

Iraqi elections were competitive and 'surprisingly' well-managed, observers say

Fri, 2021-10-15 01:22

LONDON: Despite some lack of clarity, low voter turnout, the exclusion of several groups and the overarching security, the Iraqi elections this week were "surprisingly" well run and managed and were genuinely competitive, according to experts.

"It was a special experience being the first chief observer of the European Union Election Observation Mission to Iraq," said Viola Von Cramon-Taubadel, a member of the European Parliament.

"Coming from a, let's say, very civil society in Germany and even more-robust political environments in a post-Soviet world, something like this I have never experienced or seen before."

She was speaking on Thursday during a panel discussion, organized by UK think tank Chatham House, about the Iraqi elections last Sunday and what they mean for the government. Only about 9 million of 22 million eligible voters cast a vote, a turnout of just over 40 percent.

Cramon-Taubadel said observers' preliminary statement was fairly critical and that the low voter turnout was in part due to structural problems, including a lack of access and services for people with special needs, including those with vision and hearing impairments and in wheelchairs. The high level of security at polling stations also hindered access and several sections of the population were excluded, such as internally displaced persons, she added, and there were technical issues with voter cards that did not work and biometric systems that failed to recognize fingerprints.

However she compared this with election experiences in Berlin, where significant problems have also been encountered. And in terms of the fundamentals, Iraq fared relatively well, she added.

"In terms of administration, in terms of having everything, people knew what they were doing and the technology worked, mainly – I cannot say this for Berlin, honestly," said Cramon-Taubadel.



(L to R) Head of the European Parliament's delegation Domenec Ruiz Devesa, Chief Observer of the EU Election Observation Mission to Iraq Viola von Cramon, and deputy chief Alexander Matus hold a press conference to announce their preliminary report in Baghdad's Green Zone on Oct. 12, 2021. (AFP)

Many democratic countries are experiencing increasingly low levels of voter turnout, even the US, she added, but rather than comparing Iraq's elections with those in the West she suggested that a more relevant comparison was with the previous elections in Iraq, in 2018.

"The level of security, the level of professionalism...in general, if you look through the process how it went in 2018 and now, I would say this was a huge upgrade," said Cramon-Taubadel. "And I have only heard that people were surprised by how many independent candidates in the end have made it, and

they kind of regretted their decision to boycott (the election) because they didn't believe, they didn't trust the institution and there was no confidence in the IT system."

Authorities ran election simulations before and after the vote and have precautionary measures in place to prevent fraud or tampering, she explained, and eradicated a number of loopholes in the past month.

Cramon-Taubadel said she saw highly-sophisticated precautionary measures in place at a warehouse in Basra where ballots were being stored, to protect it and avoid a repeat of incidents such as a warehouse fire in Baghdad during the 2018 election in which votes were destroyed. Staff at polling stations were well trained and committed, she added, but they were sad and frustrated because they had hoped for higher turnouts that would have given them more to do, especially in urban areas.

Regarding accusations of fraud and ballot-rigging, Cramon-Taubadel said the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq has access to the raw election data and has not found any evidence of this. Expressing her trust in Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission, she said any indications of fraudulent activity should be submitted to it so that their and EU observers can implement the proper legal mechanisms and investigate.

She said the main thing now is for the government to listen to the people and include the views of protest movements in the political process, focus on rebuilding the nation's infrastructure, particularly the "awful" schools, and try to capitalize on oil and other resources while it can because the Iraqi people "deserve better."

Harith Hasan, a non-resident senior fellow at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, said the low turnout had favored some parties and hurt others.

Muqtada Al-Sadr's bloc was the biggest winner, taking more than 70 seats, followed by Mohammed Al-Halbousi's Progress Party, Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, and Nouri Al-Maliki's State of Law, all of whom won more than 30 seats. The most notable loser was the Fatah bloc, pro-Iranian Shiite parties with links to armed groups, affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd Al-Shaabi).



Iraq's populist cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr shows his ink-stained finger after casting his vote at a polling station in the central Iraqi shrine city of Najaf on Oct. 10, 2021. (AFP)

Hasan said Iran is the country with the biggest stake in the outcome of Iraq's election, because of the influence it exerts over its neighbor.

"The Iranians have three interests in Iraq," he explained. "The first is, of course, the ending of the US military presence and making sure there are no threats coming from Iraq.

"The second is maintaining the Hashd Al-Shaabi, and the third is keeping the Iraqi markets open for Iranian products."

Tehran would prefer an Iraqi government dominated by its allies, which they believe would secure their interests much better than a government dominated by Al-Sadr, Hasan said, but much will depend on who is responsible for Iraqi policy in President Ebrahim Raisi's government.

Hanaa Edwar, the founder and general secretary of the Iraqi Al-Amal

Association, a non-political, non-sectarian organization of volunteers that works to improve the lives of all Iraqis, said that if there is an effort to “really build an opposition for the first time inside the parliament,” that would be a positive first step.

“And if they really can confront cutting MPs’ privileges, materially and funding and so on, I think this is also something we can take into consideration as a positive step,” she added.

She said this will depend on how established national parties and MPs cooperate with new parties, as well as civil society, intellectuals and “the movement in the street,” which have a large role to play “in the development of this new era in the country.”



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UN condemns armed violence outside of state authority in Beirut

Thu, 2021-10-14 23:52

NEW YORK: UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Joanna Wronecka expressed deep concern over the people killed during clashes in Beirut on Thursday and condemned the use of “armed violence outside of state authority.”

In a statement, she underscored “the need for restraint, for maintaining calm and stability and ensuring the protection of civilians.”

At least six people were killed and dozens injured in Lebanon’s capital amid a protest organized by Hezbollah and its ally Amal movement against the judge who is investigating last year’s Beirut port explosion.

Tensions are high around the probe. Protesters accused Judge Tarek Bitar of being politically biased, but many Lebanese, including victims’ families, see him as an incorruptible judge, taking on a corrupt political elite.

Wronecka noted the “dangerous increase in polarization” in the context of the Beirut port explosion investigation. She also called on the Lebanese leaders to shoulder their responsibilities and place the interests of the country first at this critical juncture.

“Lifting Lebanon out of its current crisis and moving forward on reforms requires the efficient functioning of the state’s legislative, executive and judicial institutions,” Wronecka said.

“Now is the time for all sides to support judicial independence in the interest of the people.”

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reiterated the need for “an impartial, thorough and transparent investigation” into the explosion on Aug. 4, 2020, when some 2,750 tons of highly explosive ammonium nitrate blew up in the port of Beirut after being inadequately stored there since 2013. The blast killed more than 200 people and wounded thousands.

Guterres called on “all concerned to immediately cease acts of violence and to refrain from any provocative actions or inflammatory rhetoric,” spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters in New York.



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Six killed in Beirut clashes as tensions soar over port blast investigation
Lebanon president says people behind violence will be held accountable, PM announces day of mourning

[Pro-Iran militias warn of 'very cruel' response after Israeli strike on Palmyra](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-10-14 23:40

AMMAN: Iran-backed forces in Syria said on Thursday they would respond forcefully to an Israeli strike over Syria's Palmyra area in the province of Homs on Wednesday evening in the second such strike within a week.

The Syrian Defense Ministry said in a statement that one soldier was killed in the attack that took place at 11:34 p.m. (2034 GMT) and targeted a

communications tower and caused some material losses.

Israel has kept silent about the strikes that came days after Damascus reported its air defenses intercepted an Israeli missile attack above the Homs countryside, wounding six Syrian soldiers and causing some material damage.

Israeli missiles flew over Jordanian airspace above US forces based in the Tanf area at the Syrian-Iraqi border, the Syrian ministry statement said.

The latest strikes are part of an escalation of what has been a low-intensity conflict in recent years that has seen hundreds of Israeli raids whose goal was to slow down Iran's growing entrenchment in Syria, Israeli and regional military experts say.

Tehran-backed forces including Lebanon's Hezbollah have built a presence since deploying to help President Bashar Assad in the Syrian conflict that erupted in 2011.

A statement by the so-called operations room of Assad's Iran-backed allies said the response to the strike would be "very cruel," adding casualties would have been much higher had its forces not been well spread across the desert area.

"As a result of this attack a number of martyrs and injured from our Mujahedeen brothers have fallen," the statement said without elaborating.

"We have taken a decision to respond to this attack in revenge for the martyrs and the blood of the injured and the response will be very cruel," said the statement published on pro-Iranian news outlets whose authenticity Reuters verified.

A senior military source who requested anonymity said the strikes hit among other targets the T4 airbase where Iran-backed militias launched drone strikes in recent months against US bases in northern Syria.

The source said unidentified drones believed to be Israeli also hit this week Tehran-backed bases in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor along the Iraqi border, a strategic supply route for Iranian-backed militias who regularly send reinforcements from Iraq into Syria

Israel's Defense Minister Benny Gantz earlier last month accused Tehran of providing foreign militias with drone training at an airbase in Iran.

Two military sources familiar with the affair say the site that was hit on Wednesday was near a secret facility that Tehran was using to transfer "know-how" on unmanned aerial vehicles technology.

The Palmyra area where the strikes were conducted is close to a major concentration of Russian bases and where its troops conducted in recent days maneuvers with Syrian troops, military experts say.

Israel wants Iranian and Iran-backed forces kept away from its border and

more broadly, removed from Syria entirely.



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Syrian war monitor says Israeli strike near Palmyra kills 9

[Tunisia's President Saied revokes predecessor's passport](#)

Author:

Associated Press

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Thu, 2021-10-14 22:27

TUNIS: Tunisia's President Kais Saied said Thursday he had decided to withdraw the diplomatic passport of his predecessor Moncef Marzouki. Tunisian media suggested that Saied was irked by Marzouki's demands that France end its support for the Tunisian government. The decision on the passport was made public in a communique.

"Some have gone abroad to undermine the interests of Tunisia," Saied said, referring to Marzouki who was president from 2011 to 2014.

Days ago, Marzouki participated in a demonstration while in Paris, during which he had urged French decision-makers “not to endorse a totalitarian system.”

In July, Saied sacked Tunisia’s prime minister, suspended parliament and assumed executive authority, saying it was because of a national emergency. His critics called it a coup.

Last month, Saied issued presidential decrees bolstering the already near-total powers he had granted himself.



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Thousands protest against Tunisia leader Kais Saied

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may be stepped up in wake of Iraqi elections: Experts

Thu, 2021-10-14 21:45

ANKARA: Turkish and Iraqi counterterrorism operations to eliminate Daesh from the region could be stepped up following parliamentary elections and the recent capture of one of the group's senior leaders, experts have claimed.

A recent joint intelligence operation between the two countries in northwestern Syria led to the apprehension by Iraqi security forces of Sami Jasim, deputy to the late former Daesh leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

An Iraqi national, Jasim was also known to be a close aide to the current leader of the terror group, Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al-Quraishi. Turkey's influence in Syria's northwest, where for years it has had troop observation points, and its close ties with rebels in the region helped in the success of the operation.

A number of Iraqi Daesh members hiding in the region are believed to have been inspiring group affiliates in other war-torn countries such as Afghanistan.

Analysts now reckon that closer cooperation between Ankara and Baghdad would not only help eradicate the last remnants of Daesh but establish a new layer of trust between Turkey and the US on counterterrorism issues.

America had offered \$5 million for information on Jasim and considered him as being "instrumental in managing finances for ISIS' (Daesh) terrorist operations."

Last year, Turkey's Financial Crimes Investigation Board signed a deal with its Iraqi counterpart Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism.

Goktug Sonmez, director of security studies at Ankara-based think-tank Orsam, said Turkey's Iraq policy was primarily focused on counterterrorism.

He told Arab News: "Initially this focus was limited with the fight against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and then it was expanded to the counterterrorism efforts against Daesh with Turkey becoming an integral part of the global coalition to fight against it."

Parliamentary elections were held in Iraq on Oct. 10, and experts think the result of the elections will have direct repercussions on counterterrorism efforts depending on regional alliances.

Sonmez said: "Pro-Iranian Shiite segments have emerged as the biggest loser of the elections, while the Kurdistan Democratic Party significantly increased its share of votes. Following the election results, Ankara may boost its anti-Daesh operations with Iraqi central government.

“With the decrease of Iranian influence on Iraq, such cooperation between the two countries may also contribute to Washington’s efforts to sustain its links of alliance with the region.

“Both Gulf countries and Turkey can help the Baghdad government in this process by using the security card as a sustainable avenue of cooperation.

“From the perspective of military assistance and security collaboration, I expect Turkey will further provide Iraq with new military equipment for better identifying Daesh hideouts,” he added.

In August, Iraqi Defense Minister Juma Anad Saadoun announced that his country was considering buying Turkish drones, T129 tactical reconnaissance and attack helicopters, and electronic military hardware.

“Turkey has so far compiled a very comprehensive list of tens of thousands of foreign fighters who are or may be linked with Daesh. Following the recent elections, Turkey and Iraq can deepen their counterterrorism efforts based on Ankara’s strong documentation about the Daesh network in its neighborhood,” Sonmez said.

Turkey recently arrested several Daesh members on its home soil. In mid-September, security forces arrested three people in southern Turkey with alleged links to Daesh and the PKK, along with several documents and digital materials.

“Turkey’s domestic operations against Daesh go hand-in-hand with its cross-border operations. The data that Turkish security officials have obtained and the networks that have been uncovered with such operations have helped authorities in revealing the jihadists’ foreign contacts in countries of the region,” Sonmez added.

Between 2014 and this year, Turkey carried out more than 5,855 operations against Daesh, capturing and arresting more than 1,200 of the group’s members.

Meanwhile, Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization and police have arrested eight people, including two Iranian spies, over an attempt to kidnap a former Iranian soldier, state-run Anadolu Agency reported on Wednesday.



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