



Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani: A Biography

By Ali Alfoneh

This is the first in a series of Middle Eastern Outlooks about Qassem Suleimani.

Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani was appointed chief of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) sometime between September 10, 1997, and March 21, 1998, during the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Suleimani's appointment was no accident. He was chosen in part because he is a native of a mountainous village in Kerman, which is both geographically and culturally closer to Afghanistan than Qom, Suleimani's commonly believed place of birth. Suleimani also had extensive battlefield experience in the civil war in Kurdish regions of Iran during the immediate aftermath of the revolution, was a seasoned commander in the war against Iraq from 1980 to 1988, and fought against drug cartels near the Iran/Afghanistan border from 1988 until he was appointed Quds Force chief. This Outlook provides biographical background on Suleimani that shows why he was chosen as IRGC Quds Force chief in the first place.

"You should know that I . . . control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan,"¹ wrote Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani in a message to General David Petraeus, commanding general of the Multi-National Force–Iraq, in spring 2008. Suleimani, chief of the Quds Force of the IRGC, which was established in 1979 and tasked with exporting the Islamic revolution beyond Iran's borders,² was not bragging; according to leaked US Department of State diplomatic cables, the US embassy in Baghdad considers Suleimani "the point man directing the formulation and implementation of the [Islamic Republic of Iran Government's] Iraq policy, with authority second only to Supreme Leader [Ali] Khamenei."³ The Quds Force that he leads has been "organizing, training, funding, and equipping Iraqis to fight against Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces," along with Lebanon's Hezbollah.⁴ Since March 2004, Iraqi authorities

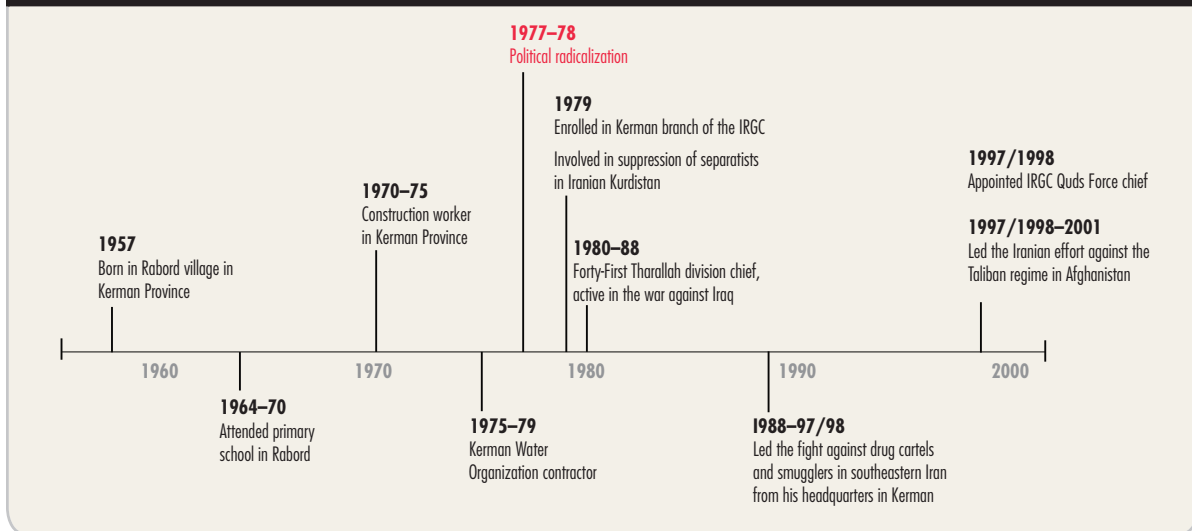
have complained publicly about the interference by the Quds Force in Iraqi political affairs.⁵ Suleimani also appears on both the United

Key points in this Outlook:

- Little information is available in English-language sources on Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani.
- By piecing together Persian-language sources, we can begin to understand Suleimani's life and why he was appointed Quds Force chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.
- As the Iran/Iraq war generation is dominating the politics, military, economy, and even spiritual life of the Islamic Republic, US policy analysts should pay greater attention to the Persian-language material from the 1980s and other sources discussing the formative phase of this generation.

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Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani at a Glance, 1957–2001



Nations Security Council's⁶ and the US Department of State's⁷ lists of individuals sanctioned for their involvement in proliferation activities and support for terrorism.

Despite Suleimani's central role, open-source materials in English provide no information about his life before the invasion of Afghanistan. For that matter, neither do the majority of online Persian sources, some of which are primarily comprised of translations of English-language material. The lack of knowledge about Suleimani's past constitutes a formidable challenge when trying to analyze his actions in the present. However, a careful analysis of the Persian-language open-source material on the Iran/Iraq War (1980–88) produced by the Tehran-based IRGC Center for Research and Study of the War, Iran's preeminent institution for the study of the Iran/Iraq War, along with select Persian-language sources available online, provides interesting insights into Suleimani's life.

Early Life

According to the US Department of State, Suleimani was born in the city of Qom on March 11, 1957.⁸ Persian-language sources contest this claim, identifying the village of Rabord in Kerman Province in southeastern Iran as Suleimani's place of birth⁹—which has significant implications for understanding Suleimani. Qom's population is centered around religion, including theologians and seminary students from all over the world, along with pilgrims and those who make their

living from the pilgrimage industry.¹⁰ In contrast, the mountain village of Rabord in remote Kerman—closer to the Afghan border—has a tribal structure,¹¹ which would have prepared Suleimani for operating in tribal societies such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq. This unique knowledge and experience is likely one of the main reasons why Suleimani was appointed Quds Force chief.

The open-source material provides no detailed information about Suleimani's parents or immediate family members, but his name identifies him as part of the Suleimani tribe, which migrated to Kerman from Fars Province in the eighteenth century.¹² In a rare autobiographic note, Suleimani writes that his father was a peasant and that the family owed nine thousand rial to the government sometime around 1970.¹³ This indicates that Suleimani's relatives were landless peasants who initially benefitted from the Shah's land-reform program of 1962—which divided the agricultural land of the landed aristocracy among the peasants—but that the Suleimani tribe became impoverished because of poor execution of the program.

According to Suleimani, in 1970 he and Ahmad Suleimani, a close relative killed in the war with Iraq in 1984,¹⁴ traveled to Kerman City and worked as construction workers to help repay their fathers' debt.¹⁵ This shows that Suleimani left Rabord at age thirteen, as soon as he had finished the mandatory five years of primary school. In 1975, Suleimani started working as a contractor for the Kerman Water Organization.¹⁶

Kerman-based blogger Majid Malek confirms this information, noting that Suleimani worked there “either as a technician or a workman.”¹⁷ A third source states that Suleimani worked as a construction worker,¹⁸ which may refer to his work before joining the Kerman Water Organization or the fact that he probably had not had any education beyond five years of primary school.

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According to Suleimani, he began his revolutionary activities in 1976 “through the late Martyr [Hojjat al-Eslam Reza] Kamyab” (assassinated by the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization on July 29, 1981)¹⁹ but continued his work at the Kerman Water Organization.²⁰ Kamyab was a firebrand preacher from Gonabad who was active in Kerman during the month of Ramadan in the years 1977 and 1978.²¹ But there is a conflict between the year of Kamyab’s visit to Kerman and Suleimani’s recollections. If Suleimani was radicalized “through” Kamyab, Suleimani could not have started his revolutionary activities before Kamyab’s arrival to Kerman in 1977. Remarkably, Suleimani does not mention any pre-revolutionary connections with the main clerical revolutionary figures from Kerman Province such as Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad-Ali Movahedi Kermani, or Yahya Jafari. This suggests that Suleimani’s participation in the revolution was likely limited to attending Kamyab’s sermons directed against the Pahlavi regime.

Membership of the IRGC in Kerman

According to Suleimani, after the victory of the revolution, the father of “Martyr Qazi” established the association of “honorary Guardsmen,” which Suleimani joined while he was working at the Kerman Water Organization.²² This information seems plausible since the IRGC established a command council in Kerman some time before May 29, 1979.²³ Suleimani recalls, “We were all young and wanted to serve the revolution in a way. This is how I joined the Guards.”²⁴

Like many other IRGC commanders, Suleimani had no military experience before joining the IRGC,²⁵ but

because of his superior performance he was quickly appointed as an instructor.²⁶ Suleimani does not provide any details about the length of the military training he received, but, according to Asghar Mohammad-Hosseini, a fellow IRGC veteran from Kerman, the military training entailed only a forty-five-day course.²⁷

Expedition to Mahabad

Suleimani soon needed both his knowledge of tribal societies and his military training, as he was deployed to Mahabad in the province of West Azerbaijan to suppress the Kurdish separatist uprising in the aftermath of the revolution.²⁸ Suleimani shares no information about the Mahabad expedition, but, according to fellow IRGC member Mohammad-Hosseini, a “company-size irregular contingent” from Kerman was dispatched to Mahabad and tasked with “administering and protecting the city.”²⁹ The regime in Tehran preferred to send non-Kurdish troops, who were free of local bonds of loyalty and allegiance, to suppress the rebellion of Kurdish separatists³⁰ and the bloody ethnic clashes between Azeris and Kurds.³¹

Mohammad-Hosseini’s account does not mention Suleimani by name, which may indicate that there were several expeditions from Kerman to Mahabad. Suleimani and his supporters may also prefer to obscure his role in Mahabad. The Islamic Republic generally considers the very existence of separatist movements and ethnic clashes in Iran as a source of embarrassment, let alone the central government’s use of non-Kurdish ethnic groups to suppress them. Secretly, however, a record of participation in the suppression of the Kurdish rebellion in 1979 and the early 1980s is considered a qualification within the IRGC. Former IRGC chief Mohsen Rezaei, currently secretary of the Expediency Council, disclosed in an interview that Ahmad Motevasselian, who was kidnapped in Lebanon on July 5, 1982, was chosen as the head of an IRGC expeditionary force to Lebanon precisely because of his past role in suppressing the Kurdish rebellion.³² Therefore, Suleimani’s experience in Kurdistan likely contributed to his appointment as IRGC Quds Force chief.

The War with Iraq

Suleimani reveals that he was given the task of administering the Kerman IRGC Quds Garrison upon his return from Mahabad.³³ In the face of the Iraqi invasion of Iran,

Suleimani trained and expedited several contingents from Kerman to the southern front against Iraq.³⁴ Later, the IRGC sent a company under Suleimani's command to Sousangerd, where it resisted Iraqi advances in the Malekiyeh front.³⁵

Suleimani appears on the United Nations Security Council's and the US Department of the Treasury's lists of individuals sanctioned for their involvement in proliferation activities and support for terrorism.

Malek provides an entirely different account of Suleimani's participation in the war against Iraq. According to Malek, Suleimani was sent to the front as merely a participant in a "very casual mission transferring water to the front. He was sent to the front for only two weeks, but the enlightened and heavenly atmosphere of the front left such an impression on the heart of this young and pure workman or technician that he, rather than spending only two weeks of his mission at the front, spent almost the eight-year-long period of war there."³⁶

While it is not possible to verify either account, Suleimani's own account gives the impression of a young man with a clear purpose in life, while Malek's account portrays a young man's idealism coupled with the youthful urge to flee boredom in provincial Kerman and seek adventure and glory in the war.

Suleimani participated in most major military operations during the war with Iraq. The list includes the successful joint Islamic Republic of Iran Army and IRGC Operation Tarigh al-Ghods liberating Bostan (November 11, 1981–December 6, 1981); Operation Fath al-Mobin liberating Western parts of Dezfoul and Dehloran, and protecting Andimeshk, Shoush, Dezfoul, and the Andimeshk/Ahwaz road (March 3, 1982–March 30, 1982); Operation Kheibar threatening Basra (February 22, 1984–March 12, 1984); Operation Karbala I liberating Mehran (June 30, 1986–July 10, 1986); Operation Karbala V invading Shalamcheh and advancing toward Basra (January 9, 1987–March 3, 1987); Nasr IV advancing toward Sulaymaniah, during which Iraqi forces used mortars with chemical agents against Suleimani's unit (June 21, 1987–July 5, 1987); the Forty-First Tharallah Division's breaking of Iraqi encirclement attempts following defeat of the Nasr IV operation

(June 26, 1987); Operation Beit al-Moghadas IV, aiming at conquering the Shakh-e Shemiran heights (March 25, 1988–March 29, 1988); and the disastrous operations in al-Faw Peninsula and Majnoun, which Suleimani was against from the very beginning (April 1988–July 1988).³⁷

After the End of the War with Iraq

After the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, the Forty-First Tharallah Division, led by Suleimani, returned to Kerman to fight against "villains directed from the eastern borders of the country."³⁸ The southeastern parts of Iran have always posed multiple challenges to the central government. The considerable distance from the power center in Tehran, a Sunni majority area within the Shia state, and a rigid clan structure in Sistan va Balouchestan, which also affected neighboring Kerman Province—combined with high unemployment and poverty that contribute to narcotics trafficking—all make the region a problem for the central government.

In the immediate aftermath of the ceasefire with Iraq, the central government tasked the IRGC with fighting the drug cartels.³⁹ Suleimani's campaign claimed many lives but ultimately proved successful. According to Mashregh News, "the people of Kerman and Sistan va Balouchestan [Province] still consider the era of the presence of Qassem Suleimani in the eastern and southeastern parts of the country among the securest eras."⁴⁰ Suleimani's activities in Sistan va Balouchestan Province also earned him the praise of Rezai in 1994⁴¹ and his successor, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, who says Suleimani secured Kerman "within three years [after his appointment]."⁴² Rezai's praise came promptly after a major operation led by Suleimani, which routed a gang of narcotics smugglers led by Jalal Kamrani and Eid-Mohammad Bameri.⁴³

Appointment to Quds Force Chief

Former IRGC chief Safavi, in an interview with the Islamic Revolution's Documents Center, disclosed that he appointed Suleimani as chief of the IRGC Quds Force the same year that he was appointed IRGC chief.⁴⁴ Since Khamenei appointed the IRGC chief on September 10, 1997,⁴⁵ Suleimani was most likely appointed Quds Force chief sometime between September 10, 1997, and March 21, 1998.

The timing of Suleimani's appointment is of great significance. Events in neighboring Afghanistan changed the threat perception of the Islamic Republic. Iraq, weakened by the international sanctions regime, posed no greater danger; Iran was the loser in its rivalry with Saudi Arabia and the United States in distant Bosnia, where the Iranian leadership tried and failed to use the war in the former Yugoslavia to gain a foothold in Europe;⁴⁶ but the rise of the Taliban, which Iranian analysts considered a pawn of Iran's regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Pakistan,⁴⁷ posed a formidable challenge to the Islamic Republic. Iran felt particularly vulnerable, as most of its investments in the Afghan political system had been among Shia Hazaras in western Afghanistan and Persian-speaking Sunni Tajiks in the north.⁴⁸ The Taliban's August 8, 1998, execution of nine Iranian diplomats and one Islamic Republic News Agency journalist, following its capture of Mazari Sharif, demonstrated the significant threat emanating from Afghanistan.⁴⁹

Iranian decision makers soon realized they had followed a zigzag course in Afghanistan. Iranian academic Sadegh Zibakalam argued, "As opposed to the Pakistanis, we have not had a cohesive policy which we could continue. Take a look at it and you see that we, for a time, supported the Shi'a movement, on another occasion we supported [Gulbuddin] Hekmatyar, and on another occasion we supported Burhan al-Din Rabbani. . . . They [the Pakistanis] only supported one Jihadist group which we today call the Taliban. By the way, this group is numerically the largest group in Afghanistan as two-thirds of the population is composed of Pashtuns."⁵⁰

Suleimani had to reorganize the Quds Force toward operations in Afghanistan to protect the remaining Iranian assets there. In a show of force against the Taliban, the Islamic Republic deployed two hundred thousand troops near the Iran/Afghan border,⁵¹ but instead of confronting the Taliban from the Iranian border, Suleimani directed the operations in support of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, also known as the "Northern Alliance," from Tajikistan. Suleimani made at least one visit to Tajikistan that is referred to in the open-source documents.⁵²

Conclusion

The choice of Suleimani as chief of the Quds Force of the IRGC, which coincided with the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, was no accident. Suleimani was chosen

because, as a native of a mountain village in Kerman, he had intimate knowledge of political mechanisms in tribal societies in general and Afghanistan in particular. He was also a suitable choice because of his experience during the civil war in the Kurdish regions of Iran, since he was expected to operate in Taliban-era Afghanistan, itself a country engaged in a civil war. On top of that, Suleimani had an exceptional record from the war with Iraq and his successful fight against drug cartels near the Iran/Afghanistan border from 1988 until his appointment as Quds Force chief.

In the United States, Iran analysts have a tendency to examine the present condition of foes and friends. However, as the generation whose formative years occurred during the war with Iraq in the 1980s is dominating the politics, military, economy, and even spiritual life of the Islamic Republic, there is an increased need to study the impact of the war with Iraq upon society in Iran. Understanding Suleimani's present is not possible without knowing his past.

Notes

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33. "Sardar Qassemi: Gomnami Khasteh-ye Shahidan-e Ma Boud" [Commander Qassemi: Being Unknown Was the Wish of Our Martyrs].
34. Ibid.
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