Tehran’s regional militia network

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 15.12.2023

Iranian strategy in the Middle East has long centered on nurturing regional proxies and partners — a so-called “Axis of Resistance” — to mount an existential threat to Israel by encircling it in a ring of fire composed of heavily armed militias arrayed along its borders. This keeps Israel busy having to defend itself on multiple fronts, thus presumably deterring it from attacking Iran. The bloody war between Israel and Hamas sparked by the latter’s Oct. 7 massacre is the first large-scale implementation of this Axis of Resistance doctrine. Whereas the legacy of the late commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, was defined by the growth of Tehran’s regional militia network, his successor’s, Esmail Ghaani’s, lasting contribution will be the network’s entry into the battlefield in a comprehensive and coordinated manner.

The Soleimani legacy

As commander of the Quds Force, Soleimani was the senior commander to whom Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, assigned the task of developing and expanding the exportation of the Islamic Revolution in the Middle East. This is the same job Khamenei had originally assigned to the Quds Force in 1989, shortly after he became supreme leader. Upon assuming office in 1998 as Quds Force commander, Soleimani began to cooperate extensively with Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, as this partnership empowered Hezbollah’s capabilities and underscored the group’s position as the spearhead of the pro-Iranian militia array in the region.

This alliance already included at the time the Badr Corps in Iraq, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the latter of which had by then escalated its attacks against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in southern Lebanon and even began launching missiles toward Israeli territory after the 1992 assassination of its Secretary-General Abbas al-Musawi.

The Iraq War (2003-2011) was Soleimani’s next step in developing the Axis of Resistance. As part of an Iranian determination to prevent Iraq from becoming an American forward operating base that could be used to attack Iran, Soleimani played a significant role in the establishment of Jaish al-Mahdi as soon as the Iraq

War broke out in 2003. During this period, he fostered Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and other groups. These militias killed and injured American troops across Iraq in cooperation with the Quds Force and Hezbollah's Unit 3800, implementing the Iranian strategy that pushed the United States out of Iraq in 2011.

This is how Soleimani managed to turn the threat inherent in the American invasion of Iraq into an opportunity for Iran to significantly increase its foothold in the country. During this period, there was also a notable warming in ties between Iran and Hamas, especially following the meetings of the then-prime minister of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, in Tehran with Khamenei and then-president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran reportedly provided $250 million to Hamas in December 2006, in a move that reflected the solidifying of relations between the two parties.

Three major events in the second decade of the 2000s led to an unprecedented boom among the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. First, the Arab Spring and especially the Syrian civil war enabled Iran to increase its grip on Syria to ensure the Bashar al-Assad regime's survival. For this mission, the Quds Force formed various Shiite militias in Syria, including the Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zeinabiyoun brigades. In addition to protecting Assad, they also fulfilled Soleimani's vision: to establish a second northern front against Israel.

Second, the ISIS crisis that broke out in 2014 increased Iraqi dependence on Iran, allowing Tehran to deepen its grip there because of the existential threat the partial occupation by ISIS posed to Iraq. In this framework, Soleimani, who became more and more visible, operated freely throughout Iraq and Syria, dominating the pro-Iranian militias and gradually developing them into a transnational Shi'a army under the leadership of Iran. This phase was critical for the development of the Axis of Resistance, providing the opportunity for its various elements to deeply acquaint themselves with each other, especially through joint participation in conferences in Tehran on topics like countering Israel.

Third, the war in Yemen became an opening for Iran to significantly expand and strengthen the Axis of Resistance, which the Quds Force exploited by arming and training the Houthis. U.S. forces assassinated Soleimani in January 2020, after he systematically grew the Axis of Resistance, which at this stage included militias

that possessed advanced military capabilities and operated from a number of key territories across the Middle East, thus constituting strategic depth for Iran. Accordingly, the commander of Iran's Khatam al-Anbia Headquarters, Maj. Gen. Gholam Ali Rashid, revealed in 2021 that three months before Soleimani was eliminated, the then-Quds Force chief asserted in a security discussion in Iran that he had managed to nurture six armies outside of the country: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, the Houthis in Yemen, Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, and militias in Syria. The management of Iran's network of proxies under Soleimani was characterized by centralization, with Soleimani playing a key role thanks to his charismatic personality and strategic military skills. He made himself ubiquitous on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, regularly surrounding himself with Shiite fighters who admired him.

Ghaani's ascendance

Following Soleimani's death, many commentators speculated whether his successor, Esmail Ghaani, would be able to fill his shoes. After all, Ghaani did not have the same command of Arabic and lacked Soleimani's interpersonal abilities that had enabled him to manage and steer the Axis of Resistance. Ghaani came to the job with a different skill set: He had deep experience in Afghanistan, and a major part of his role as Soleimani's deputy commander was overseeing financial disbursements to elements of the Quds Force's network of foreign militias.

Ghaani also held an inferior military rank to Soleimani's — of brigadier general in the IRGC, compared to the felled Quds Force commander's rank of major general when he was eliminated. Most significantly, Soleimani had a singular connection with Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, the commander-in-chief of Iran's Armed Forces. As the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) noted in 2019, "[H]is [Soleimani's] close relationship with Khamenei allows him to often directly advise and receive orders outside the traditional chain of command." Coupled with the existence of other more senior commanders in the IRGC, especially Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami, who himself is a major general, this raised questions as to whether Ghaani would have the same level of standing in the Iranian system as Soleimani enjoyed.

In fact, there was a diffusion in the management of Iran's regional assets after Soleimani's demise. In addition to the IRGC's Quds Force, the IRGC's Intelligence Organization became more active. In July 2021, Hossein Taeb visited Iraq for the

first time as commander of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization. Likewise, Iran's intelligence ministry increased its profile in these matters following Soleimani's demise. That is not to mention Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's own growing role as a leader of the Axis of Resistance.

The Gaza comparison

The legacies of Soleimani and Ghaani also differ. Where Soleimani presided over the growth of the Axis of Resistance, Ghaani is masterminding its coordination. A comparison of the broader Axis of Resistance's participation in Gazan conflicts spanning the tenures of Soleimani and Ghaani is instructive. During the 2006 Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah, there was no significant kinetic response from other members of Iran's Axis of Resistance, including Hamas. This was despite Soleimani being stationed in Beirut in the course of the hostilities.

During Israeli Operations Cast Lead (2008-09), Pillar of Defense (2012), and Protective Edge (2014), among others, sporadic attacks from Lebanon and Syria coincided with escalations in Gaza. For example, as Operation Cast Lead unfolded, three rockets were fired into northern Israel from Lebanon. Palestinian militants in Syria also fired shots at Israeli forces in January 2009. There was a similarly scattered response from the broader Axis of Resistance during Operation Pillar of Defense, with, for example, two rockets being launched from Lebanon in November 2012 (some others were disarmed by the Lebanese army). Part of this lackluster response can be attributed to Hamas' falling out with Syria's President Assad and Tehran over the civil war, which erupted in 2011.

However, after Soleimani's death, Ghaani made a concerted effort to orchestrate a more cohesive Axis of Resistance. Beginning in 2021, during Operation Guardian of the Walls, pro-Hezbollah media reported that Ghaani twice visited a joint operations room that the IRGC established for Hamas and Hezbollah. These visits featured intelligence sharing and logistics and were reminiscent of Soleimani's stay in Beirut during the 2006 Lebanon War. But Ghaani's trips overlapped with an increasing volley of rockets being fired from multiple theaters, specifically Lebanon and Syria, compared with previous Gazan conflicts during Soleimani's era. There were at least 12 rocket launches from Lebanon and Syria, coupled with provocations at the border fence. Additionally, Israel downed an Iranian drone carrying explosives that at the time was thought to have been launched from either Syria or Iraq.

Fast forward to March and April 2023: Ghaani journeyed to Syria to incite a coordinated attack among Palestinian factions on Israel in response to the latter's strikes that had killed Iranian advisers in Syria. He later traveled to Beirut, where he met with leaders from Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad at the Iranian embassy, including Ismail Haniyeh, who was in Lebanon. Those meetings occurred at the same time as Palestinian militants fired the largest salvo of rockets at Israel since the 2006 Lebanon War as a show of support amid ongoing tensions at the Temple Mount and rocket fire from Gaza.

There have also been reports of significant consultations between Iran and the Axis of Resistance in the weeks leading up to Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, massacre of over 1,200 people in Israel. In the war between Israel and Hamas that has followed, there have been regular attacks against Israeli and U.S. interests not only from Lebanon, but also in Iraq, Syria, and out of Yemen. While the Iranian leadership seeks to keep the attacks below the threshold of what would trigger an armed conflict that could pose a danger to Iran, there has nonetheless been a significant escalation in the response from the Axis of Resistance to Israel's campaign to dislodge Hamas — both qualitatively and quantitatively. Not only have the provocations increased, but their geographical origins have expanded. Since Oct. 7, there have been near-daily attacks from Lebanon on Israel; regular rocket and drone strikes against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria; and, for the first time, the Yemeni Houthis have routinely lobbed missiles and drones at the Jewish state and attacked commercial vessels in international waters. It is worth recalling that the Houthis offered mainly rhetorical and moral support, like fundraising drives, to Hamas during Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021 — although in one case, Hamas rejected a Houthi offer to provide them with targeting information for a strike on Israel. Whereas, this time, they are mounting regular kinetic operations against it. Indeed, during the Soleimani era, the Houthis never tried entering the Gaza theater.

The Tehran-led Axis of Resistance has already racked up numerous achievements amid the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas. It has punctured the perception of Israeli invincibility and implemented a mutual defense strategy of sorts across several theaters, all without triggering a war that could endanger its Iranian patron. This record is very much a testament to Ghaani's signature, and it will be his legacy. While Soleimani birthed the architecture of the Axis of Resistance, Ghaani integrated the cause and united the fronts.

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