

# Does Soleimani's Death Matter? Findings from a 2019 Workshop

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Jan 3, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/hl-yutbr-mqtl-slymany-dha-ahmyt-alntayj-mn-wrsht-ml-am-2019\)](#) /

[Farsi \(/fa/policy-analysis/pyamdhay-mrg-slymany-yafthhay-kargah-bhthy-dr-2019\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

---

**Last year's Washington Institute forum on post-Soleimani succession suggested that the IRGC would lose a unique coordinating capability and its most important totem once he left the scene.**

Last April, The Washington Institute held a closed-door roundtable to discuss the potential impact if Qassem Soleimani no longer commanded the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force. Governed by the Chatham House rule, participants discussed how succession might work in the Qods Force and what Iran would lose if Soleimani became permanently unavailable, reaching consensus on many key issues. Now that the commander is indeed gone, their conclusions can help policymakers navigate the stormy seas ahead, though some aspects of his importance remain a matter of heated debate.

## IRREPLACEABLE PERSONAL CACHET?

Workshop participants agreed that Soleimani had become a very valuable strategic asset to the IRGC-dominated Iranian government because of his unique blend of four characteristics:

- **Close to Khamenei.** There is no evidence that Soleimani had a close relationship with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei prior to being appointed as head of the Qods Force in 1997-1998. Once he assumed that post, however, Khamenei quickly began to regard him as a paragon of the Islamic Republic's ideals. Unlike other subordinates, Soleimani was both obedient to the Supreme Leader and highly effective. Khamenei influenced—and was later influenced by—Soleimani's uncompromising vision of a transnational, armed Shia movement at war with America, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

- **Risk-taker.** Soleimani's death was eminently avoidable, but he accepted a risk by moving too close to major concentrations of U.S. aerial and intelligence assets around Baghdad International Airport, at precisely the moment that U.S. officials had warned via backchannel that they might kill him. Yet his past risk-taking tendencies often advanced the regime's regional interests. For example, he was the driving force behind the following innovative moves: deploying robust conventional military forces to save the Assad regime in Syria; using Shia legions from outside the region (Afghanistan, Pakistan) for the same purpose; asking Russia to intervene in the Syria war; shipping advanced weapons to the Houthi rebels in Yemen; and helping Hezbollah with tunnel and precision-strike projects in Lebanon.
- **Charismatic and photogenic.** In addition to his magnetism as a relationship manager and power player, Soleimani was a media darling seemingly made for the age of online social networks. He was particularly loved by Afghan fighters, whom he supported in his early years; he also built a strong following among Arabs and Pakistanis.
- **Committed and consistent.** For most of his twenty-year career as Qods Force commander, Soleimani painstakingly nurtured his relationships with senior stakeholders across Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and other theaters of conflict. An Arabic speaker, he commanded respect—and sometimes fear—from local proxies and allies.

## KEY ROLES IN THE QODS FORCE

**S**oleimani came to the Qods Force when it was in the doldrums and turned it into an effective source of power projection in Afghanistan, then Iraq, and finally Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. In terms of his command style and focus, Soleimani specialized in four key roles:

- **Coordination hub.** Soleimani was empowered to lead Iran's whole-of-government approach to regional interventionism, aided by his closeness with Khamenei, his personal dynamism, and his seniority (in date of promotion) over other IRGC commanders. As a result, he had the ability to draw forces from the IRGC and the conventional army (Artesh) into unprecedentedly effective joint operations. He was also Iran's senior interlocutor with Iraqi, Lebanese, Russian, and Syrian partners.
- **Operational firefighter.** Soleimani moved between trouble spots efficiently, showing his face and holding key conversations with partners as needed. He operated in both the military and political spheres, visiting battlefronts while just as readily mediating the appointment of Iraqi prime ministers. As noted at the Washington Institute workshop, more than one Iraqi described him as "the last person we asked for help, but the first to arrive and deliver."
- **Visible totem of IRGC power.** Participants in the workshop were told that the IRGC's years-long power projection in the region rested on two pillars: missiles and Soleimani, the face of the Qods Force's expeditionary capabilities.
- **The IRGC's domestic face.** Soleimani was the only officer who could confidently show up at Iranian protest sites where most IRGC leaders were shooed away. His reasonably positive profile seemingly made him "un-booable," and therefore a valuable bridge between the IRGC and disgruntled rural populations.

## DECLINING ARC

In his essay [inaugurating The Washington Institute's "Sudden Succession" series](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-king-is-dead-does-it-matter) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-king-is-dead-does-it-matter>), Martin Kramer wrote that the key factor in assessing the significance of a given transition in the Middle East is deciding "where the leader stands in the arc of his life": is he in the middle or toward the end, or is everything of significance behind him? The impact of removal obviously declines in the latter case.

Here Soleimani's story becomes more complicated, since there were signs that his golden touch was beginning to abandon him before his death. In the end, he may have been a victim of his own success, with firm belief in his own

“infallibility” spin and oversaturated with tasks due to his past effectiveness. By 2019 he was visibly overstretched and unable to delegate many key duties abroad, which meant frequently exposing himself to U.S. targeting opportunities as he shuttled around Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.

He had also experienced several very public missteps in previous years. Some were operational failures, such as the botched 2011 plot to kill the Saudi ambassador in Washington. Others were overly costly successes, from suffering high casualties among the ground forces he deployed in Aleppo to potentially losing some influence over the Assad regime after inviting Russia to enter the war.

Soleimani’s political ventures in Iraq were mixed as well. He succeeded in ensuring that a malleable candidate became Iraq’s prime minister in 2018, but only after failing to insert Faleh al-Fayyad in that post and whiffing on his preferred presidential candidate. Most important, he made the potentially fatal mistake of pressing Iraqi leaders to violently suppress Iraqi Shia protestors last October. This overreach **snowballed into further errors** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-iraq-relations-at-a-crossroads-policy-options>) that led to his death, from the December 27 killing of an American contractor, to the December 31 attack on the U.S. embassy, to his ill-fated regional tour purportedly aimed at organizing anti-American attacks.

## CONCLUSION

**T**he Qods Force has not stood idly by while Khamenei placed so many of his eggs in Soleimani’s basket. The force’s new, less-charismatic leader—former deputy commander Esmail Ghani—intimately knows Soleimani’s vision and will likely try to continue it. Similarly, foreign relationships can be picked up to some extent by deputies in each country.

Yet something unique may have been lost with Soleimani’s death. The unity of command he was able to achieve might degrade going forward. Operations conducted by the IRGC, Artesh, and Intelligence Ministry could be less well-coordinated, and rivalries may resurface.

Perhaps more significant, the IRGC will likely lose some of the prestige that was over-invested in Soleimani. The face of IRGC expansion in the Middle East is dead, killed as he hurried around the region trying to correct a spiraling sequence of errors. In combination with recent mass protests in Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran itself, the death of Soleimani could be a momentum-breaker for the IRGC’s expansionist policies.

Accordingly, U.S. policymakers should let the reality of his assassination sink in across the region before taking further actions that might distract from this dramatic gesture. Whether through sanctions or kinetic strikes, the targeting of malign elite figures should be a model for future pushback against Iran’s proxies, with Washington taking care to never impose collective punishment or fear on the innocent populations that Iran is suppressing. In terms of information operations, killing Soleimani could be a success of epochal importance—but only if it is followed up with more-measured policies that show Washington’s ability to pause, reflect on shared interests with foreign partners, and let the dust settle.

*Michael Knights is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute.* ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](#)

