

Who Is Esmail Qaani, the New Chief Commander of Iran's Qods Force?

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Given the IRGC's recent restructuring, the Qods Force will likely see more continuity than change under Qaani, though his bureaucratic background is a far cry from Soleimani's brand of charismatic, risky leadership.

On January 3, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani as chief commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force, just hours after his predecessor, Qasem Soleimani, was killed by a U.S. drone strike. The new commander's background and military activities are not nearly as well known as Soleimani's, so taking a closer look at them can help determine whether and how the IRGC's main extraterritorial branch might change under his leadership.

EARLY LIFE AND MILITARY BACKGROUND

Interestingly, even the basic details of Qaani's birth are a matter of dispute. According to the short biography released by the Islamic Republic News Agency, he is a native of Mashhad, but the opposition Green Movement claims he was born in Bojnourd. The IRNA report also indicates he was born in 1959, which would make him around sixty-one years old—but the U.S. Treasury Department claimed he was born in 1957 when designating him as a terrorist in 2012 (an action spurred by [his alleged role in financing Qods Force arms shipments to Gambia](#)).

Persian-language open-source material does not provide much information about Qaani's family background, but he appears to have at least one son, Ali Qaani, who was a student of electrical engineering at the Mashhad branch of Azad University in 2010. According to the Green Movement, Ali was arrested for participating in anti-government rallies in 2009 at university campuses in Mashhad, a claim his father dismissed.

Most biographies of Islamic Republic officials include detailed commentary on their contributions to the 1979 revolution, but not so with Qaani. In a rare autobiographical interview published in the October 2015 edition of the news journal *Ramz-e Obour*, he admitted he did not play a prominent role: "I was present [in the revolution] like the rest of the people." Just as remarkably, he admitted he did not join the ranks of the revolutionaries right away—instead, he enlisted with the local branch of the nascent IRGC in his native Khorasan region in March 1980, a full year after the revolution, but a few months prior to the Iraqi invasion.

At the time, the Khorasan branch of the IRGC was led by a command council composed of young local clerics, including Ali Khamenei. There is no evidence of a direct relationship between Qaani and Khamenei at that point, but the two were destined to get to know each other.

According to the *Ramz-e Obour* interview, Qaani was then sent to Tehran, where he underwent thirty-five days of paramilitary training at the IRGC garrison in Saadabad, currently known as Imam Ali Garrison. The training was probably carried out by officers of the 23rd Airborne Special Forces Brigade. There he became friends with two fellow Khorasanis: Mohammad-Mehdi Khadem al-Sharieh (who would later be killed in the war with Iraq in 1982) and Vali-Allah Cheraqchi (killed in 1985). Following his training, Qaani returned to Mashhad, where he formed the nucleus of the eventual 5th Nasr Division alongside Cheraqchi, Khadem al-Sharieh, Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf (who would later become mayor of Tehran), and Nour-Ali Shoushtari (a highly influential IRGC officer assassinated in 2009).

Before long, the Mashhad unit was deployed to Gonbad-e Kavus in Golestan province to suppress leftist and ethnic Turkmen unrest. There is no evidence Qaani took part in that operation or subsequent policing of the city. Yet he admitted to *Ramz-e Obour* that he had been deployed in Iran's Kurdistan province to suppress Kurdish separatists. According to the 5th Nasr Division's website, 100 IRGC members from Khorasan were stationed in the Kurdistan province town of Sanandaj under Mahmoud Kaveh's command from March 1980 onward. Many IRGC members who later rose to prominence, including Soleimani, served in that area at one point or another, but there is no evidence of contacts between Soleimani and Qaani. By the time Iraq invaded in September 1980, the Khorasan unit in Kurdistan had expanded to 250 men under Baba-Mohammad Rostami's command and was relocated to Ahvaz to slow the enemy advance.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOLEIMANI AND KHAMENEI

It was on the southern front that Qaani befriended Soleimani in March 1982. Qaani commented on the relationship in a 2015 interview: “We are all war kids. What connects and relates us and our camaraderie is not based on geography and our hometown. We are war comrades, and it was the war that made us friends...Those who become friends at times of hardship have deeper and more lasting relations than those who become friends just because they are neighborhood friends.”

Indeed, the two men faced plenty of hardship during the war. The 5th Nasr Division played an active role in the conflict, and Qaani personally took part in successful operations such as Ashura, which liberated the Fasil and Garkoni heights north of Meimak (October 18-22, 1984); Valfajr VIII, which captured al-Faw Peninsula (February 9-April 29, 1986); Karbala I, which liberated Mehran (June 30-July 10, 1986); Nasr VIII, which stabilized Iranian positions around Maoot (November 20-21, 1987); and Karbala V, which liberated Shalamcheh (January 9-March 3, 1987). Yet he also participated in the disastrous Beit al-Muqaddas VII operation in Majnoon (June 25, 1988)—a defeat for which he is at least partially to blame because he served as the division’s commander at the time.

During these campaigns, Qaani also got to know then-president Khamenei. As a native of Mashhad, Khamenei often visited the 5th Nasr Division at the front. The two men were further connected through Shoushtari, who knew Khamenei before the revolution.

RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN THE IRGC

Immediately after the war, Qaani was promoted to deputy chief of the IRGC Ground Forces. In that capacity, he was likely involved in operations against drug cartels infiltrating Khorasan from Afghanistan. He also helped support Afghanistan’s Northern Alliance against the Taliban in the late 1990s. These activities no doubt brought him in close contact with Soleimani, who was pursuing a similar path in neighboring Kerman province at the time.

Open-source information does not indicate when Qaani joined the Qods Force. The earliest documented reference to his service there appears in the 1993 edition of the book *Islamic Fundamentalism: The New Global Threat*, which identified him as the force’s Ansar Corps commander responsible for IRGC activities “in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Asian Republics.” Soleimani probably appointed him as his deputy upon taking leadership of the force sometime between 1997 and 1998.

The author’s [2012 survey](#) of Qaani’s activities likewise found that his primary responsibilities as second-in-command centered around Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. This explains his presence in eastern parts of Iran and his frequent visits to Qom, where the leaders of Iran’s Afghan Shia proxy militias receive political indoctrination. Qaani may also have been in charge of Qods Force operations in Africa and South America. For example, when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad flew from Gambia to Brasilia in November 2009 accompanied by “200 business leaders,” Qaani was reportedly part of the delegation—a controversial move given that Brazil regards the Qods Force as a terrorist organization. After a twenty-four-hour stay, the delegation continued on to Bolivia, Venezuela, and Senegal.

Few other details are available about Qaani’s activities as Soleimani’s deputy, but the two appeared to establish a rough division of labor after the 2003 coalition invasion of Iraq, if not earlier. Iran’s strategic focus shifted westward at the time, with Soleimani working primarily on the western front and Qaani concentrating on Iran’s eastern borders. Just as important, Soleimani soon emerged as the charismatic public face of the Qods Force, while Qaani apparently attended to the organization’s day-to-day bureaucratic and administrative affairs.

CHANGE IN STYLE?

The Qods Force will likely see more continuity than change under Qaani’s leadership. In recent years, external factors compelled the IRGC to reorganize its foreign operations in a manner that insulated them somewhat from a major loss like Soleimani’s death. Due to the high fatality rate among Qods Force members in Syria, Tehran began deploying members of the regular IRGC there, thus removing many barriers between the two branches and gradually transforming the entire IRGC into one large extraterritorial force.

Even so, the Qods Force will likely change in at least one significant respect. In becoming the public face of a once-secret organization, Soleimani exposed himself to considerable danger, which eventually led to his killing. But he also managed to become a heroic figure capable of mobilizing many people behind a cause he considered sacred. It is difficult to expect Qaani, the bureaucrat, to emulate this brand of charismatic leadership. That said, Qaani will still exert substantial influence over Iran’s foreign activities due to the institutional power of the force he now commands.

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