

## International

# US zeroes in on the shadowy Lebanese playmaker in Iraq

## US offers millions for any details on the 'mysterious man'

**BAGHDAD:** Months after the United States killed a top Iranian general in Baghdad, it has offered millions for any details on the mysterious man filling his boots-Hezbollah power-broker Muhammad Kawtharani. Washington charged last week that Kawtharani had "taken over some of the political coordination of Iran-aligned paramilitary groups" formerly organized by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qasem Soleimani.

In fact, when a US drone strike in January killed Soleimani and others in a small convoy outside the Baghdad airport, the little-known but powerful official from Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement was initially rumored to have died alongside him. It was quickly confirmed that Kawtharani, who has long spearheaded Hezbollah's Iraq policy, was not among those killed in the attack that brought arch enemies Tehran and Washington to the brink of war.

But rumors of his demise only proved his place among the shadowy pro-Iran brokers steering politics in Iraq, the oil-rich but poverty-stricken country torn by unrest since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein. Keen to curb Iran's influence in Iraq, the United States last week announced the reward of up to \$10 million for any details on Kawtharani's activities or associates. The State Department accused him of inheriting part of

Soleimani's role coordinating among pro-Tehran factions that have attacked foreign diplomatic missions and "engaged in wide-spread organized criminal activity".

### 'The conductor'

Washington had first sanctioned Kawtharani as a "terrorist" in 2013 for providing "training, funding, political, and logistical support to Iraqi Shi'a insurgent groups". Born in Iraq in the late 1950s, Kawtharani studied in the holy shrine city of Najaf and is married to an Iraqi woman with whom he has four children. Little is known about his early political work, but his rise to prominence began following the US-led invasion.

"Kawtharani was appointed to head Hezbollah's Iraq file in 2003 and has reported directly to its secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah," said a source close to Hezbollah's senior ranks. In that role, the slender sheikh travelled frequently between Baghdad and Beirut to negotiate with Iraqi figures, particularly during politically turbulent times like government formation and elections.

He was often in the Prime Minister's Guesthouse, an ornate resort in Baghdad hosting officials and foreign dignitaries, in his traditional white turban and black robe. "In that role, he was like a copy of

Soleimani," a senior Iraqi official who met with him several times told AFP, referring to the Iranian general's infamous shuttle diplomacy. Kawtharani fluently speaks Iraqi dialect, which differs markedly from Lebanese Arabic. "He's got a lot of experience and is the only foreigner, after Soleimani, to know the Iraqi political scene inside out," another Hezbollah source said.

Iraqi political expert Hisham Al-Hashemi said Kawtharani wore multiple "hats". "He's the conductor in the Shiite loyalist orchestra," said Hashemi, referring to the collection of Iraqi Shiite parties that see Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as their main reference. As such, he painstakingly builds consensus among Iraq's varying Shiite political and armed factions-but he has also worked on bringing Iraq's Sunnis on board with their traditional Shiite rivals.

### A growing profile

Following the US strike that killed Soleimani and top Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, Kawtharani saw his portfolio balloon further to include coordination with Kurdish parties. "He became responsible for all the political factions," said Hashemi. At the same time, he crafted ties between Iraq and Lebanon, where Hezbollah has strained under financial pressure from US sanctions,

"Kawtharani held sway over Iraqi politicians-so much so that he asked for millions of dollars from Iraq last year to solve Lebanon's financial crisis," a diplomatic source said. The request was made outside the formal state-to-state channels and it was unclear if it was ever processed.

And while a second Iraqi official confirmed Kawtharani made the request, a source close to the sheikh in Beirut denied the overture. The US's renewed spotlight on Kawtharani was worrying, another source close to him said. "Seeking information about him now may be an introduction to a possible attempt at his arrest, or his assassination," the source said. When approached by AFP regarding Kawtharani, numerous Iraqi and Lebanese sources declined to comment on his activities, hinting at fears their information would be used by the US to target him.

Given the backlash the US faced internationally following its assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis-both key officials in their respective countries-the US may target someone with a relatively lower profile. "Assassinating the new Quds Force chief Ismail Qaani isn't among Washington's options right now. That's why they turned to Kawtharani. He's a party official but not a government one," the source said. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Syrian down Israeli missiles

**DAMASCUS:** Syrian air defenses downed Israeli missiles over the ancient city of Palmyra in Homs province on Monday, state media reported. Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes in Syria targeting government troops as well as allied Iranian forces and fighters from Lebanese militant group Hezbollah. "Air defenses confronted an Israeli aggression over Palmyra and intercepted several hostile missiles," SANA said. The missiles were downed before they could hit their targets, it added. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said the targets were "military posts for Iranian militias in the Palmyra desert." The monitor did not report any casualties. Contacted by AFP, an Israeli army spokesperson declined to comment. — AFP

#### Mexico marks deadliest day

**MEXICO CITY:** Mexico has recorded its deadliest day this year, official data showed Monday, with 105 murders the previous day amid the government-imposed quarantine to combat the spread of COVID-19. Sunday's toll exceeded the latest high of 104 people on April 4, 2020, federal data showed. "We are addressing the issue of the coronavirus, but unfortunately we continue to have problems with homicides," President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, known as AMLO, acknowledged Monday in his morning briefing. The data, collected by state prosecutors offices and federal agencies, showed the State of Mexico (center) had the highest number of intentional homicides, with 12; Chihuahua (northwest) with 10, while Mexico City, Guanajuato (center) and Oaxaca (south) reported nine each. — AFP

#### UN slaps sanctions on Miskine

**UNITED NATIONS:** The UN Security Council on Monday imposed sanctions on Central African Republic rebel leader Abdoulaye Miskine, who last year signed a peace agreement between the government and armed groups. Miskine, founder and head of the Democratic Front of the Central African People (FDPC), was offered a government position under the terms of the February 2019 accord. However, in the last report by UN experts monitoring sanctions and an arms embargo imposed in 2013, the self-proclaimed general was mentioned as looking for fighters. Despite the signing of the agreement, Miskine "remains a threat to the peace, stability and security of the CAR," a diplomat said. Miskine had signed the peace agreement in Khartoum between CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadera and the heads of 14 armed groups. — AFP

#### Biden raises \$46.7 million

**WASHINGTON:** US presidential candidate Joe Biden raised more than three times as much money for his campaign than President Donald Trump managed in March, a potential sign of voter enthusiasm for the Democratic challenger. Biden's campaign said on Monday it took in \$46.7 million last month despite the coronavirus health crisis that has disrupted fundraising for US politicians and hit donor finances. It was a record haul for the former vice president and well above the \$13.6 million that Trump's campaign raised, which was a decline from the prior month. Still, Biden is entering the general election contest with a smaller war chest than what Trump, a Republican, has been amassing since 2017, according to disclosures filed by the two campaigns to the Federal Election Commission. Biden ended March with \$26.4 million in the bank, an increase from February but well below Trump's

## Israel's Netanyahu, Gantz agree to form unity government

**JERUSALEM:** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reached a historic deal Monday with one-time rival parliament speaker Benny Gantz to form a unity government, ending the country's worst-ever political crisis. The three-year agreement allows Netanyahu, 70, to stay in office for 18 months, during which he is due to stand trial on corruption charges he has long denied. Gantz, 60, will then take over as premier for the remaining 18 months as Netanyahu bows out after 12 years in office-the longest premiership in Israeli history.

Netanyahu, head of the right-wing Likud party, had squared off against Gantz in three inconclusive elections over the past year, but neither had secured enough support to form a viable governing coalition. As the COVID-19 epidemic intensified following the last election on March 2, calls mounted for them to unite and offer the country a rare period of political calm as it battles an unprecedented health crisis.

"I promised the State of Israel a national emergency government that will act to save the lives and livelihoods of Israeli citizens," Netanyahu tweeted shortly after the deal was announced. Gantz stressed that the deal had prevented "a fourth election." Through the first six months, the government will be defined as an "emergency" body focused

## Sri Lanka falls silent for victims on Easter attacks anniversary

**COLOMBO:** Survivors of last year's devastating Islamist suicide bombings in Sri Lanka held a private anniversary service yesterday because of a coronavirus lockdown as the nation paid tribute with a two-minute silence. The pandemic forced the Roman Catholic leadership to call off elaborate services to honor the 279 people killed at hotels and churches in the Easter Sunday attacks.

Instead, churches across the country rang their bells for five minutes. This was followed by two minutes of silence from 8:45 am - the moment the bombers struck. Even television channels went silent during the tribute. Some survivors attended a closed service at St. Sebastian's church just outside Colombo, which was hit by a bomb. At St. Anthony's church in the capital, residents prayed outside and lit candles near a memorial for the 56 people who perished inside.

On April 21 last year, seven followers of a local

## Seoul plays down report on N Korea leader's health

**SEOUL:** South Korea played down a report yesterday that the North's leader Kim Jong Un was being treated after surgery, as speculation mounted over his absence from a key anniversary. Pyongyang marked the birthday of its late founder, Kim's grandfather Kim Il Sung, on April 15 - by far the most important date in its annual political calendar-but Kim was not seen in attendance. Daily NK, an online media outlet run mostly by North Korean defectors, said Kim had undergone a cardiovascular procedure earlier this month and was recovering at a villa in North Phyongan province.

"Excessive smoking, obesity, and fatigue were the direct causes of Kim's urgent cardiovascular treatment," it cited an unidentified source inside the country as saying. No confirmation of the report was immediately available. But it triggered wide-

spread speculation, with CNN citing a US official saying that Washington was "monitoring intelligence" that Kim was in "grave danger after a surgery". That report did not specify what the intelligence was.

### Power-sharing

The deal evenly splits cabinet posts between Likud and Gantz's centrist Blue and White alliance. Gantz, a former army chief, will officially become "prime minister-designate" when the government is sworn in, stepping down as parliament speaker. Under the deal signed by members of both men's alliances, the speaker's position will then be filled by a Netanyahu loyalist. A key issue in the unity talks was implementation of US President Donald Trump's controversial Middle East peace plan, which gives Israel the green light to annex Jewish Settlements and other territory in the occupied West Bank.

Such annexations would defy international law, and the Trump deal has been rejected by the Palestinians and condemned by much of the international community. The Netanyahu-Gantz deal allows the prime minister "to bring President Trump's statement with regard to the realization of Israeli sovereignty (in parts of the West Bank) to government and Parliament, following due process." Palestinian prime minister Mohammad Shatah on Monday condemned the formation of an "Israeli annexation government," saying it marked the end of the two-state solution.

### Judicial appointments

Following the March election, Israeli President



**COLOMBO:** This combination of pictures shows (right) part of the interior of St Anthony's church during the first anniversary of the Easter Sunday attacks on April 21, 2020 and Sri Lankan security personnel walking past dead bodies covered with blankets amid blast debris at the same church following an explosion on April 21, 2019. — AFP

Muslim radical group went into three churches and three luxury hotels as services and morning buffets were being held and set off explosive vests. The dead included 45 foreigners.

Nearly 600 people survived with serious injuries. "We honor especially all those, who lost their loved ones and those who were injured, for their spirit of magnanimity in not reacting in anger and hatred," said Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, Sri Lanka's Catholic leader in an anniversary message.

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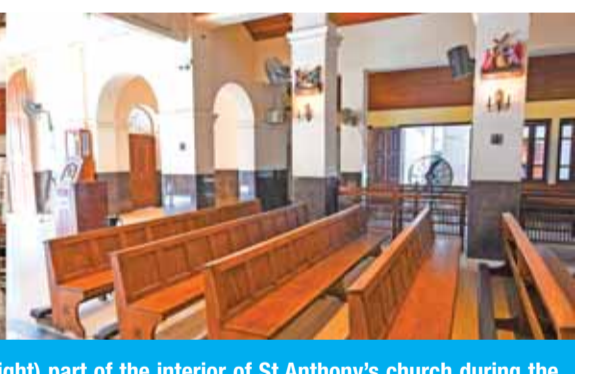
In a statement, a spokesman for the South's presidential Blue House said: "Kim have nothing to confirm and no special movement has been detected inside North Korea as of now." And the South's Yonhap news agency cited an unnamed government official saying that reports Kim was seriously ill were "not true". Previous absences from the public eye on Kim's part have prompted speculation about his health.

In 2014 he dropped out of sight for nearly six weeks before reappearing with a cane. Days later, the South's spy agency said he had undergone surgery to remove a cyst from his ankle. "No-one knows what's going on inside North Korea," said Martyn Williams, who is affiliated with the 38 North research website. "Kim Jong Il had been dead several days before it was announced and it took everyone by surprise," he tweeted. "Kim Jong Un has been 'missing' before, and has always reappeared. That said, his absence this week was more



**TEL AVIV:** This combination of file pictures shows Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (left) and retired Israeli general Benny Gantz in Tel Aviv. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former rival, parliament speaker Benny Gantz, agreed to form an emergency unity government - ending the worst political crisis in the country's history. — AFP

Reuven Rivlin mandated Gantz to form a government. But for a third time, he was unable to forge a coalition because of deep divisions within the anti-Netanyahu bloc. After Gantz's surprise election as speaker, he pledged to seek a deal with Netanyahu, saying the coronavirus pandemic and grinding political deadlock demanded tough compromises. That decision led to high-profile defections from Blue and White. Many had speculated that Netanyahu would capitalize on Gantz's weakened position to take Israel to a fourth election in 18 months. But Monday's deal averted such a poll. — AFP



**SEOUL:** People watch a television news broadcast showing file footage of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, at a railway station in Seoul yesterday. — AFP

Ranjith thanked minority Catholics for not retaliating against Muslims. However, inter-communal riots did erupt three weeks after the attacks. One man was killed and hundreds of homes and vehicles were damaged. The government used emergency powers to prevent a spread of violence. The extremist National Thowtheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State militant group, was held responsible for the bombings. — AFP



**SEOUL:** People watch a television news broadcast showing file footage of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, at a railway station in Seoul yesterday. — AFP

notable." The North Korean leader has not made a public appearance since presiding over a meeting of the Workers' Party politburo on April 11. His powerful sister Kim Yo Jong was named as an alternate politburo member and the meeting called for stronger measures against the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP