

# The Evolution of Iran's Qods Force Since 1979

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**By absorbing rival organizations and favoring commanders who lack connections to other regime power centers, the IRGC has used the Qods Force to steadily centralize and monopolize control over the country's foreign operations.**

Since the death of Qasem Soleimani last year, the leadership of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force has changed substantially, with [Esmail Qaani \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-esmail-qaani-new-chief-commander-irans-qods-force\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-esmail-qaani-new-chief-commander-irans-qods-force) taking the top post and, more recently, [Mohammad Reza Fallahzadeh \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-mohammad-reza-fallahzadeh-new-deputy-commander-irans-qods-force\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-mohammad-reza-fallahzadeh-new-deputy-commander-irans-qods-force) being named as his deputy this April. Such changes raise fundamental questions about the composition of the organization's commanding echelon. Who makes it to the apex of the IRGC-QF, and on what grounds? And what do these appointments mean for Iran's regional policy? Tentative answers to these questions can be reached by taking a closer look at who has led the IRGC-QF and other external operations branches since 1979.

## Patterns, Associations, and Operational Chance

Prior to the IRGC-QF, four Iranian organizations engaged in foreign military operations during the Islamic Republic's infancy:

1. The IRGC's Islamic Liberation Movements Unit
2. The Irregular Warfare Headquarters (independent of the IRGC)
3. The IRGC Lebanon Guard (which was also known as the Qods Force at the time, not to be confused with the eventual IRGC-QF)

#### 4. The IRGC's Ramezan Headquarters

By 1989, following the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the reorganization of the country's armed forces, surviving members of these four groups and their international networks had been merged into the IRGC-QF. The new organization then established a monopoly over Iran's extraterritorial operations that lasted until the current Syria war.

Leadership of Iranian Extraterritorial Operations Organizations, 1979–2021

Organization	Commander	Deputy Commander
IRGC Islamic Liberation Movements Unit	Mohammad Montazeri (1979–81)	Mehdi Hashemi (dates unknown)
	Mehdi Hashemi (1981–86)	Unknown
Irregular Warfare Headquarters	Mostafa Chamran (1980–81)	Unknown
IRGC Lebanon Guard	Ahmad Motevaselian (1982)	Mansour Kouchak-Mohseni (1982)
	Mansour Kouchak-Mohseni (1982)	Ahmad Kananli (1982)
	Ahmad Kananli (1982–?)	Hossein Dehghan (dates unknown)
	Hossein Dehghan (?–1988)	Hossein Moeleh (aka Moeleh-Nia) (dates unknown)
IRGC Ramezan Headquarters	Hossein Moeleh (dates unknown)	Mohammad Naqdi (aka Shams) (dates unknown)
	Morteza Rezaei (1984)	Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr (1984)
	Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr (1984–?)	Mohammad Naqdi (dates unknown)
IRGC-Qods Force	Mohammad Naqdi (?–1989)	Unknown
	Fereydoon Verdinajad (aka Moh'dinejad) (1986–?)	Ahmad Vahidi (aka Ahmad Shah Cheraghli) (1986–?)
	Ahmad Vahidi (?–1997)	Esmail Qasbi (dates unknown)
	Qasem Saleimani (1997–2020)	Esmail Qasbi (?–2020)
	Esmail Qasbi (2020–present)	Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi (2020–21) Mohammad Reza Fallahzadeh (2021–present)

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In all, seventeen individuals are known to have served as commanders or deputy commanders of these five organizations since 1979. Three of them—Mohammad Montazeri and Mehdi Hashemi of the Islamic Liberation Movements Unit, and Mostafa Chamran of the Irregular Warfare Headquarters—stand out in several important regards: they founded their respective organizations rather than being appointed by a higher authority; they underwent guerrilla warfare training abroad in the 1960s and '70s, developing close relationships with foreign governments and organizations (e.g., Libya, Syria, the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Lebanese Amal Movement); and they had key regime supporters independent of the IRGC (namely, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri and Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan). Once these support bases crumbled due to regime purges, the IRGC quickly usurped each leader and incorporated their organizations into the Guards.

The remaining fourteen individuals share very different common denominators. None received guerrilla warfare training abroad prior to the revolution, and all but the three youngest served in the shah's Imperial Iranian Army. They had no foreign patrons and no known extra-organizational allegiances back home (with the exception of Mansour Kouchak-Mohseni, a follower of Ayatollah Montazeri who was purged from the IRGC by the mid-1980s). Ten of them fought in the Iranian Kurdistan civil war after the revolution, and all served in the war against Iraq. Their loyalty was reciprocated by the IRGC, which promoted them to top posts.

Career Paths of Iranian Extraterritorial Operations Leaders, 1979–2021

Name	Born	Place of Birth	Organization	Tenure	Pre-Appointment							
					1979-81 IRGC-QF Headquarters	1979-81 IRGC-QF Lebanon	1979-81 IRGC-QF Iraq	1979-81 IRGC-QF Syria	1979-81 IRGC-QF Yemen	1979-81 IRGC-QF Afghanistan	1979-81 IRGC-QF Other	
Chahrouz, Mostafa	1922	Tehran	Irregular Warfare Headquarters	1979-81	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Deligani, Hossein	1927	Irbil	IRGC Lebanon Guard	1982-84	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Falavarzadeh, Mohammad Reza	ca. 1942	Yazd	IRGC-QF	2011-present	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Hachemi, Mehdi	1946	Irbil	IRGC Islamic Liberation Movement Unit	1979-86	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Hajati, Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh	ca. 1956	Irbil	IRGC-QF	2020-21	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Kanani, Ahmad	NA	Tehran	IRGC Lebanon Guard	1982-7	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Kouchak-Mohseni, Mansour	NA	Tehran	IRGC Lebanon Guard	1982	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Moradian, Mohammad	1944	Irbil	IRGC Islamic Liberation Movement Unit	1979-81	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Musick, Hamid Jaka Makhlo-Naj	NA	NA	IRGC Lebanon Guard	NA	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Motavaselian, Ahmad	1953	Tehran	IRGC Lebanon Guard	1982	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Najdi, Mohammad Jaka Shams	ca. 1952	Tehran	IRGC Ramezan Headquarters	ca. 1985-1988	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Qasbi, Ezzat	1927	Isfahan	IRGC-QF	7-present	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Rasoul, Marziya	NA	NA	IRGC Ramezan Headquarters	1984	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Soleimani, Qasbi	1927	Kerman	IRGC-QF	1997-2009	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Vahidi, Ahmad Jaka Ahmad Shah Cherafidi	ca. 1958	Fars	IRGC-QF	1989-97	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Vahidi, Farouk Jaka Mehdi-Vahidi	1956	Lanarjan	IRGC Lebanon Guard	1986-89	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Zahedi, Mohammad Bagher	ca. 1954	Fars	IRGC Ramezan Headquarters	1984-8	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

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Yet the selection of commanders was sometimes shaped by chance as much as commonalities or conscious design. In 1982, the Islamic Republic deployed a joint contingent of the IRGC and the regular army (Artesh) to the Lebanon-Syria border. The deployment’s ostensible purpose was to counter the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, but in reality it sought to counter the Amal Movement, a Syrian proxy, by establishing Islamic Amal, the group that would later become Hezbollah. IRGC chief Mohsen Rezaii ordered Davoud Karimi, the head of operations in Tehran and a veteran revolutionary trained by the Amal Movement, to head the Lebanon Guard. At the time, Karimi could not have been aware of the deployment’s real purpose, but he questioned the wisdom of sending forces to Lebanon while Iran was in the midst of a war with Iraq. This led him to demand an audience with Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, or at least a decree from the ayatollah authorizing the mission. Denied both, Karimi refused the mission, and the responsibility was given to his deputy, Ahmad Motevaselian, who grudgingly accepted once persuaded by Ali Khamenei, the future Supreme Leader who was then serving as Khomeini’s representative to the Supreme Defense Council.

Similarly, the tradition of a commander being succeeded by his immediate deputy in a mission abroad was also born out of accident rather than design. In 1982, the same year he was tasked with leading the Lebanon Guard, Motevaselian was kidnapped and presumably assassinated in Beirut. His deputy in Lebanon, Mansour Kouchak-Mohseni, took over Guard, not because he was the most qualified candidate for the job, but because the IRGC could not afford to delay an ongoing, sensitive operation by dispatching a new senior commander from Tehran. And when Kouchak-Mohseni was ousted from the post within months for his aforementioned ties to Ayatollah Montazeri, his deputy Ahmad Kanani was given full command for similar reasons.

By 1984, the IRGC’s Ramezan Headquarters had been established as an irregular warfare force composed of Iraqi Kurds, Iraqi Shia, Afghans, and other nationalities. Its leaders tended to be former IRGC intelligence officers, one of whom—Mohammad Naqdi, also known as Shams—was a veteran of the Lebanon Guard. Personnel exchanges between the Lebanon Guard and Ramezan were significant at lower organizational levels as well.

## Enter the IRGC-QF

Once the Iran-Iraq War came to a close, the IRGC-QF was established to centralize and monopolize extraterritorial operations within a single unit—a decision driven in large part by President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. The force’s first three commanders reflected Rafsanjani’s preference for ensuring that the post went to former IRGC

intelligence directors with whom he had close personal relationships. Fereydoun Verdinejad (aka Mehdinejad) and Ahmad Shah Cheraghi (better known as Ahmad Vahidi) were both intimately involved with him in the Iran-Contra affair during the mid-1980s—they supervised the delivery of arms and spare parts from Israel to Iran and briefed Rafsanjani, who upon receiving each shipment would authorize the release of American hostages in Lebanon. Rafsanjani also had a close relationship with Qasem Soleimani, a fellow native of Kerman. According to Rafsanjani's memoirs, Soleimani nearly resigned from the IRGC in 1997 due to conflicts with Mohsen Rezaii, who was still heading the organization at the time. Rafsanjani persuaded him to stay a few more months until Khamenei replaced Rezaii with Yahya Rahim Safavi. Soleimani was then appointed as chief of the IRGC-QF.

Soleimani and his successor, Qaani, were also recruited on the basis of their Afghanistan expertise, which they gained while deployed there to fight drug cartels and the Taliban. At the time, the Islamic Republic perceived the rise of the Taliban as its primary external threat. Similarly, the men chosen as Qaani's two deputies so far (Fallahzadeh and, before him, Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi) reflect Iran's current strategic focus—they both served in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon over the past two decades.

Finally, beginning with Soleimani, all IRGC-QF commanders and deputies have previously served as IRGC provincial commanders. This fact—coupled with the Syria war, which necessitated the deployment of regular IRGC forces to reduce the burden on the IRGC-QF—has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the career tracks taken by leaders in each force. It also means that Qods Force leaders have extensive experience with internal security matters.

*Ali Alfoneh is the author of the book Political Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Demise of the Clergy and the Rise of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (2020).* ❖

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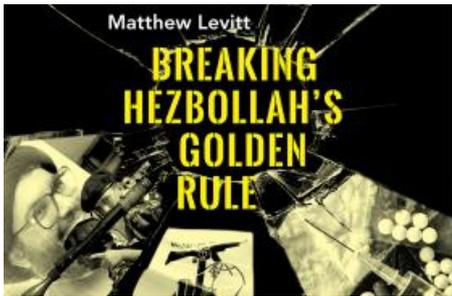
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