

Qaani’s Growing Leadership Struggles in a Post-Soleimani World

by [Jaber Rajabi \(/experts/jaber-rajabi\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Jaber Rajabi \(/experts/jaber-rajabi\)](#)

Jaber Rajabi is a former official in more than one Iran-backed Iraqi militia. In addition to his role in training militias with the support of the IRGC-Quds Force, he worked as a coordinator between some Iraqi factions. In 2016, Rajabi defected from the so-called Axis of Resistance and became a vocal opponent of the Islamic Republic’s policies in the region as well as its domestic policies.



After the killing of Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani, Esmail Qaani may have inherited a role for which he was not prepared, bringing instead a new style of leadership to the IRGC.

Upon the death of Soleimani, Esmail Qaani took over this role as spelled out in Soleimani’s own will. Yet understanding Qaani’s position under Soleimani helps explain some of his subsequent decisionmaking as Qods Force leader, along with some of the challenges he currently faces in that role.

During Soleimani's tenure as Qods Force commander, Qaani's role was mostly focused on managing the force's internal affairs. He was concurrently responsible for Afghanistan and Pakistan affairs. Managing the internal affairs of the Qods Force, which includes about 33,000 Iranian military personnel (across all divisions, including those working in Qods Force industries and military training) as well as supporting proxy groups that are directly managed by the Qods Force (groups managed by the Islamic Republic through Hezbollah), required constant presence. Soleimani was either traveling or in meetings and gatherings with various individuals, leaving the administrative and internal affairs to Qaani.

Although the Qods Force—part of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—comprises different components and ranks known as Units 400, 340, 12,000, and 700, among others, each has tasks in different geographical areas and dimensions. The responsibility for managing these ranks falls on the shoulders of the Qods Force leadership council, which often holds sessions similar to cabinet meetings to discuss important issues such as policymaking in target countries, operations, budgets, forming new groups, evaluating activities, military industries, etc. Qaani was also present in this council as the deputy commander of the Qods Force.

However, Qasem Soleimani acted like a spiritual father in networks akin to a mafia head; many of these networks do not fall under the ranks of the Qods Force. For instance, Unit 400 in the Qods Force is responsible for managing Iraqi

groups, at the same time, Qasem Soleimani created a strong network of various individuals with separate budgets and objectives. In this way, various individuals and groups depended on Soleimani, thus enabling him to establish a cohesive organization without registering it in the Qods Force, which consisted of thousands of companies, individuals, and small groups. Soleimani had frequent and friendly personal meetings even with the leaders of the middle ranks in the factions proxy to Iran.

On another front, Soleimani managed to balance between proxy groups such that each proxy group believed that Soleimani had the best relationship with it only, thus developing a high level of coordination and reliance on the Qods Force leader. Therefore, when Qaani took over, many of these groups had no prior connection with him and knew little about him. Qaani likewise did not have significant field knowledge of these groups given his experience focusing primarily on internal affairs.

The situation does not appear to have improved significantly since Qaani only meets proxy leaderships within a certain framework and in a very formal atmosphere, which has caused the relations between him and the groups affiliated with Iran in the region to cool down. Instead, proxy leaderships often now prefer to interact with those people who were close to Soleimani—especially the Unit 400 whose members compete with Qaani within the organization.

Qasem Soleimani was afflicted with an illusion of power and believed that no one would attempt to kill him because the cost would be too high. In contrast, Qaani is extremely worried about his safety. He has consequently become less active, further pushing Soleimani's previous tasks into the purview of other institutions. Qaani's efforts to isolate himself intensified after Israel attacked a target in Lebanon which happened to be close to Qaani's location, deepening his fears of assassination and impacting his willingness to develop relationships through face-to-face meetings with proxy leadership.

Qaani's inability to establish these close relationships has had an impact on the ability of the Qods Force to exercise coordination and control. A prime example of this erosion of relations occurred following the Iraqi elections, where Qaani was unable to play a decisive role in balancing the Tehran-affiliated groups as Soleimani had in the past.

Further signs of Qaani (Q)'s limited control include Asaib Ahl al-Haq (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0>) and the Badr Organization's private attacks on him, and Muqtada al-Sadr's refusal to allow Qaani to enter his house multiple times.

This new reality has ultimately had an impact on how Tehran manages its proxy relationships writ large. During Soleimani's time, matters related to countries where the Islamic Republic possessed significant influence—such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—were managed by the Qods Force and Soleimani himself, including on a political level where the Qods Force would appoint an ambassador to coordinate their financial, commercial, and military relations. Qaani has again proven unable to play such a role, leading other Iranian power centers to intervene in these portfolios. The breakdown in a chain of command has led to parallel work, lack of planning, contradictions, and confusion in the foreign policy of the countries targeted by Iran.

Qaani likewise faces challenges at home; he lacks the upper hand when it comes to internal conflicts within the Qods Force. Individuals like Yousif Shahlaei (Qods Force commander responsible for Yemen) Majid Navvab (commander of Unit 400 and deputy commander of Unit 340), Mohamed Reza Mohammadi (commander of Qods Force operations), Saeed Rezaei (former commander of Qods Force Intelligence Protection) and Seyyed Razavi (currently head of Qods Force finance previously head of logistics in Iraq) are all in purported conflict with Qaani, reaching a point where leadership members blocked Qaani's efforts to forcibly 'retire' sixty prominent members of the Qods Force who had been members of Soleimani's circle.

In fact, Soleimani's secret networks were not connected to Qaani at all, remaining instead within the competencies

of many of Soleimani's close associates. The exception to this model is Lebanese Hezbollah (LH), where all its leaders are members of the Qods Force—in some cases with military ranks and Iranian names. Due to this connection with the Qods Force, LH leadership has supported Qaani, tried to strengthen his position, and made his relations with Palestinian groups stronger than before. There are some insiders who believe that this relationship has had an impact on Hamas's decision to attack Israel on October 7. After the start of the war, sources affiliated with the so-called Axis of Resistance, whose identities are protected for security reasons, stated to the author that Qaani had directly planned this operation with the Palestinians. They understood the attack as having been implemented based off of a plan developed by Imad Mughniyeh years ago and updated with the help of Lebanese Hezbollah. However, these sources believe that Qaani had informed both Hezbollah and the Qods Force leadership council that the planned attack would not happen in the near future and that the measures being taken were simply preparatory in nature.

These sources described a conflict in the Qods Force leadership after October 7, questioning Qaani why the decision to attack had bypassed the leadership council—and whereby Qaani tried to exonerate himself in emphasizing that Mohammed Deif, Sinwar, and Al-Gharidi had carried out the attack outside of his command. That this is the understanding of at least some Axis of Resistance affiliates of how October 7 unfolded—a disconnect between Qaani and other elements of Qods Force leadership in the lead-up and aftermath of a major operation of an Iranian proxy—underscores the perception of turmoil within the IRGC leadership post-Soleimani, and their views of what this tension can lead to or allow in terms of Iran's broader control over its proxy groups. Moreover, there is the perception that the attack has sparked a good deal of criticism of Qaani from within the organization and among some proxy groups. The sources likewise believed that Qods Force leadership had reprimanded Qaani in a meeting held on October 14 and attended by the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Bagheri, commander of the central headquarters of Khatam al-Anbiya Gholam Ali Rashid, Shirazi, head of the military office of Mohsen Qomi, and a number of government members.

Each potential suggests a failure of leadership: if Qaani was indeed directly involved but did not inform IRGC leadership, this suggests that failed to inform the broader leadership beforehand that an attack would take place in order to ensure that the political, military, and economic infrastructure for it could be provided. Or else, if the operation took place without his knowledge, it is a significant failure for a leader held responsible for the behavior of groups that receive monthly salaries from Iran and where Iran bears the political responsibility resulting from these actions.

Unusual communication from the Supreme Leader provides some context to the assertions that there has been significant friction in the IRGC leadership in the preceding months. In December 2023, Ayatollah Khamenei felt compelled to publicly support Qaani during his meeting with Qasem Soleimani's family. This message of support was then posted on Khamenei's various X accounts in several languages including Farsi, Arabic, and English. The supreme leader rarely praises a live commander, and the break with this norm suggests Qaani needed this support, and that a deep schism inside the IRGC—and a serious challenge to Qaani's position—obliged Ayatollah Khamenei's public defense of him.

Qaani's Vision of the Future

The contrast between Soleimani and Qaani's leadership is striking. Soleimani led through developing deep and personal relationships with militia actors, while Qaani's cold and formal demeanor has alienated past supporters of Soleimani. Soleimani was extremely keen to be the most influential and most important man in the room, making moves in the region, while Qaani is still trying to consolidate his position as the commander of the Qods Force. And Soleimani apparently tried to avoid interfering in Iran's internal political affairs and to maintain an equal distance from the political factions within the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran, while Qaani maintains close

relations with Ibrahim Raisi and is seeking to establish closer cooperation with the Ministry of Intelligence—thereby distancing himself from the intelligence wing of the IRGC. Specifically, he is coordinating closely with the Ministry of Intelligence to liquidate political activists abroad, while in Soleimani's time these activities were done through the intelligence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

On the one hand, Qaani is inarguably a less effective leader. But his lack of control over Iran ’s proxies brings its own kind of danger. Qaani is no less warmongering than Soleimani, and is a strong supporter of Iran’s development of nuclear weapons. Moreover, his inability to control the empire built up by Soleimani has its own consequences for those targeted by these militias, as Iran’s ability to systematically reign in these forces erodes through a fragmentation of coordination.

Right now, Qaani’s future is unclear. After the end of the war between Israel and Hamas, it is likely that Qaani will be dismissed if he is indeed considered the main architect of October 7 among Iranian leadership. However, if he does manage to retain his position, Qaani will likely aim to carry out a wide-ranging structural change in the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, further bringing the force out of the age of Soleimani and into a different kind of role in the region to match Qaani’s own leadership style and limitations. ❖

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