

# Australian leader rules out helping children of Daesh militant

Author:

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CANBERRA: Australia's prime minister said on Monday he won't put officials in danger by retrieving three orphaned Australian children of a convicted terrorist who have reportedly been found in a Syrian refugee camp.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's response to the plight of former Daesh militant Khaled Sharrouf's children is the same as his government's reaction to other Australians who have joined the fight with extremist groups in Syria and want to come home.

"I'm not going to put one Australian life at risk to try and extract people from these dangerous situations," Morrison told reporters.

But security experts say that Australians can and should be safely brought home from Syrian refugee camps since the defeat of Daesh forces.

Only three of Sharrouf's five children survived the conflict, Australian Broadcasting Corp. reported. They are 17-year-old Zaynab, Hoda, 16, and Humzeh, 8. The siblings fled the siege of Baghouz village in mid-March. Zaynab is pregnant and has her two children with her, Ayesha, 3, and Fatima, 2.

Their grandmother, Karen Nettleton, said she is particularly concerned for Zaynab, who is about to give birth in the squalid Al-Hol camp. "Zaynab is seven-and-a half months pregnant; she's feeling very fatigued," Nettleton told ABC.

The siblings' father Khaled Sharrouf in 2017 was the first dual national to be stripped of Australian citizenship for actions contrary to his allegiance to Australia.

The Sydney-born man slipped out of Australia in 2013 on his brother's passport because his own had been canceled because of his conviction for his part in a thwarted terrorist attack plot in Australia. He was left with Lebanese citizenship.

Sharrouf horrified the world in 2014 when he posted on social media a photograph of his young son clutching the severed head of a Syrian soldier. Then-US Secretary of State John Kerry described that image as "one of the most disturbing, stomach-turning, grotesque photographs ever displayed." Sharrouf's wife Tara Nettleton, with her five children, joined her husband in Syria in 2014. She died of medical complications in 2015. Sharrouf and his two eldest sons Abdullah, 12, and Zarqawi, 11, were killed in an air strike near Raqqa, the Daesh group's stronghold in Syria, in August 2017, the ABC reported.

Save the Children Australia's Mat Tinkler said Australia should follow the lead of France, which recently repatriated five orphaned children from Syria. "We seek to ensure Australian children trapped in Syria are not punished for the crimes of their parents," Tinkler said. "It is entirely within the Australian government's power to bring these children home and we urge them to do so immediately," he added.



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## [Turkish voters ring changes in nail-biting local elections](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-04-01 22:01

ANKARA: Local elections held in Turkey on Sunday resulted in a significant shift in the governance of the country.

Voters in Turkey's major cities turned their backs on officials from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party and instead opted for administration by candidates from opposition groups.

After a nail-biting count of votes in the first municipal ballot since Turks approved constitutional reform in 2017, the "prize" cities of Istanbul and the capital Ankara fell to rival parties.

As the Turkish saying goes, "whoever wins Istanbul, wins Turkey," and when voters in Izmir – the country's third-largest city, which is popular with Arab property investors – chose an opposition candidate for mayor, it marked a major change on the local political scene.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its nationalist coalition partner the MHP lost other authorities including the southern provinces of Antalya, Adana, Mersin and Hatay.

The local election results confirmed a change of mood among Turkish voters unhappy with the way the country has been governed and concerned about rising inflation and unemployment rates.

The outcome of the polls was also achieved in a country where almost 90 percent of the media is under government control, limiting publicity opportunities for opposition parties.

A recent survey by Istanbul's prestigious Kadir Has University, revealed that unemployment, increased living costs and depreciation of the Turkish lira were the most significant problems facing Turkey.

In Ankara, where the government recently opened retail stores to sell fruit and vegetables at reduced prices in an apparent bid to woo low-income voters, an opposition figure will govern the city for the first time in 25 years.

The capital's new mayor, Mansur Yavas, is known for his nationalistic roots and as a moderate character trying to reach out to every segment of society.

However, during his election campaign, prosecutors drafted an indictment against him on forgery charges. President Erdogan also warned that Ankara could "pay a heavy price" if Yavas was elected.

In southeastern Turkey, pro-Kurdish HDP won by a landslide, increasing its vote significantly since the last elections and gaining back all municipalities where the government had assigned trustees in place of elected mayors. HDP decided to give its support to the candidates of the opposition coalition in the west by not nominating any candidates in many metropolitan municipalities.

Experts believe Erdogan's recent rhetoric and politics based on internal and external enemies, have paradoxically consolidated the opposition camp and pushed rival voters to go to the ballot box instead of boycotting it.

Sinan Ekim, a Turkey analyst at Rome-based Istituto Affari Internazionali, said the election results showed the resilience of Turkey's democracy.

"The CHP's success in Istanbul and Ankara, against the backdrop of massive corruption and a campaigning landscape that is entirely controlled by the government, is nothing short of historic," he told Arab News.

"The fact that the CHP will now control 10 of Turkey's 20 top municipalities in terms of GDP, shows how Turkey's economic recession was a top concern for voters. The results also show a growing dissatisfaction among the younger generation, reacting to a lack of media freedom and lack of employment prospects," Ekim added.

He said Erdogan's strategy of religion-based electioneering had fallen flat with economic concerns taking precedence over religious identity.

Despite the apparent failure of his party in retaining key cities, the president made a balcony speech on Sunday night, saying "in some areas where they fell short, they weren't able to communicate their message enough. We will begin to fix our faults beginning from tomorrow morning. We won't fight with the nation."

Although Erdogan's speech was somewhat conciliatory in tone with him vowing to pay more attention to economic reforms, Ekim said the president's unreadiness to admit defeat in Istanbul said otherwise.

With Turkey's state-run news agency Anadolu stopping the flow of election data until Monday morning, the move was considered suspicious by some as it coincided with an equal vote share for two mayoral candidates in Istanbul.

"The government may demand a recount or a revote; or first accept the results and then remove opposition leaders from their positions down the line. The government's final stance vis-a-vis the results will be telling in terms of the style of leadership that awaits Turkey until 2023," Ekim said.

Turkey's next elections will be in 2023 when Erdogan's presidential term of office ends.

Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara office director at German Marshall Fund of the US, told Arab News: "Both the opposition parties and their social bases have learned how to deal with polarizing politics."

The expert said the success of the Turkish opposition parties was partly down to nominating candidates that appealed to wider society, setting up a smart and inclusive alliance, giving positive messages, and avoiding confrontation.

"Their social base continued to post polarizing messages on social media, but less than they used to in past elections. I think Turkish politics is in a process of normalization and rebalancing," he said.



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## [Palestinians see little hope in Israeli elections](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-04-01 21:51

RAMALLAH: Tayseer Barakat is like many Palestinians when asked about the upcoming Israeli elections. He doesn't see much hope.

"We have learned from past experience that we are always the victims of Israeli elections, and it doesn't seem there will be anything new," said 58-year-old Barakat.

"It is more than likely there will be no meaningful changes, despite our hopes that there will be something new to change the situation," he added as he walked with bags of groceries in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank.

Israel's upcoming elections could have a direct effect on the Palestinians, but many have little interest in who wins, having lost hope its more than 50-year occupation will end no matter which party is in charge.

Some who do express concern say they are worried the campaign could lead to an uptick in incitement against Palestinians.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's current coalition is considered the most right-wing in Israel's history and includes prominent members who rule out a Palestinian state while seeking aggressive settlement expansion. Some call for annexing large parts of the West Bank. Peace talks have been frozen since 2014.

The Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority has previously made a freeze on settlement building a prerequisite to re-entering peace talks. At the beginning of the election campaign it was widely assumed Netanyahu would win, despite being dogged by corruption allegations.

But former military chief Benny Gantz has emerged as a serious challenger, with polls showing his centrist Blue and White alliance slightly ahead of Netanyahu's Likud.

Under those polls, Gantz would still fall far short of an outright majority and it is unclear whether he could assemble enough parties to form a coalition.

Early in the campaign, Gantz signalled openness to withdrawing settlers from parts of the West Bank. His alliance's platform favors "separation from the Palestinians" but does not mention a two-state solution.

Palestinians initially saw encouraging signs, but Saleh Rafat, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's executive committee, said he now believes the policies of Gantz and Netanyahu are similar.

"So far we haven't seen fundamental differences between the right-wing and the center party," he said.

"They are proposing a unified Jerusalem and to continue settlement and control over the Jordan Valley."

Israel seized mainly Palestinian East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War and considers the entire city its capital. The Palestinians see the city's eastern sector as the capital of their future state.

Israel occupied the West Bank, including parts of the Jordan Valley, in 1967.

More than 600,000 Israelis live in settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, communities considered illegal under international law.

The international community sees them as one of the largest obstacles to peace, though Israel disputes this while pointing to Palestinian attacks and what it calls incitement to violence.

Hafed Barghouti, a former Palestinian newspaper editor, said relative calm in the West Bank has led to less attention to the conflict in Israeli elections.

Israeli politics have also shifted firmly to the right in recent years.

“There is no Israeli party talking about the Palestinian issue. Those that do talk, do so in the language of a brutal occupation,” he said.

“The right, center and left agree to ignore the Palestinian issue and focus more on the legalization of marijuana.”

Whether to legalize recreational-use marijuana has received unexpected attention in the Israeli campaign.



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# Israeli watchdog finds online manipulation favoring Netanyahu ahead of vote

Author:

AFP

ID:

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JERUSALEM: An Israeli cyber watchdog said Monday it has uncovered a network of fake online accounts backing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and slandering opponents ahead of next week's general election.

In a new report the Big Bots Protect, which describes itself as a campaigner against social media abuse, said posts used "lies, libel and rumormongering" to attack Netanyahu's challengers.

It found over 130,000 tweets from "hundreds of fake or anonymous accounts" without names or profile pictures, which did not identify themselves as linked to Netanyahu's Likud party.

It acknowledged that there were also "hundreds of genuine accounts" backing the premier's bid for re-election.

Among the targets were journalists and public figures considered hostile to Netanyahu including his main challenger, Benny Gantz, leader of the centrist Blue and White party.

The report said they included accusations that Gantz was a "rapist" and others questioning his mental health.

A spokeswoman for Blue and White told AFP that party leaders had filed a complaint against the posts with police.

"There is an attempt to steal the elections, there is a system of lies here," Gantz wrote on Twitter.

"Netanyahu's house of cards is collapsing."

The prime minister went live on Facebook and YouTube to dismiss the report, flanked by what he said was a genuine Likud online supporter.

"A million Likud voters are not 'bots'," he said, adding that Likud was also filing a police complaint against Blue and White for accusing him.

"Not one of them is fake," he said of the messages cited by the Big Bots Protect.

"They have names, they have families," he added. "They have their own opinions, independent people!"

Netanyahu, 69, is seeking a fifth term in office in the April 9 election, despite also facing potential corruption charges.

Blue and White has consistently been scoring better than Likud in opinion polls, although Netanyahu is seen as standing a better chance of putting together a coalition government under Israel's proportional representation electoral system.



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## [Algeria's president Bouteflika says he will step down before April 28](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1554139653777431800

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ALGIERS: Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika will step down before his fourth term ends on April 28, a statement issued by his office said on Monday.

The short statement said Bouteflika would take "important steps to ensure the continuity of the functioning of state institutions" after he leaves the

office he'd held since 1999.

Massive weekly protests demanding Bouteflika's departure along with his cadre of loyalists have challenged the political status quo of his two-decade rule. The 82-year-old president has been in public rarely since he suffered a stroke in 2013.

It's unclear if Monday's announcement will satisfy anti-government protesters, who have said they don't just want Bouteflika out, but Algeria's entire power structure overhauled.

The Algerian Constitution calls for the head of the upper house of parliament to act as interim leader for a maximum of 90 days while an election is organized.

Algerian national television reported Sunday night that Bouteflika and Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui had named a new government after weeks of the mass protests and political tensions in this gas-rich North African country. The new government must stay in place during the transition period.

Ending his presidency amid the protests was a stunning decision for Bouteflika.

His declaration that he was running for a fifth term in a presidential election originally scheduled for April 18 initially fueled the protests. He withdrew and postponed the election in response to growing demonstrations. The protests have been driven mostly by young Algerians, who make up a growing part of the population. Demonstrators say they think Bouteflika and his generation are out of touch with the contemporary problems of the country's people. Many Algerian youth struggle to find jobs, and desperation has driven some to attempt to migrate to Europe on rickety boats.

Bouteflika has been known as a wily political survivor ever since he fought during the 1950s and 1960s for Algeria's independence from France.

He became foreign minister at the age of 25, and stood up to the likes of Henry Kissinger at the height of the Cold War, when Algeria was tethered to the former Soviet Union.

Bouteflika famously negotiated with the Venezuelan terrorist known as Carlos the Jackal to free oil ministers who were taken hostage in a 1975 attack on OPEC headquarters in Vienna and flown to Algiers.

Most crucially, he helped reconcile Algeria's citizens after a decade of civil war between radical Muslim militants and Algerian security forces left some 200,000 people dead in the 1990s and nearly tore Algeria apart.

During his 20 years in office, age and illness took its toll on the once-charismatic figure. Corruption scandals over infrastructure and hydrocarbon projects have also dogged him for years and tarnished many of his closest associates.

Algeria is Africa's biggest country by land mass and a major natural gas producer, but its energy riches have not trickled down to reach the pockets of its people.

Algeria is also a key partner to the United States and Europe in fighting Islamic extremism. The recent political crisis has caused concern among Western allies.



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