

Qassem Soleimani, a new kind of Iranian national hero

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* For years Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's elite Quds Force, worked from the shadows, conducting the nation's battles from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

But today he is Iran's celebrity general, a man elevated to hero status by a social media machine.

The Islamic Republic long ago turned hero worship into an art form, with its devotion to martyrs from Shi'a religious history as well as recent wars. But the growing personality cult that halos Maj. Gen. Soleimani is different: the gray-haired servant of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is very much alive.

"The dead heroes now are not useful," said an analyst in Qom, who asked not to be named. "We need a live hero."

Soleimani surged into public view after the self-described Islamic State swept from Syria into Iraq in June 2014. Iranians cite many reasons for his rise, including "saving" Baghdad from IS jihadists, reactivating Shi'ite militias in Iraq, and preserving the rule of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad during nearly six years of war.

"People in all walks of life respect him," said a veteran observer in Tehran, Iran, who asked not to be named. "It shows we can have a very popular hero who is not a cleric."

Soleimani has become a source of pride and a symbol for Iranians of all stripes of their nation's power abroad. Among the Islamic Revolution's true believers, Soleimani's exploits are sung by religious storytellers and posted online. His writings about the Iran-Iraq War are steeped in religious language.

In a video from the Syrian front line broadcast on state TV earlier this year, he addressed fighters, saying of an Iranian volunteer who was killed, "God loves the person who makes holy war his path."

When erroneous reports of Soleimani's death recently emerged (Iran has lost dozens of senior IRGC commanders in Syria and Iraq and hundreds of "advisers"), he laughed and said of martyrdom, "This is something that I have climbed mountains and crossed plains to find."

Ebrahim Hatamikia, a renowned director of war films, made a film inspired by Soleimani: *Bodyguard*, which premiered at a festival in Tehran. Hatamikia told an Iranian website that he is "the earth beneath Soleimani's feet."

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