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No, Esmail Qaani is neither dead nor in shackles

Last week, Iran's Quds Force leader, Esmail Qaani, became the target of a coordinated propaganda campaign by western, Israeli, and Arab media outlets. But with his surprise public appearance today, the focus now shifts to the Israeli media proxies who concocted a pack of lies.

After weeks of rumors and speculative reports that Esmail Qaani, head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGCQF), had been killed in last month's Israeli bombardment of Beirut – which claimed the life of Hezbollah secretary-general [Hassan Nasrallah](#) – Iranian state television [quashed the rumors](#) by airing footage of Qaani at Tehran's Mehrabad International Airport.

The Quds Force commander was present for the repatriation of the body of IRGC General Abbas Nilforushan, who had been assassinated in the Beirut airstrikes. Qaani, who appeared to be in good health, also [attended](#) the funeral procession for Nilforushan, which began at Imam Hossein Square in central Tehran.

Confrontations between Iran and Israel, which were simmering after Iran's 13 April [retaliatory missile and drone strikes](#) on Israeli-occupied territories, flared up again following the assassinations of Nasrallah and Nilforushan – as well as the earlier killing of Hamas political bureau chief [Ismail Haniyeh](#) in Tehran. In response, Iran launched a second, more destructive [barrage of missiles](#) targeting Israel on 1 October.

The world held its breath as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatened harsh retaliation for the Iranian missile attack. Two weeks later, however, Israel's threats remain unfulfilled, although the latest reports suggest that Israeli authorities have reached a [full agreement with the US](#) on “the method, timing, and strength” of their expected attack against Iran.

In the interim, the Israeli government and its allies turned to psychological warfare, with a media campaign aimed at tarnishing the reputation of Qaani and Iran's IRGCQF.

Qaani: Missing, dead, injured, or a collaborator?

On 3 October, Israel dropped US-made [bunker-buster bombs](#) on residential areas in Beirut's southern suburb, Dahiyeh. Several media outlets, both [western](#) and [Arab](#), reported that Nasrallah's likely successor, Hashem Safieddine, was the target. They also speculated that Qaani had been killed in the strike, although Israeli forces [denied](#) knowledge of Qaani's presence.

Tehran and the IRGC remained kept tight-lipped about the whereabouts of their top general, understandably, given Tel Aviv's record of assassinating top Resistance Axis officials. After two days of speculative reporting, Reuters news agency [quoted](#) two Iranian officials as saying, “Iran has lost contacts with the Quds Force chief since the Beirut strike.”

Qaani was last seen on 29 September at [Hezbollah's office](#) in Tehran, where he had paid condolences for Nasrallah. As media claims about him dead or wounded grew, the deputy head for IRGC coordinations and former Iranian ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, came forward to dismiss the rumors, [saying](#), “Qaani is neither martyred nor injured. He is safe and healthy, performing his normal duties.”

On 7 October, Iranian media released a message from Qaani during an event to commemorate the first anniversary of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, also [reporting](#) that the Quds Force commander was unable to be present at the special ceremony in Tehran “due to his presence in another meeting.”

That set off yet another round of speculation about Qaani's physical state – neither Masjedi's statement nor Qaani's message was sufficient to quell the media rumors. In response, another

IRGC general and military advisor [revealed](#) that “Qaani will soon be awarded the First-Class Order of Fat’h [Conquest] medal by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.”

A coordinated media attack on the Resistance Axis

Despite all official reassurances, the rumors continued to swirl. But with reassurances that Qaani was alive, the speculations took on an entirely different tone.

On 10 October, Qatari-funded London-based *Middle East Eye* (MEE) published an explosive report, quoting multiple high-ranking sources, that Qaani was [under house arrest](#) and was being interrogated over suspicions that he had played a role in exposing Nasrallah’s location to Israeli forces:

Ten sources in Tehran, Beirut, and Baghdad, including senior Shia figures and sources close to Hezbollah and in the IRGC, told MEE that even Qaani, one of Iran’s most senior generals, and his team are under lockdown as investigators seek answers.

Sky News Arabia followed suit, claiming Qaani had [suffered a heart attack](#) while under interrogation for allegedly collaborating with Israel.

Then, Iranian opposition media outlet *Iran International* covered the claims made by its Qatari and Emirati counterparts in three languages: Farsi, English, and [Arabic](#).

Established in 2017, the London-based *Iran International* is known to have been funded by a [media firm](#) with links to Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. It is believed that in the wake of the China-brokered [normalization agreement](#) between Iran and Saudi Arabia last year, the channel’s management was [handed over to Israel](#).

Neither the Iranian foreign ministry nor the IRGC saw fit to respond to the claims by MEE and Sky News Arabia. Rather, *Tasnim*, a news agency with close connections to the IRGC, was left to [mock](#) the bizarre reports, noting that “20 informed sources have fundamentally rejected the claims of the MEE’s 10 sources, as lies.”

Strategy to sow discord in the resistance

In just seven days, media reports on Qaani went from speculating about his assassination or injury in an Israeli bombing – to tarnishing him as a top-level traitor who sold out Nasrallah and the resistance to enemy agents.

The flurry of reports in major media raises questions about why there was so much attention focused on a commander who is rarely in the spotlight, who is often characterized as being “a man in the shadows,” and [Qassem Soleimani’s](#) lower-profile successor.

The media speculation on Qaani’s whereabouts and misdeeds appeared to be part of an orchestrated, multi-front campaign to undermine the IRGC’s reputation, cause paranoia, and sow suspicion within the region’s Axis of Resistance.

Gulf media outlets affiliated with Qatar and the UAE spread the rumors, *Iran International* and US-owned [Alhurra](#) added commentary to those rumors, and Saudi Arabia's *Al Arabiya* aired a [documentary](#) alleging Hezbollah involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafic al-Hariri.

The broader aim appears to be an attempt to weaken the coalition of anti-Israel forces led by Iran, Hezbollah, and their allies. As Abbas Golrou, a member of Iran's National Security and Foreign Affairs Committee, explains to *The Cradle*:

One of the enemy's strategies is to sow discord within the Axis of Resistance as well as the public opinion that has thrown its weight behind the Resistance network ... these rumors are mainly spread on social and online media but one should not pay attention to them.

Tehran's firm diplomacy and regional solidarity prevail

A plausible explanation for this heavy media campaign may be related to the [stern warning](#) Tehran issued to Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia regarding a possible Israeli strike on Iran.

As in past Iranian confrontations with an enemy – notably, Tehran's ballistic missile retaliation against US military bases in Iraq following the assassination of IRGCQF Commander Qassem Soleimani – Iran has again made clear to its neighbors that any collaborative action by a Persian Gulf state to allow the enemy use of airspace or military bases, will be regarded as a direct act of aggression against Iran.

While the governments in Doha, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi may have caved to Iranian warnings and demands and even joined the US in working to [stop Israel from bombing](#) Iranian oil facilities, their media outlets made a beeline for Iran's jugular – its security apparatus – via what looks like a coordinated media campaign, deploying rumors, lies, and disinformation as their primary weapons.

Tehran's dispatch of Foreign Minister [Abbas Araghchi](#) and Parliament Speaker Mohammad-Baqer Ghalibaf to Beirut in the midst of Israel's aggressive bombing campaign was a meaningful show of Iran's commitment to its allies in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza.

At the highest levels, Axis officials, in deed and words, remain resolute in their commitment to their Unity of Fronts and often warn about the enemy's psychological war to destabilize their ranks and supporters.

The Qaani media frenzy was a miscalculation, though. Those outlets lost reputations over something so easily proven wrong, which is exactly what happened when the Quds Force

commander popped up in Tehran today, looking physically fit and with nary a shackle in sight.

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