Generational Change in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force: Brigadier General Iraj Masjedi

By Ali Alfoneh

This is the fifth in a series of Middle Eastern Outlooks about the IRGC QF.

Brigadier General Iraj Masjedi of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) personifies the new generation of IRGC commanders whose careers at Base Ramezan during the 1980s war between Iran and Iraq qualified them to direct QF operations after the 2003 US-led invasion of the country. As Masjedi’s generation is being promoted to advisory positions in Tehran, a new generation of field operatives is emerging. Those seeking to predict who will direct the IRGC QF in the future should therefore look to this nascent generation of field operatives.

Not a single week passes in the Iranian and international presses without mention of Major General Qassem Suleimani, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) commander. Suleimani and the IRGC QF can be linked to events ranging from suppression of the prodemocracy movement in Syria to the emergence of revolutionary movements in the Middle East and North Africa.

Despite press coverage, little is known about the activities of Suleimani and the clandestine force under his command. However, a close survey of Persian open-source materials provides us with the names of several key individuals who shed light into the otherwise dark and secretive world of the QF. This Middle Eastern Outlook, the fifth in a series about the IRGC QF, discusses one such individual: Brigadier General Iraj Masjedi, senior adviser to Suleimani and a veteran of IRGC QF Base Ramezan.

From Obscurity into the Limelight

Previously under the radar, Masjedi emerged as a public figure when he unveiled a commemorative

Key points in this Outlook:

- Though little is known in the United States about Brigadier General Iraj Masjedi of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF), he serves in an influential role as senior adviser to IRGC QF Commander Qassem Suleimani.
- Masjedi is part of an emerging group of leaders in Iran—Base Ramezan veterans from the 1980s Iran-Iraq war who formed bonds with Iraqi insurgents to enhance war tactics in the border region.
- Masjedi’s career illuminates a cycle of generational change within of the IRGC QF, and examining his background can help identify who else may rise to power in the IRGC QF.

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bust of Kazem Kazemi, late IRGC Intelligence Bureau cofounder, in Laleh Park in Tehran on January 16, 2012. Fars News Agency presented Masjedi as “senior adviser to the commander [of the IRGC QF].”

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Masjedi used the occasion to praise Kazemi, but also commented on the relationship between the IRGC Intelligence Bureau, its Intelligence Ministry, and the Quds Force: “The Guards’ Intelligence [Directorate] was transformed into the present day Intelligence Ministry—a sacred institution which came out of the heart of the Guards Intelligence,” Masjedi said. “The second organization and establishment is the Quds Force in which me and many other friends are and which is another child of the Guards’ Intelligence [Directorate].”

Given the fierce rivalry between the IRGC Intelligence Bureau and Intelligence Ministry, the IRGC’s decision to commemorate Kazemi and Masjedi’s choice of words are hardly surprising. The IRGC Intelligence Directorate—currently known as the Sazeman-e Ettelaat-e Sepah [Guards’ Intelligence Organization]—used this occasion as an opportunity to remind the rival Intelligence Ministry of its debt to the IRGC.

It is nonetheless surprising that the IRGC chose to expose Masjedi to the broader public. The IRGC leadership may have done so to communicate Masjedi’s elevated position as the commander’s senior adviser to the greater fraternity of IRGC members—both those in active duty and veterans from the Iran-Iraq war. The action may also have been an attempt to expose Masjedi to the press by bringing him in from the field. Regardless of the reasons behind Masjedi’s exposure, it heralds a generational change in the IRGC QF.

Iraj Masjedi: Biography, Ideology, and Career Overview

Personal information about Masjedi such as his date and place of birth cannot be found in public records. There is a similar dearth of information about Masjedi’s ideological tenets. His few publicly available speeches provide only vague insight into his thinking. In his December 16, 2010, interview with the Tehran-based International Peace Studies Centre, Masjedi delivered a cogent analysis of the negotiation tactics of the Iraqi Kurds concerning redistribution of Iraq’s oil revenue, territorial disputes among ethnic groups in Kirkuk, relations between the Iraqi Kurds and the government of Turkey, and related issues. Masjedi’s tone was almost triumphant in his September 4, 2011, interview on Iran’s influence in Iraq: “The political authority in Iraq is moving in a direction parallel to the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Masjedi said, and then described Iran as “the most influential stream in Iraq’s political issues.”

When speaking to an IRGC audience, Masjedi uses the organization’s well-known official rhetoric; in addressing the Salman IRGC unit in Sistan va Balouchestan province, Masjedi said:

The Islamic awakening in the Middle East and North Africa follows the path of the late Imam [Rouhollah Khomeini] and the example of the warriors during eight years of Sacred Defense and the Imposed War [against] Iran [reference to the 1980–88 war with Iraq]. The heads of state have on many occasions admitted this.

Speaking in Ahwaz in the Khuzestan Province on September 27, 2011, Masjedi stressed that “export of the Islamic revolution is one of the achievements of the Sacred Defense.” From the limited material available, one can distinguish between Masjedi’s thoughtful statements given to journalists and his repetition of official IRGC slogans when addressing the public.

The open-source material provides slightly better insight into Masjedi’s military career. The earliest reference to Masjedi appears in the February 21, 1987, entry of the IRGC’s Iran-Iraq War Chronology, which claims that Masjedi was the Base Ramezan deputy. He served under Mohammad-Baqer Zolqadr, the first commander in the history of the base, who is currently the Societal Security and Crime Prevention director of the Judiciary.

By September 15, 1987, Masjedi was appointed chief of staff at the Quds Base, a tactical location north of the Karkheh River. Recent references to Masjedi present contradictory information about him. For example, a September 27, 2011, story reported by the Iran Labour News Agency (ILNA) refers to Masjedi as “Quds Force deputy,” while the Sistan va Balouchestan branch of the Basij Resistance Force more plausibly presents him as
“Quds Base deputy” in a report dated the same day as ILNA’s story. It is unclear when exactly Masjedi was appointed senior adviser to Suleimani, though it must have occurred prior to Fars News Agency’s January 16, 2012, article mentioning said title.19

Masjedi’s Service in IRGC QF’s Base Ramezan

Masjedi’s record of service in Base Ramezan is significant for two important reasons: it was the hub of the IRGC QF’s war effort behind enemy lines in Iraq, and many Base Ramezan veterans are now IRGC QF commanders. Toward the end of 1984, the IRGC presented a plan to then-president Ali Khamenei and the Supreme Defense Council calling for the establishment of an Irregular Warfare Headquarters.20 After experiencing a stalemate on the southern front, the IRGC went about establishing Ramezan headquarters as a northern front against Iraq.21

The QF, tasked with the extraterritorial operations of the IRGC, used Base Ramezan to organize Shi’a Iraqi refugees looking to engage in armed struggle against Iraq’s Ba’ath regime. The refugee groups included the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq,22 led by Iraqi Shi’a leader Mohammad-Baqir al-Hakim. More importantly, the IRGC QF managed to cooperate with Kurdish insurgents inside Iraqi territory, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).23 The presence of various Iraqi groups provided Base Ramezan with the necessary operational flexibility to gain allies whenever a particular Iraqi insurgent group was unwilling to cooperate with the IRGC.24 By 1985, the IRGC QF had engaged in serious irregular warfare against Iraqi oil installations from Base Ramezan, particularly against those in Kirkuk.25 Thus, Base Ramezan managed to disband enemy forces in the border zone, manage counterrevolutionary groups in Northern Iraq, ease information-gathering and operations, and take part in cooperative efforts against the Ba’ath regime.26

There is no reference to Masjedi’s functions at Base Ramezan with the exception of his hiding irregular forces among the local Iraqi population to ensure that increased demand for food did not lead to rising prices in the local market.27 Nonetheless, Masjedi must have been deeply involved in operational planning at Base Ramezan. According to the Iran-Iraq War Chronology, he participated in meetings with senior IRGC officials including Mohsen Rezaei, IRGC commander;28 Ali Shamkhani, IRGC deputy;29 Rahim Safavi, IRGC ground forces commander;30 Gholam-Ali Rashid, IRGC operations commander;31 Mostafa Izadi, IRGC staff member;32 Mohammad-Baqer Zolqadr, IRGC Irregular Warfare Headquarters commander;33 and Asghar Moqaddam, whose role during the war is unclear.34 Other first-generation Base Ramezan commanders with whom Masjedi must have been in contact include Mohammad-Ali Rahmani, former Ramezan Base intelligence commander;35 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former engineer at the IRGC Special Operations Brigade and current president of Iran;36 Sadeq Mahsouli, former IRGC Special Operations Brigade commander who served as welfare minister to Ahmadinejad;37 and Parviz Fattah, who served as energy minister in the same cabinet.38

Masjedi’s presence at Base Ramezan also allowed him to establish a relationship with senior KDP officials such as Fazel Mirani, Molazem Babak, and Abd al-Mohaiman Barzani,39 as well as the highest officials in the PUK, including Jalal Talabani, the current president of Iraq.40 It was Masjedi who, during a meeting with Talabani, assured him of Iran’s commitment to the war against Iraq: “You rest assured, we will not under any circumstances have peace with Saddam. We believe in fighting against the Ba’th regime until it is toppled.”41

The United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a mixed blessing for the Islamic Republic. In the words of Rahmani, former Ramezan Base intelligence commander, the invasion “did away with a real menace…[but] the Ba’th party’s rule in Iraq was replaced with the United States Army.”42 Rahmani continues:

Saddam’s goals were limited to Iraq’s geography and its periphery, but the goals of the United States encompass the entire region. Should the Americans desire to stay in the region forever . . . it is natural that we have not benefited from the toppling of Saddam. But should the Americans wisely think that their presence in the region is not to their benefit, and should they feel that they must pay a heavy price for their presence, doubtlessly, they will reduce their military presence and return to their country.”43
How the IRGC QF has tried to impose a “heavy price” on the United States since 2003 is outside the scope of this Outlook— but according to some sources, Base Ramezan resumed direction of operations on Iraqi soil in the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq and has since expanded its presence with smaller tactical bases.

Unfortunately, references to the post-2003 activities of Base Ramezan are limited to information provided by the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a sometimes unreliable source. According to the MEK, Base Ramezan commands more than five operational bases (each of which has several affiliate command posts) along the Iran-Iraq border: Nasr Garrison in Naqdeh; Fath Garrison in Sardasht; Ra’d Garrison in Marivan; Zafar Garrison in Kermanshah; and Fajr Garrison in Ahwaz. The MEK also claims that Masjedi, along with Brigadier General Hamid Taqavi (a Base Ramezan operations commander whose identity could not be verified through other sources), and Brigadier General Obeidavi (whose first name is not known and who according to the same source was Fajr Garrison commander in 2003) were instrumental in organizing the IRGC QF’s operations in Iraq.

Conclusion

If the information provided by the MEK is accurate, and Masjedi has indeed played a role in directing IRGC QF activities in Iraq since 2003, we can draw several interesting conclusions.

Masjedi’s career demonstrates that experience in the Iran-Iraq war and personal bonds with Iraqi insurgents are crucial components to getting promoted within the IRGC. Similar to Masjedi, other senior IRGC QF commanders operating in Iraq today are likely to be Base Ramezan veterans who worked behind Iraqi lines during the war, having developed close bonds with Iraqi insurgents who are now in power in Iraq. Masjedi’s promotion to senior adviser to the IRGC QF commander is a sign of generational change within the IRGC QF: as the older generation of Base Ramezan veterans is vacating operational positions in the field for desk jobs in Tehran, they will be replaced by a younger generation of IRGC QF field operatives. Therefore, following this trend, future IRGC QF commanders operating in Iraq are likely to be those serving in Base Ramezan today, which narrows the field of candidates Iran watchers should pay attention to in order to predict the future composition of the IRGC QF leadership.

Notes


2. “Khabar-e Velayati Darbareh-ye Naqsh-e Bi-Badil-e Sepah-e Qods Dar Tahavolat-e Mantaqeh” [Velayati’s News About the Unrivaled Role of the Quds Force in Regional Events], Ghased News (Tehran), February 25, 2012, www.ghasednews.ir/fa/news/19755/%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%D9%86%D9%82%D9%B4-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B3 (accessed February 27, 2012).


5. “Ertegaqe Mouvenat-e Ettelaat-e Sepah Be Szeman-e Ettelaat” [Promotion of the Intelligence Bureau to the Guards’
6. The only public record reference of interest is to a certain Reza Masjedi, who, according to one source, received guerrilla warfare training in Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria before the revolution, and functioned as a military instructor at the IRGC's Imam Ali Air Base in Sa'd Abad in Tehran after 1979. A shared family name and career in extraterritorial IRGC activities may indicate that the two men are blood relatives, but this is not enough information to establish a clear relationship between them. See “Khaterat-e Yeki Az Farmandeh-ye Bazmandeh Az Amaliat-e Beit al-Moqaddas” [Memoirs of a Surviving Commander from the Beit al-Moqaddas Operation], Ayeh-he-ye Entezar (Tehran), n.d., www.ayehayeentezar.com/archive/index.php/t-15200.html (accessed March 10, 2012).

7. “Kordestan va Moadeleh-ye Qodrat Dar Eraq: Goftegou Ba Sardar Iraj Masjedi” [Kurdistan and the Balance of Power in Iraq: A Conversation with Commander Iraj Masjedi], Strategic Review (Tehran), December 16, 2010, http://strategicreview.org/1389/09/25/%DA%A9%DA%B1%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%82%D8%A8%DA%97%88-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%82%D8%A8%DA%97%88/ (accessed March 11, 2012).


17. “Sodour-e Enghelab-e Eslami Yeki . . .”


23. Ibid.


25. Ibid.


32. “14 Sarlashkar-e Irani Be Revayat-e Tasvir” [Fourteen Iranian Major Generals According to Photos], Khouz News (Khouzestan), April 6, 2011, www.khouznews.ir/fa/news/534/14-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%84%D8%B4%DA%A9%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B1 (accessed March 1, 2012).


37. “Tashkil-e Sepah-e Badr…”

38. Ibid.


41. Ibid.

42. “Tashkil-e Sepah-e Badr…”

43. Ibid.


45. For a survey of tactical bases reporting to Base Ramezan see Mohammad Mohaddessin, Islamic Fundamentalism—the New Global Threat, (Washington DC: Seven Locks Press, 2001), 106; and Alireza Jafarzadeh: The Iran Threat: President Ahmadinejad and the Coming Nuclear Crisis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 240.