

that ostensibly came from the East but were leavened with German as much as British romantic elements. It is especially good at showing the insurmountable dilemma they faced: how to jump across centuries to Iran's pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian past for inspiration, without disregarding let alone eliminating the country's rich Islamic heritage.

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[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.3751/75.1.303](https://doi.org/10.3751/75.1.303)

The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, the U.S., and Iran's Global Ambitions, by Arash Azizi. London: Oneworld Publications, 2020. 304 pages. \$27.95.

Reviewed by Ali Alavi

A little over a year has passed since the world was stunned by news of the assassination of a top-ranking Iranian general by the United States via drone strike on Iraqi soil. The news of the assassination stimulated many commentators to learn who General Qasem Soleymani was. Although the news was soon outshined by the global coronavirus pandemic, recent months have seen a steady stream of studies on the international politics of the Middle East, particularly on the impact of American-Iranian relations on the 2020 presidential elections in the US. In light of this, Arash Azizi's *The Shadow Commander* is timely, as it attempts to narrate the life story of General Soleymani.

The book follows a loosely chronological structure. The first three chapters endeavor to retrace the history of pre-revolutionary Iran through the turbulent era of the 1979 revolution by briefly highlighting the role of various factions in its success. The context framing these three chapters, rather fleetingly, underlines the impact of the revolutionary discourse on the population, including on young men like Qasem Soleymani who hailed from the provincial areas of the country. In

doing so, Azizi provides the reader with a superficial overview of the revolution and not more. As a result, the reader feels rather abandoned, left with the need for a more comprehensive historical analysis of the roots of the revolution.

Moreover, there are some inconsistencies that hamper the narrative. In drawing a historical analysis of the Iranian Revolution, for instance, the author points out that "more inspiring for the Iranian radicals were the struggles of the Palestinian and the Algerians," arguing that the Palestinian National Liberation Organization (Fatah) and Algeria's National Liberation Front (FLN) showed that Islam and national liberation could be the answer (p. 35) without delving into the other side of the history and how the revolutionary movement in Iran inspired the Palestinian struggle. Chapters 4–8 amount to a hurried account of the history of the Iran-Iraq War, narrating the causes of the conflict and the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in shaping the outcome with a mere transitory indication of Soleymani's role.

The successive chapters merge into more contemporary developments in Iran and the region, including the third Persian Gulf War (i.e., the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq), the subsequent civil conflict in Iraq and the Iranian proxy engagement in Iraq and the Levant. In Chapter 9, in particular, the author argues that Soleymani became a prominent actor in the decision-making machinery of the Iraqi government as early as in 2005, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the president of Iran. Azizi goes further, claiming that Soleymani was updated daily on the negotiations of Iraq's prime minister from 2006 to 2014, Nuri al-Maliki. The author also claims, though without any substantial primary references, that Soleymani had convinced Maliki not to accept US proposals (p. 178). Here, given the history of the 2003 war in Iraq, the impact of the Arab Spring in Syria, and the geopolitics of the region, a thorough historical analysis would have been needed for the reader to better grasp the situation at that time and to assess Iranian tactics in forging alliances in Baghdad, Gaza, Beirut, Damascus, and elsewhere. Azizi's analysis of sociopolitical

developments, however, is historically flawed and without much context. Instead, the author puts a lot of effort into sketching accounts of Soleymani's personal journeys in the region.

Furthermore, the book has analytical and structural shortcomings, perhaps to be expected from a PhD student at the beginning of his endeavors. It is rather long, despite the lack of historical context (12 chapters; 255 pages of text) and especially considering that the reader could easily navigate Soleymani's biography, which is compressed into three chapters. In addition to this, each chapter has a mere 8–11 references, which leaves the reader to wonder what the real primary sources are. To make matters worse, the references are primarily taken from mainstream Western media outlets. It is unlikely that many readers will be left effusively persuaded about the impact of Soleymani's journeys on the geopolitics of the region. This study of Soleymani's life may have given them not much more than a comfortable tale of developments.

The strength of Azizi's book lies in his achievement in presenting the first written work about Soleymani's life story. As a "trade book," the prose is reader-friendly; the author describes events chronologically and in a straightforward format. Having said that, the book was published shortly after the assassination of Soleymani and at a time when many media outlets and commentators' interest in knowing more about the general was at its peak. Due to the importance and sensitivity of the subject matter, then, the book has to be assessed with close attention to the complexity of Iran and with critical acumen about the way the country is studied and represented. Certainly, until we can read further and deeper research about Soleymani and his historical period, this book can merely be considered a tentative start.

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SAUDI ARABIA

Graveyard of Clerics: Everyday Activism in Saudi Arabia, by Pascal Menoret. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. 264 pages. \$24.

Reviewed by Sean Foley

Pascal Menoret's *Graveyard of Clerics* aims to rehabilitate Saudi Arabia's Islamic Awakening activist movement and Islamists generally. Throughout the concise text, Menoret draws on extensive interviews, unique fieldwork, and an interdisciplinary analytical framework to explore how the movement's young activists mobilized support and, in his eyes, revived public life in the country. Notably, he eschews doctrines and the ideas of individual thinkers in favor of studying (a) the strategies that activists used to disseminate ideas and (b) what he calls "political geography": the physical and social spaces where activists mobilized (pp. 208–9). In Menoret's eyes, his focus on "practices, not texts and doctrines" (p. 11) also helps to explain how the movement won support across society, including among those who rejected its worldview. To illustrate this point, he shares the view of one of these Saudis — a Western-educated chain smoker and "amateur of strong cocktails" (p. 4), who nonetheless regrets that Islamist activists had vanished from public life. "Without them," he explained, "we are left alone to face the Saudi state" (p. 4).

That observation reflects one of the guiding assumptions of *Graveyard of Clerics*: the elite, or what Menoret collectively calls Al-Sa'ud (p. 15), dominate Saudi society through an all-powerful state allied with the West. From the start, Menoret's rage toward the governing system and the West generally mirrors the *tufush*, or intense anger at injustice (p. 14), voiced by the activists whose words shape his book. That anger also informs the book's title, which builds on the observation of Jordanian-Palestinian Islamist 'Isam al-Barqawi (better known as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi) that "Saudi Arabia is a graveyard