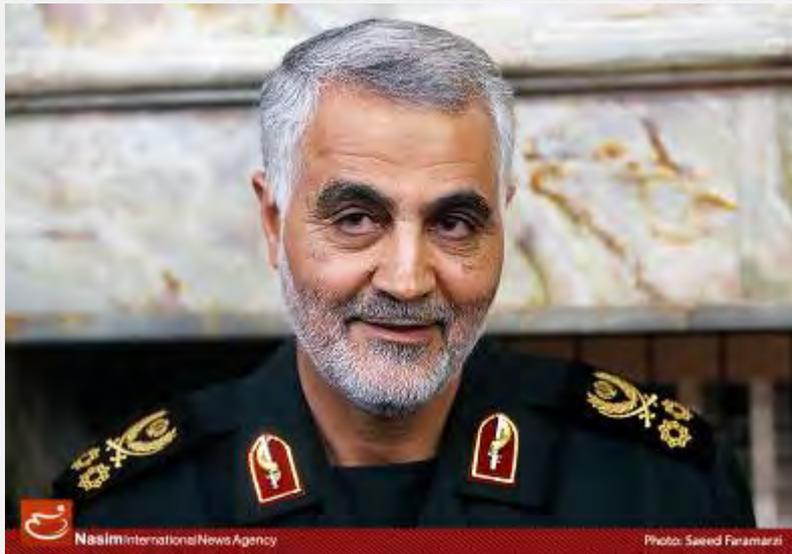




October 29, 2015

Portrait of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force, Instigator of Iranian Subversion and Terrorism in the Middle East and around the Globe

By Dr. Raz Zimmt¹



Qasem Soleimani (Nasimonline, October 20, 2015)

Overview

1. Major General Qasem Soleimani (Haj Qasem) was appointed commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) Qods Force ("Jerusalem Force") during the period between September 1997 and March 1998. It is one of five IRGC arms, the strongest security force in Iran and the regime's main prop. It is an elite unit thought to be composed of several thousand operatives. The Qods Force was established in 1990 as an organized, operational framework for the extensive activities Iran conducts to export the Islamic Revolution to other countries. **Over the years the Qods Force has become the spearhead of Iran's efforts to consolidate**

¹ This study of Qasem Soleimani was written for the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC) by Dr. Raz Zimmt, a research fellow in the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies in Tel Aviv University and a research fellow at the Forum for Regional Thinking. His fields of expertise include the politics, society, foreign policy and social networks in the Islamic Republic. The study was coordinated with ITIC research fellows and includes information previously appearing in ITIC publications about the Qods Force.

its regional power and promote its strategic objectives through terrorism and political subversion.

2. The Qods Force is not an organic military unit but rather an organizational framework which has general headquarters, designated commands that deal with various covert areas of specialization, and regional administrations responsible for specific geographical areas. It has great prestige with the upper echelons of the Iranian leadership, enjoys access to many resources, and has the ear of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The Qods Force influences the strategic-defense decision-making processes in Tehran, especially decisions concerning sensitive external issues related to Iran's regional activities. To fight Iran's various enemies in the Middle East and around the world **the Qods Force uses proxies, providing them with military support, funding and guidance.**

3. Qasem Soleimani is the second Qods Force commander. He replaced **Ahmad Vahidi**, who served as defense minister under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2009-2013). For many years Soleimani kept a low media profile and was almost unknown to the Iranian public (although he was mentioned in connection with Iranian subversion and terrorism beyond the borders of Iran). He was designated on the US foreign terrorist organizations list after the attempted assassination of the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Washington in 2011.² That and the key role he played in strengthening Iranian influence in the Middle East during the regional upheaval (the so-called "Arab Spring"), **significantly increased his media exposure both in Iran and abroad.** As a result, **he was mentioned as a possible candidate for future high political office in Iran.**

4. The far-reaching political changes in the Arab world in recent years created new opportunities for Iran to expand its influence in the Middle East. When the regional upheaval began, Iran represented the changes in the Arab world as an expression of an Islamic awakening inspired by the Islamic Revolution, and as the beginning of a transformation that would alter the face of the region. Since then, **under Qasem Soleimani's command, in order to advance Iranian hegemony in the Arab world the Qods Force has become the main instrument used to exploit the new opportunities presented by the collapse of national states and the weakness of the Sunni Arab states that oppose Iran's regional influence.**

² For further information see the November 2, 2011 bulletin, "The United States foiled an Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington using Quds Force..."

5. However, in addition to the new opportunities, the dramatic events in the Middle East **presented significant risks and challenges for Iran**. It quickly became apparent to the Iranian leadership that Arab-world politics were more complex than previously supposed and **that it was not entirely certain the Islamic Republic could direct the regional upheaval or serve as a role model for the Arab Sunni states**. The Shi'ite uprising in Bahrain in 2011 increased Arab concerns over Iran's increasing influence, and deepened existing Sunni Arab suspicions of Iran. **The civil war in Syria** (Iran's most important ally in the Arab world) **was another serious challenge for Iran and threatened to undermine the coherence of the Iranian-led "resistance front."** ISIS's military successes were a strategic challenge for Iran, which it met by sending Iraq and Syria weapons and advisors, the most important of whom was Soleimani. The American-led international campaign against ISIS made the challenge more formidable and complicated the situation in Iraq and Syria for Iran.

6. To cope with the regional upheaval, Iran provided the Qods Force with resources in an effort to exploit opportunities and to minimize risks. **In the new Middle East that arose, behind the scenes (and during the past year on center stage) Qasem Soleimani began pulling the strings of Iran's subversive, military and political activities. That made him one of the most influential figures in formulating Iranian foreign policy, and his influence can be expected to grow in the wake of Iran's nuclear deal.** In shaping Iranian regional foreign policy, he has become even more influential than the foreign minister. He is closely connected to the political leadership, who regard him as an authority on the dramatic developments unfolding in the Middle East. For example, on two occasions during the past two years (September 2014 and September 2015) Soleimani was invited to appear at the Assembly of Experts (a powerful council, responsible for electing, removing and overseeing the activities of the Supreme Leader, and with the power to decide if he is fulfilling his role properly).



Qasem Soleimani shakes hands with Iranians in Isfahan (www.598.ir, January 18, 2015).

7. Qasem Soleimani's approach to developments in the regional arena reflect the basic concept of the Iranian regime, **which regards the West, especially the United States, as the source of all the evil in the world and the main threat to Iran's national security and vital interests.** Its hostility towards the United States and Israel ("the Zionist regime," considered an American proxy) is still at the core of the Iranian ideology, even after the nuclear agreement. According to Qasem Soleimani, whose views accurately reflect those of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, **Iran spearheads the struggle against the United States and its regional proxies.** Therefore, ensuring the might of Iran, the Qods Force and Iran's allies in the "resistance front" is necessary to foil American efforts and **turn Iran into the regional hegemon.**

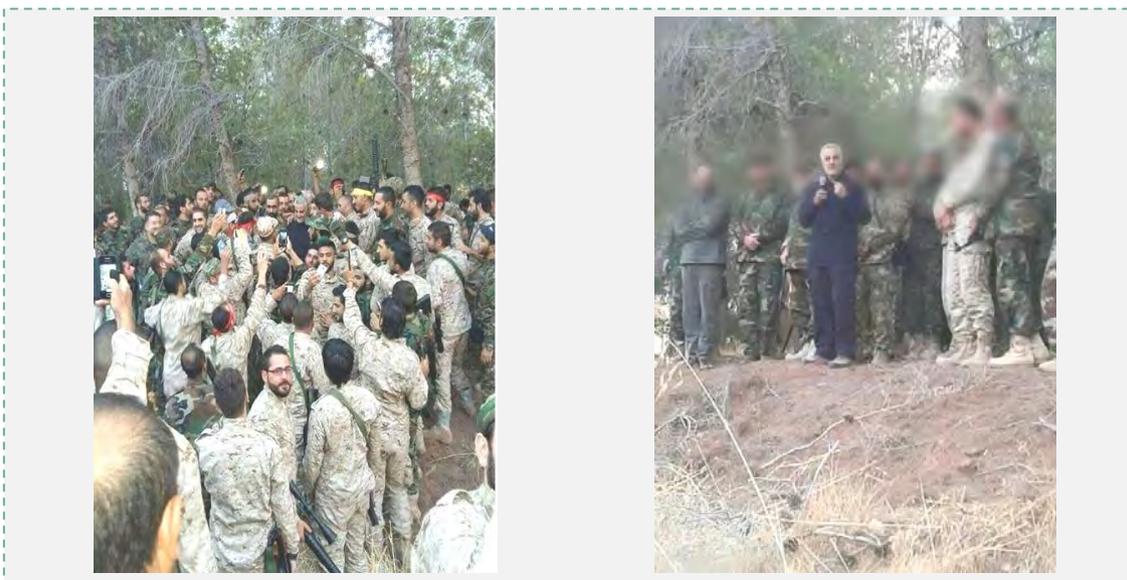
8. **According to Qasem Soleimani, Iran has had considerable success in its dealings with the United States and its Middle Eastern allies.** Speaking recently at a conference of IRGC commanders in Tehran, he claimed that the Middle East and Western Asia had been greatly influential in the "collapse" of America's status as a world power and that during the past twenty years Iran had inflicted great damage on everything that made America a power. He noted four ways the United States was trying to rehabilitate its status in the Middle East. They included exploiting the UN and other agencies, such as human rights organizations; strengthening the "Zionist regime;" weakening Iran; and keeping the struggles in the Muslim world alive in order to increase their dependence on the United States. He claimed that American policy regarding ISIS and other radical Islamist organizations was to exploit them to promote its own interests, but not to destroy them. The United States wanted to preserve

these organizations so that Middle Eastern countries would become more dependent on it (Mehr News Agency, September 16, 2015).

9. Using Qasem Soleimani's strategies, Iran strengthened its regional status and influence during the upheaval. Iranian involvement in Iraq halted ISIS's advance, its support for Assad prevented the Syrian regime from collapsing, and its support of the Houthi rebels in Yemen gave them an advantage over the Yemeni government. **On the other hand, both Iran in general and Soleimani in particular also had failures.** Despite Iranian support, including of Hezbollah and the Syrian army, the Syrian regime is flailing, which necessitated direct Russian military involvement. The fighting between the Iraqi administration and the Iranian-supported Shi'ite militias on the one hand, and ISIS on the other, is at a stalemate, and Iran's Houthi allies in Yemen recently suffered serious setbacks. That showed the limits of Iran's force in those arenas and the problematical nature of a strategy relying on the use of Iranian proxies throughout the Middle East.

10. In view of the Syrian regime's distress during the past year, manifested by the threat posed by Al-Nusra Front to Latakia and other Syrian regime strongholds along the coast, **in the middle of September 2015 Iran increased the number of its forces in Syria from several hundred to several thousand.** The reinforcements, who came from the IRGC and IRGC-operated militias, were sent to support the Syrian army in its offensive in northern Syria, which began on October 7, 2015. The Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese daily newspaper Al-Akhbar reported that on October 11, 2015, Qasem Soleimani arrived in northwestern Syria and commanded the Syrian army offensive with the support of the IRGC (Al-Akhbar, October 13, 2015).

11. The IRGC involvement in the fighting in Syria has brought Qasem Soleimani into the limelight. The social networks posted current video and pictures of Soleimani (apparently from the region of Latakia) showing him briefing Hezbollah fighters. His arrival in Syria at the same time as the Iranian forces **would seem to indicate that the efforts of the Qods Force in general and Soleimani in particular are being diverted from Iraq to Syria.** The Syrian regime's strategic distress is forcing the Qods Force, under Soleimani's command, to concentrate its efforts to help the Syrian army repel the rebels in northwestern Syria (in the regions of Homs, Hama, Idlib and Aleppo), with Russian aerial support. So far the Syrian offensive has had difficulties and IRGC fighters in the front lines have suffered serious losses (**more than thirty dead, among them three senior officers with the rank of colonel or brigadier general**).



Qasem Soleimani briefs fighters (apparently Hezbollah), probability in the region of Latakia, after the beginning of the ground offensive in northern Syria (Facebook, October 13, 2015).

12. In recent years Qasem Soleimani has become very powerful in the internal Iranian political arena. His continued service in the IRGC, the support he receives from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, his close relations with the Iranian political leadership, his commitment to the Islamic regime and the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, and his public image as a national hero all **strengthen his position and might help him in the future if he decides on a political career**. However, connections, experience and talent do not necessarily ensure political success in Iran. There are several past examples of senior IRGC commanders who tried to go into national politics and did not succeed (for example former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei and Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf).

Sources and Structure

13. **This study focuses on Qasem Soleimani** and his activities during the past two years with regard to overall Iranian policy and the Qods Force. It is the continuation of two previous Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC) studies: "Using the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards as the main tool to export the revolution beyond the borders of Iran," issued April 2, 2007; "The Quds Force, an elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, spearheads Iran's global terrorist campaign," issued August 7, 2012; and other ITIC documents that examined the Qods Force's subversive and terrorist activities in the Middle East and around the globe under the command of Qasem Soleimani.

14. The study is based on a **wide variety of open source material** issued in recent years by Iranian, Arab and Western media, and by the social networks. While they

provide a large quantity of information about Qasem Soleimani's activities and the operations of the Qods Force, there are still some gaps, which have been noted.

15. The study is divided into nine sections:

- 1) Section 1: A short biography of Qasem Soleimani
- 2) Section 2: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in the Syrian civil war
- 3) Section 3: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in Iraq
- 4) Section 4: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in the Palestinian arena and Israel
- 5) Section 5: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in Lebanon
- 6) Section 6: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in Yemen and other Middle Eastern states
- 7) Section 7: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in internal Iranian politics
- 8) Section 8: Qasem Soleimani's public image
- 9) Section 9: Possible lifting of international sanctions on Qasem Soleimani in the wake of the nuclear agreement

Section 1: A Short Biography of Qasem Soleimani³



Qasem Soleimani during the Iran-Iraq War (Snn.ir, May 29, 2014)

1. **Qasem Soleimani (Hajj Qasem)** was born on March 11, 1957, in the village of Qalat Molk in the Rabor district of Kerman Province in southeastern Iran. The area is mountainous and has a tribal population. Soleimani has five siblings. The oldest is a sister, now about 60; Qasem was the middle child. His brother Sohrab, seven years his junior, is head of the Tehran Province prisons.



Sohrab Soleimani, Qasem Soleimani's younger brother, head of the Tehran province prisons (Fars News, August 12, 2015).

³ Some of the material in this section comes from the August 7, 2012 bulletin "The Quds Force, an elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, spearheads Iran's global terrorist campaign," There is also biographical material written by Ali Alfoneh, who studies the IRGC: Ali Alfoneh, "Brigadier General Qasem Soleimani," American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, January 2011. Additional information was taken from a Fars News interview with Qasem Soleimani's brother Sohrab Soleimani, on August 12, 2015.

2. In 1970, when Soleimani was 13 years old, he graduated from elementary school and moved with a relative to the city of Kerman, the provincial capital. The two worked in construction for the Kerman Water Organization to help the family repay the debts of his father, who was a farmer. He was active in sports and worked as a fitness trainer, and apparently has a black belt in karate.



Soleimani with his father (left) and mother (who died in September 2013) (Mashriq News, September 29, 2014, Fars News, April 20, 2014).

3. Soleimani began his revolutionary activities against the Shah in Kerman in 1976. In 1979, after the Islamic Revolution, he joined the IRGC when it established a command council in the city of Kerman. Like many other IRGC commanders, he had no previous military experience. However, he showed himself capable and was quickly appointed to command positions, and according to a comrade at the time, he participated in a 45-day military course. His first military mission was in 1979, when he was sent to help suppress a Kurdish separatist uprising in the West Azerbaijan Province in northwestern Iran. He was stationed in the city of Mahabad, apparently as part of a company-size unit of irregulars sent to administer and defend the city. The unit helped suppress the Kurdish uprising and put an end to the bloody sectarian clashes between Azeris and Kurds.

4. From Mahabad Soleimani returned to Kerman and was appointed to administer the local IRGC garrison. When the Iran-Iraq War broke out in the fall of 1980 he was sent to the southern front where he commanded a force from Kerman. He rapidly climbed the ladder of command and by the time he was in his twenties he commanded the IRGC's 41st Sarollah Division.

5. After the Iran-Iraq war, the division under Soleimani's command was sent back to Kerman to fight drug smugglers operating along Iran's southeastern border. His extensive experience in the Iran-Iraq War and his successful operations against the smugglers led the supreme leader to appoint him as commander of the Qods Force at the end of 1997 (or the beginning of 1998, the exact date is unclear). His appointment as commander of the Qods Force came at a time when Iraq no longer posed a significant threat to the Islamic regime in Tehran. The regime's attention was drawn to events in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban. In addition to strengthening the Iranian forces along the Afghan border, Soleimani dealt with the challenge by using non-conventional military methods, and at the same time directed subversive activities on Afghan soil from Tajikistan and the areas controlled by the Northern Alliance.

6. In the years since Qasem Soleimani's appointment as the Qods Force commander, it has expanded and developed. The numbers of its forces and missions in the Middle East and elsewhere have increased. In the meantime, Soleimani's status in the Iranian leadership has risen. In January 2011, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei promoted him to the rank of major general, the highest rank in the IRGC and equal to the rank of IRGC commander.



Qasem Soleimani bows before Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (Asiran.com, July 3, 2015). The Qods Force's subversive and terrorist activities are supported by Ali Khamenei and the rest of the Iranian leadership.

7. Soleimani has three sons, one of whom is married to the daughter of his younger brother Sohrab, and two daughters, one of whom, named Narges, lives in Malaysia.

Section 2: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in the Syrian civil war



Qasem Soleimani and the Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun. The picture was posted to the social networks at the beginning of 2015 but its date is unknown.

Recent Iranian Involvement in Syria

1. The civil war in Syria that broke out in 2011 posed a serious challenge for Iran. If the Bashar Assad's regime toppled it could herald Syria's exit from the resistance camp as a strategic ally and weaken Iran's regional status. It could also weaken Hezbollah in Lebanon (Iran's most important and an effective proxy), because it would mean the loss of vital Syrian logistic support, necessary for the transfer of military support to the organization.
2. The rebels' mounting military successes, a function of the continuing depletion of the Syrian regime's resources, made it necessary for Iran to ramp up its support for the regime, whose control was becoming increasingly limited to vital areas ("Little Syria"). The military successes of ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations, some of them supported by the United States, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, raised doubts in Iran as to Assad's ability to remain in power. Nevertheless, the increasing commitment of Iran and Hezbollah, then joined by Russia, have made it possible, so far, for the Syrian regime to survive.
3. **Until recently, Iran's involvement in Syria**, like its involvement in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, **was carried out by proxies and Iranian advisors**. Iran had so far not sent fighting units to Syria or other Arab countries. **That recently changed when the Iranian IRGC joined the ground offensive in Syria**. The Qods Force, commanded

by Qasem Soleimani, has been in the forefront of Iran's effort to prevent the fall of Damascus and other strategic strongholds, and the collapse of the Syrian regime. Iran provided Syria with weapons, strategic guidance and military advisors, and sent Hezbollah and Shi'ite foreign fighters (primarily from Iraq and Afghanistan) to active duty in Syrian territory. Beginning in 2012, the IRGC recruited several thousand Shi'ite volunteer fighters from among the Afghan refugees living in Iran, in return for a monthly salary and other benefits.

Cultivating Terrorist Networks in the Golan Heights

4. In addition to supporting the Syrian regime, **Iran also supports the cultivation of terrorist networks in the Golan Heights to oppose Israel.** It employs local networks operating in the Golan Heights that exploit the loss of the Syrian regime's control over most of the region (and which for the most part is now under rebel control). The main local forces involved in establishing terrorist networks against Israel are **Hezbollah operatives, Druze operatives linked to Samir Quntar and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) operatives.** Iran probably wants to cultivate the terrorist networks but not put them into operation against Israel immediately, because most of its attention is focused on protecting the survival of the Assad regime.

5. **A reminder of the potential for terrorism from the Golan Heights** came on August 20, 2015, when four rockets were fired at Israel from the Syrian-controlled Golan Heights. Two hit Israeli territory in the Upper Galilee and two fell in the Golan Heights. It was the first rocket barrage from the Golan Heights attacking the Galilee Panhandle since the Yom Kippur War (October 1973). According to Israeli security sources, the rockets were launched by a PIJ squad directed by a high-ranking Iranian.

6. It was not the first Iranian footprint found among the terrorist networks trying to establish themselves in the Golan Heights. On January 18, 2015, **a convoy of Hezbollah operatives was attacked in the northern Golan Heights,** and Hezbollah accused Israel of responsibility. Among those killed were Jihad Mughnieh, the son of Imad Mughnieh, who had commanded **Hezbollah in the northern Golan Heights.** Among those killed was also Mohammad Allahdadi, a senior IRGC commander. His presence in the convoy might indicate his involvement in the activity of Hezbollah operatives who were attacked. .



Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, senior IRGC officer, killed in the attack on January 18, 2015 (Jibshit website, January 19, 2015)

7. Despite the Qods Force's significant involvement in Iran's support for the Assad regime, there is not much information about Qasem Soleimani's personal involvement in the events in Syria. **Until recent months most of his attention was clearly directed towards Iraq.** The Iraqi arena is high on the Iranian regime's priority list because it has a large Shi'ite population, it is immediately important to the defense of Iran's borders, and because of ISIS's dramatic military successes there in the summer of 2014 (the conquest of Mosul and the declaration of the Islamic Caliphate).

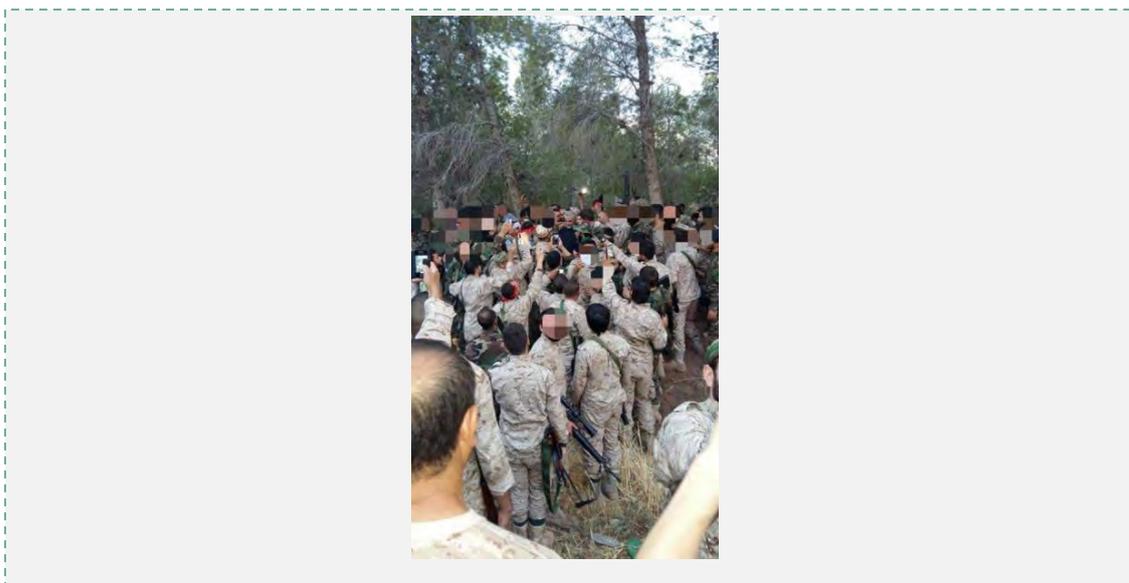
8. However, there is no doubt about Soleimani's personal involvement in IRGC activity in Syria, especially in directing the fighting and coordinating between the Syrian forces, the Hezbollah fighters and the Shi'ite foreign fighters in the various battle zones. According to John Maguire, formerly a CIA officer in Iraq, quoted by The New Yorker on September 30, 2013, it was Soleimani who led the successful offensive of Syrian regime supporters in May-June 2013, leading to Hezbollah's retaking of the town of al-Qusayr on the Syrian-Lebanese border. According to the report, Soleimani ordered Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to dispatch more than 2,000 Hezbollah fighters to support the fighting.⁴ In addition, Soleimani met with senior Syrian officials.

9. During the past two years the Arab media issued reports of sporadic visits paid by Soleimani to Syria. Sources affiliated with the Lebanese opposition claimed he was in the Aleppo region at the beginning of June 2014, where he formulated a plan to

⁴ For further information about the involvement of Hezbollah in the fighting at al-Qusayr and its losses, see the bulletin, "Hezbollah Operatives Killed in Syria – Update."

retake the city, parts of which had been occupied by the rebels. Putting the plan into operation was delayed, apparently by ISIS's advance through Iraq, the fall of the city of Mosul to ISIS and the declaration of the Islamic Caliphate in June 2014; the plan was renewed in August 2014 (Now Lebanon website, December 11, 2015).

10. On October 7, 2015, with the participation of IRGC and Hezbollah fighters, and with Russian aerial support, the Syrian army began an offensive to cleanse the regions of Hama, Aleppo and Idlib. Its objective was to ward off **the recent strategic threat to Latakia** and the Syrian regime strongholds along the coast. The threat necessitated **Soleimani's increased personal involvement, in all probability to a great extent at the expense of his involvement in Iraq**. At the beginning of June 2015 the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese website Al-Hadath reported that Soleimani had visited the fighting fronts in southern and western Syria to gain knowledge of the situation and formulate a strategy to curb the activities of the radical Sunni organizations. According to the report, he headed a delegation of senior military advisors from Iran and Hezbollah in Aleppo who went to the plain of Al-Ghab to examine the deployment of the Syrian army and find ways to halt the advance towards Latakia of Al-Nusra Front and its allies. Al-Hadath also reported that during the visit, Soleimani appointed a senior IRGC officer to command military advisors in Syria and represent him in everything related to conducting military affairs in Syria, in collaboration with Hezbollah and the Syrian army.⁵

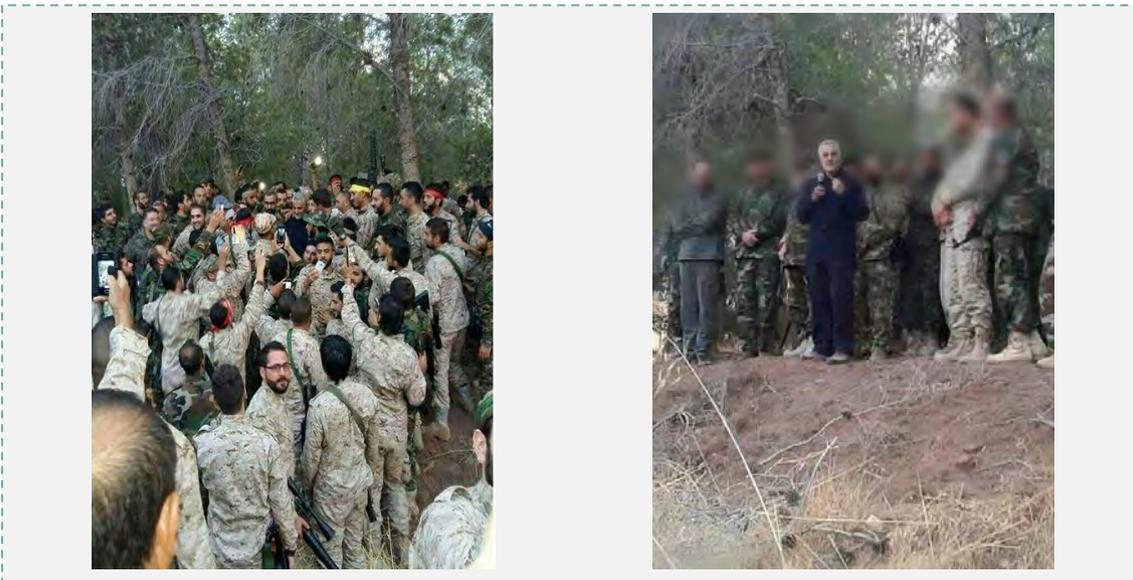


Syrian soldiers in Qasem Soleimani's selfie (Qasemsoleimani.ir, October 14, 2015)

⁵ The officer may have been Hossein Hamedani, the senior IRGC military advisor killed on October 8, 2015, in the region of Aleppo.

11. In mid-September 2015, the Syrian regime's predicament led Iran to increase the number of its forces in Syria, **apparently by several thousand**. The reinforcements, who were both IRGC operatives and Shi'ite foreign fighters from Afghanistan and Iraq, were sent to support the Syrian army in the ground offensive in the north. The Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar reported that **on October 11, 2015, Qasem Soleimani had arrived in northwestern Syria and commanded the Syrian army offensive with the support of the IRGC** (Al-Akhbar, October 13, 2015).

12. **Soleimani's participation in commanding the offensive put him in the limelight**. The social networks posted a video and pictures of him briefing Hezbollah fighters (apparently in the region of Latakia). His arrival in Syria with the Iranian reinforcements apparently indicates the Qods Force has switched its attention to there from Iraq. The strategic distress of the Syrian regime requires that the Qods Force, under Soleimani's command, concentrate its efforts on repelling the rebels from northwestern Syria (the regions of Homs, Hama, Idlib and Aleppo) in collaboration with the Syrian army and Hezbollah, and with Russian aerial support (a pro-Assad coalition inside Syria which Soleimani plays a key role, operating in tandem with the American-led international coalition).



Qasem Soleimani briefs fighters, apparently in the region of Latakia, after the beginning of the Syrian army's ground offensive in northern Syria (Facebook, October 13, 2015).

13. So far, **the Syrian army ground offensive in northwestern Syria has met with difficulties**. Near the city of Al-Safira, south of Aleppo, ISIS and Al-Nusra Front made territorial gains and now threaten to take control of the rural areas south of the city (as of October 28, 2015). The IRGC fighters, stationed at the front of the attacking Syrian

force, have suffered heavy losses (more than thirty dead since the beginning of the offensive, among them three senior officers with the rank of colonel and brigadier general). **Hossein Salami**, acting IRGC commander, has already been asked to explain the rise in Iranian losses. He reportedly said the IRGC had raised the "quantity and quality" of its advisory forces in Syria. He claimed it was sending in reinforcements that led to the rise in the number of Iranian dead, because, he said, "they cannot stay in closed rooms," but had to go out into the field (ISNA, October 26, 2015).

Soleimani's Public Position on the Syrian Issue

14. Like other senior Iranians, **in his public statements Qasem Soleimani unequivocally adheres to Iran's commitment to support the Syrian regime**, emphasizing Syria's importance for Iran's national interests. He has not publicly expressed any reservations, regardless of the harm the Syrian regime does to its own population or as a result of its use of chemical weapons (which was strongly condemned by the West). In response to reports that the Syrian regime had, in fact, used chemical weapons in the summer of 2013, Soleimani said Iran supported Syrian regime "to the end" (Fars News, September 4, 2013).

15. Reviewing regional developments for the Council of Experts in September 2013, **Soleimani accused the United States of trying to topple the Syrian regime through political pressure and by sending Al-Qaeda operatives to Syria**. He claimed that the American administration also exploited reports of the Syrian regime's alleged use of chemical weapons as an excuse to topple the regime. However, he said that in his estimation the American efforts would fail. A few weeks later he said that the central role Syria played in supporting the "resistance camp" against the United States and Israel, and the achievements of the Syrian regime in its fight against the terrorists were the reasons for the increasing pressure put on Damascus. He stressed Iran's continuing support for Syria, claiming it served Iran's national interests (Fars News, September 14, 2013).

16. Soleimani also noted Iran's commitment to support Syria at a meeting held in July 2015 with Iran-Iraq War veterans and the families of fighters who were killed. He told them that the defense of the shrine of Sitt Zeynab (the granddaughter for the prophet Muhammad) in Damascus was the defense of a sacred site, which was defined by the founder of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, as a supreme religious duty (Arman-e kerman, July 17, 2015). (Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias, both Iranian proxies, played a central role in defending of the shrine)

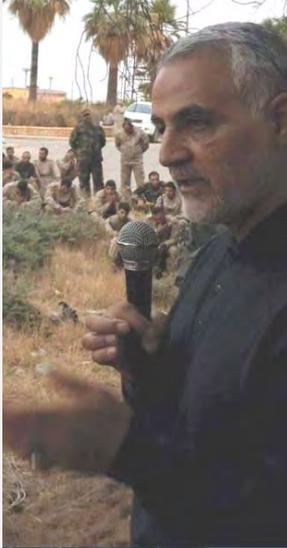


Qasem Soleimani speaks to Iran-Iraq War veterans and the families of fighters who were killed (Tashohada.ir, July 17, 2015)

17. **Soleimani's public statements often parrot Iran's official propaganda line and should be regarded as based on expectations and wishful thinking rather than fact.** For example, in early 2015 he stated that ISIS's days were numbered because of the defeats it and the other radical Sunni Islamic organizations had suffered in Syria and Iraq (IRNA, February 11, 2015). A few months later the Iranian media quoted him as saying the world would be surprised "in the coming days" by developments in Syria in the wake of the collaboration between Iran and the commanders of the Syrian army (Mashregh News, June 1, 2015). The report was later denied on the claim that Soleimani did not customarily make promises about future military successes.

Coordinating Russian Involvement in Syria

18. In the summer of 2015 the Assad regime's distress led its main allies, especially Russia and Iran, to intensify their involvement in the fighting in Syria. At the beginning of August 2015 Fox News reported that **during a visit to Moscow Soleimani met with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.** The meeting, which was denied by both Iranian and Russian sources, was held, according to American sources, to discuss military collaboration between Iran and Russia, including the provision of Russian S-300 aerial defense systems. In retrospect it would seem that **the meeting focused on expanding Russian-Iranian security and political collaboration in the Syrian arena during the months before the beginning of the Russian aerial attacks in Syria.**



Qasem Soleimani briefs fighters in Syria (Qasemsoleimani, October 14, 2015).

Section 3: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in Iraq



Qasem Soleimani on a visit to the city of Karbala in Iraq (ABNA, August 21, 2015)

Soleimani's involvement in Iraq during the American military presence

1. Since the beginning of the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, the Qods Force has led Iran's collaboration with the Iraqi Shi'ite militias. Its objectives were to strengthen Iranian influence with them, support their campaign against the United States and the international coalition forces and to establish Iranian influence over the Iraqi leadership.

2. As part of Iranian involvement in Iraq **the Qods Force provided most of the Shi'ite militias⁶ with money, equipment and weapons.** The Qods Force also coordinated and organized **sending Hezbollah operatives to Iraq to support the fighting against the United States.** The weapons the Qods Force supplied the Shi'ite militias, especially powerful explosive devices, killed many American and other coalition forces soldiers. At the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007 the **American forces arrested Iranian operatives, among them Qods Force operatives in Iraq,** for their involvement in subversion and terrorism in Iraq.

⁶ Among the Shi'ite militias cultivated by the Qods Force, the largest were the Hezbollah Battalions (Ktaab Hezbollah), the League of the People of Truth (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq) and the Promised Day Brigade (Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud), with several thousand operatives.



Left: The logo of the Hezbollah Battalions Shi'ite militia. Right: the logo of Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Arabic is a Qur'an verse reading "Fight the imams of apostasy, for they have no faith." The similarity between the two logos is striking.

3. Qods Force activity in Iraq during the American military presence was orchestrated by a regional command called the Iraq Corps (or Ramadan Corps). It directed Iranian activities inside Iraq, especially commanding the Shi'ite militias operating under Iranian influence. In addition, the Iranians also engaged in political subversion in the internal Iraqi arena. One of the Wikileaks documents exposed a communiqué from the American embassy in Baghdad sent on November 13, 2009, which described Iran's efforts to manipulate the Iraqi elections, and detailed Qasem Soleimani's capabilities in the Iraqi arena.⁷

Qasem Soleimani's involvement in the anti-ISIS campaign

4. ISIS's dramatic military successes in Iraq, especially in the summer of 2014, **posed a serious strategic challenge for Iran**. At the beginning of June 2014 ISIS occupied most of the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. ISIS's takeover of broad swaths of Iraq jeopardized its territorial integrity, worsened the Sunni-Shi'ite rift and positioned a hostile, violent organization on Iran's border. **That forced Iran to dispatch arms and advisors to Iraq under the command of Qasem Soleimani, who directed the Iraqi military campaign fought by Iranian-supported Shi'ite militias in coordination with the Iraqi regime.**

5. During the past year the social networks and Iranian media posted dozens of pictures and videos documenting Soleimani's activity in Iraq (despite the fact that his presence in Iraq was formally denied by Iran until the summer of 2014). The pictures

⁷ Guardian.co.uk, December 4, 2010.

prove Soleimani was often in Iraq, accompanied by commanders and fighters of the Iranian-supported Shi'ite militias. Soleimani, who until then had preferred to work behind the scenes, entered the limelight.



Left: Qasem Soleimani meets with the commanders of the Jihad Companies militia and Jamal al-Ibrahimi, commander of the Hezbollah Battalions (Facebook, June 17, 2015). Right: Qasem Soleimani and Jamal al-Ibrahimi (aka Abu Mahdi the Engineer), (Qasemsoleimani.ir, June 7, 2015).

6. In the wake of ISIS's military successes in Iraq, beginning in the summer of 2014 Soleimani's involvement in the various battle zones in Iraq increased significantly. During the past year, until the recent Syrian army offensive in the north, **he devoted most of his time and energy to halting the spread of ISIS in Iraq**. To that end he paid frequent visits to Iraq, led campaign planning and the transfer of military support and intelligence from Iran to Iraq, coordinated the joint fighting of the Iraqi army and the Shi'ite militias fighting under IRGC aegis and was in constant contact with senior Iraqi officials in the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish leadership in northern Iraq.

7. **ISIS's occupation of Mosul triggered the intensification of Soleimani's involvement in Iraq**. According to a report broadcast on Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV, a few hours after ISIS occupied Mosul Soleimani landed in Baghdad, accompanied by Iranian and Hezbollah military advisors. Meeting with senior Iraqi regime officials, he formulated a strategy of Iraqi army and Shi'ite militia collaboration for the defense of Baghdad and its environs to prevent further ISIS advances. Soleimani ordered the securing of the road between Baghdad and Samarra, which lies 125 kilometers (78 miles) to the northwest. He also commanded the battles against ISIS along the road leading to Baghdad and in Al-Anbar Province in western Iraq (Lebanese news website Naharnet, November 29, 2015). **In retrospect, it can be said that the**

impetus of ISIS's expansion in Iraq was halted after its successes in the summer of 2014. However, despite American and Iranian support, the Iraqi army and the Shi'ite militias could not restore the status quo ante.



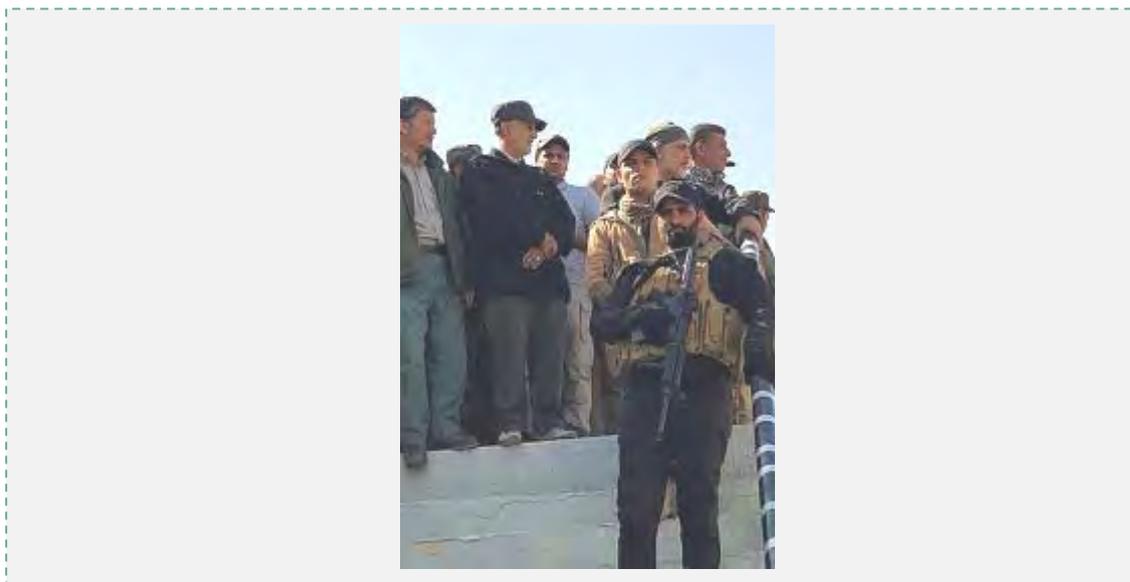
Qasem Soleimani and senior Shi'ite militia commanders in Iraq (ABNA, August 21, 2015).

8. Senior Iraqi army personnel also gave Soleimani credit for planning the liberation of the ISIS-occupied city of Jurf al-Sakher, which lies 50 kilometers (30 miles) south of Baghdad, as part of Operation Ashura (October 2014). According to Iraqi Shi'ite militia commanders, Soleimani was on the front lines and oversaw the training of thousands of Iraqi fighters. He also coordinated with Iraqi army commanders before the operation, whose objective was **to prevent ISIS from advancing towards the cities of Najaf and Karbala, both sacred to Shi'a Islam** (Fars News, November 12, 2014). **Fears ISIS would make such inroads have not been realized so far and the fighting in Iraq has not yet reached regions sacred to Shi'a Islam.**



Qasem Soleimani with senior Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq militia fighters after the reoccupation of Jurf al-Sakher (ABNA, November 10, 2014)

9. At the beginning of March 2015 Soleimani went to the Salah al-Din Province north of Baghdad to oversee the fighting of more than 25,000 Iraqi army soldiers and Shi'ite militiamen, who fought successfully to liberate the Sunni city of Tikrit, the provincial capital (occupied by ISIS in June 2014). Soleimani had conducted the campaign in conjunction with the commanders of Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite militias during the time of the American presence in Iraq. The commanders were **Hadi al-Ameri**, commander of the **Badr Forces**; **Qays al-Khazaeli**, commander of the **Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq**; and **Abu-Mahdi al-Muhandis**, commander of the **Hezbollah Battalions in Iraq** (Fars News, March 2, 2015). The reoccupation of Tikrit in June 2015 was assisted by **aerial support from the American-led international coalition**. That support, **which illustrated the limits of the Iraqi army and the Iranian-supported Shi'ite militias**, came in response to a request from the Iraqi government, in view of the difficulties experienced by the Qods Force-supported Iraqi forces in expelling ISIS from Tikrit.



Qasem Soleimani at Tikrit during the campaign to reoccupy it (Fararu, March 2, 2015).

10. On October 24, 2015, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced **the liberation of the oil city of Baiji after seven months of fighting**. The Iraqi army issued a similar announcement. Iraqi TV broadcast pictures of the Iraqi army in the center of the city (which was in ruins). If the Iraqi army gains control of Baiji, the refineries and surrounding areas, it will be **an important achievement for both the army and the Iranians**. It will also mean more prestige for Soleimani, who follows events in Iraq even as he manages the Syrian arena. The Iraqi army is aided by Shi'ite militias supported by the Qods Force, and in the region of Baiji there are Iranian advisors who helped the Iraqi army occupy the city (Al-Hadath News, October 13, 2015). On October 13, 2015, before the reports of the liberation of Baiji, the Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar reported that **Soleimani had recently paid a visit to the city, apparently to coordinate the campaign for its liberation from ISIS**.

Soleimani's contacts with other power centers in Iraq

11. In his efforts to halt ISIS's progress in Iraq, **Soleimani did not deal only with the central government in Baghdad and the Shi'ite militias**. He also extended his contacts to **the Kurdish leadership in northern Iraq**. In July 2015 he met in the city of Irbil with Masoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq. Barzani thanked him for Iran's support of Iraq in its war against ISIS, and Soleimani told him that the nuclear agreement signed in the middle of July between Iran and the Western powers would not change Iran's regional policies (Asr-e Iran, July 22, 2015).

12. A few weeks later the Kurdish media reported Soleimani had visited Iraqi Kurdistan again, and had met with senior Kurdish leaders. A source in the political bureau of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) reported that Soleimani had met with

senior PUK officials and advised them to avoid internal struggles and focus their efforts on fighting ISIS (Fars News, August 5, 2015).



Qasem Soleimani in the town of Jalawla, in northeastern Iran, November 2014 (Sahebkhbar.ir, November 26, 2014)

13. In recent months Soleimani also tried to convince the Sunni tribal chiefs in Iraq to join the fighting against ISIS. In June 2015 the social networks posted a video of Soleimani meeting with Sunni tribal chiefs in Al-Anbar Province to convince them to fight alongside the Shi'ite militias. There was also a report that a delegation of fourteen Sunni tribal chiefs had gone to Iran to ask for money and weapons to fight ISIS. According to the report, Iran said it would grant the request, but on the conditions that the money and weapons be sent via the Iraqi government (Fars News, June 23, 2015). **So far, Soleimani's efforts to enlist the Sunni tribes have not succeeded, in large measure because of Iraqi government policies that pushed them into the arms of ISIS.**



Qasem Soleimani meets with Sunni tribal chiefs in Al-Anbar Province
 (www.facebook.com/IRGCSF?fref=photo, June 9, 2015)

14. **Qasem Soleimani has publicly expressed his confidence that ISIS can be defeated.** He has said that Iran is the only country operating against ISIS and accused the United States of not only not doing anything to support the anti-ISIS campaign, but of supporting radical Sunni organizations. After the city of Ramadi fell to ISIS in May 2015, Soleimani claimed that the American forces stationed at the air force base at Ain al-Asad, near Ramadi, had done nothing to halt ISIS's advance towards the city (IRNA, May 25, 2015). In view of the poor performance of the Iraqi army during the past year, **Soleimani's declarations seem overly optimistic, since the Iraqi army and the Shi'ite militias have so far not had any significant successes in fighting ISIS.**

Tension and disagreements between Soleimani and the Iraqi leadership

15. **Qasem Soleimani's contribution to the campaign against ISIS gained him respect and admiration from several senior Iraqi officials.** For example in August 2015, **Imad al-Hakim**, the chairman of the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, said that without Soleimani's support of Iraq it would not have acquired its current capabilities in the struggle against ISIS (Abna News, August 18, 2015). **Qasem al-Araji**, a member of the Iraqi parliament, even proposed erecting a statue of Soleimani in Iraq in appreciation for his struggle against ISIS (Qasemsoleimani.ir).

16. **However, Soleimani's involvement in directing the campaign against ISIS, and especially his intervention in Iraq's internal affairs, led to disagreements between him and the central Iraqi government.** In recent months there have been reports of the Shi'ite Iraqi political and religious leadership's growing reservations of

Iran's increasing influence in the country, especially **opposition to Soleimani's personal intervention in internal affairs**. The reservations stem from Iraq's genuine desire not to turn into an Iranian satellite, its fundamental desire to continue receiving American aid in the campaign against ISIS and its desire to preserve correct relations with the Sunni Arab world.

17. The tensions came to the fore in the political confrontation that developed in the summer of 2015 between **Haider al-Abadi**, the current Iraqi prime minister, and **Nouri al-Maliki**, the former prime minister. In August 2015 the Iraqi media reported that Soleimani had been sent to Baghdad to convince the Iraqi government not to remove al-Maliki from his post as deputy president and put him on trial, after the Iraqi parliament announced the initiation of a parliamentary investigation of his responsibility for the fall of Mosul to ISIS in the summer of 2014 and on charges of involvement in corruption (Okaz, August 17, 2015).

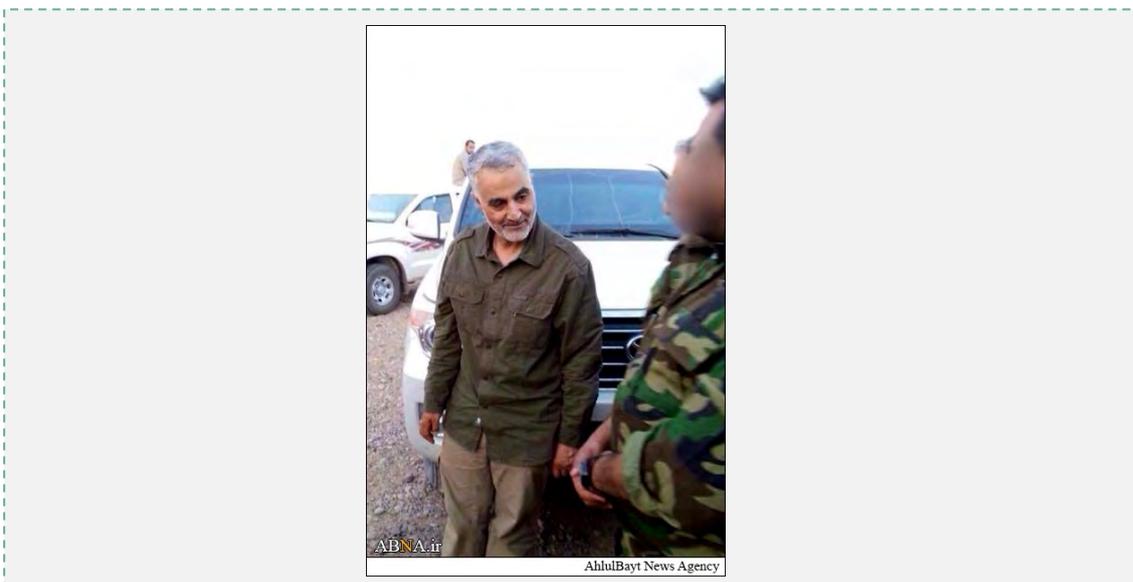
18. In September 2015 there were a number of reports in the Arab press about a **serious dispute between Prime Minister al-Abadi and Qasem Soleimani**. On September 12, 2015 the Lebanese daily Al-Nahar reported there had been two serious incidents during August 2015:

1) **The first took place after al-Abadi instructed the Iraqi security forces to conduct a search of Iranian planes in the Baghdad airport** and examine the cargoes to prevent the transfer of arms to the Syrian regime and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq.

2) **The second took place** in the middle of August 2015 during a meeting al-Abadi held with al-Maliki and other senior Iraqi officials after al-Maliki had returned from a visit to Tehran. Soleimani was also present at the meeting, and criticized the political reforms proposed by al-Abadi in the wake of public protest over corruption. Al-Abadi strongly criticized Soleimani, asking if he was speaking on behalf of the Iranian government or expressing his own personal opinions. Soleimani told him that he was speaking as the advisor to the popular Iraqi militias. Al-Abadi answered that he himself made decisions that expressed the will of the Iraqi people and the Shi'ite religious leadership in Najaf. He said there was no justification for Soleimani's presence at the meeting, at which point Soleimani left.

19. On September 22, 2015, the London-based Saudi Arabia-affiliated daily newspaper Al-Sharq Al-Awsat reported another incident between Soleimani and al-Abadi. It occurred in Basra, when al-Abadi met a convoy of official vehicles going

towards the Baghdad airport. When he asked whose vehicles they were, he was told they would be used by Soleimani, who was supposed to arrive in Baghdad for a meeting with Abu-Mahdi al-Muhandis, the commander of the Hezbollah Battalions Shi'ite militia. Al-Abadi became angry and instructed the convoy to be stopped. According to the source of the report, whose reliability has not been verified, al-Abadi said that if Soleimani wanted to hold an official visit in Iraq, he had to inform the authorities, and if he wanted to hold a private visit, he had to ask for a visa. According to the paper, because of the disagreements between al-Abadi and Soleimani, al-Abadi was becoming increasingly concerned about possible attempts to assassinate him.



Qasem Soleimani in Tuz Khormato, in Salah al-Din Province (Abna News, November 10, 2015)

20. Reservations about Qasem Soleimani's activity in Iraq have not been limited to the political leadership. For example, the senior Shi'ite cleric **Ayatollah Ali Sistani**, considered the highest Shi'ite authority in Iraq, **expressed concern over Soleimani's increasing intervention in Iraqi politics**. On September 7, 2015, an Iraqi politician told Al-Sharq Al-Awsat that Sistani had recently sent a letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, asking if Soleimani's political involvement was a private initiative or undertaken on instructions from the supreme leader.

21. The closer Soleimani's relations with the Shi'ite militias in Iraq become, the more internal Iraqi criticism of him there is. The Iraqis claim **he provokes the widening of the serious sectarian rift between Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq**. That is significant for the campaign against ISIS, because it forces the Sunni population into the arms of ISIS and makes it difficult to recruit them.

22. In September 2014 several Sunni members of the Iraqi parliament demanded to summon **Sa'dun al-Dulaymi**, the Iraqi minister of defense, to the parliament, to explain the role the Iranian forces played in liberating the city of Amirli, in the Salah al-Din Province from ISIS in August 2015. They claimed that the presence of Soleimani in Iraq was, **a gross violation of Iraqi sovereignty. The demand was made after pictures of Soleimani were published showing him in the suburbs of Amirli wearing a uniform and accompanied by Shi'ite militia fighters. Khaled al-Dulaymi**, a Sunni member of parliament, said that Soleimani's presence in uniform in an Iraqi city reinforced Sunni concerns about an organized campaign led by the central administration in Baghdad and Iran against the Sunnis in Iraq (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, September 5, 2015).



Qasem Soleimani in the city of Amirli in September 2014. He was accused of violating Iraqi sovereignty (Abna News, November 10, 2014).

23. Apparently criticism of Qasem Soleimani's conduct was **not limited to Iraq** and was joined by Iranian officials, as well. In the summer of 2014 the media issued several reports claiming the Iranian leadership had decided to remove Soleimani from his position as responsible for the Iranian campaign in Iraq because of ISIS's successes and Soleimani's failure to ensure Nouri al-Maliki would be reelected as Iraqi prime minister. **The reports turned out to be false** and Soleimani even increased his involvement in directing the fighting in Iraq, but it is probable that they indicated criticism in certain forums in Iran of his conduct.

24. In recent months there has been a significant reduction in Iranian media exposure of Soleimani's activities in Iraq, again raising speculations that his performance has been unsatisfactory. That can be explained by the ongoing fighting

in Iraq against ISIS, which has not been decisive, and the diverting of IRGC and Hezbollah resources from Iraq to Syria. On September 5, 2015, the British Economist quoted a source claiming that the objective of the return of former IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezaei to its ranks was to supervise Soleimani.

Section 4: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in the Palestinian arena and Israel



"Soleimani, from us, the residents of Palestine." Support for Soleimani in east Jerusalem (Facebook page of Haj.Qasem.Soleimani, April 13, 2015).

Overview

1. Since the 1990s, **the Qods Force has operated in the Palestinian arena to encourage, promote and finance terrorist attacks against Israel.** The Qods Force has been involved in smuggling weapons into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It supports most of the Palestinian terrorist organizations, especially Hamas and the PIJ, with funding, training and guidance, and has also provided technical operational support, including specifications for manufacturing weapons.
2. During the second intifada Iran supported the terrorist organizations operating in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, either directly or through Hezbollah. Following the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007, Iranian support, transferred by the Qods Force, was moved mainly to the Gaza Strip. **The Qods Force provided Hamas and the PIJ with military (training, information), financial, political and media support.** Iran saw the establishment of Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip as a way of gaining leverage for an armed campaign against Israel and for advancing its influence in the Palestinian arena. The exposure of the Israeli home front to rocket fire during the rounds of armed confrontation between Israel and the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, the most recent of which was Operation Protective Edge, showed the Iranians **the great benefits they could reap by constructing a military infrastructure for Hamas and the PIJ.**

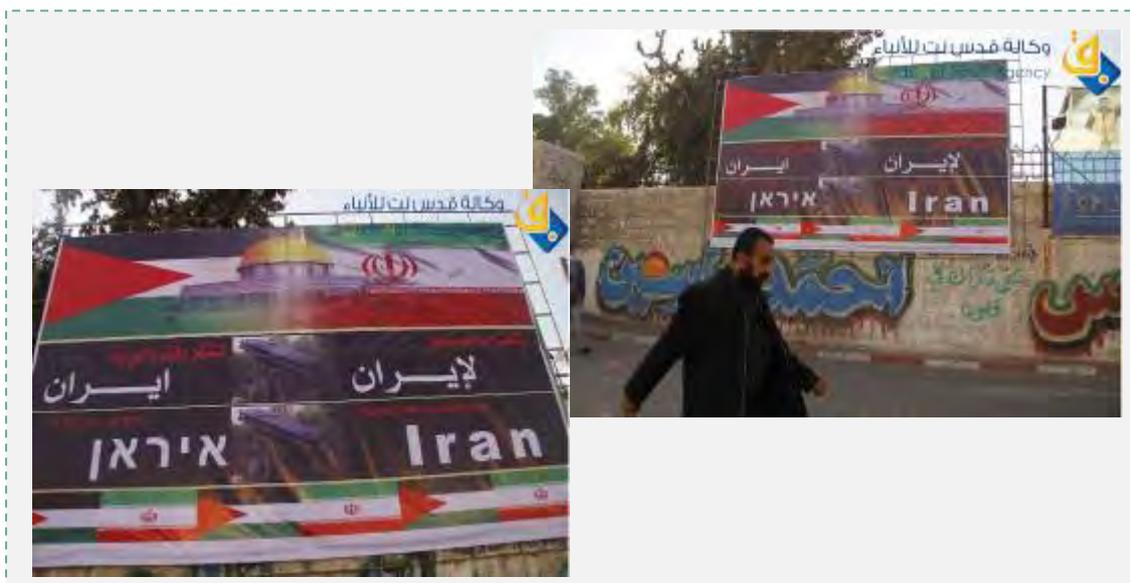
3. In addition, the Qods Force engages in the direct handling of agents in Israel for intelligence and terrorist objectives. Its goal is to construct an infrastructure for future terrorist activity, according to the regional considerations of Iranian policy. In all probability Qasem Soleimani is involved, although most of his attention currently focuses on Syria and Iraq.

The rift with Hamas

4. **The civil war in Syria undermined the cohesion of Iranian-led "resistance camp" and caused a deep rift between Iran and Hamas.** As Tehran increased its involvement in Syria by supporting the Assad regime, Hamas turned its back on Iran and supported the Syrian opposition. Iran's disappointment caused it to significantly limit its aid to Hamas, **although it did not stop it entirely.** The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt in the summer of 2013 raised hopes in Tehran that it might be possible to rehabilitate relations with Hamas. That would make it possible for Iran to regain its foothold in the Gaza Strip, increase its influence in the Palestinian arena, and strengthen the "resistance camp." Hamas understood that more than ever, it needed Iran for financial and operational support, especially in view of the deteriorations of its relations with Egypt.

Operations Pillar of Defense and Protective Edge

5. During Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012 and Operation Protective Edge in July-August 2014 the military capabilities Iran had constructed for Hamas and the PIJ were put to the test. **Those capabilities, especially rocket capabilities, had been constructed with massive Iranian support.** In the years before the operations Iranian weapons had been transported to the Gaza Strip overland, by air and by sea through the use of border-crossing networks of smugglers and merchants.



Posters thanking Iran in four languages, hung in the Gaza Strip after Operation Pillar of Defense (Quds.net, November 29, 2012). They were apparently the work of the PIJ, a Palestinian terrorist organization with very close relations with Iran.

6. Operation Protective Edge provided the Iranian leadership with another opportunity to support the Palestinian terrorist organizations. During the operation Qasem Soleimani was vocal about the developments in the Gaza Strip. In a public message to the Palestinians transmitted by the Iranian media, he rejected Israel's demand for the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip and claimed that disarming the "weapon of resistance" was false propaganda and an illusion that would never be realized and that Israel would take with it to its grave. He declared that "Palestine is a volcano that will only be extinguished when we destroy the regime of occupation" and that the events in Palestine "fill the hearts of the Iranians with blood, pain and anger that will explode onto the Zionists when the time comes." He claimed that "Iran will continue its support of the resistance until we turn the land, the air and the continent into hell for the Zionists...We wish to die as martyrs. Death as a martyr on the way to Palestine and Jerusalem is the wish and pride of every Muslim. In this important moment in the history of our nation, **I call on all our bothers to use a rifle, a weapon, blood and honor to defend humanity and Islam in Palestine**" (Serat News, July 30, 2014).

7. The Iranian regime saw in Operation Protective Edge an opportunity to rehabilitate its relations with Hamas and perform an important function in the Palestinian arena. Iran's desire to exploit the opportunity was clear in the declarations made by senior officials, led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. On July 23, 2014, Khamenei gave a speech for World Jerusalem Day, marked every year on the final Friday of the Muslim religious month of Ramadan. Not only did he express support for the Palestinians, but

in an exceptional gesture he also called for the arming of the West Bank. Other senior Iranian officials followed his lead. **Amir Ali Hajizadeh**, chief of the IRGC's aerospace division, claimed that arming the Palestinians in the West Bank would speed the destruction of Israel (Fars News, July 25, 2014). The Basij wing of the IRGC announced the opening of a bank account to raise funds for arming the Palestinians, in accordance with instructions from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (Fars News, July 24, 2014).

The period after Operation Protective Edge

8. **Iran's expectations of improved relations with Hamas went unmet** in the wake of the dramatic events unfolding in the Middle East, the fruit of the regional upheaval. Hamas, with its Muslim Brotherhood ideology, found it difficult to stand by Shi'ite Iran, which was supporting Shi'a-affiliated rebels, militias and regimes against Sunni states and regimes. The Saudi Arabian attack on Yemen in March 2015 (Operation Decisive Storm) worsened relations between Iran and Hamas. When the attack began, Hamas issued a statement supporting the ousted Yemeni president and the Saudi attack. Iran regarded it as yet another slap in the face from Hamas and proof Hamas preferred relations with Saudi Arabia and the Sunni camp to closer ties to Tehran.

9. The visit of Khaled Mashaal, the Hamas leader, to Saudi Arabia in July 2015 worsened the Iran-Hamas crisis and the planned visit of a Hamas delegation to Iran was cancelled. However, the ties between Iran and Hamas' military-terrorist wing continued despite the political tensions. In practical terms, **Iran's ability to send advanced rockets and weapons to the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip overland, by sea and through the vast network of smuggling tunnels became seriously limited** in the wake of Operation Protective Edge and the intensive Egyptian crackdown on the tunnels along Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip (part of Egypt's conflict with the ISIS branch in the Sinai Peninsula).

10. In the meantime, developments in Iraq and Syria made it necessary for Iran to invest most of its efforts in halting the progress of ISIS and defending the Assad regime. That was because to a great degree, Iran's order of strategic preferences currently limits the Qods Force's ability to invest excessively in promoting the Iranian regime's objectives in the Palestinian arena. **One indication of that is the conspicuous absence of Qasem Soleimani's personal involvement in the events in the Palestinian arena in the past two years.** However, that may change, depending on future developments in Syria, Iran and the Palestinian-Israeli arena.

Israel

11. In the past, Israel was an important target for the Iranian regime's intelligence and terrorism activity. It was undertaken directly by the Qods Force and other Iranian agencies, and indirectly by Hezbollah. Israel exposed operatives, mostly from Lebanon and Muslims from Europe, sent by Iran and Hezbollah. Most of them were exposed by the Israel security services and put on trial.⁸

12. On September 11, 2013, **Ali Mansouri**, an Iranian intelligence agent, was detained at the Ben Gurion International Airport. **He had been recruited by the IRGC in Iran** and sent to Israel posing as a Belgian businessman named Alex Mans. His operators had instructed him to start businesses in Israel that could serve as the foundation for covert Iranian activity against Israeli and Western interests. He was promised a million dollars in return. He paid three visits to Israel using his false Belgian identity, during which he made efforts to develop ties and sign contracts with businesses in Tel Aviv. On October 6, 2013, he was indicted for espionage and aiding an enemy.⁹

13. Ali Mansouri had previously visited Israel for his operators twice, once in July 2012 and once in January 2013. His last visit was between September 6 and September 11, 2013, and ended with his detention. **At the time of his detention he was found to be carrying pictures of various locations in Israel, including Ben Gurion International Airport and the American embassy in Tel Aviv. He was operated by a Qods Force special ops unit commanded by Hamed Abdollahi and Majid Alavi.** It is probable that Soleimani knew about Ali Mansouri because he is aware of Qods Force activities, although most of his attention is currently devoted to Iraq and Syria.

⁸ Israel Security Agency, September 29, 2013.

⁹ For further information about Qods Force activity against Israel see the August 7, 2012 bulletin, "The Qods Force, an elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, spearheads Iran's global terrorist campaign."

Section 5: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in Lebanon



Left to right, Qasem Soleimani, Imad Mughnieh and Hassan Nasrallah
(Parsine.com, August 20, 2014)

Iranian support for Hezbollah until the outbreak of the civil war in Syria

1. For years Lebanon had been considered the flagship of the Qods Force's activity to promote the armed campaign against Israel. After he was appointed commander of the Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani worked to improve relations with Hezbollah and transferred resources to the organization, which focused on fighting against the IDF in the security zone in south Lebanon. In Lebanon the Qods Force had a regional headquarters called the Lebanon Corps, which collaborated closely with the Syrian regime and exploited Syria as the main transit point for shipments of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

2. Qods Force support for Hezbollah increased after Israel withdrew from the security zone in May 2000. **A long-range rocket infrastructure was established that threatened (and threatens) the Israeli home front, which was put into operation during the Second Lebanon War (July-August 2006).** The Qods Force gave Hezbollah massive support during the Second Lebanon War and was integrated into the organization's command units. Qasem Soleimani gave a World Jerusalem Day speech on October 20, 2006, a few months after the end of the war, in which he spoke about the significance of the war's outcome and its influence on the Palestinian arena. He said that **"with Hezbollah's victory in the Lebanon a new Middle East**

has been created, not an American Middle East but an Islamic one...At the same time as jihad groups were being formed in Palestine, a Shi'ite organization called Hezbollah in Lebanon exported to Palestine the model of the way to live a life of faith. Hezbollah played a central role in turning the stones of the Palestinians into rockets...The [firm] stance of Hamas strengthened the security of the Arab states but to our sorrow the Arab rulers were traitors...Jerusalem Day marches increase the pressure on the Islamic governments in favor of peace, and that will lead to the failure of the plots of the United States and Israel (Fars News, October 20, 2006).

3. Since the end of the war, **the Qods Force has had a central role in reconstructing Hezbollah's military infrastructure.** It has supplied Hezbollah with cutting-edge weapons (guided missiles, SA-22 anti-aircraft missiles and Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles), smuggled from Iran to Lebanon (for the most part through Syria). Over a period of year and with Syrian collaboration, **the Qods Force constructed for Hezbollah an effective military infrastructure with an arsenal of more than 100,000 rockets and missiles, including missiles with precise guidance systems that threaten the military and civilian infrastructure of the State of Israel. The arsenal will be activated in accordance with Iran's strategic considerations.**

4. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, has repeatedly boasted of the military capabilities his organization received from Iran, **especially its ability to attack Israeli civilians and Israel's civilian infrastructure.** For example:

1) In his 2012 World Jerusalem Day speech, Nasrallah boasted that Hezbollah had **"precise missiles, a small quantity of which can hit pinpoint targets."** He added that Hezbollah had a number of missiles that could hit many targets in Israel and that Hezbollah had their coordinates. Attacking those targets, he said, **"will turn the lives of thousands of Israelis into a living hell."** He said it would mean tens of thousands of Israeli civilian dead, "not 300 or 400 or 500" (Al-Manar TV, August 17, 2012).

2) During an interview with Al-Mayadeen TV, Nasrallah was asked about turning the lives of hundreds of thousands of Israelis into a living hell. He claimed that Israel would not be able to win with a blow to Hezbollah's rocket arsenal. That, he said, was because even after Israel's first blow, **Hezbollah would still have "a few missiles" that would be "able to turn the lives of hundreds of thousands of Israelis into a living hell."** He claimed Hezbollah had **"a bank of targets" including civilian, economic and industrial targets, power plants**

and nuclear installations. "They have," he said, "power plants in the center of the city, and if they are hit, not only will the lights go out but it will have an enormous economic influence." He boasted that "every target in the length and breadth of occupied Palestine...can be hit by the rockets of the resistance..." (Al-Mayadeen TV, September 3, 2012).

5. Iran continues its flow of weapons to Hezbollah, including smart missiles, advanced aerial defense systems, and anti-ship missiles.¹⁰ The weapons are sent from Iran to Syria and from there to Lebanon. It can be assumed that the Qods Force, which manages the construction of Hezbollah's military infrastructure, is also involved in transferring weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon, even at the height of the Syrian civil war.

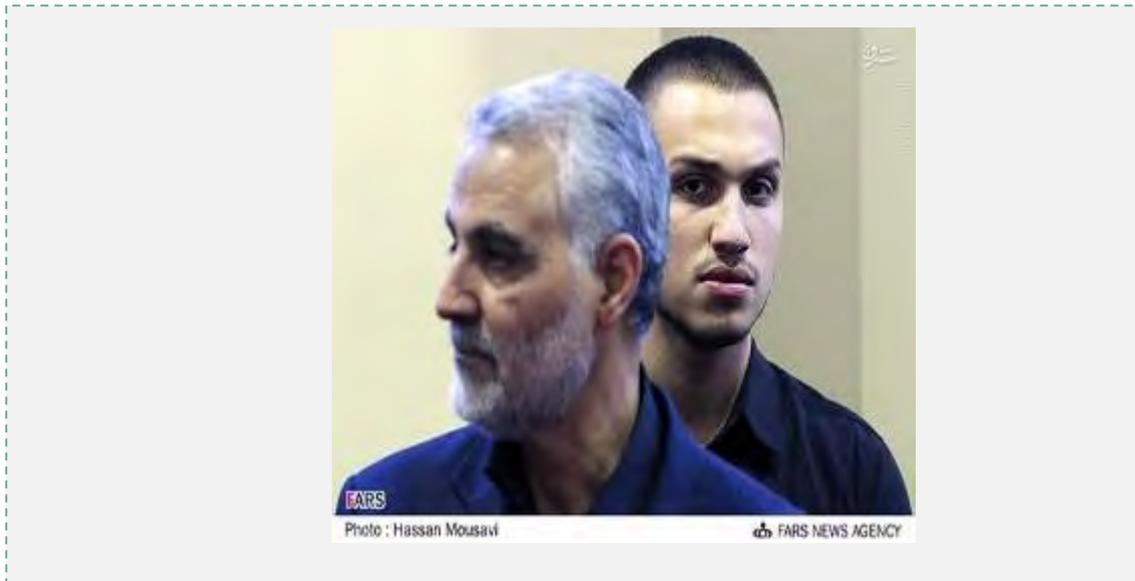
Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war

6. The Syrian civil war made it necessary for Iran to put **the survival of the Syrian regime at the top of its priority list.** To that end Iran used the Qods Force to **enlist Hezbollah, its most effective proxy in the Middle East.** Hezbollah was asked to participate in the fighting alongside the Syrian security forces and Shi'ite foreign fighters from countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, who operate in Syria under the aegis of the IRGC. As a result, during the past two years **most of Qasem Soleimani's efforts regarding Hezbollah have dealt with coordinating the fighting in Syria and integrating Hezbollah fighters in the most effective way possible.**

7. During that time, insofar as is known, Qasem Soleimani has been to Lebanon only once. He went there after the aerial attack, allegedly carried out by Israel, in the region of Quneitra on January 18, 2015. The attack was intended to prevent Iran and Hezbollah from establishing an anti-Israeli terrorist infrastructure in the Golan Heights. Six Hezbollah operatives were killed, among them Jihad Mughnieh, the son of Imad Mughnieh, the former head of Hezbollah's military-terrorist wing, who was killed in 2008. A high-ranking IRGC officer was also killed. According to Lebanese media reports, Qasem Soleimani visited Lebanon only 48 hours after the Quneitra attack. He met with Hassan Nasrallah and paid a condolence call to the Mughnieh family (Al-Manar, January 31, 2015).

¹⁰ Speaking to the UN General Assembly on October 1, 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Iran had given Hezbollah surface-to-surface target-seeking missiles and attack UAVs to be able to precisely hit any target in Israel. Hezbollah, an Iranian protégé, had smuggled into Lebanon SA-22 anti-aircraft missiles and Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles to be able to attack IDF aircraft and ships (Ynet, October 1, 2015).

8. It can be assumed that Qasem Soleimani and Hassan Nasrallah discussed coordinating Hezbollah's response to the IDF attack in a way that would not harm Iranian interests (since at the current time it is not in Iran's interests to divert its efforts and attention from Syria to Israel). On January 28, 2015, ten days after the meeting, Hezbollah did in fact carry out a combined terrorist attack of anti-aircraft and mortar shell fire that targeted an IDF force in the Har Dov region, killing two IDF soldiers. In that way Hezbollah "repaid" Israel without causing an unwanted escalation.



Qasem Soleimani at the funeral held for Jihad Mughnieh, who was killed in an attack attributed to the IDF in Quneitra (Fars News, January 19, 2015).

Section 6: Qasem Soleimani's involvement in Yemen and other Arab states

Iranian support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen

1. Iran regards Yemen as an important part of its **regional policy of establishing an Iranian ground and naval presence at the entrance of the Red Sea**. Its objective is to control the sea lanes leading from the Persian Gulf to the Middle East and Europe, and in that way increase its leverage and ability to pressure the West and its Arab allies. In addition, Iran regards Yemen, and especially the northern area along the border with Saudi Arabia, **as a convenient arena for conducting subversion against Saudi Arabia**, its main political and religious rival in the Middle East.
2. As in other countries, in Yemen Iran uses the Shi'ite population to promote its interests. In recent years Iran, with the Qods Force and its commander Qasem Soleimani, has **given military support to the Houthi rebels, who belong to the Zaidi sect of Shi'a Islam**. For example, on January 23, 2013, the Yemeni coast guard and security forces took control of the *Jihan 1*, a ship whose cargo included weapons, explosives and military equipment, some of it of Iranian manufacture. The ship was en route from Iran to the Houthi rebels in northern Yemen. On February 2, 2013, the Yemeni News Agency reported that according to the Yemeni government, when the ship was in port in Iran it was handed over to eight Yemeni crew members to sail to the shores of Yemen.



The weapons and military equipment found aboard the *Jihan 1* (Sabanews.net, February 7, 2013; yemensaeed.com)

3. **Ali Hassan al-Ahmadi**, head of Yemeni National Security, accused Iran of being behind the smuggling attempt. He claimed such a shipment could not have been orchestrated by merchants or smugglers, only by a state (Agence France-Presse, February 9, 2013). According to American officials, the weapons seized were manufactured in Iran, and the way they were transported was **similar to previous incidents of weapons smuggling from Iran to Yemen** (The New York Times, January 28, 2013). However, despite Iran's financial and military support for the Houthis in recent years, most of the rebels' successes are apparently the result of the lack of governance in Yemen and the country's political instability which led to the Houthi rebels' alliance with the former Yemeni president, Ali Abdallah Saleh, and their access to Yemeni army arsenals.

Opportunities and challenges presented by developments in Yemen, 2015

4. The developments in Yemen in 2015 and the Houthis' first military successes were considered **proof of Iran's rising regional status**. They focused Arab and Western world attention on Iran's intention to use the IRGC to strengthen its foothold in the Yemeni arena. In March 2015 the BBC in Arabic reported that **Qasem Soleimani was en route to Yemen to arrange aid for the Houthis** (the reliability of the report is doubtful, and it was denied by Iran).

5. The Houthis' military and political successes made it necessary for Saudi Arabia to change its traditional policy of avoiding direct military involvement beyond its borders. **In March 2015 the Saudis, heading an Arab coalition, initiated Operation Decisive Storm** in Yemen, which included aerial attacks and whose objective was to repel the Houthis from the areas over which they had gained control. One of the reasons for the operation was Saudi and Arab concern that Shi'ites would control the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandeb Straits. The Iranian regime strongly condemned the Saudi attacks in Yemen and demanded that Saudi Arabia immediately stop its military activities in the country.

6. While the crisis in Yemen presented new opportunities for Iran to establish its regional influence, **Iran was concerned with the Saudi campaign**. That was mainly because of the situation in Iraq and Syria, which made it difficult for Iran to divert military and economic resources to Yemen. In March 2015 Iran signed an agreement with the new Yemeni government for increased cooperation. It included Iranian aid for developing the port of Al-Hudaydah, which controls the Bab al-Mandeb Straits, and launching 14 flights a week between the two countries (which would enable Iran to

transfer weapons to the Houthi rebels). The embargo Saudi Arabia imposed on Yemen and the tight international oversight of the aid shipments sent from Iran to Yemen by sea **limited, however, Tehran's ability to support the Houthis.**

7. Despite the limitations imposed on it, Iran has continued its efforts to transfer aid to the Houthi rebels. In the middle of May 2015 Iran sent a ship called *Iran Shahed* to Yemen with a cargo of 2,500 tons of food, water, medicines, tents and blankets, delivered after a significant delay while UN inspectors in Djibouti examined the ship's contents. Iran decided to dispatch the ship after several failed attempts to send aid to Yemen by air (Defa Press, June 7, 2015). A second Iranian ship left for Yemen on June 6, 2015, setting sail from Port Khomeini in Khuzestan Province in southwestern Iran. The chairman of the province's port association claimed that the *Arezou* ("wish") was carrying 8,000 tones of rice and 1,000 tons of sugar (ISNA, June 7, 2015).

8. On September 26, 2015, the Arab coalition forces fighting in Yemen halted an Iranian ship found to be carrying weapons, apparently en route to the Houthi rebels. The ship, whose papers defined it as a "fishing vessel," was halted in the Arab Sea near the shores of Oman. According to the Saudi-led Arab coalition, **the vessel had been examined by Iranian customs officials and Tehran knew what its cargo contained.** According to reports, **there were 14 Iranians aboard, as well as large quantities of weapons, including shells, anti-tank missiles and other weapons systems.**



Pictures posted to a Twitter account taken from Yemeni TV, showing the weapons consigned to the Houthi rebels found aboard the Iranian ship halted by the Arab coalition forces.

9. The limitations on Iranian support for the Houthis were manifested again in recent months. Iranian attempts to aide the Houthis (which included the use of Hezbollah operatives, as well) **did not prevent Yemenis loyal to the government in exile from retaking a number of important cities from the rebels, among them the key port city of Aden.** Iranian involvement via the Qods Force is still far from over and it is difficult to estimate what success Iran will have in Yemen.

10. Reviewing the situation for the Assembly of Experts in September 2015, **Qasem Soleimani described the developments in Yemen.** He claimed that the Houthi rebels were supported by more than 50% of the Yemenis and that **Saudi Arabia would never will the war in Yemen** (Tasnim News, September 1, 2015). **However, it is probable that most of Soleimani's attention and effort are devoted to Iraq and Syria, and his ability to manage the crisis in Yemen is limited.**

Other Arab States

11. During the past year some evidence was revealed for Qods Force involvement in subversion and terrorism in **other Arab states.** In July 2015 the **Jordanian government** reported it had detained an Iraqi working for the Qods Force who was suspected of planning to carry out a terrorist attack in Jordan. A month later the Bahraini police announced it had exposed a direct connection between Iran and Hezbollah to the terrorist attack carried out on July 28, 2015, in which an IED killed security force personnel. According to the announcement, five suspects had been detained on suspicion of involvement in the attack and had confessed that they had ties to the IRGC and Hezbollah.

12. The accusations made by Jordan and Bahrain, which were vigorously denied by Iran, did not relate to the direct involvement of Qasem Soleimani. A declaration attributed to Soleimani in March 2015, that Iran could control developments in Jordan as it did in Iraq and Lebanon, was also denied by the Iranian embassy in Jordan and an IRGC spokesman (Fars News, March 23, 2015).

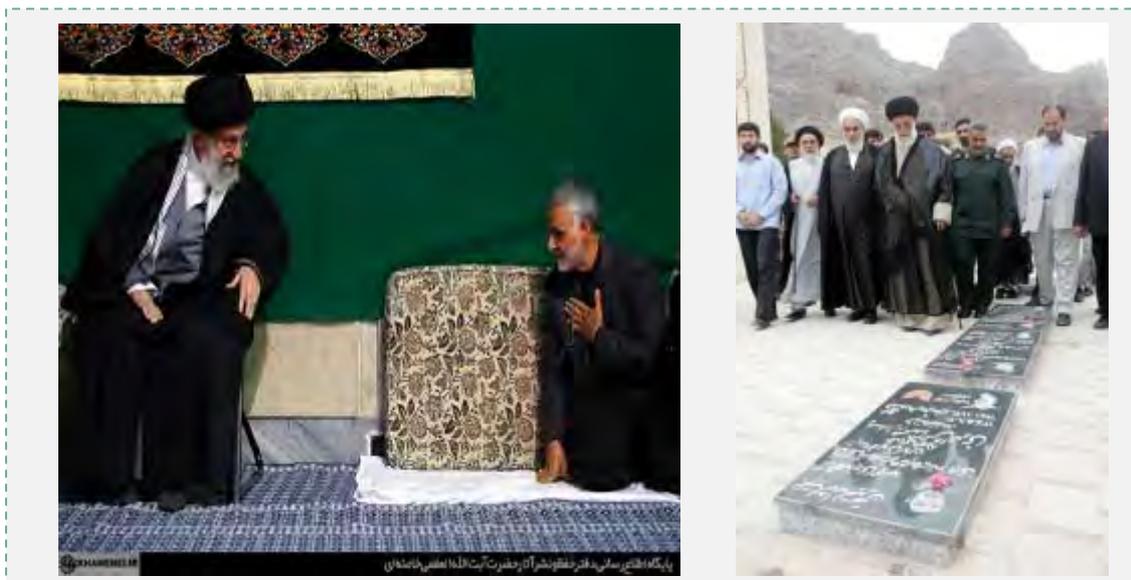
Section 7: Qasem Soleimani and Iranian internal politics



Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani bows before Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (Asiran.com, July 3, 2011). The Qods Force's subversive and terrorist activities are fully supported by Khamenei and the Iranian leadership.

Soleimani's relations with the Iranian leadership

1. One of the sources of Soleimani's power is **his close ties to the leadership of the Iranian regime, especially Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who has full confidence in him and supports him.** In a speech Khamenei made in 2005 at a meeting with martyrs' families from Kerman Province, he called Soleimani "a living shaheed" (Qasemsoleimani.ir, November 26, 2014). **Soleimani also has close ties to senior officials in Iran's political leadership,** many of whom have known him since the Iran-Iraq War.



Left: Qasem Soleimani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Right: Soleimani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (Facebook page of Haj.Qasem.Soleimani, April 21, 2015)

2. Soleimani's political views are not well known, but they can be assumed to be **conservative**. During the student demonstrations in Tehran in July 1999 he signed a letter sent by high-ranking IRGC officers to former President **Mohammad Khatami** demanding he use force to suppress the demonstrations, and even threatening to intervene if he did not act.

3. The leadership's respect for Soleimani was evident in a rare interview given by **Hojjat-ul-Islam Ali Shirazi**, supreme leader's representative in the Qods Force, to the conservative Iranian weekly 9 Day in September 2012 (9day.ir, September 23, 2102). Shirazi praised Soleimani, calling him "a man of deeds" rather than "a man of words," and complimented him on his qualities as a commander. He said that he had known Soleimani since 1982 and even then, during the Iran-Iraq War, he had demonstrated courage and command. Soleimani, he said, was brave, did not know fear, had great faith in Allah and was completely devoted to the supreme leader. He never said "I cannot" and carried out every mission the supreme leader gave him. Shirazi said many people could sit with the supreme leader without properly understanding what he was saying or act appropriately, but Soleimani, he claimed, could understand what was required, analyze wisely and act correctly.

4. Shirazi rejected the claims in the Western media about disagreements between Soleimani and IRGC commander **Mohammad-Ali Jafari**. He also denied that Soleimani acted directly with the supreme leader and not in coordination with the IRGC commander. He claimed Soleimani was totally loyal to Jafari and that his close relations with the supreme leader did not affect his loyalty to Jafari in any way.

Soleimani and Jafari were committed to one another and any attempt to create a difference of opinion between them to weaken them or harm the IRGC and the Qods Force would fail, said Shirazi.



Qasem Soleimani during a meeting of senior Iranian officials with Khamenei (Vic.ir, July 25, 2015).

5. On the eve of the presidential elections in Iran in the summer of 2013 the Iranian media reported on Soleimani's close relations with presidential candidate and mayor of Tehran, **Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf**. During the campaign Soleimani was quoted by the supreme leader's representative in Kerman Province as saying he [Soleimani] would vote for Ghalibaf (May 26, 2013). After the elections IRGC spokesman **Ramazan Sharif**, interviewed by the reformist daily paper Shargh, denied the report. (Shargh, July 22, 2015). Sharif claimed the IRGC were in no way involved in the elections and that reports about the alleged support of senior IRGC commanders, Soleimani among them, for any candidate were false. He claimed the election headquarters of some of the candidates wanted to use the names of popular senior IRGC commanders to enlist political support. He claimed that all the reports published about the support of senior IRGC commanders for political candidates were denied immediately after publication.



Left to right: Qasem Soleimani, Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Mehdi Chamran, head of the Tehran City Council (Fars News, February 6, 2014).

Praise for Soleimani from Iranian politicians

6. **Soleimani also has close ties with politicians who are not affiliated with the conservative right wing.** One of them is senior Iranian diplomat **Sadegh Kharazi**, who was an advisor to former President Mohammad Khatami and is affiliated with the moderate wing of the reform camp. Interviewed by the website Neda-ye Iranian in March 2015, he spoke of his close ties with Soleimani, who had affiliations with both reformists and conservatives. Kharazi called Soleimani "a general without equal anywhere in the world," whose name inspired hope among freedom-seekers and fear among imperialists, Zionists and radical Sunni Islamists. Soleimani, he said, was also a fighter, a national Islamic Iranian symbol and a friend, and by virtue of his qualities as a human being and commander he had no equal. He was not only a man but also "a school of thought."



A selfie of Qasem Soleimani Iranian diplomat Sadegh Kharazi and (Zaman News, April 27, 2015).

7. Conservative Iranian parliament member **Mohammad-Reza Bahonar** also mentioned Soleimani's extensive political support. Interviewed by Khabar Online on December 14, 2014, Bahonar said there was a consensus regarding Soleimani and that he personally knew people who did not support the Iranian regime but loved Soleimani. He said he had known Soleimani since the early 1980s, when he was deputy governor of Kerman Province at the same time of Soleimani's military service in the province. He praised his qualities as a fighter and commander. He stressed Soleimani's great commitment to the families of soldiers killed in the Iran-Iraq War and described how he made sure they had financial support after their sons died. He said that as opposed to other senior commanders, Soleimani was not merely familiar with military matters, but also with political issues, and even compared his political talent and understanding to those of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.



Qasem Soleimani speaks to the conservative faction of the Majlis, April 28, 2015 (Serat News, April 29, 2015).

Soleimani's relations with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani



Qasem Soleimani shakes hands with President Hassan Rouhani (Khedmat.ir, September 15, 2015)

8. Information about the relations between Soleimani and President Rouhani is scarce. Since Rouhani was elected in the summer of 2013, he has publicly opposed the involvement of the IRGC in politics. In a speech he gave shortly after he was elected, he praised the contribution of the IRGC to the country's security and called on it to continue its involvement in the economy to help Iran deal with the sanctions, but stressed it should not involve itself in political power struggles (Asr-e Iran, September 16, 2013). Since his election Rouhani has also tried to limit the IRGC's influence in politics and the economy, including by reducing its representation in the

government and removing it from a number of economic projects in development and energy.

9. However, **President Rouhani recognizes the power of the IRGC and clearly does not want an open confrontation with it, which might also lead to a confrontation with the supreme leader.** So far he has tried to walk between the raindrops and focused on promoting the nuclear negotiations and the Iranian economy. His caution has led him to be circumspect in his statements about Iranian regional policy. In the wake of reports that the Assad regime used chemical weapons in the summer of 2013, he expressed a general reservation regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria (without mentioning that the Syrian regime had allegedly used them), but followed the official Iranian line and expressed unequivocal support for the Assad regime.

10. **Since the signing of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the West in July 2015, the Rouhani administration has increased its involvement in regional issues.** In addition to its ongoing military support for the Assad regime, efforts have also been made to promote a political solution to the Syrian crisis, one that will ensure Iran's vital interests, especially the preservation of its influence in Syria. In mid-August 2015 **Mohammad Javad Zarif**, the Iranian foreign minister, visited Syria and met with President Assad and Walid al-Mualem, the foreign minister. Zarif stressed Iran's determination to continue its support of Syria, and said Syria's future had to be determined by the Syrian people without foreign intervention (IRNA, August 12, 2015).

11. **The simultaneous involvement of both the Iranian foreign ministry and the Qods Force in forming Iran's Syrian policy may create a confrontation between the two** (although so far there is no evidence for a power struggle between the Rouhani administration and the IRGC over Iranian policy in Syria.). In addition, Russia's increasing involvement in Syria and the continuing international efforts to formulate a political solution for the country may also lead to disagreements between the president and Soleimani regarding the definition of Iranian interests in Syria and the nature of a possible future political arrangement.

12. **Qasem Soleimani usually does not express his opinions on controversial political issues.** During the nuclear negotiations he did not join other senior IRGC officers who on several occasions expressed implied criticism of the conduct of the talks. He also does not criticize the government's domestic policies. Apparently he distances himself from controversial political issues because **he does not want to**

involve the Qods Force in internal political power struggles, in order to maintain its unique position in the IRGC. That may also be **the result of his political ambitions** and concern lest any statement made about politically sensitive issues might undermine his public position.

Section 8: Qasem Soleimani's public image



A picture of Qasem Soleimani on the shutter of a store in the city of Karaj (Facebook, September 3, 2015)

Overview

1. For many years Qasem Soleimani was careful to keep a low media profile and was almost unknown to the Iranian public. However, as his media exposure increased, first in the Western and later also in the Iranian media, public support for him increased to the level of a personality cult.

Wave of support for Soleimani following the assassination attempt of the Saudi ambassador to the United States

2. The inclusion of Soleimani's name in the affair of the attempted assassination of the Saudi ambassador to Washington in 2011 **led to an unprecedented wave of support for him**. It reached its height after deliberations in Congress where calls were heard for the assassination of senior Iranian officials, among them Soleimani. Two hundred and forty members of the Majlis signed a petition in support of Soleimani and warned the United States not to "continue its propaganda and plotting" against the IRGC (Dolat-e ma, November 2, 2011).

3. Conservative Iranian newspapers also rushed to express support for Soleimani. The daily Javan praised him in an article called "Who is Hajj Qasem Soleimani?" and described him as a man whose virtues exceeded his capabilities as a commander. According to the article, as opposed to claims raised in the Western media, Soleimani

was not a mysterious figure but was well known in Iran because of his long years of service to the Islamic Revolution. Iran did not need the Hollywood stories the Americans tell about Soleimani and his activity outside Iran. His activities beyond the borders of Iran were only one side of the coin, and the other was his activity inside Iran as a soldier in the service of the regime. Since his appointment as commander of the Qods Force Soleimani had become "a nightmare" for the West, claimed the article, but among Iranians he inspired pride and was known for his calm, shyness, modesty and friendliness (Javan, November 5, 2011).

4. Ordinary Iranians were also enlisted to express support for the Qods Force. Bloggers and users of social media posted pictures of Soleimani captioned, "We are all Qasem Soleimani." Public admiration for him was also expressed by the many sympathetic responses following the death of his mother in September 2013. Many Iranian social media users, some of them even identified as supporting the reformist opposition, expressed condolences and praised Soleimani for his great contribution to the security of the country.

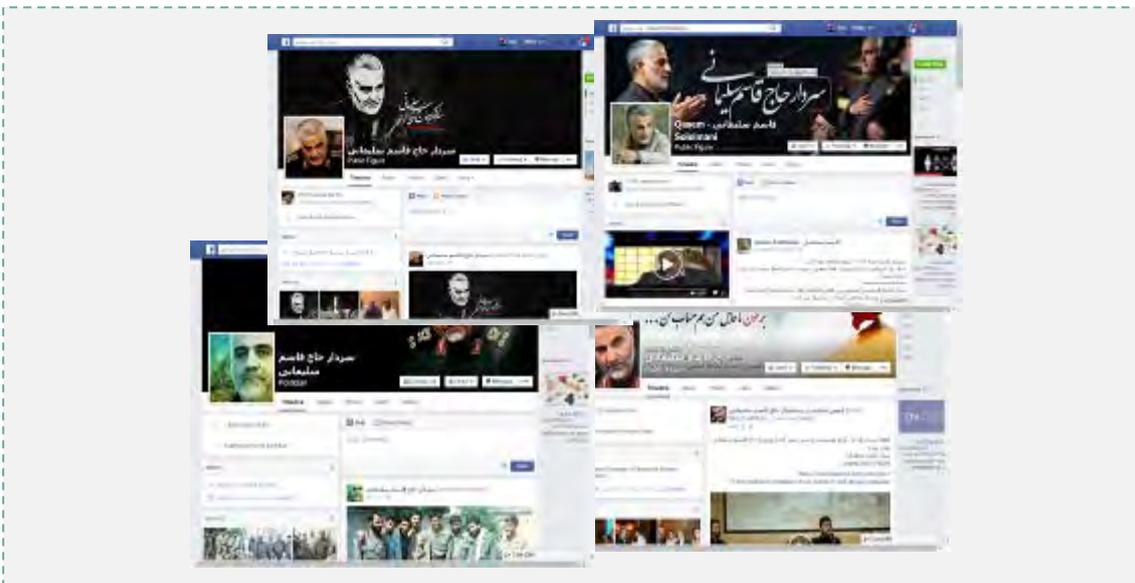
Fostering Soleimani's personality cult



A picture of Qasem Soleimani carried alongside pictures of the supreme leader at festivities for Islamic Revolution Day in Iran (Facebook page of Haj.Qasem.Soleimani, February 11, 2015)

5. Soleimani's involvement in the campaign against ISIS, the successes attributed to him and his extensive media exposure, alongside the developments in Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014, have led to **an unprecedented wave of support**. More than 20 Facebook pages are devoted to him with more than 100 thousand followers and

dozens of pictures (including selfies) and videos documenting him, especially his visits to Iraq, which were posted on the social networks.



Some of the Facebook pages devoted to Qasem Soleimani

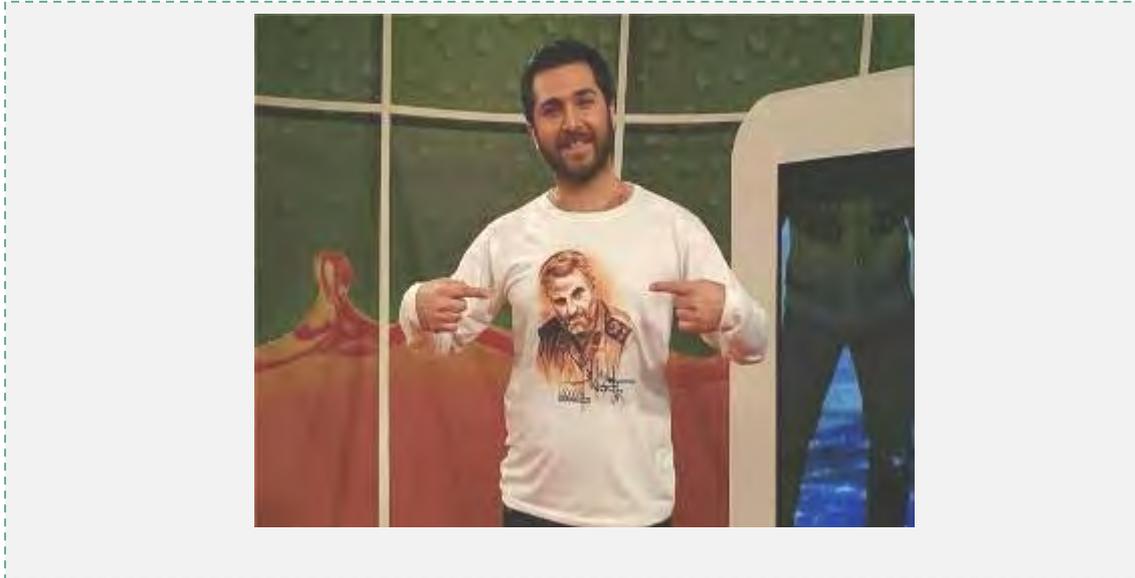
6. Popular support for him includes a biopic, a book of memoirs, a postage stamp, poems written in his honor and a YouTube video called "Iranian General" performed by The Nabz band.



A postage stamp issued in honor of Soleimani in the city of Kerman (IRNA, September 29, 2015).

7. As time passed, support for Soleimani began to turn into a personality cult. That led to reservations from the IRGC and Soleimani himself, if only for the sake of appearances. For example, he opposed having his picture posted on the social networks and had reservations about having a biopic made (Fararu, April 11, 2015).

In March 2015 Ramazan Sharif, the IRGC spokesman, made a media appeal to stop people from posting news about him during his visits to Iraq in order to keep information out of the hands of Iran's enemies. He claimed Soleimani was displeased by his pictures in the media and social networks, and on several occasions asked they not be posted (Tabnak, March 12, 2015).



An Iranian TV show host wears a Soleimani T-shirt to mark his birthday (qasemsoleimani.ir, March 11, 2015)

8. It can be assumed that at least some of Soleimani's traditional media and social network exposure has been **deliberate**. **Its objective has probably been to advance his political aspirations and at the same time strengthen the image of Iran and the IRGC as the most influential deterrent factors in the Middle East, operating with determination against Iran's enemies.** In any event, Soleimani's image has become the symbol of Iran's regional might, and the Iranian regime clearly wants to magnify his image both at home and abroad.

Section 9: Possible lifting of international sanctions on Qasem Soleimani in the wake of the nuclear agreement

1. Following the nuclear agreement of July 2015 between Iran and the West, according to Western reports, Soleimani and the Qods Force were among the list of important Iranian individuals and institutions from which the sanctions previously imposed on Iran would be lifted. **Soleimani has been included on several lists of senior Iranian officials on whom international sanctions were imposed.** Since March 2007 he has been on the UN Security Council's list of persons sanctioned as part of Resolution 1747 for his involvement in the Iranian nuclear program. In 2011 he was put on the American sanction list for his involvement in supporting the Syrian regime and the attempted assassination of the Saudi ambassador to Washington. In June 2011 the EU imposed sanctions on him and two other IRGC senior figures, **Mohammad-Ali Jafari**, the IRGC commander, and **Hossein Taeb**, chief of intelligence, for their involvement in support of the Syrian regime.

2. **Sources in the American administration initially denied reports of the intention to lift the sanctions on Soleimani.** They claimed the Qasem Soleimani on their list was Ghasem Soleimani, responsible for mining uranium in lead mines in Saghand. **The American administration later confirmed that Qasem Soleimani would be removed from the list of UN Security Council sanctioned individuals but only eight years after the signing of the nuclear agreement.** However, the American Treasury Department clarified the issue, stating that **because of his involvement in other illegitimate activities** (i.e., subversion and terrorism), **Soleimani's status would not change.**

3. Without relating to the question of whether or not the sanctions imposed on Soleimani would eventually be lifted, **his recent trip to Russia illustrated the difficulty of enforcing personal sanctions on him.** Russia's military involvement in Syria and the possibility that it will spread to Iraq indicate the establishment of a new regional coalition composed of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Russia. Iran has already demonstrated its ability to exploit every opportunity to fortify its regional status. Soleimani's extensive experience and proven talent in advancing Iranian involvement in the Middle East ensure **he will continue playing a key role in the future turmoil which is certain to plague the Middle East in the coming years.** Whether or not he remains in the Qods Force or enters national politics, **he can be expected to**

continue as an important player in the Iranian leadership and as a key figure in Iran's regional politics.