

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

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

## 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 [Iran-Iraq War]." Born in the northeastern city of Mashhad. Unlike many senior Iranian officials, he does not seem to have played a significant role in the 1979 Islamic Revolution and joined the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a year later, in 1980.

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

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

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

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## Tenure as Deputy Commander of the Quds Force

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

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

Like Soleimani and other key commanders, Qaani was one of the signatories of the 1999 letter to then-President Mohammad Khatami warning of removing him from power if he did not act more to crush the student protests in June of that year.

Soleimani and Qaani appear to have divided QF's areas of operation, with Soleimani focusing on the Arab world and the Middle East, while Qaani covered South and Central Asia and also Africa.

In 2018 alone, Qaani [traveled](#) to Afghanistan under the cover of deputy ambassador to meet with the governor of Bamian to discuss the construction of an Iranian hospital there, and also accompanied an Iranian national security delegation to the country later in the year, according to Afghan reports in 2020.

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

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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." Soleimani personally thanked Qaani as "my dear friend" in his last will. Soleimani has had some big shoes to fill. Qaani has not proven to be a charismatic speaker or figure like Soleimani .

Qaani's first major operation as Quds Force commander happened in northern Syria when he pushed the IRGC and its proxies to expand involvement in an assault in coordination with Damascus and Moscow into insurgent-held Idlib. The assault ground to a halt after a bombing [killed](#) dozens of Turkish soldiers stationed in Syria, leading to a massive Turkish counter-attack. Turkey bombed Guard Corps positions.

In Iraq, in the absence of Soleimani, who exerted so much influence in the country, Qaani has [faced](#) competition from other Islamic Republic intelligence agencies like the Ministry of Intelligence and the center of powers seeking to carve out its influence in Iraq by sponsoring paramilitary groups. Lacking familiarity with Iraqi militias and knowledge of Arabic, Qaani has [relied](#) on Iraj Masjedi, Iranian Ambassador to Iraq and a senior Quds Force officer, to handle Quds Force meetings in Iraq.

Qaani has fared better in other battlefields. In early 2021, Yemeni Ansar Allah, also known as the [Houthis](#), [demonstrated](#) the ability to maintain barrages of missiles and drone attacks against [Saudi Arabia](#). These capabilities are owed to years of Quds Force-directed investment. Ansar Allah also expanded their ground assaults.

Qaani was also able to claim some victory in the 2021 conflict between Israel and  [Hamas](#), which demonstrated the efficacy of the force's long-running support of Hamas, giving it the ability to maintain rocket strikes against Israel. In a public address, he [said](#), "I'd advise all Zionists to go back and repurchase the houses they sold in Europe, the US and elsewhere before those houses become more expensive than they are today." Qaani added that Palestinian missiles did not target Israeli infrastructure "because it will not take long for Palestinians to use these facilities."

At another event in April 2021, Qaani [vowed](#) that "today, Resistance Fronts constituting Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and the children of Resistance...are everyday undertaking a fundamental action against enemies of Islam and the Revolution, and America and bloodthirsty Zionist regime and will continue this path...until reaching the global government of the Imam of Time [Mahdi]," referring to a belief in Shiism that the Mahdi, or Messiah, would return from his occultation one day to herald the apocalypse. Qaani has acknowledged Khamenei as "the representative of the Imam of Time [Mahdi] on earth"; that acknowledgement is one of the foundations of Guardianship of the Jurisconsult (*velayat-e faqih*), which is enshrined in the Islamic Republic's constitution.