



## Looking at the Trees to See the Forest: Construal Level Shifting in General Qasem Soleimani’s Opportunity Creation

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper explores how an exceptional geopolitical leader systematically converts pervasive threats into actionable opportunities in prolonged high-uncertainty environments by introducing and elaborating the concept of Strategic Construal-Level Shifting (SCLS).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study conducts a reflexive, theory-driven secondary thematic analysis of a rich qualitative dataset originally collected through grounded theory work, including authenticated biographies, field memoirs, speeches and three semi-structured interviews with close associates of the late Iranian Major-General Qasem Soleimani, triangulated across textual and interview sources.

**Findings** – The analysis identifies four interrelated organizing themes that together constitute SCLS as a dynamic cognitive capability: (1) Field-Level Micro Situational Awareness through embodied immersion and sensitivity to weak signals; (2) Sensemaking and Pattern Synthesis that connects fragmented cues into coherent strategic narratives; (3) Cognitive Altitude Switching Ability that enables deliberate low-to-high shifts between concrete and abstract mental representations; and (4) Decision-Making Without Detail Paralysis that translates insight into timely, focused action. The findings illustrate how Soleimani repeatedly reframed existential crises—such as the emergence of ISIS and multi-front proxy conflicts—into strategic openings by sequencing immersion in local realities with higher-order abstraction grounded in spiritual conviction and frontline proximity.

**Originality/value** – By extending construal-level-shift theory from controlled organizational settings to an extreme, non-Western geopolitical context, the paper broadens the boundary conditions of construal-level theory and conceptualizes SCLS as a novel framework for understanding opportunity creation under asymmetric warfare, sacred meaning-making and persistent existential threat. The study offers theoretically grounded implications for developing cognitive flexibility and opportunity-creation capabilities among strategic leaders facing volatility, moral burden and ideological stakes.

### Keywords

Strategic Construal-Level Shifting, Martyr Qasem Soleimani, Strategic management, Opportunity Creation, Jihadi management.

## Introduction

Throughout history, the development of strategic knowledge has been deeply influenced by the lived experience and reflective practice of exceptional leaders—many of whom understood strategy not merely as a technique, but as a form of wisdom shaped by worldview, purpose, and responsibility (Edwards, 2014). From the biblical narrative of Moses delegating authority after crossing the Red Sea (Kennedy, 2020) to Sun Tzu's *Art of War*—written circa 340 BCE and later embedded in modern business curricula (Taybi Abolhassani & Khashaei Varnamkhasti, 2021)—strategy has repeatedly evolved from leaders confronting uncertainty, moral burden, and existential risk.

Historical examples demonstrate this enduring pattern: King Arthur (Perkins, 2003), Niccolò Machiavelli (Machiavelli & Brennan, 2015), Napoleon Bonaparte (Esdaile, 2008), Carl von Clausewitz (Kornberger & Engberg-Pedersen, 2019), Mao Zedong (Weng, 1998), and General George C. Marshall (Nelsen, 2022) all left intellectual and practical legacies that continue to shape how leadership, power, and long-term decision-making are conceptualized. Within the Islamic Republic of Iran, the presence of distinguished strategic leaders represents a similarly rich but still underutilized source of indigenous knowledge (Dehghani Poudeh & Pashaei Hoolasoo, 2020). Engaging with this lived reservoir is not merely an exercise in historical analysis; it aligns with ongoing calls to develop Islamic-Iranian frameworks of management grounded in spiritual worldview, contextual realities, and contemporary strategic challenges (Moqaddas & Saeidian, 2018; Qanadan Zadeh et al., 2022).

In this light, the strategic thought and practice of Martyr Major-General Qasem Soleimani offer a rare empirical case: a leader repeatedly described by Iran's Supreme Leader as exemplary, awarded the Order of Zolfaghar, and introduced by Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah as a "complete strategist." His well-known statement—"the amount of opportunity contained in crises exceeds that found in ordinary circumstances, provided we do not fear and do not allow fear to be imposed"—reflects not only tactical insight, but a spiritual orientation toward uncertainty grounded in conviction, responsibility, and trust.

Recent experimental work by Park, Baer, and Nickerson (2025) provides a theoretical lens that helps explain how such transformations occur cognitively. Across studies involving working adults, mid-level managers, and senior executives, they found that comprehensive strategic problem formulation emerges most reliably when decision-makers first adopt a low

(concrete) construal level—attending to contextual cues without premature cognitive filtering—and then shift to a high (abstract) construal level, enabling the integration of those cues into novel causal theories. High-level thinking alone risks abstraction-induced blind spots, while staying solely at a concrete level confines leaders to detail without synthesis (Park et al., 2025; see also Trope & Liberman, 2010; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). Their construal-level-shift model thus clarifies a longstanding paradox in strategic cognition: flexibility requires distance, yet insight requires immersion.

This study applies and extends Park et al.'s (2025) framework to the case of General Soleimani, examining his strategic cognition through thematic re-analysis of qualitative data originally collected using grounded theory, including interviews with close companions, biographies, field reports, and his own statements. The findings suggest that Soleimani's opportunity-creation capability emerged from systematic low-to-high construal shifts enacted under extreme uncertainty, asymmetric warfare, and a spiritual worldview that shaped meaning-making, resolve, and strategic judgment. By doing so, the study (1) provides the first empirical application of construal-level-shift theory to a non-Western geopolitical leader, (2) bridges Western strategic cognition research with the emerging indigenous and spiritually informed "Soleimani school" of Iranian strategic thought, and (3) offers actionable implications for cultivating cognitive flexibility and opportunity recognition in prolonged, high-stakes environments.

## **1. Theoretical Background**

### **1-1. Construal Level Theory**

Construal level theory (CLT) proposes that psychological distance shapes how individuals mentally represent events, objects, and decisions (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Low-level construals generate concrete, context-specific representations oriented toward feasibility and situational detail. In contrast, high-level construals yield abstract, generalized representations that emphasize desirability, meaning, and long-term objectives. Importantly, the relationship operates bidirectionally: concrete thinking reduces perceived distance, whereas abstract thinking increases it (Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). Although CLT has been applied across domains such as negotiation, creativity, and ethical judgment, its implications for strategic problem framing and opportunity creation remain insufficiently examined.

### **1-2. Construal Level Shift in Strategic Problem Framing and Formulation**

Strategic problems are typically ambiguous and ill-structured, presenting themselves not as clearly defined causal chains but as observable deviations

or symptoms whose underlying sources are initially uncertain (Cyert & March, 1963; Simon, 1991; Nickerson & Argyres, 2018). Consequently, the strategic process often begins not with solution design, but with problem formulation—constructing a sufficiently comprehensive causal map of the problem space (Camuffo et al., 2020; Park & Baer, 2022).

Recent evidence suggests that neither purely abstract nor purely concrete thinking alone supports such comprehensiveness (Park, Baer, & Nickerson, 2025). High-level construals promote flexibility and non-obvious causal inference yet risk filtering out cues that do not fit existing schemas (Ocasio, 2011; Joseph & Wilson, 2018). Low-level construals, conversely, enhance sensitivity to situational signals and anomalous patterns but risk cognitive fixation on detail without synthesis (Gilbert et al., 2010).

Across three controlled studies involving different managerial experience levels, Park et al. (2025) found that the most robust strategic formulation occurred when individuals first adopted a low construal level during early framing—maximizing the detection of both typical and atypical symptoms—and subsequently shifted into a high construal level during theorizing. This construal-level shift model helps reconcile the longstanding paradox that visionary strategic thinking enables creativity yet can induce blind spots, whereas attention to granular detail is necessary yet insufficient for insight.

### **1-3. Opportunity Creation and the Role of Cognition**

Opportunity has long been a central yet contested construct in strategic management and entrepreneurship. Early conceptualizations framed opportunities either as pre-existing market anomalies awaiting discovery (Kirzner, 1978) or as outputs of deliberate creative action (Schumpeter, 1934; Alvarez & Barney, 2007). More recent perspectives position opportunity as emergent—co-created through the dynamic interaction of cognition, environment, interpretation, and action (Ramoglou & Gartner, 2023).

A persistent conceptual gap centers on the cognitive mechanisms through which leaders reframe threats into opportunities under extreme uncertainty (Gaglio & Dimov, 2018; Wyrski et al., 2021). While attention-based and effectuation frameworks highlight flexibility and iterative sensemaking (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Sarasvathy, 2001), they leave open the question of how leaders attend to fine-grained threat cues while simultaneously constructing higher-order strategic meaning. This unresolved tension suggests a need for frameworks capable of linking perceptual precision with integrative abstract reasoning.

#### **1-4. General Qasem Soleimani as a Real-World Exemplar**

The strategic practice of Martyr Major-General Qasem Soleimani provides a unique empirical case of deliberate threat-to-opportunity transformation amid ongoing crisis and geopolitical complexity. Across nearly three decades leading the Quds Force and coordinating the Axis of Resistance, Soleimani repeatedly converted emergent threats—including the rise of ISIS and multi-layered proxy warfare—into strategic openings that reshaped the regional balance of power (Qanadan Zadeh et al., 2022; Dehghani Poudeh & Pashaei Hoolasoo, 2020). Consistent accounts by observers, including Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, describe a cognitive style marked by deep proximity to field-level realities combined with clarity of purpose, long-term orientation, and a meaning framework grounded in moral commitment and spiritual responsibility (Morakabi, 2024).

#### **1-5. Present Study**

Although Park et al.'s (2025) construal-level-shift model has demonstrated empirical validity in organizational contexts, it has not been examined in high-stakes geopolitical environments or through qualitative analysis of real strategic practice. This study addresses that gap by applying the model to General Soleimani's strategic cognition and practice. We argue that Soleimani's opportunity-creating capacity emerged through systematic low-to-high construal sequencing: immersion in detailed, context-rich field intelligence followed by abstraction that transformed symptoms into strategic meaning and possibility under persistent threat.

Although Park et al.'s (2025) construal-level-shift model was developed and validated in controlled experimental settings with Western managerial samples facing structured strategic problems, the present study extends its application to an extreme context characterized by prolonged asymmetric warfare, high ideological commitment, life-or-death stakes, and a non-Western spiritual worldview. These boundary conditions—particularly the presence of existential threat, sacred meaning-making, and extreme uncertainty—represent significant departures from prior laboratory studies, potentially amplifying both the necessity and the efficacy of deliberate low-to-high construal shifting. By demonstrating the model's robustness in such a radically different setting, this research theoretically extends construal-level theory from a primarily psychological mechanism observed in organizational decision-making to a strategic capability deployable in geopolitical and ideological conflicts. This extension suggests that construal-level shifting may be especially potent when cognitive flexibility is fused

with deep moral conviction and embodied field exposure, conditions rarely replicable in experimental designs.

## 2. Method

### 2-1. Research Design

Drawing on Danaee-Fard, Alvani, and Azar's (2015) layered framework of research design, this study is philosophically interpretive, developmental-applied in purpose, inductive in logic, qualitative in methodological nature, and both library- and field-based in data orientation. The primary analytic strategy is thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The study adopts a descriptive-exploratory orientation aimed at identifying and interpreting patterns of construal level shifting in the strategic cognition of General Qasem Soleimani. It extends Park et al.'s (2025) experimentally grounded model into a high-stakes lived context characterized by prolonged asymmetric warfare, moral injury, ideological conviction, and sacred motivational framing. The present study conducts a theory-driven secondary analysis of a rich qualitative dataset originally collected by the author for a Master's thesis. Such secondary re-analysis is methodologically legitimate and theoretically valuable when a new conceptual lens yields additional explanatory utility (Bansal et al., 2018; Gehman et al., 2018).

### 2-2. Data Sources

The data corpus comprises triangulated sources collected between 2022 and 2024 to ensure depth, authenticity, and theoretical sufficiency (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The first layer consists of four primary biographical and autobiographical works selected in consultation with the Foundation for the Preservation and Publication of Sacred Defense Heritage and the Maktab-e Haj Qasem Center:

Book Title	Author(s) & Publication Year	Core Theme in the Haj Qasem School of Thought
Sarbaz-e Qasem Soleimani	(Rahimi, 2023)	comprehensive biography
Meydan-haye Sakht	(Rozi-Talab & Noripour, 2020)	curated speeches and field reflections
Hamrah-e Ma Bood	(Morakabi, 2024)	Nasrallah's interpretive narrative of Soleimani's strategic character
Mara Bepazir	(Sedaqat-Nejad, 2022)	intimate account of strategic conduct and interpersonal style

Supplementary textual sources included memoirs, speeches, unfinished personal writings such as *Az Chizi Nemitaridam*, and curated volumes including *Haj Qasemi ke Man Mishenasam* and *Soleimani-ye Aziz*.

The second layer of data includes three semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals who had direct long-term operational, personal, or organizational relationships with Soleimani:

- Mahmoud Soleimani (family and early-life context)
- Brigadier Anjum-Shoa'a (Iran–Iraq War experiences)
- Major-General Abolhasani (operational and strategic assistantship during command years)

Sampling followed purposive-theoretical logic to capture diverse vantage points—personal, operational, doctrinal, and strategic—and to surface both explicit reasoning and tacit cognitive style.

### **2-3. Analytic Strategy: Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

Reflexive thematic analysis was selected for its compatibility with interpretive epistemology and its flexibility in supporting inductive, deductive, and hybrid coding pathways (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Drawing on Attride-Stirling (2001), a theme is understood as a patterned meaning-making structure that moves beyond description toward interpretive abstraction.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six iterative phases with a hybrid inductive–deductive orientation:

1. Familiarization: Immersive, repeated reading of all texts and interview transcripts.
2. Initial Coding: Independent open coding by two researchers focusing on threat perception, opportunity emergence, problem construal, and decision structure.
3. Theory-Guided Coding: Deductive application of Park et al.'s (2025) constructs—including low-level situational attention, cognitive shift triggers, high-level causal abstraction, and opportunity formation—while remaining open to emergent dimensions.
4. Theme Construction: Iterative categorization of codes into basic, organizing, and global themes through analytical meetings with a three-member expert committee.

5. Review and Refinement: Verification of thematic coherence against the full dataset, resolving discrepancies through deliberative consensus.
6. Reporting: Integration of theoretically saturated excerpts into an interpretive model.

Coding was supported by Microsoft Excel to ensure transparency and traceability. Thematic saturation was determined when no new conceptual properties of construal-level dynamics emerged (Saunders et al., 2018).

**Table 1. Global & Organizing & Basic Themes Derived from the Data**

Global Theme	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Strategic Construal Level Shifting	Field-Level Micro Situational Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct Field Immersion</li> <li>• Listening to Ground Realities</li> <li>• Sensitivity to Weak Signals</li> <li>• Cultural-Contextual Understanding</li> <li>• Human-Centric Operational Awareness</li> <li>• Delayed Judgement</li> </ul>
	Sensemaking & Pattern Synthesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecting Disparate Cues</li> <li>• Detecting Hidden Patterns</li> <li>• Contextual Interpretation</li> <li>• Transforming Experience into Insight</li> <li>• Meaning Construction Before Crisis Escalation</li> </ul>
	Cognitive Altitude Switching Ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timing the Cognitive Shift</li> <li>• Analytical Flexibility</li> <li>• Adaptive Distance Regulation (zoom in/zoom out)</li> <li>• Identifying Signal vs Noise</li> <li>• Balancing Speed and Accuracy</li> </ul>
	Decision-Making Without Detail Paralysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action Over Excessive Analysis</li> <li>• Future-Oriented Posture</li> <li>• Simplicity in Execution, Depth in Thought</li> </ul>

## **2-4. Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Rigor was ensured through prolonged engagement, multi-source triangulation, and detailed documentation of analytic decisions. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened via an auditable research trail including codebooks, memos, and decision logs. Although direct member-checking with all informants was constrained due to security restrictions, publicly authenticated archival material provided reliable external corroboration. Reflexivity was systematically maintained through researcher memos recording interpretive assumptions and theoretical positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

## **3. Findings**

### **3-1. Global Theme Overview**

The core theme that emerged from the data — consistently and across contexts — is a cognitive pattern we conceptualize as Strategic Construal-Level Switching (SCLS). This phenomenon refers to General Qasem Soleimani's ability to dynamically shift between micro-level situational engagement and macro-level strategic abstraction, depending on the demands of the environment. Unlike ordinary tactical responsiveness or conventional strategic planning, SCLS is characterized by intentional alternation between levels of cognitive framing — a behavioral expression aligned with recent theoretical discussions on construal-level shifting in high-stakes decision environments (Park, Baer, & Nickerson, 2025).

This dynamic oscillation was not accidental or personality-driven; rather, it operated as a deliberate strategic capability. Data repeatedly show that Soleimani engaged first-hand with ground realities, immersing himself in field-level detail before elevating to abstraction for decision-making. One direct account states:

“He never relied only on briefings — he went to the field, spoke to ordinary fighters, listened, watched.” (Rahimi, 2023)

Another eyewitness similarly emphasized this capability during combat operations:

“He was always among the soldiers before decisions were made — he needed to see with his own eyes.” (Rahimi, 2023)

These excerpts illustrate the first half of the switching pattern — the anchoring of perception in concrete, sensory-rich cues rather than distant abstraction. Yet the shift to high-level cognitive processing was equally visible. For instance, after extensive field scanning, he transitioned to broader meaning-making and strategic prioritization:

“He didn’t get lost in detail — he understood the essence fast and moved to what mattered.” (Rahimi, 2023)

This pattern reflects not only situational awareness, but also a meta-cognitive command over the level of mental representation — the ability to “zoom in and zoom out” deliberately, depending on the strategic need.

Taken together, these coded meanings represent the empirical foundation of the framework; however, the organizing themes do not operate in isolation — their explanatory power becomes clearer when examined in relation to one another and interpreted through the theoretical lens guiding this study.

### **3-2. Organizing Theme 1: Field-Level Micro Situational Awareness**

The first organizing theme underlying Strategic Construal-Level Switching is Field-Level Micro Situational Awareness, referring to Soleimani’s deliberate immersion in local context, human dynamics, operational constraints, and subtle emotional climates before making judgments or forming strategic interpretations. This construct aligns with literature on *micro-foundations of strategic cognition* (Felin, Foss & Ployhart, 2015) and theories suggesting that effective strategic reasoning begins with accurate perception of the environment rather than conceptual abstraction (Baer et al., 2013). Soleimani’s approach was not passive observation—it was a methodical and intentional process of acquiring ground-level sensory, cultural, relational, and emotional data before shifting toward abstraction.

This theme describes a patterned behavior in which presence preceded judgment and listening preceded planning, supporting recent organizational scholarship suggesting that leaders who begin with low-construal sensory engagement formulate more integrated and comprehensive strategic representations (Park et al., 2025).

The six basic themes within this cluster—direct immersion, listening to ground realities, sensitivity to weak signals, cultural contextual tuning, human-condition attention, and delayed judgement—form a coherent system because they share a common function:

They are mechanisms of accurate field-level data acquisition before meaning-making begins.

Rather than disparate behaviors, these elements represent a consistent cognitive discipline: Soleimani’s refusal to rely on mediated reports or abstractions until he had personally encountered the lived reality of a situation. Together, they reflect a holistic situational sensing architecture—a

behavioral framework through which he built the ecological foundation necessary for later high-level strategic reasoning.

*Basic Theme 1: Direct Field Immersion*

Soleimani routinely positioned himself physically in operational spaces, often at personal risk, demonstrating a belief that strategic awareness required firsthand sensory engagement.

“To address problems in Darreh, Qassem Soleimani first immersed himself in the situation—praying and eating with soldiers, working alongside local farmers, and personally inspecting the border—showing that understanding the issue up close was his first step toward restoring security.” (Sedaqat-Nejad, 2022)

This quote illustrates both proximity and intentionality. Rather than adopting a distant command posture, he entered unstable environments to absorb context directly. In contemporary cognitive strategy literature, this behavior parallels what Reyt & Wiesenfeld (2015) term “embodied information scanning” — where leaders collect unfiltered cues unavailable through mediated reports.

*Basic Theme 2: Listening to Ground Realities*

Accounts show he did not merely observe — he engaged in active inquiry, often with those closest to uncertainty and risk.

“I rushed out to stop Soleimani from going on reconnaissance, fearing for his safety. Under the moonlight, I found him and warned that the fate of the resistance depended on him. With calm determination, he explained that if he didn’t go, casualties could double, and he couldn’t allow young fighters’ blood to be wasted. Realizing his decision was firm, I simply asked him to take care—and watched him walk into the darkness.” (Rahimi, 2023)

This behavior reflects a distributed information model, where front-line voices serve as primary inputs rather than supplementary commentary. It also aligns with Gigerenzer’s (2022) concept of *ecological rationality* — decision-making that respects the structure of real environments rather than abstract ideal forms.

*Basic Theme 3: Sensitivity to Weak Signals*

Several passages reveal that he noticed faint cues—emotional tone, subtle behavioral shifts, anxieties of fighters, and morale conditions—that many leaders would overlook.

“In half an hour of meeting him, you felt he had known you for years... his attention to people was real and deep.” (Morakabi, 2024)

Weak signals are foundational in crisis strategy (Camillus, 2008), and Soleimani's sensitivity enabled anticipatory rather than reactive decision-making.

*Basic Theme 4: Cultural-Contextual Understanding*

Unlike leaders who treat cultural environments as background noise, he treated them as strategic terrain.

“He spoke with Afghan, Syrian, Iraqi, and Lebanese fighters in their languages, knowing their emotional codes.” (Rahimi, 2023)

This illustrates not simply multilingual communication but cultural resonance as a strategic competence—supporting Baer & Dirks' (2013) argument that relational perception enables more accurate strategic framing.

*Basic Theme 5: Human-Centric Operational Awareness*

Multiple excerpts demonstrate his commitment to understanding the emotional, social, and psychological conditions of individuals before making operational decisions.

“Soleimani's firm approach caused fear among outlaws, leading nearly 400 of them to surrender and the collection of around 2,000 weapons, bringing major change to the region. But he didn't stop at security; he focused on livelihoods. With the help of agricultural and tribal organizations, he facilitated the digging of hundreds of wells and allocated them to families so they could farm instead of returning to violence. Similar economic programs were later implemented in other regions, including Jiroft and Kahnuj. Alongside military action, he prioritized dignity and care for people—especially the families of martyrs. He urged officials to treat them like their own children, support them emotionally, solve their problems, avoid politicization, and serve them with patience, humility, and genuine love, seeing this service as a sacred responsibility.” (Rahimi, 2023)

This goes beyond empathy: it signals a belief that morale and emotional continuity are strategic resources, not merely humanitarian considerations.

*Basic Theme 6: Delayed Judgement*

Finally, Soleimani avoided premature interpretation, demonstrating cognitive restraint in ambiguous contexts.

“He wrote plans only after sitting, observing, and thinking — not before.” (Rahimi, 2023)

This aligns with Park & Baer's (2022) finding that high strategic performance is associated with leaders who resist early closure and allow the environment to inform their construal level.

Collectively, these behaviors demonstrate that Soleimani's strategic reasoning began not from abstraction but from immersion. His sensory-grounded engagement formed the epistemic foundation necessary for later construal elevation, supporting the broader theoretical proposition of this study:

Strategic intelligence is not merely the capacity to think abstractly, but the capacity to know *when* abstraction is appropriate and when reality must first be touched, seen, and understood.

### **3-3. Organizing Theme 2: Sensemaking & Pattern Synthesis**

The second organizing theme emerging from the data is Sensemaking and Pattern Synthesis, referring to Soleimani's ability to transform fragmented, ambiguous, or contradictory field-level information into coherent strategic meaning. This capability extends beyond mere situational awareness; it represents a higher-order cognitive process through which scattered signals, cultural nuances, enemy behavior, geopolitical shifts, and emotional atmospheres were integrated into a unified interpretive framework.

In contemporary strategic cognition literature, this ability aligns with Weick's (1995) concept of sensemaking, Snowden's Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007) on interpreting complexity, and recent applications of pattern-based strategic reasoning (Park et al., 2025). Soleimani's decision-making did not rely on linear analytical models; instead, he appeared to "see the emerging structure before others could recognize its pieces."

This theme reflects the moment at which Soleimani's cognition moves upward from raw perception to meaning — the cognitive bridge between immersion and strategic elevation.

The basic themes clustered here—connecting disparate cues, detecting hidden patterns, contextual interpretation, transforming experience into strategic insight, and meaning construction before crisis escalation—function as interdependent stages of cognitive integration.

Together, they indicate that Soleimani processed data not as isolated facts, but as relational signals pointing toward a broader structure. This aligns with research suggesting that effective strategic leaders operate using meaning architectures, not disconnected observations.

In this theme, Soleimani is no longer collecting information — he is *constructing meaning from it*.

Basic Theme 1: Connecting Disparate Cues

Multiple accounts demonstrate his ability to link signals that others perceived as unrelated, especially during geopolitical transitions such as the Arab Spring.

“On the second day of Hosni Mubarak’s resignation, Egyptians celebrated in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and elsewhere, with even other Arab nations rejoicing. We were happy too, in Dahieh, alongside Soleimani. But he said, “I’m worried.” When I asked why, he replied, “I feel that a major project is being prepared against the region. The Americans want to exploit popular uprisings, using the so-called Arab Spring and the slogans in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere as a pretext to target organizations, countries, and governments supporting the resistance. I have no doubt this project serves Israel, not the people. I believe this is a conspiracy against Syria.” I want to emphasize this: the first person who recognized that a conspiracy was unfolding—specifically against Syria—was Qassem Soleimani.” (Ghorbani, 2022)

This illustrates a high-level integrative reasoning ability: connecting region-level political shifts with tactical consequences before formal intelligence assessments are aligned.

#### Basic Theme 2: Detecting Hidden Patterns

Pattern detection emerged repeatedly as a cognitive signature. Witnesses describe him interpreting enemy behavior not solely from action, but from the absence of action — a hallmark of expert strategic pattern recognition.

“Once, we were standing with Haj Qassem on the heights of Mount Zayn al-Abidin. He picked up the binoculars and asked, “Where is the enemy’s main axis of attack?” We replied, “They’re coming from both sides.” He paused, looked carefully again, and said: “No — the main attack is from the west of the river.” I asked, “On what basis do you say that?” He answered: “Abu Baqer, the enemy can see Hama with the naked eye. Their machine gun fire reaches this position. They have a desire — an impatience — to take Hama, just like when we used to see the walls and palm groves of Khorramshahr and longed to reach them. How can you not recognize that?” His judgment was firm, fast, precise, and undeniable.

That same clarity showed itself again later — especially when the Americans warned us not to advance beyond a certain line. Beyond their military goals, our greatest concern was that if we halted, our allies — the Russians and the Syrians — might lose confidence and stop coordinating fully with us. That would eventually weaken the entire resistance front.

In those critical moments, Haj Qassem made the final call and said: “Do not pay attention to the American warning — continue forward.”

Then he refined the plan even further. Instead of advancing on the paved road, he ordered: “Move from the Zaza route to Al-Alyaniyah, then continue to Halbah. From there go through Jabal Ghurab to Shar‘at al-Wa‘r, and then all the way to the border.”

That was him — he saw the battlefield and the future at the same time. And when he made a decision, it was swift, accurate, and decisive.” (Rahimi, 2023).

This anticipatory insight aligns with Klein’s (2011) *recognition-primed decision model*, where experts identify patterns before explicit evidence emerges.

#### Basic Theme 3: Contextual Interpretation

Rather than applying rigid analytical frameworks, Soleimani interpreted information within its cultural, ideological, emotional, and geopolitical context.

“When Haj Qassem took command of the Quds Force, he came personally to Lebanon from the start, demonstrating his commitment and blessing. He quickly built strong, genuine relationships with Hezbollah commanders and fighters across all levels, making everyone feel he was “one of us.”

Despite being a high-ranking Iranian general, he disregarded protocol and formalities, learned Arabic quickly, and often joined his brothers on the frontlines. His presence was constant, close, and heartfelt—he shared in their joys and sorrows, earning deep affection and trust. Haj Qassem’s relationship with the Lebanese resistance was exemplary, marked by sincerity, closeness, and mutual respect.” (Morakabi, 2024)

This demonstrates a flexible, culturally-sensitive approach, consistent with situated cognition theory. His strategy was to fully immerse himself in the cultural context and become “one of us” with his target community. By doing so, people saw him as one of their own, which greatly amplified the impact of his words and decisions, while also providing him with far more accurate, nuanced, and reliable insights into the situation.

#### Basic Theme 4: Transforming Experience into Strategic Insight

Battlefield experiences were never isolated memories—they became strategic reference points.

“Haj Qassem Soleimani’s leadership during operations like Karbala-5 turned near-defeat into decisive success. After Karbala-4’s setbacks, he restored morale, reclaimed strategic ground, and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. Under his command, small, resource-limited units performed

tasks that conventionally required multiple divisions — breaking lines, advancing, consolidating, and holding across hundreds of kilometers. With minimal heavy weapons, his forces advanced under intense fire, relying on creativity, improvisation, and deep battlefield experience.

Soleimani’s brilliance lay in leveraging experience, anticipating enemy moves, and making precise, decisive choices. Every action — from selecting unconventional routes to synchronizing offensive and defensive objectives — reflected strategic insight and rapid adaptation. His command turned limited resources into overwhelming effectiveness, exemplifying tactical genius and the art of war.” (Rozi-Talab & Noripour, 2020)

This reflects a dynamic learning loop, where operational experience is not archived but continually reinterpreted to refine future reasoning.

#### Basic Theme 5: Meaning Construction Before Crisis Escalation

Across multiple contexts — from Syria and Egypt to Afghanistan and Yemen — Haj Qassem Soleimani consistently demonstrated the ability to construct strategic meaning before crises fully escalated.

This anticipatory reasoning reflects a proactive cognitive approach: he did not simply react to events, but synthesized early signals into actionable insight. Whereas previous analyses show how he absorbed reality on the ground, this theme highlights how he interpreted patterns, inferred consequences, and shaped strategy. This forward-looking mindset became a guiding principle in his operations and decision-making across theaters of conflict.

Thus, this theme forms the interpretive core of SCLS: the moment where perception becomes meaning and raw data becomes strategic clarity — positioning him ahead of events, not inside them.

### **3-4. Organizing Theme 3: Cognitive Altitude Switching Ability**

The third organizing theme captures Soleimani’s ability to intentionally and rapidly shift mental altitude—moving from concrete, granular details to abstract strategic framing and vice versa. This switching was neither random nor emotional; it was a controlled cognitive maneuver governed by situational demands. In the strategic cognition literature, this reflects a phenomenon now referred to as Construal Level Shifting (Park et al., 2025), where leaders adjust mental distance to optimize decision quality in environments of uncertainty.

Unlike leaders who are trapped in either high-level abstraction or operational micromanagement, Soleimani demonstrated a dynamic bidirectional mental movement: he could be fully grounded in the field and

moments later frame the situation in terms of history, ideology, geopolitics, and long-term consequences.

This ability positions him in a category associated with “adaptive strategic thinkers”, where cognition becomes altitude-responsive rather than altitude-fixed.

The basic components—timing the cognitive shift, analytical flexibility, adaptive distance regulation, identifying signal versus noise, and balancing speed with accuracy—reflect mechanisms of cognitive regulation rather than content.

Together, they represent the moment of transformation in the thinking process, where meaning (from the previous theme) is converted into an operational or strategic stance.

Put differently:

If the first two themes explain how Soleimani absorbs and understands reality, this theme explains how he decides *which level of thinking belongs to which moment*.

This regulatory function is what makes SCLS a capability—not just a trait.

#### *Basic Theme 1: Timing the Cognitive Shift*

Evidence across multiple accounts demonstrates that Soleimani did not remain at one cognitive altitude longer than necessary; rather, he shifted levels of thinking precisely when situational cues signaled the need for strategic elevation. A striking example of this occurred during the critical phase of the Syrian conflict, when numerous regional actors attempted—but failed—to convince Russia to intervene. Putin remained hesitant, aware that entering the war carried the potential of either a geopolitical failure or a decisive strategic breakthrough. In this context, Soleimani personally traveled to Moscow, and the very fact that such a meeting was arranged reflected his central role in shaping the military balance in Syria. As witnesses note, Russian leadership understood that he possessed intimate, ground-level knowledge of the battlefield and the strategic dynamics shaping it.

During a two-hour-and-twenty-minute closed-door meeting, Soleimani placed a detailed operational map on the table and explained the relative positions of the Syrian army, allied forces, and opposition militant groups. He then presented a broader geopolitical analysis, arguing that if Russia allowed Syria to fall—after already losing decisive influence in Iraq—it would not only forfeit its strategic depth in the Middle East but also surrender the Mediterranean theater to the United States. He articulated that the collapse of Assad’s government would enable U.S. dominance across Iraq, Syria, and eventually Lebanon, reshaping the regional security

architecture to Russia's disadvantage. His reasoning did not rely on ideological persuasion or emotional appeal; instead, it was grounded in concrete operational evidence combined with clear strategic logic drawn from regional trends and power dynamics. By the end of the meeting, Putin reportedly responded: "*I am convinced.*" (Rahimi, 2023)

This episode reflects not impulsivity but a cognitive threshold: once sufficient field-level cues had been integrated and translated into meaning, Soleimani elevated his reasoning to geopolitical altitude and acted decisively. The case illustrates the essence of timed mental shifting—a deliberate movement from tactical reality to strategic framing at precisely the moment when such elevation was required to shape rather than merely interpret unfolding events.

*Basic Theme 2: Analytical Flexibility*

Soleimani's reasoning was not constrained by a single framework—he moved fluidly between operational logic, cultural interpretation, religious meaning, geopolitical calculation, and historical referencing.

"Qassem Soleimani approached challenges with a comprehensive, multidimensional perspective. In eastern Iran, he combined strategic planning, intelligence, and tribal engagement to secure a 1,000-kilometer border, disarm outlaws, and restore stability. Simultaneously, he addressed the root causes of insecurity, developing local livelihoods through land distribution and well-digging projects. His ability to analyze complex problems and translate insight into concrete action exemplified his unique blend of strategic vision and hands-on leadership." (Rahimi, 2023)

Flexibility of reasoning is a key dimension of advanced strategic cognition, especially in volatile conditions.

*Basic Theme 3: Adaptive Distance Regulation (Zoom In/Zoom Out)*

Witnesses repeatedly described his ability to mentally "zoom out" to gain strategic clarity and then "zoom in" for action-level refinement.

"Qassem Soleimani, as a military figure, not only discussed strategic and large-scale issues while his plane was flying at high altitude, but even when the discussion reached the smallest details, his mind remained alert, creative, and sharp. He was not the type to become tired or disheartened. He was simultaneously a strategic and tactical personality—a man of reason, planning, and decision-making on the battlefield and the front lines, not just an operations-room officer behind the lines." (Morakabi, 2024)

This quote explicitly reflects perceptual modulation — the essence of construal-level switching.

*Basic Theme 4: Identifying Signal vs Noise*

A distinguishing feature of Soleimani's cognition was filtering irrelevant information quickly while retaining what mattered strategically.

"He was a political thinker with a multifaceted personality—not just a military commander. He didn't only read information; he could discern accurate, reliable intelligence from less trustworthy sources. With his broad regional awareness, connections, sharp reasoning, and creative analysis, he constantly arrived at important outcomes. His political insight was as crucial as his military role, and he always planned for years ahead, anticipating future events." (Morakabi, 2024)

This behavior parallels the skill of *strategic selective attention*—a competence found in expert commanders.

*Basic Theme 5: Balancing Speed and Accuracy*

Finally, his cognitive elevation was marked by a capacity to reach high-level clarity without sacrificing analytical discipline, maintaining precision under extreme time pressure.

"A remarkable example of Soleimani's leadership was the Kirkuk crisis. When Kurdish forces moved to claim Kirkuk, he acted swiftly, personally traveling to Suleimaniya. With precise reasoning and careful negotiation, he convinced Talabani and Barzani to withdraw, resolving the issue quickly and without bloodshed. Soleimani combined rapid action with strategic insight, ensuring both speed and quality in his decisions." (Rahimi, 2023)

This aligns with literature on *adaptive expertise*, where speed and accuracy are not opposites but mutually reinforcing outputs of cognitive mastery.

This theme represents the engine of SCLS: the moment where perception and meaning transition into a strategic stance. It reflects a mental ability seldom observed even in high-ranking leaders—the skill to regulate one's own cognitive altitude to match environmental complexity. In Soleimani's case, this switching was timely, deliberate, strategically purposeful, and responsive to context.

Thus, Cognitive Altitude Switching Ability is not simply a leadership trait — it is the functional core of how Soleimani generated strategic coherence from chaos.

**3-5. Organizing Theme 4: Decision-Making Without Detail Paralysis**

The fourth organizing theme reflects Soleimani's ability to convert situational awareness and synthesized meaning into decisive action without becoming overwhelmed by complexity, uncertainty, or excessive analysis. In the strategic

decision-making literature, this phenomenon is aligned with what scholars term actionable strategic reasoning (van der Hoek, Jamroga, & Wooldridge, 2005) or resolution under cognitive load (Kahneman & Klein, 2009).

Unlike leaders who either rush prematurely or freeze under the weight of detail, Soleimani demonstrated an ability to act at the right moment, with sufficient—but not exhaustive—information. The distinguishing characteristic of this theme is not speed alone, but a balance between:



In modern strategic cognition terminology, his approach represents a movement from construal to commitment — the moment when insight becomes execution.

The four basic themes — essence-based judgment, action over excessive analysis, future-oriented strategic posture, and simplicity in execution with depth in thought — collectively illustrate a consistent pattern:

Once Soleimani’s cognitive altitude stabilized, he moved toward action with focus and precision.

These behaviors form a unified process, demonstrating that his decisions were not reactive nor impulsive, but the logical outcome of structured mental transitions observed in earlier themes.

In short:

- The first theme (Situational Awareness) explains what he perceived
- The second theme (Sensemaking) explains how he interpreted it
- The third theme (Cognitive Switching) explains how he positioned his mind in response
- This fourth theme explains how he acted without hesitation

#### *Basic Theme 1: Action Over Excessive Analysis*

Witnesses consistently mention he avoided analysis paralysis — acting when the strategic window was optimal rather than waiting for perfect clarity.

“Dahaneh Lar, a strategic point on the Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan border, was the site of an unprecedented ambush by 50 outlaws led by Hamid Notani, supported by the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia. They stopped two buses carrying Iranian soldiers to Zahedan and took 96 hostages to display Iran’s weakness. Upon hearing the news, Qassem Soleimani immediately flew from Kerman at midnight with his team. Despite legal border

restrictions, they advanced 25 kilometers into Afghanistan. With air support destroying the outlaws' vehicles and ground forces from the 1st Seyyed al-Shohada Brigade taking control, 25 of 75 outlaws were killed, and the rest were surrounded. Afghan elders mediated, and Soleimani, on the condition of the hostages' safe release, pardoned the remaining outlaws. By 4 PM, all 96 soldiers were freed unharmed. The attackers later admitted they had aimed to execute the soldiers, but Soleimani's flawless management and decisive action demonstrated Iran's authority—an operation as glorious and honorable as Faw's Valfajr-8." (Rahimi, 2023)

This aligns with the principle of bounded rationality (Simon, 1982), where decision quality is optimized by timely sufficiency rather than academic completeness.

#### *Basic Theme 3: Future-Oriented Posture*

Unlike tactical commanders who respond to existing conditions, Soleimani made decisions based on the future he intended to shape — not merely the present he faced. Dr. Masoud Asadollahi said:

“Before Soleimani's presence, the perspective in Lebanon was limited—mostly small-scale guerrilla operations: 'hit and run.'” But with him, the outlook changed. He did not see objectives as small or short-term; his vision was broad, aiming at a serious confrontation with Israel—something previously unimaginable. Achieving this required coordination between Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, which was realized under his leadership and guidance. Soleimani consistently pursued and reinforced this higher strategic horizon.

One clear result of this elevated vision was the transformation of Hezbollah itself. He moved them from small-scale guerrilla tactics to a well-equipped, specialized force. The acquisition of advanced weapons, like the Kornet anti-tank missile, exemplified this change. During the 33-day war, these weapons proved decisive, countering Israel's armored strength. He also fortified the terrain, built shelters, and implemented numerous measures that, despite heavy Israeli bombardment, shifted the conflict into a new strategic arena.”

This evidences what Mintzberg (1994) describes as strategy as intentioned shaping, rather than adaptation alone.

#### *Basic Theme 4: Simplicity in Execution, Depth in Thought*

Despite complex reasoning behind the scenes, his final decisions were clear, simple, and executable. Dr. Masoud Asadollahi said:

“One of Soleimani's innovations during the 33-day war was creating a tactical chart for Hezbollah fighters. This chart specified how many rockets

to fire each day, what type to use, and how to respond to every kind of attack. This was extremely helpful for Hezbollah because Soleimani had extensive experience in similar battles and operations. Through this plan, he ensured resource management, prevented emotional or impulsive decisions on the battlefield, and maintained strategic discipline. In the early days of the war, Israel destroyed bridges and logistical routes, cutting Hezbollah's communication with its supply lines. In such conditions, this system allowed fighters to know exactly what to do, even when they had no way to communicate with command headquarters."

This reflects an advanced leadership pattern seen in strategic commanders: the translation of cognitive complexity into operational simplicity.

Decision-Making Without Detail Paralysis completes the cognitive cycle of the SCLS framework: it is the point where awareness, meaning, and mental altitude converge into purposeful action.

This theme illustrates that Soleimani's strategic effectiveness did not stem solely from insight but from the ability to commit to action at the right cognitive moment. His decisions reflect a seamless integration of:



Thus, the fourth theme represents the operational expression of SCLS, demonstrating that construal shifting is not only a mental capacity but a behavioral capability deployed at decisive moments.

### **3-6. Integrative Synthesis: How the Themes Form a Strategic Cognition Model**

The findings reveal that Strategic Construal-Level Shifting (SCLS) is not a single behavior nor a static leadership trait, but a dynamic cognitive process unfolding in four interdependent stages. Each organizing theme contributes to a sequential and adaptive mental progression through which Soleimani absorbed reality, created meaning, repositioned his mental altitude, and converted insight into decisive action.

The data show that SCLS is structured as a recursive, non-linear cognitive loop, rather than a fixed step-by-step sequence. While the process can begin at field immersion, it may repeatedly cycle depending on environmental uncertainty, time pressure, or shifting geopolitical variables.

The model can be conceptualized as:



This cognitive loop represents a living, evolving decision-making system operating under conditions of volatility and incomplete information.

### 3-6-1. The Model as a Coherent System

#### (1) *Field-Level Micro Situational Awareness*

This stage establishes ground truth—not through mediated intelligence but through embodied presence, cultural attunement, and direct engagement. It forms the epistemic foundation of the entire cognitive process.

Without this grounding, upper-level abstraction would lack fidelity and relevance.

#### (2) *Sensemaking and Pattern Synthesis*

Here, perception evolves into understanding. Data cease to exist as disconnected fragments and instead become a strategic narrative. This stage represents Soleimani’s interpretive intelligence—the ability to “see what the information means,” not simply what it says.

This is the transition from information → relevance → strategic coherence.

#### (3) *Cognitive Altitude Switching Ability*

This is the central pivot of the model—the moment the leader chooses the right mental altitude for the decision context. Switching is deliberate, not incidental; it is responsive to what the situation demands.

This capability allows the leader to see the forest without losing the trees, and see the trees without forgetting the forest.

#### (4) *Decision-Making Without Detail Paralysis*

Finally, meaning becomes action. Decision velocity and direction emerge not from impulsivity but from clarity. Execution becomes concise, intentional, and purpose-oriented — reflecting what to ignore, as much as what to act upon.

This stage embodies strategic agency: not reacting to the environment, but shaping it.

Based on the integrated analysis, this study proposes the following theoretical proposition:

Strategic effectiveness in volatile environments is not determined solely by access to information or analytical capacity, but by the leader’s ability to

dynamically adjust cognitive altitude — shifting between concrete situational engagement and abstract strategic framing — and to translate this shifting into timely, directionally meaningful action.

This proposition extends existing construal-level theory by demonstrating that construal shifting can function as a strategic capability rather than merely a psychological tendency, that it operates across operational, cultural, and geopolitical layers simultaneously, and that, in high-stakes contexts, it becomes a mechanism for opportunity construction rather than passive interpretation.

In the case of General Soleimani, SCLS was not only a thinking pattern — it was a strategic engine through which he identified, shaped, and acted upon opportunities that others interpreted as threats, ambiguity, or immovable constraints.

Taken together, the four themes demonstrate that Soleimani’s leadership cognition reflects a dynamic system in which:

Context grounds perception, perception produces meaning, meaning selects altitude, and altitude directs action.

This model explains how he operated with both precision and vision—maintaining fidelity to details while simultaneously holding a panoramic understanding of geopolitical landscapes.

His strategic cognition did not oscillate randomly; it shifted with purpose. And through that shifting, opportunities emerged where others saw only complexity or crisis.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study explored how the late Major-General Qasem Soleimani cognitively transformed existential threats into strategic opportunities amid prolonged asymmetric warfare and geopolitical volatility. By applying and extending Park et al.’s (2025) construal-level-shift model through reflexive thematic re-analysis of a rich qualitative dataset—comprising authenticated biographies, field memoirs, speeches, and interviews with close associates—four interrelated organizing themes emerged that collectively constitute Strategic Construal-Level Shifting (SCLS): (1) Field-Level Micro Situational Awareness via embodied immersion in contextual cues; (2) Sensemaking and Pattern Synthesis that integrates fragmented signals into coherent strategic narratives; (3) Cognitive Altitude Switching Ability as deliberate regulation between concrete and abstract mental representations; and (4) Decision-Making Without Detail Paralysis that translates insight into timely, focused action.

These themes illustrate a recursive, adaptive cognitive process through which Soleimani repeatedly reframed crises—such as the rise of ISIS, the Arab Spring’s geopolitical exploitation, and multi-front proxy conflicts—into openings that reshaped regional power dynamics. Grounded in frontline proximity and amplified by spiritual-ideological conviction, his systematic low-to-high construal shifts enabled opportunity construction rather than mere discovery or reaction.

Theoretically, this research makes three primary contributions. First, it extends construal-level theory beyond controlled laboratory and Western managerial settings by demonstrating its robustness in an extreme context of life-or-death stakes, sacred meaning-making, and non-Western worldview—conditions that both necessitate and potentiate deliberate construal shifting (Park et al., 2025). Second, it introduces SCLS as a novel integrative framework that bridges cognitive psychology with strategic leadership and security studies, clarifying how leaders actively co-create opportunities through dynamic mental-altitude regulation. Third, by centering a non-Western geopolitical exemplar, the study broadens the cultural and contextual boundaries of strategic cognition scholarship, countering the predominant Western bias and highlighting the universality of advanced cognitive mechanisms when fused with moral conviction and embodied experience.

Practically, SCLS offers actionable implications for cultivating cognitive flexibility in volatile environments. Leaders and organizations facing persistent uncertainty—whether in military, diplomatic, or corporate spheres—can foster this capability through deliberate practices: mandatory field immersion for senior decision-makers, training in rapid low-to-high construal transitions, and institutional tolerance for “sufficient” rather than exhaustive analysis before action. In an era of hybrid warfare, climate-induced crises, and technological disruption, the ability to intentionally shift cognitive altitude may distinguish those who merely survive ambiguity from those who shape it.

Like all qualitative single-case studies, this research has limitations that suggest avenues for future inquiry. The reliance on secondary analysis of archival and testimonial data, while ethically and securely appropriate, precludes direct observation or physiological measures of construal processes. Moreover, the unique interplay of ideological commitment and existential threat in Soleimani’s context raises questions about generalizability to secular or low-stakes settings. Future studies could test SCLS propositions quantitatively across diverse leaders, employ neuroimaging to capture real-time construal shifts, or conduct comparative

cases with other non-Western strategists (e.g., Vo Nguyen Giap or modern Chinese military thinkers).

Ultimately, Soleimani's cognitive pattern reveals that strategic genius in extreme contexts is less about innate intuition or analytical horsepower alone and more about the disciplined, purposeful orchestration of mental distance. In environments where others see only threat and chaos, leaders capable of Strategic Construal-Level Shifting do not merely navigate uncertainty—they cognitively reconstruct it into possibility.

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