

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

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Table of Contents

Background 3
Tenure as Deputy Commander of the Qods Force 4
Qaani as Commander 5

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On January 3, 2020, the United States assassinated Major General Qassem Soleimani, who commanded the Qods Force (QF), the expeditionary branch of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). That same day, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, Soleimani’s longtime deputy, was named the QF’s new chief by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

As Iran and the U.S. continue fighting each other—directly and indirectly, in the Middle East and beyond—Qaani’s QF will serve as a vital part of Iran’s war effort. This report will examine Qaani and the impact his leadership of the QF may have. What roles has he played before being named commander, and how did he perform? How will his background shape his leadership of the QF? In which ways is he similar to and different from Soleimani? Will the QF expend more resources on Central and South Asia, on which Qaani has focused his efforts? And what effect will Qaani’s leadership have on the threat Iran poses to the U.S. and its allies—will the U.S. and its allies be better off with him in charge than Soleimani?

Background

Supreme Leader Khamenei, when appointing Qaani to succeed Soleimani as QF commander, [said](#) Qaani “has been one of the most prominent commanders in the Holy Defense. But there is sparse publicly available information on Qaani’s life, particularly his early years. He was born in the city of Mashhad in 1957 in the Khorasan region in northeastern Iran. Unlike many senior Iranian officials, he [did not play a significant role](#) in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and only joined the IRGC a year later, in 1980.

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

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

Qaani [rose to command Nasr-5](#) and later headed the Imam Reza–21 division as well. After the Iran-Iraq war, he was named deputy of the IRGC Ground Forces’ division in Mashhad. Iran

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expert Ali Alfoneh [wrote](#) that “one can safely assume that Qaani was involved in suppressing the June 1992 social unrest in Mashhad. It is equally likely that Qaani was involved in the IRGC’s operations against drug cartels infiltrating Khorasan province from Afghanistan and in the IRGC’s support to... the Northern Alliance, against the Taliban in the late 1990s.” Iran supported the Alliance to counter the increasing hegemony of the Taliban, Sunni extremists backed by Iranian adversaries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Qaani repeatedly [visited Tajikistan](#), where Alliance fighters were treated and where the Alliance received arms shipments from external backers. “Qaani appears to have traveled into Afghanistan to establish a presence,” added Alfoneh. “That is particularly true after the Taliban seizure of Kabul.” Around this time, Qaani was named Soleimani’s deputy.

Tenure as Deputy Commander of the Qods Force

In [1997 or 1998](#), IRGC Commander Rahim Safavi [named](#) Qassem Soleimani to lead the QF and Qaani as his deputy. The two remained in those positions until the U.S. killed Soleimani in 2020.

While Soleimani provided charismatic leadership, Qaani [reportedly](#) served as the QF’s de facto chief operating officer. The two also divided up the QF’s areas of operation, with Soleimani focusing on countries west of Iran, while Qaani covered Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia.

In 1998, Qaani [convinced](#) the Iranian regime not to strike the Taliban militarily after the latter attacked the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan, killing nine diplomats. Qaani brought Shiite communities in Afghanistan into Iran’s sphere of influence, [indoctrinating, training, and deploying](#) Afghan Shiites to fight Iran’s battles abroad. Qaani [allegedly](#) helped to form an Afghan Shiite militia, Liwa al-Fatemiyoum, that was deployed to Syria to fight on the side of the forces of dictator Bashar al-Assad.

In 2012, Qaani was the first Iranian official that admitted Iran had an armed presence in Syria, [claiming](#) “big massacres were prevented” consequently.

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

Qaani as Commander

When appointing Qaani to succeed Soleimani as QF commander, Supreme Leader Khamenei [said](#) the Force's program "will be unchanged from the time of [Qaani's] predecessor." The Ayatollah's vague statement is unsurprising and believable—the regime will continue to use the QF to project power in the region and worldwide. But the devil is in the details.

While Soleimani served as a charismatic public figure, Qaani took a low-key approach. The obvious prediction is that the new commander will continue operating quietly, if only because he lacks Soleimani's natural magnetism. However, Qaani could try to exhibit more charisma in order to build trust and inspire loyalty among the QF's rank-and-file.

Qaani will likely maintain the QF's intimate ties with allied foreign militias. Speaking at his first press conference as commander, he was [flanked](#) by the flags of Iran-backed Shiite armed groups, including Hezbollah and Liwa al-Fatemioun. Even Soleimani never displayed so blatantly how close the Islamic Republic is to those organizations.

Given Qaani's longstanding focus on South and Central Asia, observers wonder if he will direct more of the QF's resources to Iran's east. With thousands of Lebanese and Iraqis demonstrating against Iranian interference in their countries, Qaani will have to choose between doubling down and continue trying to crush the protests or spending more time growing Iranian hegemony elsewhere, particularly as the Trump administration seeks to quickly end its military presence in Afghanistan.

Perhaps most important, the QF will have to decide how to retaliate against the U.S. for Soleimani's assassination. Qaani has [promised](#) to shed American blood, stating, "We tell everyone, be patient and see the dead bodies of Americans all over the Middle East." However, U.S. State Department official Brian Hook [stated](#) on January 23 that if Qaani "follows a similar path of killing Americans, he will meet the same fate" as Soleimani. Qaani could justify refraining from further lethal attacks as a temporary, tactical move, but protracted restraint could demonstrate that the U.S. had succeeded in deterring Iran by killing Soleimani.

Qaani will not be able to make these decisions independently. Other regime factions will undoubtedly seek to capitalize on the loss of Soleimani and fill any resulting power vacuum at the QF's expense. Qaani's longstanding ties to Khamenei could give him significant freedom of action, but probably not as much as his predecessor enjoyed. Soleimani's power and autonomy were built through successfully advancing Tehran's interests for more than two decades. With the war between U.S. and Iran as hot as it's been in decades, Qaani likely will have to try to slowly and patiently grow his authority, all the while trying to stave off death at America's hands.