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Political Theology of Shi'i Transfiguration: How Qasem Soleimani Will Continue to Shape the Western Asia?

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After the US assassination of Qasem Soleimani near Iraq's international airport, many pundits have suggested that a dead Soleimani is more dangerous for US hegemony in the region, than a living Soleimani. Why? Below I highlight the political theology of Shi'i transfiguration underpinning this idea. As Ghonche Tazmini has argued, well-established theological patterns of thought will transform the 'Shadow Commander' (as a BBC documentary named Soleimani) into the 'Eternal General', who will continue to shape the Western Asia (*aka* the Middle East) even more effectively than in life.

### **Soleimani's Life**

Iranians have plenty of rituals around death. Persian culture cultivates mindfulness of death by intimately embedding death in everyday life. The tombs of Iran's classic poets, such as Hafez and Sa'adi, have for centuries been main sites for pilgrimage. The holy shrines of Shi'i Imams and other religious figures are respected places for prayer and regular visit. Remarkably, the *Guinness* world record for the largest percentage of population attending a funeral belongs to Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution, who died in 1989. Khomeini's funeral record has remained uncontested until the assassination of Soleimani, with millions attending his funeral in Iran (as well as Iraq). Many Western observers were baffled by the fact that a few weeks after the anti-government riots, millions would show unprecedented support for a key political and military figure. It was down to more knowledgeable journalists to explain the obvious: that Iran is not a monolith or a community of like-minded crowds (Gallagher, Mohseni, and Ramsay 2020). I would like to explain Soleimani's popularity from the perspective of his Iranian admirers.

Qasem Soleimani was an Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander. Although he was popular in certain circles and sections of Iranian and Lebanese society over the past three decades, he achieved the peak of his fame in around 2014. With ISIS gaining more power in the Levant, Soleimani was admired for masterminding their defeat in a series of face to face battles, at a time at which even the Russians were wary of entering the mayhem for fear of casualties to their army. Soleimani's fame was enhanced by Iranian governmental cultural centres and media, which shared videos of Soleimani in the battlefield, not only commanding the forces, but also joking with soldiers. In one video he is seen talking furiously to his soldiers about their mission to save the lives of women and children in a village surrounded by ISIS. In another, he is seen laughing with an Iraqi commander over the misspelling of a word. It became a trend among young people to use his picture as their Twitter avatar, with his black eyebrows and white hair looking to some point outside the frame.

*Bodyguard* (2016) is a film made by the famous Iranian director, Ebrahim Hatami Kia, loosely based on Soleimani's life. At the end of the movie, the protagonist is assassinated by American agents in Tehran. This might now sound prophetic. But the fact is that Soleimani was known for publicly expressing the wish for a noble death in the battlefield. In one of the videos, from a battle against ISIS in either Syria or Iraq, he is seen resisting a commander who tries to stop him from moving further toward the battlefield. Soleimani's response was that he was not afraid of "a couple of bullets". Unlike many of his peers, he did not see his role as that of a general from behind a desk. This well-known wish for, and expectation of,

an honourable death in battle, made him the embodiment of the Iranian culture of mindfulness of death, and the Sufi-like embrace of impermanence, long before his assassination.

### **Transfiguration of Soleimani**

Soleimani and Ayatollah Khomeini share another, deeper similarity, beyond the magnitude of their funerals. They are, arguably, the only two figures in the history of the Islamic Republic for whom the process of transfiguration into a martyr had already begun during their own lifetime. The transfiguration of a martyr or a pious person after his or her death has always been part of the Shi'i political theology. A grave will turn into a shrine or site of regular, ritualistic visit if that person died in a noble and honourable way, particularly during a fight against injustice. But for these two figures, the process of transfiguration had already begun while they were alive. What is the Shi'i political theology of transfiguration and why were Soleimani and Khomeini transfigured in their own lifetime? What made them 'eternal figures' for so many? In brief, the role they played in particular historical moments put them in an analogical position to the protagonists of the archetypal tragedy of Karbala, allowing them to be recognised as figures who embody the eternal battle of good versus evil.

In Christianity, a transfiguration occurs in the story of Jesus' glorious appearance on a mountain, when his luminosity is observed by a handful of apostles. This story of transfiguration is a determining moment, in which the apostles come to understand that Jesus is God's incarnation. In Shi'i version of Islam, the story of Imam Hossein's martyrdom plays a similar role. Shias around the world have various rituals for mourning the unjust killing of the grandson of the prophet at the battle of Karbala in 680 CE. As the story is told, Imam Hossein had protested the injustice of Yazid, the caliph of the time, and refused to accept his tyrannical rule. As a result, he and seventy-two of his followers were killed in battle. The idea behind the Shi'i rituals commemorating Imam Hossein is to become *Hosseini* or *Hosseini-like*. In Iran, rituals include a performative and theatrical recreation of the battle of Karbala, similar to the Christian Passion Plays. The performative ritual is called *ta'ziye*. As Hamid Dabashi explains:

The characters of *ta'ziyeh* drama are not just metaphorical, they are metamorphic- they easily mutate into contemporary historical figures. The transfiguration of *ta'ziyeh* characters is historically multi-metamorphic, from historical to metaphorical, and from metaphorical to historical. That multi-metamorphic aspect of *Ta'ziyeh* characters makes them at once extremely potent allegories of cosmic significance and yet instantaneously accessible to contemporary remodulations (Dabashi 2010, 186).

This ritualistic domain has always been capable of expansion into the realm of politics. It was in a similar vein that the revolutionary slogans of the 1979 Islamic revolution called Ayatollah Khomeini, the *Hosseini of the time*, and the Shah was turned into *the Yazid of the age*.

The updating and ‘contemporary remodulation’ of the story of Karbala was a recurring theme in the works of Ali Shariati, an Iranian revolutionary intellectual of the 1970s who died two years before the revolution. Shariati is mentioned in Michel Foucault’s observations on Iran, based on his travels in Iran during the 1979 revolution. Foucault mentions the enduring popularity and public presence of Shariati: “we encounter a shadow that haunts all political and religious life in Iran today: that of Ali Shariati, whose death two years ago gave him the position, so privileged in Shi’ism, of the invisible Present, of the ever-present Absent” (Foucault 2005, 207). Arguably, this ever present absence is related to Shariati’s interpretation of Imam Hossain’s uprising against injustice.

When we speak of Hossein, we do not mean Hossein as a person. Hossein was that individual who negated himself with absolute sincerity. [...] His content is no longer an individual, but is a thought. He has transformed himself into the very school [for which he has negated himself] (Shariati 1980 [1972]).

That is the school of Shi’ism. In a way, Shariati was theorising the expansion of *ta’ziye* into a grand-political performance in order to make political transformation possible. The idea of Karbala as a mega-performance and a framework for making sense of everyday life is a unique survival, which has repeatedly been used to reinvent and refashion the fabric of Shia political existence over the past half-century. Soleimani, in a way very similar to Ayatollah Khomeini, consciously lived a *ta’ziye*-like life. As a result, along with a few others, they came to embody the Shi’i eternal tragedy of the battle of good versus evil, turning them into eternal figures in the minds of their followers.

There are moments in history in which one person ascends to the position of representing a grand narrative. That is what I called transfiguration. Shi’i interpretations of the tragedy of Karbala as an event in the ‘holy history’ of Islam is a useful framework for thinking about such transfigurations more generally. Ayatollah Khomeini famously led the revolution in Iran which toppled the Shah, a major US ally in the region. Forty years later, a war-veteran Qasem Soleimani became the representative of the security of Iran in the face of the regional challenge, primarily from ISIS. One led a political transformation to gain independence from US control, the other was the public face of the country’s defence in a much-troubled Western Asia, destabilized by constant and damaging US interventions.

The unprecedented assassination of a state official by the US has made Soleimani into a figure who is, for many, an eternal commander in the ongoing political and military conflicts of the Western Asia. He has now been assimilated into the powerful mythology of the mega-performance of Karbala, the foundational Shi’i tale of the eternal battle of good versus evil. That is why, as many social scientists and political analysts have pointed out, the death of Soleimani is far more dangerous for the US than his life. There are generations to come who will follow his lead, as an ever-present-absent in the following decade.

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