



The Fading Memory of Soleimani Exposes Iran's Sclerotic Regime

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The way a regime icon is remembered reveals much about the state of the regime itself. General Qassem Soleimani's fast-fading memory in Iran, especially in Tehran province, exposes a sclerotic elite that resembles the Soviet elite before its demise.

The extent to which Qassem Soleimani's spectacular demise at the hands of the Americans affected Iran's ability to harm the US and its allies is debatable.

What is abundantly clear, however, is that his memory is fading fast within Iran despite the regime's efforts to maintain it.

An analysis of the contours of Soleimani's memory reveals that most of the Iranian population is interested in neither his killing nor his "revolutionary" legacy.

Soleimani was head of the Quds force, Iran's most powerful weapon, and the mastermind of the regime's agenda to export its revolution and create a Shiite crescent of proxy militias in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. His fast-diminishing memory is an indication that Iran's population does not support these policies, and probably does not support the regime behind them.

These inferences are drawn from an analysis of Google Trends, which records online search terms. Searches on Google reflect the degree of public interest in the terms or personalities being searched.

By far the greatest indication of Soleimani's lack of popularity, dead or alive, is the relatively low level of interest he evokes inside Iran versus the arenas where he operated. Just over six months after his killing, his biography was searched 50 times more often (relative to the population) in Lebanon than in Iran and nearly 100 times more often in Bahrain, where the Shiite majority

chafes under a Sunni minority regime backed to the hilt by Iran's archrival, Saudi Arabia.

This does not only reflect paltry identification with Soleimani in Iran as a whole. The pattern of searches within Iran is problematic to the regime. The largest number of searches inside the country took place, unsurprisingly, in Kerman province, where Soleimani was born and raised. But searches in Tehran province—the political, economic, and demographic heart of the country—were only one-eighth the number of searches in Kerman relative to the population.

The same pattern holds true for other personalities and terms venerated by the Iranian regime, such as Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic; his successor Khamenei; and revolutionary terms like “vilayat el-feqih” (the “rule of the Supreme Spiritual Leader,” a key concept behind the Iranian theocracy). The inhabitants of Tehran appear to have little interest in these personalities, their ideological concepts, or their grand scheme of exporting the revolution and exerting Iranian domination, which was Soleimani's domain.

Even where Soleimani and the Quds Force operated with their local proxies, an analysis of the pattern of internet searches shows support in the wrong places. In Lebanon, a clear positive correlation exists between the relative number of searches for Soleimani and the preponderance of Shiites in one of Lebanon's six provinces. Soleimani evokes the least interest in the almost exclusively Sunni northern province of Tripoli and the highest in Nabatiyeh, in southeast Lebanon, where Shiites form a sizeable majority.

There is, however, one major exception to this correlation: Beirut. In sparsely populated Nabatiyeh, Hezbollah's real stronghold, searches for Soleimani are at least 20 times higher relative to the size of the population than in Beirut, which includes the Dahiya agglomeration of Shiite neighborhoods in the southern part of the city. Dahiya is home to Hezbollah headquarters and contains the bunker where its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, resides.

Media sites usually add the phrase “Hezbollah stronghold” to designate this area. Shiites represent more than 60% of Dahiya's population. But how much support do those Shiites really give to Hezbollah? Google records relatively few searches there for Soleimani, Nasrallah's close ally.

This finding jibes with my searches for Hezbollah “martyrs,” which I performed to determine from where Hezbollah recruits its fighters. I found (albeit from a very small sample due to Hezbollah censorship) that the organization recruits mostly from the periphery—the Lebanese south and Nabatiyeh—and only marginally from Dahiya, where the overwhelming percentage of Lebanese Shiites live.

In the periphery, where there are no jobs except for those paid for through Iranian largesse, young people are more easily recruited. In Beirut, where there are other ways to make a living besides fighting the Syrian dictator's battles, Shiite youth look elsewhere.

These patterns add up to a much larger picture. Iran, over 40 years after the revolution, is going the way of the Soviet elite: it is exerting violent force wherever it can, but its legitimacy is hanging by a thread and still declining. Just as the Soviet Union projected power abroad only to lose the home front, so have the Iranian ayatollahs succeeded in giving the impression at least of growing regional power while their support declines at home.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in the Jerusalem Post on July 11, 2020.

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