki's policies as driven by sectarian motivation. Large scale demonstrations calling for al-Maliki's resignation took place on in Anbar Province from 2012 to 2013. One of the triggers was when Baghdad tried to arrest Vice-President Tariq al-Hashimi.<sup>84</sup> The former lieutenant colonel in the Iraqi army was accused of being involved in 150 terror attacks, which killed religious pilgrims and Iraqi military commanders.<sup>85</sup>

Anbar itself was the birthplace of the "Sunni Awakening Movement", a militia group that had been funded and trained by the US. Sunni politicians who supported this movement began issuing threats. If Baghdad does not give them an important part in policy making, then they will join extremist groups to overthrow power. This was the stepping-stone for the entry of ISIS terror

groups into Iraq, especially in the western part of the country.

In mid-2014, ISIS entered Anbar, and easily controlled a number of major cities, such as Ramadi and Fallujah. The relatively smooth ISIS manoeuvre was partly due to the help of Sunni politicians who were disappointed with al-Maliki.

Former Finance Minister Rafi al-Essawi reportedly participated in holding a welcome for the terror group. Then there is the name Ali Hatem Sulaiman, a sheikh from Anbar, who previously worked as a US contractor. He and his militia even joined ISIS soldiers in attacking Iraqi army positions. There is also Khamis al-Khanjar, a businessman from Fallujah who has a political lobbying firm in Washington. Al-Khanjar blamed al-Maliki's policies as the cause of ISIS.<sup>86</sup>

ISIS continued to push north and occupy Mosul. They then swept through Sinjar, a

mountainous area inhabited by the Yazidi ethnic minority. Then horror ensued. In Sinjar, ISIS massacred thousands of Yazidi men, and turned thousands of Yazidi children and women into prisoners and slaves.<sup>87</sup>

The Sinjar massacre is just one of the horrors that came with ISIS. In Tikrit, the city where Saddam was born, ISIS and former members of Ba'ath slaughtered 1,600 unarmed Iraqi military cadets. This barbaric action was called the "Camp Speicher Slaughter". Out of the 4,000 cadets captured, ISIS sorts cadets according to their faiths. Then, they execute Shi'a cadets. The media called this the biggest one-day massacre during the "civil war" in Iraq.<sup>88</sup>

ISIS did not appear out of nowhere. It is a metamorphosis of the *Jamaah al-Tawhid* which was formed by al-Zarqawi in the late 1990s; changed its name to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) when

it took allegiance to Osama bin Laden in 2004; them renamed again to the Islamic State of Iraq; and finally officially became the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Levant (ISIS/ISIL) in 2014 after a violent split from Al-Qaeda in Syria.

Because it was spawned from al-Zarqawi's AQI, ISIS is no alien to Anbar residents. Some of the "Sunni Awakening Movement" militants are former AQI members.

Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, is also no stranger to the US. He was a US prisoner in Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca in Iraq for nearly 10 months in 2004. Some reports say that al-Baghdadi's detention lasted even longer, from 2005 to 2009. Entering as a petty criminal, al-Baghdadi was returned into an extremist preacher when he got out of a US prison. Long story short, al-Baghdadi inherited the extremist network from al-Zarqawi and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.

At the beginning, Washington did not seem too eager to fight ISIS. They argued that the war against ISIS was a sectarian conflict caused by al-Maliki's policies. If the US was directly involved in this conflict, then the US will be seen as siding with the Shi'ites against the Sunnis.<sup>89</sup>

On 18 May 2015, Judicial Watch, a conservative watchdog organization in the US, won a public information suit over the Pentagon. This victory made available a document whose content is shocking: ISIS and Al-Qaeda are seen by the Pentagon as a strategic tool of US policy on Arab states in the Gulf, and Turkey towards Iraq and Syria.<sup>90</sup>

The document dated 12 August 2012 included:



C. IF THE SITUATION UNRAVELS THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING A DECLARED OR UNDECLARED SALAFIST PRINCIPALITY IN EASTERN SYRIA (HASAKA AND DER ZOR), AND THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THE SUPPORTING POWERS TO THE OPPOSITION WANT, IN ORDER TO ISOLATE THE SYRIAN REGIME, WHICH IS CONSIDERED THE STRATEGIC DEPTH OF THE SHIA EXPANSION (IRAQ AND IRAN).

D. THE DETERIORATION OF THE SITUATION HAS DIRE CONSEQUENCES ON THE IRAQI SITUATION AND ARE AS FOLLOWS:

--1. THIS CREATES THE IDEAL ATMOSPHERE FOR AQI TO RETURN TO ITS OLD POCKETS IN MOSUL AND RAMADI, AND WILL PROVIDE A RENEWED MOMENTUM UNDER THE PRESUMPTION OF UNIFYING THE JIHAD AMONG SUNNI IRAQ AND SYRIA, AND THE REST OF THE SUNNIS IN THE ARAB WORLD AGAINST WHAT IT CONSIDERS ONE ENEMY, THE DISSENTERS. ISI COULD ALSO DECLARE AN ISLAMIC STATE THROUGH ITS UNION WITH OTHER TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA, WHICH WILL CREATE GRAVE DANGER IN REGARDS TO UNIFYING IRAQ AND THE PROTECTION OF ITS TERRITORY.

The document, which totals seven pages, shows that the US has predicted the emergence of Islamic State (IS or ISIS) since 2012. Instead of considering it a threat, the US considers ISIS as a strategic asset to isolate the Syrian government – which was called a strategic depth for Shi’a expansion (Iran and Iraq).

In fact, the US knows that the explosive situation in western Iraq which borders Syria could be an “ideal atmosphere” for the return of AQI to Mosul and Ramadi. The document also clearly shows that the US wants to trigger sectarian conflict: the return of AQI from Syria to Iraq could be a momentum that unites Sunni Iraq

and Syria – and even all Sunnis in the Arab world – against “their enemies, deniers” (meaning Shi’a).

An e-mail from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, leaked by WikiLeaks, also showed that the US knew the Saudi and Qatar governments secretly provided financial and logistical assistance to ISIS and other radical groups. Hillary sent the email to John Podesta, the manager of his campaign team, on 17 August 2014.

The context of the e-mail showed that until August 2014, the US was still reluctant to attack ISIS or assist its allies such as the Peshmerga in dealing with ISIS. At the same time, according to Hillary, the US must instead increase aid to the Free Syrian Army, a “moderate” rebel group in Syria to overthrow Bashar Assad and pressure Saudi and Qataris – who she knows funded ISIS

and other radical groups in secret – to focus on Assad, as shown in this highlighted e-mail excerpt:

regime. This entire effort should be done with a low profile, avoiding the massive traditional military operations that are at best temporary solutions. While this military/para-military operation is moving forward, we need to use our diplomatic and more traditional intelligence assets to bring pressure on the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups in the region. This effort will be enhanced by the stepped up commitment in the KRG. The Qataris and Saudis will be put in a position of balancing policy between their ongoing competition to dominate the Sunni world and the consequences of serious U.S. pressure. By the same token, the threat of similar, realistic U.S.

When the assistance that Baghdad and Erbil had hoped for from Washington did not arrive, Soleimani once again moved quickly. He coordinated the delivery of weapons and ammunition assistance.

“The US was cutting our weapons supply, so we did not have any weapons that can match ISIS weapons,” said former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. “And here I will say honestly and clearly, we were asking for Iranian rocks. And Iran will soon come and stand with us, something we will be thankful for and always remember.”<sup>91</sup>

“When we took Mosul, ISIS had many American weapons, while we were only left with aging Russian weapons. We don't have armoured vehicles, we don't have anti-tank weapons, “ said Captain Rebin, commander of the Peshmerga. “Then two Iranian soldiers came and asked how Iran could help, and I mentioned nine types of weapons and then two days later they returned with the weapons.”<sup>92</sup>

At that time, Ayatullah al-Sistani also issued a *fatwa* on *jihad* against ISIS. This *fatwa* has a role in forming al-Hashad. The al-Hashad volunteers consisted of resistance militias, most of whom had combat experience, such as Asaib Ahli al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and the Badr Organization. The Quds Force with Hezbollah then sent military advisors and trainers. This momentum made the Iraqi militias that were initially fragmented

become solid in al-Hashad and became more trained.<sup>93</sup>

“Iran was helping us in the battle against ISIS, and their assistance is fast and strong,” said Khazali, commander of Asaib Ahl al-Haq. “The person who played the most role during this battle was Hajj Qasem Soleimani.”<sup>94</sup>

In contrast to his role behind the scenes during the US occupation of Iraq (2004-2011), Soleimani this time appeared directly in a number of battlefields. He did not even hesitate to take pictures with Iraqi and Kurdish fighters. “At first we did not want to take photos of Hajj Qasem, but as soon as we did, he was okay,” said Peshmerga senior commander Muhammad Mahmoud.<sup>95</sup>

A number of media reports recorded the moment of Soleimani's presence on the battlefield, including defending the city of Amirli; in liberating the city of Jurf al-Sakhar; in freeing a

number of villages in Diyala Province; in liberating Tikrit; and in freeing Fallujah.

One by one, the territories of Iraq occupied by ISIS was re-taken, mostly due to the role of al-Hashad, a volunteer force trained by the Quds Force and Hezbollah. Baghdad and even Sunni politicians like Khamis al-Khanjar recognize al-Hashad's role.<sup>96</sup> The Iraqi government and parliament then adopted al-Hashad as part of the Iraqi military.<sup>97</sup> On 10 December, 2017, Baghdad also officially declared victory over ISIS.

The victory over ISIS increased the prestige of Soleimani and Iran in Iraq. Prime Minister Haidar Al-Abadi praised Iran at the 2015 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. According to al-Abadi, Iran was eager to help Iraq to eliminate ISIS while the US was still reluctant. In particular, al-Abadi even raised the name Soleimani as a person who could be relied upon

against ISIS. "We respect him and the government he represents," said al-Abadi.<sup>98</sup>

The militias trained and supported by the Quds Force are now increasingly integrated into the country's security institutions after al-Hashad officially became part of the country's military. Some of its leaders even entered politics. There have been several demonstrations against Iran's influence in Iraq. But, the success of Soleimani has made Iran a security partner that Baghdad cannot ignore.

After ISIS was defeated, voices now emerged from the US and Western media which harboured anxiety towards al-Hashad. Washington has included several resistance groups in al-Hashad's body on their "black list of terror organizations". On 29 December 2019, the US even attacked the headquarters of Kataib Hezbollah, one of al-Hashad's elements in al-Qaim

near the Iraq-Syria border.<sup>99</sup> Large demonstrations which surrounded the US Embassy in the Green Zone, Baghdad, were a reaction to this attack.

The climax, on 3 January 2020, a US drone attack killed al-Hashad Deputy Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis who was with Soleimani near Baghdad Airport. This was the first time the US has attacked Iraqi and Iranian officials on Iraqi soil. This action then triggered the parliament to issue a resolution asking US troops – and other foreign troops – to leave Iraqi territory.

On the eve of the liberation of Tikrit and Fallujah, there were voices from the West that questioned whether al-Hashad should liberate the Sunni-dominated cities. It is as if al-Hashad is a collection of bloodthirsty vampires who will devour every Sunni in these cities after driving out ISIS. In fact, many Sunni fighters fought with al-Hashad, such as Yazan al-Jiburi, Wanas Hussein,



and Omayya Jabara (the first woman to be martyred in the war against ISIS in Iraq). The fact also shows that the Sunni population in general is treated well despite a number of unexpected incidents that occur, such as extrajudicial killings and the destruction of houses due to misidentification – something that typically occurs in counterinsurgency situations.<sup>100</sup>

\*\*\*

IN SYRIA, Qasem Soleimani faced a different reality from Iraq. In Iraq, the US is shy about fighting ISIS and continues to support the government in Baghdad. In Syria, the US has instead deployed training and weapons assistance to anti-Damascus rebel groups that are claimed to be "moderate", such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Later the FSA could not separate themselves from the Al-Qaeda terrorist group and its affiliates and even fought together.<sup>101</sup>

So, it is not surprising that the weapons that the US bought and sent – with the support of Arab countries and Turkey – for the FSA fell into Al-Qaeda's hands. In a certain period, before ISIS separated from Al-Qaeda and they even killed each other, US weapons flowed into ISIS's armoury.<sup>102</sup>

Sharmine Narwani, a Middle East journalist and analyst, writes in a report<sup>103</sup> that the Military Operation Centre (MOC) is not unaware of the rebel cooperation it supports with Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda franchise that has been designated by the United Nations as a terror organization. MOC itself is the headquarters of joint operations of the US, Arab countries and Israel located in Amman, Jordan. It is this MOC who controlled, trained, armed and even hired anti-Damascus rebels.

Israel itself has an interest in the war in Syria. One of them is to use rebels and anti-Damascus terror groups to create a buffer zone for Israel inside of Syria. In certain periods, Israel even assisted rebel and terrorist movements in dealing with the Syrian military and its allies (Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, and resistance militias), especially in battles near the Golan Heights. Israel even provided salaries and gasoline and treated wounded militants in their hospital.

The US program to send weapons (mostly made in Eastern European countries) for rebel groups in Syria is called "Timber Sycamore". The program was managed secretly by the CIA with Saudi assistance and was launched in late 2012. Timber Sycamore was exposed when a federal government auction site (Federal Business Opportunities) posted a contract bid for shipping

tons of weapons and ammunition from Eastern Europe to Tasucu, Turkey and Aqaba, Jordan.<sup>104</sup>

The initiator of this program is none other than David Petraeus, who in 2012 served as Director of the CIA. President Barack Obama initially rejected Petraeus's proposal. But, thanks to the insistence and lobby of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and King Abdullah of Jordan, Obama finally approved the Timber Sycamore.<sup>105</sup>

Compared to Iraq, Soleimani faced a much stronger enemy in Syria: a deadly combination of anti-Damascus rebels, terror groups (ISIS and Al-Qaeda), the US, Western countries (mainly France and Britain), Arab countries, and Turkey. Soleimani and Nasrallah had to mobilize other resources.

They invited Iraqi militias, such as Hezbollah Kataib, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Hezbollah al-Nujaba. Then, Afghan and Pakistani militias also joined.

They formed the Liwa 'al-Fatimiyyun (Afghanistan) and Liwa' al-Zaynabiyyun (Pakistan). Syrian volunteers have also mobilized themselves in militias, such as the National Defence Forces (NDF or in Arabic Quwat al-Difa 'al-Wathaniy), Quwat al-Imam al-Ridha, Liwa' al-Sayyida Ruqayya, and Liwa 'al-Baqir.

The war in Syria had costs the lives of a number of Quds Force officers and Hezbollah commanders. The names that can be mentioned include: Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani (Quds Force); Brigadier General Hassan Shateri (Quds Force); Mustafa Badreddine (Hezbollah); and Mohammad Issa (Hezbollah). Correspondents say about 1,600 to 2,000 Hezbollah soldiers and about 190 Quds Force soldiers were killed in Syria.

For Iran and the Hezbollah, the Assad government is vital to provide logistics, not only to Lebanon but also to Palestine. Moreover,

Damascus is the only Arab country that openly opposes Israel. Damascus has also long hosted the headquarters of Palestinian resistance groups.

Iran and Hezbollah also believe the enemies of the "axis of resistance" created a crisis in Syria to avenge failure in the 33-day war in Lebanon. In other words, the US and its allies piggybacked the issue of democratization, which at that time was sweeping a portion of the Middle East in what was called the "Arab Spring". Because the US and its allies could not wage a direct war on Iran and failed to destroy Hezbollah in 2006, the only option left was to overthrow Assad.

Thus, the fall of Damascus became an existential threat to Tehran and the Hezbollah. There is a saying that if Tehran is unable to defend Damascus, then it will never be safe. Therefore, this is a war that must be won. It is unavoidable.

That conclusion did not come from the first day of war in Syria in mid-March 2011. In the beginning, Iran only sent military advisers to Damascus because they still believed in the ability of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in dealing with the situation. But because the rebel group received overwhelming support from the US and its allies – and later that support even secretly flowed into Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups – and various defections that occurred in the SAA command chain, nearly 70 percent of Syria fell into the hands of Assad's enemies in the first year of the war.

At this point, Khamenei made an important decision. "No, that can't happen. We have to do our job. If we do our job, Assad and Syria will be stable," said a statement believed to be given by Khamenei to Nasrallah and a number of IRGC officers, including Soleimani.<sup>107</sup>

In mid-2012 Soleimani also designed a unique mix of militias and regular troops. He then made Damascus a command centre. There, he gathered all the militia commanders and SAA generals.

In May 2013, the SAA, NDF and Hezbollah launched an operation to liberate Qusayr, a mountain town bordering Lebanon. This city is strategically very important for Jabhat al-Nusra because it is a logistical route to Homs, the larger city they control. For Syria, Qusayr's liberation would make it easier for them to take over Homs. For Hezbollah, Qusayr's liberation was very important to ensure the war did not spill over into Lebanon.

In just two weeks, SAA and Hezbollah were able to free Qusayr. This was the first victory of pro-Damascus troops.



Some reports, as written by Dexter Filkins in *The New Yorker*, mentioned Soleimani as directly involved in the takeover of Qusayr. However, there are no reports that confirmed Soleimani was at the location before the operation – a habit he had during the fighting in Syria. Most reports said the operation was led directly by a Hezbollah commander who is also Imad Mughniyah's brother-in-law, Mustafa Badreddine.<sup>108</sup>

This shows that the Iranian partner militias are not totally dependent on the Quds Force commander. However, many parties acknowledge that Soleimani's presence at the battlefield had a significant impact on the militancy and morale of the troops.

Despite the success in Qusayr (and afterwards Qalamoun), the pro-Damascus forces were not fully supported by air power, so the forward progress was not as smooth as expected.

The capacity of the Syrian air force is very limited while Iran is unlikely to step into this phase because it will trigger a war on a larger scale given the strong reactions that will come from the US and Israel. The only choice is to ask Russia.

In mid-2015, Soleimani visited Moscow to ask Russia to get involved. Another story says, Khamenei first sent senior Iranian security advisers to the Kremlin to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin. During the meeting, Putin asked Iran to send Soleimani with a comprehensive plan. When meeting with Putin, Soleimani was told to open a map of Syria, show the current war situation, and detail the scheme that could turn Assad's defeat at a number of battle sites into a victory.<sup>109</sup>

Putin then agreed. History was made. This is the first time Russia has been involved in conflicts

outside its territorial borders since the Cold War ended with the Soviet collapse.

Russia actually supported Assad at the beginning of the crisis. But the support is only limited to political, especially by using veto power in the UN Security Council.

So why did Moscow decided to be involved directly?

The closeness of Russia and Syria has existed since the superpower was still called the Soviet Union. Damascus was the only Soviet ally during the Cold War. In 1971, President Hafiz Assad also allowed the Soviets to build a naval base in Tartus, a port city as well as a famous tourist site in Syria.

Since then, Syrian military officers have undergone military education in Russia. It is this inter-military relationship that continues even though the regimes come and go with the political upheavals that occur. Until the Syrian crisis,

Damascus remained Moscow's closest ally in the Middle East – where Russia has the only military base in the region.

In addition, Moscow sees its involvement in Syria as a chance to return to the political stage in a region that has been dominated by the US. Since the failure of the invasion of Afghanistan in 1989, Moscow has practically lost its role and influence in the Middle East.<sup>110</sup>

The pro-Damascus forces were even more strengthened with Russian air support. Soleimani and his troops on land moved faster to liberate village after village; city after city; from the hands of rebels and terrorists who have joined forces. One of the keys to the success of Syria and its allies is the battle to liberate Aleppo, Syria's largest province which is vital because it is a logistical and weapons supply route from Turkey to the bases of anti-Damascus forces.

In October 2015, Soleimani reportedly arrived at Bassel Assad Airport in Lattakia, the port city of Syria. He immediately moved towards Slunfeh, the Quds Force headquarters in Lattakia to draw up a plan to liberate Aleppo. This operation involved large resources from Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani militias in addition to the Quds Force itself, the SAA, NDF and Hezbollah with Russian air support.<sup>111</sup>

So vital and fierce was the battle, the battle of Aleppo came to be called "The battle of all battles" or " Syria's Stalingrad". After more than a year of siege to Aleppo – especially the eastern part of the city – pro-Damascus forces finally liberated Aleppo on 22 December 2016. Russian air support and militia mobilized by Soleimani became crucial even though SAA commanders, such as Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan

(Commander of Tiger Special Forces), also played a direct role in operating the field.

Like a domino effect, the victory in Aleppo led to more victories in a number of areas. By early 2020, the Syrian military and affiliates had freed more than 70 percent of the country's territory. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – which is dominated by YPG Kurdish militias – controlled 20 percent while the remaining 10 percent was still occupied by the al-Nusra group which was then renamed *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) in Idlib.

At the end of 2019, the SAA continued to conduct an offensive to free Idlib, the last small enclave of terrorist groups. Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani militias concentrate more on the Syrian-Iraqi border while the Quds Force and Hezbollah take positions near the Golan Heights. This position was targeted several times by Israeli air

strikes. In later years, Soleimani himself had focused more on Iraq.<sup>112</sup>

It is important to briefly mention here how the war in Syria was sold to the media as a sectarian war between Shi'ites versus Sunnis. Rebels, terror groups, the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have described the Assad government as a "Shi'a ruler" who suppressed the "Sunni majority" in Syria.<sup>113</sup>

Assad's own political dynasty actually presented themselves as secular rulers even though they came from the Alawites, a sect touted as a "Shia splinter". Al-Qaeda and ISIS propaganda often refer to Alawites only as a "*Shia Nushayriyah*" sect.<sup>114</sup> Some analysts also believe that the power of Assad is in the Alawi minority which dominates the centres of power.

The Alawi sect authority refuses to be called part of the Shi'a.<sup>115</sup> Peter Theo Curtis, an American

journalist who has long covered Syria, wrote that since the 1970s, the Alawi looks more Sunni than Shi'a.<sup>116</sup>

Apart from the religious problems of the Alawi sect, the Sunnis actually dominate almost all levels in the Assad government and the majority of the Syrian army (SAA) is also Sunni.<sup>117</sup> In his book, *La Syrie de Bashar al-Assad: Anatomie d'un régime autoritaire* (Bashar Assad's Syria: Anatomy of an Authoritarian Regime), Parisian political scientist, Souhail Belhadj, wrote that Sunni citizens in Syria not only have political power, but also social power, more opportunities, and more choices compared to Sunnis in Arab countries led by Sunni rulers.<sup>118</sup>

According to Cyrus Malik, the main mistake of the "Sunni oppression" in Syria narrative is the mainstreaming of the Sunni identity, which has been perpetuated by the most extreme groups in



the Sunni world: Al-Qaeda and ISIS. It is as if there were no other Sunnis outside these two groups. It is as if they best represent the majority of Sunnis, especially in Syria.<sup>119</sup>

For this reason, according to Malik, rebels and terror groups failed to topple Assad. They are not strongly connected with the majority of Sunnis in the areas they control. They depend on foreign support, especially from Arab countries.

It is this dependence that makes them able to operate independently without regard to the security and welfare of local residents. They are not reluctant to launch terror and destruction against the Sunni community in these areas. They even killed Sheikh Muhammad Said Ramadhan al-Buthiy, a prominent Sunni cleric in Syria who was nicknamed "*Shaykh of Sham*".<sup>120</sup>

Instead, Assad enjoys strong support from the Sunni community. Malik pointed out that

Sunni officials dominate the security institutions in the Assad government. They also take root in Sunni areas that were once controlled by terrorists, such as Dayr al-Zur, Dar'a, al-Hasakah, Aleppo, and Raqqa. Sunni officials include: Director of the National Security Bureau Ali Mamluk; Chief of the Directorate of Political Security Muhammad Khalid Rahman; and Chief Director of Public Security Muhammad Dib Zaytun. NDF commanders in Dar'a, Quneitra, Raqqa and Aleppo are also Sunni.<sup>121</sup>

In December 2016, Soleimani appeared in the Citadel of Aleppo, a medieval castle that became the city's landmark.<sup>122</sup> It was reportedly the day of Aleppo's liberation which was a significant victory of the Syrian military and its partners.

The victory also marked the "new birth" of what is now called the "axis of resistance".

"Practically, it was he who created the axis of resistance," said Hajj Sadiq, a Hezbollah field commander who accompanied Soleimani around the battlefield.<sup>123</sup>

According to Sadiq, Soleimani was a very precise commander who designed the operation and was calm in executing it. "I believe leadership, management and military theories must be reviewed by considering the role, behaviour and impact of this person (Soleimani)."

One of the biggest impacts of Soleimani was his presence on the battlefield. Sadiq said, that habit increased the morale of fighters. When visiting the fighters, according to him, Soleimani asked questions about their daily lives rather than fighting, such as how they slept, ate and drank, communicated with their families, and their spiritual condition. This method makes them feel an inseparable part of this resistance.

Soleimani is also very concerned about the condition of civilians even though they support his enemies. He wanted to make sure that they are not hurt or injured.

There is one story in the battle for the liberation of Al-Bukamal, Syria, from the clutches of ISIS (the city was liberated in November 2017). Soleimani wrote a letter which he left to the owner of the empty house which he occupied during the battle.<sup>124</sup>

In the letter, he apologized to the landlord for trespassing and living in it. Not only apologizing, he even included his telephone number in the letter. He asked the owner of the house to call that number if there is damage or lost items. He is ready to compensate.

At the end of the letter, he wrote that the owner of the house seemed to be a Sunni citizen while he was Shi'a. He stated, both Sunni and Shi'a

were followers of the Prophet Muhammad, and therefore they were brothers in Islam.

Christians in Syria recognize the services of Soleimani in saving their cities from the control of the ISIS terror group and Jabhat Nusrah. In Aleppo, the Presbyterian Church held a special mass to honour Soleimani after the general was assassinated by the US. Reverend Ibrahim Nasir said the resistance of Soleimani and his allies was no different from the resistance that Jesus held in the face of a power that wanted to oppress others.

“Blessed are you, if because of me, you are reproached and persecuted and you are slandered with everything that is evil,” said Reverend Ibrahim of Soleimani while quoting Matthew 5:11.

*What Qasem Soleimani is doing and those standing with him, is to defy ISIS and all terrorist organizations who want to kill anyone who disagrees with them.*<sup>125</sup>

In a photograph, Soleimani is seen posing with Simon al-Wakil, the NDF commander in Muhradah, a Christian-majority city north of Hama. The city is defended by NDF – a Syrian militia assisted and trained by Soleimani – after being surrounded and completely attacked by Jaysh al-Izzah – a terror group affiliated with Jabhat Nusra throughout 2017.

Soleimani is also known by his soldiers as to never ask for strict security procedures for him. He never hesitated to ride a truck, an old car, or a cargo plane. He even continued to use his mobile phone freely. He believed when the decision to kill

him came, that was what he hoped for and that he had been waiting for all his life.<sup>126</sup>

“His presence is irreplaceable,” continued Sadiq, recalling the Commander who died on Friday morning, 3 January 2020, after the US drone destroyed his car and scorched his body.

*Killing him this way, and with his friends, is an important point in our resistance. Hajj Qasem succeeded in destroying the prestige and power of the giant American in our region. He opened the way for us to get rid of and expel them. Without a doubt, I say that he is the biggest nail in the American coffin in our region.*

### **Palestine: The Martyr of al-Quds**

MILLIONS of people thronged the streets of Tehran on Monday morning, 6 January 2020. They ushered the body of Major General Qasem

Soleimani to his funeral in his hometown, Kerman. In Tehran, Iran's Supreme Spiritual Leader, Ayatullah Ali Khamenei led the prayer for his body. Tears were unbearable; trickling both his cheeks.

After the prayer, on the main stage, a woman stood up, made a speech, and looked emotional. She was the general's daughter, Zaynab Soleimani. After chanting a warning to Donald Trump, his father's killer, Zaynab said in Arabic (amid all his Farsi-speaking speeches), "My father's blood will pave the way for us to pray in al-Quds (Jerusalem)."

Then, there appeared Ismail Haniyah, Head of the Hamas Political Bureau (the top leader of the resistance group). "I say on this occasion, the martyred Commander Soleimani has lived his life supporting the resistance in Palestine, and in fact he is a martyr of al-Quds," Haniyah said repeating his last phrase three times.<sup>127</sup>



Iran's relations with Palestinian resistance groups, especially Hamas, have never been openly acknowledged, especially in an open event before millions of pairs of eyes. Hamas elites often speak diplomatically when asked about Iran's role in the struggle of the Palestinian people. They may try to protect the feelings of "Sunni" countries that have traditionally helped them, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Turkey. Moreover, propaganda and the "Shia versus Sunni" campaign are like desert storms that continue to sweep the region. However, Soleimani's death – and the presence of Haniyah on the memorial – seemed to destroy this sectarian divide.

Iranian researcher from SOAS University of London, Elaheh Rostami-Povey, wrote that Israeli aggression against Lebanon in 2006 and Israeli aggression over the Gaza Strip, Palestine, in 2009 brought Hamas and other Palestinian resistance

groups (such as *Jihad Islam*) closer to Iran.<sup>128</sup> In his book, *Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in its Region*, Elaheh tried to explain how Palestinian activists and academics perceive the role of Iran. The results show the majority view the role of Iran positively.

“Iran might have its own agenda in the Middle East but I prefer the role of Iran over the US. For me, the real enemy is the Zionists (Israel) not Iran. In this context, I support Iran and Hamas. We suffer from the occupation, and Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah are able to stand up against the Zionists,” said Tania, a Palestinian activist.

“The divisions in Palestinian internal politics are because the US and Israel made the Palestinian Authority passive before the occupation. In this context, Palestinians see Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and Syria as on their side, despite the differences between Sunni and Shi’a.

People may wonder what the Iran agenda is. But as long as that agenda opposes Israel, that's enough for us," said Islah Jad, an academic from Birzeit University in Ramallah, West Bank.

The role of Iran in the Palestinian struggle can be traced long before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Mostafa Chamran, the Islamic Republic's first defence minister, for example, was listed as one of the first people to train guerrilla warfare to the Palestine Liberation Organization camp or PLO in 1970. Chamran, a dropout physicist from the University of California, was known as the father of Muslim guerrillas. He was involved in the establishment of a number of resistance movements in the Middle East. In the region, he is often juxtaposed with the revolutionary Marxist Latin American, Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

After the Revolution, that role was even greater. Revolutionary Leader Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini immediately severed Iran's diplomatic relations with Israel, calling it the world's cancer. The Israeli Embassy in Tehran was closed and handed over to the PLO representative for office.

The senior Hamas official, Mahmoud al-Zahar, said, to the best of his knowledge, Iran and Hamas relations began in 1991 when some Hamas leaders were exiled to Marj al-Zohour (in southern Lebanon). At that time, the Iranian envoy came to Hamas and listened to what the group needed in Lebanon. According to al-Zahar, thanks to Iran's help, the Hamas leadership was able to return to Palestine a year later. "From that time until now, they (the Iranians) have always been there (for Hamas)," al-Zahar said in an interview with Almayadeen TV.<sup>129</sup>

That relationship improved in 2006 when Hamas won the election in Palestine. The victory made the US and Israel upset. Washington then isolated Hamas and stopped financial aid to Gaza while Israel has completely blocked the tiny area up. Since then, Iranian aid has increased, militarily, politically, and economically. A Hamas official in Bayt Lahiya, a district in northern Gaza, once said that Iran contributed a third of the Hamas government budget in Gaza. Al-Zahar confirmed this.

“When Hamas came to power in 2006 after the general election, as foreign minister at the time, I visited Iran and met with all parties and officials there. So our relationship is deeper and their support is increasing ... because they support the (Hamas) government.”<sup>130</sup>

According to al-Zahar, Iran and Hamas relations were built on the basis of a common

vision and long-term strategy: ending Israeli occupation and establishing a Palestinian state on all Palestinian land. Elaheh also saw a difference between Iran's support and the support of Arab countries, such as Saudi, Qatar, and Kuwait. The latter's support was motivated more by the strategic interests of stemming Iran's influence in Palestine than by its anti-American and anti-Israel vision.<sup>131</sup>

The war in Syria tested the solidity of relations between Iran and Hamas. Although not involved in the war, some Hamas elites openly condemned Bashar Assad,<sup>132</sup> even though since 1999 Damascus was the host of the Hamas Political Bureau office (then led by Khaled Meshaal).

Since then, Iran's relations with Hamas's political leadership have reportedly cooled. However, a number of reports reveal that Iran

maintained communications with the Hamas military wing, the Izzuddin al-Qassam brigade. When the war raged in Syria, al-Qassam Commander, Mohammed Deif,<sup>133</sup> even sent a letter to the Hezbollah leader, Hasan Nasrallah: conveying his condolences over the death of the Hezbollah army in Quneitra, Syria.<sup>134</sup>

In 2017, when the war in Syria entered its final phases with a series of victory for pro-Damascus forces in a number of battlefields, relations between Iran and Hamas began to warm again. One factor was the replacement of Hamas's political leadership in May 2017. Haniyah replaced Meshaal as head of the Political Bureau while Yahya Sinwar took over Haniyah's role as government leader in Gaza. Sinwar is a former al-Qassam commander who has spent the past 20 years in Israeli jails.<sup>135</sup> After a shake-up of Hamas' political leadership, Soleimani sent his

congratulations to Haniyah and Sinwar. Specifically, the Quds Force Commander called Hamas by the phrase "our best friend in the axis of resistance".<sup>136</sup>

"With the recent change of leadership in Hamas, those within the movement who are calling for improved relations with Iran from gained new hope. The road is now increasingly paved for the return of full support, both financial and military support. The Saudi summit, attended by US President Donald Trump on 21 May which placed Hamas as a terrorist group, may make those who are still hesitant to finally accept an approach with Iran," said Walid al-Moudallal, professor of political science at Gaza Islamic University.<sup>137</sup>

Walid added, in the region, there are now two axes: the pro-US axis which includes the Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan and the anti-US axis



which includes Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas (as well as several other resistance factions such as Jihad Islam). In fact, Walid said, if the Hamas leadership in Qatar was forced to leave following pressure on Doha in a diplomatic crisis with the Saudis and their allies, then there was no other choice for Hamas except going to Tehran.

Al-Zahar said there were parties who deliberately created sectarian issues to plant the seeds of division between Iran and the resistance factions in Palestine. They also say that Iran has a "Shiite" agenda in Palestine or dragging al-Qassam into its regional political interests. Al-Zahar ensured that Iran never once asked Hamas to do anything outside the interests of the Palestinian struggle.

"I swear by Almighty Allah, Iran's support for Palestinian goals is unconditional," al-Zahar said. "This murder (of Soleimani) is the greatest proof

of Iran's sincerity. If Iran is part of a hypocritical group, and if Iran does not suppress Western-Israeli interests, then there will be no killing. This murder was carried out because there were practical steps taken by the Quds Force and by Iran to support the resistance project (in Palestine).”<sup>138</sup>

Al-Zahar claimed he had met with Soleimani on a number of occasions. He described the commander as someone who knew the details. Ahmed Abdel-Hadi, Hamas's representative in Lebanon, even said Soleimani had entered Gaza more than once. In fact, Abdel-Hadi said, Soleimani and Imad Mughniyah were two figures who had the idea of building an underground tunnel in Gaza to bypass the Israeli blockade.

“There are more than 360 kilometres of underground tunnels and you know the idea of this tunnel came from two people: the martyred

Commander Imad Mughniyah and martyred Hajj Qasem Soleimani.”<sup>139</sup>

Al-Zahar could not confirm whether Soleimani had entered Gaza or not. As far as he knows, Soleimani has never come to the tightly blockaded territory of Israel. "It's very difficult to enter Gaza," he said. "But, I do not know everything. A number of security and military issues are sometimes highly classified, and only one or two people know about it."

After more than two decades of leading the Quds Force, the soldier from the Kerman mountains have brought Iran and its strategic partner resistance groups closer to Israel's foremost defence base. Ground corridors are now stretching for them from Iraq to the Golan Heights (Syria) which is only a stone's throw away to Israel. In southern Lebanon, Israel's northern front, Hezbollah surged into areas that were once

annexed by Israel and forced one of the strongest militaries in the region to retreat in 2000. Hamas has since 2006 controlled the Gaza Strip, a region that borders the Mediterranean Sea and is on Israel's southern front.

Soleimani achieved all this thanks to his ability to exploit the actions of his enemies: Israeli aggression against Lebanon; US invasion of Iraq; and US-Israeli intervention in an attempt to overthrow the Assad government in Syria. All of this was achieved as a logical consequence of responding to existential threats: aggression and terror, and not driven by the projected ambitions of Iranian domination, as Washington and his friends want to portray.

“They have built a land route from Tehran to the Mediterranean coast in Syria through Iraq,” said Danny Yatom, Israeli military advisor. “They have surrounded Israel.”<sup>140</sup> []



### **PART III: THE PARADOX OF QASEM SOLEIMANI**

This section will trace several key words into Qasem Soleimani's worldview: what we call reality must be stratified. The lowest is the material that we normally think of as the only reality.

To reach the level above it, man must fight to escape from the previous level. The war is against himself, the self which always maintains its existence at one level, because it thinks that it is his eternal home. This is the greatest war that goes on and on and knows no space and time.

The end of the war is death, a departure leaving one level to move on to the next level. Death here is not merely biological, but mainly spiritual and existential.

There are people who only die biologically but are unable to die spiritually. They are those who choose to die with love and longing for *shahadah* (the testimony). In contrast to mere biological death, *shahadah* actually means eternal life, witnessing an endless journey to higher, more perfect, and more beautiful levels of reality.

### **Testimony of Love of a Sufi Wayfarer**

Qasem Soleimani is not an ordinary figure, like most wartime generals. He could never be understood like most military commanders. He does not think, act, and aspire like most of them.

He is a spiritual wayfarer in military uniform. He is a lover of Allah who happens to have to work on the battlefield, from a young age to the end of his life.

If there was no 1979 Revolution, no eight-year Iraq-Iran War, no US invasion of Iraq, and ISIS incursions throughout Syria and Iraq, then

perhaps his life story would not be much different from the stories of Sufis like Al-Junayd, Hafiz Shirazi, Ibn Arabi, or Qunawi. In fact, seeing how much he likes to quote poetry, he might be better known as a love poet like Rumi.

Since the beginning of his career in the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), Soleimani has shown mystical aspirations that are so prominent. In his book *Qasem Soleimani: Dzikrayat wa Khawathir*, author Ali Akbar Mizdabadi recorded various Soleimani statements, stories, lectures, poetical quotes, and memories that were full of spirituality.

This war commander often behaves like great spiritual masters and said words of great wisdom. Often he delivered speeches containing references to mysticism and high spiritualism. In addition, his daily behaviour is full of humility,



self-preservation, low-key, and always observing strict rituals.

For many people, Soleimani is perhaps a strange person. How could a war commander who at any time think of ways to defeat and kill enemies, devise military strategies, weigh tactics, prepare logistics, launch attacks and propaganda, and so on can have a mystical atmosphere that is generally portrayed as peaceful, quiet, far from the noise of the world, solitary, beautiful, and without lust and anger? How can there be a personality like this?

The answer is yes, and there must be. The reason is that every man, whoever he is, likes it or not, conscious or not, is always involved in a war with himself.

This war is not just any war, but this is the biggest and longest war. Because, it goes on continuously, in every place where men are.

And this war was not only a war in the technical military sense that was learned and experienced by commanders and soldiers, but a universal war. Progress on this battlefield will enable man to advance on other fields.

In that great war within, Soleimani became a true commander and soldier. He certainly had listened a lot to the thoughts of Imam Khomeini, his leadership and role model, that the outcome of this war would not only determine the fate of men in the world. But even worse, this war will determine the fate of men in the next phases of life.

This unending war rages within the human soul. Unlike other warfare, avoiding it will not bring peace and security but will instead lead to failure and defeat.

But could this kind of battle really be true? Real pain and suffering? Are there victims and

losses? Are there soldiers who defeat and hurt others? How did all this happen? What is the explanation?

Here we enter a far more important theme, which is what reality is. This is the most basic question that distinguishes between classes of people: those who believe in the existence of levels of reality and those who only believe in one level of concrete reality, namely this tangible reality.

Soleimani is among those who believe in other levels of reality, which are far stronger, real, more valuable, and more important, than the physical realities. These realities are like a spectrum.

This section does not aim to explain the complex spectrum of reality. Nor is it structured to explain how to penetrate each level. But it is

impossible for people to understand Soleimani without understanding the basics of his beliefs.

Without looking at the context of his worldview, thoughts, character and personality, one cannot understand his character. In fact, maybe people will be hostile to him, like most Western politicians and media who describe him as a "vicious, mysterious, and cunning terrorist".

In Soleimani's beliefs, as he often expressed in his speeches and interviews, this reality has many levels and sides. Each level is full of traps and battles. Properly trained people are able to relate to various levels and higher sides of reality and see what is happening at lower levels accurately and completely.

For example, in a lengthy interview on Almayadeen television in October 2019, Soleimani mentioned how Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was able to discover the secrets

behind the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006, without anyone giving him prior information. Then, he declared Hezbollah's great victory in that unequal war.

But how could Khamenei have dreamt of something like that? Theoretically, that insight occurred because he was able to ascend to a higher level and see the level beneath. At this higher level, time will slow down due to slower motion and wider space.

At a higher level, no matter how long it takes, people will be able to see what is beneath them more fully and more freely. How long a person is able to be at a higher level than the physical realm while life is still contained in the body, depends on his spiritual ability and Divine gifts.

As is usual with the *urafa*, Soleimani believes that the 'reality' of the sensory world that

surrounds us and what we consider to be 'reality' is just a shell – if not a cage – that we build ourselves. As in Rumi's poem,

*Oh my friend,  
All you see of me  
Is just a shell,  
And the rest belongs to Love.*

Through the five senses, we perceive things, distinguish one thing from another, arrange it according to our reasoning, then we solidify everything around us and ultimately believe that this solid framework, this shell, is the 'reality'. We become comfortable in it and never want to leave it. In fact, slowly we treat it as the only home.

In fact, it is not the reality in the real sense. It is not a truly essential form. In the realm in which we live, form in its metaphysical nature

cannot be perceived, just as physical reality cannot be perceived by people who are sleeping and dreaming.

We can only capture the ultimate form after we wake up, to leave this shell. Rumi recited,

*The soul resembles a clear mirror, the body is dust upon it;*

*Our beauty is invisible, since we are stuck under the dust.*

As long as we are inside this body, we will not see anything; we die even if we feel alive. The nature where this body dwells is a container for the growth of the spirit. It resembles the womb for a fetus. But once the fetus is perfect and ready to move to the natural world, it must cut off contact with the uterus completely. If not, then

the baby that comes out will die, or be deformed first and then die.

This situation made men to resemble longs reeds separated from their roots, whose sound drowned men and women in sorrow, and in perpetual broken hearts due to separation, lamenting in grief and longing. It also made men to paint themselves as the master of the tree of life (*Sidhrat Al-Muntaha*) and the world as either a series of tests, or as beings trapped in a golden cage in the middle of paradise.

Then, what should we do if what we consider as 'reality' is actually a prison? Should we abandon this "reality" and look for a totally different world, a truly essential form?

Soleimani did not see it that way. He had never been avoided this physical reality by living in a cave or mountain, for example. Because, prisons or shells are not at all worthless or false.



What we call worldly reality is indeed not an ultimate reality, but it is also not worthless. Instead, it is a school and playground. This is where each soul must hone and exploit all its potential, to die, then to awaken, before rising to a higher level of reality.

There is a famous *hadith*: *“All men fall asleep (in this world); after death, then they will awake”*. Experts in spiritual intuitive knowledge (*ma’rifah*) explained that “death and awakening” is not a biological process. It is a spiritual one that demands human action to cast away the shackles of senses and reason, to go beyond the walls of visible phenomena, and break through beyond visible objects.

In short, men must experience the mystical experience of 'self-negation' (annihilation of the self or *fana'*) or death. In their understanding, death is a lesser apocalypse, which is a

resurrection that must be passed before the larger apocalypse.

In the language of Rumi and other Sufis, men must die in a lower level in order to ascend to a higher level. In his famous poem entitled, *"I Die as a Mineral"*, Rumi tells about the stages of the development of life. This is 'human evolution', which is the continual movement of life from one level to another endlessly.

Minerals are the starting point towards the forms of plants, animals, to becoming 'human'. Then the "human" must also die so that he is reborn in the higher angelic realm (*malakut*), because, *"Everything shall perish save His face"* (*Qur'an 28: 88*). After that, he must continue into emptiness and silence, until a voice is heard: *"Verily unto Him shall we return."* (*Qur'an 2: 156*)

In a long poem about death as a process of climbing towards perfection, Rumi stated,

*I died from the mineral and became a plant;  
 I died from the plant and reappeared in an animal;  
 I died from the animal and became a human;  
 Wherefore then should I fear?  
 When did I ever become less through dying?  
 In turn, I shall die from human form, only  
 To spread my wings and soar above each angel.  
 And from the angelic realm, too, I must pass on;  
 "For everything shall perish save His Face".  
 And again sacrificed from the angelic form,  
 I shall become what lies beyond imagination.  
 Ah, let me then become naught, non-existent;  
 For in there resonates within me, a clear voice  
 saying, "Verily unto Him shall we return".*

Like Rumi, Soleimani also believes that death is an eternal process. And that is one of the main points of Islamic teachings. In *Surah Al-*

*Waqi'ah* (Quranic Chapter The Imminent), Allah says:

*"We have ordained death among you, and We are not to be outmanoeuvred from replacing you with your likes and recreating you in [a realm] you do not know"* (Qur'an 56: 60-61).

So death is nothing but a process, a move toward the next steps. For this reason, why fear death? Why do you feel something is missing and someone is departing? For those who realize life is an endless process, death is but a moment of relief.

Rumi recited, in another way of saying:

*And again, I still have to die and incarnate into something that I could not understand.*

*Ah, let me disappear into the emptiness, silence.*

Another translation of this piece of poetry could be something like this:

*Then I will become nothingness, because  
nothingness will sing like the deep notes of an  
organ, "Verily unto Him shall we return."*

For them, death is awaited because they believe that they will find a better condition afterwards, a higher level of reality, perfect and more beautiful. Rumi wrote,

*If you fear and flee from death, you fear yourself,  
oh friend. Take heed!*

*It is your own ugly face, not the face of death.*

*Your spirit is like a tree, and death its leaves*

*Whether good or bad, it has grown from you.*

*Every hidden thought, pleasant or unpleasant,  
derives from your own self*

Rumi further asks,

*How many children of your thoughts will you see  
in the grave after death...*

*Your good thoughts give birth to youths and  
houris;*

*Your ugly thoughts produce great demons*

Then he concluded,

*You are your thought, brother,*

*The rest of you is bones and fibre;*

*If you think of roses, you are a rose garden;*

*If you think of thorns, you are for the furnace.*

And further he said,

*There are thousands of wolves and swines in our  
existence: good and evil, fair and foul.*

*Man's properties are determined by the trait that predominates:*

*If gold is more than copper, then he is gold.*

People who wake up from biological sleep and open their inner eyes will bear witness or the *shahadah*. He will see the treasury hidden in plain sight behind the veil (nature), so that all that we call the 'reality' is nothing more than a sign that is faintly hinting at what lies behind it.

That is The Absolute who is none other than *al-Haqq*, that is the truth that transmits what we call this 'reality', which consists of various forms, levels, and conditions that themselves are nothing more than a spectrum of fiction and perception. But, at the same time, the spectrum signals the Reality – If only the conscious person does not believe it to be separate and independent from the Reality.

Thus is the meaning of the word of Allah in  
*Surah Qaf* verse 22,

*You were certainly oblivious of this. We have  
removed your veil from you, and so your sight is  
acute today*

Cover is nothing but ego, lust, shadows of  
desire, diseases of the heart, and so on. As a  
result, the cover is what was previously called the  
shell, the framework, which we solidify as the only  
reality.

And we want to survive in that prison at all  
costs, because we are afraid to leave it and die  
from it. In fact, the soul will not develop except by  
getting out of this prison, to die and leave it  
behind. If we leave, we will meet the various  
manifestations of the Reality. Uniquely, with that  
death, the walls and curtains that cover the heart



will immediately collapse; a horizon of infinite beauty stretches out ahead.

The wise call men as but droplets in the divine ocean. Or the ripple in the waves of His ocean. In man there is the Divine, a spirit from Him. As in Rumi's poem,

*You're not just a drop in the middle of the ocean.  
You're the great ocean in the drip.*

Because, said Rumi again,

*We search for Him here and there, while looking  
straight at Him.*

*Sitting by His side, we ask: "O Beloved, where is  
the Beloved?"*

He also wrote,

*The only veil, yourself, remain.*

*Hidden treasure chest, buried in soil*

*Why let dark clouds full moon spoil?*

Thus, Rumi prayed,

*My God, do not leave me in the hands of this  
unreliable self*

*Do not make agree with anyone but You*

*I run to You from deceits, troubles from my self*

*I am Yours, do not give me back my self*

However, there are many ways and degrees of death. The highest is the *shahadah*, because this is experienced by those who truly miss the encounter with the Divine. This is death that is being sought, not happened upon; death that are taken, not to take. This is the death of free people who are racing towards the finish line. This is not

the death of a cheering audience, or of slaves waiting for their turn. This is the death of witnesses and climbers who are persistent in running. As in Rumi's poem,

*Go die, oh sir, before your death,  
So that you will not suffer the pain of dying.  
Die the kind of death which is entrance into light,  
Not the death which signifies entrance into the  
grave.*

In one of the video clips containing Soleimani's voice, he was heard quoting the famous words of Imam Ali while drinking a cup of *shahadah*, "*fuztu wa Rabb il-Ka'bah*" (*I swear to the Lord of the Ka'ba that I have succeeded*). Then he explained it as follows: "I have triumphed, I have won, I have arrived, I have flown, I have finished, I have died."

*Shahadah* is not only death, but the testimony of the dead to the beautiful and bright horizons of the fire of love that has been raging for a long time. It is impossible for people to experience it, as Soleimani said, unless he had longed for it. And not only crave it, but it has long been realized in daily behaviour.

So, *shahadah* can only be achieved by those who have died before dying, by those who have indeed sown their seeds for the rest of their lives. In a regular meeting with the family of martyrs, Soleimani said:

*Noble brothers and sisters. Friends who miss your shahadah! There is one important principle that we need to always remember. If one does not live (feel and experience) the life of a martyr, then he will never become a martyr. The requirement to reach shahadah is to become a martyr (shuhada*

*before shahadah). If you smell the aroma of words, knowledge and morals of the martyrs of a person who is still alive, then know that he will surely die as a martyr. All martyrs have this characteristic: before they die as martyrs, they have beforehand spread the aroma of shahadah. Just as one cannot be a scientist without studying and learning, so the condition for being a scientist is to taste and gain knowledge...*

*Shahadah* is the chosen death, even longed for and coveted. This is the death of lovers who cannot be achieved except through the way of love. Like Rumi's poem,

*In the ocean of love, like salt I dissolve  
Faith, doubt, every things dissolves.*

Miraculously, Soleimani finally won the *shahadah*, as Rumi stated,

*This is how I would die into the love I have for You:  
As pieces of clouds dissolve in sunlight*

Beyond his charred body, Soleimani had sipped the cup of *shahadah* that he longed for. Just like the prayer Soleimani offered on the banks of the Arvand River in 1990 which he prayed to commemorate the friends of the martyrs who died there:

*My Lord, for our shattered hearts,  
for the hearts of those martyred in Your path,  
for our oath in Your name,  
end our lives with the shahadah.*

*Shahadah* itself means the act or state of testifying, and *shahid* is the reason. Before becoming human nature, *shahid* is the nature of Allah.

There are dozens of verses that attribute this quality to Allah. Among these, Allah says,

*Say, 'What thing is greatest as witness (shahadah)?'*

*Say, 'Allah! [He is] witness (shahid) between me and you'. (Surah al-An'am (Chapter The Cattle) verse 19).*

Then in *Surah Yunus (Chapter Jonas)* verse 29, Allah says,

*"Allah suffices as a witness between you and us"*

And in *Surah Saba (Chapter Sheba)* verse 47, Allah says,

*"... and He is witness of all things"*

In *Surah Ali Imran* (The Family of Imran) verse 98, Allah says,

*“... while Allah is witness to what you do?”*

*Shahid* was also part of the nature of the Prophet, Muslims, warriors who died in the way of Allah and so forth. Witnesses and testimonies are certainly more than knowledge. Because, testimonies require direct involvement and contact with the object being witnessed. One cannot be called a witness if one only hears words, sees from a distance, is negligent, doubtful and so on.

Witnesses and testimonies require the loss of distance between the witness and the object being witnessed. The closer and brighter, the stronger the testimony. Those who are killed in the way of Allah witness His greatness, beauty,



and divine truth when their death exceeds anyone else. So much so that he does not die, but instead continues to live and receive unending fortunes. He lives because he died for the Living.

Martyrs will never die. They live the eternal life of the afterlife that they always craved. Not weathered and degraded by the wheel of this mortal world. No one can destroy the flames of divine love that burn in their chests.

In his audiovisual will, the martyr Hasan Shaib from the Hezbollah resistance group never thought that Allah would one day answer his prayer:

*This is the path of al-Husain that I do not deserve to receive in return for my actions. Only the gift of Allah made me able to embrace the glory in this way. If Allah revived me a thousand times, then I*

*am cut to a thousand pieces, of course I'm still not worthy of receiving this gift except as His gift.*

In his will, the martyr Ali Al-Musawi revealed one of the following aspects of the meaning of martyrdom:

*A martyr who fights in the path of Allah sincerely is a guide of humanity toward Allah. They have lighted the path of the lovers of Allah. It is truly a blessing for those who live in the world with such a longing for Allah, that Allah will reward them with similar desires and accelerate their return to Him. These are the people whom Allah has granted the greatest and holiest gift a servant has ever desired. They chose eternal life in the hereafter through martyrdom and gave to those who are still in this world a noble and praiseworthy life.*

The martyr Ammar Hamud recited this beautiful poem before his *shahadah*:

*O Lord, I run fast from creatures as I yearn so much  
for You;*

*I orphaned my family merely to meet You.*

*Truly, if you cut my body with Your Love, then my  
heart will not turn away from You.*

In his will, the martyr Khalid Abdullah quoted the following words of the Prophet:

*There are no drops that Allah likes more than  
blood of martyrs and the tears of my servants who  
dropped in the middle of the night.*

Shaykh Shahid Raghib Harb once stated that the blood which was shed to fulfil the passions will

freeze and rot, while the blood of martyrs spilled in the hands of Allah. He will live, grow, and develop. "That blood will spread on the face of the earth, and grow shoots of humanity." Such is the blood of martyrs: the blood that does not recognize self-interests, the blood that longs solely for Allah, the blood that boils with the gift of *tawhid* and is compounded with the *Shahadah*.

The martyr Muhammad Damasyq summarizes the meaning of *shahadah* in the following sentences:

*Martyrs will be the heart of history that continues to pump resistance. Shahadah is the blood that will give life to people who are dying. Shahadah will pump fresh blood, rebirth, and fresh infusion for people who are dying. The most concrete manifestation of martyrdom is the flow of fresh*

*blood back into the organs of society that has died.*

The martyr Abbas Musawi died with his wife and two sons, Yasir and Mustafa. A form of martyrdom that Allah did not give to just anyone on this earth. About a week before his martyrdom, he offered the following prayer:

*O Allah, grant me an incomparable martyrdom. Martyrdom that makes my body cut into small pieces, so that each slice can atone for the sins that I have committed.*

And that is the reality.

The martyr Abbas Al-Musawi also stated:

*Martyrs are the best people among us; martyrs are the noblest among us; martyrs are our wheels*

*of history; martyrdom is our eulogy; martyr is the Qur'an that speaks; martyr is the son of al-Husain's grandson who has truly walked his footsteps.*

Returning to the matter of the war within, to climb up the levels of reality, each person, like Soleimani, must go through war against himself, or against the self that wants to dwell in just one level of reality.

He must fight the reluctance to move from one level, defeating the self that is attached to objects of a certain level of reality. Just like a baby who has to completely leave his mother's womb, remove his placenta and break his umbilical cord to be able to live in the natural world, so every self who wants to go beyond a higher level must be able to leave the world beneath, to die from it, in order to rise to the next levels.

However, it is human nature that on each level, he becomes comfortable, intimate, and finally created a fictional reality that he turned into home. In fact, to perfect himself, he must walk and move on.

He thought the prison was an eternal home, so he did not want to die and rise up. In this prison, he built a system of life and deployed soldiers to survive there. He even identified his entire existence with this level, evading and dispelling all attempts from within him to quickly leave this cramped and narrow place.

Rumi said,

*Your task is not to seek for love, but only to find all the obstacles within you that you have built and fight them.*

They are our carnal self! And if we ask, why is our duty not to seek, Rumi would answer, "What you seek, will seek you."

And why is He also looking for you? Rumi said again,

*A horse is moving beneath the rider's thighs,  
yet still he asks, "Where is my horse?"*

Then what makes people able to move freely? What makes people so deftly climb such long and tiring stairs?

Of course, first there must be contemplation of the necessity of rising up and moving on. After that there must be a strong will to fight, against all odds, a fierce war within.

He must fight all the neglect, laziness, fear, and worry that made him want to continue to stay



at a certain level. He must understand that there are many other higher levels, perfect and more beautiful. That is how the term war or *jihad* against the self appears.

Soldiers who want to defend themselves on a level and are reluctant to move on have many names, as well as soldiers who invite people to move to higher levels have many names. Both also have armies gathered in their ranks.

Among the soldiers that gathered in the army who did not want to move on was ignorance, hatred, arrogance, ego, lust, fanaticism, fear, lies, greed and so on. Conversely, among those who encourage men to leave immediately are reason, love, heart, spirit, *zuhud*, patience, honesty, gratitude and so on.

What is clear is that both of them continue to fight on the battlefield of the soul, staging

unparalleled struggle, drama and heroism that is beyond imagination.

This war against the Self is clearly a *jihad* that is greater than other forms of fighting in the way of Allah. The reason is, this war forces everyone to fight against themselves; one essential dimension of the Self which is forced to torture and beat, to hurt and displace, to defeat, and to kill a false dimension of the Self. In fact, every man surely loves himself, and it is not impossible to feel that the false self is his true self, so that when he has to fight it he will feel a dilemma, acute inner conflict, fear, anxiety, and unrest.

Thus, undoubtedly, this is the fiercest war, a war that rages and its battlefield is inside. Blood and wounds are immediately felt to the soul.

From this great and frightening war on the Self, a soldier and commander like Soleimani

certainly gained a lot of knowledge and experience. In fact, the whole experience of dealing with enemies on the battlefield of physical war, organizing soldiers, determining the type of weapon, ammunition, moments of engagement, duration of battle, and so on is nothing more than a simulation of that greater war.

But on the contrary, the outcome of that greater war can certainly be applied on a lighter and simpler battlefield: physical warfare on the biological battlefield. The myriad of experiences also certainly made the war commander who is diligent to wage war against the biggest enemy, namely himself, to have a combat ability above the average commander who is reluctant to wage battles like this.

For Soleimani, the experience of the Iraq-Iran War was not just a military experience. More

importantly, it is a spiritual experience, a meaningful inner learning.

The physical war, he said at one time, was like *wuquf* in the field of Arafat and spiritual *mi'raj* during prayer. There, he witnessed the love, longing, sincerity of the lovers of Allah and wayfarer of the spiritual path.

There, on the battlefield, he saw people struggling to get rid of hatred and hostility. As the climax, together they find the beauty and spiritual strength of people who are searching for the Eternal Beloved.

Soleimani once told me about a soldier who asked a sage, "At certain moments on the battlefield, I pray with clothes that might be splashed with blood. What do you think the law is?" The sage replied, "By Allah, I am willing to trade that one prayer which purity you have doubted with all of my prayers."

Clearly, Soleimani saw this physical war as a simulation or extension of a thrilling inner war. He believed that at every moment in any place, Allah would see his movements, both in physical and spiritual warfare.

*Once you conquer your selfish self,  
all your darkness will change to Light*

Because, said Rumi,

*Whoever has heart's doors wide open,  
could see the sun itself in every atom*

Before the grief assembly in memory of the martyrs of the city of Gilan, Soleimani once explained that the war he had endured for eight years felt like a *tawaf* in the House of God (*Bait Allah*). The experience of war which brought it to

the heights of the senses, inner acumen, and a thrilling longing. That is the nature of war for him.

One of the prominent conditions on the battlefield so close to death, said Soleimani, is sincerity in words, deeds, and thoughts. Those in this battlefield always attach themselves to purity, such that they become holiness incarnate.

Let us hear the story he told of a soldier on the anniversary of the martyrs of Kerman, his hometown. He said, during the Iraq-Iran War, a soldier longed for his *shahadah*.

This soldier was in a company led by his own brother. After it was discovered that his younger brother had died, his superior commander offered to take him by helicopter. The soldier refused this privilege. He also begged to have his brother brought together with the other corpses, without any special treatment.

After finally being taken and placed in a safe zone, the soldier cleaned his brother's uniform and found a piece of paper. It turned out that the younger brother longed for the *shahadah*, so he wrote on the blood-stained paper an oath. In the paper, he had written:

*O Arab brothers who are watching me as I am  
watching them ...*

*O those who are looking for me as I am looking for  
them ...*

*I swear by Allah, if you make me take my shahadah  
(by killing me), then I will give you shafa'ah  
(intercession).*

How can one have thoughts and expressions like this if their chest is not filled with longing and love? Obviously, it is not possible. Warriors like this are too homesick, in longing, and in love with

Allah, so that no more cavity in their chests can be filled with hatred and animosity.

He has been a manifestation of *Surah Al-Ahzab* (The Confederates) verse 4:

*"Allah has not put two hearts within any man..."*

You will not see these soldiers except as lovers who are in love, whose actions and feelings are overpowered by his attention to the idol of his heart, so that there is nothing else inside of them.

Those who echo Rumi's poems daily really have realized the contents of the poems. They are like Rumi said,

*This is how I would die into the love I have for You:  
As pieces of clouds dissolve in sunlight*



They have arrived at the message sung by  
 Rumi,  
*Oh my friend,  
 all you see of me  
 is just a shell,  
 and the rest belongs to Love.*

In the pain and suffering of war, the warrior  
 turned into preachers of Love, as described by  
 Rumi in his poem,

*A breast which separation's split in two  
 Is what I seek, to share this pain with you:  
 When kept from their true origin, all yearn  
 For union on the day they can return.*

In a speech leading up to the 1981  
 Operation "Yaum al-Quds" which was published in  
 the book *Qasem Soleimani; Dzikrayat wa*

*Khawathir*, Soleimani delivered a speech describing the war against himself as his footing. In this important speech, he too explained the meaning of *shahadah*, which is the servant's testimony and meeting with the Beloved.

After delivering the *hamdalah* (praising God) and greetings and *salawat* (sending salutations to the Prophet and his pure family), he quoted *Surah An-Nasr (Chapter Divine Support)*:

*When Allah's help comes with victory,  
and you see the people entering Allah's religion in  
throngs,  
then celebrate the praise of your Lord, and plead  
to Him for forgiveness. Indeed He is all-clement.*

Then, Soleimani continues,

*Allah has chosen among you His lovers. And the encounter between pleasure (ishq) and bliss (mashuq) will soon take place. Allah says in the Hadith of Qudsi: 'Whoever seeks Me will find Me. Whoever finds Me, will know Me. Whoever knows Me, will love Me. Whoever loves Me, then I will kill him. And whoever I kill, then I am His fine (diyat).*

*Martyrdom is truly the greatest happiness. All hearts of lovers who long for an encounter with the Beloved. They see martyrdom as a means of reaching the Beloved, so they too joyfully choose it. This glory is not just for anyone. It is only for those who have purified themselves to be worthy of achieving the pride of meeting Allah. And there are many of you like this.*

*The signs and colours of martyrdom mixed with spirituality appear to radiate on your faces and*

*can be seen from a distance. This is the month of Muharram which brings out the spirit of the Mustadafin (oppressed). All eyes – the eyes of the Imam, the people, and the martyrs who see us – look proudly at your mighty arms. Even though your souls continue to yearn for martyrdom, you are still able to be patient for the moment to fight and defeat the enemy with a defeat they never imagined ...”*

As we have said, *shahadah* is the witness's testimony after moving on, or dying, from one level of reality. It cannot happen except by death. The Qudsi Hadith above shows that Allah will not give *shahadah* to just anyone, but those who seek, find, love, and know Him. After all that, Allah will “kill him” and He will be the fine to compensate for the death.

Of course, people will ask, what is the purpose of the murder? And how did Allah become *diyat* for the killing?

Those who are not familiar with the language of the mystics will probably have difficulty understanding the expression above. In fact, the point is simple: whoever seeks Allah will surely end up finding, loving, and knowing Him. And after knowing Him, he no longer wanted to live in his ego, so he would die even before physically and biologically dying. Allah will fill him, as if Allah was *diyat* for the killing of his ego. The false ego is murdered, killed, and destroyed to be replaced with an intrinsic Divine soul.

Let us consider the beautiful parable in this composed *Masnavi*:

*Moses once asked God, 'Master of Reckoning,  
You made these forms, so why are You now  
reckoning?*

*You made the male and female pairs so gorgeous,  
So why do You destroy them? For what purpose?'*

*'I know your question's not from heedlessness,  
Or unbelief or lust and greediness,*

*Otherwise I'd chastise you straight away  
And make sure that for this you'll later pay.*

*What you seek rather is for comprehension  
Of secrets of subsistence through My action,*

*So you can teach the everyday men and  
Make them less raw once they all understand.*

*Intentionally you asked so you can show  
To those who don't know, though you clearly  
know.'*

*Questioning is half of knowledge – this is true  
But it's not something all outsiders do.*

*From knowledge, question and response arose –*

*From soil and water grow both thorn and rose.  
From knowledge, guidance and perdition grew:  
Bitter and sweet fruit both need moisture, too.  
Acquaintance leads to love and hate as well;  
Rich food gives strength but makes some men  
unwell.*

*Moses become a foreigner who seeks it,  
So he could tell those unaware the secret:  
Let's make ourselves seem like outsiders, too,  
And draw the answers as the strangers do.  
As sellers turn to rivals and start fighting  
When they seek the same contract sealed in  
writing.*

*God carried on, 'O wisdom's own possessor,  
Since you asked you can hear from Me the answer.  
Now cultivate seeds in the soil, O Moses,  
So you as well might truly do this justice.'  
Once Moses had completed all his sowing  
And the corn ears completed all their growing,*

*He grabbed a scythe to cut them down, and then  
A voice from the Unseen reached him again:  
'Why do you reap what you yourself has sown?  
You cut it down once it has fully grown.'  
'I raze it once it's finished all its growth,  
For there are grains and straw: this corn has both.  
The grain does not belong in barns, and I know  
That straw is not appropriate for the silo;  
It is unwise to mix them carelessly:  
Winnowing's therefore a necessity.'  
'From whom did you acquire this knowledge to  
Prepare a threshing floor the way you do?'  
'You gave me the discernment,' Moses said.  
'So how can I, your God, lack this, instead?  
While pure souls are found in creation, there  
Are muddy souls too that are far from fair.'  
Shells are not all the same grade; it is known  
While some hold pearls, others hold just a stone.  
To manifest both good and bad's a must*



*Just as with wheat and straw, as we've discussed.  
The world's creation's is so truth's revealed,  
So that our wisdom's gold won't stay concealed."*

Obviously that stage is not reached easily. It is not enough to know and discuss. Far from it. This stage is achieved through the bitter experience, with the pain of a tiring climb, with the pain of intense inner struggle.

As in Rumi's poem,

*The Sufi's book is neither ink nor letters,  
For it's a heart like snow, one pure and bright;  
The scholar is known through words he writes;  
The Sufi's method is shown by footprints*

This is more an act and a struggle than discussion and debate. This is more a matter of taste, not of language and words.

Exposing higher levels of reality cannot be done through what Islamic spiritualism observer William Chittick calls empirical knowledge, that is knowledge that is usually contrasted with analytical knowledge. Perhaps the best way to understand the difference between empirical knowledge and analytical knowledge is to contemplate the difference between "imitating" or "following authority" (*taqlid*) and "realization" or "verification" (*tahqiq*) – two basic pathways in gaining knowledge.

To become a member of a religion, culture, society, or group, people need to learn from those who are already members, and this learning process takes place by "imitating". This process is the way we learn language and culture, not to mention the scriptures, rituals, and law. In the context of Islam, those who have taken responsibility for preserving this empirical

heritage are referred to as scholars, that is, “people who know” tradition.

In empirical knowledge, the question of “why and how” must be set aside. When someone asks the clerics, why do we have to accept certain dogmas or why we must pray and fast, then the simple answer is “because Allah commanded so”, which means that we have knowledge that uses the authority of the Qur'anic and Sunnah propositions. Just like parents correcting their children's speech using standard grammatical authority.

Analytical knowledge is totally different. If people receive it on the basis of news or what people say, it means he does not understand it. Mathematics is a science that does not depend on authorities. Instead, it needs to be awakened in everyone's consciousness. In learning it, one must understand formulas, or else he will only

memorize or imitate others. It does not make sense to say that two plus two equals four because 'my teacher said so'. Whether you understand it or not, you must find the truth within yourself.

Knowledge about these levels of reality is included in analytical knowledge. People who want to know it must verify it themselves and cannot just hear it from the authorities or read it in a reference book.

In fact, according to some experts, analytical knowledge alone is inadequate to know these levels. What is needed here more than knowledge, is experience or what is technically referred to as knowledge through presence. Namely, the subject who wants to know it must present its object or object within itself. They gave an example by knowing the sweet taste of honey

that cannot happen except by putting a spoonful of honey on each of our tongues.

Only in that way can we uncover the secrets of these levels of reality. That is why when explaining the nature of the Iraq-Iran War, Imam Khomeini called it the best *madrassa* for every spiritual traveller.

Having completed his eight years spiritual education on the battlefield of Iraq-Iran War, Qasem found his path: the path of blazing divine love. It was this love that guided him in the raging, gruesome battlefields of Palestine and Lebanon, of Syria and Iraq. It was this particular love that defined him and provided him with determination, that acted as a compass in his life and in his struggle that knows no boundaries.

In one occasion where the supreme leader Ali Khamenei convened with a number of poets, Soleimani was struck with awe after hearing a love

poem entitled “our boundary is love” read by one of the participating poets. He said that the poem was so beautiful and deeply moved his heart, as if it represented his life so far. Soleimani who took note and memorised the poem recited it again in the presence of the leader on different occasion where Khamenei hosted the family and children of martyrs. Soleimani hoped that by reciting this poem, full of doctrinal lesson and rich of prominent meanings, he could sparkle the flames of joy and wisdom to the hearts of the audience, and to give comforts and tranquilities to those who had just lost their loved ones on the path of martyrdom:

*If you were a mountain,  
between rain and flood what's the difference?  
If you were a Cedar tree,  
between winds and storm what's the difference?*

*To the earth borders belong, to the sky you belong,  
between the sky of the Levant and of Iran, what's  
the difference?*

*The lock must break, the cage we must break,  
between the siege al-Zahra and Abadan, what's  
the difference?*

*Our border is love and it is our land wherever it is,  
between Samarra, Gaza, Aleppo, and Tehran,  
what's the difference?*

*Anyone without martyrdom at the dawn, will have  
death at the night,  
without martyrdom, between death and  
destitution, what's the difference?*

For Qasem, it makes no difference if the oppressed was under siege like Prophet Muhammad's daughter Zahra, in the 10 months siege of Abadan in Iran during the fateful Iran – Iraq war, in the siege of Kafarya in Syria, or in

Sarajevo in Bosnia Hercegovina during the Balkan war. Fighting injustice has no territory, defending the oppressed has no boundary.

\*\*\*

Three hours before leaving for Baghdad, Soleimani transited in Damascus. At his last stop, he stuck to a piece of paper on the edge of the mirror which he initialled three times.

On the paper he wrote three times *alhamdulillah rabbil 'alamin* (all praise is due to Allah the lord of the worlds). Then there is the prayer," O Allah, accept me in a state of holiness." Then in another part of the paper he wrote,

*My lord, I miss You and truly long to meet You as Moses desired to meet You until he fell unconscious*

And finally he wrote a prayer,



*O Allah, please accept me in a state of holiness and accept me in purity*

Sometime earlier, a girl met with Soleimani at a banquet with the family of martyrs. After the pleasantries, the girl came to Soleimani and asked for the ring he was wearing.

Soleimani took it off while saying, "Do you want to fulfil this right?" The girl asked what he meant by the right of the ring. Soleimani replied, "The right is that you ask at the tomb of Imam Ali Ridha so that Allah will grant me a *shahadah*." The girl was reluctant and refused to pray for this.

The same yearning existed in every martyr long before they truly die. Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah said that several months before the assassination of Abu Mahdi Al-

Muhandis, the commander of the Iraqi resistance militia came to him in Beirut.

After speaking, the guest whispered to Nasrallah,

*The war against ISIS seems to have reached its final round. Many have died as martyrs. Meanwhile, I am getting old and my beard is getting white. Pray that Allah will accept me as a martyr.*

It is true what Soleimani has said several years ago. Martyr is a person who has longingly chosen his way of death. He had achieved *shahadah* before becoming a martyr. His thoughts, words and deeds had been martyred before he attained martyrdom.

This is never a coincidence. There is an agreement between a martyr and his True Lover,

even long before the moment of *shahadah* itself. There is a contract that he always holds that he will surely fulfil with all his heart, when the time comes.

That is the meaning of the word of Allah in *Surah Al-Ahzab* (The Confederates) verse 23,

*Among the faithful are men  
who fulfil what they have pledged to Allah.  
Of them are some who have fulfilled their pledge,  
and of them are some who still wait,  
and they have not changed in the least*

After Soleimani's death, Almanar television broadcast footage of an exclusive interview with Soleimani. In the interview, Soleimani talked a lot about how the core of all core is the spiritual aspect. This is the aspect that can give an actual victory.

Then he stated,

*We must always remember this very important expression (which is contained in the prayer of Makarim al-Akhlaq Imam Ali Zayn al-Abidin):*

*'O God, raise me not a single degree before the people without lowering me an equal amount within me;*

*And bring about no outward exaltation for me without an equal amount of inward abasement in me.'*

The prospective martyr is a person who is always humble, because he is always present at the Divine altar. He felt his Lover was always watching, so he was always shy.

Affirming that situation, a famous Iranian philosopher and sage, Jawadi Amuli, recounted the following story.

*Every time I remember the name Qasem Soleimani, I always pray for him. We all owe our shahadah and the struggle of our beloved brother Qasem Soleimani. Last year the deceased visited Qum to meet with a number of scholars and leaders. After the meeting, he approached me and stated that there was little favour. So I asked him. Suddenly he pulled a piece of a shroud from his jacket pocket. Then he said, "Can you give testimony on this cloth (that I'm a good person)?"*

Jawadi Amuli stopped, tears slightly ran down his cheeks, for a moment before continuing his story.

*Who am I to be worthy of witnessing like this? Especially for someone who throughout his life has maintained the honour and security of the family, religion, state sovereignty, and the continuity of government, the person who carries out the orders of Imam Khomeini, our leader (Sayyid Ali Khamenei). But upon being asked, I said, 'Very well, I will give that testimony.' I wrote, 'My Lord, You are the All-Witness, that our noble brother, is Your servant.' And truly now in the best way he has become a guest of Allah, gather with the prophets of Allah, gathering with the prophets of Allah, the martyrs of Karbala and Husain ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib.*

Below are two stories told by Soleimani on various occasions in memory of his colleagues who died as martyrs during the Iraq-Iran War. The first story is about Hamid Fidai who accompanied him in the operation, "Eighth Imam". And the

second story is Soleimani's favourite story about a soldier calling himself by the title Husain, son of Ghulam Husain.

### **First Story**

Operation "Path of Al-Quds" took place after the Operation "Eighth Imam", which succeeded in ending the isolation of the Abadan region. The Operation "Eighth Imam" lasted for three months and drained the soldiers.

Nevertheless, we still sent our brigade to participate in the operation after a leave of around three to four days. Among the soldiers who did not take a day off was Hamid Iranmanesh, better known as Hamid Fidai (Hamid who likes sacrifices).

Hamid is always trying to be at the forefront in carrying out difficult and dangerous missions. One of the dangerous missions he carried out

caused him to be hit by dozens of bomb shrapnel. He then fell behind the enemy line. We could not find him for several days. After the military operation ended, he stated that he had been held hostage by the enemy.

When we met again, he said,

*After being hit by a bomb or rocket, I fainted. The next day I woke up and saw that there were already about 20 enemy soldiers. I also pretended to die while praying, O Imam of the End of Days, what I am doing now is in the path of Allah (fi sabilillah) and to glorify Islam. So, help me!’*

Not long after, the group of soldiers came towards me and kicked me. But they thought I was dead, so they left me. After about ten minutes, two soldiers approached me. I pretended to die once again. But these two soldiers spoke to me



and were saddened by the name of Imam Khomeini's army. When they searched my clothes and pouches and found a sermon for prostration and the Qur'an and a photo of Imam Khomeini, both began to curse Saddam. They said, this is a soldier of the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali. I also thought that the Imam of the End of Days had been kind to me.

I began to move my body so that they understood that I was still alive. After they understood I was still alive, they carried me to their post and fed me. It turned out that there were soldiers who spoke Farsi who told me that they had been forced by Saddam to fight against Iran. They then called the doctor for me and treated the wounds in my entire body.

At first, they wanted to take me to Iraq using a tank but I refused because I asked for martyrdom and refused to be taken prisoner. So,

when they pulled away from the tank and let their guard down, I ran from where they were to our post. When I see my friends, I immediately prostrate to Allah. My friends then took me by helicopter to Ahvaz to seek treatment there.

### **Second Story**

Before the Operation Badr began, we conducted a field survey and mapping of the Shalamcheh area. We did all that with extra care so that the operation plan did not leak to the enemy. This area is empty of military activity (because it has been occupied by the enemy), and only a small river is our defensive line.

Friends continue mapping and monitoring activities under the command of Husain Yusufullahi. He himself preferred to call himself Husain, son of Ghulam Husain.

The monitoring team went down on a mission for several nights. In this first team, there

were Akbar Musayi and Husain Sadiqi. These two people left and did not return.

We wondered, were they both captured by the enemy or killed? I was afraid that both of them were captured and that our operation plan had been leaked to the enemy.

The next day, Husain the son of Ghulam Husain called me and casually said, "Both of them will return tomorrow." I asked, "How do you know this?" He answered, "Akbar Musayi immediately conveyed this news to me in the dreamland. Both of them were not captured but had fallen as martyrs. Akbar will return tomorrow while Sadiqi returns the 13<sup>th</sup> day." I then joked, "Can you know the unseen?" He replied, "This news is from Husain son of Ghulam Husain."

I was still in the Shalamchek area when I heard loud voices from the friends watching a black figure floating on the water. Even though the

river water is shallow and it is unlikely to be able to drag an adult's dead body, but in fact that's what happened. On the 12<sup>th</sup> day, the water carried Akbar Musayi's body to the river bank where friends were reading the Ashura Pilgrimage prayers. On the 13<sup>th</sup> day Sadiqi's body reached the same riverbank.

After the bodies arrived, Husain the son of Ghulam Husain said to me, "Do you know why the body of Akbar Musayi arrived before Sadiqi?" I said I don't know. Then he said, "Because Musayi never leaves evening prayers even in water."

Husain the son of Ghulam Husain was a true servant of Allah, physically and mentally. One time, he came to me wearing a T-shirt, hanging his uniform around his shoulders and not wearing shoes. I looked at him with wonder. He understood that I was not happy with his appearance. He then said, "I was praying with this

appearance when orders came to me to come to you. When I was about to wear a uniform, I thought, 'Husain, O son of Ghulam Husain! You approach Allah with this appearance, do you want to appear better in front of that person?'"

\*\*\*

Qasem Soleimani won martyrdom after 40 years of exhaustive searching and longing. In his will and testament read out in the 40 days' commemoration of his *shahadah* by Ismail Qaani who replaced his position in the Quds Force, Soleimani had written,

*O God, my head, my wisdom, my lips, my nose, my ears, my heart and all parts of my body harbour the same hope [of martyrdom].*

*O most Merciful, most Compassionate God, accept me and accept me in purity. Accept me in a way that I will be worthy of seeing You.*

Then he continued,

*My God, it is many years now that I have been left behind from a caravan [of martyrs].*

*I have constantly sent others towards it, but I myself have been left behind it.*

*You Yourself know that I have never been able to forget them.*

*Their memory and their names always echo, not in my mind, but in my heart and in my eyes with tears and sighs*

*My beloved God, my body is becoming infirm [as a result of the long search].*

*How could You possibly not accept someone who has been waiting at Your door for 40 years?*

*My Creator, my Beloved and my Love, I have always asked You to fill my heart and my soul with the love of You.*

*Let me burn and die in being apart from You*

*My dear One, I have wandered into deserts feeling restless and ashamed of being left behind.*

*I go from one city to another and from this desert to the next in winters and summers, for the sake of the wish that burns my heart.*

*O Generous God, my Beloved God, I have fixed my hopes on Your Generosity.*

*You know that I truly love You.*

*You surely know that I do not want anyone other than You.*

*Help me join You.*

In another part of the will, he said,

*O You, Whom I worship, my Love and my Beloved, I truly love You.*

*I have seen You and felt Your presence again and again.*

*I cannot remain separate from You any longer.*

*It is enough. It is enough.*

*Then please accept me, but only when I am worthy of You.*

\*\*\*



## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Iran is aware of Baghdad's turmoil ahead of the end of the year. There was initially a rocket attack on the US K-1 Air Base in Kirkuk on 27 December 2019, which killed one US contractor and injured six others. The United States, blamed the attack on Kata'ib Hezbollah, a resistance militia against ISIS in Iraq, and retaliated by attacking a guard post of the al-Hasyd al-Sya'bi, Kata'ib's parent group, in Ghabat Salum, al-Harsh, west of Anbar, near the Syrian border on 29 December. There were 27 al-Hasyd members killed in the attack. This triggered the anger of the Iraqi people. The next day, angry Iraqi men stormed the US Embassy in the heart of Baghdad. This is the first time in the history of the US invasion there are masses who are brave enough to break through the embassy gate. The pretext of threat to the embassy was what later prompted the US to target Qasem Sulaymani on 3 January 2020, which was thought to have masterminded the embassy invasion. A month after Sulaymani's death, The New York Times published the news that ISIS was the one who most likely triggered an initial attack on K-1, and not a civilian resistance group that was the enemy of ISIS. In short, as an Iraqi politician said, the US almost triggered a conflict based on false intelligence reports.

<sup>2</sup> The US assassination of Sulaymani has violated international norms and law. Sulaymani was in Iraq on a diplomatic mission, which indicates he has immunity. On the other side, Trump authorizes the assassination without the approval of Congress and yet the US is not officially involved in a war with Iran. By killing Sulaymani, the US is tantamount to becoming a rogue state, a law-breaking state.

- 
- <sup>3</sup> The First World War I was triggered by the assassination of the Austrian prince, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by Serbian nationalist groups in Sarajevo. From that incident, Europe was then dragged into a major war that killed 16 million people. The war ended four years later in 1918.
- <sup>4</sup> Subject to the direction of the CIA, Mossad was complacent by targeting Imad Mughniyah, the Hezbollah field general. Imad died with a body that could no longer be recognized after being exposed to a car bomb prepared by Mossad. More about this, can be seen in The New Yorker's report, "Qasem Suleimani and How Nations Decide to Kill", edition 10 February 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> Iranian diplomats are said to have repeatedly try to persuade Russia to be involved in the Syrian war. Unfortunately, the efforts hit a brick wall. However, Sulaymani changed that merely by meeting Putin directly in Moscow. US media reports, quoting the Western intelligence community, said that Sulaymani flew to Moscow on 24 July 2015, aboard a commercial plane from Iran. After two days there, he returned to Tehran on 26 July. The trip itself is a slap in the face for the US, who thought that the travel sanction from the United Nations could limit Sulaymani travel space. After the death of Sulaymani, Iran's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, described the figure of Sulaymani as "the most effective force against terrorism and extremism" in the Middle East. Zarif refers to the many public faces of Sulaymani; as a military planner, field general, intelligence coordinator, veteran diplomat, and many other publicly known roles.
- <sup>6</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCOPA) treaty was considered by Trump as Obama's legacy, who then agreed with Europe, Russia and China, to allow Iran to become a *de facto* nuclear state. Iran itself says its nuclear program

---

is for civilian purposes only. Iran proves that by giving wide access to the world nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). To date, after more than a thousand inspections, the IAEA continues to say there is no sign of Iran's nuclear program leading to the development of nuclear weapons.

<sup>7</sup> Iran shot down a Global Hawk drone which broke through Persian Gulf waters using the 3rd Khordad medium range air defense system. One month after Sulaymani's death, Iran showed off a number of vital components of the drone, including a supercomputer, radar, and a number of sophisticated sensors, which they netted from the depths of the sea. General Amir Ali Hajizadeh called these "treasures" for the future development of Iranian drone research. "Iran now has the ability to neutralize similar drones not only from distances of 50, 100 or 150 kilometers, but even from thousands of kilometers from Iranian territory," he said. That success is a repeat of Iran's success of hacking the RQ-170 drone in 2011, which paved the way for Iran to make a similar drone: the Saeq. Some have said that the sophistication and strategic components of the RQ-170 allows Iran to experience a 20-year technological leap. Other US drone collections in the hands of Iran included the Scan Eagle and MQ-1 Predators. Iran was later succeeded in mass-producing drones in the same class as these two favorite US drones.

<sup>8</sup> Various reports said Sulaymani flew from Damascus that night using an Airbus A-320 passenger plane owned by Chasm Airline, an Iranian airline. He arrived in a small group, only accompanied by four people close to him: Brigadier General Hussein pour Jaafari, Colonel Shahrud Muzaffari Nia, Major Hadi Tameri, and Captain Wahid Zamani. Previously, he stopped by Lebanon to attend a *takziah* (a prayer assembly) of the parents of an MP. It is

---

suspected that the US had confirmation of Sulaymani's presence in Baghdad that night from information supplied by its assets at Damascus Airport.

<sup>9</sup> Saudi-Iranian relations are practically frozen amid Tehran's strong opposition to the Saudi invasion of Yemen and previously related to Saudi support for the US project to overthrow Bashar Assad's sovereign government in Syria. The split between the two countries reached another peak in September 2019, when a mysterious drone-strike paralyzed Aramco's largest oil refining facility, the Saudi oil giant. The United States has accused Iran of being behind the drone attack despite recent UN investigations saying there is "not enough evidence" to blame Tehran.

<sup>10</sup> Washington seemed stunned by the decision of the Iraqi parliament, although it later tried to downplay it by calling the decision as not binding. Later, after getting tired of small talk, Trump said the US would only leave if Baghdad paid all the costs of building US bases in a number of provinces in Iraq. Trump calls the figure "billions of dollars".

<sup>11</sup> Iraqi anger at the presence of US troops peaked on 24 January 2020, as massive demonstrations broke out demanding the US to leave Iraq. Reports say at least three million people attended the demonstration initiated by the popular young cleric, Muqtada Sadr. This is the largest anti-US demonstration in Iraqi history. US mainstream media tries to hide that fact. The Associated Press, for example, had reported the demonstration was 'only' attended by hundreds of people, before then rectifying it to be "tens of thousands of people". Iraqi police officials estimated the demonstration was attended by 1.5 to 2 million people.

<sup>12</sup> History records the savagery of the Caliph Yazid bin Muawiyah continued even after his troops slaughtered

---

the Prophet's grandson, Husayn ibn Ali, and 72 of his followers in the desert of Karbala, Iraq, 61 years after the Rasul's death. Yazid ordered the troops to lead Zainab, Husain's younger sister, and all the remaining women of the Prophet's family with their hands and feet handcuffed to his palace in Damascus. Zainab's sufferings were indescribable along the way: he and his entourage still had to see the bodies of their families, including his brother Husain's head, stuck on the spearhead of a Yazid soldier. In Kufa, the townspeople welcomed the captive procession initially with joy, until later they realized that the captive and displayed body parts at the ends of the spear were of the family of the Apostle, the children of Ali and Fatima who they knew well. Zainab's speech made the townspeople howl in sadness. "O Kufa!" said Zainab. "What a shame you are! Do you know which part of the body of the Apostle you have cut? Do you realize which of the promises you broke? Do you realize whose blood you shed? And which honorable family have you publicly shown (as captives)? And whose holiness have you broken? All of your behavior can tear the sky, split the earth, and make mountains disappear. As far as the landscape of the earth and sky, your behavior is second to none, there is no equal and you have no propriety at all. You have actually done the worst, most fatal and terrible deeds."

<sup>13</sup> Shock and awe refer to fierce military force deployment tactics and show off spectacular power to stifle enemy perceptions on the battlefield while eroding the opponent's fighting spirit.

<sup>14</sup> After Iran's response, a number of mysterious deaths befell US troops. In Afghanistan, for example, a US Bombardier E11A spy plane was hit and destroyed. In addition to the two pilots, there were reportedly senior

---

CIA officers who were killed and their bodies held hostage by the Taliban. Iranian media said the dead included Mike D'Andrea alias Ayatullah Mike (this figure was filmed in Zero Dark Thirty). This figure is said to be the sole designer of all US intelligence operations on Iran. He was also said to be responsible for the killing of Hezbollah field commanders, Imad Mughniyah, and also Sulaymani. Washington minimised the news and only acknowledged that the plane had crashed in Afghanistan and not because it was shot, but simply because of engine damage. Photos and videos published by Iranian media showed some signs that parts of the aircraft were hit by missile fragments. The mystery increased because the Taliban had no history of shooting down US aircraft. Shortly a week after the plane-shooting incident, news emerged that the Taliban had kidnapped a CIA agent and shot down a US drone.

<sup>15</sup> The seriousness of Khamenei's promises is no secret, even for many parties outside Tehran. Serious foreign analysts and observers, for example, easily find holes in the promises of President Hasan Ruhani and many previous Iranian presidents. But practically no one has found a case where Khamenei's make such promise lightly. One example is on Syria. When ISIS was at the gates of Damascus and almost all world leaders predicted the end of Bashar Assad's government to be a matter of weeks, Khamenei promised that Damascus would remain standing and sovereign. This is the promise which then led Sulaymani, the "best son of the Revolution" who was previously more behind the scenes, to move the forefront of the fight throughout Syria and, later, in Iraq. The promise was kept even though trucks had to go back and forth via the Iraqi border carrying the coffin of Iranian soldiers who died on various fronts. Iran has, until now,

---

remained loyal to supporting Syria, even when the coffin returning to the border was Sulaymani's.

<sup>16</sup> In total there are 19 US bases outside the Iranian border. Of that number, eleven of them are located on the east and west sides of Iran and the remaining eight on the north and south sides.

<sup>17</sup> On 3 June 1989, when Khomeini died of illness at the age of 89, the world witnessed a phenomenal burial procession, the largest of its time. Millions of people poured out in Tehran, a city with a population of around 6.2 million people at that time. Crowd of mourners packed 32 kilometers of the funeral route, from Khomeini's funeral home in northern Tehran to the Zahra Bahesy Cemetery on the southern outskirts of the city. The crowd cheered. The Guinness Book of Records recorded 10.2 million mourners, forcing the government to fly Khomeini's coffin with a Bell helicopter. When the helicopter landed on Bahesty Zahra, hysterical masses were waiting. They snatched the coffin. The new army managed to seize it and put it back in the helicopter. When the helicopter was about to rise, a fatal accident nearly occurred. The masses tried again to seize and hold the helicopter's arms. Khomeini could only be buried the next day, on 11 July after the army installed containment barricades and closed off the cemetery. Eight people were killed and more than 500 others injured due to jostling during the burial procession.

<sup>18</sup> Official government statistics say about 25 million Iranians, or about 30 percent of the country's population, participated in the entire Sulaymani burial procession.

<sup>19</sup> See Gallagher, Nancy; Mohseni, Ebrahim; Ramsay, and Clay (October 2019), "Iranian Public Opinion under Maximum Pressure: A public opinion study". The Center

---

for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM).

<sup>20</sup> Al-Quran, surah Ali Imran: 169.

<sup>21</sup> Of the many Iranian ballistic missiles, the Raad-500 appears to be the cheapest. Introduced to the public a month after the funeral of Sulaymani and ahead of the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution on 11 February 2020, the price of the Raad-500 is only half of the Fateh missile, or around US \$ 50,000 per unit. However, its capabilities and specifications are far more sophisticated. The missile is fully composite, making it lighter, and can withstand extreme temperatures of up to 3000 degrees Celsius. The missile is capable to carry two tons of explosives and has the freedom to maneuver in the atmosphere because it has two motors. Interestingly, Tehran introduced the Raad-500 along with Salman, a sophisticated missile engine, only owned by a handful of countries, with Thrust Vectoring Control capabilities. Simply put, TVC allows missiles to 'dance' freely outside the thin layers of the atmosphere, before returning to earth at extreme speeds. There is an opinion that by showing off the two components of sophisticated weapons, Tehran gave a strong message that they have mastered Intercontinental Ballistic Missile technology, which allows Iran to target US strategic bases such as Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean or even further: US mainland. Tehran itself claims the Raad-500 and Salman as major breakthroughs that allow Iran to more freely place satellites in space.

<sup>22</sup> Iran has bitter experience with foreign weapons during the Iraq-Iran War. The US embargo on the Iranian air force meant that their fleet, the strongest in the Middle East at that time, could only operate with half the power. The continued embargo, which still continue to this day, would



---

have turned them all into junk had Iran not walked in the path of independence. At present, Iran is the only country recorded to still operate the F-14 Tomcat, one of the best US fighter jets in its era.

<sup>23</sup> This contrasts with the condition of Iran at the beginning of the Revolution. According to Minister Javad Zarif, Iran had to beg everywhere to be able to have a missile. Almost all doors were closed. Among those who reached out was Syria, then under the rule of Hafiz Assad. Syria was the one who educated dozens of people sent by Iran to learn how to operate Scud missiles. The training, which usually takes months, was finished in a matter of weeks. This small team later returned to Iran and started a local missile research and development program. One of the brightest of the team was a young engineer, Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam. Known later as "the Father of Iranian Missiles", he was the one who gave birth to almost all of the missiles that Iran has today. One of Moghaddam's monumental works before he died in November 2011 was the 'monster' rocket for Iran's space exploration project. Iran is reportedly going to use solid-fueled rocket with a diameter of almost 4 meters and 48 meters high – almost half the length of a football field – for missions to place satellites in geostationary orbit.

<sup>24</sup> An estimate says the US needs at least 1.6 million soldiers to be able to start a ground invasion of Iran.

<sup>25</sup> Iran first introduced the existence of missile cities in October 2015, only a few months after the signing of the JCOPA. At that time, General Amir Ali Hajizadeh told the IRIB government reporter, who was invited to the location with his eyes closed, that Iran had "hundreds" of similar cities. The city holds all types of strategic Iranian weaponry, including liquid-fuel missiles that are ready to be fired at any time. A number of extra safeguards are

---

applied in this secret city. For example, to prevent fatal accidents, all crucial missile components are stored in a separate room and reassembled before launch. Missile and oxidizer fuels are also placed in rooms that have been specifically designed to avoid corrosion and without the need for extensive maintenance. In general, missile cities are considered safer for the public and the environment. The entire design, construction and operational process is carried out entirely by the military or military-owned companies, so the construction costs are relatively low. Iran has never published its costs. Some suspect, Iran began the construction of cities since the 1990s.

<sup>26</sup> Two of the 15 missiles failed to cross the Iranian border. Satellite photos confirm there were 13 points hit by missiles at Ayn Al-Assad. Everything was precise.

<sup>27</sup> The excitement in Iran only lasted a few hours. At dawn, a new test comes. A big tragedy. The air defense system outside Imam Khomeini International Airport shot down a Ukrainian civilian plane that had just taken off with 176 passengers inside. On 11 January 2020, the Government of Iran officially announced responsibility and apologized, calling the tragedy was born of accident. General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, in an open explanation to the Iranian public, said the tragedy occurred when the Iranian defense system was still in full alert in anticipation of the US counterattack. He said, there was a sudden disruption in the communication system of the air defense system operators near the location, which made them unable to communicate with headquarters. At the same time, he said, operators must make decisions on what they see on radar as cruise missile movements that lead to Iranian military facilities. "They only have 10 seconds to make a decision," Hajizadeh said, promising major military

---

reforms to ensure a similar tragedy would not be repeated.

<sup>28</sup> Hajizadeh doubted the claim that there were no casualties on the part of US soldiers. "We know there are nine planes flying the wounded soldiers to Jordan, some to Israel, and some to the US hospital in Baghdad," he said. The US itself initially said there were a small number of soldiers who had brain trauma due to the effects of missile attacks. Over the weeks, the number of "concussion" soldiers increased to dozens of people. After a month had passed, the Pentagon announced that more than 100 soldiers were experiencing the same pain. In Tehran, in a statement, the Iranian military quipped by saying the US had replaced the "dead" vocabulary for soldiers with the word "brain trauma".

<sup>29</sup> Filkins, Dexter. 23 September 2013. "The Shadow Commander". [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com). Last accessed on 18 January 2020.

<sup>30</sup> The Iran-Iraq war presents an irony for Kurds. In Iran, they tried to rebel while their brothers in Iraq helped Iranian forces face Saddam Hussein's aggression.

<sup>31</sup> Fisher, Gabe. 24 February 2013. "Israel's strike on Syria last month killed top Iranian general". [www.timesofisrael.com](http://www.timesofisrael.com). Last accessed on 5 February 2020.

<sup>32</sup> "Shadow Commander: Iran's Military Mastermind". BBC Two. 14 March 2019.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Soufan, Ali. "Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy". *CTC Sentinel*. Vol. 11. Issue 10. November 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Mack, Eitay. "The unwritten history of Israel's alliance with the Shah's dictatorship". 24 June 2019. [www.972mag.com](http://www.972mag.com). Last accessed on 20 January 2020.

- 
- <sup>36</sup> Curtis, Glenn E dan Eric Hooglund (editor). 2008. *Iran: a country study*. Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Hal. 276.
- <sup>37</sup> Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal. "Factors Conducive to the Politicization of the Lebanese Shia and the Emergence of Hizbullah". *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 14, Issue 3, September 2003. Hal. 300-3.
- <sup>38</sup> Lebih lanjut, lihat Saad, Amal. 2019. "Challenging the sponsor-proxy model: the Iran-Hizbullah relationship. *Global Discourse*, vol. 9, no. 4. Hal. 627-50.
- <sup>39</sup> Chappel, Bill. 8 April 2019. "US Labels Iran's Revolutionary Guard as A Foreign Terrorist Organization". [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org). Last accessed on 4 February 2020.
- <sup>40</sup> Narwani, Sharmine. 3 November 2017. "Hezbollah is Not a Threat to America". [www.theamericanconservative.com](http://www.theamericanconservative.com). Last accessed on 4 February 2020.
- <sup>41</sup> "Speech of the Secretary General of Hizbullah, Sayyid Hasan Nashrullah, on 25 May 2018". [www.mediarelations-lb.org](http://www.mediarelations-lb.org). Last accessed on 21 January 2020.
- <sup>42</sup> Bajoghli, Narges. 15 May 2019. "The Hidden Sources of Iranian Strength". [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com). Last accessed on 21 January 2020.
- <sup>43</sup> "United States Army Special Operations Command: Counter-Unconventional Warfare White Paper". 2004. [www.publicintelligence.net](http://www.publicintelligence.net). Last accessed on 22 January 2020.
- <sup>44</sup> Speck of Hasan Nashrullah on 12 January 2020. [www.alahednews.com.lb](http://www.alahednews.com.lb). Last accessed on 22 January 2020.
- <sup>45</sup> Jihad Mughniyah, a Hizbullah commander, was killed in an air raid at the Syrian-Israeli border near the Golan Heights.

---

The attack was believed to be conducted by Israeli military.

<sup>46</sup> Report from TV station Lebanon Almayadeen on 30 January 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Filkins, Dexter. *Op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> "IRGC Quds Force Commander Reveals Untold Facts about 33-Day War". 2 October 2019. [www.tasnimnews.com](http://www.tasnimnews.com). Last accessed on 23 January 2020.

<sup>49</sup> In this kidnapping action, Regev and Goldwasser were reported to have been seriously injured and had been treated by Hezbollah. Later, both were known to have died. Hezbollah claimed, Israeli air strikes on Lebanon had killed the two Israeli soldiers.

<sup>50</sup> Hersh, Seymour. 21 August 2006. "Watching Lebanon". [www.thenewyorker.com](http://www.thenewyorker.com). Last accessed on 22 January 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Conal Urquhart. "Israel planned for Lebanon war months in advance, PM says". [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com). Last accessed on 22 January 2020.

<sup>52</sup> After being released, Samir Kuntar became a Hezbollah fighter assigned to the Golan Heights, Syria, to help President Bashar Assad's Government fight rebels and terrorists. In 2015, Samir was killed on the outskirts of Damascus by a rocket attack. Free Syrian Army claims responsibility for this attack.

<sup>53</sup> Goldman, Adam, dan Ellen Nakashima. 30 January 2015. "CIA and Mossad killed senior Hezbollah figure in car bombing". [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com). Last accessed on 22 January 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Bergman, Ronen, dan Raz Zimmt. 7 April 2018. "Israel's most dangerous enemy: Who are you, Hajj Qasem Soleimani?". [www.ynetnews.com](http://www.ynetnews.com). Last accessed on 22 January 2020.

- 
- <sup>55</sup> Sly, Liz. 20 March 2015. "Petraeus: The Islamic State isn't our biggest problem in Iraq". [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com). Last accessed on 25 January 2020.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> Lamothe, Dan. 20 March 2015. "Animosity between David Petraeus and Iranian commander, Qassem Soleimani, still on display". [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com). Last accessed on 2 February 2020.
- <sup>58</sup> Carnelos, Marco. 15 March 2019. "Qassem Soleimani is a master strategist, not a cartoon villain". [www.middleeasteye.net](http://www.middleeasteye.net). Last accessed on 4 February 2020.
- <sup>59</sup> Clark, Wesley. 2007. *A Time to Lead: For Duty, Honor and Country*. New York: St Martin's Press. In his book, Clark does not mention the four other countries. But in a television interview, he mentioned the four countries: Lebanon, Libya, Somalia and Sudan.
- <sup>60</sup> "Shadow Commander: Iran's Military Mastermind". BBC Two. 14 March 2019.
- <sup>61</sup> Magnier Elijah. 27 November 2018. "Who boosted Qassem Soleimani's Image and spread Iran's influence throughout the Middle East?". [www.ejmagnier.com](http://www.ejmagnier.com). Last accessed on 25 January 2020.
- <sup>62</sup> Magnier, Elijah. 5 January 2020. "Fragmentation in the Axis of Resistance Led to Soleimani's Death". [www.ejmagnier.com](http://www.ejmagnier.com). Last accessed on 2 February 2020.
- <sup>63</sup> The founder and leader of the Mahdi Army is Muqtada Sadr. He came from a distinguished family of scholars in Iraq. His father, Ayatullah Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq Sadr, and his uncle, Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir Sadr, were martyred when Saddam Hussein's regime came to power.

- 
- <sup>64</sup> “Letter may detail Iraqi insurgency’s concerns”. 10 February 2004. [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com). Last accessed on 26 January 2020.
- <sup>65</sup> Whitney, Mike. 13 March 2013. “The Myth of the Surge”. [www.counterpunch.org](http://www.counterpunch.org). Last accessed on 25 January 2020.
- <sup>66</sup> Oliver, Mark. 23 February 2006. “Shia shrine blasts spark reprisal attacks”. [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com). Last accessed on 26 January 2020.
- <sup>67</sup> Kramer, Nicholas J. 23 November 2016. “Waking up to the truth about the Sunni Awakening”. [www.warontherocks.com](http://www.warontherocks.com). Last accessed on 26 January 2020.
- <sup>68</sup> Jamail, Dahr. “The myth of sectarianism: The policy is divide to rule”. *International Socialist Review*, Issue 57, January-February 2008.
- <sup>69</sup> Kamal, Nesrine. 18 June 2016. “Sushi children defy Sunni-Shia divide”. [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com). Last accessed on 25 January 2020.
- <sup>70</sup> Jamail, Dahr. *op. cit.*
- <sup>71</sup> “From El Salvador to Iraq: Washington’s man behind brutal police squads”. 6 March 2013. [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com). Last accessed on 26 January 2020.
- <sup>72</sup> Magnier, Elijah. *Op. cit.*
- <sup>73</sup> Carnelos, Marcos. 15 March 2019. “Qassem Soleimani is a master strategist, not a cartoon villain”. [www.middleeasteye.net](http://www.middleeasteye.net). Last accessed on 26 January 2020.
- <sup>74</sup> Saadoun, Mustafa. 14 January 2016. “It’s official: Sunnis joining Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units”. [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com). Last accessed on 26 January 2020.
- <sup>75</sup> Porter, Gareth. 9 July 2019. “Lies About Iran Killing US Troops in Iraq Are a Ploy to Justify War”. [www.truthout.org](http://www.truthout.org). Last accessed on 26 January 2020.

- 
- <sup>76</sup> “Noam Chomsky on U.S. Policy Towards Iran”. 19 November 2007. [www.chomsky.info](http://www.chomsky.info). Last accessed on 26 January 2020.
- <sup>77</sup> Malik, Cyrus. 23 August 2016. “Washington’s Sunni Myth and the Civil Wars in Syria and Iraq”. [www.warontherocks.com](http://www.warontherocks.com). Last accessed on 27 January 2020. Cyrus Malik, according to the site editor's note, is an alias. The editor allows the author to use the alias due to the author's security reasons. The editor believes in the author's expertise and the sources he used because he knows him.
- <sup>78</sup> It is also interesting that the voices of Christians in Iraq and Syria hardly ever have a place in mainstream Western media and in the political centers of Western countries. The media and Western politicians are uniquely listening to the voices of extreme circles in the Sunni world.
- <sup>79</sup> Hersh, Seymour. 26 February 2007. “The Redirection”. [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com). Last accessed on 28 February 2020.
- <sup>80</sup> Graff, Peter dan Khalid al-Ansary. 23 August 2008. “VP choice Biden unpopular in Iraq for autonomy plan”. [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.
- <sup>81</sup> Al-Salhy, Suadad. 23 January 2020. “US seeking to carve out Sunni state as its influence in Iraq wanes”. [www.middleeasteye.net](http://www.middleeasteye.net). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.
- <sup>82</sup> Abdel-Latif, Omayma. 1 March 2007. “The Shi-Sunni Divide: Myths and Reality.” *Al-Ahram Weekly*.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>84</sup> Tariq al-Hashimi is a Sunni politician who is part of the Iraqiyya political coalition. Formed in 2009, the coalition was led by, among others, the ex-banned party member of the Ba'ath, Saleh al-Mutlaq. (see: Katzman, Kenneth. 15 July 2011. “Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights”.



- 
- Congressional Research Service. [www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov). Last accessed on 28 January 2020)
- <sup>85</sup> Omar Al Jawoshi; Michael Schwartz. 9 September 2012. "Death Sentence for Sunni on Day of Violence in Iraq". [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.
- <sup>86</sup> Malik, Cyrus. *Op. cit.*
- <sup>87</sup> Spencer, Richard. 14 October 2014. "ISIL carried out massacres and mass sexual enslavement of Yazidis, UN confirms". [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.
- <sup>88</sup> "ISIS commits mass murder, advertises it: Iraq executions detailed". 27 June 2014. [www.rt.com](http://www.rt.com). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.
- <sup>89</sup> Hines, Nico. 18 June 2014. "Petraeus: U.S. Must Not Become the Shia Militia's Air Force". [www.thedailybeast.com](http://www.thedailybeast.com). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.
- <sup>90</sup> Pages 287-293 (291) *JW v DOD and State* 14-812. [www.judicialwatch.org](http://www.judicialwatch.org). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.
- <sup>91</sup> "Shadow Commander: Iran's Military Mastermind". 14 March 2019. BBC Two.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>93</sup> Magnier, Elijah. 27 November 2018. "Who boosted Qassem Soleimani's image and spread Iran's influence throughout the Middle East? [www.ejmagnier.com](http://www.ejmagnier.com). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.
- <sup>94</sup> "Shadow Commander". *Op. cit.*
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>96</sup> Ragab, Ali. 10 December 2019. "Khamis al-Khanjar targeted by US sanctions". [www.theportal-center.com](http://www.theportal-center.com). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.
- <sup>97</sup> Antonopoulos, Paul. 19 December 2019. "Law passes making the PMU a part of Iraq's national forces".

---

[www.almasdarnews.com](http://www.almasdarnews.com). Last accessed on 28 January 2020.

<sup>98</sup> “Iraqi PM says West and Iran both helping against Islamic State”. 24 January 2015. [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com). Last accessed on 29 January 2020.

<sup>99</sup> Frantzman, Seth J. 30 December 2019. “US airstrikes target Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and Syria”. [www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com). Last accessed on 29 January 2020.

<sup>100</sup> Malik, Cyrus. *Op. cit.*

<sup>101</sup> Porter, Gareth. 22 June 2017. “How America Armed Terrorists in Syria”. [www.theamericanconservative.com](http://www.theamericanconservative.com). Last accessed on 29 January 2020.

<sup>102</sup> O’Connor, Tom. 14 December 2017. “How ISIS got weapons from the US and used them to take Iraq and Syria”. [www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com). Last accessed on 29 January 2020.

<sup>103</sup> Narwani, Sharmine. 25 June 2018. “Are al-Qaeda Affiliates Fighting Alongside U.S. Rebels in Syria’s South?”. [www.theamericanconservative.com](http://www.theamericanconservative.com). Last accessed on 29 January 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Binnie, Jeremy dan Neil Gibson. 8 April 2016. “US arm shipment to Syrian rebels detailed. IHS Jane’s Defense Weekly. [www.janes.com](http://www.janes.com). Last accessed on 29 January 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Mazzetti, Mark, Adam Goldman, dan Michael S Schmidt. 2 August 2017. “Behind the Sudden Death of a Billion Secret CIA. War in Syria”. [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). Last accessed on 29 January 2020.

<sup>106</sup> Hashem, Ali. 16 March 2017. “In Syria, Iran sees necessary war”. [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com). Last accessed on 30 January 2020.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

- 
- <sup>108</sup> "FSA: Mustafa Badreddine Leading Hizbullah Operations in Qusayr". 20 May 2013. [www.naharnet.com](http://www.naharnet.com). Last accessed on 31 January 2020.
- <sup>109</sup> "How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow". 6 October 2015. [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com). Last accessed on 30 January 2020.
- <sup>110</sup> Frolovskiy, Dmitriy. 1 February 2019. "What Putin Really Wants in Syria". [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com). Last accessed on 30 January 2020.
- <sup>111</sup> Aboufadel, Leith. 11 November 2015. "Where is Major General Qassem Soleimani?". [www.almasdarnews.com](http://www.almasdarnews.com). Last accessed on 31 January 2020.
- <sup>112</sup> "Qassem Soleimani's role in the Syrian War". 10 January 2020. [www.almasdarnews.com](http://www.almasdarnews.com). Last accessed on 31 January 2020.
- <sup>113</sup> Demographic data indicates that Sunni accounts for 74 percent of the population of Syria, whhila Shi'a 13 percent, Christians 10 percent, and Druze 3 percent.
- <sup>114</sup> Abu Syu'aib Muhammad bin Nushayr al-Numayri is believed to be the founder of the Alawi sect in the 9th Century.
- <sup>115</sup> Wyatt, Caroline. 3 April 2016. "Syrian Alawites distance themselves from Assad". [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com). Last accessed on 31 January 2020.
- <sup>116</sup> Curtis, Peter Theo. 4 Oktober 2011. "The Cult: The Twisted, Terrifying Last Days of Assad's Syria". [www.newrepublic.com](http://www.newrepublic.com). Last accessed on 31 January 2020.
- <sup>117</sup> Zambelis, Chris. "Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience". CTS Sentinel, vol. 8, issue 5. May 2015. Hal. 5-10.
- <sup>118</sup> Vignal, Leila. 26 January 2015. "The Origin of the Syrian Insurrection". [www.booksandideas.net](http://www.booksandideas.net). Last accessed on 31 January 2020.

---

<sup>119</sup> Malik, Cyrus, *op. cit.*

<sup>120</sup> "Terrorists affiliated to Jabhat al-Nusra confess to assassination of Sheikh al-Bouti". 22 December 2013. [www.sana.sy](http://www.sana.sy). Last accessed on 31 January 2020.

<sup>121</sup> Malik, Cyrus, *op. cit.*

<sup>122</sup> "Syria: Iran's General Soleimani in Aleppo". [www.en.farsnews.com](http://www.en.farsnews.com). Last accessed on 5 February 2020.

<sup>123</sup> "General Suleimani: The Creator of the Axis of Resistance". [www.alahednews.com.lb](http://www.alahednews.com.lb). Last accessed on 5 February 2020.

<sup>124</sup> Jonkers, Brecht. 25 November 2017. "Iranian courtesy: General Soleimani apologizes to Albukamal house owner". [www.almasdarnews.com](http://www.almasdarnews.com). Last accessed on 5 February 2020.

<sup>125</sup> Beeley, Vanessa. "General Qassem Soleiman saved Christian lives in Syria and Iraq". [www.thewallwillfall.org](http://www.thewallwillfall.org). Last accessed on 14 February 2020.

<sup>126</sup> Magnier, Elijah. 5 January 2020. "Fragmentation in the Axis of Resistance Led to Soleimani's Death". [www.ejmagnier.com](http://www.ejmagnier.com). Last accessed on 5 February 2020.

<sup>127</sup> " Hamas leader speaks at Qassem Soleimani's funeral in Tehran". 7 January 2020. [www.almasdarnews.com](http://www.almasdarnews.com). Last accessed on 1 February 2020.

<sup>128</sup> Rostami-Povey, Elaheh. 2010. *Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in its Region*. London: Zed Books.

<sup>129</sup> "Senior Hamas official: 'Qasim Soleimani gave us everything Iran has to offer'". 15 January 2020. [www.middleeastobserver.net](http://www.middleeastobserver.net). Last accessed on 1 February 2020.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Rostami-Povey, Elaheh, *op. cit.*

- 
- <sup>132</sup> Barnard, Anne dan Hania Mourtada. 2 Oktober 2012. "Syria Berates Hamas Chief, an Old Ally, on State TV". [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). Last accessed on 1 February 2020.
- <sup>133</sup> Deif is the Supreme Commander of the Izzuddin al-Qassam Brigade. He's one of Israel's number one targets for the past 24 years.
- <sup>134</sup> " Hamas Military Chief Commander, Deif's Condolence Letter to Sayyed Nasrallah: United in Face of 'Israel". [www.alahednews.com.lb](http://www.alahednews.com.lb). Last accessed on 1 February 2020.
- <sup>135</sup> Eldar, Shlomi. 6 July 2017. " Hamas turns to Iran". [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com). Last accessed on 1 February 2020.
- <sup>136</sup> Kais, Roi dan Elinor Levy. 24 May 2017. "Iran extends hand to new Hamas leader Haniyeh". [www.ynetnews.com](http://www.ynetnews.com). Last accessed on 1 February 2020.
- <sup>137</sup> Abu Amer, Adnan. 2 June 2017. "In eye of regional storm, Hamas pushed closer to Tehran". [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com). Last accessed on 1 February 2020.
- <sup>138</sup> "Senior Hamas official: 'Qasim Soleimani gave us everything Iran has to offer'". 15 January 2020. [www.middleeastobserver.net](http://www.middleeastobserver.net). Last accessed on 1 February 2020.
- <sup>139</sup> "Soleimani in Gaza". 24 January 2020. [www.iswnews.com](http://www.iswnews.com). Last accessed on 1 February 2020.
- <sup>140</sup> "Shadow Commander: Iran's Military Mastermind". BBC Two. 14 March 2019.