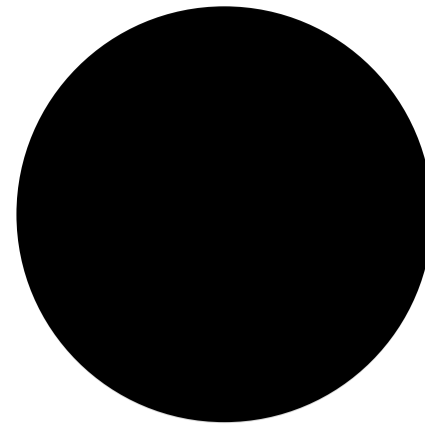




'Hostile' efforts suppressing voter turnout should be confronted:
Leader

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Iran Mourns for Iran

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- *Over 100 killed as twin bombs hit Gen. Soleimani's memorial in Kerman*
- *Gov't declares day of national mourning*



The photo shows the aftermath of a twin terrorist bomb attack in Kerman, Iran, on January 3, 2024.



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SPECIAL ISSUE

Over 100 killed as twin bombs hit Gen. Soleimani's memorial in Kerman

Two terrorist blasts in Iran's southeastern city of Kerman have left at least 103 people dead and 188 more injured during a ceremony marking the fourth martyrdom anniversary of General Qassem Soleimani, according to Iran's Emergency Organization. Today, a national mourning was declared.

The security deputy of the Kerman governor verified the terrorist nature of the explosions. Babak Yektaparast, deputy head of the organization, said that some of the injured were in critical condition.

The explosions occurred near the burial site of martyred Soleimani, where people had flocked to mark the fourth martyrdom anniversary, Press TV reported. According to IRNA, the first explosion occurred some 700 meters from the grave of General Soleimani, and the second one about one kilometer away.

Tasnim news agency cited unnamed sources as saying that two suitcases loaded with explosives, which were remotely detonated, caused the explosions.

The first explosion occurred at 14:50 local time, and the second took place 15 minutes later. Some people were injured during a crowd crush following the first explosion. Officials say all the injured have been transferred to hospitals and the situation is under control.

General Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and their companions were assassinated in a US drone strike authorized by then-US president Donald Trump near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.

Both commanders were highly revered across the Middle East because of their key roles in fighting the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

In less than a week after the attack, Iraqi lawmakers approved a bill that required the government to expel all US-led foreign forces from the country.

The IRGC also targeted the US-run Ain al-Asad base in Iraq's western province of Anbar with a wave of missile attacks in retaliation for the assassination of General Soleimani.



● TASNIM



◀ Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei meets with a group of religious eulogists and elegists in Tehran on January 3, 2024.
● IRNA

'Hostile' efforts suppressing voter turnout should be confronted: *Leader*

National Desk

Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on Wednesday warned against "hostile" efforts aimed at dissuading voters from the ballot box ahead of two looming elections.

Iranians will head to the polls on March 1 to elect new lawmakers as well as members of the Assembly of Experts, a top clerical body that is tasked to choose Iran's leader and oversee his performance.

"Some seek to depress turnout in the elections, which are a testament to the realization of religious democracy, in order to undermine them," Ayatollah Khamenei told a gathering in Tehran. The Leader called for the realities to be reflected by what he called "fight-

ers of enlightenment," urging them to "stand up against this hostile move."

"[Voting in] elections is a duty, and whoever opposes the elections is opposed to the Islamic Republic and Islam," he said.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Ayatollah Khamenei said the border of the Muslim world is in Gaza today; the Palestinians there are standing against arrogance and the United States.

"The border of the Muslim world today is in Gaza, the pulse of the Muslim world beats in Gaza today, and the Palestinians there are standing against the world of disbelief, tyranny, arrogance and the United States," the Leader stated.

The Israeli regime has been waging a devastating war on the Gaza Strip since October, killing at least 22,000

people, most of them children and women. More than 57,000 others have also been wounded.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the Leader said that soft power is more effective than hard power, as the latter has immediate effects, but wanes.

Over the past 44 years, he noted, the Islamic Republic has relied on soft power more than hard power.

"Of course, you know that I believe and follow up on ... advanced weapons that match the capabilities of the enemies. In my opinion, however, intellectual, linguistic and other strong weapons should pervade among us along with hard power."

Ayatollah Khamenei also said world powers such as the United States have atomic bombs and all kinds of advanced arms, but they make in-

vestments in the arts, cinema, and advertising as soft power, Press TV reported.

"Hard power means that the US comes and stays in Afghanistan for 20 years and spends billions. In the end, it is forced to flee from Afghanistan due to the people's hatred [towards it]," he added.

"Hard power means that the US comes and takes over the entire country of Iraq with equipment. It overthrows the Iraqi government and sits in its place. After about 20 years, the most hated government in Iraq is the American government."

The Leader noted that Palestinians have no weapons to defend themselves, but they have today attracted public attention through their patience, innocence and resilience.

Raisi due in Ankara today, regional issues on agenda

National Desk

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is scheduled to visit Ankara today at the invitation of his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in a bid to address pressing regional issues.

While the meeting is expected to

focus on various matters, the war in Gaza remains a key agenda item, reflecting the shared concerns of both nations, hurriyetdailynews.com reported.

The discussions are also anticipated to touch upon the South Caucasus Regional Cooperation Platform. The international body's first foreign

ministerial-level meeting, held in Tehran last October, saw the participation of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, alongside the host, Iran. The next meeting is slated to take place in Turkey this year.

As the neighboring nations share a 560-kilometer border, Turkey is set to reiterate its expectation for Iran

to actively engage in the joint fight against terrorist organizations.

In addition, the eighth meeting of the high-level cooperation council between the two countries is scheduled. The council, established in 2014, last convened in Tehran on July 19, 2022, and aims to enhance collaboration across various sectors.

Offshore rial to be launched in months: *CBI*

Offshore rial will become operational within the next few months to help economic activists to do their transactions with any country in the national currency, announced the deputy governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) for international relations affairs.

The offshore rial will be launched in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan due to the extensive social relations and also the Russian Federation due to the finalization of a bilateral

monetary pact, Mohsen Karimi said, reported Tasnim News Agency.

Since Iran has extensive trade and social relations with Iraq and Afghanistan, the Central Bank of Iran has designed a new mechanism for enhancing bilateral trade and economic activity, he added.

The offshore rial will facilitate the trade exchanges for domestic traders and businesspersons, Karimi emphasized, noting that both importers and exporters

will exchange their products in rial.

The feasibility studies for the launch of this plan started six months ago and it is hoped that this comprehensive plan will become operational within the next few months, the deputy CBI said.

Earlier, CBI Governor Mohammadreza Farzin had said that the country is scheduled to finalize a plan for using offshore rial in exchanges with several neighboring countries by the end of the

current Iranian calendar year (to end March 20, 2024).

Farzin said that this mechanism has been devised for the settlement of exchanges of goods and services which will facilitate trade with countries like Afghanistan and Iraq.

The CBI chief added that offshore currencies are among the tools used by some countries to give a boost to the use of their national currencies in trade and help manage their forex reserves.



Envoy asks Armenia to cut tariffs for Iranian trucks

Zeroing of tolls plays a huge role for truckers to use the territory of Armenia to reach Georgia and the Black Sea, said Iran's ambassador to Armenia Mehdi Sobhan.

Speaking in an interview with the Public Television of Armenia, the diplomat added that it is very important for Iranian

trucks at what price they can transport their cargo to the Black Sea.

According to him, some of the Iranian truckers tends to use Azerbaijan's relatively longer route to reach Georgia and the Black Sea because its tolls and fuel prices are more affordable. "The route passing through

Armenia is shorter. And if we can reduce the customs duties and tolls and come to an understanding on these issues facing [truck] drivers, truck traffic through this route will increase dramatically, Armenia's revenues will increase, and Armenia will become a regional transportation hub.

Iran's eight-month export of aquatics surges 14%

Iran exported 132,000 tons of aquatics in the first eight months of the current Iranian year (from March 21 to November 22, 2023), registering a 14 percent hike compared to the same period last year.

The country exported 116,000 tons of aquatic products over-

seas from March 21 to November 22, 2022, IRNA reported. The report put the value of fisheries exported from the country in the eight-month period at \$235 million, showing a six percent hike compared to last year's corresponding period.

Iran imported \$40 million

worth of aquatics in the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year.

According to the statistics, 70 percent of Iran's fishery products were exported to Iraq (39,000 tons), China (22,000 tons), the United Arab Emirates (21,000 tons) and Russia (10,000 tons).



Museum of the Islamic Era
● IRNA



Iran Bastan Museum
● apochi.com

Embark on a journey through millennia in the National Museum of Iran

Iranica Desk

The National Museum of Iran holds the distinction of being the oldest, most important, largest, and richest museum in Iran. It is divided into two sections: Iran Bastan (Ancient Iran) and the Museum of the Islamic Era. The Iran Bastan section showcases historical objects from the Paleolithic to the Sassanid periods, while the Islamic section displays artifacts from the Islamic era.

Established as the country's first official museum, the National Museum of Iran boasts a foundation of over 20,000 square meters and a total area of 18,000 square meters. It houses an impressive collection of over 300,000 objects from various cultural eras of

Iran, spanning from prehistoric times to the Islamic era.

The idea of establishing a museum in Iran was initially proposed by Sani al-Dawlah during the early years of the Constitutional era. However, it wasn't realized at that time. It was not until the reign of Ahmad Shah Qajar, under the efforts of Morteza Khan Momtaz al-Mamalek, the Minister of Education at the time, when a collection of objects was gathered and kept in a room at Darolfonoon School, under the name of the National Museum. Subsequently, during the first Pahlavi period in 1925, the National Museum was relocated to the Mirror Hall of Masoudieh Mansion in Baharestan Square.

The museum's initial collection in-

cluded items such as 15 carved antiques, 158 pieces of pottery, ceramics, and glass, nine coins, and 54 ancient weapons, guns, helmets, armor, items obtained from archaeological excavations, and donated items from private collectors.

In 1927, the National Consultative Assembly (Parliament) annulled the French monopoly on archaeological excavations in the country and, in exchange, granted them the right to excavate in Susa. Additionally, the government approved the construction of a museum and library, with a French individual appointed as its head for up to five years. Consequently, in that year, André Godard, a renowned French architect, arrived in Iran and, with the assistance of two Iranian ar-

chitects named Hajj Abbasali Memarbashi and Morad Tabrizi, commenced the construction of the National Museum of Iran in the western part of Mashq Square in 1933.

The National Museum of Iran, situated near 30th Tir Street on the north side of Imam Khomeini Street, and west of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, underwent construction beginning in 1933, lasting four years across four phases. The museum, characterized by red brick adornments, takes the form of a horizontal rectangle resting on the ground, comprising three distinct yet interconnected sections.

In the design of the museum's entrance, Godard drew inspiration from the Sassanid Ctesiphon Palace and the renowned Kasra Arch (Taq-e Kasra),

incorporating elements from Iranian architecture such as the arrangement of bricks on the interior surfaces of the porch and its surrounding structures. The entrance features a porch with a crescent-shaped arch, notable for its unconventional absence of typical decorations found in such structures. Flanking the entrance are two two-story buildings housing the library, exhibition halls, and conference halls. Above the door, a marble inscription displays a poem by Mohammad Taqi Bahaar, penned in Thuluth script by Amir Al-Ketab Malik Al-Kalam. The Ancient Iran Museum showcases artifacts from the prehistoric era to the Sassanid period in two sections, spanning prehistoric and historical periods of Iran, across two floors.

First floor

We recommend beginning your museum visit on the first floor, where you will encounter objects from the earliest period of human history, spanning from the Paleolithic era to the end of the fourth millennium BCE, predating the invention of writing. Highlights of this section include stone tools from the Paleolithic era, pottery from significant archaeological sites and regions, human and animal figurines, and a model of the Chogha Zanbil Ziggurat.



Museum of the Islamic Era
● IRNA

Ground floor

After exploring the prehistoric period on the first floor, you will transit into the realm of history and civilization on the ground floor. This section showcases artifacts from the dawn of writing to the end of the Sassanid period, spanning from the end of the fourth millennium BCE to the conclusion of the Sassanid era. Notable objects in this section include the world's oldest animation on a pottery from Shahr-e Sookhteh (the Burnt City), the statue of Darius the Great, and the Salt Man from the Zanjan mine.



Iran Bastan Museum
● apochi.com

Museum of Islamic Era

The Museum of the Islamic Era was originally designed in 1943 by Eugene Aftandilian, in collaboration with Andre Godard as an anthropology museum. However, the building was subsequently repurposed for administrative functions, temporary exhibitions, and conferences. Firstly, the collection of Islamic art was on display on the second floor of the Iran Ancient Museum. However, due to the signifi-

cance of the period, it was later decided to establish an independent museum for that. Following renovations, building enhancements, and artifact transfers, the Islamic Period Museum officially opened in this building in 1996.

Years later, the museum underwent further improvements, including facility expansions, space enhancements, and a review of artifact display methods,

leading to its closure and subsequent reopening in 2005. The design and layout of the Islamic Period Museum draw inspiration from the plan of the Sassanid palace in Bishapur.

From Timurid to Qajar

The first floor of the Museum of the Islamic Era encompasses halls dedicated to the Holy Qur'an, spanning the Timurid, Safavid, Afsharid, Zand, and



Museum of the Islamic Era
● IRNA



Iran Bastan Museum
● apochi.com

Qajar periods. On display are bookbinding and illustrations from the Timurid era, blue and white Chinese ceramics, Safavid brocades, paintings and lacquers from the Zand and Qajar periods, coffeehouse paintings, woodworks, and gold-plated steel mirrors from the Qajar era.

From early Islam to the Ilkhanid period

The second-floor features halls

representing early Islam, the Seljuk and Ilkhanid eras. Notable exhibits include Holy Qur'ans written on deer skin, pottery from Neishabur and Kashan, ancient handwoven fabrics from Rey and Isfahan, glassware from Gorgan, stuccos and brickworks from the Seljuk period, gold-plated vessels and grand mihrabs from the Ilkhanids, and calligraphic manuscripts, along with the Panj Ganj

book of Nizami.

Holy Qur'an Hall

The central space under the main dome on the first floor is dedicated to the Qur'an Hall. Some of the Holy Qur'ans, dating back to the early Islamic centuries, are written on deer skin. An intriguing example is a Qur'an with marginal notes attributed to Imam Ali (PBUH). The Holy Qur'ans in this hall are written in various scripts such as Kufic, Naskh, Reyhan, Mohaqiq, and Thuluth. Additionally, a page from a large and precious Holy Qur'an written by Baysonghor Mirza is displayed, which Nader Shah transferred from Herat to Khorasan, carrying it in front of his army during battles to protect the soldiers.

Facilities

Library: The National Museum of Iran's library, established concurrently with the museum, houses a rich and important collection of books in the field of archaeology and history. It includes handwritten and lithographic books, and lithographic copies of the Holy Qur'an from the Qajar period.

Gallery: A handicraft gallery is situated within the National Museum of Iran, offering visitors the opportunity to view and purchase items after touring the museum.

Café: Following an exploration of Iranian history in the museum, visitors can enjoy a cup of tea or coffee in the café at the National Museum of Iran.

Gen. Soleimani: A man of battlefield and diplomacy



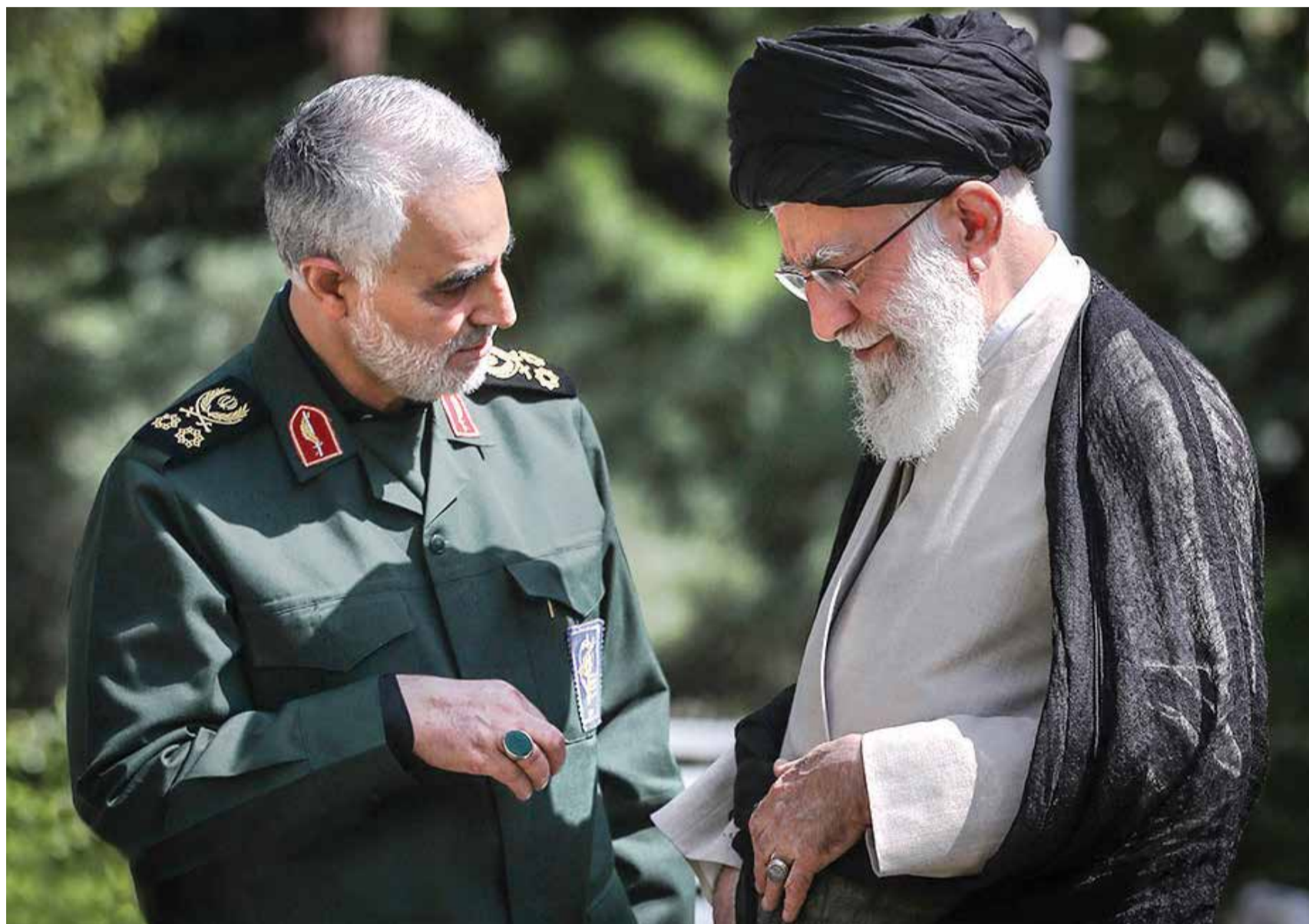
By Sadeq Dehqan
Staff writer

Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of the Quds Force and the primary administrator of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' military operations abroad, is a prominent figure on the global stage. He led the operation to liberate Al-Bukamal city in Syria, the last stronghold of ISIS, which marked the decisive blow to the terror group, effectively ending its rule.

Today, it is rare to find people in the international community who are unfamiliar with the name of Gen. Soleimani. His valor and bravery in combating terrorist groups, particularly his pivotal role in uprooting ISIS and other extremist factions, have garnered widespread recognition and admiration.

Within Iran and the countries comprising the Resistance Front, the esteemed commander of the IRGC enjoys immense popularity. His standing among high-ranking officials and the Iranian people is so profound that the indelible image of tears shed by Iran's Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei while praying over Gen. Soleimani's body, followed by million-strong funerals held for him across Iran, remains etched in memory.

Conversely, Gen. Soleimani has left an inefaceable mark on terrorist groups and their supporters in the region, including the occupied territories of Palestine. His unparalleled fearlessness and indomitable spirit in battling extremist organizations continue to evoke trepidation among their supporters. Even after his assassination at the hands of the United States, depictions of Soleimani are met with intolerance by some of his opponents in political arenas and even sporting events. Despite being one of Iran's senior military commanders and overseeing major operations on the international stage, Gen. Soleimani's face and name remained unknown to many within Iran for a considerable period. Consequently, he was often referred to as the "Shadow Commander" in Western media.



A leading figure in diplomacy

The issue that continues to raise questions for many pertains to the sudden transformation of Gen. Soleimani from an enigmatic figure, who deliberately maintained a sense of anonymity for an extended period, into a widely known personality.

Morteza Mahmoudvand, a member of the Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee (NSFPC), who himself has a military background, shed light on this matter in an interview with Iran Daily.

Mahmoudvand said that despite his extraordinary stature, Gen. Soleimani humbly identified himself as a "soldier" of the nation.

"There are numerous soldiers akin to Gen. Soleimani whose identities remain unknown to the masses. The exposure of Gen. Soleimani to the public and the international community can be attributed to the delicate regional political and security landscape, particularly the Arab Spring and the ensuing military conflicts in Syria and Iraq. These circumstances required the appearance of Gen. Soleimani's image in the media," the lawmaker said.

"It was during this period that terrorist

groups and military forces from both the East and West infiltrated the region, waging a large-scale war. Given Gen. Soleimani's versatile prowess, encompassing both military genius and diplomatic finesse, his involvement in diplomacy became imperative. Consequently, his presence in front of cameras became indispensable," he added.

Regarding Soleimani's popularity in Iraq and other countries, Mahmoudvand expounded on the crucial factor that set him apart in the eyes of free-thinking nations.

"Gen. Soleimani's compassionate and benevolent manner toward various social strata played a key role. For instance, when ISIS subjected Yazidi women, children, and girls to physical and sexual violence in Iraqi Kurdistan, Gen. Soleimani, despite the absence of a historical connection between Islam and the Yazidi religion, empathetically responded by shedding tears and providing immediate assistance. This remarkable display of humanity epitomized his character."

Mahmoudvand pointed to the efforts of Gen. Soleimani's adversaries, both domestic and foreign, to tarnish his image even

after his assassination. "The enemies, recognizing the significance of a national hero to a nation's strength, seek to exploit his legacy for their own gain, thereby distorting Gen. Soleimani's personality."

He dismissed the notion that Gen. Soleimani's military services solely benefited the Resistance Front and Iran. The legislator emphasized how the top general played a pivotal role in countering ISIS.

"Long before its ultimate defeat, Gen. Soleimani relentlessly combated the ISIS reign of terror, thwarting their terrorist acts in multiple European countries. In doing so, he rendered an invaluable service to the global community including European nations," the lawmaker said.

When questioned about the Western powers' inability to eradicate ISIS independently, Mahmoudvand responded by highlighting their inabilities.

"Despite the collective efforts of the United States, the entire Western world, and even assistance from the Eastern Bloc and Russia, they failed to move forward. It was a military branch of our armed forces that brought the terrorists to their knees," he said.

Iran's security is intact after Soleimani's loss

Western powers were never lacking in military equipment but, ultimately, courage was the decisive factor on the battlefield. It is through courage that weapons are effectively employed.

The distinguishing characteristic of the Iranian armed forces lies in their gallantry, as exemplified during the Iraqi war against Iran in the 1980s. "Iran has numerous soldiers similar

to Gen. Soleimani and, thus, his absence has not caused any disruption to the authority and security within the Islamic Republic," Mahmoudvand said.



The Syrian war, one of the most intricate conflicts in history, involved numerous Western and international military forces. Yet, despite their advanced weaponry, none of them achieved significant results. It was the military genius of Gen. Soleimani that ultimately led to the decisive defeat of ISIS.

A figure that fostered national unity



Moinoddin Saeedi, a representative of Sistan and Baluchestan Province in Iran's Parliament, told Iran Daily that Gen. Soleimani was once appointed to serve in the southeastern region where he managed to enhance security through an approach characterized by "maximum attraction and minimum rejection".

Saeedi said such an approach encouraged many militants causing insecurity in the volatile region to put down their guns and return "to the arms of the nation".

The lawmaker emphasized that Gen. Soleimani's impact extended beyond the military and security realms.

"His inclusive perspective, which refrained from dividing people into different factions, engendered a sense of harmony and empathy within society. This sentiment is evident in his speech, where he referred to even the girls avoiding the Muslim veil as being part of our own family. As a result, Gen. Soleimani emerged not only as a hero in the fight against terrorism but also as a national figure revered across all segments of society," Saeedi pointed out.

"He presented himself as a devoted servant of the people, a sentiment that resonated deeply, drawing great love and admiration. The massive turnout at his funeral is a testament to this widespread sentiment."

The lawmaker noted that even after his assassination, Gen. Soleimani's influence remains potent.

"His martyrdom served to unify the resistance movement and garnered the sympathy of people from all walks of life."

Gen. Soleimani's attachment to society



Mahmoud Abbaszadeh, a lawmaker also sitting in the NSFPF, said Gen. Soleimani had remarkable personality traits.

"Not only was he a strong battlefield commander, but he also demonstrated abilities as a skilled diplomat. It is due to these exceptional characteristics that he was assigned to deal with complex international arenas. The Syrian war, one of the most intricate conflicts in history, involved numerous Western and international military forces. Yet, despite their advanced weaponry, none of them achieved significant results. It was the military genius of Gen. Soleimani that ultimately led to the decisive defeat of ISIS," Abbaszadeh said.

According to the lawmaker, another aspect of Gen. Soleimani's character was his attachment to the realities of society.

"He paid close attention to various segments of society... His realistic outlook on societal issues permeated his military approach, as he displayed pragmatism and calculated strategies in defense and combat operations. Indeed, his military genius was undoubtedly influenced by his pragmatic perspective."

Abbaszadeh said Gen. Soleimani's refusal to pursue political power demonstrated his commitment to being a true warrior.

"Despite his widespread popularity among the people, he declined a potential candidacy in the 2021 presidential elections. Gen. Soleimani said that as long as his performance in his current position was satisfactory to the Leader, he would not seek any other capacity. This aspect of his character reflected his dedication to his role and his focus on fulfilling his responsibilities," he said.

The lawmaker said the slain general left a lasting impact overseas as he "established a school" that trained many individuals, both in the military and political spheres.

"Gen. Soleimani's followers and successors carry the weight of his experience, further contributing to the ongoing legacy he left behind," Abbaszadeh said.



He presented himself as a devoted servant of the people, a sentiment that resonated deeply, drawing great love and admiration.



United in talks over Sancho loan to Dortmund



● GETTY IMAGES.

THE GUARDIAN – Manchester United and Borussia Dortmund are in negotiations over a deal for Jadon Sancho to return to the Bundesliga club on loan. The winger is keen on the move after more than four months without a game.

Talks centre on a loan fee and salary coverage, with only a temporary transfer fee for Dortmund, who sold Sancho to United for an initial £73m in July 2021. Sancho has not played since he effectively called Erik ten Hag a liar in early September. United's manager has demanded an apology from the 23-year-old and ostracised him from the first-team squad. When Sancho was left out for the 3-1 defeat at Arsenal, Ten Hag said it was because the England international had not met the standards required in training. Soon after, Sancho posted on social media that the explanation was "completely untrue". He claimed he was being made a scapegoat.

Sancho believes Dortmund would be an ideal environment to find his best form again. He thrived there in the three seasons before his transfer to United and left after scoring 50 goals and providing 64 assists in 137 appearances. Dortmund, fifth in the Bundesliga, have made Sancho and a left-back their priority January targets.

Sancho, who has been training with United's under-18s, made three substitute appearances in August before his fallout with Ten Hag.

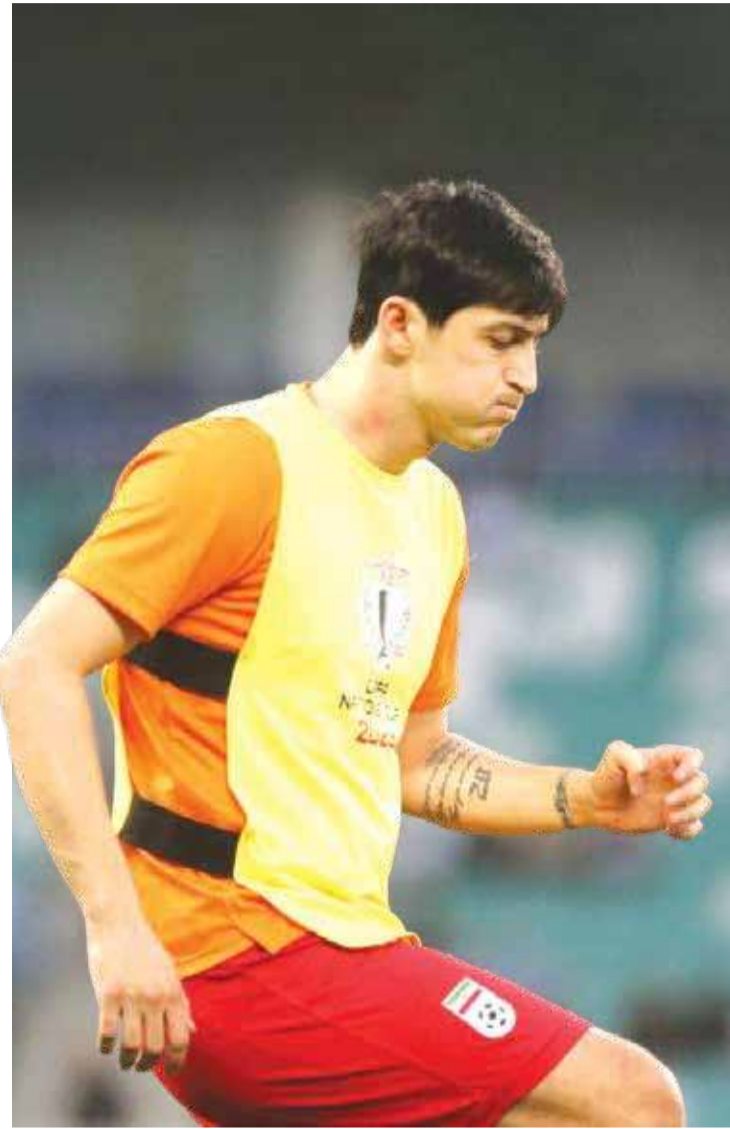
Meanwhile, Sergio Reguilón will return to Tottenham after Manchester United exercised a break clause in his loan deal. The 27-year-old Spanish left-back made 12 appearances for United after joining in September after injuries to Luke Shaw and Tyrell Malacia.

United have chosen to cut short the deal with Shaw having returned to action, although he is out with a slight injury, and Malacia nearing a comeback.

With United eliminated from European competition and the Carabao Cup, it was felt there would be fewer opportunities for Reguilón to feature in the second half of the season. He has only played for United this season, so could play for another club if he left Spurs during the January window.

Tottenham are looking to strengthen their defence and have stepped up their pursuit of a centre-back by opening talks with Genoa over the signing of Radu Dragusin.

Iran pinning hopes on deadly duo to end Asian Cup drought



● FFIRI



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

Having always felt hard done by to see his previous spell on the national team bench come to a premature end in the 2007 AFC Asian Cup, courtesy of a last-eight shootout

setback against South Korea, Iran head coach Amir Qalenoeei will hope to steer his team to glory in the continent's flagship international event this time around.

To that end, the Iranian will be craving to have his strike force of Sardar Azmoun and Mahdi Taremi at

their best over the course of four weeks when the three-time champion begins the quest for a first title since last lifting the trophy on home soil in 1976 on January 14 – against Palestine in Group C.

Both strikers have endured a rather mediocre campaign in their clubs so far

this season, but their contribution on the international level has been second to none during Qalenoeei's 10-month second stint, as has been the case since the two first formed the partnership nine years ago.

Azmoun has found the net only once in 13 cameo appearances for AS Roma

in Serie A after joining the Italian club on a season-long loan deal from Leverkusen in the summer, while bagging eight goals and four assists in seven matches for Iran – starting with a strike and a couple of assists against Afghanistan in June's CAFA Nations Cup.

Azmoun has proved to be an integral part of Qalenoeei's tactical plans, so much so that the Iranian Football Federation had to negotiate with the Giallorossi's sporting director Tiago Pinto to convince him to release the striker for the international duty after next Sunday's top-flight game against Atalanta, despite a clause in his contract keeping him from Asian Cup participation.

Meanwhile, Taremi stepped into the ongoing season on the back of a remarkable 31 goals and 14 assists in the 2022/23 campaign for Porto – including 22 goals that saw him finish as the leading marksman of the Portuguese league.

With his preseason dominated by the Milan transfer saga, the Iranian talisman has only managed six goals and four assists in 23 matches across all competitions for the Dragons since July, though it has been business as usual for him when wearing the national team shirt, as he has netted 12 goals – providing three for his teammates – in 11 outings.

Last time Azmoun and Taremi combined in an international tournament in Qatar the final outcome turned out to be one to forget as a defeat against USA saw Iran exit the 2022 World Cup in the group stage.

Fourteen months on, the two will again lead the line for Iran in Qatar, hoping to inspire the team to walk away with the ultimate prize, come the final showpiece in Doha's Lusail Stadium on February 10.

Curry scores 36 points to lead Warriors past Magic

AP – Stephen Curry scored 36 points and delivered on key plays in the fourth quarter to help the Golden State Warriors snap a three-game losing streak with a 121-115 victory over the Orlando Magic on Tuesday night.

Curry scored or set up 13 straight Warriors points in a four-minute stretch late in the fourth quarter that proved to be the difference.

"Steph was amazing," coach Steve Kerr said. "But Steph is always amazing. Even when he doesn't score 36 points, just the attention he draws defensively, what he does to an opposing defense, the way he opens up the floor, he's a remarkable player. He really got himself going on a night when we needed it."

Jonathan Kuminga added 19 points and Klay Thompson scored 15 for the Warriors, who got their first win in three tries on a season-high, seven-game homestand. Paolo Banchero had 27 points and 12 rebounds



● LOREN ELLIOTT/AP

for Orlando, while Franz Wagner added 25 points. The Magic have lost their first two games on a four-game road trip. Curry hit two 3-pointers

and assisted on two other baskets during a flurry midway through the third quarter that helped the Warriors build a small lead that the Magic were

able to erase when he went bench for his second-half rest. But Curry then took over down the stretch after returning with 8:33 to play.

He scored on a drive to put Golden State up 101-97 and then hit a step-back 3-pointer on the next possession to make 104-97. Curry added assists on

back-to-back baskets by Thompson and Kuminga to make it 110-101 with 2:29 to play and the Warriors held on from there.

"They have an elite shot maker and Hall of Fame player in Steph Curry," Magic coach Jamahl Mosley said. "That's what we got."

The first half ended with excitement as Curry converted on a four-point play with 3.5 seconds remaining to put Golden State up 55-52. Gary Harris answered with a 3 at the buzzer to tie the game for Orlando.

The Warriors improved to 9-9 this season without suspended forward Draymond Green, who has missed the last 10 games for an indefinite suspension for hitting Phoenix center Jusuf Nurkic in the face. Kerr said before the game that he has been texting with Green but hasn't seen him in the team facility and has no date of a possible return.

"We've been giving him his space, he's been giving us ours," Kerr said.

Hamas deputy leader assassinated in Lebanon



Saleh al-Aroui
● AFP

International Desk
The deputy leader of the Palestinian resistance group Hamas Saleh al-Aroui was assassinated in a drone attack in Lebanon's capital, which is widely assumed to be carried out by Israel. Israel has neither confirmed nor denied that it killed Saleh

al-Aroui on Tuesday, who was the political number two of Hamas and one of the founders of the resistance group's military wing. Israel kept bombing Gaza on Wednesday after the army warned it is ready for "any scenario" following the assassination of Aroui and six other fighters.

Amid the almost three-month-old war, Israel has traded almost daily cross-border fire with the Lebanese resistance group Hezbollah while so far avoiding a full-scale war. Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi in a statement said the Israel's terrorist act is a clear sign of regime's desperate and ignominious failure in the Hamas's

Operation Al-Aqsa Storm. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian also condemned the "cowardly" Beirut strike and said it proved that Israel "has not achieved any of its goals after weeks of war crimes, genocide and destruction in Gaza and the West Bank of Palestine, despite the direct support of the White House".



Municipal workers clean the street by the building that was hit by a strike blaming on Israel targeting Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Aroui in the southern suburb of Beirut on January 3, 2024.
● ANWAR AMRO /AFP

UN worries

Following Aroui's killing, the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon said it was deeply concerned about the possibility of an escalation "that could have devastating consequences for people on both sides of the border". Saleh al-Aroui played a key

role in building up the Palestinian group's military capabilities and its links with regional allies. Aroui, 57, was one of the founders of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, in the early 1990s.

Living in exile

Born in the village of Arura, near Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, Aroui joined the Muslim Brotherhood movement as a young man. He became a member of Hamas when the group was founded in 1987 by the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. He was detained several times in the early 1990s, and in 1992 was sentenced to 15 years in jail on charges of forming the first cells of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades in the West Bank. He was released in 2007, but detained again three months

later until 2010 when he was freed on condition that he go into exile. Aroui was then sent to Syria, where he remained for three years before relocating to Lebanon. Following his release in 2010, Aroui was appointed as a member of Hamas's political arm and was on the negotiating team that secured a prisoner exchange involving French-Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in 2011, along with Egyptian mediators. On October 9, 2017, Hamas announced the election of Aroui as deputy head of its political arm.

Israel's terror machine

Amir-Abdollahian stressed that the regime's terror machine is a "real threat" to regional peace and security. Hezbollah vowed Aroui's killing would not go unpunished and labelled it "a serious assault on Lebanon... and a dangerous development". Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati charged that the killing "aims to draw Lebanon" deeper into the war, while French President Emmanuel Macron urged Israel to "avoid any escalatory attitude, particularly in Lebanon".

In the West Bank - the Palestinian territory where Aroui was born - the Palestinian Authority called a general strike to mourn his death. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh also condemned the killing and warned of its "risks and consequences". French President Emmanuel Macron called on Israel to avoid escalation, "particularly in Lebanon", the Elysee Palace said Tuesday. Macron, who spoke by telephone with Israeli minister and war cabinet member Benny

Gantz, said "it was essential to avoid any escalatory attitude, particularly in Lebanon, and that France would continue to pass on these messages to all players directly or indirectly involved in the area", the presidency said. Israel regularly carries out strikes against the Hezbollah movement along Lebanon border, but Aroui's killing was the first time since the start of the war in Gaza that it has targeted the Lebanese capital. The assassination was a further sign that the war in Gaza was spreading across the region,

drawing in the occupied West Bank, Hezbollah forces on the Lebanon border, and even Red Sea shipping lanes. Hamas politburo member Hosam Badran said in a eulogy for Aroui: "We say to the criminal occupation (Israel) that the battle between us is open." Israel had long accused him of orchestrating attacks on its citizens. But a Hamas official said he was also "at the heart of negotiations" conducted by Qatar and Egypt over the outcome of the Gaza war and the release of Hamas-held Israeli captives.

EU's Borrell urges world to impose solution to Gaza conflict

Social Desk

Israel kept bombing Gaza on Wednesday, killing more Palestinians in the Palestinian territory as EU's Borrell urged world to 'impose' solution to the conflict. The Israeli armed forces again bombed Gaza targets overnight, including in the crowded south-

ern city of Rafah where eyewitnesses said survivors flocked to Al-Najjar Hospital to mourn the dead, including a child. The health ministry in Gaza said Wednesday at least 22,313 people have been killed in nearly three months of Israel's onslaught. The toll includes 128 people

killed over the past 24 hours, a ministry statement said, while the fighting since October 7 has also wounded 57,296. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the international community had to "impose" a solution to the conflict. "What we have learned over the last 30 years, and what we are

learning now with the tragedy experienced in Gaza, is that the solution must be imposed from outside," Borrell told diplomats in Portugal. "Peace will only be achieved in a lasting manner if the international community gets involved intensely to achieve it and imposes a solution," he said. Borrell warned that a strike in Beirut on Tuesday that killed a senior Hamas leader was "an additional factor that can cause an escalation of the conflict".



● AFP

care must be protected, at all times, under international humanitarian law," Tedros said. "Today's bombardments are unconscionable. Gaza's health system is already on its knees, with health and aid workers continuously stymied in their efforts to save lives due to the hostilities."

'Provocative' comments

Meanwhile, France on Wednesday described as "provocative" comments made by far-right Israeli ministers calling for Palestinians to emigrate from Gaza and Jewish settlers to return to the besieged territory. "France condemns the comments of Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir," the French foreign ministry said in a statement. Ben-Gvir on Monday called for promoting "a solution to encourage the emigration of Gaza's

residents" and the re-establishment of Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip. His comments came the day after Smotrich also called for the return of settlers to Gaza, adding that Israel should "encourage" the territory's approximately 2.4 million Palestinians to leave. The United States on Tuesday also denounced the ministers' controversial comments as "inflammatory and irresponsible". The Israeli minister Ben-Gvir hit back at the US over its criticism. "The United States is our best friend, but first of all we will do what is best for the State of Israel: the migration of hundreds of thousands from Gaza will allow the (Israeli) residents of the envelope to return home and live in security and will protect the IDF (Israeli) soldiers," the extreme-right minister posted on X late Tuesday.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



'Art for Freedom' unites musicians from 20 countries to support Gaza

Arts & Culture Desk

IRNA - In an innovative initiative to raise awareness about the historic events in Gaza and strengthen the resilience of the Palestinian people against Zionist aggression, the first 'Art for Freedom' festival is set to take place in Tehran from February 20 to 25, 2024. Organized under revolutionary and anti-imperialist themes, the festival will showcase performances by artists affiliated with resistance groups.

Keyvan Amjadian, the festival's director, highlighted the urgency of bringing the global community closer to the struggle of the Palestinian people in the face of Zionist atrocities, coinciding with the birth anniversary of Imam Mahdi in mid-Sha'ban, the 15th day of the eighth lunar month (Feb. 25).

Participating groups in singing, choir, and folklore, known for their steadfastness against Western dominance, will present their performances.

Among the countries competing in the festival are South Africa, Algeria, Uganda, Indonesia, Belarus, Yemen, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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Iran sells rights of 'The Lion Skin' to India, Russia



Arts & Culture Desk

Ali Sartipi, a film producer and CEO of FilmNet, said that the rights of the recently produced Iranian series 'The Lion Skin' were sold to India and Russia.

The rights were sold on the sidelines of the sec-

ond national exhibition of Iran's comprehensive audio and video media (Raseta), held from January 1 to 3, ISNA wrote.

He said that the time has come for the exhibition to be recognized in the international arena, considering the internationalization of the exhibition as a

gateway to new opportunities for global collaboration. Sartipi expressed optimism about the potential for joint activities and exports, emphasizing collaboration with international entities.

He said, "We are witnessing positive developments in this field. The interna-

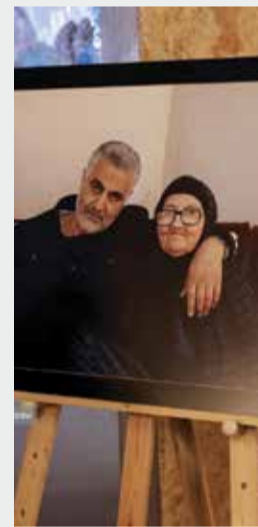
tional demand for series like 'The Lion Skin,' especially in countries like India and Russia, indicates the readiness for the exhibition to become global." Discussing the importance of collaboration, Sartipi emphasized the need for platforms to improve.

He stated, "When plat-

forms collaborate, and there is a supportive working environment, positive things happen. Our goal is to stimulate the job market within the platform domain. Despite challenges, we, like other platforms, work with determination and overcome obstacles through

interaction and communication."

Sartipi acknowledged that positive interactions have elevated the level of television production. However, he highlighted the high expectations of today's audience, emphasizing the daily pursuit of higher quality.



A symphony entitled, 'When Comrades Start Prayers,' one of the biggest artistic works produced about the personality of Lt. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, was performed on Jan. 2, 2024, in Tehran's Vahdat Hall. The event was attended by Iranian Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad-Mehdi Esmaeili and the martyr's family.
● MARZIEH MOUSAVI/IRNA

Universal overtakes Disney as highest-grossing studio at 2023 box office

Thanks to Mario, J. Robert Oppenheimer and M3GAN, Universal Pictures ranked as the highest-grossing studio at the 2023 box office. The company's slate — a range of 24 films that included 'The Super Mario Bros. Movie,' 'Oppenheimer' and 'M3GAN' — collected \$4.907 billion in worldwide ticket sales. Universal's victory is notable because it marks the first time since 2015 that Disney was not the global box office leader, Variety reported.

Disney slid to second place in terms of market share as its 17 new films, 'Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3,' 'Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny' and 'The Little Mermaid' among them, raked in \$4.827 billion globally. In a note to press, the studio partially attributed the \$80 million difference

to the fact that Disney released seven fewer movies than Universal in 2023. It also went on to stress that Disney had the most titles of any studio in the top 10 this year, with four of the highest-grossing global releases and three of the biggest domestic releases. But for the first time in a long time, Disney didn't have one of the top three movies — those spots belong to Warner Bros.' 'Barbie' (\$1.4 billion) and Universal's 'The Super Mario Bros. Movie' (\$1.3 billion) and 'Oppenheimer' (\$950 million). It's also the first time since 2014 (except for the pandemic-stricken 2020 and 2021) that none of Disney's movies crossed the \$1 billion benchmark. Disney indeed remains a box office powerhouse, but the reality is that most of the studio's 2023 tentpoles failed to live up to



expectations. 'Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3' (\$845 million) was the only clear triumph. Otherwise, a string of underperforming sequels and remakes ('Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania,' 'The Marvels'

and 'Haunted Mansion,' to name a few) resulted in the studio ceding the box office crown to Universal. It should be noted that many of Disney's modest wins or even outright flops would be classified

as smash successes for its rivals. The problem is that Disney movies are hugely expensive — typically carrying production budgets of \$200 million to \$250 million — so they have high bars to clear in terms

of profitability. So while 'Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania' ranked as the 10th-highest grossing movie of the year with \$476 million, it still ended up losing money for the studio in its theatrical run. Universal endured a few misfires as well, but none were as painful. The vampire comedy 'Renfield' limped to \$26 million globally, 'Book Club: The Next Chapter' failed to reach \$30 million worldwide (the first film hit \$100 million in 2018) and the animated 'Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken' barely hit \$45 million. Although 'Fast X' cost \$340 million and barely broke even, the film grossed \$704 million, enough to stand as the fifth-biggest movie of the year. While Universal and Disney were closely gunning for No. 1, they were punch-

ing far above the rest. Warner Bros. landed in a distant third place with \$3.84 billion globally — led by 'Barbie,' 'The Nun II' and 'Wonka.'

Sony and Paramount haven't reported final grosses for 2023, but each studio reportedly brought in \$2 billion globally to round out the top five. With 'Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse,' the Denzel Washington threequel 'Equalizer 3' and Ridley Scott's 'Napoleon' among its 2023 lineup, Sony has a slight edge with an estimated \$2.09 billion worldwide.

Paramount, whose major releases were 'Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One,' 'Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves' and 'PAW Patrol: The Mighty Movie,' ended the year with an estimated \$2.03 billion globally.