

Brigadier General Esmail Qaani: Commander of the IRGC's Quds Force

February 2024



UNITED
AGAINST
NUCLEAR
IRAN

UNITED
AGAINST
NUCLEAR
IRAN

Table of Contents

Background 3

Tenure as Deputy Commander of the Quds Force..... 4

Qaani as Commander 5

UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

Esmail Qaani

On January 3, 2020, the United States assassinated [Major General Qasem Soleimani](#), who commanded the Quds Force (QF), the external operations branch of [Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#). That same day, [Brigadier General Esmail Qaani](#), Soleimani's longtime deputy, was named the Quds Force's new chief by Iran's Supreme Leader, [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#).

Background

Supreme Leader Khamenei, when appointing Qaani to succeed Soleimani as Quds Force commander, [said](#) Qaani "has been one of the most prominent commanders in the Holy Defense [Iran-Iraq War]." Born in the northeastern city of Mashhad. Unlike many senior Iranian officials, he does not seem to have played a significant role in the 1979 Islamic Revolution and joined the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a year later, in 1980.

Qaani initially trained at an IRGC garrison in Tehran. Afterward, he helped form what became the Nasr 5 Division, based in Mashhad. Qaani's fellow unit leaders included future Tehran mayor [Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf](#) and Nour-Ali Shoushtari, who became a high-ranking IRGC commander and was [killed in a suicide bombing](#) in 2009. Qaani has stated that he was deployed to Iran's Kurdistan province to crush Kurdish separatists.

Several months after Qaani enlisted, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) broke out. His unit was shifted to Ahvaz in Iran's southwest to fight against the Iraqis. During this deployment, he [met](#) his eventual boss, Qasem Soleimani. Qaani told an interviewer in 2015 that his friendship with Soleimani was forged in the war, saying, "We are war comrades, and it was the war that made us friends... Those who become friends at times of hardship have deeper and more lasting relations than those who become friends just because they are neighborhood friends." Qaani also [made the acquaintance](#) of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, then-president and future Supreme Leader of Iran and a fellow Mashhad native, when Khamenei frequently traveled to the battlefield and visited Qaani's division.

Qaani [rose to command Nasr-5](#) and later headed the Imam Reza-21 division as well. After the Iran-Iraq war, he was named deputy of the IRGC Ground Forces' division in Mashhad. Iran expert Ali Alfoneh [wrote](#) that "one can safely assume that Qaani was involved in suppressing the June 1992 social unrest in Mashhad. It is equally likely that Qaani was involved in the IRGC's operations against drug cartels infiltrating Khorasan province from Afghanistan and in the IRGC's support to... the Northern Alliance, against the Taliban in the late 1990s." Iran supported the Alliance to counter the increasing hegemony of the Taliban, Sunni extremists backed by Iranian adversaries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Qaani repeatedly [visited Tajikistan](#), where Alliance fighters were treated and where the Alliance received arms shipments from external backers. "Qaani appears to have traveled into

Afghanistan to establish a presence,” added Alfoneh. “That is particularly true after the Taliban seizure of Kabul.” Around this time, Qaani was named Soleimani’s deputy.

Tenure as Deputy Commander of the Quds Force

In [1997 or 1998](#), IRGC Commander Rahim Safavi [named](#) Qasem Soleimani to lead the Quds Force. It’s not entirely clear when Qaani joined the force. Some Persian-language sources published following Qaani’s appointment to Quds Force Commander say he joined the force following its establishment as a distinct branch of the Guard Corps following the Iran-Iraq War. As Alfoneh has noted, the earliest documented reference to his service in the force appears in the 1993 edition of the book *Islamic Fundamentalism: The New Global Threat*, which identified Qaani as the force’s Ansar Corps commander responsible for Guard Corps activities “in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Asian republics.”

Again, some Persian-language sources say that he was appointed deputy to Soleimani soon after Soleimani himself was appointed Quds Force commander, while others say that he was appointed in 2007. Prior to Qaani’s 2020 appointment, he is [known](#) to have been IRGC Counter Intelligence Organization Deputy, and was promoted to IRGC Intelligence Deputy in 2006.

Like Soleimani and other key commanders, Qaani was one of the [signatories](#) of the 1999 letter to then-President Mohammad Khatami, which warned that the IRGC would remove him from power if he did not act more to crush the student protests in June of that year.

Soleimani and Qaani appear to have [divided](#) Quds Force’s areas of operation, with Soleimani focusing on the Arab world and the Middle East, while Qaani covered South and Central Asia, Africa and Latin America. In 2018, Qaani [traveled](#) to Afghanistan under the cover of deputy ambassador to meet with the governor of Bamiyan. There, he discussed the construction of an Iranian hospital in the city. A year later, he accompanied an Iranian national security delegation to the country later in the year, according to Afghan reports in 2020. Qaani also [maintained deep ties](#) with Pakistan’s Shia community during this time. He was instrumental in establishing the Zainabiyoun, an IRGC proxy militia comprised of Pakistani recruits.

In 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department [added](#) Qaani to its “Specially Designated Nationals” sanctions list, stating he oversaw the Quds Force’s “financial disbursements to [Quds Force] elements, including elements in Africa, as well as to various terrorist groups, including Hizballah,” and engaged in “financial oversight” of a Quds Force “weapons shipment that was intended for The Gambia.” The shipment included [240 tons of ammunition](#), according to a United Nations panel of experts. In 2009, Qaani also [reportedly](#) accompanied Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then president of Iran, on an official government delegation to Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Senegal.

Qaani as Commander

When appointing Qaani to succeed Soleimani as commander, Supreme Leader Khamenei [said](#) the Quds Force's program "will be unchanged from the time of [Qaani's] predecessor." Soleimani personally thanked Qaani as "my dear friend" in his last will. However, Qaani has not proven to be a [charismatic figure](#) like Soleimani. That said, Qaani is very much a member of Khamenei's cult of personality. This was best captured when, in July 2021, Qaani [stated](#): "We must stand only under the flag of Khamenei. [This means] even if someone is a very good person, prays regularly and is an experienced worker in the system...if they are not followers of the supreme leader, their place is in the trash can."

In early 2020, Qaani faced setbacks as Quds Force commander. The first operations he oversaw were conducted in northern Syria, as the Quds Force and its proxies coordinated with Damascus and Moscow in an assault against insurgent-held Idlib. The assault ground to a halt after a bombing [killed](#) dozens of Turkish soldiers stationed in Syria, leading to a massive Turkish counterattack. In retaliation, Turkey bombed IRGC positions. Initially, Qaani also [faced](#) competition from other Islamic Republic intelligence agencies like the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS), in the absence of Soleimani's power and influence, agencies like MOIS [sought](#) to establish influence in Iraq by sponsoring militia groups. These issues were compounded by Qaani's lack of familiarity with Iraqi militias and the Arabic language, which caused him to [rely](#) on Iraj Masjedi, then-Iranian Ambassador to Iraq and a senior Quds Force officer, to handle Quds Force meetings in Iraq.

In his early period as Quds Force commander, Qaani fared better on other fronts. In early 2021, Yemeni Ansar Allah, also known as the [Houthis](#), [demonstrated](#) the ability to maintain barrages of missiles and drone attacks against [Saudi Arabia](#). These capabilities were owed to years of Quds Force-directed investment and enabled the Houthis to conduct new ground assaults. Qaani was also able to claim some victory in the 2021 conflict between Israel and [Hamas](#). The conflict demonstrated the efficacy of the force's long-running support of Hamas, particularly its ability to maintain prolonged rocket strikes against Israel. Ahead of the conflict, Qaani frequently [communicated](#) with the leaders of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, likely to coordinate operations. In a public address, Qaani [said](#), "I'd advise all Zionists to go back and repurchase the houses they sold in Europe, the US and elsewhere before those houses become more expensive than they are today." Qaani added that Palestinian missiles did not target Israeli infrastructure "because it will not take long for Palestinians to use these facilities."

At another event in April 2021, Qaani [vowed](#) that "today, Resistance Fronts constituting Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and the children of Resistance...are everyday undertaking a fundamental action against enemies of Islam and the Revolution, and America and bloodthirsty Zionist regime and will continue this path...until reaching the global government of the Imam of Time [Mahdi]." This statement was made in reference to the Shia doctrine of [Mahdism](#). According to the doctrine of Mahdism, the Hidden Imam, Mahdi, will return from occultation one day to herald the apocalypse. Based on IRGC indoctrination, the [militaristic doctrine of Mahdism](#) requires the IRGC to act as the military vehicle to

UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

remove the barriers to the Hidden Imam's return – chief among them, the eradication of Israel. Qaani has acknowledged Khamenei as “the representative of the Imam of Time [Mahdi] on earth”; that acknowledgement is one of the foundations of Guardianship of the Jurisprudent ([velayat-e faqih](#)), which is enshrined in the Islamic Republic's constitution and underpins the entire system of governance in the clerical regime.

In recent years, we have seen the results of Qaani's vow for “fundamental action.” After [consolidating](#) the Quds Force's relationship with [proxies in Iraq](#), continuing to support [Hamas](#), [Hezbollah](#), and the [Houthis](#), Qaani has coordinated attacks against the US and its allies across the Middle East. This coordination has included taking an active role in [planning](#) Hamas's deadly October 7 terrorist attack against Israel, and [promising](#) further support in widening the scope of the conflict. Qaani has also [pressed](#) Hezbollah to intervene on behalf of Hamas to this end. As the Houthis conduct their ongoing campaign of maritime terror against commercial shipping, Qaani has [provided](#) arms, on-the-ground advisers, and intelligence support. This has given the Quds Force a key role in the Houthis' ability to conduct these malign activities. Connected with these other “Axis of Resistance” efforts, Qaani has been [instrumental](#) in facilitating deadly attacks against US personnel by IRGC proxies in Iraq – such as the [Tower 22 attack](#) in 2024, which killed three US soldiers.

Though many [speculated](#) that Qaani would not be as effective as Quds Force commander as his predecessor, he has demonstrated that this is not the case. After October 7, Qaani is no longer in Soleimani's shadow. He has coordinated and mobilized the IRGC's militia network against Israel and the US to new levels and, in doing so, has “proven” himself to Khamenei. In turn, we can expect Qaani to rise in prominence in the elite structures of the Islamic Republic – something that will result in the Quds Force commander becoming even more dangerous.