

Iranian Succession and the Impact of Soleimani's Death

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

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



Brief Analysis

The general's peerless domestic stature would have served a crucial mediatory role during the eventual transition to Khamenei's successor, so his death brings significant uncertainty to that process.

Following the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, much attention has been focused on the foreign operations conducted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force. Yet his organization also played a major role at home, one whose future is now unclear. In particular, Soleimani himself was well positioned to be a unifying, steadying figure once Iran faced the challenge of determining a successor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

SOLEIMANI AS KHAMENEI'S PERFECT SOLDIER

In the Supreme Leader's eyes, Soleimani was the epitome of how a military commander should conduct himself professionally and politically. No other senior commander was as trusted by Khamenei—a fact that was evident in the preferential treatment often accorded to him.

For instance, when Khamenei took office in 1989, he introduced a new policy of limiting the terms of service for military and political positions, including the top post at the IRGC, which was capped at ten years. Khamenei was not considered a natural successor to Ruhollah Khomeini and lacked the founding leader's religious credentials and charisma, so carefully reshuffling the military hierarchy now and then was an alternative way of establishing and consolidating his power. Even today, when his authority is nearly absolute, rotating senior and middle-ranking staff helps him prevent commanders from forming their own power circles and alliances. Yet Soleimani was an exception to these terms limits, in part because he hailed from a small group of IRGC commanders who were close to Khamenei rather than his rivals during the transition from Ayatollah Khomeini. Once the general was appointed as commander of the Qods Force in 1997, he remained in that position until his death more than twenty years later.

Soleimani did not achieve this special status just because of his early loyalty and subsequent military achievements. Unlike the overwhelming majority of IRGC officers, he also avoided any involvement in economic and political activities, instead living a purely pious personal life. These traits endeared him to Khamenei, who often pointed to the general and his Qods Force as proof that a “resistance” strategy worked better than the diplomatic approach favored by Iranian presidents. Soleimani was unique in carrying out that strategy without making public statements in support of hardline policies or against dissenting officials, even during heated election cycles. He was impenetrable by influential power centers—he received orders directly from the Supreme Leader and was accountable only to him, so the general could not care less about what presidents or other officials wanted. The only person to whom he proudly and repeatedly expressed his blind devotion was Khamenei. In return, the Supreme Leader often described Soleimani’s character and service with epithets that have not been used for any other commander.

This mutual favoritism was also illustrated by the manner in which they conducted regional policy. In early 2019, for example, Qods Force personnel escorted Syrian president Bashar al-Assad from Damascus to Khamenei’s office in Tehran without the government’s advance knowledge. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif reacted angrily to being excluded from the meeting and offered his resignation, but was ignored. Even President Hassan Rouhani was excluded from portions of the meeting—in contrast, Soleimani and his associates sat next to Khamenei throughout the entire session, with the Supreme Leader and Assad praising him in the warmest terms.

In addition, thanks to state propaganda and Western media coverage, Soleimani was perceived as a hero by a great portion of Iranian society, though he explicitly cast himself not as a nationalist figure, but rather as a soldier in the service of Islam and the regime. The “national hero” label often bestowed on him is a rare epithet in Farsi, reserved for characters in Persian epics and mythology rather than modern military figures. In that sense, Soleimani became almost as ideologically sacred as Khamenei himself. Publicly criticizing his record or role was not permitted, and the regime elite tended to speak of him respectfully, even affectionately, regardless of their factional affiliations. In their eyes, he had the traits necessary to facilitate decisionmaking and build consensus in a time of crisis—an unmatched personality whose authority and wisdom would be unquestionably accepted by his military peers, the political elite, and a large portion of the population.

This reputation was further solidified in recent years whenever the Qods Force was tasked with playing a greater domestic role. For instance, after the government’s incompetent response to last year’s flooding crisis, Soleimani’s troops stepped in to provide relief. Given his portrayal of the force as a national body with multiple military and nonmilitary mandates, it will be interesting to see whether and how the new leadership feels compelled to reposition the organization.

Incoming deputy chief Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi exemplifies this dilemma. Prior to joining the Qods Force, he was instrumental in [molding the Basij militia into the repressive force](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-is-mohammad-hossein-zadeh-hejazi-the-new-deputy-commander-of-irans-qods) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-is-mohammad-hossein-zadeh-hejazi-the-new-deputy-commander-of-irans-qods>) that brutally put down the 2009 Green Movement protests. Although he has held foreign roles since then, his overall background is very much focused on internal security. The Qods Force has largely stayed out of the regime’s efforts to crack down on more recent unrest in Iran, such as the killing of hundreds for protesting gasoline price hikes. As a result, it has received little blame for such suppression, but that could change.

SUCCESSION NEEDS A STEADYING HAND

The eighty-eight ayatollahs who make up Iran’s Assembly of Experts are constitutionally charged with appointing the Supreme Leader’s successor, but the institution is well-known for its dependence on outside players, particularly the IRGC. Members usually win election to the assembly with direct support and funding from

IRGC elements, and their ties to the military-security apparatus are much stronger than their roots in the clerical establishment. Therefore, the real decision about Khamenei's eventual successor will need to be made outside the assembly.

Soleimani's death makes this situation more problematic because Khamenei has steadily replaced allegiance to regime ideology with a cult of personality over the years. If he were to leave the scene anytime soon, the highly factionalized elite—including the IRGC—would have no pivotal authority on which to build a new foundation for internal unity and domestic legitimacy, thus creating an existential risk for the regime as a whole.

The irony is that Khamenei is a “man of institutions” who firmly believes in limitless, modernized bureaucratization in order to undercut the role of individual actors. Yet his emphasis on fostering an abundance of institutions is not intended to empower the government's democratic structures, but rather to weaken the potential for independent alliances and strong democratic institutions. Today, it is common for Iranian institutions to be assigned overlapping missions with no options for coordinating with each other or seeing themselves as accountable to any authority other than the Supreme Leader. This design helps Khamenei insulate his power against domestic threats, whether from the elite or the people, allowing him to enjoy maximum authority—but with minimum responsibility when things go wrong.

The danger of concentrating so much power in Khamenei's hands is obvious: what happens when he is gone? Soleimani was an unparalleled alternative authority, someone who likely gave Khamenei peace of mind that the regime could remain stable when the time for transition came around. Even authoritarian regimes benefit from having such safety valves—figures who can offer guidance during times of crisis and expect it to be followed without resorting to coercive measures. Now the prospect of succession likely seems more unnerving to Tehran, and the regime's future less certain.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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