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# From military hero to martyr: crafting singularity and the formation of Muslim collective subjectivity in an Iranian statist ritual

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**Abstract:** The staging of the funeral procession of Major General Qasem Soleimani (d. 3 January 2020) strengthened the Iranian state's legitimation amidst the crisis related to intensified US sanctions. Images of his funeral parade across the country with its dense mourning crowd were circulated widely and commented on in both Iran's official media and the international media. In response to these images, media commentaries engaged obsessively and exclusively with the biographical reviews that emphasised his heroic individuality and charismatic figure. This article engages critically with these reactions, while asking instead what his funeral tells us about the unfolding of the statist cult in Iran. I analyse two ethnographic scenes, one showing the entanglement of the official discourse of martyrdom with the statist culture, and the other, how the atmosphere of grief and veneration during the martyrs' funeral processions unsettle the dichotomies between compliance and resistance, orchestrated and emergent affects. These observations open a new vista on the mutual processes of singularity and the collective subjectivation that goes beyond one-sided causal explanations of heroic individuality on the one hand and blatantly dramatised expressions of the state's religious policies on the other.

**Keywords:** affects; atmosphere; collective subjectivity; Iran's martyr cult; Qasem Soleimani; singularity; statist culture

## 1 Introduction

A radical discourse of *military heroism* and an image depicting the severed hand of the slain *martyr* were integral to the biggest funeral parade in the contemporary

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history of Iran. In the twilight hours of 3 January 2020, Major General Qasem Soleimani of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and his companions<sup>1</sup> were assassinated in a US drone strike near Bagdad International Airport. Within the next 48 h, Iran's state officials designed and "orchestrated" one of the longest funeral parade routes since the 1979 Revolution, despite inner fractional competition over the prospective site of his burial.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, the route linked four cities of Shi'i saintly shrines in Iraq with locations in five cities in Iran. Notably, the choices in Iran did not follow a mere religious logic but juxtaposed memories of the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) in the southwestern borderland of Iran, the 1979 Revolution in the Mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran and Soleimani's hometown in Kerman on the one hand with the atmosphere of Islamic seminaries in Qom and the Shi'i saintly shrine of Mashhad on the other.

In this combination, the city of Ahwaz, located in the border province of Khuzestan, stands out due to its past and recent connections to Soleimani as a war veteran and as the head of the elite extraterritorial IRGC unit, Qods Force. These factors loom larger with regard to Soleimani's leading role in infrastructure development projects in the borderlands that boosted his popularity in Khuzestan. Thus, it becomes clear that the configuration of social civil projects offers heterogeneous entanglements which should be considered when discussing the processes between Soleimani's mourning crowd and the arrangements made by the state for the funeral parade.

I will approach Soleimani's veneration in Khuzestan through both arranged and emergent affective elements that were able to shape the collective subjectivity of his followers. As I will show, while aligning to the official scripts of the state, the expressions of collective subjectivity can produce a whole range of accommodative and excessive amendments to these scripts.

Judging by the images and reports that poured out of Iran, the public announcement of his violent demise triggered a veritable torrent of mourning and grief.<sup>3</sup> The fact that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter blocked his name and image in the initial hours after the incident redirected attention toward Iran's official media.<sup>4</sup> Once titled "the shadow

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<sup>1</sup> Five Iraqi and four other Iranians were killed alongside Soleimani, including the deputy chairman of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) Mahdi al-Muhandis (1954–2020).

<sup>2</sup> The dispute evolved around his burial in Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum or far away from the capital in Kerman.

<sup>3</sup> At the same time, in some regions in Iraq, Syria and among the Kurds, his assassination was conceived as the end of an era in Iran's extraterritorial politics and thus celebrated.

<sup>4</sup> The contestations in representing Soleimani posthumously were not only radical but also entangled in complex censorship. As a result of Washington imposing sanctions on Iranian militia in Iraq, comments and photos in his memory were blocked by Twitter and on Facebook servers.

commander”,<sup>5</sup> Soleimani became the “commander of hearts” on Iran’s government TV. Photos and videos taken from drones and helicopters that flew above the crowd captured hundreds of heads in each frame around the slow-moving flatbed trailer pulled by a truck. On top of the truck, the coffins were wrapped in the respective national flags and separated by a short distance from one another with arches of flowers. The density of the crowd in most photos makes it hard to trace the outline of the truck. A few pictures depict faces of grand clerics, state authorities and high-ranking IRGC members in the crowd. However, the facial expressions of individual ordinary mourners are barely visible.

Much was made in the international media analyses of the mourning crowds’ corporeal density. At the last site of the funeral procession in Kerman, people lost control and fell; the pressure of the crowd damaged the metal column mounts of a high banner which then dropped over the people; at least 56 people lost their lives in these incidents. These scenes convinced many international scholars to formulate their analyses of the event with the focus on Soleimani’s individual heroism, thus reducing the mass participation of people to the naïve act of cherishing his figure. One commentary published in *Jadaliyya* describes the moment of receiving the news as “catastrophic, painful and sudden [...] for Iranians who cherished the characteristics he possessed.”<sup>6</sup> Katajun Amirpour, Professor of Islamic Studies, said in an interview with the German radio broadcasting channel

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Meanwhile, critical notes and reactions were suppressed in Iran. See, for example, the BBC coverage of the issue at <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-50990988> (4 January 2020).

5 Filkins 2013.

6 In November 2020, the online disputes in response to Soleimani’s controversial heroism published in an article in the open journal *Jadaliyya* caused its editors to temporarily take down the article. The readers attacked the position of the author, Peyman Eshaghi, for his uncritical assessment of Qasim Soleimani’s legacy, which was considered “too close to propaganda”. He was condemned for overlooking other lost lives, ignoring trans-regional dynamics and undermining the voice of opponents in Iran and abroad. Religious studies scholar, Babak Rahimi responded to these criticisms by making an illuminating point, which this paper emphasises further, namely, that the article highlights the position of the statist. According to Rahimi, “Eshaghi’s article is reductive [...] [in that] he makes blunt generalisations about “Iranians” who are defined strictly in terms of a cohesive national character with Shia Islamic motifs. [...] [I]t essentially advocates a stable and harmonising view of society as organic and self-contained. However, it provides a unique perspective on a segment of the Iranian population that is consistently overlooked among many scholars of Iran” (Rahimi 2021). Although I think the segment that Rahimi mentions (the statist) only takes up a small part of Eshaghi’s article, it would be interesting to explore the problematic relation between their “cultural patterns” and the state’s sovereignty. Along with the framing of certain lives as “more grievable” (Butler 2009), statist fantasies and practises constitute new sources of legitimacy for the state.



NDR, “tears welled up in my eyes – not because I am mourning Soleimani, but because I realised very quickly what a wildfire this could bring [...]. One may accuse Soleimani of many things, but he is a *hero* for both the Iranians and the Iraqis because he prevented Islamic State from overrunning Iraq. In this respect, much of this grief is not a sham. For many people in Iran, the man is a *hero* because he saved Iran from war. So there is not much staging in this mourning.”<sup>7</sup> In a round-table discussion with three social scientists specialised in the IRGC Soleimani’s symbolic significance is attributed to the state’s success in integrating more people into military nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

While highlighting one side of the relation between Soleimani and his followers, these analyses remain flat in their understanding of the emotional dynamics that spur the mourners and prompt their participation in his funeral. Their analyses rationalised all these dynamics under the umbrella of an appeal to military patronage in combat against the threats of an ISIS invasion. In this regard, the emphasis on heroism risks overlooking the more remarkable phenomenon of public participation in reproducing systems of power.

Notably, in the months before the incident, a pronounced detachment between the people and the Iranian state could be observed. In particular, the crisis reached its zenith during economic and anti-corruption protests all over Iran and especially in Khuzestan in November 2019 when the army opened fire on the protesters. Such a controversial background casts doubt on the assumption that the event could be instrumentalized to generate military nationalism in the people. Furthermore, even in the aftermath of the assassination of Soleimani, it becomes excessively difficult – if not impossible – to read any coherent narrative of nationalism. The momentary solidarity that marked his funeral parade was the only moment of coherence between the people and the state in the range of surrounding events such as contradictory reactions to his activities in Syria and Iraq, the heightened tension between Iran and the US, and the aviation incident that provoked massive resentment in the public.

Taking these backdrops into consideration, sociologist Maryam Alemzadeh suggests, “to understand better the apparent unity of many Iranians in commemorating Soleimani, it is necessary to break down the qualities that made him loved by some and respected by many other Iranians.”<sup>9</sup> Here, I depart from Alemzadeh’s quest by reformulating it as: How is Soleimani’s life *framed* in a way

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<sup>7</sup> Amirpour 06.01.2020 <https://tangsir2569.wordpress.com/2020/01/28/>.

<sup>8</sup> Adib-Moghadam et al. 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Alemzadeh 2020.

that *makes* him revered?<sup>10</sup> In answering this question, I am not separating an individual hero from the state, nor the state from civil society. In the ethnographic context of Khuzestan, Soleimani's popularity and actual networks make such a separation impossible. My argument in outline will be that the emphasis on narratives of individual heroism not only shadows the pitches and falls of these narratives, but also ignores the emotional inconsistencies and deviances in the very moment of conforming and revering the state.

What we can say without doubt is that the statist culture is extended; it embraces new groups with different ambitions and concrete demands. Rational capacities and fantasies go hand in hand and become complicit in regenerating the state after multiple crises. The voice that says *no* to the act of terrorism and anticipates the external threat mingles with the voice that seeks spirituality in the relics of a martyr. This context raises a question: How does the fleeting atmosphere of rituals correspond to the collective subjectivity of the participants in a highly homogenised ritual space, crafted and orchestrated through the state's formal discourse of martyrdom? How do the minimalistic moments of elation invoke amalgamation of helplessness and revenge in spontaneous practises that challenge the homogeneity of a state-organised funeral?

I follow two scopes. First, the focus on collectivity versus heroic individuality brings me to the concept of singularity. As formulated by Andreas Reckwitz in *Society of Singularities*, it sets a character of late modernity that underpins the interest in invoking, fabricating and manipulating singularity on the verge of the processes of standardisation and generalisation.<sup>11</sup> In other words, singularity coexists with governmentality or is occasioned by it. Driven by this concept, I show how the heroic figure of Soleimani emerges as a singular entity that is perceived, crafted and practised in both arranged and spontaneous manners. The spontaneity stands here as the realm of agency of the collective actors.

Second, I follow the role of the quasi-material atmosphere of the environment that corresponds to the formation of collective subjectivity. Here, I draw on Yael Navaro-Yashin's articulation of "affective space" as an anthropological approach that studies affect and subjectivity in tandem, attending to "the embroilment of inner and outer world [...] to draw a cartography of the affects of an outer environment and those of interior human selves, as they are interrelated."<sup>12</sup> Drawing on her conception and following William Mazzarella's study of mass publicity,

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<sup>10</sup> On this point, I follow Georg Stauth's critique of Weber's sociological reflection on Islam. As he argues, rather than asking why Islam did not rationalise, Weber should have asked what they did not do to rationalise it. Stauth 1998: ch. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Reckwitz 2019: ch. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Navaro-Yashin 2012: 24.

I explore the endorsed dramatic space of grief in Khuzestan and how the mourners momentarily appropriate it.<sup>13</sup> Through a sensory ethnography of the funeral procession of Major General Soleimani in Khuzestan, I provide a rereading of religious collective subjectivity and its paradoxical contribution to the fabrication of singularity in the Iranian state. This part must be read as a critical commentary on theoretical work on the social constructionism of the martyrdom in frames of individualism and intentionality. The majority of these works remain silent about material mediations that shape the crowd and create new meanings. Given the case of Soleimani's veneration, I will complement these theories in presenting the directions in which collective emotions and atmospheres can correspond to religious traditions and contribute to the formation of modern Muslim subjectivity.

## 2 Heroic singularity and the state

In early 2016, the story of the then recently discovered and reburied Iranian divers who had been martyred during the war was still resonant in daily conversations. After 30 years, the 175 yasoldiers' remains had been discovered in collective graves, buried in their diving gear. Negar, a local woman from Ahwaz and my host during my fieldwork in Khuzestan, noted this incident in the circle of pious women that she held at home. "I have heard Soleimani was there to help some of the families to claim a DNA test and give solace to the families of martyrs," said Negar and sighed. The participants, mostly her female relatives and neighbours, remembered her own decade-long suffering in the lacuna of absence of her martyred brother. Her parents were waiting for news of their son from his comrades in the battlefields or the imprisoned veterans until their death. Some years later, his body was retrieved in a discovery operation and reburied in the section devoted to martyrs of the Iran–Iraq war in Ahwaz cemetery. It was only after seeing the coffin of her brother that Negar could actually accept his martyrdom and hang his framed photo in her living room. Although my stay in Ahwaz was related to the pilgrimage of the pious women and mothers of martyrs to the former battlefields of war, what Negar said remained in my mind. Negar's sigh expressed her deep desire: if only she could turn time back and experience the same warmth and recognition as the families of the martyred divers who were received by General Soleimani.

Moreover, direct reference to an IRGC major general in the pious women's circles was a new phenomenon. The mothers of war martyrs are held in high esteem, occupying a specific spiritual position in the circle of pious women, and their sons

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<sup>13</sup> Mazzarella 2017: 6. See also Taussig 1993: 45.

are often venerated collectively in cemeteries.<sup>14</sup> However, except on occasions of prayer for their families, the pious women do not chat about men of state.

Since the spread of ISIS in Iraq and during the Syrian civil war, the clandestine Qods unit of the IRGC had come out of the shadows under the command of Maj. General Soleimani. Fear among Iranians of potential terrorist attacks and the advance of ISIS to Iran's borders prompted the regime's cultural producers to attempt to reduce fear through social media campaigns about the Qods Revolutionary Guard in which Soleimani featured prominently. In their videos and images Soleimani was illustrated as "a defender of nation of Iranians" and "the mastermind behind the fight against ISIS on the ground for both Arabs and Iranians".<sup>15</sup> These depictions were not always made in realistic or epic genres but included the surrealist images of paradise that had been used in urban murals of martyrs in the previous two decades. The connection between Soleimani and the martyrs that was built in this medium succeeded in regenerating public emotional attachments for him.

Negar, who seemed to have absorbed this messaging, yearned to visit General Soleimani to attain more spiritual and social recognition. Meanwhile, other participants had their own reading of this connection. An older relative broke the silence caused by Negar's account, "May God resurrect all his good servants with Agha Imam Hussayn. It doesn't matter whom you meet in this world my girl." Nodding her head in agreement, another woman added, "I met the daughter of missing martyr Ahadi in Mashhad. She narrated her dreams, in which her father had taken her to the shrine of Imam Hussayn and had signalled to her that his body would be discovered soon. In turn, Haj Qasem Soleimani went to visit their family. He had asked her to sign his shroud as a testament of purification. We should cultivate such virtues in ourselves."

Both women agreed on the personal virtues of Qasem Soleimani; while the first comment related the source of virtue to predestination, the second referred to the individual's own role and emphasised Soleimani's ceaseless attempts to gain those virtues. In contrast to the image raised by the mass mourners, the women's reflections manifest how each of them harbours seeds of self-determination through spiritual and ethical means. In consuming the heroic position that the IRGC cultural producers provided, pious women from former war zones cast new meanings and tools as dreams and desires that expanded and enhanced those messages.

In the aftermath of Soleimani's assassination, the illustration of his martyrdom by Hassan Roholamin circulated widely on giant banners across the cities as well as in private profile pictures. The painting was originally an epic scene from the

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<sup>14</sup> Chavoshian 2017: 124–127 and 2020: 155–158.

<sup>15</sup> Bajoghli 2019: 109–110.

battle of Karbala, where the third Shi'i Imam, Hussain, and his battalions were slain in an uneven battle against the Umayyads (680 CE); it illustrated Hussain holding the bloodied and armless body of his kinsman and fellow combatant Qasem in his arms. With a slight alteration to the painting, this time it was Qasem Soleimani whose head rested in Imam Hussain's arms. And his torn arm in the painting evoked the memory of his hand as his only remains after the explosion. Symbolic assimilations such as these elevated Soleimani's spiritual position on the one hand and on the other interlaced the hagiographic past, the memory of the fallen soldiers of the Iran–Iraq war, and his assassination into the timeless battle against injustice at the core of the Shi'i belief. This way, Soleimani is crafted as a “world of his own” to whom many families of the martyrs and some of the local inhabitants of Khuzestan could easily relate. Negar and her circle were no exception. I first saw the painting on their WhatsApp profile pictures. To put it in the “logic of singularization” proposed by Andreas Reckwitz, Soleimani's figure is crafted through the “inherent complexity and inner density”<sup>16</sup> that encompasses multiple histories and eschatological implications.

Furthermore, General Soleimani was revered in the pious women's circle for his devoted services to the shrines of the martyrs of Karbala. The women contributed to the refurbishment of Imam Hussein's shrine in Karbala and financially supported construction projects under Soleimani's leadership. Although on a low income as a part-time teacher, Negar helped regularly at the Atabaat Civic Organisation and knew its directors in Khuzestan. The Atabat Organisation was initiated and led by Qasem Soleimani and his unit in 2003, after the US invasion, to reconstruct the Shi'i saintly shrines in Iraq and invest in infrastructure development projects for the roads of Khuzestan that connect Iranians to the shrines. After each meeting of their pious circle, Negar would pass around a small plastic bag to collect money for the organisation. Participants would contribute with their personal gold pieces or the cash that they had saved for a religious promise (*nadhr*). The collection of votive cash started with devotional supplication to Imam Hussein, as a proclamation of their creedal faith in his ghostly presence and their wish to personally visit his shrine in Karbala. Women shed tears for their martyred sons to intermeditate between them and the Imam as those who have joined him in paradise.

Atabaat construction projects include a large network of engineers, young social scientists, the Tehran municipal council and local city councils. In Negar's neighbourhood, many locals hold these projects in high regard as an economic boost to the region. Negar's husband, Ali, rented accommodation for the short-term stays of the project employees. He also owned a small grocery shop, where he

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<sup>16</sup> Reckwitz 2019: 142.



would meet various tourists and groups of visitors. He told me that the young, educated engineers brought new hope to their district, as they engaged actively in conversation with the locals and did not hesitate to live among them for the period of their work in the borderland or in Iraq. In the war-ridden cityscape, where the debris has penetrated the affective lives of the residents, urban planning and policies coming from Tehran are viewed with high scepticism. In this regard, Ali compared the Atabat project with the massive commemoration of the former battlefields by the IRGC. In doing so, he meant that, unlike the Atabat construction projects, the commemoration initiatives did not care about the inhabitants: “Rather than improving the infrastructure, they preferred us to live in isolation, misery and the ruins of war.”

Despite being reflexive and fragmented, the material I have presented here directs us to the specificities of what I loosely call Soleimani’s “heroic singularity”, à la Reckwitz, and its relation to the statist culture in Iran. According to Reckwitz, contrary to the traditional treatment of the heroic subject under the misleading rubric of individuality, fashioning of the human singular subject occurs in the social realm.<sup>17</sup> Subjects are singularised when their uniqueness is recognised socially through achieving an acknowledged degree of inherent complexity.<sup>18</sup> This is particularly visible in the way Ali singles out Soleimani’s leading role in one project against the other. One can complement Reckwitz’s considerations by thinking through the element of fantasy and imagination that undergirds this uniqueness. This is when Negar and her friends cite saintly dreams and visions to authenticate Soleimani’s visits to martyrs’ families as spiritual events.

Yet this singularity is enmeshed in the statist culture that Negar and her friends present in different guises. On the one hand, complying with the statist narratives of virtuousness and martyrdom are ways of alleviating emotional turmoil and gaining economic benefit. In this instance, governmentality is not repressive or enforcing but “self-generating”.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, critical engagements, in Ali’s case, do not exceed the frame of those narratives. His cynical comment about the memorials that do not help the local economy, while that economy benefits from another construction project, holds onto the same statist culture.<sup>20</sup> They give two wings to the statist culture, cling to its narratives, and proliferate and embellish them.

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<sup>17</sup> Reckwitz 2019: 143.

<sup>18</sup> Reckwitz 2019: 144.

<sup>19</sup> Navaro 2003: 120.

<sup>20</sup> See Navaro-Yashin 2003: 156–171 on the relation between cynical agency and political subjectivity. See also Zizek 1995: 74–75.

The singularity of Soleimani should be read, then, in this context, where the statist culture and the martyrs play the prime roles. This becomes especially clear in the particular context of war-stricken Ahwaz and among pious women and the families of martyrs of war. They become believers in what they do. And yet others, conscious of ideology, take action upon the world as if they were not aware.

### 3 Totalitarian tears?

Unpacking the North Koreans' deep mourning and grief during their leader's funeral, William Mazzarella cynically repeats the question circulating in the Western media about the spectacle of the event: Do the North Koreans really mean it? Isn't it a well-rehearsed show of "totalitarian tears"?<sup>21</sup> In the ethnographic context of my study in Khuzestan, this very question captures how two insurmountable modes of legitimation, one affective and fleeting and the other engineered and discursive, happen in the same polity and how these discursive and non-discursive mediations allow for the formation of religious collective subjectivity whose performances are habitualised through years of participating in mass coordination of bodies and emotions.

Here, I relocate the martyrdom of Qasem Soleimani in the context of the "atmosphere" around his remains in his funeral procession in Ahwaz. I examine the different ways his remains were experienced among the participants. The significance of participants' perceptions of his remains lies in the refractory reading of martyrdom that their experience illustrates amidst the formal state procession.

The collective funeral procession of martyrs of the Iran–Iraq war, which has been a widespread institutionalised practise since the late 1980s, was reinvigorated to revere the martyrdom of Soleimani and his companions. It was indeed no coincidence that the city of Ahwaz in Khuzestan was chosen as the first destination of the procession. The precedent for this parade was the mass funerals, best known as the Friday Processions, initiated amidst the second year of war in Ahwaz. At that time, the corpses of the fallen soldiers were not able to be retrieved from the battlefields, and bereaved women mobilised caravans of women to go through the streets of Ahwaz bearing empty coffins marked with the names of their martyred sons and husbands on their shoulders and also to console the families for whom recent losses had been reported.<sup>22</sup> Later, with the increasing retrieval of bodies through excavation operations, the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs

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<sup>21</sup> Mazzarella 2015: 92.

<sup>22</sup> See my article "Affective Consanguinity" (forthcoming) on the Alam al-Huda family and their activities during the war in Ahwaz and Howeyzeh.



organised mass funeral processions for identified bodies in large cities after Friday prayer. The formalised commemoration services entailed caravans of trailers attached to a truck carrying wooden caskets wrapped in Iranian flags and mourners filling the city centres and proceeding to the sections reserved for martyrs in the cemeteries. During the procession, the sound of prayer from loudspeakers and religious slogans from the crowds filled the air of the neighbourhoods. Along with the families of the discovered bodies, the crowds grew and attracted people from the neighbouring areas. The participation of women in the Friday funerals was active and sizeable. They would come in groups; elderly women would carry framed pictures of their “martyred” sons above their black-veiled heads. The Friday Processions explicitly expressed the bond between the martyrs and an all-embracing sense of grief. They functioned both as solidarity tactics, since they attracted public emotions, and as a tool for political incorporation.<sup>23</sup>

In the early hours of Sunday 5 January, a large crowd filled the streets of Ahwaz, where the funeral procession of the General and his companions was taking place. The density of the crowd at the spot delayed the procession; thus, security officials and municipal officers decided to reverse the path of the procession in order to make way for the truck through the crowd. At around 9 am, Iran’s state TV aired the procession live on three channels; millions of mourners in black attire walked at a slow pace alongside the truck carrying the coffins. On the four corners of the truck, the guards stood in military salute out of respect. Through megaphones, the parade leaders incited the crowd to join in their chants and mourning songs. A huge placard with a photo of Soleimani covered one side of the truck. It read: “Tough revenge awaits the assassins.”

However, an affective engagement with his relics interrupted this perfectly orchestrated and staged atmosphere. In a moment of collective effervescence, the crowd threw their shawls and scarves at the male guards riding next to the martyrs on the truck. The guarding soldiers broke their military posture, but instead of taking a defensive measure, they bent and snatched up the items thrown by the public. Then, they performed a devotional practise (*tabarro*) in the same way as when pious women visit shrines. They rested their palms on the coffin and brushed the items over the top of it, infusing the fabric with his sacred blessing, and then flung them back to the crowd. News agencies covered this moment in its peculiarity when the crowd swarmed around the truck to obtain the “sacred relics” that the pieces of cloth had become now that his energy had been transmitted to them.

One might see this devotional practise as an expression of the over-interpretation of state ceremonies and performances of loyalty to Soleimani in

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<sup>23</sup> See Wellman 2021: 2–3 for a local martyr procession in Fars province.

the public. Indeed, the resemblance of the people's behaviour to the most pious devotional forms of veneration promotes reverence for the state's military hero. Yet, the set of religious emotions and the desires for the blessing of a martyr among the crowd were different from the revengefulness and strength that the state invoked. Contrary to the retaliation dictated by the state, the inherent ambiguity of receiving *baraka* promoted individual engagement and personal desires. In this sense, collective emotion momentarily reveals the incongruence between the venerators' desire and that of the state.<sup>24</sup> Two contrasting framings, one charged by the people's need and the other loaded by the state's incitement to revenge stand in contrast with one another. In this regard, the collective performance of the mourners oscillates between the invocation of the traditional principles of the martyr cult and their collective power in the demarcation of the sacred. It draws a blurry line between religious ritual and political assertion. Here, the participants draw on a resonant performative practise of mourners through the military heroism, and yet they build their very own overarching sense of despair and grief coupled with their need for the martyr's *baraka* and help.

Again, Mazzarella reminds us that the "cynicism" of collective subjectivity hinges upon the ambiguity of the subject's belief, i.e. it is not to be evaluated or differentiated.<sup>25</sup> From above, where the drones and cameras captured the crowd, it is impossible to determine whether the faces are crumpled in pain or revenge. Even the erected flags and slogans, whose perfect print quality attest to them being printed in a government office, were not able to break this thin line between revenge for the sake of the state and resentment against it. This fragile ambiguity provides a space for an outpouring of emotions while these emotions paradoxically enhance the legitimacy of the state.

The complex amalgam of contempt and fascination, revenge and despair implies the specific story of the impact of official religious discourse on local beliefs, the construction and maintenance of the emergent relics, and the ambivalent treatment of local belief by the orthodoxy of the system.<sup>26</sup> Within the dramatic space of mourning for Soleimani, a specific form of collective subjectivity has emerged that performs his belief in accordance with his perceived sacred. Saba Mahmood's seminal expansion of Foucauldian modes of self-cultivation among pious mosque participants highlights this form of collective

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<sup>24</sup> As Stauth and Schielke explain, the aura that is created during saintly veneration can be read as the juxtaposition of two opposing principles of organising religion: the *baraka* and systematic rationality. Whereas *baraka* is an inclusive source of power, systematic rationality exclusively fosters established moral practises and rational needs. See Stauth and Schielke 2008: 19.

<sup>25</sup> Mazzarella 2015: 104.

<sup>26</sup> See also Stauth 2006: 166.

subjectivity.<sup>27</sup> According to Mahmood, despite the seeming “obedience” and “submissiveness” ascribed to the mosque participants, their embodied ethical practises that build their subjectivity are necessary conditions of political agency inasmuch as these practises produce unanticipated effects in the social field.<sup>28</sup> Her analysis allows for a political imaginary where collective subjectivity does not put the structure that governs its normativity at risk but rather consolidates it.<sup>29</sup> She acknowledges the intersubjective level of being and acting as particular imaginaries of pious politics. I build on this view but shift its focus from embodied and intersubjective relations to “interobjective”<sup>30</sup> networks that emerge in the environment as affective properties and are complicit in the invocation of sacred relics. In Emile Durkheim’s prominent study of religious rituals, “collective effervescence” is the most decisive “current of energy” that comes from without and sustains the group of people like “an invisible gas”.<sup>31</sup> Yet, it is a short-living imminent energy generated by proximate bodies that each mirror the other’s excitement.<sup>32</sup> In the emergent relationship between the remains of Soleimani and his venerated, we observe a rather tangible dynamic. Here, the flow of energy is proliferated by the remains and this energy is even perceived to be transmittable through pieces of cloth.

The aura that the state crafted around the image of Soleimani during the previous years is acknowledged by the crowd and is rematerialised through the pieces of cloth. The differential moment between the fabricated aura and the genuine way of capturing it in the crowd qualifies the collective effervescence. The intervening role of collective effervescences appears when we attend this differential moment: the state orchestration for the funeral procession propagated and incited “revenge” for the deceitful assassination of a military hero.

“Revenge” stands here for the emotional differentiation between the masses and the state-led religion, a new ultimate legitimacy of the government in crisis due to the international sanctions and extensive anti-government protests. In contrast, the material mediation of the coffins of martyrs on the truck recomposes public emotions towards the intrinsic sense of the sacredness. This sense of saintliness is not engendered by historical Shi’i narratives, but rather it is coeval

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<sup>27</sup> Mahmood 2005: 29.

<sup>28</sup> Mahmood 2005: 152.

<sup>29</sup> Mahmood 2005: 164.

<sup>30</sup> Bruno Latour (1996: 239) puts interobjectivity as that which signifies that action must be shared with other kinds of actants dispersed in other spatio-temporal frameworks and who exhibit other kinds of ontology.

<sup>31</sup> Yael Navaro-Yashin describes Durkheim’s engagement with affects as an invisible gas; see Navaro-Yashin 2012: 203.

<sup>32</sup> Collins 2005: 119–26.

with political public demands. It speaks out a specific collective emotional expression which would be otherwise suppressed.

Nearly a year after Soleimani's assassination, at around the national anniversary of his martyrdom, I was able to contact Negar's family again. Not to my surprise, they had all participated in the funeral procession. However, Negar's reply to my question about her feelings during the procession cast light on my doubt about the heterogeneity of emotional dynamics at work there. She said, "Yes, I came close to Haj Qasem's coffin. I could even touch the white truck with my forehead and from there I complained ... I complained to him about the situation he left us with!"

The two ethnographic scenes that I presented indicate two dialectically connected moments in the cultivation of a state-revering political cult: the moment of intense manipulation and the moment of emergent affects. These moments mark the performative dispensation of martyrs as a set of performative conventions that make and remake the social order by coordinating the movements between the incitement of affects and the symbolic mediation or containment.<sup>33</sup>

While singularisation (as in the first instance) and collective incitement around the material remains (as in the second instance) share a sense of spontaneity and contingency, they do not refrain from, deny or resist state ideologies. They cannot promote an emancipatory form of subjectivation. Instead, the juxtaposition of immediate and mediated affects in the state apparatus have led into a specific mode of sovereignty where the emergent practises of the collective elevate and embellish formal discourses and strategies in favour of the state.

In answering the question at the beginning of this article concerning how Qasem Soleimani's life is framed that makes it revered, I show the process of singularisation and intermediating affects. What they disclose is the efficacy of the state's mediation strategies to craft singularity and transpose and orchestrate the atmosphere around it. Another way to put this is to suggest that sovereignty is worked on through a network of collectives engaged with martyrs and engaged on through material mediations that invoke martyrs.<sup>34</sup>

Looking from the perspective of atmosphere that *envelops* an environment, we can unravel another facet of religious subjectivity, one whose bodily demarcations go beyond somatic "moral agency" à la Foucault. While Foucault's work exhibits how language and discourse (as a form that power takes) mould and specify one's somatic singularity, the very attributes of the broader atmospheres occasion the

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<sup>33</sup> See Mazzarella on performative dispensation (2009: 6–7).

<sup>34</sup> According to Navaro-Yashin (2012: 43), sovereignty can be described as something which is worked on in a given territory through time and is a long-term process of negotiation, contestation and mediation between various actors within a terrain of materialities and physical properties.

recognition of singularity.<sup>35</sup> The scene of the mourners of Soleimani in Khuzestan manifests the role of the sacred relic and a spiritual atmosphere in generating statist discourse and vocabularies of the formal martyr cult in Iran.

Through these two ethnographic instances, I try to reflect upon the discursive and non-discursive formation of religious collective subjectivity as it corresponds to the material imprints and expands upon it. The last section revisits the existing conceptions of martyrdom with regard to this central role of a collective constitution of meanings.

## 4 Martyr cult: a critical sociological sketch

Much of the social-scientific work on martyrs has problematically dissociated emotional dynamics from the social processes that legitimise the martyrs and solidify the bonds of the community. The collective image of the crowd who embrace and assign martyrdom is prefigured as any typical mass, “the savage-minded”,<sup>36</sup> who are hyperactive and devoid of sober judgement. This way, collective emotional dynamics have been abstracted from the construction of martyrdom for their incompatibility with the singularity of the sacrifice and the rational process of its construction. While scholars in the social constructionist vein have emphasised the intentionality that articulates the martyr’s commitment to sacrifice, the cultural theorisations of martyrdom have upheld the authenticity of martyrdom through passion narratives in distinction from collective legitimation. Concomitantly, they neglect the entanglement of affective imprints and the social imaginary. In figuring the multifaceted material and state-generated mediations, the following lines seek to examine the possibility of a Muslim collective subjectivity that exceeds genuine, singular and rational casting of the martyrs. Driven by the notion of “martyr cult”, the collective interventions challenge the individual and deliberate vistas to martyrdom and highlight the affective flowing through them. I am not simply suggesting that the rationalising, disenchanting institutions of modernity should be combined with affectively structured premises of martyrdom in Islamic traditions. Rather, taking the insight from Andreas Reckwitz, who described late modernity’s logic of the particular as

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<sup>35</sup> Foucault 1974: 55.

<sup>36</sup> A lucid explanation can be found in the work of Gustave Le Bon (2002 [1895]: 17). His description of the masses is relevant here in the way he criticises the social imaginary: “A crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images that have no logical connection with the first.” Reversing this understanding, the affective understanding of martyrdom is an attempt to analyse the stream of images between the material reflections and collective imaginations.



“singularities”, I try to uncouple moments of collective ritual emotionality from the ideological discourse of modernity that either demonises it as anti-modern or romanticises it as a part of a disappearing world.

Martyrdom has been generally theorised through the cultural sociological terminologies of victim/hero.<sup>37</sup> Martyrs demarcate the sacred; they generate collective identities and elicit desired values and belief by making them “tangible” and “cognitively memorable”.<sup>38</sup> In the construction of ideal types of boundary work, the martyr stands ambiguously between the hero and victim types. On the one hand, the martyr represents “extreme heroism”<sup>39</sup> with his act of ultimate sacrifice. On the other hand, his victimisation becomes a social-moral construct that guides the community in defining an evil.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, there is a normalising discourse in the sociological studies of martyrs in that they tend to miss momentary and collective effervescences. More precisely, neither the good intentions (strong beliefs) of the martyr nor the general remarks on the polarisation of values in the society can capture “how” the community recognises someone as their martyr. It is as if the processes of victimisation, polarisation and sacralisation were all taking place in an achronological and emotionally sterile atmosphere. In this context, the collective and discursive emotions are reduced to the follow-up of this flat attribute.

Among the scholars of religious studies and philology, the collective affective imprints of martyrs are also blurred. In contrast with the a-temporal, sociological approach, religious studies focus aptly on the “passion narratives” in the invocation of martyrdom. Yet, their works position martyrdom in its historical originality; if there is a publicity of martyrs, it is endowed to the theatricality of the original scene. The martyr imparts a transcendental value only insofar as his/her sacrifice is actively narrated and commemorated.<sup>41</sup> Although sacrifice is a powerful story, its reverberations consolidate the sacred. In the opening line of her article “On the Superseding of Sacrifice”, Angelika Neuwirth articulates three axes of martyrdom, namely, the original scene (Urszene), the mythic dimension of bloodshed and finally the suffering and pain (imitato).<sup>42</sup> Providing a historical comparative approach, she argues that, unlike Judaism, which kept the memory of liturgical sacrifice alive as a core part of spirituality, and unlike Christianity, which spiritualised sacrifice in the shape of Christ’s redemptive suffering, the Quran

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<sup>37</sup> See Alexander 2008; Giesen 2015 [2004].

<sup>38</sup> DeSoucey et al. 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Gözl 2019a: 6.

<sup>40</sup> Giesen 2004: 46.

<sup>41</sup> Pannewick 2012: 21.

<sup>42</sup> Neuwirth 2014: 61.

played down sacrifice by framing the act of ritual slaughtering as a strikingly low-profile gesture of piety. Subsequently, Shi'is opted to cling to the idea of vicarious suffering, while the Sunni accommodation of the idea of martyr was actualised through the theo-erotic paradigm of passionate love implying the ideal of sacrificial death.<sup>43</sup>

This prevailing emphasis on the concept of an “Urszene” among scholars of religion has limited the analysis of martyrdom to a focus on static symbolic order. The acknowledgement of the symmetrical morphologies between the drastic moment of the killing of a martyred personage such as Jesus, Jeanne d’Arc, Hosayn (Shiite third Imam) or Al-Hallaj (a mystic figure of the 10th century) reduces their understanding of martyrdom to being a distinct form of idealism, whereby the domains of the subject and intentional meaningful action take primacy over contingent affects.

Both sociology and religious studies scholars gloss over the collective effervescences and affects by presuming martyrs to be dramatically concentrated in individual human embodiment, paradigmatically the hero. Following the Durkheimian ritual situation, they consider the effervescence in demarcated sacred persons, objects and sites. While a familiar fetish effect is centred around the inherent individual power of the martyr, it may be better understood as the ability to actualise “diffuse” and “distributed” potentials in the environment.<sup>44</sup>

My focus on the cult and affects is not simply an effort to establish the sentiments that arise for martyrs. Rather than studying modern martyrologies, we need to gain an understanding of the collective inclinations and symbolic divisions that encompass affects within them. Here, the term “martyr cult” seems to capture a facet of historical experience inaccessible to the common martyrologies. In their attempt to reflect on modern Muslim subjectivities, Jung and Sinclair have heuristically interwoven civilisational macro-approaches to religion with their adoption of Andreas Reckwitz’s tripartite subjectivities. They show how in a shared context of a specifically Islamic modern discourse a new culture of salaried masses, “peer-groups”, emerge with a new set of ethical/Islamic technologies of the self and public religious performances. As they explain, these masses are oriented towards standardised forms of efficiently coordinated social action and advocated practises of adaptation and reverence.<sup>45</sup> Jung and Sinclair’s insight into the historical Islamic organised peer-groups contributes to the understanding of the specific role of the martyr cult in a contemporary Shi’i Iranian context. Instead of a generic ideal type of martyrdom, “martyr cult” deals with the production of

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<sup>43</sup> Neuwirth 2010: 64–71.

<sup>44</sup> Mazzarella 2010: 162.

<sup>45</sup> Jung/Sinclair 2015: 30–34; Reckwitz 2006: 275–440.



standardised aesthetics of the human body that combines with top-down elements of tradition. The cult performs its mourning as much for itself as for the purpose of export. I want to add to this constellation the role of new technologies of “enchantment engineering” as well as environmental and material imprints that mediate the construction of martyrdom. Here, we should account for the concept of “atmosphere” as it highlights the fleeting state that the environment and material objects mediate the perception of sainthood and martyrdom and lends itself to be perceived in terms of patterned practises such as rituals of pilgrimage and reverence.<sup>46</sup>

The image of Soleimani’s severed hand adorned with his amulet ring, the memory of the funeral procession for the mass martyrs’ in the region, and the coast on which he had recently chanted mourner songs for his martyred friends invoked the saintly qualities of his reverential practises in the crowd. At the same time, the enchantment strategies of the state, ranging from the religious mourning soundscape, the parade of coffins accompanied by military guards and the live TV coverage of the event conducted the collective grief. The density of the people converging around the truck prompted the crowd to recognise its own presence and gave it a sense of collectivity. These mediations, whether invoked genuinely or through the state’s arrangements, construe the affective reverberations of martyrdom.

Thinking about Muslim collective subjectivity and the martyr cult becomes possible in this distributed and multiply mediated terrain of subjectivity itself. Emphasising atmospheres and collective effervescences allows us a different vantage point on the sensuously intimate dimension in the formation of martyrs. Whether distorted, masked or staged, the collectives around martyrs imply an innervated and abstract destination, complementing the coherent intentionality of the martyr.

## 5 Conclusions

I have reinterpreted the mass funeral procession of Maj. General Qasem Soleimani in two different trajectories: first, I showed the interrelation between heroic singularity and the statist culture. Through an ethnographic exploration in Ahwaz, I discussed how the state narratives of virtuousness are regenerated and authenticated through daily life and imaginaries. Second, drawing on affect theory, I approached the funeral procession of Soleimani as the momentum of construction

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<sup>46</sup> Wetherell et al. 2015: 59.

of sacred relics and authentication of martyrs. Hence, the conjunction between the orchestrated and fleeting atmospheres becomes vivid.

As I have argued, rather than heroic individuality or a sense of unity, the extension of the statist culture through new modes of singularisation and orchestration of feelings underlies the mass participation in his funeral. The fleeting atmosphere that invokes the sacred relic in the remains of Soleimani undergirds collective subjectivity within mass publicity while embellishing the state's policies.

Taking a larger theoretical frame, the notion of martyrdom has been rearticulated through its cultic and collective repertoires. The focus on collective subjectivity in the martyr cult challenges an idealistic demarcation between ideological discourse that naturalises domination and an emergent practise that is refractory to the central power. Against this grain, I have tried to show how foregrounding statist and pious positions in the study of Muslims seeks to understand strategies and patterns of governmentalisation of religion as well as modes of mediation through their different guises on the subjective side.

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