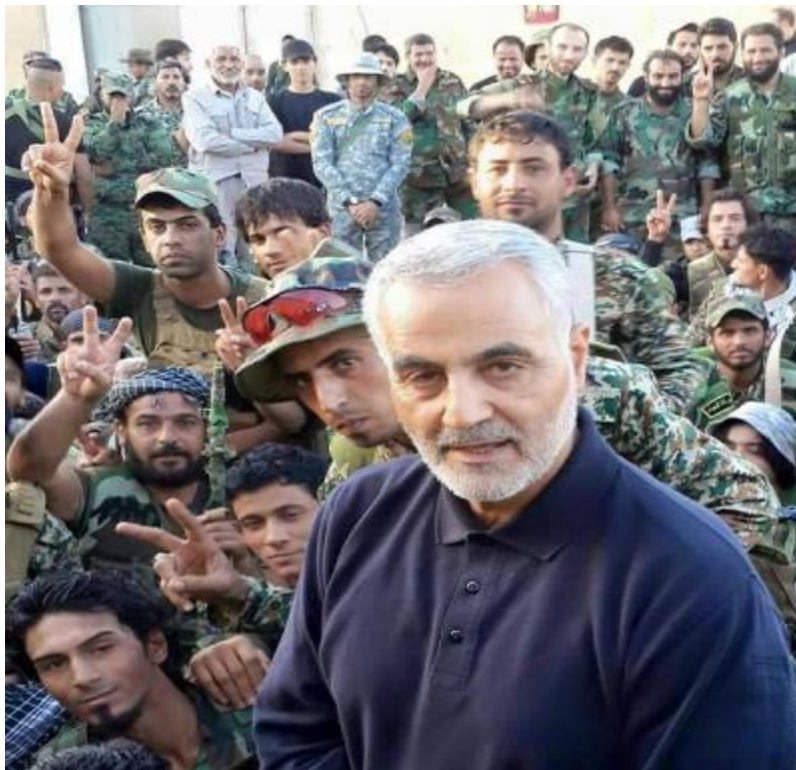


Major General Qassem Soleimani: Former IRGC-Quds Force Commander

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Introduction

Major General Qassem Soleimani arose from humble origins to become the commander of Iran’s elite Quds Force, the external expeditionary wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that oversees and carries out intelligence operations, terrorist plots, and unconventional warfare outside of Iran. The Quds Force, whose name refers to Iran’s desire to liberate *al-Quds* (Jerusalem) from Israeli control, is primarily tasked with spearheading the export of Iran’s Islamic Revolution throughout the Middle East and coordinating the activities of the loyal terrorist proxies and militias that Iran has cultivated around the region.

Soleimani was [killed](#) on January 3, 2020, in a U.S. airstrike near Baghdad International Airport. [Kata’ib Hezbollah](#) leader Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim, a.k.a. Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes, who was traveling in a convoy with Soleimani, was also killed in the strike. The strike was ordered because Soleimani was “actively developing plans” to attack U.S. troops and officials, according to a [statement](#) released by the U.S. Department of Defense.

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The Quds Force that Soleimani helmed is the tip of the spear in Iran’s efforts to subvert American, Israeli, and Western influence in the Middle East and to buttress Iran’s hegemonic ambitions. The Quds Force offers ideological, financial, and material support, as well as training, for Iranian proxies which have enabled Iran to establish spheres of influence throughout the region, including in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the Palestinian territories. Through the Quds Force, Iran effectively controls a transnational [foreign legion](#) of proxy forces subservient to its foreign policy objectives and willing to operate in which ever theater Tehran orders them to.

As head of the Quds Force, Soleimani was one of the most powerful Iranian regime figures and arguably the individual most responsible for the destruction, destabilization, and inflammation of sectarian tensions that Iran has sown throughout the Middle East in pursuit of regional domination. Under Soleimani, Iran amassed influence in a swathe of territory stretching from Afghanistan to Lebanon and Syria, creating a “Shia crescent” that functionally acts as a land bridge linking Tehran to the Mediterranean, enabling Iran to more efficiently and lethally arm its proxies. Since turning the tide of the Syrian civil war decisively in favor of its client, the Assad regime, Iran has increasingly sought to entrench itself militarily within Syria, creating a base from which to project power into the Levant and encircle and threaten Israel.

Soleimani spent much of his tenure as Quds Force commander since the late 1990s operating behind the scenes, earning him the nickname of “[the Shadow Commander](#).” But his public profile grew considerably after taking control of overseeing the direction of Iran’s intervention in Syria in 2013, and Soleimani emerged from the shadows to become a revered figure in Iran—considered above the political fray. He was the subject of documentaries, an animated film about his life, music videos, and in March 2019, Iran’s Supreme Leader awarded Iran’s highest military order, the [Order of Zulfagar](#), to Soleimani, making him the first official to receive the commendation since the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded in 1979.

While revered in Iran, Soleimani was equally reviled in the West, albeit begrudgingly respected, as the architect and public face of Iran’s regional strategy. U.S. General David Petraeus, the former leader of U.S. forces in Iraq and Central Intelligence Agency Director, [said](#) of Soleimani, “We saw [him] as a very capable, charismatic, skilled, professionally competent, diabolically evil human.” The U.S. government, the United Nations, and the European Union had all placed sanctions on Soleimani. Furthermore, U.S. Central Command documents [declassified](#) in 2015 revealed that Iraqi Shiite militants under Soleimani’s command killed more than 500 U.S. service members in Iraq between 2005 and 2011. U.S. intelligence also [linked](#) Soleimani to a 2011 assassination attempt of Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States in Washington, D.C.

This resource aims to contextualize Qassem Soleimani’s role inside and outside of the Islamic Republic of Iran during his life. It will first explore Soleimani’s biography—rising from humble origins to the pinnacle of power in Tehran. This resource will then analyze Soleimani’s modus operandi in key regional theaters— Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. It will then discuss Soleimani’s symbolic role in Iran’s domestic politics and his continued significance since his death. Lastly, the resource offers a collection of quotes from Soleimani.

Early Life and Career

Early Life

Qassem Soleimani was born in 1957 to an impoverished peasant family in the mountainous Kerman province in Iran's southeast. In a brief memoir, Soleimani recounted that one of his earliest [formative experiences](#) was travelling to the nearest city, Kerman, at the age of thirteen in search of work to pay back an agricultural loan of approximately \$100 that his father had taken out and struggled to repay. Soleimani had to work as a laborer at a school construction site for eight months in order to save up enough to pay off the debt, which he feared would have led to his father's imprisonment. The episode bred resentment in Soleimani toward the Shah for failing to provide opportunity for Iran's peasantry.

Soleimani attained only a high-school education and went on to work for Kerman's municipal water department. During this period, as anti-Shah sentiment grew, Soleimani began attending sermons of a preacher close to Iran's current supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, introducing him to the revolutionary Islamist ideology that provides the theological underpinnings of the Islamic Republic. While Soleimani was reportedly inspired at the time by the prospect of an Islamic Revolution, he did not belong to the revolutionary leadership. It is not even known if he participated in the 1979 demonstrations that led to the fall of the Shah.

Joining the IRGC and Iran-Iraq War

Shortly after the 1979 overthrow of the Shah, 22-year-old Soleimani joined the IRGC, which was founded in May of that year to provide Iran's nascent revolutionary government an armed basis of support and defend against domestic and external threats to the Islamic Revolution. Recalling this period, Soleimani once [told](#) an interviewer, "We were all young and wanted to serve the revolution in a way. This is how I joined the Guards." Soleimani received only about six weeks of formalized military training, but rapidly thrived in his new role and was designated as an instructor, beginning an unlikely ascent that would culminate with him becoming Iran's most influential military official.

Soleimani attained his first frontline battlefield experience when his unit was dispatched to Iran's Western Azerbaijan region to quell a Kurdish separatist uprising. When Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, catalyzing the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, Soleimani was initially dispatched back to Kerman province to train troops, but soon was redirected to the front lines, where he [volunteered](#) to spend extra time and gained renown for his battlefield exploits and bravery. Soleimani's initial mission was simply to supply water to the men at the front, but he ended up taking part in most of the war's key [front-line battles](#), "from the retaking of Bostan in December 1981 to the invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan in 1987, during which Saddam's forces attacked his unit with chemical weapons, to the climactic expedition to the al-Faw Peninsula in April 1988, whose failure helped precipitate the ceasefire that ended the war," according to former FBI Special Agent Ali Soufan.

The brutal Iran-Iraq War was characterized by the Iranian regime's disregard for its own soldier's lives on the battlefield, as exemplified by its "human wave" assaults, where thousands of fighters, many of them

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minors, would storm Iraqi lines, often to clear minefields, with staggering losses of life. Soleimani, by contrast, developed a reputation for looking after the welfare of his fellow fighters. He would reportedly return from reconnaissance missions behind enemy lines with live goats with which to feed his unit, earning him the admiring nickname “[the goat thief](#).” He was soon placed in command of a brigade of conscripts from Kerman due to his [battlefield prowess](#). Before battles, he would [reportedly](#) embrace each man in his unit and bid them goodbye, and on occasion he would be viscerally affected by large losses of lives of his men. Soleimani was reportedly wounded at least once during the conflict, and his cousin, Ahmad, who he was close to, died in combat in October 1984. Soleimani at times would criticize superiors for seemingly having no plan to win the war and for the lives cost by their wastefulness, but despite his insubordination, he was promoted to division commander while still in his mid-twenties.

Soleimani emerged from the Iran-Iraq War as a decorated and highly respected war hero who began to attract attention from the higher echelons of the Iranian regime. He was photographed during this period at the right-hand of then president and current supreme leader Ali Khamenei, planting the seeds for a relationship that has been central to Soleimani’s rise within the Islamic Republic.

Following the war, Soleimani became a commissioned officer of the IRGC with the rank of brigadier general. Soleimani became part of a network of IRGC officers whose hardline worldviews were shaped by the Iran-Iraq War and who remain part of Iran’s military elite to the present day. In particular, the conflict reinforced this network’s enmity toward the U.S. and the West, which they viewed as implacably hostile to Iran and responsible for backing Saddam Hussein in the conflict and supplying him with chemical weapons which he deployed against their fighters. Another major takeaway from the war for Soleimani and his cadre was an aversion to head-to-head combat. As a result, Iran increasingly turned toward asymmetrical, proxy warfare and terrorism to confront its adversaries, strategies that Soleimani would deploy to great effect as the commander of the Quds Force.

Tenure as IRGC-Quds Force Commander

Relatively little is known about Soleimani's activities during the period between the end of the Iran-Iraq War and his appointment as Quds Force commander in 1997 or 1998 (The exact date of Soleimani's appointment is unknown, but Iranian military scholar Ali Alfoneh places it [between Yahya Rahim Safavi's appointment as head of the IRGC on September 10, 1997 and March 21, 1998](#)). Immediately following the war's end in 1988, the Iranian regime dispatched Soleimani's division back to Kerman province and tasked it with eradicating drug cartels tied to the Afghan Taliban that were wreaking havoc in Kerman and the neighboring Sistan and Baluchestan province near Iran's eastern frontier with Afghanistan. Soleimani proved immune from the corruption that had previously enabled drug smugglers to thrive and led a brutal campaign against the narcotraffickers that claimed many lives but pacified the region within three years. Soleimani's leadership in defanging the drug cartels caught the attention of and [elicited praise](#) from then-IRGC head Mohsen Rezai and his successor, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi.

Within a year of Safavi's appointment as the head of the IRGC on September 10, 1997, he designated Qassem Soleimani to take over as commander of the Quds Force, the IRGC's unit tasked with bolstering Tehran's relations with pro-Iranian political factions, militias, and terrorist organizations abroad, and coordinating their militant activities. Soleimani inherited control over an organization that was instrumental in managing Tehran's relations, including the provision of funds, arms, and training, with [Hezbollah](#), Iran's most important Middle Eastern proxy. In the years leading up to Soleimani's promotion, the Quds Force had partnered with Hezbollah, providing logistical and recruitment support, for [international terror attacks](#) including the 1992 and 1994 bombings of the Israeli embassy and AMIA cultural center in Buenos Aires, and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia. His predecessor as head of the Quds Force, Ahmad Vahidi, is [wanted](#) for his role in the attack in Argentina.

After assuming the post, Soleimani steadily worked to implement his vision of Iran's national interests, which dovetailed with the shared consensus of Iran's political and military elites. Namely, Soleimani sought to expand the Iranian sphere of influence in the Middle East and to evict Western military, economic, and political interests from the region.

A renowned strategist and tactician, Soleimani used asymmetrical means, including terrorist attacks, covert operations, and outsourcing fighting to foreign militias, to threaten and destabilize the U.S. and its regional allies. Soleimani's strategic vision helped Iran overcome structural weaknesses – it is outmanned, outgunned, and outspent by its adversaries – to gain outsized influence in regional affairs.

Soleimani's success in furthering Iran's hegemonic regional ambitions stemmed from his pioneering of Iran's strategy of destabilizing neighboring governments and undermining their sovereignty by building up Iranian military, political, and social influence in countries around the region. Soleimani strengthened Iran's ties to the so-called "[axis of resistance](#)," of which Hezbollah, Syria's Assad regime, and Hamas are the most consequential members, and built, funded, trained, and/or partnered with an ever-growing array of sub-state political, militia, and terrorist organizations.

Some of the Quds Force partners share the Iranian regime's revolutionary ideology and/or are completely subservient to Tehran's interests, while other alliances are temporary and borne of mutual

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convenience. Tehran's outreach tends to focus on Shia actors, including offshoots such as Syria's Alawite Assad regime or Yemen's Zaidi Ansar Allah/Houthi rebel movement. However, only focusing on Shias would be self-limiting due to their minority status in the Middle East, and so Iran has partnered with groups across sectarian lines, such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Taliban, and even Al-Qaeda on shared bases such as anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism.

Iran's [proxy strategy](#) derives its potency from the fusion of militant and political aims. Tehran's proxies, most notably Hezbollah, work with the grain of government power in order to gain space to flourish, enabling them to more subtly degrade the state's authority. Iran's proxy militias and terrorist organizations are well-armed and supplied by Tehran via the Quds Force. Their arms inherently erode state sovereignty by preventing the ruling government from acquiring a monopoly of violence. With Tehran's backing, these militias simultaneously entrench Iranian military influence in neighboring countries and provide security for their domestic constituencies, establishing reliance on Iran.

Iran-backed proxies buttress their militant activities with political and social welfare endeavors. Many of the militias have affiliated political parties that vie for seats in national parliaments and seek key cabinet positions, ensuring that domestic constituencies are granted political representation to advance their interests while also granting Iran undue political influence over neighboring states' affairs. Iran has also established networks of mosques, cultural centers, educational institutions, charities, and media organs in neighboring countries which amplify its proxies' militant and political efforts. These institutions provide social services that weak central governments cannot, further loosening state authority and ensuring that domestic constituencies develop reliance on Iran instead for their physical security and material well-being. As an added bonus, schools, mosques, and cultural centers often serve as hubs of ideological indoctrination and recruitment into militant activities.

While Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, a purported "moderate," serves as the smiling face of Iran's public diplomacy, it can be plausibly argued that Qassem Soleimani was more influential in terms of crafting and executing Iranian foreign policy. Underscoring this assertion, when Bashar al-Assad paid a surprise visit to Tehran in February 2019, it was [Soleimani who handled the security protocols and accompanied Assad on his flight](#). Zarif was not even informed of Assad's visit and did not participate in any of his meetings, triggering his abrupt resignation, which he rescinded shortly thereafter.

Among his key achievements, Soleimani played an instrumental role in cementing Iran's tactical alliance with Russia in Syria which proved vital to preserving the Assad regime, an existential policy priority for Tehran. Soleimani was also the principal equipper, trainer, and financier of Iran-backed proxy militias and terrorist organizations, making him the foremost terrorist within the country that the U.S. State Department has declared "[the foremost state sponsor of terrorism](#)" for years. The Iranian regime dispatches Zarif to court diplomatic and economic engagement with the West, but his [defense of Tehran's regional destabilization efforts](#) indicates that he is little more than a public relations lackey for Iran's terrorism and proxy war strategy of which Soleimani was the primary architect.

Soleimani's indispensable role in Iran's external affairs made him one of the most powerful and consequential figures in shaping the Middle East of today. Examining his legacy as head of the IRGC's Quds Force, paying particular attention to how and when Iran chose to pursue military interventions and

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terrorist plots, is vital for understanding how Iran strengthened its military and diplomatic influence around the Middle East. The ensuing destabilization of the region and inflammation of sectarian tensions are features, not bugs, of Soleimani's foreign policy design. Despite his passing from the scene, the terrorist and proxy militia networks he architected endure and will continue to threaten the US and its allies.

Afghanistan

Iran's evolving threat perception played an important role in Soleimani's promotion to Quds Force commander in late 1997 or early 1998. Iraq, the major proximate threat to Iran since the founding of the Islamic Republic, was effectively neutralized following the Gulf War and subsequent imposition of international sanctions. In neighboring civil war-torn Afghanistan, meanwhile, the extremist Sunni jihadist movement, the Taliban, rose to power in 1996, backed by Iranian geopolitical rivals Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The emergence of the Taliban government, which was inimical to Iranian interests, stood as the major looming challenge on the horizon.

Soleimani's background fighting against Kurdish separatists early in his career and pacifying the drug crisis along Iran's Afghan border familiarized him with navigating tribal societies and Afghanistan. This made him an attractive candidate to lead the Quds Force as Iran reoriented its focus toward containing the rising Taliban threat.

During the Afghan Civil War, Iran defensively sought to cultivate military and political influence in Afghanistan by backing elements hostile to the Taliban with ethnic, sectarian, and linguistic affinities toward Iran, namely Shia ethnic Hazaras in the West of the country and Persian-speaking Tajiks in the North who formed the core of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, more commonly referred to as the "Northern Alliance." Iran's backing of minority elements placed it at an inherent disadvantage, as the Taliban drew its support base from Afghanistan's Pashtuns, which comprised two-thirds of the population.

In August of 1998, the Taliban escalated tensions with Iran following its capture of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, a cosmopolitan and diverse city with a large Shia Hazara population. The Taliban brutalized the town's Hazaras, raping and massacring hundreds. Amidst the chaos, Taliban soldiers besieged an Iranian consulate and [executed](#) nine Iranian diplomats and an Iranian journalist.

The incident was the first major crisis of Soleimani's tenure. Iran's response was characterized by bluster tempered with caution. Iranian political leaders vowed revenge for the deaths at gatherings punctuated by chants of "Death to the Taliban." The IRGC issued a televised [statement](#) that, "The Taliban and the main agents responsible for this horrific crime must know that they shall never be immune to the tumultuous anger of the Islamic corps." Iran had 70,000 IRGC troops already stationed at the Afghan border to defend against spillover from the conflict next door. They immediately began undertaking war games both to signal a potential looming offensive and deter against further Taliban provocations.

Two months after the killings, Iran [amassed](#) 200,000 additional conventional troops near the Afghan border in Sistan and Baluchestan province for a parade of Iranian military hardware and to conduct live-

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fire military exercises and war games in conjunction with the IRGC forces stationed there. Iran warned that it planned on maintaining the troops following the war games to defend Iran's national security, a move that would represent a severe escalation of tensions. As demands for retaliation grew, IRGC Commander-in-Chief Safavi drew up operational plans and requested Supreme Leader Khamenei's permission to advance two IRGC divisions to Afghanistan's Shia stronghold of Herat as a base from which to "[annihilate, punish, eliminate them \[the Taliban\] and return.](#)"

Soleimani – averse to direct confrontation and heavy Iranian casualties – [intervened and helped defuse the crisis](#), coming up with an alternate plan that involved ramping up Iran's backing of the Northern Alliance rather than fighting the Taliban directly. Soleimani reportedly played a personal role in directing the Northern Alliance's operations from [Tajikistan](#), where the Tajik-dominated group had established bases from which to launch attacks into Afghanistan and coordinate resupply of its fighters. In thwarting a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan, Soleimani established a template that would resurface consistently throughout his career, using a light Iranian footprint while bolstering indigenous forces and thereby maximizing Iran's political and military influence for minimal expenditure and exposure.

Afghanistan's Taliban government provided Al Qaeda safe haven for its terrorist operations in the mid-1990s and the group took advantage of the vast terrorist infrastructure, including training camps, which were left in place from the era of the global jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In 1999, the CIA authorized covert assistance to the Northern Alliance to facilitate operations against the growing Al Qaeda threat, an unusual instance of Iran and the U.S. independently backing a guerilla movement albeit for different ends. After the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, America turned its sights on Afghanistan's Taliban government, a welcome development for Iran. Despite the enmity between the Islamic Republic and the United States dating back to the Islamic Revolution and subsequent hostage crisis, Soleimani evinced pragmatism, seizing the opportunity to leverage American military might to neutralize a more proximate and pressing adversary—a trend that the region would witness later in the effort to crush the Islamic State in Iraq.

In the month between the attack and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, Ambassador Ryan S. Crocker, then a senior U.S. State Department official, conducted several rounds of [shuttle diplomacy](#) with Iranian negotiators in Geneva to facilitate cooperation in confronting the Taliban. The talks were carried out in secret, as the U.S. and Iran had severed diplomatic relations after the hostage crisis. According to Crocker, the Iranian emissaries answered to Soleimani, who effectively controlled Iran's Afghan portfolio. With Soleimani's backing, Iran's negotiators encouraged the U.S. to begin kinetic operations in Afghanistan and handed over intelligence detailing Taliban positions to target during the early stages of the conflict. Iran, meanwhile, kept up its role supplying and training Northern Alliance fighters.

The U.S.-led invasion commenced on October 7, 2001 and by November, Kabul fell and the Taliban government collapsed. In December, the United Nations staged an international conference in Bonn, Germany bringing together numerous Afghan factions. As one of the primary backers of the Northern Alliance, Iran played a major diplomatic role in achieving the December 5 Bonn agreement, which installed Hamid Karzai as interim administration head and led to the formation of an international peacekeeping force to maintain stability in Afghanistan.

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The confluence of shared U.S.-Iranian interests in this period occurred during the administration of Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, a relative moderate who sought [a reduction of tensions and cultural exchanges](#) between Iran and the U.S., although not a full political and diplomatic restoration of ties. One of the Iranian interlocutors in the secret U.S.-Iranian negotiations [revealed](#) to Crocker that Soleimani, pleased with the cooperation, had been considering, at great political risk as he was not yet the revered figure he would later become, a reevaluation of Iran's ties with the U.S. More conservative figures within Iran, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, were cautiously on board with allying with the U.S. toward the limited tactical end of confronting the Taliban, but remained skeptical of U.S. motives. Soleimani posited that even if the U.S. ended up betraying Iran after the shared objective of defeating the Taliban were complete, it was still a win-win for Iran, as their enemy would be defeated, and America would end up entangled in Afghanistan, similar to the Soviet Union. "Americans do not know the region, Americans do not know Afghanistan, Americans do not know Iran," [warned](#) Soleimani.

The betrayal that Soleimani and others in the Iranian leadership anticipated came to pass in President George W. Bush's January 2002 State of the Union address, when he labeled Iran, along with Iraq, as part of an "axis of evil." The proclamation caught Iran off-guard, and dashed the spirit of cooperation that had characterized the first stage of the war. With the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran's threat perception changed as the U.S. was no longer the distant "Great Satan," but a proximate threat with an expanding military footprint in the region that had toppled two neighboring governments and was ultimately bent on Iranian regime change.

As such, Iran's primary objectives in Afghanistan shifted toward ensuring that the country remained sufficiently weak as to preclude a further military threat toward it, and imposing costs on the U.S. to compel its withdrawal. Paradoxically, Tehran had a compelling interest in a stable, albeit weakened, Afghanistan to prevent terrorism and the drug trade from spilling over its borders. To that end, Iran pursued foreign direct investment in Afghanistan's reconstruction and assistance in the fields of infrastructure, agriculture, energy, and communications.

Iran played what former Defense Secretary Robert Gates termed a "[double game](#)" in Afghanistan, seeking good relations with the central government while also modestly funneling arms to insurgents of various ethnic and ideological stripes through Soleimani's Quds Force, according to U.S. intelligence. In this manner, Iran ensured a relatively stable yet not overly strong government next door, retained levers to impose costs against the U.S. or Afghan government on an as-needed basis (in response to pressure over its nuclear program or malign activities in Lebanon and Iraq, for instance), and was able to cultivate influence with a variety of Afghan factions.

Showing the lengths to which Soleimani's pragmatic streak extended, one of the primary insurgent groups the Quds Force began arming was Iran's erstwhile adversary, the Taliban. Beginning in 2006, the U.S. State Department alleges that [the IRGC-Quds Force began](#) "training the Taliban in Afghanistan on small unit tactics, small arms, explosives, and indirect fire weapons" in addition to providing armaments "including small arms and associated ammunition, rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, 107mm rockets, and plastic explosives." Iran has also permitted the Taliban free movement of foreign fighters through Iranian territory to support its insurgency in Afghanistan. On October 25, 2007, the U.S.

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Department of the Treasury designated Soleimani under Executive Order 13382 for providing material support to the Taliban and other terrorist organizations.

Soleimani's direction of Iran's Afghanistan strategy through multiple iterations reveals him as a canny, pragmatic actor. He was able to skillfully negotiate with hostile actors – first the U.S. to topple the Taliban, and later the Taliban to bleed the U.S. – in pursuit of Iran's short-term objectives. Iran's long term interest is in a stable, friendly, weak Afghanistan, and Soleimani has pursued this by haphazardly supporting the Afghan government, the Taliban, as well as Persian-speaking Tajiks and Shia Hazara groups opposed to the Taliban. Soleimani's approach is not without drawbacks, as it has engendered enmity among broad swathes of the population, as evidenced by [pushback](#) and [demonstrations](#) against Iranian meddling in recent years. Iran has sought to mitigate such blowback by ensuring that Afghanistan's Hazaras (roughly 20% of the population) [predominantly subscribe to Iran's Khomeinist revolutionary ideology](#), establishing a permanent pocket of influence within Afghanistan.

Lebanon

Since its inception, Hezbollah – a Lebanon-based Shia terror organization and paramilitary force committed to Iran's revolutionary ideology – has operated as the IRGC's spearhead far beyond Lebanon's borders in order to protect and advance Tehran's interests. Hezbollah plays a leading role in training and equipping militia groups around the Middle East loyal to Iran's foreign policy objectives. One of Iran's primary stated objectives is the elimination of Israel, viewed by Tehran as an illegitimate outpost of American influence implanted in the heart of the Middle East. Hezbollah is Iran's primary vehicle for confronting Israel. The group has also conducted terrorist attacks targeting American and French interests and Iranian opposition figures abroad at Tehran's behest.

While Hezbollah's [adherence to Khomeinist ideology](#) dates back to the group's founding charter, Qassem Soleimani played a role in enhancing the group's utility as an instrument of Iranian foreign policy. Bolstering Hezbollah was one of Soleimani's top-line priorities immediately upon taking over as Quds Force commander, which he pursued simultaneously with his handling of Iran's Afghanistan portfolio. Soleimani set about forming close, personal ties with Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, and primary military commander, Imad Mughniyeh. Mughniyeh was Hezbollah's chief terrorist mastermind who planned and executed Hezbollah's 1983 attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847, and the 1992 and 1994 bombings of an Israeli embassy and cultural center in Buenos Aires. With these relationships cemented, Soleimani concentrated on transferring additional resources to the group, which at the time was engaged in fighting against the Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) occupation of a security zone it had carved out in southern Lebanon, and Israel's South Lebanon Army (SLA) proxy. Soleimani dispatched Quds Force operatives to the area, who trained, advised, and assisted Hezbollah forces. Later, Hezbollah hailed Israel's withdrawal as a victory for Iranian-backed "resistance," creating a mythology that would serve as the engine for the growth of Iran's enhanced diplomatic and military influence throughout the Middle East.

After Israel's withdrawal, the Quds Force increased its material support to Hezbollah, including helping set up Hezbollah's long-range rocket infrastructure. The growth of Hezbollah's military capabilities gave the group the ability to plunge Lebanon into conflict at Iran's behest. In 2006, Hezbollah abducted two

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Israeli soldiers, precipitating a 34-day war that devastated Lebanon's infrastructure. The Quds Force provided Hezbollah critical support during the conflict and was [integrated into Hezbollah's command units](#). Hezbollah has also recently revealed that Soleimani was present in Lebanon during the 2006 war, aiding in the planning of operations against Israeli forces.

Following the end of the Second Lebanon War, the Quds Force played a central role in the rearmament of Hezbollah. Soleimani leveraged the opportunity to entrench an Iranian presence in Lebanon.

The IRGC created the Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon (ICRL), an important institution that Iran uses to curry favor in Beirut which doubles as an instrument of Tehran's expansionist agenda. Tasked with helping rebuild Hezbollah-controlled areas of southern Lebanon devastated in the war, the ICRL played a role in reconstructing mosques, educational centers, and health facilities, but the bulk of its aims were nefarious and non-humanitarian related.

The ICRL provided a cover for Iran to embed elite Quds Force operatives in Lebanon under the radar. The organization's "civilian" leader, Hessam Khoshnevis, was in reality [a senior Quds Force commander named Hassan Shateri using a false identity](#). Under Shateri's leadership, the ICRL played an integral role in resupplying Hezbollah's arsenal and building a secret fiber optics network for secure communications which triggered a crisis in 2008 that strengthened Hezbollah at the expense of the Lebanese government.

On February 12, 2008, Israel's Mossad intelligence service carried out an operation in coordination with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to assassinate Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's military chief and overseer of the group's rearmament. The Israelis surveilled Mughniyeh, who was visiting Damascus for weeks. On the morning of the planned car-bomb assassination, the Israelis had to abruptly abort the mission, as Mughniyeh was [engaged in a warm conversation outside his vehicle with Qassem Soleimani](#), underscoring Soleimani's personal role in abetting Hezbollah. However, the Israelis only had clearance to target Mughniyeh, and thus spared Soleimani's life, carrying out the assassination of Mughniyeh later that evening.

Particularly since 2003, and especially in the last decade, Hezbollah has played a critical role in Iran's regional adventurism, training and assisting Shia militias in Iraq, fighting and recruiting Shias to buttress Syria's Assad regime, and dispatching advisers to Yemen to aid and train Houthi rebels in their fight against neighboring Saudi Arabia.

As such, maintaining its supply line to its Hezbollah proxy serves as Iran's primary objective in its project to establish a Shia crescent. Iran is able to transport weaponry via air to Damascus international airport, and from there, transport it by land to Hezbollah's stronghold in the Beqaa valley. Were a hostile power to take over in Damascus, it could deny Tehran access to the Damascus airport, curtailing this supply line.

Under Soleimani, the Quds Force [manages Hezbollah's terrorist infrastructure](#), which is now firmly entrenched in Lebanon and Syria. Arming Hezbollah has taken on renewed urgency given its role in Syria combat. To that end, Soleimani has prioritized enhancing ties between the [Quds Force and Hezbollah](#)

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[procurement agents](#), working to streamline logistics and procurement channels to more effectively supply Hezbollah with weaponry. Exploiting the chaos of Syria's civil war, the Quds Force has attempted to clandestinely transfer advanced, balance-altering weapons into Lebanon – with unclear levels of success, given Israeli aerial interdiction of these shipments in Syria while they are en route to the group. Nonetheless, despite the heavy casualties it has suffered in Syria, Hezbollah is emerging from the Syrian civil war as an increasingly critical and powerfully armed partner and instrument of the Quds Force.

Iraq

Nowhere was Soleimani's brilliance as a strategist and tactician more evident than in his handling of the Iraq portfolio. The U.S. invasion in 2003 paved the way for Iran to solidify its influence in the country, and to extract costs from the U.S. in terms of casualties, dollars, and prestige. Through a combination of military aid, cash, favors, bribes, and intimidation, Soleimani came to wield tremendous personal influence over the country's Shia militias and political parties.

Having been labeled a member of the "axis of evil" by President George W. Bush, Iran viewed the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq as both a welcome and worrying development. The invasion removed Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, the next biggest proximate threat to Iran after the fall of the Taliban, but also raised the prospect that Iran would be next. Iran went to great lengths to signal it did not want confrontation with the U.S., [reportedly](#) dispatching runners across the border to tell U.S. troops in the field that Iran wanted no problems with the U.S. The 2003 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate even found that Iran slowed down work on its illicit nuclear program (or at least reconfigured elements of the program to make it more covert), presumably in order to draw scrutiny away that may have invited conflict.

After Saddam's regime fell, there were early signs of [indirect Iranian cooperation](#) as the U.S. endeavored to establish a provisional governing council. However, once the U.S. occupation began to collapse and get bogged down by insurgency, Iran's fears of a follow-on U.S. invasion dissipated and Soleimani opportunistically changed tacks, doing everything in his power to add to the U.S.'s frustrations in Iraq. One of his first moves was to work with the head of Syrian intelligence to establish pipelines to facilitate the flow of Sunni jihadists from around the region across Syria's border into Iraq, where they launched frequent attacks against U.S. forces.

While useful in the short term, Soleimani could not control these Sunni forces, and he soon thereafter turned his attention to standing up a network of Iraqi Shia militias to attack U.S. and coalition forces and otherwise pursue Iranian strategic objectives. The vast network of Shia proxy militias that Soleimani controlled, coordinating their battlefield activities and spearheading their funding and equipping, served as his main lever for influence in Iraq, and will continue benefiting Tehran, even after his demise. Even while Saddam Hussein was still in power, Soleimani's operatives had been actively cultivating Iraqi Shia militias to wage an underground struggle against Saddam, using Iran as a base of operation. The most powerful of these was the [Badr Organization](#), which was founded during the Iran-Iraq War as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a Khomeinist political party created by Iran in order to organize Iraqi Shia under the banner of the Islamic Revolution.

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After Saddam's fall, the Badr Organization, which is loyal, but not fully subservient to Iran, largely refrained from attacking U.S. forces and focused instead on exacting revenge on Baathist remnants. Soleimani thus set about establishing militias whose primary focus was targeting U.S. and allied forces, most notably, [Asaib Ahl al-Haq \(AAH\) and Kata'ib Hezbollah \(KH\)](#). These new militias, which followed the Hezbollah model of fusing militant and political power, were more committed to Khomeinist ideology and were directly under Soleimani's control. Thousands of Iraqi Shia militants traveled to training camps in Iran, where they received paramilitary training from Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah operatives (who helped overcome language barriers) before returning to Iraq.

In addition to recruiting and training militants, Soleimani was instrumental in supplying them with increasingly sophisticated weaponry. By 2006 the Quds Force had developed "[a widespread network for transferring and distributing arms from Iran into Iraq through the Ilam region in western Iran.](#)" Iran's imprimatur over the militias was most vividly borne out with the evolution from primitive Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attacks on U.S. service members to more lethal explosively formed projectile (EFP) attacks, whose sophistication U.S. military officials insist point to Iranian origins. In total, the U.S. Pentagon found that Iran-backed militias were responsible for [603 U.S. servicemember deaths between 2003-2011](#), accounting for roughly one in six U.S. casualties during that period.

Soleimani's ambitions in Iraq went beyond just killing American troops; he sought and ultimately became the leading power broker within the country. Equally as important as his ability to order his proxies to target adversaries, he could demand and receive restraint at strategic moments. In a manner similar to his conduct in Afghanistan, Soleimani played a double game of [stoking tensions and then being called upon to mediate them](#). Soleimani's machinations served to keep Iraq's central government weak and politicians from various factions reliant on him to maintain stability. Politicians were effectively held hostage to Soleimani's demands, as he could call on the militias under his command to make trouble if they tried to cross him.

In the first years after the invasion, the U.S., bogged down fighting the Sunni jihadist insurgency, largely avoided direct confrontation with Soleimani's militant proxies or Quds Force operatives active in Iraq, as it could ill afford an escalation in tensions or the opening of another front. As the threat posed by Soleimani's forces metastasized, the U.S. set up a covert task force in 2006 to kill and capture Iran-backed insurgents and Quds Force operatives. At one point, they raided a prominent Shia politician's compound and encountered Quds Force General Mohsen Chizari, the head of Quds Force operations in Iraq. The Americans briefly detained Chizari, the most dramatic escalation against Iran to date. Ultimately, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki, who was beholden to Soleimani to maintain his grip on power, demanded the Americans hand Chizari over to him, and promptly released him.

The incident demonstrated Soleimani's growing influence in Iraq and set the stage for a series of Iranian-backed provocations and American responses. The U.S. began publicly pointing the finger at Soleimani as a leading terrorist and source of instability, and a debate dragged on for several years within the military over whether to cross into Iran and target the Quds Force's training camps and weapons factories. Ultimately, the U.S. refrained from such a dramatic escalation, as Soleimani would strategically pull back or offer limited cooperation, such as [brokering ceasefires](#) with factions targeting the U.S., when situations demanded it.

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Soleimani became an indispensable and feared figure behind the scenes in Iraqi politics, using intimidation to ensure fealty from Shia and Kurdish factions. Iran's embassy in Baghdad to this day serves as an operating and organizing base for the Quds Force to project influence. For example, since the ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Soleimani has [installed](#) Quds Force operatives as Tehran's ambassadors in Baghdad. Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, Hassan Danaeifar, and Iraj Masjedi have all been IRGC operatives who ensure Iran's primacy at the decision-making table in Baghdad.

The militias under Soleimani's control borrowed from Hezbollah's example in terms of providing security and social services to Shia constituencies in Iraq, thereby cultivating patronage and loyalty which extends to the Iranian regime and its revolutionary ideology. The militias have successfully translated the support of their Iraqi Shia backers into political clout, which they in turn use to apply pressure for policies favorable to the Islamic Republic. The concentration of military and political power in the hands of Shia militias serves to weaken the centralized Iraqi government, making it harder to defend against Iran's ideological expansion in Iraq.

In 2010, Iraq held parliamentary elections which resulted in a nine-month stalemate. Soleimani brokered the impasse, bringing together Kurdish and Shia politicians in support of a second term as prime minister for his preferred candidate, al-Maliki. As international sanctions severely curtailed Iran's petroleum exports, Soleimani leaned on Prime Minister al-Maliki, beholden to Soleimani for his political survival, to hand him over the proceeds from roughly \$20 million worth of Iraqi oil sales per day, a scheme that helped shield the Quds Force from international sanctions over Iran's illicit nuclear program. In exchange for his backing, Soleimani also extracted from al-Maliki – who had previously walked a tightrope to ensure U.S. and Iranian backing – and his coalition partners a public demand for the full withdrawal of U.S. troops, which was completed in December 2011. Soleimani was seen as handing the U.S. an ignominious defeat through his political maneuvering and relentless attacks on U.S. forces, paving the way for Iran to solidify its control over Iraq.

Iran's hostile takeover of Iraq, subversion of its sovereignty, and pilfering of its resources, along with its support for the Assad regime in Syria's civil war and al-Maliki's increasingly authoritarian governance, stoked sectarian backlash, catalyzing the rise and potency of the Islamic State (ISIS). In 2014, at the apex of ISIS's power, the group took over Mosul with little resistance from Iraqi government forces and began advancing toward the outskirts of Baghdad. The situation, compounded by the fecklessness of the Iraqi military, created an opening for Soleimani to further entrench Iranian control over Iraq.

Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, Iraq's most influential Shia cleric whose desire for pluralistic governance and non-adherence to Iran's Khomeinist doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* makes him a rival of Tehran for influence in Iraq, issued a [fatwa](#) urging all able-bodied Iraqis to take up arms against ISIS. Since the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, Soleimani's focus had largely shifted to propping up the Assad regime in Syria. Soleimani had shifted resources from the transnational Shi'a foreign legion under his control to the Syrian theater, with many of the most prominent Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias sending militants to Syria to fight for Iranian objectives and to recruit, train, and advise additional fighters to defend the Assad regime. When the ISIS situation demanded action, Soleimani ordered the Iraqi militias to cross back over the border from Syria to rescue Iraq.

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In conjunction with the Iraqi government, Soleimani helped stand up the [Popular Mobilization Forces \(PMF\)](#), an umbrella organization of predominantly Shia militia groups that coordinated with Iraq's central government in the fight against ISIS. While not all the forces in the PMF are aligned with Iran, about [50 Shia militia groups](#) are backed by Iran if not under Soleimani's direct control, including some of the largest, best-funded, and most heavily armed groups. The creation of the PMF command structure and its integration with the Iraqi central government led to unprecedented coordination among the Iran-backed Shia militias and has helped entrench Iranian control over Iraqi affairs. While the PMF helped put out a fire that was largely of Iran's making in fighting ISIS, the creation of the PMF further eroded Iraqi sovereignty, as recruits, funds, and increasing amounts of sophisticated weaponry made their way to independent, Iran-backed militia forces rather than the Iraqi government. These forces, which tend to be anti-American, and rabidly sectarian, place loyalty to Iran's revolutionary ideology and foreign policy objectives over the Iraqi state they ostensibly represent. As such, they stand as the main impediment to a stable, pluralistic Iraq today.

Whereas Soleimani previously operated largely behind the scenes in Iraq, seeking to covertly cement Iranian influence, with the creation of the PMF, Soleimani became a ubiquitous presence on the battlefield and in diplomatic circles, with his trips over the border – in violation of the international travel ban he was under – carefully curated for Iranian social media and propagandistic purposes. During Soleimani's frequent trips to Iraq, he coordinated battlefield activities among the various militias under his command in conjunction with the Iraqi government, facilitated the flow of intelligence and military hardware to his forces, and liaised with Iraqi government and Kurdish officials for strategic purposes.

In elevating Soleimani to the forefront, Iran seemed to be sending a message that it was a force for stability in Iraq through its leadership in the fight against ISIS, and more insidiously, that Iran was the dominant influence in the country. The propaganda campaign served domestic purposes as well, casting the IRGC in a nationalistic light as the defender of the Iranian nation, fighting ISIS in Iraq to prevent having to fight them in Tehran.

The rise of ISIS compelled a limited U.S. re-engagement in Iraq and created a de facto tactical alliance between the U.S. and Soleimani's forces, which benefitted from the direct support given to Iraqi troops who fought alongside the Shia militias. At one point, U.S. forces and Shia militiamen even [shared an airbase near Anbar province](#), although they were kept separate. This temporary alliance of convenience once again showed Soleimani's pragmatic streak and penchant for propaganda victories. By cooperating with Soleimani's forces, the U.S. allowed Soleimani to portray himself as Iraq's savior, buttressing his image and Iran's influence. Given the U.S. and Iran's opposing objectives in Iraq, the ongoing presence and growing influence of Shia militias in Iraq risked becoming a flashpoint between the U.S. and Iran, as Soleimani was able marshal them to strike against U.S. interests when he saw fit. This state of affairs would ultimately play a role in the series of escalations that led to Soleimani's demise.

The tacit, indirect U.S. backing of PMF forces saw U.S. equipment to the Iraqi government forces end up in the hands of Soleimani-backed forces, several of which are designated as foreign terrorist organizations. For instance, [Kata'ib Hezbollah used U.S.-made helicopters, M1A1 Abrams tanks, and Humvees in some of its operations](#), even flying its banner on these American vehicles. This development

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was especially troubling, as the Shia militias engaged in systemic human rights abuses and brutality that rivaled ISIS's as they cleared out ISIS territory. Iraqi Shia militias [were alleged to have engaged in](#) extrajudicial assassinations, summary executions, kidnappings, and torture of both combatants and civilians, including children.

Due to the armed strength and brutality of the Shia militias within the PMF, their power has come to eclipse that of the central government, leading Iraqi officials to either surrender to and appease the PMF, or face reprisals. Iraq's previous prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, praised Iran at Davos in 2015 for springing to Iraq's defense and even [singled out Qassem Soleimani as an ally in the fight against ISIS](#). There are reportedly around [80,000 to 100,000 Iran-aligned Shia fighters inside Iraq today](#), and the government has little recourse to bring the Iran-backed militias, which desire to retain their independence, under its command.

In the May 2018 parliamentary elections, the PMF's political bloc won the second-most seats, but Tehran-backed elements did not win enough seats to form a governing coalition. Iraq's eventual prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, was elected with a mandate to curb Iranian influence. Soleimani had other plans, and began dispatching [hit squads to assassinate critics of Iranian influence in Iraq](#) from both the government and [civil society](#).

Through his de facto control of the PMF, Soleimani effectively laid the groundwork for Iran's takeover of Iraq, stationing allies in powerful positions both within government and outside of it. Disbanding the PMF militias remains an undertaking that the Iraqi government is not equipped to handle and the U.S. has little appetite for, so Iraq will likely remain riven by the persistence of a coordinated network of Iranian proxy militias, modeled after Lebanese Hezbollah, undermining the central government for years to come.

Syria

Since 2011, when Bashar al-Assad's heavy-handed attempts to quell popular demonstrations against his repressive rule devolved into a civil war, Qassem Soleimani's principal preoccupation shifted to saving and sustaining the Assad regime, Iran's critical ally in the "resistance axis" against Western influence in the Middle East. Retaining a friendly regime in Damascus has served numerous Iranian foreign policy objectives over the years. Most importantly, Syria is a key transshipment point for Iranian arms to Lebanese Hezbollah, which Assad allows to land at Damascus airport before they are transported via land to Hezbollah. If a hostile Sunni power took over in Syria, it would likely cut off this supply chain, potentially strangling Hezbollah. As such, Iran views maintaining the Assad regime in power as central to the preservation of its hard-won "Shia crescent" land bridge linking Tehran to the Mediterranean and to the export of its Islamic Revolutionary project. Underscoring Iran's commitment, Soleimani declared in 2013 that the Islamic Republic would ["support Syria until the end."](#)

At the onset of the Syrian civil war, Iran was financially constrained by the international sanctions regime targeting its illicit nuclear program. Nevertheless, it viewed supporting the Assad regime as an existential issue and therefore proffered a [\\$7 billion loan](#) to shore up the Syrian economy. Initially, Soleimani's mandate was limited to the Quds Force advising and training Assad regime forces. The outbreak of the war exposed the Syrian armed forces as weak and ineffectual in the face of rebel

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advances, which led Soleimani to reportedly [gripe](#), “The Syrian Army is useless! ... Give me one brigade of the Basij, and I could conquer the whole country.” Assad’s weakness prompted Soleimani to begin traveling to Damascus regularly, where he assumed personal control over assembling and commanding a mélange of pro-Assad, pro-Iranian forces in the country.

Soleimani’s first order of business was drawing from the reservoir of terrorist organizations and proxy militias he effectively controlled, ordering them into Syria to help the Assad regime stanch its losses. Lebanese Hezbollah joined the war effort virtually from the beginning at Iran’s behest. With the U.S. having withdrawn from Iraq in 2011, Soleimani also ordered Iraqi Shia militias to come to Assad’s defense. Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias served to recruit and train additional militants drawn from the local Syrian populace and from the broader Arab and Islamic world, including Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Soleimani mobilized, funded, and armed around [20-30,000 militants](#) from across the Middle East to fight on Assad’s behalf, supplementing Syria’s depleted forces. Soleimani was at the head of these forces, coordinating activities among the various Shia mercenary forces and ensuring that their activities fulfill Iranian foreign policy objectives. The various militia groups under Soleimani’s aegis tend to be modeled after Lebanese Hezbollah and undergo ideological instruction to complement their paramilitary training. Iran has sought to use religious symbolism, such as the defense of the Sayyeda Zainab shrine and martyrdom of Imam Hussein, to inculcate willingness of its fighters to be martyred for the cause. Still, the salaries and benefits Soleimani offers to his disaffected conscripts stand as the most potent recruitment tool in his arsenal.

As the Assad regime weakened, it became increasingly reliant on the local and foreign Shia militias beholden to Iran to seize and hold territory. Soleimani’s provision of proxy support was critical in stabilizing Assad’s rule, especially with his own forces plagued by defections and flagging morale. In 2013, Soleimani’s forces began to turn the tide of the civil war. After the capture by Sunni rebels of the strategic city of Qusayr, which sat on the border with Lebanon and was an important conduit for arms to Hezbollah, Soleimani led the operation to restore the city to Hezbollah control. Soleimani called on Hassan Nasrallah to [dispatch 2000 troops for the operation](#) who carried out the bulk of the fighting, going [house to house and sustaining heavy casualties](#).

By 2015, the proxy forces marshalled by Soleimani were virtually single-handedly prosecuting the war against various Sunni rebel and jihadist factions, with the fiercest fighting centered around Sunni rebel-held Aleppo, Syria’s largest city and industrial center. Soleimani had reportedly formulated a strategy to retake Aleppo in 2014, but had to shelve the operation when ISIS’s rapid gains in Mosul compelled him to divert personnel and resources back over to Iraq. In 2015, with the situation stalemated, Soleimani refocused attention on Syria and sought the backing of a major power to restore momentum to his side. In the most brazen violation of the U.N. international travel ban targeting him to date, Soleimani flew – [reportedly on a commercial flight](#) – to Moscow, where he met with Russia’s defense minister and President Vladimir Putin and convinced them to intervene more forcefully on Assad’s behalf.

With Russian aerial support, Soleimani strategized an offensive by the Syrian army, backed by Hezbollah and with IRGC and Shia militia reinforcements he called into the war, to reconquer the regions of Hama, Aleppo, and Idlib. In the final months of 2016, the world looked on in horror as Soleimani’s mercenary forces, backed by Russian air power, laid waste to Aleppo, wresting the city from rebel control. The battle for Aleppo was the decisive turning point in the Syrian civil war and swung the momentum irrevocably in favor of the Assad-Iran-Russia-Hezbollah axis’s favor. In 2018, the Assad regime further

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consolidated its control in brutal fashion, pressing an offensive in Eastern Ghouta, the last rebel-held bastion in the Damascus suburbs. The Eastern Ghouta campaign forced the remnants of rebel forces and thousands of civilians to flee to Idlib province, which is now Syria's last-remaining rebel-held enclave.

Soleimani's intervention on the Assad regime's behalf has come with a significant price tag for Assad. Whereas Syria's relations with Iran were previously cast on an equal footing, Soleimani's provision of cash and proxy fighters has fostered reliance on Iran, and Tehran is exploiting Assad's weakness to entrench itself economically, militarily, and culturally in Syria for the foreseeable future as the nation rebuilds.

Using the playbook it perfected in Lebanon, Iran is eroding the Assad regime's sovereignty and transforming Syria into a playground for it and its proxies to run amok. Iran views Syria as a forward operating base from which to threaten and occasionally attack Israel and has set about constructing military bases and weapons production and storage facilities to that end. Israel has [targeted Iranian weapons depots](#) on numerous occasions, vowing to strike against Iranian military entrenchment in Syria when it feels threatened. In 2018, Iran used Syria as a launching ground for an armed drone skirmish with Israeli forces and fired 32 missiles at Israel from Syrian territory. The Soleimani-engineered creeping Iranian takeover has given it territory from which to attack Israel, and it is Syria, not the Iranian homeland, that bears the brunt of the reprisals.

Yemen

Soleimani has expanded Iran's hegemonic ambitions to encompass Yemen as well, giving the Iranian regime added strategic depth. In a similar vein to Iran's efforts to establish forward operating bases in Syria and Lebanon from which to encircle, threaten, and provoke Israel, Yemen offers Iran a staging ground to attack another key U.S. ally and Iranian adversary, Saudi Arabia.

Further, Yemen plays into Iran's strategy of controlling key Arab waterways. Control of Yemen and its strategic ports affords control of vital commercial and energy shipping lanes which connect the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East to Europe. Control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait poses a [strategic nuisance for Israel](#), enabling Iran to cut off its naval trade routes to Asia and opening up a new conduit for Iran to smuggle weapons to Hamas and other terrorist proxies. Iran has thus sought to gain a foothold in Yemen which would allow it, despite the weakness of its naval forces relative to others in the region, to sabotage international commerce and energy markets when its interests are threatened.

Beginning in 2004, Shia Houthi rebels waged a low-level insurgency against the Sunni-dominated, internationally recognized Yemeni central government, a key U.S. counterterrorism ally. Iran and Hezbollah offered limited assistance to the Houthis, whose ideology emulated Khomeinism, since at least 2009 in the form of arms and training, with the Quds Force organizing crude Iranian small-arms shipments that were occasionally intercepted by [Yemeni and U.S. naval patrols](#). The Quds Force had also provided guidance to the Houthis to set up an affiliated political party, Ansar Allah, mimicking the Hezbollah model of fusing militant and political power. With the bulk of Soleimani's attention devoted to the Shia crescent project, Yemen was a secondary security interest for Iran; primarily a way to poke at and cause headaches for Saudi Arabia.

This all changed in September 2014, when the Houthis, who had allied with Yemen's former president

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Ali Abdullah Saleh, leveraging his ties to loyalists throughout the government and armed forces, exploited the weakness of Yemen's central government and seized the capital of Sana'a – including the strategically important Red Sea port of Hudaydah – [without firing a shot](#). Within four months, the Houthis had toppled the central government.

Soleimani, who was tied up in Baghdad at the time directing Iraqi militia operations against ISIS, remarked that the fall of Sana'a represented a [“golden opportunity”](#) for Iran. An allied Shia force now controlled the capital of a neighboring country to Saudi Arabia, Iran's primary Middle Eastern geostrategic adversary. In conjunction with Hezbollah, the Quds Force set about remaking the Houthis in Hezbollah's image, building up their military capabilities and dispatching senior Quds Force advisors to train them. The Quds Force stepped up illicit arms exports of increasingly sophisticated weaponry, including Sayyad 2C surface-to-air missile, guided anti-ship missiles, kamikaze aerial drones, landmines, Kalashnikov variant rifles, RPG-7 and RPG-7v rocket-propelled grenade launchers, machine guns, AK-47 assault rifles, precision rifles, and anti-tank missiles. The Quds Force's support has helped the Houthis overcome some core deficiencies, including [strategic planning, political mobilization, and operating advanced weaponry](#).

In addition to bolstering the Houthi forces, the Quds Force has also reportedly mobilized elements of its foreign legion of proxy militias, injecting Shia mercenary forces into the Yemen conflict, mirroring its strategy in Syria. According to a [Reuters](#) report, “Iranian and regional sources said Tehran was providing Afghan and Shi'ite Arab specialists to train Houthi units and act as logistical advisers. These included Afghans who had fought in Syria under Qods Force commanders.”

Iran's aid to its Houthi proxies has provided a low-risk, cost-effective avenue to becoming the dominant political and military influence in Yemen. Iran has also managed to weaken its geopolitical adversaries by goading an Arab coalition spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates into the conflict in 2015, which has devolved into a costly war of attrition for their side.

In March 2017, Soleimani reportedly convened a meeting of senior IRGC military officials to explore ways to further [“empower”](#) the Houthis. An official at the meeting noted that “Yemen is where the real proxy war is going on and winning the battle in Yemen will help define the balance of power in the Middle East.” Since that time, Iran has introduced increasingly complex weaponry into the Yemeni theater, and the Houthis have stepped up their aggression in accordance with Iranian foreign policy objectives. The Houthis have stepped up [rocket and drone attacks](#) on the Saudi homeland, targeting vital infrastructure including the king's official residence, military bases and encampments, oil refineries, the Riyadh international airport, and shopping malls. According to the Congressional Research Service, the Houthis have also periodically targeted [commercial and military vessels](#) transiting and patrolling the Red Sea using naval mines, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, anti-ship missiles, and waterborne improvised explosive devices (WBIEDs).

Conclusion

Qassem Soleimani's asymmetric warfare strategy helped Iran establish an unbroken arc of influence linking Tehran to the Mediterranean via Syria and Iraq and provided an additional strategic outpost in Yemen. Through the territory, proxy militias and terrorist organizations, and weaponry at its disposal, Iran is able to threaten American, Israeli, and Gulf Arab interests around the Middle East. A precarious balance of terror has taken hold, as Iran's proxies—which Soleimani played the dominant role in

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standing up—frequent provocations risk sparking a wider conflagration.

Soleimani's ability to plunge the Middle East into chaos came into full display during the last months of his life. In May 2018, the Trump administration withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA and subsequently imposed a maximum pressure campaign on Iran, ratcheting up sanctions and reducing Iran's ability to generate revenues by curtailing its ability to export oil. The maximum pressure campaign is designed to compel Iran to return to the negotiating table for a new agreement that addresses the JCPOA's deficiencies and Iran's ballistic missiles and malign regional expansionism. Iran's hardline leadership has taken the position that it will not return to negotiations as a result of U.S.-imposed pressures. In an April 2019 speech, Soleimani backed this view, [stating](#), "The enemy wants to make us sit to the negotiating table by economic pressures and such a negotiation is an instance of surrendering, but our people are vigilant and wise and believe that negotiation with the enemy under the present circumstances means complete surrendering and we will definitely not accept this humiliation." He went on to say that Iran would seek to impose "costs" on the U.S. in response to its attempts to pressure Iran.

After the U.S. [designated](#) Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and [declined to reissue waivers](#) allowing eight select countries to continue importing Iranian oil in April 2019, Iran faced cascading economic pressures and saw no hope for the resumption of European trade and investment on the horizon. The situation placed Iran at a crossroads; it could either swallow its pride and return to the negotiating table having ceded its leverage in order to sue for sanctions relief, or it could pursue a path of stepped up aggression in the hopes that imposing costs on the U.S. and its allies would force the U.S. into negotiations on Iran's terms. Iran has chosen the latter path.

With the economic vise tightening, Soleimani and his proxies escalated their aggression against U.S. allies and interests into overdrive. According to intelligence reports, Soleimani met with Iraqi Shia militia leaders and told them to prepare for a [proxy war](#) against the U.S. in late April 2019. The U.S. responded by dispatching an aircraft carrier and bomber task force to the Persian Gulf to send the message to Iran that attacks on U.S. personnel would lead to reprisals against Iranian interests. On May 19, Iranian proxies in Iraq launched a [rocket](#) that landed inside Iraq's fortified Green Zone, near the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. Aside from this provocation, Soleimani urged restraint from the Iraqi militias, as he did not desire a full-scale conflict that would threaten Iran's hard-fought military entrenchment in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Nevertheless, Soleimani stepped up provocations designed to extract costs, but not severe enough to invite devastating reprisals. During the intervening months, the Houthis have launched drone attacks and missiles targeting Saudi airports, airbases, and energy infrastructure, and have used a surface-to-air missile with direct Iranian assistance to down a U.S. drone over Yemen. Iran, meanwhile, was allegedly behind the sabotage of a Japanese oil tanker and a Taiwanese and Norwegian oil vessel in the Gulf of Oman. On June 20th, Iran shot down a U.S. surveillance drone, allegedly over international waters. The Trump administration came close to launching a reprisal after the incident, but ultimately refrained due to concerns over civilian deaths.

The elevation of hostilities mirrored Soleimani's playbook from 2011-2013, the last time Iran faced significant economic pressure over its nuclear program. At the height of the international sanctions regime and American and Israeli attempts to sabotage Iran's nuclear program, there was an uptick in

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Iran-backed terror plots targeting primarily American and Israeli interests. Most notably, Soleimani and the Quds Force were implicated by U.S. intelligence in the 2011 plot to assassinate Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the U.S. on American soil in Washington, DC. Additionally, Iran was involved in terror plots targeting U.S. and Israeli interests in Bulgaria, Cyprus, India, Azerbaijan, Thailand, and Kenya.

Domestic Significance

Major General Qassem Soleimani's presence was most felt outside Iran as a destabilizing force in the Middle East due to his efforts to bolster Iran's military and diplomatic influence through a hybrid strategy of backing militia warfare and terrorism fused with political influence peddling. For the bulk of his two-decade tenure at the helm of the Quds Force, Soleimani exhibited a predilection for operating behind the scenes, earning him a reputation as the "[Shadow Commander](#)" and drawing comparisons by Western military officials and analysts to elusive fictional spymasters such as [Keyzer Soze and Karla](#). Since spearheading Iran's intervention in Syria, Soleimani's public profile grew and he took on additional significance within Iran, as the regime – suffering a crisis of legitimacy due to its repression, corruption, and mismanagement – sought to cultivate a mythology around Soleimani and coopt him as a unifying symbol.

Soleimani's close personal relationship with the supreme leader, dating back to the Iran-Iraq War, was the key to Quds Force commander's power. Soleimani had a close ideological affinity with Ayatollah Khamenei and other conservatives who comprise the bulk of Iran's military and clerical elite, as well as the unelected political elite. Khamenei had complete trust in Soleimani, giving him essentially a free hand to pursue their shared foreign policy objectives. In the regime's propagandistic telling, Soleimani's career was marked by resounding successes including rescuing Syria's Assad regime, vanquishing ISIS, confronting Israel in conjunction with Hezbollah, and establishing Iranian dominion over Iraq and Yemen.

Unlike other leaders in the IRGC, who have enriched themselves through the Guards' pervasive role in Iranian industry, Soleimani appeared to be unencumbered by venality. He was nevertheless reportedly "[well taken care](#)" of financially by Khamenei. Soleimani's persona of incorruptibility was one of his strongest assets that the regime, bedeviled by its own endemic corruption, has sought to capitalize on.

As Soleimani's star power grew to the level of a full-on cult of personality, he managed to seemingly float above the fractious disputes and power struggles among Iran's clerical, military, and unelected political elite.

Soleimani carefully crafted his image as a simple warrior dedicated to upholding Iran's Islamic Revolution. The majority of his public appearances came at events to commemorate fallen soldiers and militia members, and martyrdom – which he viewed as the highest ideal – was a pervasive theme of his public pronouncements. This fixation on martyrdom dated back to the Iran-Iraq War and the personal impact the heavy casualties suffered by his men took on him. In March 2019, Supreme Leader Khamenei awarded Iran's highest military order, the Order of Zulfagar, to Soleimani, making him the first Iranian official to receive the commendation since the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded in 1979. In presenting the award, Khamenei [expressed](#) his wish that Soleimani would "make his end marked by martyrdom. Of course, not so soon. ... The Islamic Republic will be needing his services for many years to come, but I hope that his services will culminate with martyrdom, Allah-willing."

After years spent operating in the shadows, Soleimani suddenly became a ubiquitous presence in Iranian media in 2014. Despite being subject to a U.N. imposed travel ban, Iran began releasing a steady barrage

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of photos of Soleimani conducting battlefield operations and posing with proxy militia forces in Iraq and Syria. The images, such as Soleimani touring Aleppo following its reconquest by Iran-backed forces sans representatives of the Assad regime, were seemingly curated to show Westerners and Iranians that Iran's influence in the region was on the ascendancy. Further, they highlighted Soleimani as a military leader who, despite his rank, still relished being in the thick of combat zones alongside the troops he commands. He has also been the subject of documentaries, an animated film about his life, and music videos.

Soleimani's carefully crafted media image served the regime by appealing to the populace's nationalistic impulses. While many Iranians have become disaffected with their rulers due to the mismanagement and repression of the Islamic Revolutionary regime, there is still a strong undercurrent of nationalistic pride that made Soleimani as close to a unifying figure as existed in the Iranian system. According to the scant reliable public opinion polling that exists in Iran, [Soleimani had the highest favorability ratings](#) among other prominent political figures including President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif by a wide margin.

For his part, in his few forays into domestic affairs, Soleimani had been willing to do the regime's bidding, acting to further the objectives of hard-liners and stifle dissent and efforts at liberalization. In 1999, he was a signatory to a [letter](#) circulated by prominent Guardsmen imploring reformist President Mohammad Khatami to crack down on burgeoning student protests, warning that they would take matters into their own hands if need be. He similarly stood up for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary system in 2009, accusing the Green Movement that arose in response to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's highly irregular reelection of [sedition](#).

In the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Soleimani continued to exhibit a Khamenei-like distrust of negotiating with the United States, wary that more pragmatic elements within Iran's governing hierarchy would use the JCPOA as a means to inhibit Iran's terror proxy playbook in the region. For example, Soleimani [said](#) in March 2019, "[f]rom the very beginning the enemy saw JCPOA as a three-pronged objective, not just one, and the other two were more important than the first." He [described](#) "enemies" of the Islamic Republic, as those who seek to renegotiate the existing JCPOA.

Conclusion

Soleimani's navigation of Iran's domestic politics revealed that his savviness as a strategist extended beyond the battlefield. Through his strong alliance with Supreme Leader Khamenei, he was given space to grow his power and popularity unchecked, with the regime sanctioning and facilitating the growth of a cult of personality around him. Unlike other political operators who fell out of favor with the regime when their star shone too bright or they evinced an independent streak, Soleimani achieved longevity by aligning his rise with the best interests of the regime.

Death and Legacy

Final Months

Soleimani's heavy-handed approach to bolstering Iran's influence in Iraq ultimately catalyzed a chain of events that led the Trump administration to decide to assassinate him on January 3, 2020 in a drone strike outside Baghdad's international airport. Beginning in October 2019, an Iraqi protest movement emerged whose grievances largely centered on Iran's continued meddling in the country's political affairs and the unchecked influence of Iran-backed militias. Notably, the protesters were predominantly Shi'a, showing that Soleimani's efforts in Iran had actually alienated the core constituency that Iran purports to defend in order to justify its meddling in Iraq.

While Soleimani had cultivated relationships with the leaders of Iran's political, ethnic, and sectarian factions and was adept at strong-arming them into doing Iran's bidding, Iraqis themselves rejected Soleimani's explicit sectarian approach in favor of Iraqi nationalism and more inclusive politics. The failure of Iran's revolutionary ideology to take root in Iraq points to a wider failing of the Islamic Republic: It is bad at governance and providing for the welfare of its constituencies and therefore is increasingly reliant on repression for retaining an iron grip on power, whether within Iran or in the surrounding countries where Soleimani helped carve out spheres of influence.

The outbreak of the protests in October triggered panic in Tehran, which quickly [dispatched](#) Soleimani to Baghdad to advise Iraqi politicians and security officials on his best practices for quelling unrest. Soleimani reportedly ominously warned, "We in Iran know how to deal with protests. This happened in Iran and we got it under control." Soleimani set about orchestrating the Iraqi Security Forces and PMF's brutal suppression of the protests, demonstrating that Iran was truly calling the shots in Baghdad.

In parallel with Soleimani's efforts to quell the nascent Iraqi protest movement, Iran-backed militias under his control undertook a [concerted campaign](#) of rocket attacks targeting U.S. military targets in the country. With Iran backed into a corner due to economic sanctions and facing mounting protests domestically, in Iraq, and Lebanon, it returned to a familiar playbook of external aggression to shift focus from its own shortcomings. According to a U.S. military official, forensic analysis of the rockets and launchers used during the spate of at least ten attacks [indicated the involvement of Shia militias](#), most notably Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah. The attacks placed the U.S. on a collision course with the Iran-backed militias and Soleimani himself.

The situation reached a boil in late December 2019 and early January, 2020. On December 27, 2019, more than 30 missiles were fired at an Iraqi military base near Kirkuk, killing a U.S. contractor and wounding four U.S. troops as well as two members of the Iraqi security forces. The U.S. [accused](#) KH of being responsible for the attack, and retaliated by launching strikes against 5 KH targets in Iraq and Syria including weapons depots and command and control centers. The U.S. strikes reportedly killed at least 25 KH militants.

On December 31, 2019, protesters, including members and supporters of KH, [attempted to storm the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad](#). Demonstrators threw stones and torched a security post, prompting embassy guards to respond with stun grenades and tear gas. The militia supporters withdrew from the embassy

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after prominent commanders reportedly spoke to them. On January 1, 2020, following orders from Mohammed Mohyee, KH's political spokesman, thousands of protestors dispersed from the American Embassy in Baghdad.

The KH rocket attack that killed a U.S. contractor and subsequent embassy attack proved to be a fatal miscalculation by Soleimani, who had progressively pushed the envelope without engendering significant U.S. reprisals to that point. In the early morning hours of January 3, 2020 President Trump greenlit a drone strike targeting Soleimani's convoy shortly after his arrival in Baghdad.

Postmortem

Soleimani's death at the hands of a U.S. drone strike came just weeks after Iran quelled massive demonstrations against the regime, killing an estimated [1500 citizens](#) in the process. Despite his alignment with the regime, Iranians thronged the streets in cities around the country to honor Soleimani including in underserved regions such as Ahvaz, which faces an Arab separatist movement. While it is difficult to gauge the true sentiment of the populace in a repressive, authoritarian society such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, Soleimani did seem to be regarded as a nationalistic defender of Iran's citizenry by a segment of Iran's population.

The Iranian regime has sought to use Soleimani's death to distract from its own shortcomings, and to galvanize the public around anti-U.S. sentiment. Iranian officials, including the Supreme Leader, have frequently pointed to Soleimani's assassination as evidence of the U.S.'s perfidy and untrustworthiness. The regime frequently [refers to Soleimani](#) as a "great martyr" and has called his assassination "the gravest crime committed by the Americans against Iran after the Revolution." The regime has sought to turn to Soleimani into an enduring symbol of resistance to the U.S. In August 2020, as the U.S. tried to galvanize support for extending the arms embargo against Iran contained in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, Iran [unveiled](#) a new ballistic missile named the "Martyr Hajj Qassem" with a range of 1400 km.

His killing has hardened resolve among Iran's leadership against resuming negotiations with the U.S. on its nuclear program and malign regional activities. In December 2020 remarks ahead of planned commemorations of the first anniversary of Soleimani's death, Supreme Leader Khamenei [warned](#) that Iran's enmity toward the U.S. will continue despite America's transition to the Biden Administration. He clarified that his preferred path for Iran to gain sanctions relief is not through a negotiated process, but by forcing the U.S. and Europe's hand by continuing to advance its nuclear program and destabilizing regional pursuits.

Soleimani's killing sparked fears of a massive retaliation which could spiral to a full-blown conflict between the U.S. and Iran with no offramp of diplomacy or negotiations in sight. In the immediate aftermath of Soleimani's killing, Iran's leadership pledged the U.S. would face "[harsh retaliation](#)." Iran followed up on this threat by firing a [salvo of over a dozen ballistic missiles](#) at two Iraqi airbases housing U.S. troops in the early morning hours of January 8, 2020, causing over 100 soldiers to suffer [traumatic brain injuries](#). Supreme Leader Khamenei intoned that while the ballistic missile attack represented a "[slap on the face](#)" for the U.S., "military action like this (ballistic missile) attack is not sufficient," indicating that Iran remained determined to carry out a decisive retaliation for Soleimani's killing targeting U.S. interests at a time of its choosing.

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In the months following, however, Iran refrained from major attacks against the U.S. Iran-backed militias carried out sporadic rocket attacks against U.S. troops and interests in Iraq throughout 2020 and in September 2020, U.S. intelligence officials revealed a [plot](#) to assassinate the American ambassador to South Africa, but caution has thus far prevailed. Still, in December 2020, Khamenei [promised](#) “yet more severe slaps to come” with the ultimate goal of avenging Soleimani by completing his project of expelling the U.S. from the region.

A confluence of factors explain Iran’s blustery, yet cautious approach. Facing twin economic and public health crises due to sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic, the regime can ill afford a regime-destabilizing response to an act of retaliation if it pushes the envelope too far. More significantly, however, Soleimani’s death has caused material setbacks to Iran’s project of regional dominance. Iran feels it needs to regain its footing in the region before it can manage a confrontation with the U.S.

Following Soleimani’s death, Khamenei appointed his principal deputy, Brigadier General [Esmail Qaani](#) as his successor as Quds Force commander. Under their division of leadership, Qaani was primarily responsible for the Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia portfolios, relative backwaters in terms of Iran’s regional strategy. Replacing Soleimani has been a monumental, uphill undertaking for Qaani. Soleimani was a charismatic figure who had Khamenei’s full trust, which ensured he was universally feared if not respected. Soleimani operated with an unprecedented degree of independence, forging relationships across the region with political and militia leaders in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon that could not easily be replicated.

As such, Hezbollah has had to fill the void created by Soleimani’s death, taking over coordination of militia operations in Syria and Iraq. In April 2020, the U.S. State Department [announced](#) a \$10 million reward for information on Hezbollah operative Sheikh Mohammad al-Kawtharani, alleging he had “taken over some of the political coordination of Iran-aligned paramilitary groups” that had previously been Soleimani’s purview. Tehran’s command and control of the various militia groups it backs has been degraded as a result. Its ability to dictate outcomes in its neighbor’s political affairs has been set back as well.

These trends have been evident in Iraq, which has served as the primary flash-point for confrontation between Iran and the U.S. in recent years. In late March 2020, Qaani made his first [visit](#) to Baghdad seeking to establish continuity with his predecessor and reassert the Quds Force’s influence. His visit was widely seen as a failure. He sought to unite Iraqi militia and political factions in supporting an anti-American, pro-Iranian prime minister, but Iraq ultimately selected former intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who is viewed as supportive of U.S. interests. Qaani was snubbed on his visit by Moqtada al-Sadr, who refused to meet with him. Such a snub would have been unheard of for Soleimani, and demonstrated that Tehran no longer commanded the fear and respect it previously engendered.

In the final months of the Trump administration, Iran has sought to restrain the Iraqi militias it backs from attacking the U.S., seeking to wait out the clock and avoid any escalations. In November 2020, Qaani [reportedly](#) visited Beirut to meet with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to secure his assistance in reining in Iran-backed Iraqi militias. Qaani then went to Baghdad to meet the Prime Minister and several militia leaders to urge restraint. While some militias have followed Tehran’s orders, most notably Kataib Hezbollah, others have openly defied Tehran. Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali gave a TV interview after Qaani’s visit in which he vowed to continue confronting the U.S., declaring, “The Americans occupy our country, not yours. We will not listen to you anymore because our motives are

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100 percent nationalist. The truce with the Americans has ended due to its conditions not being met.”

Following Qaani’s visit to Baghdad in November 2020, Iraqi militias carried out [at least three attacks on U.S. interests](#). On November 17, militants targeted the U.S. embassy with a volley of rockets. On December 10, two convoys carrying logistical equipment to the U.S.-led coalition were attacked by roadside bombs. On December 20, the embassy was targeted with another salvo of eight rockets. The repeat violations of the tenuous cease-fire have been condemned by Kataib Hezbollah and other factions close to Iran, but show that the Iran-backed militias remain divided in their approach to confronting the U.S. and that under Qaani, the Quds Force can no longer enforce discipline among their ranks. With Soleimani’s departure from the scene, the networks of militias and terrorist organizations that he stood up, trained, and armed pose an enduring threat that will keep the region on the precipice of conflict for the foreseeable future.

Reflections on the Two-Year Anniversary of Soleimani’s Assassination

Two years after Qassem Soleimani’s departure from the scene on January 3, 2020, it is clear that the Trump administration’s decision to assassinate him via a drone strike has stymied Iran’s regional management. No singular figure could replicate Soleimani’s blend of charisma and intimidation, as well as his stature as a trusted representative of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, which enabled him to forge relationships and enforce discipline among the leaders of the web of Iran-backed militias and terrorist groups comprising the “axis of resistance.”

[According](#) to a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency assessment from April 2021, Soleimani’s death “degraded Iran’s relations with its array of partners and proxies in the region because he was the primary interlocutor with many regional groups.” It also predicted that [Esmail Qaani](#) “is more likely than Soleimani to delegate responsibilities, including to his deputy Mohammad Hejazi.” Numerous reports have circulated in 2021 about Qaani’s lack of skill—compared with Soleimani—in managing Iran’s Axis of Resistance and increasingly aggressive and defiant militia off-shoots, particularly after the drone attack on the home of Iraq’s prime minister in November 2021. However, that does not necessarily mean Tehran has lost influence. For example, in the attack on the home of Iraq’s prime minister, Reuters [reported](#) that “Tehran had knowledge about the attack before it was carried out, but that Iranian authorities had not ordered it.”

Qaani also no longer has Hejazi as a deputy, who died under somewhat [questionable](#) circumstances in April 2021. The Quds Force thus lost another senior officer—particularly someone with Hejazi’s seniority as he was a former deputy commander-in-chief of the IRGC in its entirety. Qaani now has to rely on a less seasoned deputy, [Mohammad Reza Fallahzadeh](#).

But current U.S. strategy may embolden Iran. The U.S. has failed to pursue a coherent strategy of its own to contain Iran’s malign regional meddling, responding instead in a piecemeal fashion to individual provocations by Iran and its allies, which have stepped up destabilizing drone and rocket attacks in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. With the U.S. intent on restoring the 2015 nuclear deal, which would rescue the Iranian regime from an economic precipice, and militarily disengaging from the region, the Biden administration risks providing Iran with an unintentional lifeline in its efforts to fulfill Soleimani’s lifelong ambitions of spreading Iran’s revolutionary ideology and supplanting U.S. influence from the Middle East.

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Iran and the region are currently at a crossroads, and it remains to be seen which of two competing visions will win out. The first vision is that of moderation, peace and stability represented by the Abraham Accords, the landmark deals to normalize relations between Israel and several major Arab nations. The other is the extremist vision of “resistance” to Western influence, economic integration and political liberalization pursued by Iran and its terrorist and militia partners that Qassem Soleimani embodied like no other figure.

The impetus for the Abraham Accords was a shared recognition that the greatest impediment to regional security comes from Iran, whose regional destabilization and overt sectarianism made it politically palatable for Arab leaders to codify the quiet cooperation with Israel that has been ongoing for several years. A secondary factor behind the Abraham Accords was a recognition of the U.S. desire to play a more hands-off role in the region, which led the Arab states and Israel to take a more proactive role in shouldering the burden for their collective defense.

The Abraham Accords have paid dividends for its signatories in terms of arms sales from the U.S., economic benefits and innovation, cultural and touristic exchanges, and military and intelligence cooperation. While Arab-Israeli unity poses a setback for Iran’s nuclear and regional ambitions in immediate terms, the most important and possibly overlooked facet is that normalization of Israel’s role in the region provides a sustainable blueprint for peace, coexistence, and improved standards of living that are truly the antidote for the Iranian regime’s “resistance” vision, which can only thrive in conditions of hopelessness and immiseration.

The regional dialogues ongoing between Saudi Arabia and Iran—and sponsored by Iraq—show little chance of succeeding, as Iran is demanding gestures, like the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Riyadh, in exchange for no concessions of its own. The United Arab Emirates has also been increasingly engaged in de-escalation with Iran since 2019—with the U.S. failure to respond to Iranian attacks on Saudi energy infrastructure—but the posture of the Quds Force remains unchanged in the region, and earlier in 2021 reports emerged of Iranian forces casing Emirati embassies in Africa for targets to attack. While Washington has applauded this dialogue under the cover of regional integration, Iran’s desire to dominate the region remains to this day. Endless diplomacy with Tehran—which results in no movement on the ground—without more robust U.S. support for its allies and partners in the Middle East plays into Iran’s hands as it can use the talks to buy time and space for the IRGC in the region. Sanctions relief via U.S. reentry to the Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) from 2015 would provide the regime a windfall to continue the very malign activities U.S. allies and partners are concerned about and undermine their leverage in negotiations with the Islamic Republic.

Iran has also been helped on its course by the changing U.S. posture toward the region. The haphazard withdrawal from Afghanistan and subsequent rapid reconquest by the Taliban have called into question America’s commitment to its allies and upholding the mantle of global leadership.

America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan was an important objective of Iranian foreign policy, which Soleimani pursued by playing a double game of backing all sides, including providing arms and training to Iran’s former foe, the Taliban. The U.S. withdrawal, helped along by Tehran’s minor supporting role in backing the Taliban, marked a major victory for Iran’s low-investment proxy warfare strategy that was Soleimani’s hallmark. The marriage of convenience between Tehran and the Taliban to repel the U.S. has won Iran some influence with the group that it hopes will endure, although tensions are likely to resurface over concerns over drug trafficking, terrorism, and refugees spilling over into Iran from

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Afghanistan.

Against the backdrop of U.S. disengagement from the region, Iran's hardline leadership has been emboldened and gone on the offensive, pushing the envelope on the nuclear and regional fronts. Iran has pursued a strategy of phased, escalatory violations of the JCPOA in order to gain leverage ahead of the resumption of negotiations with the P5+1, shrinking the amount of time needed to amass enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon from 12 months down to one or two. Since negotiations resumed in late November 2021, Iran has sidelined the U.S. negotiating team, hewed to maximalist demands, and refused to countenance negotiating any issues outside the scope of the original nuclear deal, milking the process for additional time to advance its illicit nuclear program.

The impunity with which Iran has violated the JCPOA and the abandonment of Afghanistan has emboldened Tehran in the region as well. Seeking to bleed America and sap it of its will, Iran and its proxies have stepped up drone and missile attacks targeting U.S. interests, personnel and allies in the region from Iraq and Syria to Yemen. Seeking to keep prospects for a revived JCPOA intact and intent on changing from a combat posture to a training and advisory mission in Iraq, the U.S. has consistently failed to meaningfully push back against Tehran's provocations, beyond two airstrikes during the Biden presidency in 2021.

While these developments paint a picture of an ascendant Iran, the regime faces problems on other fronts. Since Soleimani's death, Iran's leadership has had to operate in permanent crisis mode, careening from setback to setback as a result of its ineptitude and endemic corruption. Iran faces simultaneous economic, public health, environmental, and demographic crises, all of which it has responded to with further repression. Despite its failures to materially improve the lives of its citizens, Iran's revolutionary regime's survival through brutality seems assured.

Domestically, Iranians have largely checked out of politics, dissatisfied by the failures of ostensibly pragmatic leaders to enact needed reforms. Iran's new president, Ebrahim Raisi, and his fellow hardliners in the clergy, political echelon, and IRGC now effectively control all the major power centers in Iran. They are poised to maintain their control well after Khamenei and his cohort, who have dominated the Iranian political scene since the Islamic Revolution, exit the picture, ensuring that the anti-Americanism and harsh Islamic governance that are the hallmarks of the Iranian regime will outlive the first generation of revolutionaries.

Iran has proven adept at sowing terror and chaos, but less so at governing and currying influence with populations in the Middle East subject to its destabilizing meddling. This was evidenced by the October 2021 elections in Iraq, when the Fatah coalition made up of the political wings of Iran-backed militias lost seats while the Sadrist bloc, which stressed independence from Tehran and the West, came out on top.

The election loss underscored the Iraqi pushback to Iran's quest for hegemony. Any U.S. drawdown from Iraq risks the U.S. snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, as Iran will have a freer hand to reassert its primacy in Iraq, likely through increased repression and heavy handedness on the part of its militia allies that it retains full control over.

If the U.S. is to prevent Iran, whose back is against the wall, from retaking the offensive and realizing Soleimani's lifelong ambitions of spreading Iran's revolutionary ideology and evicting the U.S. from the

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region, it must recommit to a comprehensive strategy designed to contain Iran's malign nuclear and regional ambitions. This is why leaving the Middle East to pivot to Asia is such a shortsighted strategy. Working in concert with our allies, who have themselves opted to put aside fundamental differences to counter Iran, the U.S. must make clear that Iran will pay a price for its regional destabilization, and that it will not receive a pass for its meddling in order to keep nuclear diplomacy alive. Doing so will ensure that the path of the Abraham Accords, characterized by stability and prosperity will prevail over Soleimani's dark vision predicated on "resistance."

Qassem Soleimani: In His Own Words

- Anti-US

"The enemies seek to hit a blow and damage us and our country's security through pressures and economic sanctions, and they use all their capacities to this end. But today, enemy's costs go higher to the very same degree that it poses threats."

-April 29, 2018, [addressing a forum of Law Enforcement Police commanders and officials in Tehran](#).
Soleimani is warning the U.S. that Iran will impose "costs" on the U.S. in response to its maximum pressure campaign.

"The enemy wants to make us sit to the negotiating table by economic pressures and such a negotiation is an instance of surrendering, but our people are vigilant and wise and believe that negotiation with the enemy under the present circumstances means complete surrendering and we will definitely not accept this humiliation."

- April 29, 2018, [addressing a forum of Law Enforcement Police commanders and officials in Tehran](#).

"Come! We are waiting. I can stop you. Quds Force can stop you. You start this war, but we will finish it."

-November 3, 2018, [Instagram post responding to a Game of Thrones-inspired meme tweeted by President Trump warning Iran "Sanctions are Coming."](#)

"Gambler Trump! I alone will stand against you. We, the Iranian nation, have gone through tough events. You (may) begin a war, but it is us who will end it. Go ask your predecessors (about it). So stop threatening ... us. We are ready to stand against you."

-July 26, 2018 [in a speech in the Iranian city of Hamedan](#)

"You (Trump) threaten us with paying a price like few countries have ever paid. Trump, this is the language of night clubs and gambling halls."

- July 26, 2018 [in a speech in the Iranian city of Hamedan](#)

"You arrogantly attacked Iraq with 160,000 troops and multiple times [military equipment] compared to what you used in Afghanistan, but what happened? Ask your then commander who was the person that he sent to me and asked 'Is it possible for you to give us time [and] use your influence so that our soldiers would not be attacked by the Iraqi fighters in these few months until we exit this country?' Have you forgotten that you provided adult diapers for your soldiers in tanks? Despite that you are currently threatening the great country of Iran? With what background do you threaten [us]?"

-July 26, 2018 [in a speech in the Iranian city of Hamedan](#)

"You know that this war will destroy all that you possess. You will start this war but we will be the ones to impose its end. Therefore you have to be careful about insulting the Iranian people and the president of our Republic."

-July 26, 2018 [in a speech in the Iranian city of Hamedan](#)

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"All these crimes have been designed and implemented by US leaders and organizations, according to the acknowledgement of the highest-ranking US official who is currently president of the United States; moreover, this scheme is still being modified and implemented by current American leaders."

-November 21, 2017 [in a letter to Supreme Leader Khamenei](#), alleging that the U.S. is behind the creation of ISIS and responsible for its conduct

"Obama has not done a damn thing so far to confront Daesh: doesn't that show that there is no will in America to confront it?"

-May 25, 2015 [in a speech to former and current IRGC soldiers in the Iranian city of Kerman](#)

- Anti-Israel

"The Islamic Republic [Iran] is the only Islamic-based system governed by Islam, and the Zionists don't dare attack us because of Hezbollah and Hamas's strong base in the region."

-February 22, 2019 [speaking after Friday prayers](#)

(Appropriate revenge for the assassination of Hezbollah's former military chief Imad Mughniyeh is) "not launching one missile or killing one person, but the dismantling and uprooting of the baby-killing Zionist regime."

-February 15, 2018 [at a ceremony marking the 10-year anniversary of former Hezbollah military chief Imad Mughniyeh's assassination](#)

"Martyrdom for Palestine is the wish of any honorable Muslim."

-July 30, 2014 [in a letter condemning Israel's conduct in the summer 2014 conflict with Gaza](#)

"We will persist with victory until the land, the sky and the sea turn into hell for Zionists. The murderers and the mercenaries must know that we will not stop defending the resistance, not even for a moment."

-July 30, 2014 [in a letter condemning Israel's conduct in the summer 2014 conflict with Gaza](#)

"Damn those who have done you injustice and continue to do so. Damn any oppressor who has supported and continues to support this criminal regime (Israel), especially America, which leads this tyranny."

-July 30, 2014 [in a letter condemning Israel's conduct in the summer 2014 conflict with Gaza](#)

- Anti-Arab

"Wahhabism has its roots in Judaism and they are called ISIS, which destroyed two Muslim countries in the region and destroyed 3,000 mosques and killed hundreds of thousands."

- February 22, 2019 [speaking after Friday prayers](#)

Saudi Arabia has foreign currency reserves to the tune of \$1,000 billion. But today, there is a powerful movement that is based on Islam, which has confronted this financial power—this bank full of money—and has defeated it. They have operated for four years and have spent billions of dollars against the

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poor and oppressed [Houthi] Ansar Allah organization, but they are paralyzed, despite all their financial coalitions.

-February 22, 2019 [speaking after Friday prayers](#)

“The influence of Saudi money has infiltrated Pakistan. Along with behind-the-scenes involvement of the Zionist regime and Wahhabism, their goal is to shatter Pakistan to smithereens. The Pakistani army must not let this happen.”

- February 22, 2019 [speaking after Friday prayers](#)

- Pro-Islamic Revolution

“On the basis of the Islam created by Imam [Khomeini] through his revolution, a blessed and valuable creature was born in Lebanon: Hezbollah.

-February 22, 2019 [speaking after Friday prayers](#)

- Iranian military capabilities

“You (the U.S.) know our power in the region and our capabilities in asymmetric war. We will act and we will work...We are near you, where you can't even imagine.”

-July 26, 2018 [in a speech in the Iranian city of Hamedan](#)

“The Syrian Army is useless! ... Give me one brigade of the Basij, and I could conquer the whole country.”

-2012, [attributed to Soleimani by an Iraqi politician](#)

“Dear General Petraeus, you should know that I, Qassem Suleimani, control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan. And indeed, the ambassador in Baghdad is a Quds Force member. The individual who's going to replace him is a Quds Force member.”

-2008, [text message](#) reportedly sent by Soleimani to then-Iraqi President Jalal Talabani conveying a message to U.S. General David Petraeus

- Pro-Iranian meddling and terrorism

“We in Iran know how to deal with protests. This happened in Iran and we got it under control.”

-October 2019, [speaking at a secret gathering of Iraqi officials](#). Soleimani was dispatched to Iraq to orchestrate the suppression of a protest movement opposed to Iranian meddling.

“If the world of Islam feels that it possesses a powerful deterrence today, it is due to the existence of two important, strong and Islamic-based forces created in Lebanon and in Palestine: Hezbollah and Islamic movements like Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and the rest of the Palestinian Islamic groups.”

- February 22, 2019 [speaking after Friday prayers](#)

“I should kiss the hand of the great sayyid Hassan Nasrallah.”

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-July 10, 2017 [in a speech commemorating a Quds Force officer killed in Iraq](#).

“We no longer see the effects of the Baath party in the Iraqi army, and this army is moving toward a national Islamic-national army and a *hezbollahi* army.”

-July 10, 2017 [in a speech commemorating a Quds Force officer killed in Iraq](#). This statement is an exaggerated boast about increased Iranian influence within the Iraqi armed forces.