

## **Mourners in Common: Qassem Soleimani, Mohammad Reza Shajarian, and the “Pattern” of Iranian Culture**

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Iranians lost two of the most popular figures in their contemporary history in 2020, Qassem Soleimani and Mohammad Reza Shajarian. Although Soleimani and Shajarian possessed distinct lifestyles, they enjoyed a common group of admirers who comprised a large number of Iranians. This article seeks to show why and how they shared the same fans and makes the case that one cannot understand their popularity based on an imagined polarized base.

While Soleimani’s assassination always loomed as a possibility and Shajarian suffered for years from a chronic illness, many Iranians experienced their deaths as catastrophic, painful, and sudden, communicating their grief on social media. Some actively participated in farewell ceremonies, especially for Soleimani where dozens died due to overcrowding. Later in the year, thousands attended Shajarian’s funeral despite the threat of COVID-19.

Soleimani and Shajarian had two different personalities, two histories, and two life paths. Despite these differences, each was known for possessing characteristics cherished by many Iranians.

Soleimani was the son of a poor villager from an underdeveloped area of Iran. He spent the early years of his life in poverty. As a teenager, he worked to support his family and volunteered to defend the western borders of Iran when it was invaded by Iraq. He quickly progressed through the ranks of the Iranian armed forces. By the middle of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, Soleimani became one of Iran’s leading commanders. After the war, he worked mainly as the commander of the Quds Force, which was responsible for extraterritorial operations of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard. He frequently travelled to different parts of the Middle East to organize allied groups’ military forces with Iran. For all these high-profile endeavours, most Iranians only came to know Soleimani when ISIS seized control of the Iraqi city of Mosul. The spectacular violence unleashed by this event spread far and wide through various media. The nation at the time was concerned with ISIS approaching Iran’s western borders. Soleimani garnered a name for himself as a brave commander who prevented ISIS forces from entering Iran and committing crimes similar to those perpetrated in Syria and Iraq. He was killed by an American drone alongside Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Committee (*al-Hashd al-Sha’bi*), on January 3, 2020, when he landed at the Baghdad airport from Syria on a passenger plane.

Mohammad-Reza Shajarian, who fans call the “King of Iranian song,” was the leading figure in Iranian traditional music and an important symbol of Iranian culture and music for nearly half a century. As a teenager, he gained acclaim as a famous Quran reciter in his hometown of Mashhad.

Shortly thereafter, he turned his attention to traditional Iranian song and gradually made a name for himself as a practitioner of the art. Unlike many Iranian singers, he remained in Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. He regularly travelled abroad to perform as well. Many Iranians are familiar with Shajarian's rendition of Rabbana, a prayer recited and recorded in 1979, since broadcast on Iranian state television before Iftar during the month of Ramazan.

For much of his life, especially after the 1979 revolution, Shajarian remained aloof from direct participation in Iranian politics. Toward the end of his life, in particular following the controversial 2009 Iranian presidential election, he began to make political statements. In a song released during the post-election clashes, he called on the Iranian military to refrain from firing on protesters. The Iranian state-controlled media corporation, Voice and Vision, banned him in response. However, due to Shajarian's immense popularity and social media presence, the ban proved ineffective. The same state-controlled media corporation praised him after his death

Shajarian had been suffering from cancer for many years and died on October 8, 2020 in Tehran. In the days leading up to his death, many of his fans gathered at the hospital where he was being treated and chanted his songs. Although some gatherers chanted political slogans, his death did not entail overt politicization. Following his death, despite the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 and his family's requests, large crowds attended his funeral. It is conceivable that, were it not for these restrictions, his funeral would have been one of the largest in the recent years.

While Soleimani and Shajarian belonged to two distinct cultural traditions, these traditions did not necessarily contradict one another. The two much beloved men pursued their respective paths, but did not comment on and did not impugn one another's reputation or integrity. Families and friends of Soleimani and Shajarian who are active on social media have also not spoken negatively about each other. This observation runs counter to representations that insist on a crude binary between Islamism and secularism, claiming Soleimani for the former and Shajarian for the latter. What can popular reactions to the death of these figures teach students of Iranian society and culture?

### **Figures of a Complex Whole**

Soleimani and Shajarian articulated different aspects of the "pattern" of Iranian culture. In *Patterns of Culture* (1934), American anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) argues that different cultures can be described with the help of different personality types. In her view, each human culture highlights certain personality types and downplays others. Therefore, any culture can be considered to some extent a reflection of the characters that created it. On Benedict's terms, Soleimani and Shajarian constitute essential role models in Iranian culture, shaping patterns that might be thought of as standing in complex relationship with one another. That relationship, I suggest, has developed over the centuries and has come to form a seemingly contradictory whole known as Iranian society and culture.



Messages of condolence by Rambod Javan, Iranian TV host with 11 million followers on Instagram, on the assassination of Soleimani and death of Shajarian.

For many Iranians, Soleimani was a symbol of the ancient duality of humility and bravery. A man raised in environs far from the capital bearing a tanned face and rustic appearance, who volunteered for the war, he was seen as the living embodiment of canonical figures in Persian epics. Pictures of Soleimani posted on social media never show him wearing a suit, attire that has become synonymous with the much disdained Iranian bureaucratic class. Rather, posters show him sitting on the ground in dusty clothes, moving freely among the elderly, youth and deprived. Soleimani distanced himself from Iran’s domestic politics in recent years, refraining from voicing his opinion on controversial issues. When he did, he rang a tone of national unity. During a spate of protests against the obligatory hijab, for instance, he famously called the girls who did not observe the obligatory hijab as his own “[daughters](#).” Referring to Iranian society as “our family”, he [criticized](#)

those who would label and thereby condemn fellow citizens based on their political orientation, a prevalent strategy deployed by Iranian hardline political forces.

Shajarian can be said to represent another aspect of Iranian culture: a part that contains art, beauty, love, and ambiguity. Based on my personal findings while conducting ethnography in Iran as well as observations of family living in Iran, many of the same Iranians who enthusiastically narrated stories of Soleimani's courage and were thrilled by his humility and humanity found themselves whisked away by Shajarian's singing. They forgot their daily problems, felt proud of their culture, and connected themselves to long traditions of mysticism and ecstasy by whispering Shajarian's songs. His shaved face and elegant suit reminded them of an older generation of elites, cherished due to their trustworthiness, honesty, and honourable conduct. These qualities appear to be in short supply in a media landscape where Iranians are bombarded daily with news of corruption by government bureaucrats and politicians.

### **Social Media Reacts**

After Soleimani's assassination and Shajarian's death, Iranian social media exploded with an outpouring of posts commemorating their lives and contributions to the nation. In the days between Soleimani's assassination and his funeral, I visited Tehran, Mashhad, and Esfahan. In each city, I encountered citizens who expressed their bitterness toward those who killed him, foremost Donald Trump. Meanwhile, numerous personal, familial, and communal channels and groups on Telegram Messenger, the most popular form of social media in Iran, reacted to his assassination and posted messages of condolence.

In addition to ordinary people, celebrities including athletes, artists, actors and fashion models shared photos of Soleimani and expressed condolences to their families and the Iranian people. The outpouring was notable for several reasons, but especially in light of the fact that many of these celebrities have long been unhappy with the social, cultural, and political policies of the Iranian state and for many years have been indifferent to the passing of "revolutionary" figures. These celebrities are not generally considered to be "religious" or "nationalist" and certainly not "political" or "revolutionary", but had nevertheless responded angrily to the assassination. Even Ardeshir Zahedi, the one-time son-in-law of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, Iranian foreign minister (1966-1971) and ambassador to the United States and the United Kingdom during the 1960s and 1970s, who currently living in exile in Switzerland, [called Soleimani an "honorable and patriotic soldier of the homeland."](#) In their responses to the assassination of Soleimani, Iranian celebrities living in Iran mirrored a considerable swathe of Iranian society. As Instagram and its parent company Facebook began removing posts expressing support for Soleimani in compliance with US sanctions laws, many of these messages only remained on social media for a matter of hours. Those which remained conveyed the extent of their authors' anger and distress. For these celebrities, Soleimani came to be a complete and unalloyed representation of the basic values in Iranian culture, namely, valor, honor and self-sacrifice.

Consider this sample of messages, posted by celebrities following the assassination of Soleimani and death of Shajarian respectively:



behnoosh\_bakhtiari • Follow

behnoosh\_bakhtiari .

حاج قاسم سلیمانی و ابومهدی المهندس به شهادت رسیدند  
...  
شجاعت راه و سرنوشت مردمان خداست در راه  
تاییده زلفن مرد میخوانند...چه در خیابان چه در  
جبهه جنگ  
...  
حاج قاسم خجسته باد این اقتدار، کوارات وجودت  
این شهادت و شهامت  
...  
چه سال بدی شد...کاش بربر شدن انسانهای نیک  
روزگار رو نیبیم...فرقی ندارد...جوانهای ماهر که  
...رفتند چنین ناشی به دل ما گذاشتند



behnoosh\_bakhtiari • Follow

behnoosh\_bakhtiari .

فرزند ایران ، صدای شما بخشی از فرهنگ  
کهن ایران است که می خواهد یادآور بشه  
به مردم جهان که ما دارای چه فرهنگ  
انسانی، عشق ، صلح و صفا بودیم  
اللهی روحتون شاد  
#شجریان #استاد\_شجریان

1w

kianoosh\_gerami ❤️❤️❤️



314,284 views

7 DAYS AGO

Messages by Behnoosh Bakhtiari, Iranian actress with 8.9 million followers on Instagram.



baharehrahnamaoriginal • Follow  
Tehran, Iran

وطنم ای شکوه  
...پارچا  
نه از شرق دم میزنه نه از غرب  
نه از راست و نه از چپ اما بخوان یک جاش ایرانم  
میدلم لگر ایتال این قهرمانان بودند مرزهای کشورم  
نگون، پارچا نبود، حاکم از اینکه برخت از تسل  
جوان بتون نگه و اطلاع سیاسی اظهار نظر  
ممکنند و میدانند و بهیچ تخریب یک کشور  
...جست؟ و به چه قصد تمام میشود؟  
ایران #مرز#قهرمان#تسلیت#

44m



b.rahnama • Follow

محمد رضا شجریان  
اسطوره آواز ایرانی  
پس از سال ها  
بالاخره  
...آرامش را به آغوش کشید  
...روحش شاد و نامش جاوید است  
مهر ۱۳۹۹  
ایرانم تسلیت#

4d

mitraghasemkhani ❤️👍👍👍  
4d 9 likes

29,485 likes

4 DAYS AGO

Comments on this post have been limited.

Messages by Bahareh Rahmana, Iranian female cinema celebrity with 4.6 million followers on Instagram.

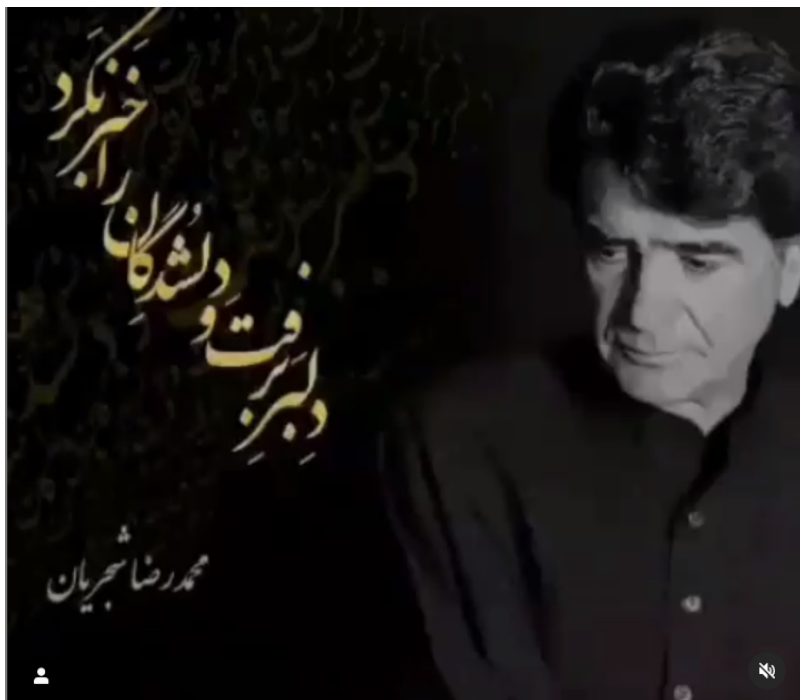





 aliparvin07 • Follow

 aliparvin07 • تسلیت به ملت ایران  
شهادت سردار سلیمانی  
او آرزوی شهادت داشت به آرزوی خود رسید  
7h

    
115,544 views



 aliparvin07 • Follow

 aliparvin07 • روحش شاد و یادش  
گرامی  
تسلیت به ملت ایران و خانواده استاد  
شجریان  
1w

    
74,782 views  
7 DAYS AGO

Messages of condolence by Ali Parvin, retired Iranian football player and coach with 1.2 million followers on Instagram.

Iranian culture has always contained diverse and seemingly paradoxical features. Over the course of centuries, these features have co-existed and, at times, come into conflict. Figures who either appeared connected to these seemingly paradoxical features or primarily embodied one but did not repudiate the other have enjoyed popularity and adoration across Iran's disparate classes and constituencies. This lies in stark contrast to those who have sought to polarise the culture and carve it up into mutually exclusive camps. For decades, the recitation of the Quran by Shajarian and the prayer he recited for the month of Ramadan were one of the most widespread songs and constituted part of Iranians' religious memory. And Soleimani's actions after the arrival of ISIS in Iraq aroused the patriotic feelings and admiration of Iranians who were not religious.

### **Intellectuals: United Under a Security Blanket**

In an unpredictable post-Arab Spring Middle East where Iran's territorial integrity was challenged, safety and security felt vital even to those who did not consider themselves "religious" or "Islamist." These two men provided Iranians a sense of strength, comfort, and security (Soleimani) as well as an equally comforting sense of identity, tradition, and uniqueness vis-à-vis the greater region (Shajarian). Perhaps it is due to these dynamics that, in addition to the condolences issued by the president and some government officials as well as countless Iranian actors, athletes, academics, artists, and celebrities, the likes of Abdolkarim Soroush, a dissident Muslim intellectual, and Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, a famous novelist associated with Iran's secular left, also offered condolences on the death of Soleimani and Shajarian.

Soroush is one of the most significant 'religious intellectuals' of Iran. Living in self-exile in the USA, he is considered a staunch critic of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the theory of "Guardianship of the Jurist", which enshrines clerical rule in the country. [In response to the assassination of Soleimani](#), Soroush modified a poem by Hafez and substituted a word with Qasem, Soleimani's "first name," in a way that vehemently praises him. He called Soleimani a "valorous" man and wrote that Soleimani had "made ablution by the spring of love," citing a poem by Rumi that reads "he closed his eyes (died) and opened our eyes (revived us)." Although Soroush's admiration of Soleimani [incited a negative reaction](#) from some dissidents of the Islamic Republic, he did not retract his standpoint. Soroush similarly published an eloquent [message of condolence](#) following Shajarian's death.

Mohsen Kadivar, another Iranian political dissident and an influential intellectual reformist who also lives in exile in the USA, recognized Soleimani as "[certainly the most popular Iranian figure](#)" and "[a defender of the territorial integrity of Iran.](#)" Although Kadivar criticizes Soleimani's regional policies and ideological approach to Iran's foreign policy, he called him "[a brave commander, planner, and tactician, resourceful and competent.](#)" For him, Soleimani's assassination was "[unacceptable in any sense.](#)" In his message of condolence on the death of Shajarian, Kadivar praised his political stances in the recent years and called him "[the voice of Iranians.](#)"

Sixty political reformist figures living inside and out of Iran, many of whom had been imprisoned in recent years due to their political activities, [issued a statement](#) and condemned the assassination of Soleimani. Calling him the "courageous commander", they asked the Iranian state not to fall into "America's trap" and to not do anything that would lead to war against it.



In [an interview](#), Bijan Abdolkarimi, an Iranian philosopher and translator of philosophical works into Persian, addressed the Iranian public's reaction to the assassination of Soleimani and death of Shajarian. For him, the massive funeral of Soleimani should not be understood as the result of coercion or threats by the Iranian state or that those who participated were necessarily supporting the Iranian state. It should not even be understood purely under the banner of Islam and religious identity but as speaking to larger questions of cultural and national identity. For Abdolkarimi, the funeral was an “eruption of Iranians’ collective conscious.” Referring to the numerous social, cultural and political problems of Iranian society in the recent years, he believes that Iranians need this “collective conscious” now more than at any other time in the past. Abdolkarimi, then, talks about the sympathy of Iranians to the death of Shajarian. For him, Shajarian was one of the “greatest sources of national capital in contemporary Iran,” “a manifestation of [Iran’s] national pride,” and “one of the most prominent representatives of the Iranian spirit”; thus “his music and song are connected with the deepest layers of our nation”.

For his part, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi also expressed dual condolences. When Soleimani was commanding Iranian forces in Syria and Iraq and Zarif was busy in his negotiations with the P5+1 countries, Dowlatabadi [asserted](#) that Iran needed both approaches. After Soleimani’s assassination, he called him a “[worthy son of Iran](#)” and exclaimed that he feels a thorn has been plunged into his heart. Following Shajarian’s death, he [issued a statement](#) that read “Mohammad Reza Shajarian has passed away. Condolences to the relatives and followers who really lived and will live for half a century with the ringing of his voice, with understanding the importance of poetry in his voice, and kinship again with the modular musicality of his voice. Those people are crying now.”

Naser Fakouhi, an influential anthropologist, [wrote an](#) article soon after Soleimani’s assassination and insisted that “what should be announced without a doubt and without the slightest ambiguity is the condemnation of this criminal and illegal act, which by any international standard means declaring war on Iran and Iraq.” Fakouhi went on to call Shajarian “a voice that never ends.” In an emotional article published some hours after Shajarian’s death, Fakouhi [writes](#) that Shajarian is a symbol of the dominance of culture over the power of violence and retaliation.



Messages of Hasan Reyvandi, Iranian stand-up comedy showman, with 14.7 million followers on Instagram.

Soleimani and Shajarian are both crucial parts of the puzzle comprising Iranian culture and society today. We can only discern a more comprehensive picture when their distinct styles, mien and demeanour are brought together. These pieces are not in opposition to each other. That is, significant parts of Iranian society does not see or imagine them in opposition to each other—the parts that generally do not hold an uncompromising ideological standpoint vis-a-vis the Iranian state, who do not view certain elements of Iranian culture and history through a Procrustean lens. This ambiguous and seemingly contradictory feature of Iranian society has shaped myriad Iranians' lives in such a way that they can simultaneously mourn Soleimani's assassination in Iraq and Shajarian's death in a hospital in Tehran. There are some cultural features and values, best embodied in the personality of Soleimani and Shajarian, that these Iranians' cherish, and which makes it possible for both men to be beloved and admired by many. One cannot understand Iranian society, as some dissidents have contended, by drawing a stark line dividing it in a Manichean fashion into those who mourned the assassination of Soleimani and those who were distraught following the news of Shajarian's death as if the latter were "real" Iranians and the former were not. Reality lies in the apparent paradox.