

## 'OMAR THE CHECHEN': NOTORIOUS, RED-BEARDED IS WARLORD

**BEIRUT:** A fierce, battle-hardened warlord with roots in Georgia and a thick red beard, Omar Al-Shishani was one of the most notorious faces of the Islamic State jihadist group. On Monday, the Pentagon confirmed that Shishani-whose real name is Tarkhan Batirashvili-died after being wounded in a US-led coalition strike in northeastern Syria earlier this month. US officials previously said Shishani "likely died" in the strike, but reports surfaced that he had survived. On Monday, Navy Captain Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, told AFP the US military now believed "he subsequently died of his injuries" following the strike.

Shishani, whose nom de guerre means Omar the Chechen, was one of the IS leaders most wanted by Washington which put a \$5 million bounty on his head. US officials had branded Shishani the "equivalent of the secretary of defense" for the jihadist group. Shishani came from the ex-Soviet state of Georgia's Pankisi Gorge region, which is populated mainly by ethnic Chechens. He fought as a Chechen rebel

against Russian forces before joining the Georgian military in 2006, and fought Russian forces again in Georgia in 2008. He resurfaced in northern Syria in 2012 as the leader of a battalion of foreign fighters, said Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, research fellow at the Middle East Forum, a US think-tank.

As early as May 2013, when IS was just emerging in Syria, he was appointed the group's military commander for the north of the country, Tamimi said. While Shishani's exact rank was unclear, Richard Barrett of the US-based Soufan Group described him as IS's "most senior military commander," adding that he had been in charge of key battles. "He is clearly a very capable commander and has the loyalty of Chechen fighters who are considered by ISIS as elite troops," Barrett said, using another acronym for IS. Shishani was not however a member of IS's political leadership, a structure that is even murkier than its military command.

**Born to Christian father**  
A profile of Shishani written by an IS

supporter and posted online described him as "one of the best strategic and tactical leaders". He was born in 1986 to a Christian father and a Muslim mother, according to the text, which claims he "never lost any of his battles". In an indication of Shishani's popularity among jihadist sympathizers, the text describes him as "the new Khalid Ibn al-Walid"-a reference to a leader from the early days of Islam who played a crucial role in spreading the nascent religion in Syria and Iraq.

Observers, however, downplayed Shishani's importance. "He was a fierce fighter," according to Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the Syrian conflict. "He would be sent to frontlines across IS-held territory," he said. Still, Abdel Rahman said the impact of Shishani's death would be minimal. "It won't have an actual impact on the battlefield. There are many other leaders," he said. "IS chooses which faces to make known in the media-while it conceals the real leaders."—AFP



Abu Omar Al-Shishani

## CLASHES SPREAD TO NEW AREAS OF SOUTHEAST TURKEY AFTER ATTACKS

### 45 MILITANTS KILLED IN IRAQ AIR STRIKES

**DIYARBAKIR:** Four people were killed in clashes between security forces and Kurdish militants yesterday, security sources said, as fighting widened in southeast Turkey following a suicide bombing that killed 37 people in the capital Ankara. Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters blocked roads and halted vehicles in the Kaynaratepe neighborhood of the city of Diyarbakir and clashed with security forces sporadically through the night as a police helicopter flew overhead, witnesses said.

No one has claimed responsibility for Sunday's car bomb that tore through a crowded transport hub in Ankara, but security officials have said it involved two militants, one of them female, from the outlawed Kurdistan

Workers Party (PKK). Violence has surged in mainly Kurdish southeast Turkey since a 2-1/2 year PKK ceasefire collapsed in July. The militants have focused their strikes on security forces in southeastern towns, some of which have been under curfew.

One police officer and three militants were killed in the fighting in the Baglar district of the southeastern city of Diyarbakir, the security sources said. A curfew was imposed in Baglar's Kaynaratepe neighborhood from 3 am after moves by militants to set up barricades, dig ditches and plant explosives, authorities said. The curfew was later widened to encompass more city streets as clashes continued in the morning. Gunfire and explosions rang out across the city and police in

armored vehicles parked on street corners called for people to stay inside. Conflict in Diyarbakir, the southeast's largest city, has until now been focused in the Sur district, parts of which have been devastated by the fighting.

#### Air strikes

Following the Ankara bombing, the Turkish military launched air strikes on Monday and struck northern Iraq's Qandil mountain area where the PKK's main bases are. The military said 45 PKK militants were believed to have been killed. The strikes by F-16 and F-4 jets destroyed two weapons depots and two Katyusha rocket positions, the military said in a statement. The conflict has also fuelled political tensions, with President Tayyip Erdogan repeat-

edly calling for lawmakers from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to face prosecution, accusing them of being an extension of the PKK.

The PKK, which says it is fighting for autonomy for Kurds, is designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and the European Union. Speaking on Monday evening, Erdogan said the definition of terrorist needed to be broadened to include supporters. "It may be the terrorist who detonates bombs and pulls the trigger, but it is these supporters who enable them to achieve their goals," he said in a speech. "Being an MP, an academic, journalist, writer or civil society group executive does not change the reality of that person being a terrorist," he said. — Reuters



MAFRAQ: Syrian refugee artists paint a mural on a trailer home in the Zaatari Refugee Camp, near. — AP

## A LOOK AT THE COST OF 5-YEAR SYRIA CONFLICT

As the war in Syria enters its sixth year with no clear end in sight, here is a glance on what has been the cost of the war:

#### Dead and wounded

There are no reliably precise statistics on the number of people killed in Syria's war due to an inability to monitor on the ground. According to the UN, over 250,000 people have been killed and well over a million wounded. But officials acknowledge that figure has not been updated in months. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based opposition group that monitors the war, puts the death toll at more than 270,000, while a recent report by the Syrian Center for Policy Research, an independent think tank, said 470,000 deaths have been caused by the conflict, either directly or indirectly.

#### The displaced

Almost half of Syria's prewar population of 23 million has been displaced by the war. The UN refugee agency says there are 6.5 million displaced within Syria and 4.8 million refugees outside Syria. Much of the remaining population is in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The refugees have mostly fled to neighboring countries - Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq - and have flooded Europe, where most arrive after a treacherous sea journey from Turkey.

#### The cities

Historic Aleppo, Syria's largest city and former commercial center, has been devastated. Its ancient souks and the famed Umayyad Mosque complex have been trashed, its 11th century minaret toppled. The city of Homs, Syria's third largest, lies in ruins, entire blocks reduced to rubble or uninhabitable husks of housing. Rebel-held towns around the capital of Damascus such as Jobar, Douma and Harasta are now a vista of collapsed buildings and rubble. A preliminary World Bank-led assessment in six cities in Syria - Aleppo, Daraa, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Latakia - released in January showed an estimated \$3.6-4.5 billion in damage as of the end of 2014.

#### Lost heritage

Almost all of Syria's UNESCO World Heritage sites have been either damaged or destroyed, including Aleppo in the north, the ancient town of Bosra in the south, the Crac des Chevaliers - one of the most important preserved medieval castles in the world - and the Palmyra archaeological site. Some have been damaged by fighting and shelling, others intentionally blown up or pillaged. The Islamic State group, which took control of Palmyra last year, destroyed many of its Roman-era relics, including the 2000-year-old Temple of Bel and the iconic Arch of Triumph. Numerous archaeological sites in Syria are being systematically targeted for excavation by criminals and armed groups. These include the

Apamea archaeological site in Hama, the Tell Merdikh archaeological site in the Idlib region, and the Dura-Europos and Mari sites in Deir el-Zour.

#### Economy

There is no accurate estimate for the economic cost of the ongoing war. A recent report by the charity group World Vision and the consultant group Frontier Economics estimated that the conflict has so far cost Syria \$275 billion in lost growth opportunities - 150 times more than pre-war Syria's health budget. If the conflict ends in 2020, the cost of the conflict will grow to \$1.3 trillion, it estimated. A World Bank report estimates the damage to the capital stock in Syria as of mid-2014 to be \$70-80 billion. The situation has deteriorated greatly since then.

#### The costs to others

Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq have borne the brunt of the economic impact of the war. Already in fragile situations, many of them are facing tremendous budgetary pressure. The World Bank estimates, for instance, that the influx of more than 630,000 Syrian refugees has cost Jordan over \$2.5 billion a year. This amounts to 6 percent of GDP and one-fourth of government's annual revenue. Cash-strapped Lebanon is also stretched to a breaking point and Turkey says it can no longer afford to take in refugees. — AP

## RUSSIA SEEKS TO REASSURE ISRAEL OVER SYRIA PULLOUT

**JERUSALEM:** A Russian diplomat sought to reassure Israel yesterday that its security would not be harmed by the winding down of Moscow's intervention in the Syrian civil war, but Israel's armed forces chief said the ramifications were not yet clear. Israeli officials have privately said Russian forces sent in last year to help Syrian President Bashar Assad turn the tide against a now five-year-old rebellion also served to restrain his anti-Israeli allies - Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia.

Israel was further helped by a hotline to the main Russian airbase at Hmeymim in Syria, which let it continue covert strikes to foil suspected Hezbollah or Iranian operations against it on Syrian turf without fear of accidentally clashing with Moscow. Russia blindsided world powers on Monday by announcing that the main part of its forces in Syria would start to withdraw. Russia's deputy ambassador to Israel on Tuesday described the two countries' Syria coordination as remaining intact.

"We will try to ensure that this (Syria) crisis is resolved, and we will also do everything so that Israel's national security interests are not harmed in the process," the envoy, Alexey Drobinin, told the Ynet news site, without elaborating. In separate remarks to Israel's Army Radio, Drobinin said Russia would maintain its military presence at Hmeymim airbase as well as a Mediterranean naval centre at Tartus. "Israel is a neighboring country. It cannot be indifferent to what is happening in Syria. We take this into account, of course," he said. "We have an ongoing dialogue with the Israeli side on all levels - the military level and diplomatic level."

Israel has occasionally fired across the

Golan Heights in response to spillover shelling or bombed advanced arms it suspected were to be transferred to Assad's Lebanese guerrilla allies, Hezbollah. Past Israeli strikes in Syria killed Syrian troops as well as Hezbollah fighters, according to both countries and the guerrilla group - though the exact number remains unclear. Israeli President Reuven Rivlin was due to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow today. Drobinin said that would be "a very good opportunity to air opinions and provide answers for any questions the Israeli side might have".

Rivlin's role is largely ceremonial. His Russia trip was set before the Syrian withdrawal announcement. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government declined to be drawn on the issue. But the Israeli armed forces chief, Lieutenant-General Gadi Eizencot, told lawmakers Israel had no advance knowledge of Russia's pullback plan, whose impact he deemed hard to gauge. "At this stage, humility and caution are required in trying to understand the vector in which the Syrian theatre will develop with the exit of Russian forces," Eizencot said in the closed-door briefing, according to a parliamentary spokesman.

Eizencot said that the Russian intervention had so far strengthened Assad's position in ceasefire talks with rebels. Israel has voiced doubt about the truce prospects in Syria, which it anticipates will end up partitioned on sectarian lines. Eizencot predicted that the Russian withdrawal would be carried out gradually, but not fully, with Moscow maintaining two bases in Syria while thinning out overall troop deployments. — Reuters

## CHIEF NEGOTIATORS AT SYRIA TALKS ARE POLAR OPPOSITES

**BEIRUT:** One is a seasoned, multi-lingual diplomat, the other a relatively unknown rebel figure and student of Islam: the two men heading rival delegations at Syrian peace talks seem worlds apart. The respective differences between government diplomat Bashar Al-Jaafari and the opposition High Negotiations Committee's chief negotiator Mohammed Alloush in many ways mirror the vast gulf between the two sides at the talks. The pair are in Geneva, Switzerland for the latest UN-brokered talks after the last round collapsed in February.

#### Jaafari: Hawkish diplomat

Jaafari is a tall, silver-haired diplomat who has been Syria's permanent envoy to the United Nations for nearly a decade. For many, he is the public face of a regime that has become an international pariah, lambasted by rights groups and the West. An unequivocal and sharp-tongued defender of the embattled government, he is now tasked with making concessions at the peace talks. "We are here to conduct indirect talks among Syrians without preconditions and without foreign intervention," Jaafari told reporters at the last round of talks. Born in 1956, Jaafari hails from Damascus and belongs to the same Alawite religious minority as President Bashar al-Assad.

He holds degrees in French literature and translation, and a doctorate in political science from the Sorbonne University in Paris. As well as his native Arabic, he is also fluent in English and Persian. Jaafari's first diplomatic posting was in Paris, later moving to positions in New York and Indonesia. Since Syria's conflict began in March 2011 with anti-government protests, Jaafari has repeatedly deflected sharp criticism of Damascus at the UN. He has doggedly rejected allegations of rights abuses by the regime, including accusations of chemical weapons use in 2013 and well-documented starvation in the besieged town of Madaya.

When the leading diplomat railed against the UN's "baseless accusations" in 2014, a Qatari official described him as "delusional". "His myopic and unquestioning analysis of the situation in Syria makes him difficult to engage with and ineffective as an interlocutor," said a UN Security Council diplomat. "His argumentative performances in the Council do little to challenge the perception that he is less of a diplomat and more of a loudspeaker for Assad." And Saudi journalist Mshari al-Zaydi has accused the Syrian ambassador of "complete moral recklessness".

Since March 2014, Jaafari has been restrict-

ed to a 40-kilometre (25 mile) travel radius around New York city where the UN headquarters are based. Jaafari, who is married to an Iranian, wears his thin glasses low on his slender nose and a neatly trimmed goatee. "People in Damascus have nicknamed him 'the lion of diplomacy' for his tough positions against his counterparts from the Gulf," a journalist with years of experience in Damascus said. "He's a ruthless negotiator, and he understands very well what happens backstage at the UN."

#### Alloush: rebel in suit

Jaafari's opposite number Alloush, the HNC's chief negotiator, could hardly be more different. Nearly 15 years younger, he was born in Douma, a besieged town east of Damascus subject to regular government bombardment that has killed hundreds. A Sunni Muslim, Alloush studied Islamic jurisprudence in Saudi Arabia, making him relatively unknown even in his hometown. One Douma resident told AFP that "no one here knows him". Alloush is a leading political member of Jaish al-Islam (the Army of Islam), the most powerful rebel faction in the Eastern Ghouta region where Douma is located.

His prominent role within the HNC has boosted the body's legitimacy among rebels on the ground, who have previously derided the opposition-in-exile as nothing more than suits in hotels. Alloush is the cousin of slain Jaish al-Islam head Zahran Alloush, killed in an air strike claimed by Syria's government in December. An official biography provided by Jaish al-Islam to AFP says Mohammed has years of political-but not fighting-experience in the group. Physically, Alloush is also Jaafari's opposite, sporting a beard on a rosy-cheeked face and a reserved demeanor.

Alloush is new to the corridors of the UN, and his appointment as the HNC's chief negotiator has been controversial. The HNC includes leading former politicians like Riad Hijab, who defected from his post as prime minister in 2012, and Riad Naasan Agha, a former culture minister. Opposition members have criticized Jaish al-Islam for its alleged involvement in kidnapping prominent rights activists in Douma. Some activists speculated that Alloush was chosen to provoke the regime and to "spite Russia because of the death of Zahran Alloush," a rebel source said. "It will also very much embarrass the regime when they sit with him, because for five years they've been saying that Jaish al-Islam are terrorists that shell Damascus-so how can they sit with a terrorist?" he added. — AFP