



Iran's Secret Network: Major General Qassem Suleimani's Inner Circle

By Ali Alfoneh

This is the second in a series of Middle Eastern Outlooks about Qassem Suleimani.¹

On January 24, 2011, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei promoted Qassem Suleimani, chief of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), to major general, the highest rank in the IRGC since the end of the Iran/Iraq war in 1988.² As discussed in the first Outlook in this series, Suleimani's rise to prominence in the IRGC has been gradual rather than meteoric. His personal and professional background and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in the late 1990s helped advance his career. However, Suleimani's network matters, too. This Outlook identifies members of Suleimani's network within and outside the IRGC. It also argues that fluctuations in their careers could serve as indicators of Suleimani's authority in the Islamic Republic.

From September 1981 until the end of the Iraq war in 1988, Suleimani was stationed at the Southern front.³ The Forty-First Tharallah Division participated in most major military operations under his command, and he was in daily contact with all the important IRGC commanders. Suleimani maintained those relationships after the end of the war during his tenure as IRGC Kerman chief, and after his appointment as IRGC Quds Force chief sometime between September 10, 1997, and March 21, 1998.⁴ This *Outlook* therefore argues that Suleimani's network of IRGC commanders during the war is more important than any other network he may have had before.

But Suleimani's extensive war-era network poses an analytical challenge. Reconstructing the IRGC's order of battle during the war with Iraq and since the end of the war is beyond the scope of this *Outlook*. Also, the fact that Suleimani was in contact with many other top IRGC commanders does not preclude fierce

competition, factionalism, and outright enmity between them. It is therefore important to seek reliable information about Suleimani's factional loyalties within the IRGC.

Suleimani's Network within the IRGC

This *Outlook* identifies two political letters signed by Suleimani and a group of other IRGC commanders that shed light on Suleimani's factional network within the IRGC. The first is an open

Key points in this *Outlook*:

- Two letters reveal Major General Qassem Suleimani's secret network in Iran.
- Suleimani's inner circle has risen to power within the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps since the Iran/Iraq war.
- By following fluctuations in the careers of other individuals in Suleimani's network, we can assess his power in the Islamic Republic.

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letter signed by thirty-four IRGC commanders praising Mohsen Rezaei upon his resignation as IRGC chief, which coincided with President Mohammad Khatami's first term in office in 1997. In the letter, the commanders thank God for having had the opportunity to "soldier and study" with Rezaei "for almost two decades," and stress that Rezaei was liked both by Khomeini and Khamenei.⁵ The letter was an outright act of protest at Rezaei's dismissal. Rezaei had criticized Khatami during the presidential campaign and the commanders blamed Khatami for his firing. The second letter, signed by a group of IRGC commanders, threatens that if the Khatami government fails to suppress the student uprising of 1999, they will take the issue into their own hands⁶ (see appendix).

Since Suleimani is a signatory to both letters, his network may best be illustrated by two concentric circles. According to this model, signatories of both letters in the inner circle constitute Suleimani's core network; signatories of one letter, who appear in the outer circle, may have a relationship with Suleimani but are not as close as the individuals in the inner circle (see figure 1).

The inner circle is composed of twenty-one individuals, including current important IRGC commanders such as Mohammad-Ali Aziz Jafari, IRGC chief; Ali Fadavi, IRGC Navy chief; Ali Fazli, Basij deputy; and Esmail Ghaani, Suleimani's deputy in the Quds Force. Twelve of them were IRGC division chiefs during the war with Iraq, which is the most significant factor. Three were Iran/Iraq war-era IRGC base chiefs, three were war-era IRGC intelligence chiefs, and two were IRGC operations deputies. With the exception of Yaghoub Zohdi, whose role during the war could not be established, all members of this circle were engaged in daily warfare during the war with Iraq (see appendix).

The composition of the outer circle of Suleimani's network is very different. Out of the sixteen members, four were Iran/Iraq war-era top commanders, including Mahmoud Ahmadpour, deputy IRGC minister; Ali Shamkhani, IRGC ground forces chief; Hossein Alayi, IRGC Navy chief; and Akbar Ghamkhar, IRGC logistics chief. Two were division chiefs, one was a division deputy, and one was a battalion chief. The outer circle includes no base chiefs, but slightly lower-level military personnel: a logistics deputy, an operations deputy, and an intelligence deputy. This circle also includes three IRGC navy commanders. The role of Mehdi Rabbani and Yazdan [Moyed-Nia] during the war with Iraq could not be established (see appendix).

FIGURE 1
MAJOR GENERAL QASSEM SULEIMANI'S NETWORK



NOTE: The names signed to the letters do not include the bracketed material.
SOURCE: "Nameh-ye Sardaran-e Defae-e Moughaddas Ba'd Az Este'fa-ye Doktor Rezaei" [Letter of Sacred Defense Commanders Following Resignation of Dr. Rezaei], Forum Persian Tools Blog (Tehran), May 30, 2005, <http://forum.persiantools.com/t19600.html> (accessed February 6, 2011); and "Matn-e Kamel-e Nameh-ye Farmandehane Sepah Be Khatami" [The Complete Text of the Letter of the Guards Commanders to Khatami], Aftab News Agency (Tehran), June 11, 2005, www.aftabnews.ir/vdefitjyd/w6de.html (accessed February 6, 2011).

Comparing the careers of the officers in the inner and outer circles shows that the outer members had slightly higher positions during the war with Iraq. With the exception of current IRGC deputy Hossein Salami, however, officers from the outer circle have become scholars at various IRGC research centers or have gone into business. Suleimani and other individuals from the inner circle had slightly lower positions during the war but enjoy top positions within the IRGC today, which may indicate that they promoted each others' careers within the IRGC (see appendix).

This is an important insight that not only helps us understand Suleimani's authority today, but also provides analytical tools to assess future changes in his power. If Suleimani's fortunes depend on the fortunes of the members of his network, fluctuations in their careers could indicate changes in his authority. Apart from this, Suleimani and members of the inner circle may also constitute the dominant faction in the IRGC responsible for strategic decision making within the IRGC and possibly

in the Islamic Republic at large. By systematically analyzing statements made by these individuals, we may at the very least better grasp the dominant strategic thinking within the IRGC.

Ebbs and flows in the careers of the members of Suleimani's network within the IRGC could serve as indicators of Suleimani's fortunes.

Suleimani and Rafsanjani

Although Suleimani and former Iranian president Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani are both from Kerman Province, information about early contact between the two is unavailable in the open-source material. There is also no reference to contacts between Suleimani and well-known clerical revolutionary figures from Kerman such as Mohammad-Javad Bahonar, Mohammad-Ali Movahedi Kermani, and Yahya Jafari. It is quite possible that Suleimani and Rafsanjani did not have any ties before the Iran/Iraq war. According to Rafsanjani's memoirs, he and Suleimani had two meetings and one phone conversation during the war. On May 25, 1986, Suleimani, Shamkhani, Mohammad-Bagher Qalibaf, then-Fifth Nasr Division chief, and many other IRGC commanders delivered "a bitter report on retreats" to Rafsanjani, who was then armed forces commander-in-chief.⁷ On December 3, 1987, Suleimani and Rafsanjani had a phone conversation "about future operations,"⁸ and on December 17, 1987, Rafsanjani met with all major IRGC commanders, including Suleimani, to discuss the invasion of al-Faw Peninsula, which would place the Iraqi city of Basra at risk of being attacked.⁹

The December 3, 1987, phone conversation between Suleimani and Rafsanjani is important because Suleimani probably expressed opposition to Rezai's plans to invade the al-Faw Peninsula, referenced by Rafsanjani as "future operations."¹⁰ On December 6, 1987, Suleimani—who may have already secured Rafsanjani's support in the phone conversation—and Ahmad Kazemi, Eighth Najaf Division chief, opposed Rezai's plan at a planning seminar led by Rezai.¹¹ However, when Rafsanjani visited the front to discuss the al-Faw operation, Suleimani and Kazemi kept silent and did not voice their opposition to the al-Faw offensive.¹² Despite Rafsanjani's request,

Suleimani and other commanders that opposed the operation did not come up with an alternative war plan.¹³ Following the Iraqi counteroffensive that proved disastrous for Iranian forces, Suleimani openly accused Rezai of not having a plan for the war on January 1, 1988.¹⁴ Suleimani's criticism provoked harsh comments from Yahya Rahim Safavi, then-IRGC ground forces deputy.¹⁵ After the end of the war, Suleimani was appointed IRGC Kerman chief, which does not indicate a close relationship with Rafsanjani.¹⁶

Suleimani and Ahmadinejad

Suleimani's possible connections before and after the 1979 revolution with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his close advisers, Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi¹⁷ and Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaei, may also be a contributing factor to his rise in power and authority in the Islamic Republic. Indeed, addressing IRGC veterans, Suleimani defended the regime after Iran's contested June 12, 2009, presidential elections.¹⁸

Suleimani could have established a working relationship with Ahmadinejad and Hashemi as early as 1979, when Suleimani was deployed with a company-size irregular contingent to Mahabad in West Azerbaijan Province to suppress the Kurdish separatist uprising, as documented in his memoirs.¹⁹ That year, Ahmadinejad was "an adviser" to the governor of Kurdistan Province, which borders West Azerbaijan.²⁰ So was Hashemi,²¹ who appeared in a photo with Ahmadinejad in Kurdistan in that period,²² but who does not seem to have known Suleimani despite being a native of Kerman.²³ Rahim-Mashaei, Ahmadinejad's chief of staff, also served in the Kurdistan region in 1979. Indeed, it was Rahim-Mashaei who founded the intelligence unit of the province.²⁴ The fact that Suleimani and the triumvirate of Ahmadinejad, Hashemi, and Rahim-Mashaei were engaged in suppressing the Kurdish rebellion in 1979 indicates that the four individuals have a long history of cooperation.

Suleimani and Khamenei

Khamenei has had a close relationship with Suleimani for decades. But it is not easy to establish the nature of the relationship between them. Khamenei usually praises war heroes only after their death, but he has made an exception for Suleimani, calling him "someone who was martyred at the front on numerous occasions and is a

living martyr of the revolution.”²⁵ A rare Iran/Iraq war-era photo shows Suleimani sitting on the right side of Khamenei, the place of honor, while Rezai, then-IRGC chief commander, sits on Khamenei’s left side.²⁶ Before Suleimani’s recent promotion, photos of Khamenei and Suleimani circulated on pro-regime websites.²⁷

Suleimani’s relationship with Khamenei may have begun as early as the late 1970s. In Ramadan of 1977 and 1978, Suleimani attended sermons of the revolutionary preacher Hojjat al-Eslam Reza Kamyab.²⁸ After the revolution, Kamyab was elected to the parliament from his native Khorasan Province, but he was soon assassinated by the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization [*Sazeman-e Mojahedin-e Khalq*] on July 29, 1981.²⁹ Suleimani’s relationship with Kamyab, though short, may provide the key to his most important early connection: Kamyab was a student of another theologian from Khorasan Province, Ali Khamenei.³⁰ Apart from this, Khamenei spent some time in internal exile in Jiroft in Kerman Province in 1978.³¹ However, as long as there is no further evidence of an early relationship between the two, it is difficult to assess the depth and importance of Suleimani’s personal relationship with Khamenei. Understanding it would help determine whether it has been the key factor behind Suleimani’s rise in prominence within the IRGC. It would also suggest whether Khamenei’s death or departure from politics would jeopardize Suleimani’s career.

Conclusion

Lack of transparency and freedom of information in the Islamic Republic, especially with regard to the IRGC, makes it difficult to research and assess promotion patterns and factionalism within the IRGC. However, biographic and open-source materials such as the two letters signed by IRGC commanders provide extremely valuable information about their careers. In the case of Suleimani, the lack of data makes it difficult to establish early contacts with Khamenei and the triumvirate of Ahmadinejad, Hashemi, and Rahim-Mashaei. It also makes it difficult to assess the importance of such contacts and their impact on Suleimani’s career. Although Suleimani sided with Rafsanjani toward the end of the war with Iraq, analysis of the open-source material does not suggest a strong relationship between the two. This *Outlook* therefore argues that Suleimani’s network within the IRGC has been the most important factor contributing to his rise to power. This is an important insight in assessing Suleimani’s authority within the Islamic

Republic. Despite the scarce open-source material about Suleimani, ebbs and flows in the careers of the members of Suleimani’s network within the IRGC could also serve as indicators of Suleimani’s fortunes and thereby help us assess his authority within the IRGC and the Islamic Republic at large.

Notes

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10. Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Defae va Siasat: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Hashemi Rafsanjani Sal-e 1366* [Defense and Politics:

Record and Memoirs of Hashemi Rafsanjani the Year 1987–1988], 383.

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14. Ibid., 507.

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APPENDIX
SIGNATORIES TO IRGC DECLARATIONS AND THEIR PROMOTION PATTERNS

Name	Signed 1997 letter ¹	Signed 1999 letter ²	Positions before and during the war with Iraq, 1980–88	Positions since 1988	Current position
Ali[-Akbar] Ahmadian ³		X	IRGC Navy commander	IRGC Joint Command Council chief	IRGC Strategic Studies Center chief
[Mahmoud] Ahmadpour ⁴	X		Deputy IRGC minister	Karbala Base logistics chief, IRGC logistics chief, IRGC ministry logistics chief, IRGC ground forces staff chief, IRGC cooperative executive director	Scholar at Entrepreneurship Center of Kashan University
[Mahmoud] Ahmadpour [Daryani] ⁵	X		Karbala Base logistics chief, Khatam al-Anbia Base logistics chief, IRGC logistics deputy, deputy IRGC minister	IRGC ground forces general staff chief, Cooperative Foundation executive director	Board member in large companies including Iran Khodro, Pak, Behran, Sherkat-Madar, Arj, and Pasargade Oil
Hossein Alayi ⁶	X		IRGC Navy chief	Air Defense Industries chief	Imam Hussein University academic board member
Jafar Assadi ⁷	X	X	IRGC Lebanon contingent chief, Thirty-Third Al-Mahdi Division chief, Nineteenth Farj Division chief	IRGC ground forces chief	Khatam al-Anbia Base chief inspector
Mohammad Bagheri [Afshordi] ⁸	X	X	IRGC ground forces intelligence chief	Not known	General staff intelligence and operations chief
Ali Fadavi ⁹	X	X	Najaf Base intelligence and operations chief, Noh Base intelligence and operations chief, Hamzeh Seyyed al-Shohada Base intelligence and operations chief, IRGC Navy intelligence chief	Khatam al-Anbia Base intelligence chief, first IRGC Navy operational zone chief, IRGC Navy deputy	IRGC Navy chief
Ali Fazli ¹⁰	X	X	Tenth Seyyed al-Shohada Division chief	Tehran Seyyed al-Shohada IRGC unit chief	Basij deputy
Esmail Ghaani ¹¹	X	X	Twenty-First Imam-Reza Division chief, Fifth Division chief	IRGC Joint Staff intelligence deputy	IRGC Quds Force deputy, Khatam al-Anbia Base deputy, according to one source
Akbar Ghamkhar ¹²	X		IRGC logistics chief	IRGC Cooperative board member	F/C Persepolis coach, Iran Tourist Organizations director
Ahmad Gholampour ¹³	X	X	Karbala, Fajr, and Quds Bases chief	Not known	IRGC Strategic Studies Center member ¹⁴
Morteza Ghorbani ¹⁵	X	X	Twenty-Fifth Karbala Division chief	Not known	General staff adviser
Hossein Hamadani ¹⁶		X	Quds Base operations deputy	Basij deputy	Greater Tehran Mohammad Rasoul-Allah Revolutionary Guards chief
Seifollah Heydarpour ¹⁷	X		Forty-Eighth Independent Fath Battalion chief	IRGC Mechanized Academy chief, Fourth Be'sat Division deputy, Third Hamzeh Seyyed al-Shohada Division chief, Tehran Saheb al-Zaman Base chief	Deceased due to exposure to chemical weapons

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Name	Signed 1997 letter ¹	Signed 1999 letter ²	Positions before and during the war with Iraq, 1980–88	Positions since 1988	Current position
Gholamreza Jafari ¹⁸	X		Seventeenth Division chief	Not known	Not known
Mohammad-Ali [Aziz] Jafari ¹⁹	X	X	Quds Base chief	IRGC Strategic Studies Center founder and first director	IRGC chief
Gholamreza Jalali ²⁰	X	X	Hamzeh Seyyed al-Shohada Base operations deputy	Passive Defense Committee secretary	Passive Defense Committee chief
Habib Kashani ²¹	X		Thirty-First Division deputy	Western Tehran Basij chief and adviser to the IRGC in western Tehran	Persepolis Soccer Club executive director
Ahmad Kazemi ²²	X	X	Eighth Najaf Division chief	Fourteenth Imam Hussein Division chief, Hamzeh Seyyed al-Shohada Base chief, Ramezan Base chief, IRGC Air Force chief, IRGC ground forces chief	Killed in plane crash on January 9, 2006
Mohammad Kowsari ²³	X	X	Twenty-Seventh Mohammad Rasoul-Allah Division chief	Not known	Parliamentarian
Gholam[Reza] Mehrabi ²⁴	X	X	Karbala Base intelligence chief	Armed Forces intelligence directorate chief	Not known
Yazdan [Moyed-Nia]	X		Not known	Not known	Not known
Assadollah Naseh ²⁵		X	Tenth Seyyed al-Shohada Division chief	IRGC ground forces inspector	Not known
Mohammad-Bagher Qalibaf ²⁶	X	X	Fifth Nasr Division (Khorasan) chief	Khatam al-Anbia Construction Base chief, IRGC Air Force chief, law enforcement forces chief	Tehran mayor
Mehdi Rabbani ²⁷	X		Not known	Not known	Tehran IRGC Tharallah Base deputy
Abd al-Mohammad Raoufi ²⁸	X	X	Seventh Division chief	Tharallah Division chief	Zanjan governor general
Gholam Ali Rashid ²⁹	X	X	IRGC Joint Force operations deputy	Armed Forces Joint Command Council intelligence chief, general staff deputy	General staff deputy
Nabi[Allah] Roudaki ³⁰	X	X	Nineteenth Fajr Division chief	Nineteenth Fars Lashgar chief	Parliamentarian, member of the Development of Islamic Iran Party
Morteza Saffar ³¹	X		IRGC Navy commander	IRGC Navy chief	Not known
Hossein Salami ³²	X		IRGC Navy commander	IRGC Air Force chief	IRGC deputy
Ali Shamkhani ³³	X		IRGC ground forces chief	IRGC Navy chief, Army Navy chief, Strategic Foreign Relations Council member	Defense Strategic Studies Center director
Amin Shariati ³⁴	X	X	Thirty-First Ashoura (Tabriz) Division chief	Not known	Not known
Nour-Ali Shoushtari ³⁵	X	X	Najaf Base chief	Hamzeh Seyyed al-Shohada Base chief (West Azerbaijan Province), IRGC ground forces chief	Killed
Ahmad Sodagar ³⁶	X		Quds Base intelligence chief	Twenty-Fifth Karbala Division chief	Sacred Defense Research Center chief
Qassem Suleimani ³⁷	X	X	Forty-First Division chief	IRGC commander in Kerman in the 1990s	IRGC Quds Force chief

Name	Signed 1997 letter ¹	Signed 1999 letter ²	Positions before and during the war with Iraq, 1980–88	Positions since 1988	Current position
Ali[Reza] Zahedi, ³⁸ aka Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi and Hojjat al-Islam Zahedi	X	X	Fourteenth Division chief	Representative of the Supreme Leader to Lebanon, second secretary at the Islamic Republic's Embassy in Beirut, IRGC Quds Force chief in Lebanon and Syria, IRGC Air Force chief, IRGC ground forces chief	IRGC Quds Force chief in Lebanon
Yaghub Zohdi ³⁹	X	X	Not known	IRGC human resource chief	Not known

NOTES TO APPENDIX:

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