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Special Report

Not Just Iran's Cæsar Abroad: Soleimani Finally Being Recognized as Iran's "Man on Horseback"?

Analysis. By Dr Assad Homayoun, Gregory Copley, and Yossef Bodansky.

Watch for [Maj.-Gen. Qasem Soleimani](#), Commander of the *Qods Force* (*Jaysh al-Qods* or *Failaq al-Qods*) of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Pasdaran*), to become increasingly central to the transformation of Iran's political leadership over the coming year or two.

Many factors point to the prospect that he may be on, literally, an almost inevitable trajectory to becoming Iran's next leader in the classical Persian tradition. This could lead — in a process masked as "business as usual" — to the overturning of the present interregnum of the clerics, who have ruled since the 1979 overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and return Iran to a more balanced, nationalist path.

The pattern is very much in line with the galvanizing trend of many societies around the world, but particularly in the Middle East, around historical identities and their geopolitical sovereignty. This is becoming evident, for example, in the Arab Middle East, with the renewed emphasis at a grassroots level on the importance of *Qaum*: the family-clan-tribe framework not only of peoples but also of the land with which they identify.¹

It is also evident in the early return by Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to nationalism in the 1990s, and by Egypt and Ethiopia at present.

In Iran, the return to Persian values and identity has been building, too, for the past decade or so. Maj.-Gen. Soleimani has already built a high profile for several years in Iran's "near-abroad", where he has been hailed as an electrifying leader, pushing for Iran's geopolitical interests.

Significantly, although Maj.-Gen. Soleimani has shown visible leadership in Iran's foreign combat operations and has courted notoriety in the external sphere, he has been careful to avoid speculation as to a potential leadership rôle within Iran or with regard to national politics. However, it is now clear that he is moving toward center stage in domestic leadership consideration — or, actually, is *being* moved to it — if only because of the changing political dynamic of politics, economics, and social patterns in Iran.

It would be apposite to parallel the unfolding scenario around Soleimani with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte from charismatic general, becoming the favorite warrior protector of the French Revolution and hero of France's military campaigns abroad, to his assumption of office as First Consul in 1799, then First Consul for Life (1802), and finally Emperor in 1804. Or even the rise of Abdul Fatah Saeed Hussein Khalil al-Sisi from Director of Military Intelligence of Egypt (2010-2012) to Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and Minister of Defense (2012-14), to Deputy Prime Minister (2013-14), and then, to the Presidency of Egypt in 2014. Or Julius Cæsar's rise as a Roman general outside of Rome, to his seizure of power by taking his troops back to Rome, across the Rubicon River on January 10, 49 BCE, when a hostile Senate demanded his return to Rome (without his troops), and his subsequent creation of the Roman Empire.

Equally apposite would be a comparison of Gen. Soleimani with Iran's Gen. Reza Shah, who moved from military success against the enemies of the Qajar Crown to the post of Minister of War (1921-25) to 20th Prime Minister of Iran (1923-25); thence to become Shah of Iran and the founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty on December 15, 1925. All four — Cæsar, Napoleon, Pres. al-Sisi, and Reza Shah — moved from trusted military positions as servants of their administrations through to the granting to them of governance posts, which then led them to seamlessly assume command of their nations.²

Events, as much as ambition, may have determined the trajectory of Soleimani's destiny, just as events conspired to give Napoleon, al-Sisi, and Reza Shah a path which would be difficult to reject. It is clear that, above all else, Gen. Soleimani has a primary mission which accords with the wishes of virtually all Iranians: the retention of the national sovereignty and territory of Iran.

Most external appreciations of Maj.-Gen. Soleimani focus on his devotion to Shi'a Islam and his support for the clerical leadership, particularly Supreme Leader *Ayatollah* Ali Hoseini-Khamene'i, 79. That devotion seems undeniable, and it has earned him the trust of the Supreme Leader, even more now that the *Ayatollah* is in failing health (prostate cancer and perhaps other ailments),³ and anxious to find a protector for a planned future rôle for his son, *Sayyed* Mojtaba Hosseini Khamenei, 48.

Soleimani is very close to *Ayatollah* Khamene'i's powerful son, Mojtaba, the *de facto* chief of Iran's foreign intelligence and security forces. In mid-June 2018, they worked together closely in Baghdad (along with the Iranian Ambassador, Brig.-Gen. Iraj Masjedi, who is Soleimani's deputy) in an effort to consolidate a pro-Iran all-Shi'ite coalition Government for Iraq.⁴ Mojtaba was very impressed and subsequently was considered a friend/supporter of Soleimani.

Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy noted in its 1-2018 edition:

The obvious cæsar in the wings, and well outside the Rubicon, is Maj.-Gen. Qasem Soleimani, Commander of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' *Quds* Force. He has demonstrated real dynamism and success fighting for Iranian interests outside of Iran's formal borders (just as Julius Cæsar did, with his legions abroad from Rome, returning to Italy at the Rubicon River, in 49 BCE). Clearly, the ambitious Gen. Soleimani has no desire at this stage to break cover and promote any agenda for his advancement; in fact, he may genuinely eschew such a proposal.

As *Defense & Foreign Affairs* noted on April 14, 2017: How much attention would the leadership of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (the *Pasdaran*), the significant combat force, pay to ensure national stability in the event that a vacuum was perceived to emerge? That report noted: “It seems probable that the *Pasdaran* itself could produce a strong leadership figure to fill such a vacuum in the way that Gen. Reza Khan did in 1921, removing the pro-British Government of Iran. [He then went on to serve, in 1923, as Prime Minister, until the Constituent Assembly appointed him as Shah, in 1925, to replace the last Qajar Shah, Ahmad Shah Qajar. That began the Pahlavi Dynasty.]”⁵

The speed of Soleimani’s move toward a central rôle — albeit one which may initially be with a lower profile — in internal affairs is being determined by the political, economic, strategic, and environmental crises which are gathering and mounting in intensity over Iran. The current drought, the worst in modern Iranian history, has exacerbated all the other problems, and “the people are in the streets” in literally every Iranian city.⁶ The threat to the clerical leadership has become palpable, to the point where Iranians are openly telling foreign journalists such things as: “People are desperate to find a way out ... If it’s war, so it be, but quick; if it’s reaching an agreement, so it be, but quick; if it’s regime change, so it be, but quick.”⁷

What, then, is the rôle, if any, of the US — and particularly US President Donald Trump’s rejection of the 2015 “nuclear pact” with Iran and its promise to end sanctions against Iran — in the rise of Soleimani and the rapidly approaching time of decisions in Iran?

There seemed little doubt that the initial rejection by Pres. Trump when he assumed office in January 2017 of the July 14, 2015, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which Iran signed with the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany), was the opening round of Pres. Trump’s negotiations with the Iranian leadership. His negotiating style, as demonstrated with DPRK leader Kim Jong-Un and with the European Union on tariffs, has been to galvanize a new negotiating position by heavy threats.

This dramatic build-up of threats worked, as well, with Iran, causing the Iranian leadership and population to galvanize around nationalist policies and leaders. This initially hurt Pres. *Hojjat ol-Eslam* Hasan Fereidun Rouhani, and appeared to allow the conservative clerics to rally, particularly as hopes for the economy seemed to fade with the continuation of US sanctions. But the pressures on the economy became seen in the country as the fault of the clerical leadership rather than being solely caused by US sanctions.

That then moved positive attention to Maj.-Gen. Soleimani, who has exemplified the Iranian — indeed, traditional Persian — identification with its sovereignty and the defense of it against foreign threats. This position — the defense of Persian sovereignty — shows a marked difference from the pan-Islamist nature, anti-Persianness of the clerical government when it came to power in 1979. Gradually, even the clerics have “become Persian”, but Soleimani even more so.

The bravura of Soleimani’s comments, particularly with regard to Israel and the US, obscures the fact that he is seen inside Iran as the most important defender of Iranian

sovereignty. It positions him well for transition to greater authority inside the country. Indeed, Gen. Soleimani's actions and statements, although often colored by Islamic and Islamist sentiments, have been profoundly traditional in the pursuit of Persian/Iranian sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Then US Pres. Trump on July 30, 2018, indicated that he would meet Iranian leaders with "no preconditions" and "any time they want", adding "I'd meet with anybody. I believe in meetings." This was classic Trump negotiating style: massive threats exchanged as an opening artillery bombardment, satisfying honor on both sides, allowing both the ability to then open talks on the basis that there were, literally, "no preconditions".

It is highly probable that Trump could offer Iran concessions which would be of greater benefit than the JCPOA did. The question would be, then, who that would benefit within the Iranian power structure, and who the US would wish to see benefit. Given the literal fear that Gen. Soleimani generates among US military and political observers, it is probable that Washington — and particularly the US State Dept. — would wish to see Pres. Rouhani strengthened.

That, ironically, could enable the present clerical system sustained in office longer, even in the face of widespread, and growing public hostility, whereas the rise of Soleimani as a cæsar, a Bonaparte, or the like could see a more rapid transformation back to a more secular framework which could begin the restoration of economic and social liberalization.

The fact that Hamid Aboutalebi, an adviser to Pres. Rouhani, tweeted in response to Mr Trump that "returning to the nuclear deal" and "respecting the Iranian nation's rights" would pave way for talks, showed that the Iranian President perhaps did not understand that he had been served a strategic opening which could literally be a career saver. Even if he did understand that, it would have behooved Pres. Rouhani not to agree to readily.

What all this has begun, albeit outside the purview of the international media (and therefore the intelligence communities), is a further complication in the trajectory of Iranian power transition over the coming year or two. What is significant is that the restoration of a clear sense of sovereignty and secure borders to Iran is most likely under a leader like Soleimani in a post-Islamist sense. In other words, Soleimani's devotion to the Iranian historical destiny would most likely guide his actions, not his religious principles.

And it is equally significant that a sovereign, secular Iran of the post-clerical era would also serve to satisfy the US and Israel, while being not unacceptable to Moscow and Beijing at the same time. Such an evolution, which could occur in the time of US Pres. Trump's first term, could reduce concerns over strategic (nuclear) instability far more than the JCPOA could ever have done. But it would not necessarily help the sense of insecurity which has been rising across the Persian Gulf in Saudi Arabia.

All that aside, the clerics are maneuvering for a leadership succession which would preserve their position, if the public would accept it. *Ayatollah* Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi was, by mid-2018, being mentioned as a possible successor of Khamene'i. The main reason for this is the desire among the closest confidants of Khamene'i (including his son, Mojtaba) to select a religious figure who would also be acceptable to the rising

élites of the *Pasdaran*, Intelligence, and *Baseej*. Mesbah-Yazdi was a close friend of Khomeini and is an ultraorthodox radical even by Qom standards.

He is now a member of the Assembly of Experts, and the leader of the Endurance Front, a very conservative political group. He has been running the Haghani School/Seminary in Qom for decades (since the 1980s). Most of Iran's senior intelligence/security officials, and several seniors of both the *Pasdaran* and the *Baseej*, graduated from Haghani and were thus regarded as faithful followers of Mesbah-Yazdi (he is their Marja al-Taqlid, or source of imitation). He is rumored to be the head and spiritual guide of various religious entities including the messianic-militant and secretive *Hojjatiyeh* Association. And Soleimani is reported to be a leading member of the *Hojjatiyeh* Association.

Gen. Soleimani remains, however, in contention. The pertinent part of a report of July 26, 2018, from the Fars News Agency, which belongs to the *Pasdaran*, are worthy of noting:

General Soleimani: IRGC Qods Force Spearheading Any Confrontation with US

TEHRAN (FNA) — Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Qods Force Major-General Qasem Soleimani blasted US President Donald Trump for his hollow threats against Iran, warning that the Qods Force alone is powerful enough to stand against Washington in any possible confrontation without any need to the other Iranian armed forces.

"We are closer to you than what you think. You should know that I am your foe. The Qods Force alone and not all the (Iranian) Armed Forces is enough to be your rival (in any confrontation). You are aware of Iran's power in asymmetric war," General Soleimani said, addressing a forum in the Western city of Hamedan on Thursday.

He underlined that Trump's recent remarks against Iran are not worth response by the Iranian president, and said, "I, as a soldier, respond to Trump. Mr Trump! How do you dare to threaten us?"

General Soleimani said that the literature that Trump uses to speak with other countries is like the words uttered from the mouth of a person who runs a cabaret or a casino, calling on the US president to ask the country's spy and security agencies about Washington's failures against Iran.

"You did everything you could against Iran in the past 20 years but victory belonged to the Iranian nation," he underscored.

General Soleimani reminded Trump of the US failures in Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen and the 33-day war against *HizbAllah* in Lebanon, and said the US attacked the *Taliban* with 110 thousand troops but after nearly two decades it is now begging the *Taliban* for negotiations.

"Ask the ex-commander of your forces in Iraq who he sent to me to ask me to open a window of opportunity by using my influence to stop attacks by Iraqi resistance forces (*Mujahedin*) on the US soldiers so that they could withdraw from

Iraq? Have you forgotten that you had provided adult-size diapers for your battle tank crews? What is your saga and what is the historical background that you rely on for threatening us?”

“You should know that there is not even a single night that we don’t think of destroying you,” he said.

He named Trump as a gambler, and said, “We are so close to you in places that you might not even think of. Come to us! We are waiting for you. You know that this war (against Iran) means destruction of all of your possibilities. You may start the war, but we decide when it should end.”

“Do not threaten us with killing. We are thirsty for martyrdom and annihilation of arrogant powers,” he said.

General Soleimani reminded Trump of the US awe and military power in the past, and said they have become so weak today that they have resorted to *Mojahedin-e Khalq* Organization (MKO, also known as the MEK, PMOI and NCRI) terrorist group to hit a blow to Iran.

“There was a time when the US enjoyed some awe, when its naval fleet started a voyage, a state would collapse, but today you have pinned hope on the MKO that has been buried in the wasteland of the history. Have you really pinned hope on a wandering woman that you take from one TV channel to another? Is that all your power,” he asked.

Gen. Soleimani thus escalated the negotiating stakes with Pres. Trump while also declaring his political leadership within Iran. He had watched the Trump-Kim Jong-Un negotiations, and took his starting position with the US to the limit. Who would now call whose bluff in the US-Iran arena, or even within the Iranian arena?

Footnotes:

1. See, Bodansky, Yossef: “Transformation in Much of the Middle East Now Seems Inevitable, Substantial, and Imminent”, in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [June 6, 2018](#).
2. Sultan Ahmad Shah Qajar, from exile in Europe after the coup, said, in essence: “I brought Reza Khan into the Government to protect me from Seyyed Zia’eddin Tabatabaee [Prime Minister, 1921], and then it was Reza Khan who forced me out.” Reza Khan Mirpanj, who later became Reza Shah Pahlavi, had assisted Zia’eddin Tabatabaee to stage a *coup d’etat* against Ahmad Shah, who was to die in exile in France, at age 32, in Neuilly-sur-Seine, Paris, on February 21, 1930.
3. “Iranian Leadership Aspirants Move as “Supreme Leader” Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamene’i Declines”, in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [April 14, 2017](#).
4. See, Bodansky, Yosef: “Iran’s Triumph in Iraq is Now Sealed, While Turkey and Iran Cooperate to Crush the Kurds with US Acquiescence”, in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [June 15, 2018](#).
5. Copley, Gregory: “Iran’s Unity is Intact, But So, Too, the National Angst”, *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, 1-2018.
6. See, Bodansky, Yossef: “Historical Fatalism, Water and Food Shortages, and Jihadism Conspire to Set the Stage for a Major Conflict Escalation Based on ‘Greater Syria’”, in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [July 23, 2018](#).
7. Protestor quoted, anonymously, in *The Guardian*, UK, on July 20, 2018.

دکتر اسد همایون رئیس بنیاد آزادگان که یک سازمان ثبت شده برای برگشت مالیات، غیر انتفاعی، [۵۰ (سی) ۳] در خدمت ایرانیان می باشد خود را وقف رسیدن به آزادی کرده است.

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Yossef Bodansky (born in Israel) is an American political scientist who served as Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare of the US House of Representatives from 1988 to 2004.

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