

Iraqi political candidates have 'real appetite' to work together – UN official

Politicians in Iraq are working constructively with each other ahead of this month's parliamentary elections, a senior United Nations official said.

"Elections by their nature are adversarial," Alice Walpole, one of the top officials at the UN mission in Iraq, told *UN News*. "One of the challenges in a place like Iraq is to avoid falling back to sectarian hostilities in the run-up to the elections."

The more than 6,000 candidates vying for some 300 seats in the Parliament have been asked to sign and abide by a code of conduct. The two-page document stipulates that politicians and their parties will avoid hate speech and incitement to violence, and contribute to a peaceful atmosphere.

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The positive engagement among politicians is one of the key differences that Ms. Walpole, a [Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Iraq](#), sees between now and when she first began working in Iraq in 2009.

"I detect among politicians a real appetite to move forward and to work for Iraq and to work constructively," she said.

The elections will be the first held since the Government declared victory over the Islamic State or Daesh. In a televised address in December, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced that more than three years of combat operations drove out the extremists from the territory they once held, and that Iraqi forces were in full control of the country's border.

The Government has focused on returning thousands of the two million people displaced since the start of the 2014 crisis back home before the polls.

This is particularly important, she noted, for all the people who lived under Daesh for a few years, whose voices were completely lost.

"I think it's really important to enfranchise them so that they get the chance now to say what they want, and people are very conscious that the Government they vote in now will shape the future of the country."

Ms. Walpole disagrees with those who say that holding elections in present-day Iraq is not possible and have called for a delay.

She points to an officially approved timeframe for the Parliament to end and a new one to begin: "It is possible to hold elections when you have a large proportion of your population displaced but you have to put other measures in place."

Those include reaching as many of the displaced Iraqis to encourage them to register to vote.

The voting group includes a high number of youth. Since the last elections in 2014, about four million young Iraqis reached the voting age.

Getting them registered and voting is one of the aims of the Deputy Special Representative and the UN mission in Iraq ([UNAMI](#)), which is providing technical advice to the Government and the Independent Electoral Commission overseeing the elections.

"I think if you encourage people to vote when they're young and they get into the habit of doing it, then they vote all through their lives," Ms. Walpole said.

She noted that the UN has a credibility and a legitimacy in Iraq that it does not enjoy in all countries.

"We're not doing the elections; the Electoral Commission is, and we're advising and supporting. But the fact that we're identified with the elections is giving them credibility and giving people confidence to engage."