



The Legacy of an Assassination: Iran's Regional Policy under Post-Soleimani Strategic Constraints

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Abstract: Qasem Soleimani's assassination in January 2020 removed a central broker from Iran's regional security network at a time of intensifying economic, military, and diplomatic pressure. This article asks why Iran's regional policy has operated under increasingly severe strategic constraints in the post-Soleimani period. Drawing on Sprout and Sprout's distinction between perceptual and operational environments, it treats Soleimani not as the sole architect of Iranian regional influence, but as a mediating variable linking elite threat perceptions, institutional resources, and the management of Iran-aligned armed groups. The analysis reconstructs the evolution of Iran's regional policy before and during Soleimani's command and then examines developments after his death, including the US maximum-pressure campaign, the Abraham Accords, declining public legitimacy of the Axis of Resistance in Iraq and Lebanon, the growing leverage of China and Russia, and the regional conflict that followed 7 October 2023. The article advances four findings. First, the principal systemic pressures on Iran pre-dated the assassination. Second, Soleimani's personal authority, cross-institutional networks, and operational experience enabled Tehran to mobilise resources, coordinate allied groups, and deter adversaries more effectively than after his death. Third, his successor was unable to reproduce this personalised mode of command, contributing to greater autonomy and centrifugal behaviour among Iran-aligned groups. Fourth, the post-Soleimani constraints are visible in Iran's declining capacity to protect senior partners, preserve political influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and translate military presence into diplomatic leverage. The assassination was therefore not the original cause of Iran's regional difficulties; it acted as a catalyst that magnified existing vulnerabilities and accelerated Tehran's shift from assertive forward defence towards selective de-escalation and strategic patience.

Keywords: Qasem Soleimani; Iran; regional policy; strategic constraints; Axis of Resistance; perceptual environment; operational environment; Middle East

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The regional policy of the Islamic Republic has undergone several major transformations since 1979. In the first years after the revolution, revolutionary expansionism reflected the ideological mobilization generated by the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, one of the West's principal allies in the Middle East. The Iran-Iraq War subsequently altered Tehran's threat perceptions and demonstrated the strategic value of asymmetric warfare and relationships with non-state partners, including the Badr organization in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. A further turning point came under Qasem Soleimani, who commanded the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force from 1998. Soleimani's ideological commitments, personality, and battlefield experience shaped his perception of US and allied activities in the Middle East, particularly after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Arab uprisings, the Syrian civil war, and the rise of ISIS then created opportunities to build and coordinate a wider network that included the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Ansar Allah in Yemen, and the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades. Soleimani's assassination in January 2020 accelerated Iran's movement into what this article terms the strategic constraints of the post-Soleimani period. These constraints arose from pressures already visible from 2018 onwards: the Trump administration's maximum-pressure campaign, closer strategic coordination between Israel and several Arab states, the declining legitimacy of the Axis of Resistance in some regional societies, and the growing role of China and Russia in theatres such as Syria and Yemen. After Soleimani's death, these pressures interacted with a reduced capacity to coordinate allies, mobilize resources, and deter adversaries. Iran's regional influence consequently became more vulnerable in political, military, and ideological terms.

The article addresses the following question: why has Iran faced tighter strategic constraints in its regional policy since Soleimani's assassination? It argues that Soleimani's removal weakened a highly personalized mechanism through which Tehran interpreted threats, mobilized institutions, coordinated allied armed groups, and converted military activity into regional influence. The analytical framework combines the concepts of the perceptual and operational environments. The former refers to the decision-makers' perceptions, beliefs, and personal characteristics; the latter refers to the material and political conditions within which policy is implemented (Sprout & Sprout 1965: 28). Their interaction makes it possible to explain why similar external pressures produced different effects before and after January 2020. The assassination did not create the systemic pressures confronting Iran, but it altered the way Iranian decision-makers responded to them and reduced Tehran's capacity to absorb their effects. In the post-Soleimani period, the interaction between a reassessed perceptual environment and a less favorable operational environment has constrained Iran's political influence, security posture, and ideological appeal across the Middle East.

Two qualifications are necessary. First, the article does not attempt to reconstruct every institution, actor, and informal network involved in Iranian regional policymaking. The opacity of the Islamic Republic's security system, competition among centers

of power, and uncertain division of responsibilities make comprehensive attribution difficult. A narrower focus on Soleimani nevertheless permits a more precise assessment of his influence at three interconnected levels: as an individual, as Quds Force commander, and as a policymaker. Second, the argument does not reduce the rise and decline of Iranian regional influence to Soleimani alone. Domestic variables – including factional competition, the growing institutional capacity of the IRGC, the position of conservative elites, and the economic effects of sanctions – also shaped Tehran's capabilities. Regional developments, including instability in post-Saddam Iraq, the Arab uprisings, and the rise of ISIS, created opportunities for Iranian expansion, while the policies of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, and other actors imposed constraints. Soleimani mediated between many of these domestic and regional opportunities and pressures. His absence therefore did not independently cause the weakening of Iran's position; rather, it increased the impact of pre-existing systemic pressures and exposed limitations in Tehran's leadership, financial resources, and military coordination.

The article contributes to the literature in two respects. Existing studies of Iran's regional policy generally concentrate on Tehran's motives, the organization of its relationships with armed groups, or developments before Soleimani's assassination. This study first examines Soleimani's growing role in the architecture of Iranian regional policy from the early 2000s. It then analyses the post-2020 trajectory of Iran's regional influence, focusing on the consequences of losing an individual who simultaneously operated as a field commander, institutional broker, and regional policymaker.

The argument proceeds in three stages. The first section traces the transformation of Iran's regional policy before and during Soleimani's command of the Quds Force. The second examines Soleimani's influence as an individual, commander, and policymaker, including his role in managing the systemic pressures that intensified after 2018. The third analyses the post-Soleimani strategic constraints and assesses changes in Iran's influence across the main regional theatres.

Iran's Regional Policy before and under Soleimani

Iran's regional policy should be understood as an integral component of its broader foreign policy rather than as a separate collection of regional interventions. Iranian leaders have treated regional influence both as a strategic objective and as a resource for pursuing wider goals: safeguarding the political order, resisting US and Western pressure, and revising an unfavorable regional and international environment. The logic of forward defense is central to this approach. In a highly conflictual regional setting, Tehran has sought to enhance its security by establishing influence in neighboring states and constructing a defensive network beyond its borders (Akbarzadeh et al. 2022: 2). Although this posture is presented as defensive, it also showcases the endurance and military readiness of the Axis of Resistance. Such demonstrations are

directed externally, to signal power and deter intervention, and internally, to mobilize solidarity and reinforce support for the political system (Akbarzadeh et al. 2022: 2). Regional policy has therefore provided Iran with leverage in its relations with Western powers and room for manoeuvre in a frequently hostile environment. It combines material capabilities with symbolic power, deterrence, and claims to regional leadership.

Iran's regional policy has nevertheless changed substantially over the life of the Islamic Republic. Soleimani's rise provides an important dividing line because of his central role in expanding and consolidating Iran's regional networks from the early 2000s. To identify the character of this transformation, the discussion distinguishes three phases: an initial phase from 1979 to 1990, a transitional phase from 1990 to 1998, and a new phase under Soleimani's command from 1998 to 2020.

The Initial Phase (1979–1990): Institutional and Personal Rivalry amid Revolutionary Mobilization

Revolutionary regimes frequently seek to translate their founding ideology into domestic and foreign policy. After 1979, Islamic, anti-imperialist, and anti-American ideas shaped the Islamic Republic's commitment to exporting the revolution. Iranian military and security assistance was initially justified primarily in ideological and religious terms: support for resistance to injustice and a claim to leadership in the Islamic world, particularly through assistance to armed groups in Palestine and Lebanon (Divsallar & Azizi 2024: 2). Ayatollah Khomeini articulated this position in a 1979 message: 'We fight because we are warriors. We export our revolution to the whole world because our revolution is Islamic ... As long as there is a struggle anywhere in the world against the arrogant powers, we are there' (Khomeini 2012: 11–12). This revolutionary discourse coexisted with limited economic and military resources, uncertainty about the revolution's long-term regional strategy, and an insufficient assessment of the geopolitical implications of supporting diverse Islamic movements. Iran's regional policy also suffered from competition and overlapping authority among individuals and institutions. Until the mid-1980s, intelligence, security, and covert operations were divided among several revolutionary and military organizations (Sirrs 2022: 22). The Office for Liberation Movements, established in 1981 under Mehdi Hashemi and protected by Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, supported the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and several Palestinian groups. Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, Iran's ambassador to Damascus, played an important role in the early deployment of Revolutionary Guard personnel in Lebanon and Syria. As the IRGC expanded during the Iran-Iraq War, its Intelligence Directorate became increasingly involved in regional policy. Following the elimination of Mehdi Hashemi, the Office for Liberation Movements was absorbed into the IRGC. The performance of Iraqi armed groups during the war gradually demonstrated to Tehran the strategic potential of long-term partnerships with non-state actors.

The Transitional Phase (1990–1998): The Quds Force, Institutional Centralization, and Asymmetric Warfare

The transitional phase was defined by the development of asymmetric warfare as a military doctrine and by the institutional infrastructure required to implement it. The Iran-Iraq War changed the Islamic Republic's strategic outlook in two principal respects: it heightened perceptions of external threat and demonstrated the limitations of Iran's conventional military capabilities. Tehran consequently sought a defensive strategy capable of offsetting future threats from the United States and Israel through relationships with non-state actors in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. The Quds Force was established in the early 1990s as the IRGC's external operations branch. Its creation transformed Iran's regional policy in three ways. First, it reduced overlapping authority among the numerous civilian and military actors involved in covert operations abroad. Second, it structured Tehran's relations with aligned armed groups. Third, it expanded financial, training, and weapons support and extended the geographic reach of Iranian and partner operations. The Quds Force thereby consolidated external activities—especially relations with Hezbollah and other militant organizations – within a single command structure (O'Hern 2012: 70). Its internal organization reflected a geopolitical division of labor, with specialized units for particular theatres, including the *Ramadan Corps* for Iraq, the *Sham Corps* for Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel, the *Rasoul Allah Corps* for the Arabian Peninsula, and the *Ansar Corps* for Afghanistan.

This centralization enabled greater attention to specific geopolitical theatres. Experience gained during the Iran-Iraq War and the Lebanese Civil War enhanced the Quds Force's operational knowledge. The establishment of a Quds Force college in 1990–1991 also created an institutional basis for the systematic study of unconventional warfare (Sirrs 2022: 39). Financial, military, and training responsibilities that had previously been distributed among several institutions were increasingly concentrated in the Quds Force. Assistance to Hezbollah, the Badr organization, and Palestinian groups consequently expanded during the 1990s, while the activities of Iran and its partners reached beyond the Middle East into Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America (O'Hern 2012: 82). The period was transitional because the doctrine of asymmetric warfare acquired strategic importance and the Quds Force became consolidated as a specialized military bureaucracy, yet Tehran had not yet created the integrated and extensive regional network that emerged under Soleimani.

The New Phase (1998–2020): Soleimani, the Axis of Resistance, and the Primacy of the Battlefield

The year 1998 marks the beginning of a new phase because Soleimani's appointment as commander of the Quds Force produced more than a change of personnel. It contributed to a transformation in the strategic and operational organization of Iran's regional policy. Three developments were particularly important: a shift from dispersed

management to centralized networking; the quantitative and qualitative expansion of Iran-aligned armed groups and their organization within the Axis of Resistance; and a closer connection between battlefield tactics and Iran's long-term strategic objectives.

Soon after taking command, Soleimani confronted a succession of regional crises: the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Arab uprisings and Syrian civil war, and the rise of ISIS. His responses added new dimensions to Iranian regional policy. At the strategic level, Tehran expanded and organized armed partners under the banner of the Axis of Resistance and combined defensive objectives with more offensive forms of pressure. The institutionalization of allied groups, the growing primacy of military operations over diplomacy, and efforts to legitimize Iran's regional role became central features of this model. At the operational level, Hezbollah acquired a more prominent coordinating function as training and support missions were delegated to experienced allied commanders. Soleimani also developed a network of theatre-specific commanders, allowing the Quds Force to exercise influence across several fronts simultaneously.

Soleimani assumed command amid an increasingly securitized regional environment. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, President George W. Bush's 2002 designation of Iran as part of an 'axis of evil', and the 2003 invasion of Iraq reinforced his perception of the United States as an immediate threat. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein also turned Iraq into a principal arena of US-Iranian competition. Soleimani therefore placed the use of armed partners beyond Iran's borders at the center of his strategy. Jaysh al-Mahdi, led by the Iraqi Shia nationalist Muqtada al-Sadr, initially occupied an important position among Iran-supported groups. Doubts about Sadr's reliability, however, encouraged Soleimani to cultivate organizations more closely aligned with Tehran. One such group was Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which reportedly conducted more than 6,000 attacks between its establishment in 2006 and the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011¹. The expansion of Iran's network proceeded in two broad stages. The first unfolded in Iraq during the 2000s, when groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq developed into powerful Iran-aligned organizations. The second followed the Arab uprisings, the Syrian civil war, and the rise of ISIS, which created opportunities to establish or expand groups such as Fatemiyoun, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, and Zainabiyoun. Countering Saudi Arabia and Israel became another central element of Soleimani's strategy, leading to stronger relations with Ansar Allah in Yemen and selected Palestinian organizations, including Hamas. The resulting network in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories performed both defensive and offensive functions. It was intended to deter attacks on Iran and preserve the Axis of Resistance, but it also enabled pressure against the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia². In Syria, for example, Iran-aligned forces created additional options for

¹ Soufan A. 2018. Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy. CTC Sentinel. New York. P. 3.

² Katz B. 2018. Axis Rising: Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy and Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/axis-rising-irans-evolving-regional-strategy-and-non-state-partnerships-middle-east> (accessed 01.07.2026).

operations against Israel. Iran's longer-term support for Ansar Allah has likewise been interpreted as an effort to develop a partner capable of exerting pressure on Saudi Arabia and threatening US naval operations near Yemen (Ostovar 2019).

Table 1. Iran-aligned armed groups operating in Iraq and Syria

No.	Armed group	Leader	Year established	Estimated membership	Area of operation
1	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	Qais al-Khazali	2006	10,000 (as of 2015)	Iraq and Syria
2	Kata'ib Hezbollah	Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis	2007	1,000–3,000	Iraq and Syria
3	Fatemiyoun Division	Abu Hamid	2013	6,000–8,000	Syria and Iraq
4	Harakat al-Nujaba	Akram al-Kaabi	2013	10,000	Syria and Iraq
5	Quwat al-Reza	Hamza al-Haider	2013	3,500	Syria
6	Zainabiyoun Brigade	Seyyed Abbas Mousavi	2014	5,000	Syria
7	Kata'ib al-Imam Ali	Shibl al-Zaidi	2014	4,000–7,000	Iraq and Syria

Source: compiled from Adesnik (2018)³

Hezbollah's performance in the 2006 Lebanon War demonstrated substantial intelligence and operational capabilities and elevated the organization's position within Soleimani's network. The Quds Force subsequently integrated Hezbollah more deeply into the training, operational support, and coordination of other partners. Hezbollah also facilitated Iran's relations with Arab organizations such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Ansar Allah in Yemen (Juneau 2020: 5). By delegating responsibilities according to commanders' experience and local access, Soleimani improved his ability to manage the diverse components of the Axis of Resistance. Imad Mughniyeh, head of Hezbollah's external security apparatus and a senior figure closely connected to the Quds Force, served as an important partner in Lebanon and the Palestinian theatre (O'Hern 2012: 92). Abdolreza Shahlaei, a Quds Force commander, played a comparable role in Yemen. Soleimani also encouraged allied armed groups to enter formal politics, seeking to convert informal influence into institutional power and political legitimacy. After the defeat of ISIS in 2017 increased the standing of several Iraqi armed groups, the Fatah Alliance was created in 2018 under Hadi al-Amiri, a close associate of Soleimani. The campaign against ISIS also improved the regional legitimacy of Iranian actions in some Shia communities. Images of Soleimani on the battlefield, accompanied by the stated goals of defending Shia shrines and communities, reinforced this narrative. The international effects were more limited but still visible: US and Iranian officials reportedly discussed the ISIS crisis on the margins of the Vienna negotiations in June 2014 (Esfandiary & Tabatabai 2015: 10). Such contacts indicated a degree of recognition of Iran as an actor opposing ISIS, despite continuing accusations that it sponsored terrorism. At the same time, Soleimani's expanding authority reduced the

³ Adesnik D. 2018. FDD Profiles of Leading Iranian-Backed Militias. Foundation for Defense of Democracies. URL: <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/02/28/fdd-profiles-of-leading-iranian-backed-militias> (accessed 01.07.2026).

initiative of civilian institutions, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Security and military considerations increasingly shaped appointments to Iranian embassies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. In a confidential interview, former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif described the resulting imbalance: "Throughout my work, I was never able to tell the field commander [Soleimani] to do this or that because I needed it for diplomacy"⁴. His account illustrates the priority accorded to battlefield objectives over diplomatic requirements.

By the late 2010s, Soleimani had helped expand and stabilize Iran's regional influence at both strategic and operational levels. Before his assassination in January 2020, his personal authority, command position, and policymaking role enabled Tehran to absorb systemic pressures and pursue its objectives against regional rivals more effectively.

Soleimani as the Architect of Iran's New Regional Policy

From the early 2000s, Iran's regional policy became unusually dependent on individual agency. This development reflected both the succession of security crises surrounding Iran and Soleimani's emergence as Quds Force commander. The US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Syrian war, and the rise of ISIS created conditions in which military-security institutions acquired greater authority. Soleimani's perceptions and personality did not independently determine Iranian policy, but they shaped how these opportunities and threats were interpreted and acted upon. His influence can therefore be examined through three complementary roles: Soleimani as an individual, as commander of the Quds Force, and as a regional policymaker. In the latter two roles, his ideological commitments, operational assertiveness, and capacity to build personal networks were combined with the formal and informal resources of the Quds Force.

Soleimani as an Individual

From the early 2000s, Soleimani became one of the Islamic Republic's most ideologically committed and operationally assertive senior officials. Strong revolutionary convictions, a comparatively uncompromising view of external threats, and limited willingness to separate political objectives from military means shaped his leadership style. These features were rooted partly in his personal and professional experience. Material deprivation in his youth, participation in the struggle against the Pahlavi monarchy, and the formative experience of the Iran-Iraq War contributed to his resilience and ambition. The later US military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq further intensified his perception of threats to the Islamic Republic. These personal

⁴ Written Voice of Diplomacy: The Full Text of the Marginal Interview. 2021. ISNA. URL: <https://www.isna.ir/news/1400020705073> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

and perceptual characteristics facilitated his rise as Quds Force commander and helped shape the pragmatic, but frequently coercive regional policies associated with his leadership.

Soleimani as Quds Force Commander

Soleimani's command of the Quds Force revealed a distinctive leadership style and a particular way of responding to regional threats. His early career in the IRGC demonstrated physical courage, ambition, military aptitude, discipline, and organizational ability (Azizi 2022: 63). When these personal characteristics were combined with command of the Quds Force and sustained support from Ayatollah Khamenei and influential conservative networks, Soleimani developed an unusually autonomous form of field leadership. Its principal effects were visible in two areas: tighter control over Iran-aligned armed groups and more credible deterrent signaling towards regional adversaries. These capacities enabled Tehran to mobilize a resilient set of military, political, and financial resources against the economic and security pressures that intensified after 2018.

Soleimani belonged to the post-revolutionary generation of officials who remained personally loyal to Khamenei and supported an active Iranian role in the Middle East (Adair 2023: 40). The Supreme Leader publicly praised this loyalty, stating that Soleimani 'remained loyal to Islam and the revolution with his whole being'⁵. Khamenei's support gave the Quds Force commander exceptional political protection and broad access to financial, military, and security institutions. It also allowed the IRGC and the Quds Force to expand their role in regional policymaking at the expense of civilian and competing security bodies. Institutions such as the Supreme National Security Council, the Ministry of Intelligence, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs formally retained important responsibilities, but senior officials acknowledged Soleimani's extensive influence. Former Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi claimed that, during part of his tenure, the ministry had effectively placed some of its capacities at Soleimani's disposal⁶. Mahmoud Alavi, who later held the same portfolio, recalled that Soleimani sometimes attended meetings of the Supreme National Security Council to brief members with the aid of operational maps⁷. Although the Quds Force commander was not a permanent member of the council, such participation illustrates the informal authority he acquired within Iran's security system. These examples do not imply that Soleimani exercised complete control over the state, but they demonstrate his unusual capacity to shape decisions across institutional boundaries.

⁵ Khamenei A. 2022. Statements on the Anniversary of Hajj Qasem Soleimani and Meeting with His Family. *Khamenei.ir*. URL: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=49260> (in Persian) (accessed 01.07.2026).

⁶ Moslehi A. 2021. Ahmadinejad Wanted Information Available Only to the Supreme Leader; We Had Placed the Ministry at Haj Qasem's Disposal. *Asr Iran*. URL: <https://alnk.ir/xs8> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

⁷ Minister of Intelligence's Account of Soleimani's Attendance at Supreme National Security Council Meetings. 2018. *Khabar Online*. URL: <https://b2n.ir/a65159> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

This political protection, together with Soleimani's formal and informal networks, strengthened his ability to mobilize domestic resources for regional operations. During the economic pressure generated by the Trump administration's maximum-pressure campaign, Parviz Fattah, then head of the Foundation of the Oppressed, recalled that Soleimani had requested assistance in paying the salaries of Fatemiyoun fighters in Syria⁸. Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr similarly stated that Soleimani sought alternative financial resources whenever official budgets proved insufficient and did not regard financial obstacles as insurmountable⁹. His ideological commitment and institutional access therefore enabled the Quds Force to supplement formal appropriations with resources channeled through IRGC-linked economic organizations and bodies associated with the Office of the Supreme Leader. These informal channels helped Iran sustain support for aligned armed groups despite sanctions and fiscal pressure.

The same concentration of authority also generated institutional costs. Soleimani's extensive access to resources, senior officials, and powerful organizations complicated relations within Iran's security establishment and produced dissatisfaction among civilian politicians and rival agencies. Disagreements were particularly visible over the status of armed groups in Iraq and Syria, relations with Sunni communities, and the relative weight of military and diplomatic considerations. The result was an erosion of formal coordination and sharper competition among the elected government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Intelligence, and the IRGC. Zarif later recalled that, before negotiations, Soleimani frequently presented him with objectives that diplomacy was expected to secure¹⁰. Tensions also affected relations between the IRGC and Iran's regular armed forces. The IRGC's constitutional mission includes defending the revolutionary order and operating through external partnerships, whereas the regular armed forces have traditionally concentrated on territorial defense. Former Army Ground Forces commander Ahmad Reza Pourdastan stated that his forces began advisory activities in regional theatres only after he had sought Soleimani's approval¹¹. The episode illustrates the Quds Force commander's informal gatekeeping role, although the formal chain of command continued to include the General Staff and other state institutions.

Soleimani's command style combined personal charisma and persuasion with coercive leverage. It shaped Iran's regional relationships through two connected mechanisms: control over allied groups and deterrence of adversaries. Soleimani's leadership helped Tehran coordinate Iran-aligned armed organizations, intervene in Iraqi politics,

⁸ Criticism of Parviz Fattah for Discussing the Salaries of the Fatemiyoun Group. 2019. Radio Farda. URL: <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/30532209.html> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

⁹ The IRGC's Justification for Qasem Soleimani's USD 22 Million Donation to Hamas. 2020. Al Arabiya. URL: <https://b2n.ir/p35704> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

¹⁰ Zarif's Audio Recording: Qassem Soleimani Was an Obstacle to Diplomacy. 2021. Radio Farda. URL: <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-zarif-qassem-soleimani-attack/31222159.html> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

¹¹ General Soleimani's Authorization for the Army and the Account of a Senior Army Officer. 2021. Khabar Online. URL: <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-zarif-qassem-soleimani-attack/31222159.html> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

and direct operations in Syria while responding to US military and economic pressure. His public rhetoric consistently portrayed the United States and its regional partners as threats to the Islamic Republic. In 2018, responding to President Trump's warnings, he declared: 'I am your opponent.' Such statements acquired credibility because they were associated with operational capabilities and a demonstrated willingness to escalate. During the maximum-pressure campaign, Iran-aligned groups attacked US diplomatic and military facilities in Iraq and targeted the energy infrastructure of US partners. Reuters reported that, in October 2019, Soleimani instructed allied Iraqi groups to intensify attacks on US targets using more advanced weapons supplied by Iran¹². Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo later wrote that the escalation threatened the maximum-pressure strategy and weakened US deterrence (Pompeo 2023: 144–146). The Trump administration's decision to assassinate Soleimani should be understood in this context of escalating confrontation. Israel likewise treated his combination of personal authority and operational capacity as a major threat. Israeli analyst Ronen Bergman described him as one of Israel's most dangerous adversaries¹³. The May 2018 launch of rockets from Syria towards Israeli positions in the Golan Heights, following Israeli strikes and the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, illustrated the risks of direct escalation. Soleimani's presence did not prevent Israeli operations against Iranian targets, but it increased the expected costs of retaliation and contributed to a precarious deterrent relationship.

In Iraq, Soleimani relied on personal relationships, fluency in Arabic, persuasion, patronage, and coercion to manage a wide network of political and military actors. Close ties with figures such as Nouri al-Maliki and Hadi al-Amiri gave Tehran channels of influence within the Iraqi state, while threats and pressure were used against actors who resisted Iranian preferences. During the 2019 protests, reports alleged that Soleimani warned Muqtada al-Sadr and other Iraqi political figures that their security could not be guaranteed if they challenged the existing order¹⁴. Media accounts also stated that he attended an Iraqi security meeting and advised officials on the suppression of the protests¹⁵. Such reports are difficult to verify independently, but they are consistent with the broader pattern of personalized influence attributed to Soleimani. His pressure reportedly contributed to Adel Abdul-Mahdi's continuation as caretaker prime minister until the period surrounding Soleimani's assassination.

Soleimani's approach in Iraq produced significant advantages for Tehran but also imposed costs on the cohesion of Iraqi armed groups and the stability of the political system. Since 2014, many militias have operated under the umbrella of the *Hashd*

¹² Inside the Plot by Iran's Soleimani to Attack U.S. Forces in Iraq. 2020. *Reuters*. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-soleimani-insight-idUSKBN1Z301Z/> (accessed 01.07.2026)

¹³ Bergman R. 2018. Israel's Most Dangerous Enemy: Who Are You, Hajj Qasem Soleimani? *Ynetnews*. URL: <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5301988,00.html> (accessed 01.07.2026).

¹⁴ Qassem Soleimani Threatened Muqtada al-Sadr: 'Your Life Will Not Be Safe in Iraq.' 2019. *Al Arabiya*. URL: <https://farsi.alarabiya.net/amp/2020/12/30/> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

¹⁵ Qasem Soleimani Called on Iraqi Leaders to Intensify the Crackdown on Protesters. 2019. *RFI*. URL: <https://B2n.ir/q36953> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Soleimani sought to preserve influence within this heterogeneous organization by directing greater material and political support to the factions most closely aligned with Tehran—sometimes described as the *Hashd al-Wala'i*—including Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. This preferential relationship generated tension with organizations such as Saraya al-Salam and the al-Abbas Combat Division, which were associated with other Iraqi Shia authorities, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The Quds Force also favored a high degree of autonomy for the PMF from Iraq's regular security institutions because such autonomy maximized Tehran's leverage (Hansen & Henningsen 2022: 981).

Soleimani's longer-term objective was to develop an Iraqi partner comparable in political and military influence to Hezbollah in Lebanon. This policy, however, also generated resentment among Sunni Arab communities, Iraqi nationalists, and some Iranian civilian officials. One account estimated that groups closely aligned with Iran held almost 80 per cent of senior administrative and command positions in the PMF, while Sunni and minority formations remained seriously under-represented¹⁶. Civilian institutions in Tehran, including parts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Intelligence, were at times more supportive than the Quds Force of integrating armed groups into the official Iraqi security system, promoting communal reconciliation, and increasing Sunni Arab participation in government (Hansen & Henningsen 2022). The differences reveal that Iran's policy towards Iraq was never fully unified.

In Syria, Soleimani's relationship with Bashar al-Assad and his command of Iran-aligned ground forces placed him near the center of military decision-making. Assad regarded him as an indispensable partner against domestic and external opponents, while Soleimani's operational knowledge, familiarity with the Syrian theatre, and authority over allied militias enhanced Iran's influence relative to other external actors. These advantages did not give Tehran complete dominance, particularly after Russia's intervention in 2015, but they enabled Soleimani to resist some Russian preferences. Masoud Assadollahi, one of his advisers, claimed that during the final stages of the battle for Aleppo, the Quds Force prevented the implementation of a Russian-Turkish arrangement for the withdrawal of armed groups until Moscow accepted Iranian conditions¹⁷. The account illustrates both the extent of Soleimani's field authority and the recurrent tensions within the Iran-Russia partnership.

Soleimani's strategy in Syria, as in Iraq, produced both strategic gains and substantial political and social costs. The Quds Force and Iran-aligned groups supported the survival of the Assad government, but their involvement also deepened the sectarian dimension of the conflict. The literature cited in this article associates some

¹⁶ What Are the Divisions within the Hashd al-Shaabi? 2020. Middle East News. URL: <https://B2n.ir/fw8951> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

¹⁷ Account of General Soleimani's Prevention of the Implementation of Russia's Plan in Aleppo. 2018. Aparat. URL: <https://www.aparat.com/v/jukp4> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

Iranian-backed actors with population displacement, settlement policies, and efforts to expand Shia religious and political influence in predominantly Sunni areas. These practices contributed to wider Sunni-Shia polarization and reinforced perceptions of Iran as a partisan actor in the Syrian war (Cohen & Shamci 2022: 402).

Soleimani's conduct in Syria also attracted criticism within Iran. According to Seyyed Hossein Marashi, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani believed that Tehran could have promoted a compromise between the Assad government and initially non-armed opposition groups during the early years of the conflict¹⁸. Iranian and Russian priorities also diverged. The Quds Force sought to preserve the autonomy and influence of allied militias, whereas Russia generally favored stronger central state institutions and a diplomatic settlement that protected its own interests. These competing approaches complicated post-war stabilization and contributed to disagreements over the distribution of military and political authority. Soleimani's distrust of Russian intentions intensified the friction. Marashi claimed that, during their final meeting three months before the assassination, Soleimani used exceptionally harsh language to describe Russian conduct in Syria¹⁹. Whether or not the remark accurately represented his broader position, it illustrates the limits of the often-assumed strategic convergence between Tehran and Moscow.

Soleimani as a Policymaker

Command of the Quds Force provided Soleimani with a platform from which to exercise growing influence over Iranian regional policymaking. Under his leadership, the force acquired a powerful military and political identity, while a security institution gained unprecedented weight in foreign policy. Soleimani's ambition, combative outlook, and reluctance to compromise strengthened the preference for battlefield instruments and reduced the autonomy of diplomatic channels. This imbalance contributed to prolonged confrontation with several Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia over Yemen. In 2016, Soleimani described the Saudi government as illegitimate and accused it of acting against Islam and Iran²⁰. His suspicion of Riyadh and other Gulf monarchies narrowed the space for de-escalation and encouraged the view that regional competition should be decided through leverage on the ground rather than negotiation. He treated talks as meaningful only if Saudi Arabia first reduced its involvement in Yemen, slowed normalization with Israel, and loosened its security relationship with the United States. In a 2018 speech, he portrayed Saudi Arabia and the

¹⁸ Marashi: Hashemi Rafsanjani Disagreed with General Soleimani over Syria; Some Iranian Allies in Syria Welcomed Soleimani's Death. 2021. Asr Iran. URL: <https://B2n.ir/xu8600> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

¹⁹ Marashi Quotes General Soleimani's Harsh Anti-Russian Assessment of Tehran-Moscow Relations. 2021. Khabar Online. URL: <https://B2n.ir/xn6941> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

²⁰ Soleimani: 'The Saudi Regime Is Illegitimate.' 2016. IranWire. URL: <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/61706/> (accessed 01.07.2026).

United Arab Emirates as dependent burdens attached to the United States²¹. Zarif's confidential interview also suggests that Saudi leaders viewed Soleimani as a central security interlocutor rather than regarding the Foreign Ministry as an autonomous diplomatic channel²². His assassination therefore removed an important obstacle to a different form of Iranian-Saudi engagement. Following the killing, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan agreed publicly with the US assessment that the region had become safer²³. Saudi reservations about Soleimani's symbolic place in Iranian policy persisted: during bin Farhan's 2023 visit to Tehran, the location of a press conference was reportedly changed because a prominent portrait of Soleimani was displayed in the original room²⁴. In Yemen, Soleimani's absence coincided with a stronger diplomatic role for China and with Tehran's eventual acceptance of a negotiated rapprochement with Riyadh. These developments did not result from his death alone, but the loss of a policymaker identified with military primacy made diplomatic rebalancing easier.

Soleimani's ideological commitments, sensitivity to external threats, operational experience, and personal networks made him an assertive commander and influential policymaker. Together, these qualities enabled him to mediate between Iran's institutions, regional partners, and adversaries and to reduce the immediate impact of external pressure. His presence did not eliminate the structural weaknesses of Iran's regional strategy, but it helped contain them. The assassination in January 2020 therefore became a turning point: it removed a central coordinating figure and accelerated a decline that had already begun under mounting economic, political, and military pressure.

Post-Soleimani Strategic Constraints: Assassination and Systemic Pressure

Since 2018, Iran's regional position has been subjected to interconnected economic, political, and military pressures. Their effects can be examined in two stages. The first, from 2018 to the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, included the Trump administration's maximum-pressure campaign, the Abraham Accords between Israel and several Arab states, the growing leverage of China and Russia in the Middle East, and the declining legitimacy of the Axis of Resistance in parts of Iraq and Lebanon. Soleimani's assassination in January 2020 did not create these pressures, but it increased their effectiveness by weakening Iran's capacity to manage political and

²¹ Major General Qasem Soleimani's Reference to the Risk of War in Saudi Arabia. 2018. Mehr News Agency. URL: <https://B2n.ir/w69230> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

²² Written Voice of Diplomacy: The Full Text of the Marginal Interview. 2021. ISNA. URL: <https://www.isna.ir/news/1400020705073> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

²³ The Challenges in Iran-Saudi Relations: From Qasem Soleimani's Portrait to the Hotel Incident. 2023. Radio Farda. URL: <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/obstacles-to-the-restoration-of-relations-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia/32469068.html> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

²⁴ Ibid.

military challenges. The second stage began after 7 October 2023 and culminated in severe losses across the Axis of Resistance, including the assassination of senior commanders and political leaders and the collapse of the Assad government. These developments confronted Iranian decision-makers with a substantially altered operational environment. The post-Soleimani strategic constraints examined below therefore refer to the interaction between enduring systemic pressure and the loss of a central coordinating actor whose absence accelerated the weakening of Tehran's regional influence.

From Sanctions to Assassination: How Maximum Pressure Weakened Iran's Regional Position

Containment of Iran became a central objective of US Middle East policy under the first Trump administration. In May 2018, Washington withdrew unilaterally from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and launched a campaign of diplomatic, economic, and military pressure. The maximum-pressure strategy sought to force Tehran to renegotiate the nuclear agreement and to restrict the financial resources available for military development and regional operations (Albarasneh & Khatib 2019: 12). Between 2018 and 2021, the administration imposed or reimposed more than 1,500 sanctions-related measures. Tanker-tracking data cited by Bloomberg indicate that Iranian crude oil exports fell from more than two million barrels per day during much of 2018 to an average of approximately 400,000 barrels per day in 2019 and 2020²⁵. The sanctions were also associated with a substantial increase in poverty and wider economic hardship inside Iran. In his assessment of the campaign, Pompeo claimed that more than thirty countries had stopped importing Iranian oil and that Tehran had lost approximately USD 70 billion in oil revenue²⁶. Although these figures reflected the administration's own evaluation, they demonstrate the scale of the pressure placed on Iran's fiscal and regional capabilities.

The sanctions increased economic hardship, weakened the domestic legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, and constrained Tehran's support for allied armed groups. Esmail Qaani, who succeeded Soleimani as commander of the Quds Force—not of the IRGC as a whole – operated with fewer financial and personal resources. During a visit to Iraq in April 2020, he reportedly presented rings rather than cash to militia leaders and indicated that, for the time being, they would need to rely more heavily on Iraqi funding²⁷. Greater financial autonomy reduced some groups' dependence on Tehran and, over time, made them more difficult for the Quds Force to direct. This

²⁵ Trump's Iran Policy Puts Focus on USD 30 Billion-a-Year Oil Revenue. 2025. Bloomberg. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-01-20/trump-s-iran-policy-puts-focus-on-30-billion-a-year-oil-revenue> (accessed 01.07.2026).

²⁶ Pompeo Assesses Maximum Pressure Campaign. 2021. Iran Primer. URL: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/jan/12/pompeo-assesses-maximum-pressure-campaign> (accessed 01.07.2026).

²⁷ Cash-Strapped Iran Struggles to Maintain Sway over Iraq Militias. 2020. Al Jazeera. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/11/cash-strapped-iran-struggles-to-maintain-sway-over-iraq-militias> (accessed 01.07.2026).

change was not solely a consequence of leadership succession, but the contrast between Soleimani's informal resource mobilization and Qaani's more limited authority was politically significant.



Figure 1. Iranian crude oil exports, 2018–2024

Iranian support for Hezbollah also came under pressure. Reports described reductions in welfare provision for fighters, employees, and their families and the departure of some Hezbollah personnel from Syria because of unpaid salaries²⁸. Maximum pressure was accompanied by a more visible US military presence, including carrier deployments and, ultimately, the assassination of Soleimani. The Trump administration also promoted Arab-Israeli normalization, culminating in the Abraham Accords of 2020. For several Gulf states, Iran represented both an ideological and a military-security threat (Quamar 2020: 596). Their concerns reflected Tehran's expanded regional network, its missile and nuclear programs, and the perception that the Syrian war, the campaign against ISIS, the JCPOA, and the US strategic turn towards Asia had strengthened Iran at their expense. Closer security cooperation between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain subsequently widened the intelligence and operational environment in which Israel acted against Iranian interests. Israel intensified its 'campaign between the wars' and later articulated an 'octopus doctrine' that placed greater emphasis on striking Iranian personnel and infrastructure rather than only Iran's regional partners. In January 2023, Israeli Chief of the General Staff Aviv Kochavi stated that Israel had conducted more than fifty operations against Iranian

²⁸ Jungman C. and Haidamous J.C. 2022. Analysis of Iranian Oil Sales under President Trump vs President Biden. United Against Nuclear Iran. URL: <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/blog/analysis-of-iranian-oil-sales-under-president-trump-vs-president-biden> (accessed 01.07.2026).

targets in Syria during 2022²⁹. From the 2020 sabotage at the Natanz enrichment facility to the April 2024 attack on the Iranian consular compound in Damascus, Israel was linked to a succession of attacks against Iranian personnel and facilities inside Iran and in Syria³⁰. These included the assassinations of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in 2020 and Hassan Sayyad Khodaei in 2022. Iran initially responded to maximum pressure through regional escalation, but Soleimani's killing altered the leadership's risk calculations. The missile strike on the Ain al-Asad base was calibrated to demonstrate resolve while limiting the likelihood of a wider war. Thereafter, Tehran increasingly combined rhetorical threats and indirect action with 'strategic patience', seeking to avoid an uncontrolled confrontation while preserving credibility among its supporters.

The 2019 protest movements in Iraq and Lebanon and the subsequent parliamentary elections also challenged Iran's political influence and the social legitimacy of its regional partners. Three developments were particularly important: the growing involvement of Iran-aligned armed groups in state institutions, allegations of corruption against officials associated with Tehran, and the increasing appeal of nationalist and anti-establishment opposition. In Iraq, many young Shia protesters attributed unemployment, corruption, and political paralysis partly to Iranian interference and to politicians and militias aligned with Tehran. Iranian consulates in cities such as Karbala and Najaf were repeatedly attacked during the protests. Adel Abdul-Mahdi's resignation created a major test for the Quds Force after Soleimani's death. During a 2020 visit, Qaani sought to build support among Shia factions for a candidate acceptable to Tehran, but Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani reportedly declined to meet him and Muqtada al-Sadr publicly opposed external interference. Mustafa al-Kadhimi ultimately became prime minister and attempted to place armed groups under greater state control. Qaani was also required to obtain a visa for travel to Iraq, a symbolic contrast with Soleimani's informal access. The 2021 parliamentary election reinforced this trend: Sadr's movement won 73 of 329 seats, whereas the Fatah Alliance won only 17. Reports that Iraqi militia leaders rejected Qaani's request to halt rocket attacks on the US embassy further indicated a decline in Tehran's command authority³¹. In Lebanon, the 2019 protests reached predominantly Shia areas, including Nabatieh, where demonstrators attacked offices associated with Hezbollah³². The Beirut port explosion in 2020 and the 2022 parliamentary election further damaged Hezbollah's standing and strengthened calls for greater state control over its weapons. These developments did not end Iranian influence, but they made it more contested and less readily convertible into political legitimacy.

²⁹ Israel: The Iran Threat and Options. 2023. Iran Primer. URL: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jan/25/israel-iran-threat-options> (accessed 01.07.2026).

³⁰ Timeline: Israeli Attacks on Iran. 2024. Iran Primer. URL: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/aug/11/timeline-israeli-attacks-iran> (accessed 01.07.2026).

³¹ Chulov M. 2011. Qasem Soleimani: The Iranian General 'Secretly Running' Iraq. The Guardian. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qasem-soleimani-iran-iraq-influence> (accessed 01.07.2026).

³² Ghaddar H. 2019. Iran Is Losing the Middle East, Protests in Lebanon and Iraq Show. Foreign Policy. URL: <https://foreign-policy.com/2019/10/22/iran-losing-middle-east-iraq-lebanon-protests-bad-governance/> (accessed 01.07.2026).

As relations with the West deteriorated, Tehran intensified its orientation towards China and Russia. International isolation, the nuclear dispute, sanctions, and recurring military threats encouraged Iranian leaders to view these powers as economic and political counterweights to the United States. Yet deeper dependence also increased Beijing's and Moscow's leverage over Iranian regional choices. In the Gulf, both Iran and Saudi Arabia cultivated relations with China, whose economic interests depended on secure energy flows and regional stability. Houthi attacks on Saudi and Emirati energy infrastructure threatened these interests and gave Beijing an incentive to promote de-escalation. Iran's economic dependence on China, combined with Saudi Arabia's importance as an oil supplier and commercial partner, enabled Beijing to support the March 2023 Iranian-Saudi agreement. The rapprochement reflected a broader rebalancing between military pressure and diplomacy in the post-Soleimani period. In Syria, Russia's 2015 intervention helped reverse the military position of the Assad government, but Russian and Iranian interests never fully coincided. Moscow generally favored stronger central institutions and the incorporation or regulation of non-state armed groups, whereas Tehran benefited from maintaining autonomous partners (Popescu & Secrieru 2019: 109). Russia's relationship with Israel also allowed Israeli forces considerable freedom to strike Iranian targets in Syria. Soleimani's authority over ground operations had previously enabled Tehran to resist some Russian preferences. After his death, reports suggested that Moscow had pressed Iran-aligned forces to withdraw from oil- and gas-producing areas³³. The removal of Quds Force commander Javad Ghafari from Syria in 2021 following disagreements involving Russian actors was another indication of Tehran's reduced leverage³⁴. These episodes show that the post-Soleimani constraints included not only pressure from adversaries but also more unequal bargaining with nominal partners.

From Haniyeh's Assassination in Tehran to Assad's Fall in Damascus: The Strategic Vacuum after 7 October

Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 marked a new stage in the pressure on Iran's regional position. The ensuing war activated several components of the Axis of Resistance and provided an unprecedented test of Iran's ability to coordinate its partners after Soleimani's death. The conflict exposed vulnerabilities that had previously been mitigated by his personalized command: greater autonomy among allied organizations, centrifugal behavior across separate theatres, and a reduced capacity to deter adversaries. Recognizing that no successor could readily reproduce Soleimani's authority, Tehran attempted under Qaani to move from a person-centered network towards a more institutionalized and flexible structure. The results were limited. Qaani

³³ Russia Expels Iran from Syrian Oil and Gas Fields. 2021. Al Arabiya. URL: <https://B2n.ir/mh5752> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

³⁴ The Reason for Javad Ghafari's Expulsion from Syria Was a Dispute with Russia. 2021. Radio Farda. URL: <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/alarabia-javad-ghafari-expel-syria/31573692.html> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

lacked Soleimani's relationships and coercive leverage, while some allied groups acquired greater freedom to pursue their own priorities. Hamas's surprise attack was the clearest example of this changing relationship. Reports citing US intelligence officials suggested that Tehran's control over aligned groups had diminished and that Iranian leaders had received no advance warning of the operation³⁵. The attack served some Iranian interests by disrupting regional normalization with Israel, but it also exposed the Axis of Resistance to a conflict that threatened its long-term survival. According to reporting based on Iranian and Hamas sources, Khamenei told Ismail Haniyeh in November 2023 that Iran had not been warned and would not enter the war on Hamas's behalf³⁶. This reported exchange illustrates the tension between political solidarity and Tehran's desire to avoid direct war with Israel and the United States.

Reduced central control was not the principal cause of the war, but it shaped the way the Axis of Resistance responded to it. Soon after the fighting began, Iran-aligned groups announced a joint operations room and adopted the principle of the 'unity of fronts'. The concept was intended to replace a heavily personalized system with a more mobile and institutionalized form of coordination capable of exerting simultaneous pressure on Israel from several theatres. It produced some operational synergy, but it also exposed Qaani's limited authority and gave individual groups considerable discretion over the timing, location, and targets of attacks. A senior source reported that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, rather than the Quds Force commander, had the final say in the joint operations room³⁷. This represented a significant departure from conflicts in which Soleimani had coordinated planning and support directly. The risks became evident on 28 January 2024, when an Iraqi armed group carried out a drone strike on a US base near the Jordanian-Syrian border, killing three US soldiers and injuring approximately forty others³⁸. The attack generated calls in Washington for strikes on Iran itself. The United States instead launched extensive attacks on militia targets in Iraq and Syria. The episode demonstrated how greater operational autonomy among Iran-aligned groups could draw Tehran towards a direct confrontation it wished to avoid. It also called into question whether the forward-defense network could continue to protect Iran without simultaneously creating new pathways for escalation against Iranian territory.

The erosion of deterrence became even more visible in Israel's campaign against senior Iranian and allied leaders after 7 October. Tehran's cautious responses, uncertainty within the leadership, and the absence of Soleimani's command authority

³⁵ Mazhari M. 2024. Is Iran Losing Control over Shia Militias? Stimson Center. URL: <https://www.stimson.org/2024/is-iran-losing-its-control-over-shiite-militias/> (accessed 01.07.2026).

³⁶ Khamenei Told Haniyeh That Iran Would Not Directly Enter the War. 2023. The Times of Israel. URL: https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/report-khamenei-told-haniyeh-that-iran-will-not-directly-enter-war/ (accessed 01.07.2026).

³⁷ A Report from the Centre of the Crisis: The Quds Force Commander Is in Lebanon, but Hezbollah 'Has the Final Say'. 2023. Amwaj.media. URL: <https://amwaj.media/fa/article/axis-gaza-qaani> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

³⁸ US Launches Strikes in Response to Attack That Killed Troops in Jordan. 2024. Al Jazeera. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/2/us-launches-strikes-in-response-to-attack-that-killed-troops-in-jordan> (accessed 01.07.2026).

encouraged Israel to expand attacks on the regional chain of command. These operations killed senior Quds Force officers in Syria, including Seyyed Razi Mousavi, Sadegh Omidzadeh, and Mohammad Reza Zahedi, and later targeted political leaders such as Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut. The losses weakened Iran's military position in Syria and prompted the reported withdrawal of some senior IRGC personnel³⁹. Tehran's reduced presence contributed to a wider shift in the Syrian balance and limited its ability to support the Assad government during its final crisis. Sources cited in the article indicate that Russia retained important military facilities and continued to seek influence in post-Assad Syria⁴⁰. The new Syrian authorities and Moscow consequently developed partially convergent interests in state stability, although the durability of this arrangement remains uncertain. The assassinations also damaged Iran's reputation as a protector of its partners. The killings of Haniyeh and Nasrallah raised doubts among regional actors about Tehran's ability to provide security or impose costs on adversaries. Some partners and former allies therefore had stronger incentives to diversify their external relationships rather than rely exclusively on Iran. Reports that Assad had explored closer contacts with the United States before his fall were interpreted in this context⁴¹, although the evidence does not establish that Iran's weakness was the sole reason for such moves.

The weakening of Tehran and the Axis of Resistance also generated criticism inside Iran. Shortly after Assad's fall, Ali Shirazi, a former representative of the Supreme Leader in the Quds Force, quoted critics asking why Qaani had been unable to perform the role once associated with Soleimani⁴². In Iraq, the changed regional balance made opposition to Iran-aligned armed groups more politically acceptable. Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein publicly called for their disarmament or integration into the Iraqi armed forces, observing that a debate that had been nearly impossible several years earlier had now entered mainstream politics⁴³. Without Soleimani's personal relationships, patronage, and coercive leverage, Tehran found it more difficult to manage both allies and opponents. This shift strengthened Iraqi actors seeking greater autonomy from Iran and contributed to the reluctance of some Iraqi groups to intervene decisively

³⁹ Exclusive: Iran's Guards Pull Officers from Syria after Israeli Strikes. 2024. Reuters. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-guards-pull-officers-syria-after-israeli-strikes-2024-02-01/> (accessed 01.07.2026).

⁴⁰ Russia Keeps a Foothold in Post-Assad Syria. 2025. Stimson Center. URL: <https://www.stimson.org/2025/russia-keeps-a-foothold-in-post-assad-syria/> (accessed 01.07.2026); After Assad: Russia's Role and Leverage in the Middle East. 2025. ISPI. URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/after-assad-russias-role-and-leverage-in-the-middle-east-224080> (accessed 01.07.2026); Russia's Enduring Grip on Syria. 2025. RUSI. URL: <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-enduring-grip-syria> (accessed 30.05.2025).

⁴¹ Assad's Efforts to Move Closer to the United States and Expel Iranian Forces from Syria. 2024. Iran International. URL: <https://www.iranintl.com/202412078347> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

⁴² Shirazi, Former Representative of the Supreme Leader in the Quds Force: 'Those Who Insulted General Soleimani during His Lifetime Now Hypocritically Claim to Revere Him.' 2024. Jamaran. URL: <https://B2n.ir/d89506> (in Persian; accessed 01.07.2026).

⁴³ Iraq Wants Iran-Backed Factions to Lay Down Their Weapons, Foreign Minister Says. 2025. Reuters. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-wants-iran-backed-factions-lay-down-weapons-foreign-minister-says-2025-01-16/> (accessed 01.07.2026).

in support of Assad during the final Syrian crisis. The episode again shows that the post-Soleimani strategic vacuum concerned political brokerage as much as battlefield command.

The systemic pressures examined in this section began while Soleimani was still alive. What changed after January 2020 was not their existence but Iran's capacity to absorb and manage them. Soleimani's authority, networks, and assertive leadership had mitigated some of their effects by coordinating allied groups, mobilizing resources, and signaling credible retaliation. His assassination weakened this resilience. Tehran consequently reduced some of its more overtly aggressive practices and relied more heavily on calibrated escalation, diplomatic de-escalation, and strategic patience.

Conclusion

This article has examined Soleimani's role in shaping Iran's regional policy from the early 2000s, the changing condition of Iranian influence under post-2020 systemic pressure, and the interaction between his perceptual environment and the operational realities of the Middle East. The findings indicate that Soleimani contributed to Iran's regional expansion at three interconnected levels: as an individual with a distinctive perception of threat, as a commander able to coordinate military and financial resources, and as a policymaker who linked battlefield operations to Tehran's wider objectives. His personal networks and operational experience produced three principal effects. They elevated him to an exceptional position within Iranian regional policymaking; facilitated the expansion and institutionalization of Iran-aligned organizations; and increased Tehran's resilience against economic, political, and military pressure. This resilience rested on his capacity to control allies, broker relations across Iranian institutions, and increase the expected costs of adversarial action. Soleimani's assassination did not create the challenges facing Iran, many of which were already accumulating under the maximum-pressure campaign and changing regional alignments. It nevertheless removed a central mechanism through which Tehran had managed them. Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen consequently became more vulnerable to financial scarcity, declining social legitimacy, leadership fragmentation, and direct military attack. The post-Soleimani strategic constraints are visible in the greater autonomy of allied groups, the reduced ability to protect senior commanders and partners, the increasing leverage of China and Russia, and Tehran's greater reliance on diplomatic de-escalation. The war that followed 7 October 2023 and the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement provide contrasting manifestations of the same transformation: one exposed the limits of decentralized military coordination, while the other demonstrated the growing importance of diplomacy in managing threats that Iran could no longer address primarily through the battlefield.

Soleimani should nevertheless be understood as a highly effective tactician and network manager rather than as the sole author of a coherent long-term strategy. His continued presence might have delayed some centrifugal tendencies within the Axis

of Resistance, but it could not have removed the structural pressures produced by sanctions, social opposition, inter-institutional rivalry, and the changing regional balance. His exceptional position also created its own succession problem: a personalized system that depended heavily on one commander's relationships proved difficult to reproduce after his death. The resulting vacuum affected not only Iran's external influence but also the internal balance among military, security, and civilian institutions, adding uncertainty to future leadership succession within the Islamic Republic.

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Conflict of Interest

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После Сулеймани: региональная политика Ирана в условиях стратегических ограничений

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Гибель Касема Сулеймани в январе 2020 г. означала для Ирана потерю архитектора его региональной военно-политической стратегии на Ближнем Востоке. Это произошло на фоне нарастающего экономического, дипломатического и военного давления на Тегеран. В статье анализируются причины, в силу которых Ирану стало труднее сохранять и расширять своё влияние в регионе после гибели Сулеймани.

Теоретической основой исследования служит предложенное Г. и М. Спраутами различие между перцептивной и операционной средами. Первая связана с тем, как руководство государства воспринимает внешние угрозы и возможности, вторая – с реальной международной и региональной обстановкой, в которой принимаются и осуществляются внешнеполитические решения. Сулеймани рассматривается не как единственный создатель региональной стратегии Ирана, а как важнейшее связующее звено между политическим руководством страны, государственными и неформальными ресурсами и аффилированными с Тегераном вооружёнными формированиями.

В статье прослеживается развитие региональной политики Ирана до назначения Сулеймани командующим силами «Кудс» и в период его руководства. Затем анализируются последствия его гибели на фоне американской политики «максимального давления», заключения Авраамовых соглашений, снижения общественной поддержки «Оси сопротивления» в Ираке и Ливане, усиления роли Китая и России на Ближнем Востоке, а также региональной эскалации после 7 октября 2023 г.

Исследование показывает, что основные ограничения региональной политики Ирана возникли ещё при жизни Сулеймани. Однако его личный авторитет, широкие связи в государственных структурах, доступ к ресурсам и опыт полевого командования позволяли Тегерану частично компенсировать внешнее давление, согласовывать действия союзных сил и поддерживать доверие партнёров к способности Ирана защищать их интересы. Его преемнику не удалось воспроизвести систему управления, во многом основанную на личных связях и авторитете Сулеймани. Это способствовало росту самостоятельности связанных с Ираном группировок и ослаблению контроля Тегерана над их действиями. После гибели Сулеймани Ирану стало сложнее удерживать политические позиции в Ираке, Сирии и Ливане, защищать ключевых союзников и использовать военное присутствие для достижения дипломатических целей. Таким образом, убийство Сулеймани не породило стратегические трудности Ирана, но усилило уже существовавшие уязвимости и ускорило переход Тегерана от наступательной стратегии «передовой обороны» к более осторожной политике деэскалации.

Ключевые слова: Касем Сулеймани; Иран; региональная политика; стратегические ограничения; «Ось сопротивления»; перцептивная среда; операционная среда; Ближний Восток

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