

Mohammad Kawtharani: Lebanese Hezbollah's Representative in Iraq

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Mohammad [Hussein](#) Kawtharani is Lebanese Hezbollah's representative in Iraq. Kawtharani assumed greater responsibility in overseeing Iraq's Shia militias since the death of former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. The U.S. Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) Kawtharani in 2013, describing him as the "individual in charge of Hizballah's activities in Iraq."

Kawtharani's family is from the town of al-Ghassaniyyeh in south Lebanon. Some reports state that Kawtharani was born in [Najaf, Iraq](#) while others [suggest](#) he was born in al-Ghassaniyyeh and traveled to Najaf at a young age to pursue religious studies. Kawtharani's [year of birth](#) is similarly in dispute, variously stated as 1945, 1959, and 1961. He also possesses official documentation identifying him by the [name](#) "Jaafar al-Kawtharani" and the [kunya](#) "Abu Zaynab al-Kawtharani." Kawtharani may have also had a son, [Ali Mohammad Kawtharani](#), who died on September 13, 1997 alongside Hassan Nasrallah's son Hadi during a Hezbollah's operation in Jabal al-Rafei. Kawtharani's has also worked alongside his brother, Adnan, who is similarly [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. Treasury Department.

Kawtharani lived in Iraq for decades and holds Iraqi as well as Lebanese citizenship. Students who attended classes with Kawtharani in Najaf's *hawzas* during the 1970s recall that Kawtharani excelled at his religious studies, particularly in the areas of jurisprudence and Islamic history. Kawtharani was a follower of the leading Iraqi cleric Mohammad Baqer al-Sadr and active in the Islamic Da'wa party. He was imprisoned for four years by Saddam Hussein's "[Fifth Department](#)" military intelligence security apparatus for his Da'wa Party activities.

Kawtharani returned to Lebanon after his release from prison and quickly rose through the ranks of Hezbollah while earning the confidence of its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. By 2003, Kawtharani [was](#) a member of Hezbollah's Political Council – a position he held until at least [2016](#). In that role, he was initially tasked with heading the [Cultural Committee](#), which works to foster and sustain the political principles of the party including resistance to any normalization with Israel as well as to American cultural and educational influences.

Kawtharani was later appointed head of the Council's [Islamic Affairs](#) portfolio, and then tasked to head Hezbollah's Iraq affairs portfolio given his experience in the country. In addition to handling the Iraq portfolio overall, Kawtharani also seemingly acted as Hassan Nasrallah's [adviser](#) on [Iraqi](#) affairs and in meetings with Iraqi politicians.

Shortly after the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, Kawtharani traveled to Baghdad to politically organize the country's Shiites. [According](#) to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Hezbollah concurrently deployed its senior operatives Imad Mughniyeh and Mustafa Badreddine to provide military training to the country's nascent Shiite movements. Kawtharani quickly established a relationship with Nouri al-Maliki, which lasted the duration of al-Maliki's premiership from 2008 until 2014. Reports claim that it was Kawtharani who [pushed](#) al-Maliki to call for the removal of all U.S. forces from Iraq as the Americans were negotiating their 2011 withdrawal from the

country. Kawtharani also seemingly had ties to Ahmad al-Chalabi, [eulogizing](#) him upon his death on November 3, 2015.

In August 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) Kawtharani pursuant to E.O. 13224, describing him as a member of the Hezbollah's Political Council and the "individual in charge of Hizballah's activities in Iraq." The designation notice states that Kawtharani worked to promote Hezbollah's interests in Iraq, including furthering Hezbollah's efforts to, "provide training, funding, political, and logistical support to Iraqi Shi'a insurgent groups." The designation also said Kawtharani helped secure the release of [Ali Musa Daqdouq](#), a senior Hezbollah commander responsible for several attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, and assisted in transporting fighters to Syria to support the Assad regime. In November of 2015, Saudi Arabia's Interior Ministry [designated](#) Kawtharani as a terrorist.

Kawtharani continued to play a prominent role in Iraqi politics after al-Maliki's tenure. In 2016, Iran [reportedly](#) tasked Kawtharani to oversee the leadership of its Iraqi Shiite militia proxies. Kawtharani [established](#) ties with the heads of these Shiite militias, particularly Asa'ib Ahlul Haq's Qais al-Khazali and his deputy [Mohammad al-Tabatabaei](#), and Harakat al-Nujaba's Akram al-Kaabi, who frequently visited Kawtharani in Beirut.

Kawtharani also established close ties with Al-Maliki's successor Haidar al-Abadi, despite the latter's apparently strained ties with Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. Kawtharani lobbied aggressively for al-Abadi's nomination to the premiership, [coming](#) into conflict with Hadi al-Amiri in the process. Kawtharani also [supported](#) Kataib al-Imam Ali's Shibl al-Zaydi's backing of Naim al-Rubaye – allegedly a [former](#) Baathist – as Communications Minister.

In [2018](#), Kawtharani traveled to [Baghdad](#) to [meet](#) with the [chieftains](#) of Iran's proxy Shiite militias and aid their efforts to form a new Iraqi government. His task was to reunify the ranks of the pro-Iran alliance headed by Nouri al-Maliki and Hadi al-Amiri and convince Sunnis and Kurds to back the government as well. As part of this task, he reportedly [worked](#) to prevent the dissolution of the Fatah Alliance, comprised of the political arms of pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiite militias. The Alliance had [de facto](#) split into two factions, one Iraqi nationalist and the other loyal to Iran, and Kawtharani was tasked with reconciling the two sides. Iraq's prime minister at the time, Haidar al-Abadi, [backed](#) Kawtharani's efforts to tamp down tensions between commanders of the different PMF militias. Ultimately, al-Abadi was insufficiently aligned with Iran's policies, leading Soleimani and Tehran to organize protests in September 2018, eventually leading to his ouster.

Al-Abadi was ultimately succeeded by Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi. [According](#) to former Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh, Kawtharani began pressuring the new Iraqi premier to appoint cabinet ministers acceptable to Iran and Syria e.g. Faleh al-Fayyad as Interior Minister. Kawtharani reportedly met with Abdul Mahdi in Baghdad to express this desire on behalf of Iran, Hezbollah, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and promised to convince Muqtada al-Sadr and his followers to accept the appointment. Kawtharani also

[reportedly](#) met with the Sunni candidates for the post of Defense Minister and relayed his impressions to Abdul Mahdi.

In [2019](#), Kawtharani once again stepped into Iraqi politics, helping Popular Mobilization Forces militias in their [response](#) to [suppress](#) the anti-government protests in Iraq. Kawtharani worked closely alongside Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani to suppress the protests. Sources claim Soleimani relied on and trusted Kawtharani. He would often request Kawtharani's assistance during crises or meetings in Baghdad.

Ultimately, Abdul Mahdi resigned his post as prime minister despite Iran's objections. Soleimani and Kawtharani quickly scrambled to find a [suitable replacement](#) that was acceptable to all Iraqi factions including [Sunnis](#) and Kurds.

[After](#) Soleimani's death on January 3, 2020, Hezbollah [stepped](#) in to fill the void by [temporarily](#) tasking Kawtharani to coordinate and direct allied Iraqi Shiite militias until a [suitable replacement](#) for Soleimani was found. In this capacity, Kawtharani was [assisted](#) by Soleimani's former aides. Though Kawtharani was formerly based primarily in Beirut – with Iraqi politicians and militant leaders traveling to meet with him there – one source close to Badr Organization's leader Hadi Al-Amiri said that since Soleimani's death Kawtharani was spending more time in Baghdad than in the Lebanese capital. The source added that Kawtharani was now handling all aspects of the Iraqi portfolio including government formation, dispute resolution among the Shiite political factions, and coordinating armed Shiite militias.

According to Kuwaiti [Al-Qabas](#), sources claimed the Iraqi militias were dissatisfied with this new arrangement. Al-Amiri allegedly did not get along with Kawtharani, while other Shiite militia heads likewise expressed displeasure with his decisions.

In one of his first meetings with Shiite faction leaders, allegedly [held](#) in either Beirut or Tehran, Kawtharani reportedly rebuked the leaders for their failure to design a unified plan for dealing with anti-government protesters in Iraq. He also [urged](#) the groups to agree on a candidate for prime minister of Iraq, which [resulted](#) in the brief nomination of Mohammad Tawfik Allaw. Sources claimed that Kawtharani also met with Muqtada al-Sadr to convince him to [back](#) the new Iraqi prime minister, as well as to [mend](#) relations with former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

On April 10, 2020, the U.S. State Department's Rewards for Justice Program [offered](#) up to \$10 million for "information on the activities, networks, and associates of Muhammad Kawtharani," as part of its efforts to "disrupt the financial mechanisms of the terrorist organization Lebanese Hizballah." Echoing the recent reports of Kawtharani's upgraded role in Iraq, the announcement [states](#) that he had "taken over some of the political coordination of Iran-aligned paramilitary groups formerly organized by Qassim Suleimani after Suleimani's death in January."

Conclusion

Kawtharani has been an important figure pushing Iran's agenda in Iraq for decades. His centrality will only increase in the wake of Qassem Soleimani's death. Tehran's proxies in Iraq are far from a cohesive unit. Soleimani was able to tamp down the centrifugal differences between the various Shiite militias through the force of his authority and charisma. Differences between the groups have resurfaced since his death and pose a threat to Tehran's efforts to dictate events in Iraq. Soleimani's successor Esmail Qaani is a respected officer but lacks the force of his predecessor's personality and may prove unable to keep all of Iraq's Shiite forces in line. Kawtharani, however, has spent decades building relations with all of Iraq's various forces including Sunnis and Kurds as well as Shiites. In light of Qaani's weaknesses, Kawtharani's special ties and negotiating abilities will become even more important in preventing Iraq from turning away from Iran.