

# Outsider leads after divisive Tunisia presidential poll

Author:

AFP

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TUNIS: Political outsider Kais Saied was leading Tunisia's election with just over a quarter of votes counted, the election commission said Monday, in the country's second free presidential vote since the Arab Spring.

Saied was on 19 percent, leading imprisoned media magnate Nabil Karoui, who was on 14.9 percent, and ahead of the candidate from the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party Abdelfattah Mourou (13.1 percent).

The announcement came after both Saied and Karoui's camp claimed to have won through to the second round, in the highly divisive polls.

Local papers splashed photos across their front pages of law professor Saied and magnate Karoui, after exit polls showed they had qualified for the second round of voting.

"An unexpected verdict," ran a headline in La Presse.

Le Temps titled its editorial "The Slap," while the Arabic language Echourouk newspaper highlighted a "political earthquake" and a "tsunami" in the Maghreb.

The initial signs point toward a major upset for Tunisia's political establishment, in place since the 2011 uprising that ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

It could also usher in a period of immense uncertainty for the fledgling north African democracy, the sole success story of the Arab Spring revolts. Tunisia's electoral commission (ISIE) reported low turnout at 45 percent, down from 64 percent in the country's first democratic polls in 2014.

Late Sunday, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed called on the liberal and centrist camps to band together for legislative elections set for October 6, voicing concern that low participation was "bad for the democratic transition."

Chahed, a presidential hopeful whose popularity has been tarnished by a sluggish economy and the rising cost of living, could well turn out to be the election's biggest loser.

The election comes against a backdrop of serious social and economic crises. Karoui, a 56-year-old media magnate, has been behind bars since August 23 on charges of money laundering and Tunisia's judiciary has refused his release three times.

A controversial businessman, labelled a "populist" by critics, Karoui built his appeal by using his Nessma television channel to launch charity campaigns, handing out food aid to some of the country's poorest.

His apparent rival is political neophyte Saied.

The highly conservative constitutionalist, known to Tunisians for his televised political commentary since the 2011 revolt, has shunned political parties and mass rallies. Instead, he has opted to go door-to-door to explain his policies.

He advocates a rigorous overhaul of the constitution and voting system, to decentralize power "so that the will of the people penetrates into central government and puts an end to corruption."

Often surrounded by young acolytes, he also set forth his social conservatism, defending the death penalty, criminalization of homosexuality and a sexual assault law that punishes unmarried couples who engage in public displays of affection.

"It's going to be new," said a baker named Said on Monday, issuing a wry smile.

"We'll have to wait and see. Anyway, what matters in Tunisia is the parliament."

The first round was marked by high rates of apathy among young voters, pushing ISIE head to put out an emergency call to them Sunday an hour before polls closed.

On Sunday morning, senior citizen Adil Toumi had asked as he voted in the capital "where are the young people?"

Political scientist Hamza Meddeb told AFP "this is a sign of very deep discontent with the political class that has not met economic and social expectations,"

"Disgust with the political elite seems to have resulted in a vote for outsiders."

Distrust of the political establishment runs high in Tunisia, where unemployment is at 15 percent and the cost of living has risen by close to a third since 2016.

Extremist attacks have exacted a heavy toll on the key tourism sector.

Around 70,000 security forces were mobilized for the polls.

The date of a second and final round between the top two candidates has not been announced, but it must be held by October 23 at the latest and may even take place on the same day as legislative polls, October 6.



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Tunisia sees 26 candidates for presidential poll on Sunday

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## [France to press to drop Sudan from US terror blacklist](#)

Author:

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1568649693512396400

Mon, 2019-09-16 15:27

KHARTOUM: French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Monday that France will press to drop Sudan from the US blacklist of state sponsors of terrorism and to support efforts to reintegrate the country into the international community.

Le Drian was in Khartoum for a one-day visit, the first such trip to Sudan by France's top diplomat in more than a decade.

His visit comes as the northeast African country transitions to civilian rule after decades of authoritarianism.

"We will use our influence to ensure that Sudan is removed from this list," Le Drian said at a joint press conference with his Sudanese counterpart Asma Mohamed Abdalla after the two held talks.

"It is the way to ensure that we can consider a new relationship (for Sudan) with financial institutions, everything is obviously linked," he said, asked by AFP if France would back efforts to remove Sudan from Washington's blacklist.

Decades of US blacklisting along with a trade embargo imposed on Sudan in 1997 has kept overseas investors away from the country, in turn isolating it from the global economy.

Sudan's worsening economic situation was the key trigger for nationwide protests that finally led to the ouster of longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir in April.

Washington lifted the sanctions in October 2017, but kept Sudan in the terrorism list along with North Korea, Iran and Syria.

Washington's measures were imposed for Khartoum's alleged support for Islamist militant groups.

Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden resided in Sudan between 1992 and 1996.

Le Drian said the pivotal role played by Sudan's army in the uprising against Bashir would help in removing Sudan from the US blacklist.

"The way the army perceived its role during this period, (that) goes in the direction of removing Sudan from this list," he said.

The army overthrew Bashir in a palace coup on April 11 on the back of months of nationwide protests.

But a military council seized power after ousting him and for months resisted calls from protesters to transfer it to a civilian administration.

Only last month after sustained agitation, a joint civilian-military sovereign council was sworn in to oversee Sudan's transition to civilian rule, the key demand of protesters.

On September 8, Sudan's first cabinet led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok was sworn in to run the daily affairs of the country.

During his short visit to Khartoum, Le Drian also met Hamdok and General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the civilian-military ruling council.

Le Drian also reiterated French support for Sudan's priorities such as rebuilding the economy and striking peace agreements with rebel groups in conflict zones of Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states.



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Five confirmed cholera deaths in Sudan since Aug. 28

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## [Lebanon tribunal charges Hariri suspect over three other attacks](#)

Mon, 2019-09-16 17:14

THE HAGUE: The Special Tribunal for Lebanon on Monday unsealed an indictment on new charges against Salim Jamil Ayyash, currently a fugitive from the court and on trial in absentia.

The court said in a statement that Ayyash faced five new charges relating to the killings of three men in 2004 and 2005.

The tribunal in The Hague was established in 2009 to prosecute crimes related to the Feb. 14 2005 bombing that killed 22 people, including Lebanon's former prime minister Rafik Hariri, and injured many others.



Ayyash, whose whereabouts are unknown, is being defended on charges of “conspiracy to commit terrorism” in the Hariri case by a publicly appointed defence lawyer. Prosecutors say Ayyash is a Hezbollah commander who led coordination of Hariri’s assassination.

The court said on Monday that Ayyash would be presumed innocent of the new charges, but that there is enough evidence against him to merit a trial. The court sent new warrants for his arrest to the Lebanese government and international police organisations.



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[\*\*Erdogan hosts Putin, Rouhani for Syria\*\*](#)

# summit

Author:

Raziye Akkoc and Maria Panina | AFP

ID:

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Mon, 2019-09-16 12:19

ANKARA: The latest summit on Syria hosted by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara with his Russian and Iranian counterparts started on Monday, with attention focused on Damascus's push on the last rebel-held bastion of Idlib.

Presidents Vladimir Putin and Hassan Rouhani met Erdogan for separate bilateral talks in the Turkish capital before they sat down together for their fifth summit on the conflict since 2017.

Iran and Russia have been staunch supporters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while Turkey has called for his ouster and backed opposition fighters. But with Assad's position looking increasingly secure, Turkey's priority has shifted to preventing a mass influx of refugees from Idlib into Syria's northwest.

"We are in complete agreement in aiming for a lasting political solution for Syria's political unity and territorial integrity," Erdogan said in a televised statement as the summit began.

Turkey is concerned over the steady advance of Syrian forces into the region, backed by Russian airpower, despite a series of ceasefires.

Turkey has 12 observation posts in Idlib to enforce a buffer zone agreement struck a year ago with Russia to prevent a full-scale Syrian offensive.

But the posts look increasingly threatened, with one of them cut off from the rest of Idlib when Syrian forces advanced last month.

Russian airstrikes have continued in the region despite the latest ceasefire agreed by Ankara and Moscow on August 31.

"A zone of de-escalation should not serve as a terrain for armed provocations," Putin said as the summit began.

"We must take supplementary measures to completely destroy the terrorist menace that comes from the zone of Idlib."

The Turkish presidency said the leaders would discuss the latest developments in Syria as well as "ensuring the necessary conditions for the voluntary return of refugees and discussing the joint step to be taken in the period ahead with the aim of achieving a lasting political solution."

Moscow is keen to see progress on establishing a constitutional committee to oversee the next stage of the political settlement in Syria.

That would give Putin a political win to add to the military victories, said Dareen Khalifa, senior Syria analyst at International Crisis Group.

After his meeting with Rouhani, Putin said he hoped they were "now in the final stages" of forming the constitutional committee.

But Khalifa said expectations should remain low.

Even if they can agree on who will form the committee, "this leaves a crux of issues unaddressed for the future of the political process including the regime's ability and willingness to undertake any kind of political reform," she told AFP.

High on everyone's mind at the summit was the weekend attack on Saudi oil facilities, which Washington has blamed on Tehran, deepening bilateral tensions and putting the region on the brink of further conflict. Iran has been a crucial actor on the battlefield in Syria but has kept a lower profile in recent months. Its focus has been on countering Israeli and US involvement.

"The presence of American military forces in a United Nations member and independent country such as Syria endangers its territorial integrity and national sovereignty," Rouhani said at the start of the summit.

"American forces should leave the country at once."

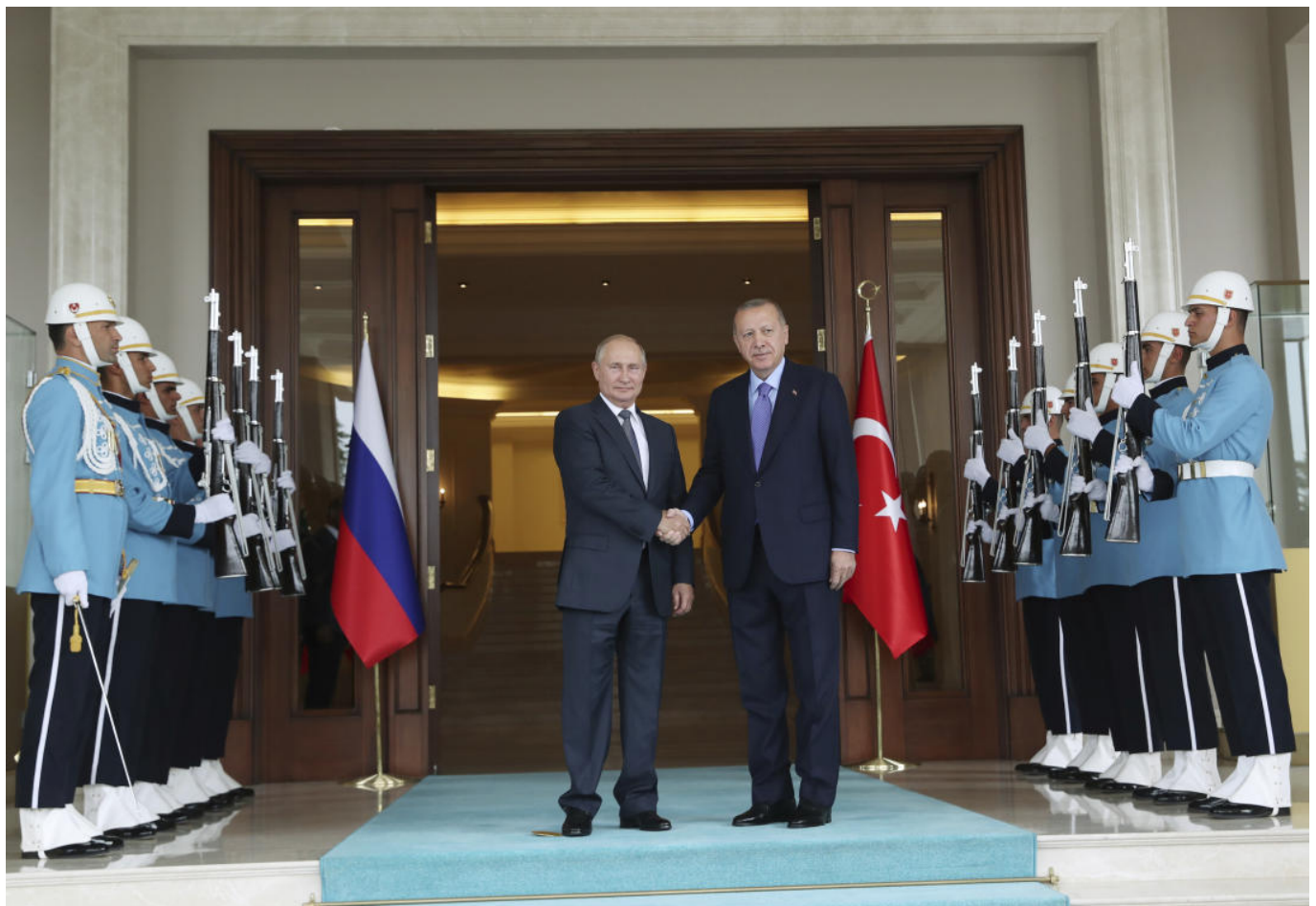
Meanwhile, Turkey has other concerns regarding Syria.

It has repeatedly threatened to launch a cross-border offensive against Syrian Kurdish forces, whom it sees as allied to Kurdish militants in its own territory.

That has strained Turkey's relations with its NATO ally, the United States, which backs the Syrian Kurds as the main fighting force against the Islamic State group (IS).

The US has vowed to work with Turkey to move Kurdish forces away from its border, but Ankara says progress has so far been "cosmetic" and it could launch an operation into Syria by the end of this month.

Turkey has conducted previous offensives against IS in 2016 and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia in 2018.



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## Israeli PM vows to annex 'all the settlements' in West Bank

Author:

By TIA GOLDENBERG | AP

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Mon, 2019-09-16 12:28

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed Monday to annex "all the settlements" in the West Bank, including an enclave deep in the heart of the largest Palestinian city, in a last-ditch move that appeared aimed at shoring up nationalist support the day before a do-over election. Locked in a razor tight race and with legal woes hanging over him, Netanyahu is fighting for his political survival. In the final weeks of his campaign he has been doling out hard-line promises meant to draw more voters to his Likud party and re-elect him in Tuesday's unprecedented repeat vote.

"I intend to extend sovereignty on all the settlements and the (settlement) blocs," including "sites that have security importance or are important to Israel's heritage," Netanyahu said in an interview with Israeli Army Radio, part of an eleventh-hour media blitz.

Asked if that included the hundreds of Jews who live under heavy military guard amid tens of thousands of Palestinians in the volatile city of Hebron, Netanyahu responded "of course."

Israelis head to the polls Tuesday in the second election this year, after Netanyahu failed to cobble together a coalition following April's vote, sparking the dissolution of parliament.

Netanyahu has made a series of ambitious pledges in a bid to whip up support, including a promise to annex the Jordan Valley, an area even moderate Israelis view as strategic but which the Palestinians consider the breadbasket of any future state.

To protest that announcement, the Palestinian Authority held a Cabinet meeting in the Jordan Valley village of Fasayil on Monday, a day after Israel's Cabinet met elsewhere in the valley.

"The Jordan Valley is part of Palestinian lands and any settlement or annexation is illegal," Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said at the start of the meeting. "We will sue Israel in international courts for exploiting our land and we will continue our struggle against the occupation on the ground and in international forums."

Critics contend that Netanyahu's pledges, if carried out, would enflame the Middle East and eliminate any remaining Palestinian hope of establishing a separate state. His political rivals have dismissed his talk of annexation as an election ploy noting that he has refrained from annexing any territory during his more than a decade in power.

Israel captured the West Bank and east Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967 war. Over 2.5 million Palestinians now live in occupied territories, in addition to nearly 700,000 Jewish settlers. Israel already has annexed east Jerusalem in a move that is not internationally recognized. The international community, along with the Palestinians, overwhelmingly considers Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem illegal.

Tuesday's vote will largely be a referendum on Netanyahu, who this year surpassed Israel's founding prime minister as the country's longest-serving leader.

He has cast himself as the only candidate capable of facing Israel's myriad challenges. But his opponents say his legal troubles – including a recommendation by the attorney general to indict him on bribery, fraud and breach of trust charges – loom too large for him to carry on.



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Embattled Israeli PM fights for survival in do-over electionEmbattled Israeli PM fights for survival in do-over election