

**BOOK REVIEW**

# The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, the US, and Iran's Global Ambitions

**Arash Azizi**

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The process of writing a biography is seldom easy and it gets even more complicated if the subject is associated with politics and the military. Qasem Soleimani is considered a terrorist in one part of the world, yet adored and admired in another part. Soleimani, the de facto creator and long-time leader of Iran's elite Quds Force unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), is an extremely controversial figure in the world and in Iranian politics. This book is particularly interesting because of the often aggressive and not always constructive foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Tehran's expansionist policy in the vast region from Afghanistan to Syria is a derivative of Iran's fundamentalist revolutionary ideology and a factor in destabilizing regional politics. Following the will of the Islamic Republic founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's leaders are actively exporting fundamentalist Shiism, trying to strengthen their geopolitical and economic influence. After the Iranian revolution of 1979, there was practically no regional conflict in the Islamic world in which Iran was not involved and did not try to spread Shiism as a political worldview and ideology. In these wars, the shadow of Iran was always represented "like a mythical bandit in a folktale" by Soleimani (p. 6).

*The Shadow Commander* is an interesting attempt to understand the mosaic of numerous regional conflicts in the dust and glory of the revolution and to analyze the internal political multisteps to the personality of Soleimani, as he signed his letters, "soldier and son" of the supreme leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei. Soleimani is a character from Hollywood action movies and epic films about spies and intelligence, who by the will of fate appears in various parts of the world defeating the enemies of the revolution and building the glory of the new Iran. At the same time, Soleimani is not one of the great humanists. He is known for his brutality, intransigence, and toughness, and is guilty of numerous murders and other violent crimes (p. 259). Moreover, *The Shadow Commander* is the first biography of Soleimani published outside of Iran.

It is hard to find someone interested in politics who does not know about Soleimani. However, media news differs from academic biography. The personality of Soleimani is a topic of interest for international-relations amateurs. Who was this enemy of ISIS, Israel, the Taliban, the United States, the Iranian liberals, and Saudi Arabia, and how did he become the punishing sword of Iran's authoritarian regime? What influenced him and made him a loyal soldier of Khamenei? It is difficult to answer these questions because the Islamic Republic of Iran is an extremely closed country. There is very little information that does not have to pass through the censorship screen of Iranian theologians, and the data is highly contradictory.

The author begins his historical narrative with a description of the Soleimani homeland and asks a logical question: "How did it happen that a man from the marginal parts of Iranian society,

the periphery, became a commander, managing armies?" It is the central question of the book. The place, called Qanat Molk, not well known even in Iran. This is in the country's periphery, not known to anyone for famous personalities (pp. 6–8). Soleimani became the only superstar of this place (p. 13). He spent his childhood in poverty but was an able student, and in 1975, at the age of 18, found his first job—as an aide in the public-relations department dealing with water (p. 22). A special role in the fate of Soleimani, according to the author, was played by the gym and karate: "He often visited the gym, was fond of karate almost as soon as it appeared in Iran" (p. 30). No less interesting is that Soleimani was not religious in his youth but began to visit the mosque quite often after the revolution (p. 34).

Fate did not foretell greatness for the country boy, but what was coming was what Eric Hobsbawm calls "social revolution in the Name of God." Soleimani joined the revolution almost immediately but did not play any role in it due to his age. The author characterizes the young Soleimani as ambitious and willing to become a part of something bigger (p. 57). Then came the war with Iraq, which changed Soleimani's life. He planned "to make this war his own." Soleimani was not part of urban society or the intellectual elite. In 1980, he was allowed to join the IRGC and after that took part in his first war. Thanks to his physical qualities, he quickly moved up the career ladder and skillfully mastered the necessary crafts for the military and revolution, such as public speeches and conscription. He began to use religious invocations, to remember Allah more often, and gradually to fit into the elite of the security forces (p. 97). Unfortunately, the author does not mention anything about the illegal seizure of the US embassy in 1979 by a group of fanatics.

In 1998, Soleimani received an unremarkable but, as it turned out, fateful appointment for the entire Middle East: he became the head of the little-known Quds Force, named after Jerusalem. The author writes that "the Supreme Leader made the most consequential appointment of his life" (p. 160). Azizi characterizes Soleimani as a person who loves to be in the center of events and knows no fear. Confirming his hypothesis, the author writes about Soleimani's trip to Afghanistan. In 1996, he arrived in Kabul a few weeks before the capital fell into the hands of Iran's enemies, the Sunni-radical Taliban. "He was in the middle of it. He sat with us on the ground in Kabul when we were waiting for the Taliban to attack," the author writes, referring to the words of one of the leaders of the Afghan anti-Taliban alliance (p. 170).

The situation in Afghanistan was extremely tough. The Taliban took control of most of the country. In Kabul, there was a pro-Iranian government, consisting mainly of Tajiks close to the Iranians. Soleimani's trip to Iran did not give any hint the Taliban would take power in Afghanistan, but it became important for the Shadow Commander's promotion up the career ladder (p. 170). Azizi, citing little-known sources, quotes a conversation between Soleimani and the leader of the anti-Taliban resistance, Ahmad Shah Massoud: "I will support you. I give you my word. Iran will support you. Look me in the eye and listen: we will not leave you. You may have to leave now, but you will be back soon" (p. 168).

Next, the author writes about an event that changed the region and the international security system. On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda carried out the largest terrorist attack in human history. Bernard Lewis in 1990 wrote about Muslim rage, comparing Islam and communism due to their shared anti-Western animus (p. 162). The US counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan began, followed by the war in Iraq. According to Azizi, after 9/11, cooperation between the United States and Iran reached the highest level (p. 176). However, the author does not provide specific examples that support his hypothesis. Counterterrorism cooperation is a highly secretive issue, and it can be difficult for researchers to find sources and information. Since the author makes such global conclusions, it would be worth confirming them with empirical data.

It is known that the Sunni terrorist organizations al-Qaeda and the Islamic State consider Shi'ite Iran an enemy and apostate regime. However, at the same time, some cooperation by various Iranian officials with al-Qaeda took place. Thus, the author writes that high-ranking representatives of al-Qaeda traveled to Iran and met with Soleimani, offering to "create an Islamic front against the United States" (p. 177). Soleimani refused, citing the fact that his priority was the revolution and Khamenei's ideas. Despite this, the author writes that some members of the terrorist organization visited Iran and stayed at the Howeyze Hotel in Tehran, owned by those close to the IRGC. Iran's foreign policy was becoming more active and aggressively expansionist. Khamenei made foreign intervention the main narrative of his reign, and Soleimani faithfully carried out his vision, the author writes (p. 207).

One of Azizi's hypotheses is that a speech by President George W. Bush in 2002, in which he called Iran part of an "axis of evil" and a sponsor of terrorism, led to an aggravation of relations. The author believes that Iran and the United States had earlier cooperated in Afghanistan against the Taliban. After the speech, the war between Iran and the United States in Iraq began (pp. 178–182). However, the confrontation was inevitable due to the struggle for regional influence in the Middle East. First, Tehran's attempts to develop nuclear weapons violated international agreements and could not have helped but cause concern among the United States and other responsible players. Second, Iran's geopolitical activity and aggressiveness, and actions by the IRGC and Soleimani, caused discontent with the United States and their regional allies. In a word, the expansion of Iran could not but cause a response. In this context, it seems that the author's hypothesis about the dramatic role of the Bush speech looks strained. Historically, the confrontation was inevitable.

After 2003, Soleimani had more work to do, and, with Khamenei's consent, Iran's intervention in Iraq began, using irregular warfare and proxy groups that significantly increased Tehran's influence in the region (p. 182). People began to say that Iran controls the four Arab capitals of Damascus, Beirut, Sanaa, and Baghdad (p. 260).

The Syrian story in the life of Soleimani is probably the most interesting, but for obvious reasons there is very little information about it. The author is convinced that the appearance of ISIS in 2013 opened a new chapter. Iran almost immediately sided with Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, and Soleimani once again became Khamenei's main tool for spreading Shiism. In July 2015, Assad was losing the war, and Soleimani told him that only Russian intervention could change the situation. According to the author, he promised that "he will solve the problem himself." Further, Azizi says, Soleimani visited the Kremlin, where he spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin for more than two hours and managed to convince him to enter Syria on the side of Assad (p. 282). Azizi, referring to the companion of the Iranian general, writes that Soleimani interrupted the conversation to pray and that Putin greatly respected him (p. 282). It should be noted first that the Kremlin officially denies the information about this meeting and claims that Putin never met Soleimani. Second, the source does not look solid. Indeed, there is much information in world media about the meeting between Soleimani and Putin, but better sources are needed for academic research than anonymous individuals or publications of media outlets.

The author concludes the book by mentioning the arrival of the most anti-Iranian president in US history, Donald Trump, and the threat it posed to Soleimani. The killing of Soleimani was the first killing of such a high-ranking official since 1943, when the admiral of the Japanese Navy, Isoroku Yamamoto, was shot down. In conclusion, the author writes, "the shadow commander had been a man without a shadow. But now he was merely a mutilated corpse" (p. 6).

When Soleimani was killed, many rejoiced and many grieved. The life story of this Iranian soldier is shrouded in secrets, myths, legends, and exaggerations. Therefore, it is very tough to

write an academic biography about his life. However, the book deserves attention and is written with great quality, containing many references to sources, interviews, and research. Azizi takes on an extremely complex subject, and the book will be of interest to scholars studying international relations in the Middle East, Iran, and terrorism. However, the study contains several drawbacks that should be noted.

First, the author often avoids social-science methodologies. It would be interesting from this perspective to investigate Iran's general population regarding Soleimani and his activities. It would be equally interesting to see studies about the social data of the population of the countries where Soleimani was active: how people remember him, how ordinary people feel about him, how they evaluate his legacy. Second, some of the author's hypotheses require a more severe and solid reference apparatus and footnotes. It is clear that the subject of the study is very specific, and Iran is an extremely closed country, so it is almost impossible to get information on this topic there. However, some conclusions and statements cannot be accepted without solid references and confirmations. Despite these shortcomings, the book deserves praise.

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