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The IRGC Post-Soleimani: Political and Security Implications at Home and Abroad

by [Ariane Tabatabai](#), [Mehdi Khalaji](#), [Farzin Nadimi](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ariane Tabatabai](#)

Ariane Tabatabai is an associate political scientist at the RAND Corporation and an adjunct senior research scholar at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs.



[Mehdi Khalaji](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Farzin Nadimi](#)

Farzin Nadimi, an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region.



Brief Analysis

Three leading Iran scholars explore how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the broader regime will adapt their policies following the death of the seminal Qods Force commander.

On February 27, Ariane Tabatabai, Mehdi Khalaji, and Farzin Nadimi addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Tabatabai is an associate political scientist at the RAND Corporation and an adjunct senior research scholar at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shia theologian,

is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. Nadimi is an associate fellow with the Institute and an analyst specializing in Iranian security and defense affairs. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ARIANE TABATABAI

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have proven to be incredibly resilient and flexible during their decades-long transformation. Under Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, the IRGC-Qods Force became a particularly crucial element of Iran's security architecture, enabling the country to project power beyond its borders. He was the engine behind this expanded role, surpassing his predecessor as the force's most influential, recognized, and well-liked commander.

Yet the Qods Force was never a one-man show. Soleimani seems to have understood the value of structure and bureaucracy; as a result, organizational hierarchy and inertia will ameliorate the operational impact of his death.

Moreover, he did not become a household name until Iran expanded its involvement in the ongoing Syria and Yemen wars. Previously, he was not a very visible figure, staying out of the limelight domestically. In contrast to most of Iran's senior authorities, he maintained an apolitical stance, thus endearing himself to reformists and hardliners alike.

His successor, Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani, was similarly unknown to the majority of Iranians (let alone Americans) until recently. He seems likely to follow Soleimani's quiet and unassuming approach; thus far, he has given few public interviews. Yet the regime is under tremendous stress lately, as demonstrated by its heavy-handed response to protestors and its mass disqualification of moderate candidates ahead of the February 21 parliamentary election. This domestic unease might compel Qaani to alter his comportment.

As for the new commander's differences from Soleimani, two stand out. First, Qaani lacks his predecessor's charisma and therefore does not garner the same level of respect from Iranian leaders, at least so far. Second, he has not yet established the relationships of trust that Soleimani opened with the leaders of Iran's many regional proxy forces, so he will need to invest in these interpersonal ties.

Iran's influence-building efforts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen will likely continue in much the same fashion under Qaani, but he may lead the regime to become more involved in Afghanistan given **his deep experience with that theater**. During the Iran-Iraq War, he supervised two units of Afghans who fought on Tehran's behalf; more recently, he oversaw the deployment of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade to help defend the Assad regime in Syria. As peace talks with the Taliban unfold in Afghanistan, the country could become another arena of competition between Iran and the United States.

As for operations in Syria, Qaani **and his deputy, Mohammad Hejazi**, will be Tehran's main military advisors in that theater, despite the fact that Hezbollah has assumed a primary role in training, equipping, and assisting Iranian proxy forces there. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah enjoys close relations with regime leaders, but he is not Iranian and cannot navigate domestic politics and factional disputes as adeptly as Qaani and Hejazi.

Regarding Iraq, the ballistic missile strike that hit U.S. base facilities on January 8 was Iran's attempt to demonstrate its power after Soleimani's assassination, and additional retaliatory actions may follow. Tehran typically prefers to avoid sensational military operations; it only resorts to such actions when it believes it can justify them domestically and internationally. As a result, its long-term response to Soleimani's death will largely be covert and plausibly deniable, and may include the use of proxies and cyberwarfare.

As for the nuclear program, shortly after Soleimani was killed, Iran announced it was taking a fifth step away from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. In contrast to the previous four steps, which involved tangible changes such

as restarting uranium enrichment at the Fordow plant, this fifth step was unrelated to any concrete enforcement mechanism. Instead, the regime issued a general declaration that it no longer considers itself constrained in its enrichment activities—a less provocative approach that may indicate Tehran is patiently waiting out the U.S. election cycle before determining its next nuclear steps. Until a new report is made public by the International Atomic Energy Agency or other sources, it will remain unclear what other steps have been taken since Soleimani's death.

MEHDI KHALAJI

Given Soleimani's humility, apolitical tendencies, and total loyalty to the Supreme Leader, his death will have significant implications for Ali Khamenei. The ayatollah had hoped to use his assassination to rally the people around the flag of Iranian nationalism. Yet the regime squandered this opportunity with its blatant mishandling of the Ukrainian airline tragedy, which greatly shocked and embittered wide swaths of the population.

At the same time, the Supreme Leader was able to capitalize on the assassination by disqualifying many moderate and reformist candidates prior to last month's parliamentary election. Hardliners were gratified to see the public remain largely silent in response to these disqualifications, indicating at least some residual receptiveness to the regime's increased nationalist rhetoric.

That said, the most important implication of Soleimani's death relates to succession. There is no established pattern for the transition of power from one Supreme Leader to the next. Khamenei's predecessor, Ruhollah Khomeini, inaugurated that post as a logical outcome of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In 1985, Khomeini designated Hossein Ali Montazeri to be his successor, a decision that was approved by the Assembly of Experts. In March 1989, however—just three months before Khomeini's death—Montazeri was dismissed for breaking with the Supreme Leader's views on executing political prisoners.

As a result, Khomeini formally held his position as the country's highest-ranking political and religious authority right up until his death. Immediately thereafter, Khamenei was appointed in a manner that bypassed the constitutional process. A group of four to five leaders who had largely taken over Khomeini's responsibilities during his extended illness decided amongst themselves to choose Khamenei, then used the imprimatur of the Experts Assembly to legalize this decision.

Absent a similar group of consensus-builders, it is unclear who will select Khamenei's successor. Soleimani could have played this arbitrate role, with his political impartiality positioning him as an honest mediator. In his absence, it is difficult to imagine how the IRGC, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Intelligence, and other competing institutions—never mind their competing internal factions—will agree on Khamenei's successor.

Reflecting on current events, Iran has closed its borders with six neighbors as a result of the coronavirus epidemic. These closures will likely have serious effects on imports and exports, particularly from Qom, the hub of Iran's viral outbreak and an important economic center. Notably, Qom has the largest Chinese community in the country, including more than 700 students at Qom Seminary and al-Mustafa International University. Thus far, the IRGC has stayed clear of the country's coronavirus response efforts, presumably to avoid sharing blame with the Rouhani government and Shia clergy for assorted failures in detecting, containing, and treating infected individuals.

FARZIN NADIMI

Looking beyond the Qods Force, the IRGC's missile and drone capabilities have become a principal element of its deterrence efforts and an increasingly important part of its power-projection capabilities. That point was emphasized when Iran used these capabilities to retaliate for Soleimani's death.

The January 8 strike on al-Asad Air Base in Iraq also marked a broader turning point in Iranian behavior, indicating

that the regime sees itself as being on equal footing with its enemies. The attack was the first time in the Islamic Republic’s forty-year history that it overtly targeted a manned U.S. military installation. Past attacks were either covert, conducted in the heat of a firefight, or aimed at unmanned facilities.

This shift should come as little surprise given the statements Iranian leaders have made in recent years signaling their belief that they can win a conflict against the “Great Satan.” For example, IRGC commander-in-chief Hossein Salami has discussed the use of “effects-based operations,” that is, using minimum force to achieve a military or political objective. In 2015, he stated that Iran had always prepared for worst-case scenarios; two years later, he spoke of Iran’s strategic criteria and logic when using its weapons and capabilities. The lack of a visible American response to the al-Asad strike will only reassure Salami and other leaders that Tehran’s tactics and overall deterrence doctrine are working.

Meanwhile, Iran is shrinking the size of its new missiles and investing more in research and development. It is also increasing its use of proxy groups in conjunction with this advanced weaponry. For example, the regime is supplying component parts to help Hezbollah upgrade its missiles in Lebanon with precision-guidance technology.

Five years ago, Supreme Leader Khamenei spoke of a sharp and painful response if the United States crossed Iran’s redlines. U.S. officials need to take this threat seriously—the al-Asad strike should open their eyes to the vulnerabilities associated with forward basing. Going forward, the United States should greatly upgrade its missile defenses, reassure regional allies, and demonstrate beyond doubt that it has the means and will to protect American interests in the Middle East.

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