



## Who Is Muhammad Reza Fallahzadeh?

by Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,043, May 23, 2021

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Iran's newly appointed Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Quds Force, Muhammad Reza Fallahzadeh, is not only an experienced military man but also a politician with diplomatic experience. He is a vital asset for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which wants to see its own man elected president in the June elections.

After the assassination of Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, Brig. Gen. Esmail Qa'ani was promoted to take his place as Commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Qa'ani had previously served as Deputy Commander of the Quds Force, leaving an opening in that position.

The job was initially given to Brig. Gen. Muhammad Hosseinzadeh Hejazi, but on Sunday, April 18, Sepah News, which belongs to the IRGC, announced that he had died of a heart condition. This report is somewhat suspect, as a mysterious tweet from an individual linked to the IRGC hinted that Hejazi might have been killed. Whatever the truth might be behind Hejazi's death, Brig. Gen. Muhammad Reza Fallahzadeh has been appointed to take his place as Deputy Commander of the Quds Force.

### Who is Fallahzadeh?

Known by the nom de guerre Abu Bagher, Fallahzadeh was born in the city of Abarkuh in the Yazd province in 1962 or 1963. He was active during the Iran-Iraq War and afterward joined the IRGC. There are scant details in the public record on his involvement in the Iran-Iraq War, and his early years in the IRGC are equally obscure.

Fallahzadeh has been commander of several IRGC [provinces and divisions](#) in Iran, including the 33<sup>rd</sup> Al-Mahdi Division and the 19<sup>th</sup> Fajr Division in the

Fars province, as well as IRGC Commander in the provinces of Yazd, Isfahan, and Fars. In [2007](#), during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Fallahzadeh was appointed Governor-General of the Yazd province. He held that position until 2013, after which he was appointed Commander of the IRGC Karbala construction camp.

After a short period in that position, Fallahzadeh was summoned to [Syria](#) by Qassem Soleimani. While there, he played a vital role in fighting both opponents of Assad and jihadists, not least in Aleppo, which saw heavy fighting. In 2016, during his tenure in Syria, Fallahzadeh was injured in an [explosion](#) and was sent back to Tehran for treatment. In 2017 he was seen accompanying officials from the Islamic regime in [peace talks](#) regarding the Syrian war.

During his time in Syria, Fallahzadeh gained vital knowledge of proxies that were trained in Iran and active in Syria. While there, he was [commander](#) of Hezbollah forces, the Fatemiyoun (Afghani Division of the IRGC), the Zeynabiyoun (Pakistani Division of the IRGC), and the Heydariyoun (Iraqi Division of the IRGC).

Fallahzadeh has given several interviews to national media in which he discussed his tenure in Syria. In one of the best-known of these [interviews](#), he related how American helicopters allegedly helped ISIS operatives flee as the IRGC and their linked forces got closer to their positions in Syria.

In 2019, Fallahzadeh was appointed Deputy Coordinator of the Quds Force, a position he held until his recent promotion to Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Quds Force.

### **Implications for the IRGC**

As Deputy Coordinator of the Quds Force, Fallahzadeh was third in the chain of command, so it is no surprise that he was promoted to Deputy Commander-in-Chief. What differentiates Fallahzadeh from many other commanders of the IRGC and the Quds Force is that he is not only a military commander but an individual with political experience.

As a military commander, Fallahzadeh not only gained massive experience in Syria in both insurgency and counterinsurgency but made vital contact with the different foreign branches of the IRGC, as well as with other Iranian proxies in the region. With respect to his political experience, Fakhrazadeh is widely connected in Iran's political sphere. His presence at peace talks has given him important diplomatic skills and experience. He is also a known face in the Iranian media. One could argue that Fallahzadeh has charisma,

notability, and political experience—all qualities that the current chief of the Quds Force, Esmail Qa’ani, lacks.

Since becoming head of the Quds Force, Qa’ani has been trying to consolidate his power. Filling the shoes of Qassem Soleimani is no easy task. As Fallahzadeh resembles Soleimani in several ways and possesses similar [diplomatic](#) skills, as well as being more of a media person than Qa’ani, he may be perceived by Qa’ani as a threat. If Khamenei and the Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, find themselves struggling to balance between Qa’ani and Fallahzadeh, serious conflicts could erupt.

Fallahzadeh’s appointment represents more than the automatic promotion of the third man of the Quds Force. His appointment is very much in line with the IRGC’s aspirations of taking over the government in the June elections. The Corps has two candidates standing for the presidency: [Brig. Gen. Hossein Dehghan](#) and [Second Brig. Gen. Saeed Muhammad](#). The speaker of the Iranian parliament, Brig. Gen. Muhammad Bagher Qalibaf of the IRGC, might also stand as a candidate. Another potential candidate—one who, while not part of the IRGC, is deeply loyal to it—is Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi.

It is entirely possible that the IRGC will indeed take over the government after the elections. Having a Quds Force Deputy Commander-in-Chief like Fallahzadeh, a man who understands the diplomatic and political game, may prove to be of vital importance to the IRGC.

*Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood, a non-resident associate at the BESA Center, is a criminologist and political scientist with a degree in Intelligence Analysis. He is also an associate professor of Emergency Medicine at Lund University in Sweden.*  
*@ardavank*