

Iraq's young voters ponder how to effect meaningful change

Sat, 2021-10-09 22:31

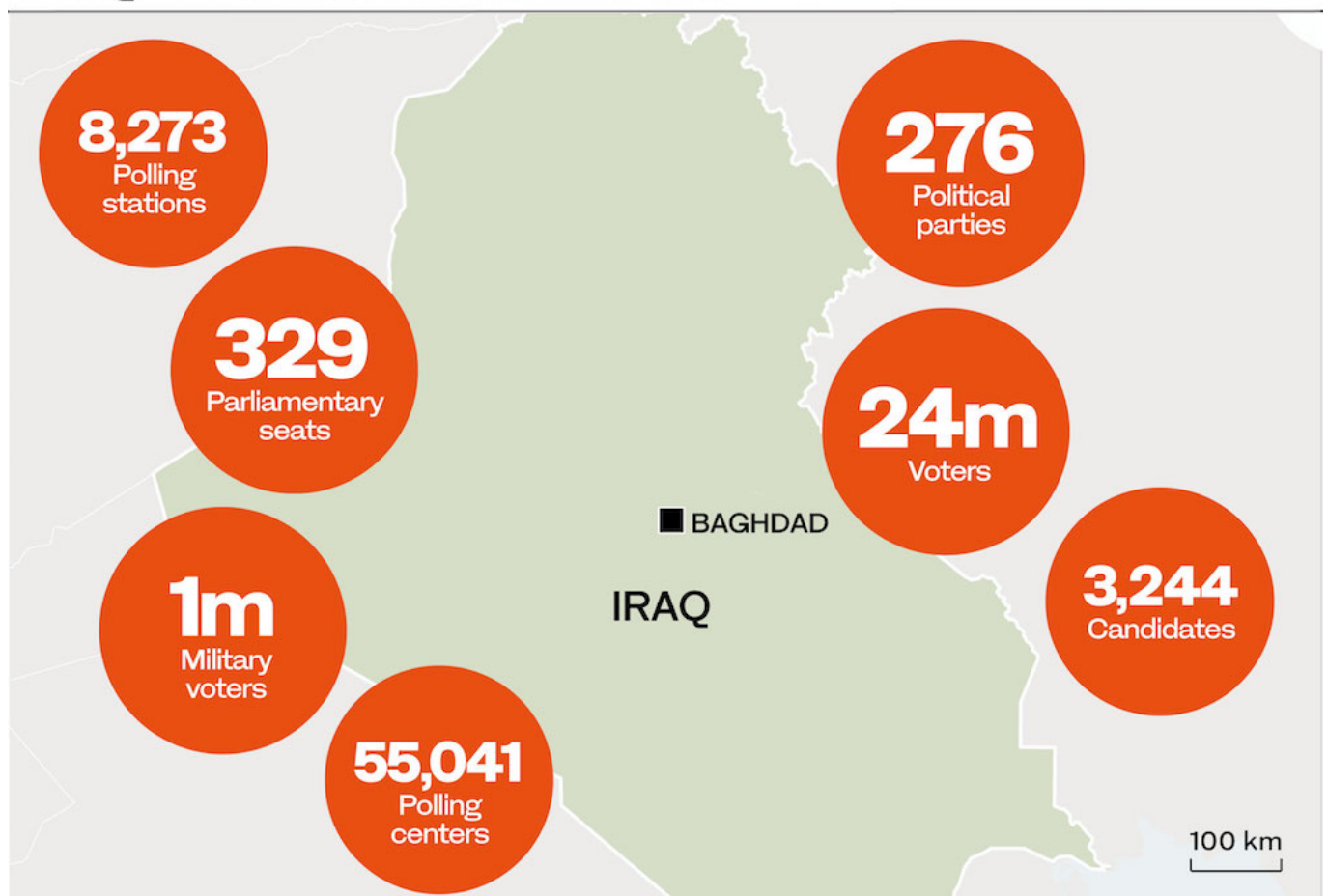
BAGHDAD, Iraq / BOGOTA, Colombia: Eighteen years since the US-led invasion of Iraq toppled the Baathist dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, a whole generation has come of age knowing only the system of parliamentary democracy built in its place.

But as election day unfolds today, many young Iraqis still feel alienated from the political process and skeptical about meaningful change happening via the ballot box.

In 2003, as part of its de-Baathification strategy, the Coalition Provisional Authority teamed up with Iraqi oppositionists, many of whom had spent decades in exile, to build the vital institutions of state almost from scratch.

However, the system they built, modeled on the West's own time-honored institutions, was alien to many Iraqis who had for centuries conducted their affairs along tribal and religious lines and were divided along sectarian lines.

IRAQ ELECTION IN NUMBERS



Mourtatha Al-Makhsousi, a 27-year-old unemployed graduate from the eastern Iraqi city of Kut, told Arab News: "In 2003, the Iraqi opposition was working to change the regime, but they did not address it well and they failed to analyze the consequences of the changes. As a result, we have a fragile system here.

"Here in Iraq people did not know about democracy and parliamentary systems. Moreover, we are a tribal and religious community with social contradictions that cannot be controlled by a parliamentary system.

"Therefore, it required a religious appeal in the Iraqi constitution and parliament for people to vote. I suppose a majority of Iraqis still do not know how it works or how power is distributed."

Foreign powers, armed groups, and corrupt individuals soon took advantage of the situation and the billions of dollars in aid money lavished on the country, fashioning a system that was, for the most part, democratic in name only.



Iraqis chant slogans as they rally at Fardous square in central Baghdad, on October 1, 2021, demanding justice for demonstrators killed during the October 2020 anti-government protests, ahead of the October 10 parliamentary elections. (AFP)

Rana, a 24-year-old law graduate, also from Kut, said: "We were told there would be democracy and change. On the contrary. We had one corrupt face; now we have many corrupt faces.

"Since the invasion and until now, we have not seen real change. It is like a

mafia controlling the government. They are just a group of gangsters working for their own interests, from the 2003 government until the current one.”

Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki’s State of Law coalition, which maintained close ties with Iran, came to dominate national affairs in the years after 2003, leaving Iraq’s once pre-eminent Sunni minority and long-persecuted Kurds feeling excluded.

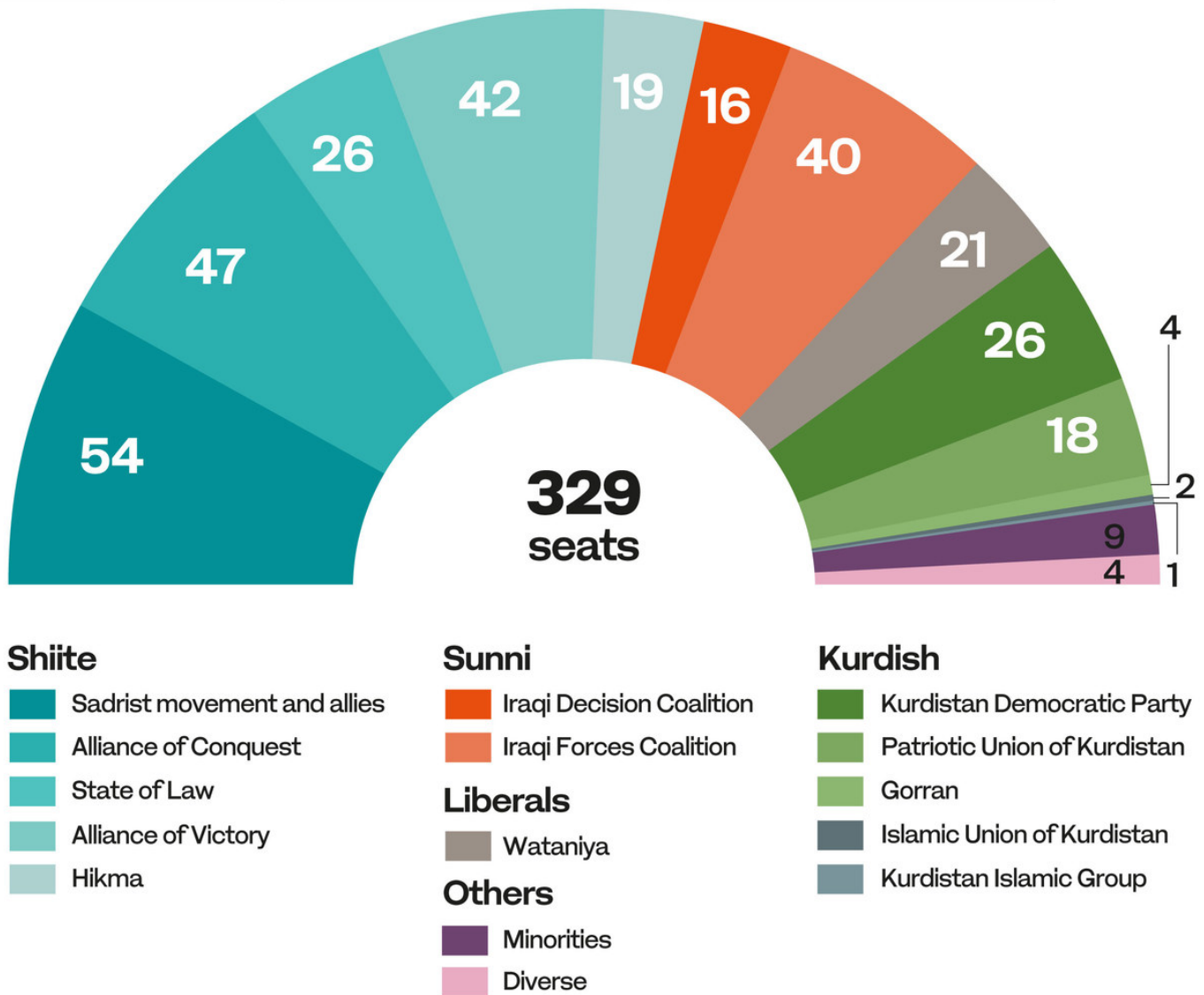
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A sectarian civil war soon enveloped the country from 2006 to 2008, followed in 2014 by the emergence of Daesh, an Al-Qaeda splinter group that went on to conquer a third of Iraq’s territory in the predominantly Sunni northwest.

Once the Iraqi security forces had reclaimed these territories in 2017 with extensive coalition air support, the country set about the gargantuan task of reconstruction and resettling millions of displaced households.

The May 2018 election was post-war Iraq’s first democratic test. But with a record low turnout, and widespread allegations of fraud, Shiite militia leaders moved almost seamlessly from the battlefields into the corridors of power, together with the followers of firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr.

OUTGOING IRAQI PARLIAMENT



Source: AFP

ARAB NEWS

And, after months of back-room wrangling, the victors chose the mild-mannered technocrat Adel Abdul-Mahdi to form a new government.

However, slow progress on reconstruction and resettlement, rising unemployment, and rolling power outages soon stoked public anger and, by October 2019, tens of thousands of young Iraqis had taken to the streets nationwide demanding the removal of the post-2003 elite.

A violent crackdown by security forces and pro-government militias left hundreds of protesters dead and thousands injured. Although it eventually secured Abdul-Mahdi's resignation, the movement soon fizzled out with the onset of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.



A youth draped in an Iraqi national flag flashes the victory gesture while standing before a statue of 19th century Iraqi cleric and poet Mohamed Said Al-Habboubi. (AFP/File Photo)

Rana added: “During the occupation period, people could not speak up and instead bottled up their frustrations. The grievances accumulated over the years until people could no longer hold it in. They came out on the streets in anger over the lack of services, reconstruction, security, and other injustices.

“The Iraqi youth became aware and more educated, so they came out with the revolution of October 2019. They stood against injustice and asked for the rights that have been stolen under the cover of democracy and by Islamic political parties.”

In May 2020, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, Iraq’s former intelligence chief, was appointed the new prime minister for the period until the national elections scheduled for the following year.

Without a clearly defined political leadership heading the movement, Iraq’s young protesters were not able to translate their energy and idealism into an electoral force capable of making their demands a reality.



Children play in front of a large poster of Iraq's populist Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, in Sadr City, east of the capital Baghdad, on July 15, 2021. (AFP/File Photo)

The handful of young revolutionaries who have chosen to run as independent candidates in the Oct. 10 election stand little chance of success against the well-oiled machinery of Iraq's establishment parties.

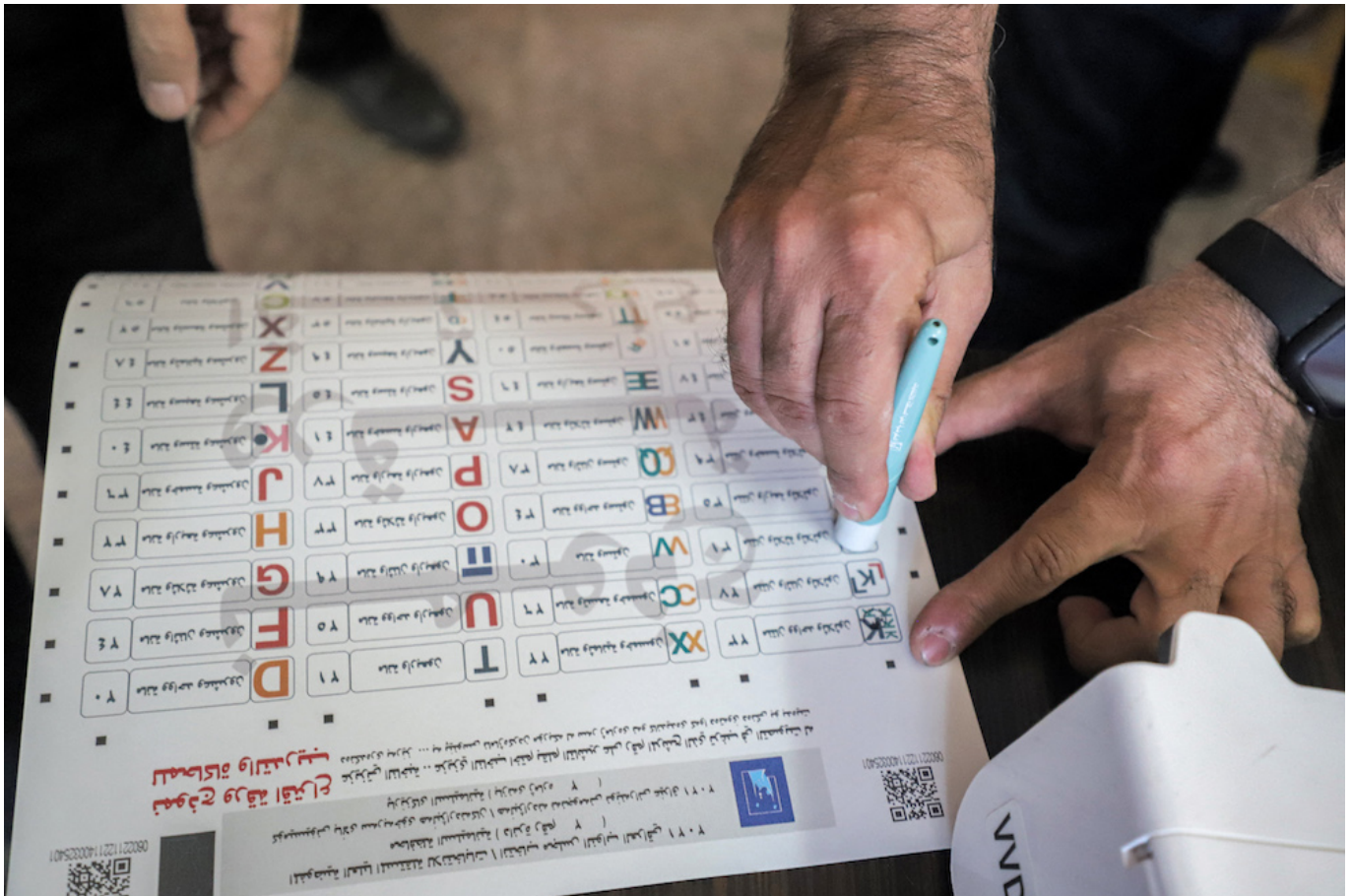
Zahraa Ali, a 31-year-old freelance journalist from Fallujah in western Iraq, said: "It is not easy to be involved in the democratic process here in Iraq. If you are, you will face many issues.

"If you participate in the election, they will definitely create an issue for you. The political leaders and parties that rule Iraq treat it like a dictatorship. They are imposing their will on us."

Ali and other local activists have organized workshops to help educate Iraqis of voting age on the democratic process, their rights, and what is at stake in Sunday's election. "In terms of change and development, it can only be achieved by Iraq's young people," she added.

Nevertheless, few among Iraq's youth hold out much hope of dislodging the post-2003 order and its powerful militia-backed parties any time soon.

Zainab Jabar, a 24-year-old unemployed graduate from Basra, said: "I boycotted the last election, and I will not participate in this one either. We already know the result, so what is the point of taking part?"



Officials of Iraq's electoral commission undergo a polling day simulation to test run its systems ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections. (AFP/File Photo)

Jabar was among the thousands of young people who joined the protests in Iraq's southern city of Basra in 2019. Despite its huge oil riches, Basra remains one of Iraq's most deprived provinces, blighted by crime, poverty, and decaying infrastructure.

"We will need 50 to 100 years to change and remove the powerful political parties in Iraq. We want the change that we demanded in our revolution in October 2019. It did not happen as we hoped," Jabar added.

Karar Al-Duaikheil, a law student from Basra, said: "Basra is the worst city in Iraq. It is dead in terms of services, construction, education, and employment, and there are militias and uncontrolled weapons on the streets. Moreover, it suffers from killings, kidnappings, threats, and arbitrary arrests.

"Unfortunately, Basra residents do not choose the candidates they want but the ones chosen by Al-Maliki, Al-Sadr, Ammar (Al-Hakim) and other political players. None of them are clean or good people.

"In addition, tribal leaders play a significant role here. They are getting stronger, with more weapons and money. Young people do not want to select a candidate who works for his party rather than for Basra."

Al-Makhsousi pointed out that it would take time for Iraq's democracy to fully mature and meet the needs and expectations of its young voters.



A campaign poster is seen in the Iraqi capital Baghdad on September 14, 2021, ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections. (AFP/File Photo)

"We need more time to shape this democracy with our culture and community. We are still learning. This democracy divided us into states, regions, neighborhoods, and groups in our country.

"Wherever you go, you need a special security permit. It feels like you are not in your own country. It is as if you do not belong to it. We do not have an Iraqi nation.

"We boycotted the election in 2018. The result was very bad, and we had a regime without anything. For the upcoming election, I will be participating in order to change something, step by step."

To this end, young people such as Al-Makhsousi have the full backing of the prime minister. In a recent tweet, Al-Kadhimi said: "Iraq counts on its youth for reform. With their persistence on a better future, the elections will be a true national triumph.

"Vote for those who preserve Iraq's unity, sovereignty, and unique national identity. Oct. 10 is the opportunity for change."



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A Mosul book cafe raises political awareness in the run-up to Iraq elections
US leads western praise for Iraqi electoral commission ahead of Sunday's vote

[100 Houthis killed in heavy fighting outside central Yemeni city of Marib](#)

Sat, 2021-10-09 21:31

AL-MUKALLA: At least 100 Houthis have been killed since Friday evening in clashes with government troops in contested areas outside the central Yemeni city of Marib, military officials said on Saturday.

The clashes broke out as the Iran-backed militia intensified its artillery shelling and ground attacks on government-controlled locations in Al-Kasara, west of Marib, as part of its push to seize control of the city, Rashad Al-Mekhlafi, a military official at Yemen's Armed Forces Guidance Department, told Arab News.

Al-Mekhlafi said the bodies of at least 100 fighters had been abandoned in mountains and rough areas in Al-Kasara, and that the rebels had been forced to stop their attacks after failing to break through the government's lines of defense.

"The Houthi attack (in Al-Kasara) began at nearly 8 p.m. on Friday and ended on Saturday afternoon. They used different kinds of weapons and dispatched waves of fighters."

Al-Mekhlafi added that Arab coalition warplanes had played a vital role in disrupting Houthi attempts to bring in military reinforcements to Marib and targeted their military locations and gatherings.

By Saturday afternoon, government forces had killed dozens of Houthis, including many military leaders, pushed back Houthi attacks, and scored limited advances in Marib province, Al-Mekhlafi said.

There was also fighting in the south and west of Marib, in Jabal Murad, Juba, and Al-Abedia.

Military officials denied Houthi media reports that residents in the besieged district of Al-Abedia had agreed to allow the militia to control it in exchange for a safe corridor for government troops.

"People there do not trust the Houthis. The Houthis launched many attacks to seize control of the district," Al-Mekhlafi said.

The siege is in its third week, with Houthis trying to force troops and allied fighters to surrender.

The Houthis have banned humanitarian assistance from reaching more than 35,000 people and blocked residents from leaving or entering the district.

There have been warnings from local organizations and officials about starvation if the Houthis continue with the siege.

The fighting in Marib comes as US Yemen envoy Tim Lenderking on Friday began a new diplomacy shuttle in the region to revive peace efforts to end the war in Yemen and discuss ways to stop the offensive, the US State Department said.

The US envoy, who touched down in Jordan on Friday, is visiting the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. He is meeting officials from those countries, along with Yemeni government officials and civil society representatives.

"During his meetings with international partners, Special Envoy Lenderking will address the consequences of the continued Houthi offensive in Marib,

which is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis, killing civilians, and defying the international consensus on the urgent need for a peaceful resolution to the conflict,” the department said.

Thousands of Yemenis have been killed since February, when the Houthis renewed an offensive to control the city.



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Houthis under fire for killing displaced civilians in Marib
Houthis reject calls for truce, intensify attacks on Marib

[Silent Jewish prayers at Al-Aqsa rejected by Israeli appeals court following protests](#)

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Sat, 2021-10-09 21:47

AMMAN: The Israeli central court accepted the appeal by the Jerusalem police against a lower court ruling that allowed "silent" prayer by Jewish activists on the grounds of Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Wasfi Kailani, executive director of the Hashemite Fund for the Restoration of Al-Aqsa Mosque, told Arab News that the entire area of Al-Haram Al-Sharif/Al-Aqsa Mosque is an Islamic religious site that is exclusively for Muslims.

"All 144 dunums of the mosque compound is an Islamic location owned and managed by the Islamic Waqf (endowment)."

Kailani said that, while the Waqf Council welcomes visitors at certain hours, it is done with the understanding that they are welcomed to visit as tourists but not to pray, and "that the visiting rights should be open to all non-Muslims who enter Al-Aqsa with permission of Awqaf and follow their instructions."

Kailani said Muslims from all around the world "should have access and the right of worship in Al-Aqsa."

The earlier decision that would have changed the status quo in occupied Jerusalem was widely rejected in the region.

Jordan, whose Waqf Ministry administers the mosque in Jerusalem, condemned the initial lower Israeli court ruling. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Haitham Abulfoul said that the decision is null and void and lacks legal status under international law, which does not recognize Israeli jurisdiction on territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem.

Dimitri Diliani, head of the Palestinian National Christian Coalition, said that the decision of the Israeli central court was the result of united efforts by Palestinians and their friends.

"This victory is the result of the popular anger of Palestinians from all walks of life, in addition to the stance of Arab countries, led by Jordan, whose monarch King Abdullah II is the custodian of Muslim and Christian holy places in Jerusalem."

A 2014 Jordanian and Israeli understanding witnessed by the US says that Al-Aqsa is for "Muslims to pray and for all others to visit."

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett backed down in July from statements that appeared to support the rights of Jews and Muslims to pray on the Muslim site, statements that would have marked a stark shift from Israel's policy of maintaining the status quo at Jerusalem's holy site.

Sources in the Israeli Prime Minister's Office claimed on July 19 that Bennett had "misspoken" when he said both Jews and Muslims have "freedom of worship" on the Temple Mount, which would be a potentially explosive change after decades of Jews being permitted only to visit there, but not to pray. The current tensions began when Bilha Yahalom, a Jerusalem magistrate judge known for her right-wing position, ruled that the silent prayer at the complex cannot be considered a "criminal act."

This came in an appeal by Rabbi Aryeh Lippo against a police ban on his visits to the flashpoint site following his repeated prayers in violation of the agreed position for visits to the Muslim site.

The police appealed the decision, which caused ripple effects in Jerusalem and throughout the region.



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[Libya 'ready for polls despite wrangling'](#)

Author:

AFP Reuters

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Sat, 2021-10-09 00:14

TRIPOLI/BENHAZI: Preparations are almost finished for polls in war-torn Libya, the head of the electoral commission says, despite wrangling over voting laws and warnings the outcome could be contested.

"We are 80 or 90 percent ready" for the presidential and parliamentary votes in December and January, Imed Al-Sayeh, head of the country's High National Election Commission, said.

"I think there will be very strong turnout for these elections, especially as there will be direct presidential polls for the first time since Libya's

independence" in 1951, he said at his office in Tripoli.

The polls are part of a UN-backed peace process that has seen a year of relative peace following a ceasefire between eastern and western camps in the North African country.

But disputes over the legal and constitutional basis of the ballots and who is eligible to stand raised doubts over the process.

Analysts warned of a return to conflict if the outcome is contested.

The presidential and parliamentary votes were initially set for the same day – Dec. 24 – but on Tuesday parliament announced that the legislative

elections, the country's first since 2014, would be postponed until January.

The HNEC said in August that more than 2.8 million Libyans had registered for the polls, out of a population of around 7 million.

Plan agreed to pull mercenaries out

Meanwhile, the eastern side in Libya's conflict said on Friday it had agreed with its opponents on a plan for a phased withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries, but gave no details or timeline for a move seen as crucial to cementing a year-old ceasefire.

Mercenaries brought by the foreign powers involved in Libya, including Russia and Turkey, remain entrenched on both sides despite the ceasefire and a parallel political process aimed at resolving the decade-long crisis through elections. Both those UN-backed efforts are seen as highly fragile, however, with a constant risk that the process could unravel.

An eastern military official said the joint committee meeting in Geneva had agreed on a "an action plan for the withdrawal of mercenaries and foreign forces in a gradual, balanced and simultaneous way."

The official added that international monitors and a monitoring mechanism were needed before any withdrawal could begin. Libyan Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush said on Sunday that a very modest number of mercenaries had already left. The committee was formed through a UN-backed ceasefire agreed on last year that followed the collapse of eastern-based commander Khalifa Haftar's 14-month offensive against Tripoli.

Libya has been ripped apart by violence since the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi, who had ruled the vast, oil-rich country with an iron fist since seizing power in a 1969 coup.

Last October's ceasefire between rival eastern and western governments, after UN-hosted talks, led to a transitional government taking office in March to usher the country toward elections at the end of this year.



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Thousands of migrants arrested in Libyan crackdown held in 'inhumane conditions'Egypt, Tunisia agree on Libya recovery strategy

[Israel, Palestinian militants use bodies as bargaining chips](#)

Author:

AP

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Fri, 2021-10-08 23:58

WEST BANK: More than a year after his son was killed by Israeli forces under disputed circumstances in the occupied West Bank, Mustafa Erekat is still seeking his remains.

It is one of dozens of cases in which Israel is holding the remains of Palestinians killed in conflict, citing the need to deter attacks and potentially exchange them for the remains of two Israeli soldiers held by the Palestinian militant group Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinians and human rights groups view the practice of holding bodies as a form of collective punishment that inflicts further suffering on

bereaved families.

"They have no right to keep my son, and it is my right for my son to have a good funeral," Erekat said.

The Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Center, a Palestinian rights group, says Israel is holding the bodies of at least 82 Palestinians since the policy was established in 2015.

It says many are buried in secret cemeteries where the plots are only marked by plaques of numbers. Hamas holds the remains of the two Israeli soldiers killed during the 2014 Gaza war.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz said at the time that holding the remains deterred attacks and would help ensure the return of Israeli captives and remains. The Defense Ministry declined to comment on the policy.

One of the bodies is that of Erekat's son, Ahmed, who Israeli officials say was shot and killed after deliberately plowing into a military checkpoint in June 2020.

Ahmed was to get married soon, his father said: "He had a house that was ready for him." To this day, he has no idea where his son's remains are. Omar Shakir, the Israel and Palestine director at the New York-based Human Rights Watch, said Israel has turned "corpses into bargaining chips." The policy is "deliberately and unlawfully punishing the families of the deceased, who are not accused of any wrongdoing," he said.

Israel has a long history of exchanging prisoners and remains with its enemies.

In 2011, it traded more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners for an Israeli soldier who had been captured by Palestinian militants five years earlier and was being held in Gaza.

In 2008, it traded five Lebanese prisoners and the remains of nearly 200 Lebanese and Palestinians killed in fighting, for the remains of two Israeli soldiers captured by Hezbollah group two years earlier.



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Egypt continuing efforts to return Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip, says El-Sisi
Facebook wrongfully suppressed Palestinians during May violence, says HRW