

Iran's New Terrorist-in-Chief: Esmail Ghani

While there is not a lot of information available on the man who replaced Qassem Soleimani as Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Qods Force, Esmail Ghani, there are small pieces of biographical data that are available from a variety of sources that give us some background. We can assume that as Iran will seek to build Ghani's 'cult of personality' in the coming months, more interviews or information will be released by the regime.



Ghani was, according to multiple reports, born in Mashad in northern Iran in 1957. Mashad is the second most populated city in Iran and home to the shrine of the eighth Shia Imam, Ali ibn Musa al-Reza. The city has attracted Shia pilgrims since ancient times and is reported to receive more than 20 million tourists and pilgrims a year.



Reaching adulthood in the final years of the rule of the Shah, he most likely would have been living in Mashad when on November 21st, 1978, the Shah's forces killed many people inside the shrine while damaging the shrine itself in the process. This could have had a significant impact on Ghani.

Ghani joined the Revolutionary Guard after the toppling of the Shah from power. The exact year of his enlistment is unclear, but it was likely either 1979 or 1980. Similar to the early career trajectory of Ghani's predecessor, his first combat experience would come by taking part in operations against Kurdish separatists.

He would then find himself in combat once again as a 10-year war began between Iraq and Iran. That conflict claimed over a million lives. Ghani led the Nasr-5 and Imam Reza-21 armored Brigade during the war.¹ During the conflict the Nasr-5 brigade participated in Iran's Operation Beit-ol-Moqaddas, that liberated the Iranian port city of Khorramshahr and pushed Iraqi troops back to the border while the Imam Reza-21 armored brigade was eventually expanded into a division.



In a conflict which saw young Iranian volunteers run into the paths of tanks and into minefields in advance of soldiers, Ghani recalls that the volunteers "were seeing that all of them are being killed, but when we ordered them to go, would not hesitate."

"The commander is looking to his soldiers as his children, and in the soldier's point of view, it seems that he received an order from God and he must do that," Ghani noted.²

He would survive the war and join the Qods force early on in its establishment; he would work hand-in-hand with his predecessor, the late Qassem Soleimani. To Iran's state-run news agency, he once described his relationship with Soleimani this way: "We are children of war... We are comrades on the battlefield and we have become friends in battle."³

Ghani is believed to have led counterintelligence efforts at the IRGC. In addition, while unconfirmed, some Western analysts have speculated that as deputy commander of the Qods Force he focused on the nations to Iran's eastern border such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, while Soleimani focused on the west. Up to this point, no official Iranian source has elaborated on the nature of his role within the IRGC.



In 1997, when Qassem Soleimani was appointed Commander of the Qods Force, Ghani was simultaneously appointed Deputy Commander.⁴



Ghani is thought to have been responsible for financial disbursements to terrorist groups, including Hezbollah. He is believed to have overseen the financial elements of Qods Force weapons. One such shipment consisted of 240 tons of ammunition—shipment seized in Nigeria in October 2010 that was intended for Gambia.⁵ Authorities opened 13 shipping containers labeled as carrying “packages of glass wool and pallets of stone.” But inside they found 107 mm Katyusha rockets, rifle rounds and other weapons. The deadly Katyusha rocket

remains a favored weapon of Iranian proxy forces, including Iraqi militias and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

According to a US Department of Treasury press release, after Ghani was added to the Office of Foreign Assets Control Specially Designated Nationals And Blocked Persons List on 27 March 2012:

Esmail Ghani serves as the Deputy Commander of the IRGC-QF. Ghani's authority covers IRGC-QF financial disbursements to IRGC-QF elements, including elements in Africa, as well as to various terrorist groups, including Hizballah. As Deputy Commander, Ghani had financial oversight of the IRGC-QF weapons shipment that was intended for The Gambia.⁶



The year after the United States highlighted that Iran had played a role in a massacre of more than 100 Syrians, including dozens of children, in the northern city of Houla, Ghani stated, “If the Islamic Republic was not present in Syria, the massacre of people would have happened on a much larger scale... Before our presence in Syria, too many people were killed by the opposition but with the physical and non-physical presence of the Islamic Republic, big massacres in Syria were prevented.”

*Then-State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland responded to these comments, stating a commander of Iran's elite Quds Force was “bragging” about its support of the pro-Asad Shabiha militia that allegedly carried out the attack.*⁷

Ghani would again find himself in the spotlight after giving an interview to the ISNA semiofficial Iranian news agency in which he stated:

*Thanks to Iran's presence in Syria - physically and non-physically - big massacres were prevented...if the Islamic republic had not been present in Syria, the massacre of its people would have been multiplied." Within hours, the interview would be removed from the ISNA website but remained on other news outlets. According to experts on the region this marked the first instance of a senior IRGC commander admitting publicly of Iranian involvement in Syria.*⁸

In 2017 at a ceremony to celebrate militias Iran financed and trained in Iraq to fight the Islamic State and in Syria to support President Bashar Assad, **Ghani openly bragged about IRGC operatives killing American troops.** While referring to the supercharged explosives Iran had supplied to its militias in Iraq that had the ability to penetrate U.S. armored vehicles, he boasted, “Americans have suffered more losses from us than we have suffered losses from them.”

He went on to repeat the Iranian propaganda line that 9/11 had been perpetrated not by Al Qaeda but by the United States, claiming, “America, under the pretext of Sept. 11 attacks, which it carried out itself, invaded Afghanistan and mobilized young Muslims and deployed them to Afghanistan so that they can later attack Iran.”⁹

In January 2020, shortly after his appointment as Qods Force Commander, Afghan media circulated pictures showing him paying an official visit to the Bamiyan province in July 2018. This prompted Afghan officials to begin an investigation into the visit by Ghani where he claimed to be the Iranian Deputy Chief of Mission in Kabul.¹⁰

Afghan officials say that Ghani has never served in a diplomatic capacity in the country, posing serious questions about the reason and intentions behind the visit to the predominantly Shia province in central Afghanistan.



Conclusion



Qasem Soleimani was something of an enigma in the Middle East; he came from nothing, and then earned the respect and admiration of the leadership and the masses. A tactician, a diplomat, and a true believer but ultimately a murderous terrorist, he won't be easily replaced and may be a once-in-a-generation general for Iran.

Given the parallel paths that Ghani and Soleimani took into the IRGC before Ghani assumed the role of deputy to Soleimani, it is plausible that Ghani was being prepared as a successor at the helm of the Qods Force as he witnessed firsthand Soleimani implement the latter's strategy for the region.

There's no evidence that they were friends previous to 1997, but they were fighting in the same places at the same times between 1979 and 1989 so at the very least they would have known of each other and likely crossed paths. But Ghani, while not raised in a rural community, rose from poverty and the enlisted ranks to the top of the Qods Force – just like Soleimani.



Ghani spent at least 22 years with Soleimani as his deputy, and it wouldn't be implausible that Soleimani, in keeping with his long-term vision, was building him up as a successor. Ghani would have spoken to Soleimani regularly since 1997 weekly if not daily. Ghani was around Soleimani, witnessing his daily interactions. Yet Ghani did not just witness Soleimani's strategy—he helped implement it.

Ghani's role in building links through financial disbursements with Hezbollah, Iran's most powerful external tool, is telling. Any Iranian leader would want Hezbollah's loyalty from day one.

Ghani isn't Qassem Soleimani, but if he's able to maintain the infrastructure Soleimani built and gain the respect of those terrorists Iran has backed in the region, he may be able to press ahead with Iran's expansionism. Of all the possible candidates to take Soleimani's place, Ghani was closest to the late terrorist mastermind, and their rise to power followed a similar trajectory.

Put simply, Ghani is well positioned and suited toward furthering Soleimani's murderous designs.

While taking out Soleimani was absolutely the right thing to do, it does not mean the Qods Force menace is undone. Ultimately the threat has not subsided, and the challenges associated with Iran's imperial ambitions remain.

¹ Zehra Nur Duz, "Iran's supreme leader names new commander of Quds Force" (3 January 2020), Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-s-supreme-leader-names-new-commander-of-quds-force/1691311>

² AP, "Iran general steps out of Suleimani's shadow to lead Quds Force" (4 January 2020), LA Times, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-01-04/iran-general-steps-out-of-soleimanis-shadow-to-lead-proxies>

³ Ibid

⁴ Muhammad Sahimi, "Profile | The Canny General: Quds Force Commander Ghasem Soleimani" (31 December 2011), PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/12/profile-the-canny-general-quds-force-commander-ghasem-soleimani.html>

⁵ "Ismail Ghani," (17 July 2012), Iran Watch, <https://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/esmail-ghani>

⁶ Press Release, "Treasury Targets Iranian Arms Shipments" (27 March 2012), US Department of Treasury, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1506.aspx>

⁷ Ted Wynne, "Media Watch | Iran's Alleged Role in Syrian Massacre" (1 June 2012) PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/06/media-watch-irans-alleged-role-in-syrian-massacre.html>

⁸ Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Syrian army being aided by Iranian forces" (28 May 2012) The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/28/syria-army-iran-forces>

⁹ Rowan Scarborough, "Iranian general boasts of Quds Force killing U.S. troops in Iraq" (31 December 2017) Washington Times, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/aug/2/ismail-ghaani-iranian-general-boasts-of-quds-force/>

¹⁰ Niala Mohammad, "Afghan Officials: Iran's New Quds Chief Likely Faked Identity in 2018" (9 January 2020) VOA News, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/afghan-officials-irans-new-quds-chief-likely-faked-identity-2018>