

Iran Appoints Seasoned Qods Force Operative as Ambassador to Iraq

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Jan 18, 2017

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Brief Analysis

General Masjedi reportedly has a long track record of overseeing deadly anticoalition operations and making threatening statements against Israel and other U.S. allies, so his appointment to the embassy in Baghdad is highly troubling.

Recently, various sources confirmed that Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps general Iraj Masjedi, a top advisor to Qods Force (QF) commander Qasem Soleimani and ex-chief of staff for the IRGC's Ramadan Headquarters, is earmarked to become Iran's next ambassador to Iraq. Masjedi's exact position in the QF is unclear; some reports claim he manned the Iraq desk. What is clear is his reportedly deep involvement in QF activities in Iraq over the past several years, many resulting in the death, injury, or kidnapping of U.S. and coalition personnel as well as the assassination of Iraqi provincial officials who did not see eye to eye with Tehran.

Masjedi will replace Hassan Danaifar, another IRGC-QF officer. Yet while Danaifar served most of his career as a civil engineer and logistician, the new ambassador is expected to draw on his operational and intelligence experience to further transform Iraq's Shiite paramilitary organizations into more powerful elements of the state security apparatus, with a greater ability to influence the upcoming elections and Iraqi politics writ large.

The QF has a significant presence in many Iranian diplomatic missions around the world, especially in conflict zones. For example, when Taliban forces attacked an Iranian consulate in Afghanistan in 1998, almost all of the eleven Iranians killed were QF members. Iranian ambassadors also traditionally entrench the QF's presence in strategically high-value countries, spurring the late Expediency Council head Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to complain that the force's dominance in all aspects of Iran's regional policy had effectively paralyzed the Foreign Ministry.

The IRGC's involvement in foreign operations goes as far back as 1980, when it trained Afghan mujahedin to fight the Soviet invaders. It later trained Lebanese Shiites, founding Hezbollah as an umbrella group for several Shiite militant groups fighting the Israeli army there.

In 1983, at the height of the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Tehran formed the Ramadan HQ, predecessor of the current QF. Morteza Rezaei was tabbed to oversee the force's initial mission: conducting partisan/guerrilla-style and intelligence-gathering operations with Kurdish rebels in the mountains of northern Iraq. This approach gave Iran some degree of initiative in the war. IRGC units affiliated with the Ramadan HQ included the 6th Special Division, the 9th Badr Brigade (now the Badr Organization), populated with dissident Iraqis and former prisoners of war, the 66th Airborne Brigade, and the Zafar and Abouzar Brigades, the latter consisting of Afghan volunteers. The 6th Division and 66th Brigade later merged to become the Vali-ye Amr Corps, the unit entrusted with providing personal protection to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

In an interview with Iran's Mehr News Agency last June, Masjedi spoke of the Islamic Republic's "historic duty" to support all Muslim countries and militant groups that fight "Zionism and imperialism" so that the ultimate goal of destroying Israel can be "hastened." He also noted that Iran pursues foreign diplomacy on three parallel fronts: official, militant organizational (or "revolutionary"), and popular, as defined by the Supreme Leader. According to the general, this means that even as Iran conducts official business with regional governments, it also maintains close ties with militant groups and parties in order to influence local events and popular opinion.

Elsewhere, Masjedi has boasted that Iran could defeat Islamic State forces in Iraq within two days if the IRGC were allowed to deploy three combat divisions there. More broadly, he is a proponent of increasing Iran's strategic depth via ongoing hegemonic campaigns throughout the region. He even advocated including the West Bank in this strategic depth; last year, at a Tehran conference titled "Jihad Will Continue," he stated, "We need to deter Israel from attacking Iran by getting it busy at its own borders...We need to increase our power in the West Bank and Gaza...We need to arm the West Bank."

With Masjedi heading the embassy in Baghdad, Iran will likely expand its financial, material, and directional support to the Badr Organization and Hashd al-Shabi (the official network of Shiite militias also known as Popular Mobilization Units). These two proxies currently operate training facilities in Najaf and Hillah, respectively, where they prepare Iraqi and other Shiite volunteers to fight in Iraq and Syria. Tehran likely aims to prepare them for the period immediately following the Islamic State's defeat in Iraq, whether that means deploying them to Syria on a larger scale or perhaps even regrouping them to confront Israel.

Farzin Nadimi is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region. ❖

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