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The New Iranian General to Watch

by [Matthew Levitt](#)

Jan 23, 2020

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Articles & Testimony

The regime has promoted a hardened veteran of the Lebanon front, raising questions about the IRGC's next steps following Soleimani's death.

The U.S. killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani earlier this month deprived Iran of one of its most singular leaders, and created new questions about Iran's strategy of building and maintaining its power in the region. Without its charismatic and high-profile commander, would Iran be forced to retrench and pause? Or would it find new ways to lash out? Now the strategy is coming into view, and it gives a window into what Iran is doing—and what challenges the U.S. faces.

Soleimani mattered because he headed the Quds Force, the external operations arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—a machine dedicated under Soleimani to pushing U.S. and other Western forces out of the region and ensuring Iran's position as the regional superpower. To this end, Soleimani spearheaded Iran's effort to build a network of proxies—effectively, a foreign legion of non-Iranian Shia militants beholden to Tehran—which he commanded in a very direct manner.

He was difficult to replace, but Iran has begun the job. First was Gen. Esmail Qaani, Soleimani's deputy, who was quickly promoted to head the Quds Force in Soleimani's stead.

This week, Iran announced a new and potentially more telling promotion: The new Quds Force deputy commander will be Gen. Muhammad Hussein-Zada Hejazi, who most recently commanded the Quds Force's Lebanon Corps, overseeing Iran's ties to Hezbollah and the Quds Force activities throughout the Levant more broadly. The message behind Hejazi's promotion is clear: Soleimani may be dead, but the Quds Force he led lives on, and is taking active

measures to ensure it is able to continue pursuing the regional strategy he championed.

Forced to rebuild the proxy management and command and control mechanisms that Soleimani once ran himself by force of personality and longtime connections, Iran is developing a new strategy to oversee what Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei **described** as “fighters without borders.” And the strategy comes down to this: Since no one commander can replace Soleimani, Iran’s proxy network will now be run by committee, with the Quds Force cobbling together a crew of its more senior and experienced managers to collectively fill the roles Soleimani had taken on himself. Key leaders of Iranian proxy groups, especially Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah, are sure to play major roles. But policymakers should pay especially close attention to personnel shifts and promotions within the Quds Force itself.

In some ways, Soleimani proved to be Iran’s single point of failure; removing him from the equation left an oversized gap in Iran’s regional strategy. In the past few years prior to his death in a Jan. 3 drone strike, Soleimani became the public face of a previously secret organization running a network of covert proxy militant groups. In the wake of the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, Tehran saw an opportunity and tapped Soleimani to build up Iran’s regional proxy alliances. A charismatic leader, Soleimani developed a devoted following among Iranian proxy groups, including both their leaders and foot soldiers. Soleimani was a hands-on commander, playing direct and personal roles in key operations, establishing personal bonds with key militia commanders, and mediating between their sometimes banal disagreements over funding streams or prestige.

Soleimani was uniquely qualified to play such a role, but his successor, **Esmail Qaani**, is not. More bland bureaucrat than charismatic leader, Qaani is unlikely to be able to fill all the same roles and responsibilities as Soleimani. Perhaps the most critical area of operations for the Quds Force today is the Levant, and the appointment this week of the head of the Quds Force’s Lebanon Corps, also known as Department 2000, is therefore highly significant.

Prior to his appointment as Soleimani’s successor as Quds Force chief, Qaani was one of Soleimani’s key deputies responsible for the Quds Force’s Ansar Corp, covering Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. For all his exposure to Central Asia, Qaani lacked deep experience in the Arab world. When he was **designated** as a terrorist by the Treasury Department in 2012, it was in the context of his role as a logistician sending money and weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Quds Force elements in Africa. Qaani reportedly does not speak Arabic and would not be well suited to be the Quds Force commander tasked with replacing Soleimani as point man for Iran’s intimate operational relationship with Iran’s proxies in Iraq, Yemen, and especially Syria and Lebanon.

Enter Hejazi, **appointed** Quds Force deputy commander this week. Hejazi boasts a long career in the Quds Force, which he reportedly joined at its founding in 1979. In 1980, Hejazi was reportedly among the IRGC forces—**along with Soleimani and Qaani**—**dispatched** to fight Iranian Kurdish groups in the north. Hejazi rose through the ranks, becoming deputy and later commander of the IRGC’s Basij Militia. He led the Basij militia for almost nine years, during which the Basij and vigilante groups it supported were implicated in a **long list** of human rights abuses.

In September 2007, Hejazi was **appointed** IRGC chief of staff, and a month later the Treasury **designated** Hejazi a terrorist (along with Soleimani and other IRGC officials) for his role in Iran’s proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Hejazi went on to **hold** several other senior military leadership positions, including deputy to the IRGC commander and deputy chief of staff of Iran’s armed forces.

Hejazi also headed the IRGC’s Sarollah Corps in Tehran, which the Council of Europe **noted** “played a central role in post-election crackdowns” in 2009. The Council further **noted** that Hejazi authored “a letter sent to the Ministry of Health on 26 June 2009 forbidding the disclosure of documents or medical records of anyone injured or hospitalized during post-election events, implying a cover up.” As a result, the European Union **sanctioned** Hejazi in 2011 for his role in human rights abuses in Iran.

As Iran's regional strategy shifted toward more aggressive regional asymmetric warfare, Soleimani needed an experienced hand to oversee the Quds Force's quickly expanding operations in the Levant. Hejazi next took over command of the Quds Force's [Department 2000](#), overseeing all Quds Force operations in the Levant. This includes not only Quds Force support to Hezbollah, but also its support of Palestinian terrorist groups like Hamas and the PFLP-GC. It is also responsible for overseeing Quds support to the Assad regime in Syria.

Against the backdrop of the chaos of the Syrian civil war, Iran decided around 2013 to ship precision-guided missiles, through Syria, to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran hoped these arms transfers would be concealed in the fog of the Syrian war, but [Israeli airstrikes](#) foiled some of these convoys and by early 2014 the [press](#) got wind of the Iranian missile program.

According to [Israeli authorities](#), at first the Iranian strategy involved shipping fully assembled precision guided missiles to Hezbollah, but then shifted gears and sought to smuggle missile parts that could then be assembled in Lebanon. In 2019, Hezbollah and the Quds Force upgraded the project by building manufacturing and conversion facilities in several locations throughout Lebanon, according to Israeli authorities; this included sending key Quds Force personnel to live and work in Lebanon, overseeing the day-to-day operations. In August 2019, the Israel Defense Forces publicly [released](#) details of this effort, including the names and photographs of three key Quds Force operatives. Chief among these was Hejazi, who had moved to Lebanon along with his family to oversee the project. Iran's Fars News does not dispute the Israeli account, [saying](#) that "in recent years [Gen. Hejazi] has also been field officer on one of the Axis of Resistance fronts." The new decision to pull Hejazi back from Lebanon, where the precision guided missile project remains a Quds Force and Hezbollah priority, is a telling example of how Iran plans to try to fill Soleimani's oversized shoes, keeping a priority on its efforts to arm and support militant groups in Lebanon and Syria.

Another person to watch will be Gen. Abdel Reza Shahlai, currently the senior Quds Force officer in Yemen but someone with extensive command experience in Iraq as well. Shahlai was reportedly [targeted](#) in a separate operation in Yemen the same night Soleimani was killed, but he survived and went into hiding. [Designated](#) a terrorist by the Treasury for his role in a 2011 assassination plot targeting the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C., and the subject of a \$15 million bounty from the State Department's Rewards for Justice program, Shahlai "has a long history of targeting Americans and U.S. allies globally," [according](#) to the State Department.

The promotion of an experienced old hand like Hejazi, who has both experience in the Levant and hard-line regime credentials at home, underscores the likelihood that the Quds Force's marching orders are to press on with Soleimani's aggressive regional campaign of asymmetric proxy warfare. Rather than retrenching, Iran is signaling that it's likely to rely even more on the Quds Force's "fighters without borders" as a means of exerting influence throughout the region.

Speaking after Soleimani's death, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah [called](#) on Iran's proxies—the "Axis of Resistance," as he called them—to step up operations to force US forces out of the region. America's regional allies are also likely targets as Tehran seeks to raise the cost of siding with the United States and housing U.S. forces. For the residents of Iran's neighbors abroad, the message is clear: Buckle up.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute, and author of the book [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God](#). This article was originally published [on the Politico website](#). ❖

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