



## A Year after the Assassination of Soleimani: Iran Faces Many Challenges, But Determined to Cement its Regional Influence

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December 31, 2020

### Main Argument

Over the year that has passed since the assassination of the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, **Iran faced growing challenges to its regional ambitions.** The death of Soleimani, who was the central executioner of Iran's efforts to increase its influence the Middle East, and **raised question marks with regard to Iran's ability to continue to entrench its hold over the region. In addition, there are growing doubts about the ability of his successor, Esmail Qa'ani, to serve as an adequate replacement.** However, an analysis of Iran's conduct in the region over the past year indicates that **despite the growing challenges, Tehran is determined to continue to further its regional goals,** chief among them compelling the removal of American forces from the Middle East, maintaining and expanding Iran's influence in Syria and Iraq, and providing Hezbollah with advanced weaponry, and particularly precision-guided missiles, for a future conflict with Israel. **The Qods Force under Qa'ani's leadership continues to play a central role in advancing these priorities while delegating some of the authorities of the commander of the Force. Thus, the Qods Force is reverting to a pattern that previously characterized its activities,** operating as a small, highly qualified force, working clandestinely through and with proxy organizations operated by Iran.



Esmail Qa'ani (on the right) alongside Qasem Soleimani  
(Fars, January 3, 2020)

- ▶ At a time when Iran had to contend with the fallout of Soleimani's assassination, **Iran has also had to deal with significant domestic and external challenges:** the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; an exacerbating economic crisis; the confrontation with the United States in light of the Maximum Pressure policy of President Trump; the activities of regional and international actors that limit Iran's ability to realize its ambitions in the region; growing voices in the Arab world, and particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, against Iran's involvement; increasing efforts by the central government in Baghdad to restrain the influence of Iran and its proxies; and the normalization of relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, Iran's neighbors in the Persian Gulf.
- ▶ A year following Soleimani's assassination, it is apparent that despite these mounting challenges, **Iran continues to entrench its foothold in the region.** In Syria, Iran and the Shia militias that enjoy the backing of the IRGC continue to operate, even if that presence may fluctuate and be reduced, stemming from changes in the needs of the battlefield, following the decisive victories of the Assad regime. **The activities of Iran and its proxies,** including local Syrian elements, Shia militias and Hezbollah, **persist in both eastern Syria and in the south, next to the border with Israel.**
- ▶ **The Qods Force, under the command of Esmail Qa'ani, continues to play a central role** in the Iranian effort to bolster its influence in Syria. Qa'ani personally paid a number of visits to Lebanon and Syria over the past year. In addition to these efforts to entrench Iran's military foothold in the country, the two countries formalized the military and security cooperation between them in an agreement of cooperation in the military, security and technological spheres, which was inked in July 2020.
- ▶ **In Iraq, Iran had persisted in its efforts to preserve its military, political, economic and religious influence, despite the challenges,** particularly in light of the efforts of Iraq's Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, to restrain the influence of Iran and the Shia militias it backs. Iran continues to view Iraq as a central arena that serves its vital interests, although Tehran has displayed caution to avoid an all-out escalation with the United States or further inflaming tensions with the central government in Baghdad. In parallel to its political and security activities, over the past year, Iran has also **worked to ensure its vital economic interests in Iraq,** to preserve its religious-cultural influence in Iraq.
- ▶ In the Iraqi arena too, **the Qods Force continues to play a central role in Iran's effort to maintain its influence in the political and security spheres.** Since assuming his position in

January 2020, Esmail Qa'ani carried out at least six visits to Iraq, during which he met with Iraqi senior officials, politicians and leaders of the Shia militias. In light of the confrontations between the Iraqi militias and American forces, Iran and the commanders of its loyal militias continue to maintain coordination, and Iran persists in providing them with financial support, as well as weaponry. It is not possible to rule out that **the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who maintained a close personal relationship, harmed the ability of the IRGC to maintain centralized control over some of the Shia militias in Iraq.** However, Qa'ani's frequent visits to Baghdad, as well as visits of senior commanders of the Shia Iraqi militias in Iran **indicate an ongoing and significant effort to maintain open communication channels and Iranian influence over the militias.**

► Although Soleimani's assassination undoubtedly impaired the ability of the IRGC and Qods Force to realize their goals in the region, at least in the short term, it also **provided them with an opportunity to better align their tasks and modes of operation to the changing regional circumstances, and the set of constraints and opportunities currently facing them.** Over the past decade, significant changes occurred in the modus operandi of the Qods Force and its commander. During the civil war in Syria and the campaign against ISIS, the Qods Force transformed from a small elite unit, which focused mostly on covert and low-signature activities, usually through proxy organizations, to a central actor shaping and overseeing the military campaign in Syria and Iraq. Soleimani personally, who previously maintained a low media profile and preferred to work behind the scenes until the middle of the last decade, assumed the center stage.

► The collapse of ISIS as a territorial entity and the military achievements of President Assad provided Iran with new opportunities to entrench its hold over Syria and Iraq, but also posed new obstacles and challenges to Iran's ambitions. Meanwhile, **the decisive victory in the civil war with Russian assistance, allowed Iran to revert to relying mostly on the foreign Shia militias operating under its guidance,** on Hezbollah and additional local proxies, and significantly reduce the number of Iranian forces stationed in Syria.



**Esmail Qa'ani next to the Supreme Leader Khamenei and Iran's President Rouhani at a ceremony commemorating Qasem Soleimani (Fararu, January 9, 2020)**

► Although it appears that Qa'ani, Soleimani's successor, **is struggling to preserve and maintain the network** weaved by Soleimani over the past decade of organizations and militias operating under the IRGC and with its support, **it should be kept in mind, that unlike his predecessor, Qa'ani is not tasked with waging a large-scale military campaign.** Moreover, it appears that the Qods Force under the leadership of Qa'ani reverted to the modus operandi that characterized it in the past, **as a small, highly capable force, responsible for covert activities,** mainly through proxy organizations operating under Iranian patronage and control. Under Qa'ani's leadership, the Qods Force has focused on coordinating between its allies and proxies in the region and transferring assistance to them **while delegating some of the authorities of the commander of the Force** to Hezbollah's leadership and the commanders of the Shia Iraqi militias.

► In summary, **undoubtedly, Soleimani's assassination dealt a serious blow to Iran.** The multiple challenges Iran has faced at home and abroad over the past year make it difficult to assess the impact of Soleimani's assassination separately from the overall set of intensifying challenges facing Tehran. In either case, Iran's conduct in the region over the past year - regardless of the growing constraints - **clearly indicates that Iran is determined to continue to entrench its influence in the region and exploit every opportunity to advance its strategic goals, and that it is unlikely to give up these efforts.**

## A Year Since Soleimani's Assassination: A Challenging and Tumultuous Period

► In the year that has passed since the assassination of the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force (January 3, 2020), Iran has faced growing challenges to its regional policy. Soleimani's killing dealt a serious blow to Tehran's ability to further its strategic goals in the Middle East,

at least in the short term. Over the past decade, the determination, operational capabilities, military and political skills, and close ties with Iran's top leadership, chief among them the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, made Soleimani into the "puppet master," and main executor of Iran's entrenchment and subversion in the Middle East. He managed to weave a tight web of relations with Iran's allies in the region, including the leadership of Hezbollah, the Syrian regime and the Shia militias in Iraq. His death raised significant doubts about the ability of his successor, Esmail Qa'ani, to serve as a proper replacement to him. Qa'ani did serve as Soleimani's deputy since Soleimani assumed his position as the commander of the Qods Force in early 1998, but Qa'ani's work over the years focused mostly on the Qods Force's involvement in Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia.



**The Commander of the Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, reading Soleimani's will at a ceremony marking 40 days since his killing (Mashregh News, February 13, 2020).**

- In addition to the ramifications of Soleimani's assassination, Iran has had to contend with significant domestic and external challenges, chief among them: the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; an exacerbating economic crisis; the confrontation with the United States in light of the Maximum Pressure policy of President Trump vis-a-vis Iran; the activities of regional and international actors that limit Iran's ability to realize its ambitions in the region; growing voices in the Arab world, and particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, against Iran's involvement; increasing efforts by the central government in Baghdad to restrain the influence of Iran and its proxies; and the normalization of relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, Iran's neighbors in the Persian Gulf.
- The COVID-19 crisis, which cost the lives of over 54,000 people in Iran thus far, occurred at one of the most challenging periods in the history of the Islamic Republic, given the withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear deal (JCPOA) in May 2018 and re-imposition

of economic sanctions, which exacerbated the challenges the country is facing, and pushed its economy to an all-time nadir. The budgetary challenges, however, do not prevent Iran from persisting with its efforts to entrench its influence in the region, but they have forced Tehran to reduce, to an extent, its support for its allies and proxies, and the extent of its military activities.

► The activities of other state actors in the region, chief among them Israel, the United States, Russia and Turkey, also constrained Iran's ability to project its influence in the region. The strikes attributed to Israel in Syria against military installations used by the Iranians and militias operating with its support have managed to stymie Iran's efforts to expand its military foothold in Syria, as well as Hezbollah's procurement of precision-guided missiles. These strikes also constrained Iran's freedom to operate in Syria and exposed Iran's inability to adequately address IDF's activities in Syria.

► Meanwhile, Russia continues to play a central role in Syria, and it is not naturally predisposed to take into account Iran's ambitions. The common interests shared by Iran and Russia are significant enough to allow them to maintain cooperation between them, and Russia has not constrained Iran's influence in Syria, despite American and Israeli requests. At the same time, there are disagreements between the two powers, which are the result of the ambitions of both countries to influence Syria and shape its post-settlement trajectory. In eastern Syria and its south, conflicts occasionally erupted between actors operating under Iranian tutelage and forces supported by Russia. Thus, for example, in recent months, southern Syria witnessed growing efforts by Russia to increase its clout in the region by bolstering the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps of the Syrian Army, which operates under Russian guidance, as part of the struggle for influence Russia is waging vis-a-vis Iran. On July 30, 2020, the al-Arabiya channel reported, based on military sources in the city of Daraa, that Russia's Military Police and forces of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps applied pressures that resulted in a reduction in the presence of forces supported by Iran in the city, its countryside and the Quneitra province bordering on Israel. According to this report, the Russian forces prevented pro-Iranian forces from establishing new positions in the area, and placed checkpoints that prevented the concentration of these forces in one location. Another actor that competes with Iran in both Syria and Iraq is Turkey, whose military presence in northwestern Syria challenges the ability of Iranian-backed forces to increase the areas under their control in the region.

► In Iraq, the appointment of Mustafa al-Kazimi at the Prime Minister of Iraq in May 2020 poses another major challenge to Iran. Although al-Kazimi was elected to his position with Iranian acquiescence, he was not Tehran's preferred candidate, who had to accept his nomination to derail the appointment of the former Governor of Najaf, Adnan al-Zurfi, to the premiership. Since his election to the role of prime minister, it is apparent that al-Kazimi is determined to prevent his country from turning into a battlefield where the United States and Iran settle their scores, and he has tried to maneuver between Tehran and Washington. Al-Kazimi strives to maintain Iraq's ties to the U.S. administration and limit the influence of the Shia militias, and particularly the factions that are loyal to Iran and seen as forces that may destabilize the country and lead to an escalation with the United States. The confrontation between al-Kazimi and the pro-Iranian militias came to a head during a raid, carried out by the Iraqi Counter-terrorism Services on June 25, 2020, against a headquarters of the Shia militia Kataeb Hezbollah, which is responsible for rocket attacks against the U.S. embassy compound in Baghdad and American forces stationed in Iraqi military bases.<sup>1</sup>



**The visit of the Iraqi prime minister to the headquarters of the Shia militias in Baghdad (Tasnim, May 16, 2020).**

► The assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of the Shia militias in Iraq and the head of the pro-Iranian militia Kataeb Hezbollah, impaired Iran's ability to maintain its control over the Shia militias in Iraq, and exacerbated the internal power struggles among them, particularly between militias that see Iran as their sole source of authority, and the majority of the Shia militias, who follow the most senior Iraqi Shia cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who is a harsh critic of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist doctrine (Velayet-e Faqih), which was enacted in Iran following the Islamic Revolution. Sistani, unlike

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the challenges facing Iran in Iraq, see the publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "Iran faces growing Challenges in Iraq but is determined to further Its vital interests", July 14, 2020. Accessible online: <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iran-faces-growing-challenges-iraq-determined-vital-interests/>

the leadership of the Iranian-backed Shia militias, supports the integration of the militias under his sway into the Iraqi security forces.



**Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of the Shia militias in Iraq (Fars, January 4, 2020).**

► In addition to the above-mentioned growing challenges facing Iran, Tehran is also contending with increasingly vocal criticism in the Arab world, and particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, of Iran's meddling in these countries. In recent years, the ongoing Iranian penetration, and particularly the growing involvement of the Qods Force of the IRGC in the management of domestic affairs in Arab countries, aroused growing political and popular criticism. The calls against Iran's meddling in their countries, including among Shia Arabs, were clearly heard in the protests that swept Iraq and Lebanon in 2020.

## Iranian Activity in Syria following Soleimani's Assassination

► Over the past year, despite these growing challenges, Iran persisted in its efforts to increase its regional clout. The COVID-19 crisis also did not significantly alter Iran's patterns of behavior. A few weeks after the outbreak of the pandemic in Iran (February - March 2020), Iran returned to business almost as usual. In Syria, the activities of the IRGC and the Shia militias operating under their control persisted, and in mid-April 2020, the regular flights of Iranian freighter planes between Iran and Syria resumed, after some of them were temporarily used to ferry medical equipment from China to Iran.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the impact of COVID-19 on Iran's regional policies, see the publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "Iran Reengages in the Middle East to Promote Its Strategic Goals, Despite the COVID-19 and Economic Crises," May 7, 2020. Accessible online: <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iran-reengages-middle-east-promote-strategic-goals-despite-covid-19-economic-crises/>

► Despite the IDF strikes in Syria, which are intended to thwart Iran's entrenchment efforts in the country, Iran and the Shia militias did not cease their operations, but did apparently alter their modus operandi:

◆ On April 13, 2020, the Syrian pro-opposition website Zaman al-Wasl, reported that the IRGC, Hezbollah and the Shia Iraqi militia Harakat al-Nujabaa, established a new headquarters in the town of Maharim, in the Aleppo countryside, to oversee the battles in the town of Saraqeb in southern Idlib governorate. Two weeks prior, the website reported about the establishment of new headquarters, to be used by the pro-Iranian militias, which were set up in a number of villages south-west of Aleppo city, including a central headquarters, intended to coordinate all the military activities of the Shia militias in the Aleppo and Idlib countrysides. According to this report, based on a senior source in the Syrian armed opposition, the Shia militias established over 16 new headquarters, most of them in areas that these militias and Syrian Army captured from the rebels in battles south of Aleppo and east of Idlib city. The source assessed that between 2,000 to 2,500 fighters of the IRGC, Hezbollah and the Shia militias are operating in the Aleppo and Idlib fronts (Zaman al-Wasl, March 26, 2020).

◆ Shortly afterwards, pro-opposition Syrian sources reported about an increase in the activity of the Shia militias, and particularly the Fatemiyoun Brigade, a militia comprised of Afghan fighters operating under IRGC guidance, along the Syrian-Iraqi border. On April 24, 2020, Syrian opposition sources reported that hundreds of Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters entered Syria and were dispatched to a number of regions across the country, and particularly the Syrian desert (the Badia), and Aleppo, Idlib and Deir Ezzor governorates. According to this report, some of the fighters arrived with their families, intending to settle in areas under the control of the Syrian regime in northern and eastern Syria (Syria TV, April 24, 2020).

◆ On April 29, the Syrian pro-opposition network, Ayn al-Furat, reported that about 30 military vehicle entered Syria from Iraq, through the Albu Kamal crossing, carrying about 100 fighters of the Fatemiyoun Brigade. According to this report, the fighters were placed in positions near the Albu Kamal bridge on the bank of the Euphrates River. These positions were set up a month in advance and stocked with various types of weaponry.

◆ On May 11, 2020, the pro-opposition Syrian website Euphrates Post reported about an increase in the deployment of the Shia militias operating under IRGC control in Syria. According to this report, 100 additional fighters of the Fatemiyoun Brigade were dispatched to Syria through the Abu Kamal Crossing connecting Syria and Iraq. The fighters first arrived to the western side of the city of Deir Ezzor, and from there continued on to Damascus. The website also reported that the Zeynabioun Brigade, made up of Pakistani fighters, also received reinforcements, which were moved from the Deir Ezzor region to the Homs countryside. In addition, another pro-opposition Syrian website reported about the deployment of the Iraqi militia Liwaa' al-Muntathir, in the Abu Kamal region. According to this report, the new militia, which were established upon the order of the Commander of the Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, is comprised of several hundred Iraqi and Syrian fighters. The fighters entered Syria in March 2020, after undergoing training in urban combat and guerrilla warfare by Iranian officers in the al-Qaim region, on the Iraqi side of the Syria-Iraq border (Step News Agency, May 3, 2020).

◆ On October 10, 2020, the Step News Agency, which is affiliated with the Syrian opposition, reported that military reinforcements of the IRGC arrived to the Abu Kamal region through the al-Qaim Crossing connecting Syria and Iraq. The reinforcements included 25 military vehicles, ten armored personnel carriers, five trucks, communication equipment, and armored vehicles bearing heavy machine guns. According to the report, the forces aimed to reach the Imam Ali Military Base south of Abu Kamal. The report further stated that the Iranian forces prevented Syrian forces loyal to the Syrian regime to approach the forces or take their photos.

◆ On December 17, 2020, the Turkish Anadolu agency reported that the IRGC and members of an Iraqi militia supported by them took over 20 houses belonging to Syrian civilians in the Deir Ezzor governorate, to shield themselves from airstrikes against targets belonging to Iran and the militias operating under its patronage in the area. According to the report, the Iranian forces turned the residential buildings to military bases of barracks without paying any compensation to the homeowners.

► Meanwhile, Iran continues to increase its influence in southern Syria, exploiting the gaps in the Syrian regime's control over the region, and the presence of multiple actors with competing interests in that area. Since the Assad regime regained control of southern Syria in

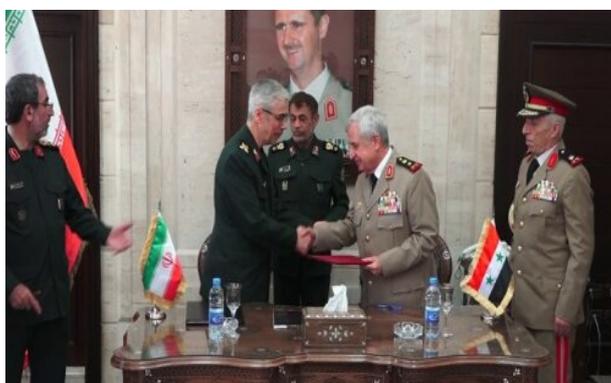
the summer of 2018, Iran has been promoting the activation and expansion of local militias operating in the region under its command or influence, and strives to establish a presence of its proxies, including local Syrians, units of the Syrian Army under the influence of Iran and Hezbollah, near the border with Israel:

◆ In August 2020, a Syrian opposition source reported, based on local military sources, that Iran began effort to establish a new military force in the Quneitra governorate, bordering on Israel, as part of its effort to expand its foothold in the region, against the backdrop of the competition of power between it and Russia in the region. According to the report, Iran is operating through Hezbollah and with the cover of Branch 220 of the Political Security Directorate in Sa'sa' to establish the new force, commanded by former fighters of the Syrian Army and the Fawj al-Jolan militia, which fought alongside the Syrian Army. Thus far, about 175 fighters were recruited into the ranks of the new force (Enab Baladi, August 12, 2020).

◆ On the night between August 2-3, 2020, the IDF struck a cell that attempted to place explosive devices in an area under Israeli control on the eastern side of the fence along the border between the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights and Syria. According to the IDF, the cell comprised of four members who were likely killed in the strikes. The IDF spokesperson assessed that a local cell, operated by Iran and not Hezbollah, was behind the attempt to place the explosive devices in the Golan Heights, possibly as retaliation to a series of air strikes of Iranian targets in Syria, which were attributed to Israel.

◆ On November 17, the IDF uncovered two areas booby-trapped with explosive devices near the border fence with Syria, in Israeli-controlled territory. According to the IDF, the members of the two cells who placed the explosive devices are residents of Syrian border villages, who operated under the guidance and with the financial backing of the Qods Force. Following the uncovering of the explosive devices, the Israeli Air Force struck warehouses, headquarters and military compounds of the Qods Force, as well as air defense batteries of the Syrian Army. The strikes of the Air Force hit, among other targets, compounds of Unit 840 of the IRGC, which belongs to the Qods Force and was responsible for the operation to place the explosive devices (Maariv; Haaretz, November 18-19, 2020).

► Over the past year, in parallel to Iran’s ongoing efforts to entrench its foothold in Syria, the two countries formalized the military and security cooperation between them. In July 2020, the Syrian Minister of Defense, Ali Ayyoub, and the Chief of Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces, Mohammad Baqeri, a comprehensive agreement concerning military, security and technological cooperation. At the signing ceremony, Baqeri stated that the agreement enhances the cooperation between the two countries in facing off American pressures. He declared that Iran intends to bolster Syria’s air defenses, as part of the expansion of military cooperation between the two countries (al-Mayadin, July 8, 2020). In September 2020, the Spokesman of Iran’s Armed Forces, Abolfazl Shekarchi, declared that Iran intends to upgrade Syria’s air defense systems based on the agreement signed in July (Fars, September 22, 2020).



**The signing of the agreement on military cooperation between Iran and Syria (ISNA, July 14, 2020).**

► The Qods Force of the IRGC continued to play a prominent role in the ongoing Iranian effort to entrench its influence in Syria, even after the assassination of Soleimani. Over the past year, the Commander of the Force, Esmail Qa’ani, paid a number of visits to Syria and Lebanon:

- ◆ In late February 2020, Qa’ani conducted his first visit to Syria since assuming his new role. Al-Araby al-Jadeed reported (March 9, 2020), that during the visit, Qa’ani toured a number of fronts where forces of the IRGC, Hezbollah and pro-Iranian militias operate. Qa’ani visited the countryside west of Aleppo city, near the Shia villages of Nubul and al-Zahraa, and the countryside south of Aleppo city, near the town of Khan Touman and the Iranian base in Jabal Azzan, west of Aleppo city. Qa’ani also toured Idlib, Hama and Lattakia governorates.



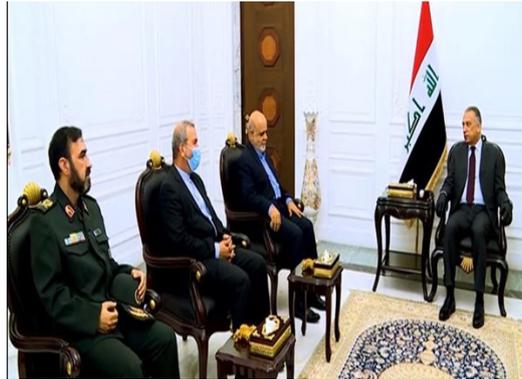
**Esmail Qa’ani alongside the former Iranian Member of Parliament, Ali-Mohammad Bozorgvari, who visited during February the fronts in Syria. It is possible that the photo was taken during Qa’ani’s visit in February 2020 (a Telegram channel affiliated with Esmail Qa’ani, March 7, 2020)**

- ◆ On June 27, 2020, the Iranian news agency Tasnim reported about a visit Qa’ani carried out in the Albu Kamal region along the Syrian-Iraqi border. During his visit, Qa’ani proclaimed that the schemes of the United States and the “Zionist regime” have not stopped.
- ◆ In November 2020, it was reported that prior to his visit to Baghdad, Qa’ani also visited Damascus and Beirut and met with President Assad and the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah (BBC, November 21, 2020). On November 30, the Lebanese daily published in French, L’Orient-Le Jour, reported that Qa’ani asked Nasrallah to avoid taking steps that would lead to an escalation with Israel, to prevent Israel from exploiting the situation for a wide-scale military operation.

## Iranian Activity in Iraq following Soleimani’s Assassination

► Iran maintained its effort to preserve its military, political, economic and religious influence in Iraq as well. These efforts were shadowed by the growing tensions between the United States and Iran and the Iraqi Shia militias, and Iran’s desire to accelerate the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. Iran, which sees Iraq as an arena of great geo-strategic importance, being in Iran’s “backyard,” has persisted in its efforts to advance its long-term goals in the country, despite the challenges, while displaying pragmatism and caution in an effort to preserve its relationship with the central government in Baghdad and the Shia militias backed by it. The removal of American forces is still perceived by Iran as a strategic

goal and a central tool for preserving and even bolstering its influence in Iraq. Therefore, the Qods Force has encouraged the Shia militias backed by it to apply measured pressure on the United States. At the same time, Iran avoided direct action against the United States, and prefers to use its proxies, without claiming responsibility formally for their activities, to avoid renewed escalation in Iraq, exacerbating tensions between it and the central government in Baghdad, and possibly even leading to a direct military confrontation with the United States, which would not serve Iranian interests.



**The meeting between the Iraqi Prime Minister al-Kazimi with the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi (Fars, May 10, 2020).**

► In the Iraqi arena too, the Qods Force continues to play a central role in Iran's ongoing efforts to maintain its political and security clout in the country. Since assuming his position in January 2020, Esmail Qa'ani conducted at least six visits to Iraq:

◆ **In late March 2020**, Qa'ani visited Iraq in an effort to unite the Shia political blocs in rejecting the candidacy of Adnan al-Zurfi for the prime ministerial position, and reaching an agreement on an alternative candidate for the role. According to several reports, Qa'ani met with the heads of the Shia parties in the Iraqi parliament, Hadi al-Ameri, Nouri al-Maliki and Omar al-Hakim, in an attempt to agree on an alternative candidate for the Iraqi premiership, due to the opposition of the Shia factions and Iran to the nomination of al-Zurfi, who was seen as close to the United States (al-Marsad News, March 31, 2020; al-Akhbar, April 1, 2020).

◆ **In early June 2020**, Qa'ani arrived for another visit in Baghdad. Iraqi sources reported that his visit was intended to develop a united front with the Shia factions loyal to Iran in Iraq, ahead of the start of the strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States, during which the matter of continued U.S. military presence in Iraq was discussed (al-Araby al-Jadeed, June 3, 2020). The Lebanese daily al-Akhbar, which is

close to Hezbollah, reported (June 6, 2020), that in the meetings Qa'ani held with the commanders of the Shia militias during his two-day visit to Iraq, he called on them to avoid escalating the situation, maintain calm and solve problems with proper judgment. He stressed that the Popular Mobilization Units (Hashd al-Shaabi), the umbrella uniting the Shia militias, is an Iraqi force that Tehran supports, but that Iran does not intend to meddle in Iraq's internal disagreements. Qa'ani also stated that Mustafa al-Kazimi's election to the role of prime minister was an Iraqi decision, and not an Iranian one, and that al-Kazimi's success will serve the interests of both countries.



**Esmail Qa'ani**  
(Tasnim, January 3, 2020).

◆ **On August 16, 2020**, Qa'ani arrived for a visit in Baghdad, during which he met with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, ahead of al-Kazimi's departure to Washington as part of the Strategic Dialogue between Iraq and the United States (Rudaw, August 17, 2020). The Iraqi Member of Parliament, Hussein Arab, who serves as the spokesman of the Shia bloc al-Iraqiyuun led by Omar al-Hakim, claimed, on the other hand, that Qa'ani arrived for a visit in Iraq as part of a formal delegation, to hold discussion with Iraqi officials and leaders of Iraq's political blocs about the security and economic situation in the country, as well as bilateral relations. He reported that Qa'ani's visit had nothing to do with the planned visit of the Iraqi prime minister to Washington, and that this topic did not come up during his meetings in Baghdad (Shafaq News, August 18).

◆ **On October 9, 2020**, Iraqi media outlets reported about another visit of Qa'ani's in Baghdad, during which he met with senior commanders of the Shia militias. The visit was held at a time when the Iraqi government, the Shia Iraqi militias and the Iranian regime are conducting talks following a warning, issued by the United States,

which threatened to shutter its embassy in Baghdad and act militarily against the Shia pro-Iranian militias, due to ongoing attacks by the militias against American targets in Iraq.

◆ **In mid-November 2020**, Qa’ani paid another visit to Baghdad and met with senior Iraqi politicians and the commanders of the pro-Iranian Shia militias. According to the AP news agency (November 20, 2020), based on two Shia Iraqi politicians, Qa’ani instructed the commanders of the militias to maintain high vigilance but avoid creating tensions vis-a-vis the United States, to avoid giving President Trump a reason to launch an attack in his last weeks in power. The Iraqi sources reported that the commander of the Shia militias who met with Qa’ani in Baghdad agreed to maintain the unofficial ceasefire with the United States, as negotiations continue between Baghdad and Washington concerning the pullout of U.S. troops from Iraq (Shafaq News, November 21). The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, confirmed in an interview to the TV channel al-Alam (December 5, 2020) Qa’ani’s visit to Iraq, and mentioned that Qa’ani met with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi; the President of Iraq, Barham Salih; and several other senior Iraqi officials, and discussed with them a host of political, security and economic matters, as well as how to bolster the security cooperation between the two countries. He stressed that Iran does not interfere in Iraq’s domestic affairs, but mentioned that there are good relations between the Iraqi factions and Iran, and it is only natural that they would consult it.

◆ **In late December 2020, Qa’ani conducted another short visit to Baghdad**, likely following the December 20th rocket attack on the compound of the American embassy in Baghdad. During the attack - the most extensive one since early 2020 - 21 rockets were fired at the Green Zone area in Baghdad, where the American embassy is located. The Iranian al-Alam network reported that during his consultations in Baghdad, Qa’ani discussed expanding bilateral ties. According to this report, Qa’ani’s visit was pre-planned and was not related to the attack on the American embassy in Baghdad (al-Alam, December 23, 2020). On the other hand, the Iraqi news website Shafaq News, reported based on an Iraqi source that Qa’ani arrived to Baghdad for a visit that lasted a few hours to meet with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, and deny any connection between Iran and the Iraqi militias it backs and the attack on the embassy (Shafaq News, December 23). Prior to this, Iraqi sources reported that

Qa’ani told the Iraqi prime minister that Iran opposes attacks on diplomatic stations and supports the efforts of the Iraqi government to maintain order and security and protect Iraq’s national interests (al-Iraq al-Youm, December 23). In an interview that Iran’s Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, gave to the Iraqi TV channel al-Ahed (December 28, 2020), he remarked that **Qa’ani is the one who holds the “Iraq file” in Iran.**

► In light of the confrontation between the Shia militias and American forces in Iraq, Iran maintains coordination with the leadership of the militias loyal to it, and continues to provide them with financial support and weaponry. The launch of rockets toward the American embassy in Baghdad over the past year raised the question whether they were carried out with Iranian guidance, or at least coordination with Iran, or were they carried out by “rogues” in the Shia militias. Although it is not possible to definitively answer this question, it is highly doubtful that repeated attacks against the American embassy and additional American targets in Iraq, while utilizing Iranian weaponry, could have been carried out without coordination or at least notifying Iran. It is still possible, that the assassination of both Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who maintained a close personal relationship, negatively affected the ability of the IRGC to maintain centralized control over some of the Shia militias in Iraq. In any case, Qa’ani’s frequent visits to Baghdad indicate his efforts to maintain direct communication channels and influence over the Iraqi Shia militias backed by Iran.

► In addition to Qa’ani’s frequent visits to Baghdad, a number of senior Shia militia commanders from Iraq paid visits to Iran:

◆ In early January 2020, Abdul Aziz al-Muhammadawi (Abu Fadak), who was appointed as the commander of Kataeb Hezbollah following the assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, paid a visit to Iran. During the visit, Abu Fadak visited the gravesite of Qasem Soleimani, the former commander of the Qods Force, in the city of Kerman (Mashregh News, February 24, 2020).



**Abdul Aziz al-Muhammadawi next to Soleimani's grave  
(Mashregh News, February 24, 2020).**

◆ In February 2020, Tehran held a conference in memory of the fallen members of the “resistance front,” during which Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi, the commander of the pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militia, Harakat al-Nujabaa, declared that the militia intends to fight the American forces until their removal from Iraq. He proclaimed that his organization is determined to avenge the death of the “fallen commanders of the resistance” and is preparing for war. He added that the countdown to zero hour, when the death of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis will be avenged, has begun (Tasnim; Mehr, February 15, 2020).



**Akram al-Kaabi, the Commander of the Iraqi Harakat al-Nujabaa militia  
(IRNA, February 15, 2020).**

◆ In October 2020, Akram al-Kaabi arrived for another visit in Tehran, during which he met with senior Iranian officials, including the senior adviser to the supreme leader of Iran on international affairs, the senior military commander of the supreme leader, and the deputy commander of the IRGC. His meetings in Tehran focused on the American military presence in Iraq (IRNA, October 27, 2020).

► Meanwhile, throughout 2020, senior Iranian and Iraqi officials continued to maintain contact on an ongoing basis:

◆ On July 19, 2020, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, arrived for an official visit in Baghdad. During his visit, Zarif met with senior Iraqi officials, chief among them the prime minister and president, and discussed enhancing bilateral relations, particularly in the economic sphere, continuing the campaign against ISIS' terrorism in Iraq and cooperation to fend off the COVID-19 outbreak. In

addition, Zarif met with Faleh al-Fayyad, the commander of the Popular Mobilization Units, and discussed the relationship between Iran and the Shia militias in Iraq, the repercussions of the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq (Fars, July 19, 2020).

◆ Two days later, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, arrived for a visit to Tehran, his first official visit since being elected as prime minister in May 2020. During the visit, al-Kazimi met with senior Iranian regime officials, chief among them the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani, the Speaker of the Majlis, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani. The Iraqi prime minister was accompanied on his visit by senior politicians and economic figures. According to the Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar (July 22), which has good access to Hezbollah sources, al-Kazimi also met in Tehran with the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani.

◆ In late September 2020, the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fuad Hussein, arrived for a two-day visit in Tehran, during which he met with senior Iranian officials and discussed developments in Iraq and the region, bilateral relations and the implementation of agreements signed during the visit of the Iraqi prime minister to Tehran (IRNA, September 26, 2020).

◆ At the same time, a military delegation from Iran, headed by the Deputy Chief of Staff for International Affairs, Qadir Nezami, who also serves as the head of the joint Iraqi-Iranian military committee, arrived for a visit in Baghdad. During the visit, the delegation met with the Iraqi Minister of Defense, Juma Inad Saadun, and discussed the military and security cooperation between the two countries, and the future of the campaign against ISIS (IRNA, September 27, 2020).

◆ In mid-November, the Iraqi minister of defense arrived for a visit in Tehran and met with senior Iranian officials, chief among them the Iranian minister of defense, the chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, the commander of the IRGC, and the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. Saadoun headed a delegation of security and military officials, which also included the commander of Iraq's Air Force, the commander of Iraq's Air Defense, and several other senior officers. The visit was intended to discuss expanding security and military cooperation between the two countries. The Iranian Chief of Staff, Mohammad Baqeri, reported after his meeting with

the Iraqi minister of defense that the two sides reached an agreement concerning security cooperation between the two countries, which will be signed in the near future. He mentioned that the Iraqi delegation discussed matters concerning military industries, security of shared borders, training plans and conducting joint military exercises (Mehr, November 15).



**The meeting of the Iraqi minister of defense with the commander of the IRGC (Tasnim, November 15, 2020).**

- ▶ Iran also maintained its efforts to secure its vital economic interests in Iraq. A central element of this efforts were attempts by senior Iranian officials and the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, to facilitate the reopening of the border crossings between the two countries, which were shuttered after the outbreak of COVID-19; a visit of a delegation headed by the Iranian minister of energy to Baghdad (June 2020); two visits of the governor of the Iranian Central Bank to Baghdad (June and October 2020); and meetings between the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad with senior economic officials in the Iraqi government.
- ▶ Iran has also maintained its activities intended to preserve its religious and cultural influence over Iraq. In early December 2020, the Reuters news agency reported about Iran's effort to expand its religious influence in Iraq through developing Shia holy sites in Iraq. The agency reported that Iran is investing hundreds of millions of dollars in a project to develop and expand the gravesite of the Shia Imam Ali in Karbala, as part of Iran's efforts to increase its "soft power" in Iraq, and to promote its economic interests, by encouraging religious tourism between Iran and Iraq. In addition to the development work of the Imam Hussein gravesite in Karbala, Iran is also carrying out construction works, through a number of subcontracting companies, in Najaf, Baghdad and Samara in northern Iraq (Reuters, December 2, 2020)
- ▶ In summary, Iran continues to view Iraq as a central arena of activities that serve Iran's vital security, political and economic interests. Exactly owing to the growing challenges at home

and abroad, chief among them the deepening economic crisis and the ongoing confrontation with the United States, Iran places even greater importance on preserving its influence in Iraq, and it has no intention to forgo it.

## The Qods Force in Transition from the Era of Soleimani to the Era of Qa'ani

► Although Soleimani's assassination undoubtedly impaired the ability of the IRGC and Qods Force to realize their goals in the region, at least in the short term, it also provided them with an opportunity to better align their tasks and modes of operates to the changing regional circumstances, and the set of constrains and opportunities facing then. Over the past decade, significant changes occurred in the modus operandi of the Qods Force and its commander. Since its establishment in the late 1980s, the Qods Force served as a small elite force, which focused primarily on covert and low-signature activities, usually through proxy organizations, to advance Iran's strategic goals through terrorism and political subversion. Following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria and the campaign against ISIS, it transformed itself into a central actor shaping and overseeing the military campaign in Syria and Iraq. The intervention of the Qods Force in Syria, particularly since 2015, reflected a significant shift in Iran's conduct, which generally avoided dispatching large numbers of forces to wage a military campaign beyond the country's borders.

► Soleimani's conduct has also undergone a dramatic shift. For many years, Soleimani made sure to keep a low profile in the media and was not well-known to the Iranian public, although his name was mentioned at times in the context of his involvement in subversion and terrorism Iran carried out beyond its border. His central role in overseeing the military campaign in Syria and Iraq, alongside the regional upheavals, led to a significant increase in his media exposure in Iran and beyond. Soleimani, who previously preferred to work behind the scenes until the middle of the last decade, assumed the center stage.

► But over the past three years, and following the achievements in the campaign against ISIS and the civil war in Syria, circumstances have changed in the two main arenas in which the Qods Force operates. The collapse of ISIS as a territorial entity and the decisive victories of the Assad regime did create new possibilities for Iran to expand its influence in Syria and Iraq, but also placed new obstacles and created new challenges to Iran, as it strives to cement its hold over both countries. Meanwhile, the military achievements of the Syrian forces, with

Russian support, which culminated in the reconquest of Aleppo city in late 2016, allowed Iran to revert to relying mostly of fighters of Hezbollah and the foreign Shia militias under its control, withdrawing a significant number of the Iranian forces who were stationed in Syria.

► Although it appears that Qa’ani, Soleimani’s successor, is struggling to preserve and maintain the network weaved by Soleimani over the past decade of organizations and militias operating under the IRGC and with its support, it should be kept in mind, that unlike his predecessor, Qa’ani is not tasked with waging a large-scale military campaign. Moreover, it appears that the Qods Force under the leadership of Qa’ani reverted to the modus operandi that characterized it in the past, as a small, highly capable force, responsible for covert activities, mainly through proxy organizations operating under Iranian patronage and control. This is done to realize Iran’s strategic goals, the primary ones being the removal of US forces from the region, maintaining and entrenching Iran’s hold over Syria and Iraq, and continuing to supply Hezbollah with advanced weaponry.

► A discussion of this change in the modus operandi could be observed in a report published by an Iranian news website on June 2020. The report stated that unlike his predecessor, Qa’ani prefers covert rather than overt activity to advance Iran’s strategic goals in various arenas, including Iraq, where Qa’ani is promoting a semi-covert policy intended to bring about the setting of a date for the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. The article concluded by stating that the Qods Force under Qa’ani’s command entered a new phase characterized by more covert activities than before, which improves its abilities vis-a-vis Iran’s enemies in the region (Jahan News, June 20, 2020).



**Esmail Qa’ani and the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei  
(KebnaNews, January 8, 2020).**

► The researcher and author Arash Azizi, who recently published a biography of Qasem Soleimani, also addressed the change in the patterns of conduct of the Qods Force under Qa’ani’s leadership. Azizi remarked that over the past year, Qa’ani has had to deal with

multiple challenges and that he lacks the charisma of his predecessor. Azizi did note that Qa'ani significantly improved his Arabic over that period. According to Azizi, the leadership of the Qods Force under Qa'ani's command has come to play mostly a role of coordination, while delegating some of the authorities previously held by the commander of the Force to the leadership of Hezbollah and the commanders of the Shia Iraqi militias, while the Qods Force remains responsible for providing support to these militias. This differs from Soleimani, who essentially served as a chief of staff of a transnational army, operating on multiple fronts. This change in the modus operandi of the Qods Force is in line with our assessment from February 2020, which stated that delegating some of the authorities of the Qods Force to Iran's local proxies (while maintaining their dependence of Tehran) and low-signature activities, may better serve Iran's goals in the Arab world at the current stage.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See this assessment in the publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "The Killing of Qasem Soleimani is a Major Loss to Iran, But May Serve as an Opportunity to Reexamine Iran's Modus Operandi in the Region," February 19, 2020. Accessible online: <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/killing-qasem-soleimani-major-loss-iran-may-serve-opportunity-reexamine-irans-modus-operandi-region/>