

## BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Marred by two terror attacks during the campaign, Britain's snap general election yesterday decided who shapes the United Kingdom's future as it leaves the European Union. Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May, who came to power without a national vote last year after David Cameron's resignation, called the election three years early after just one year in charge.

## WHY IS THE ELECTION IMPORTANT?

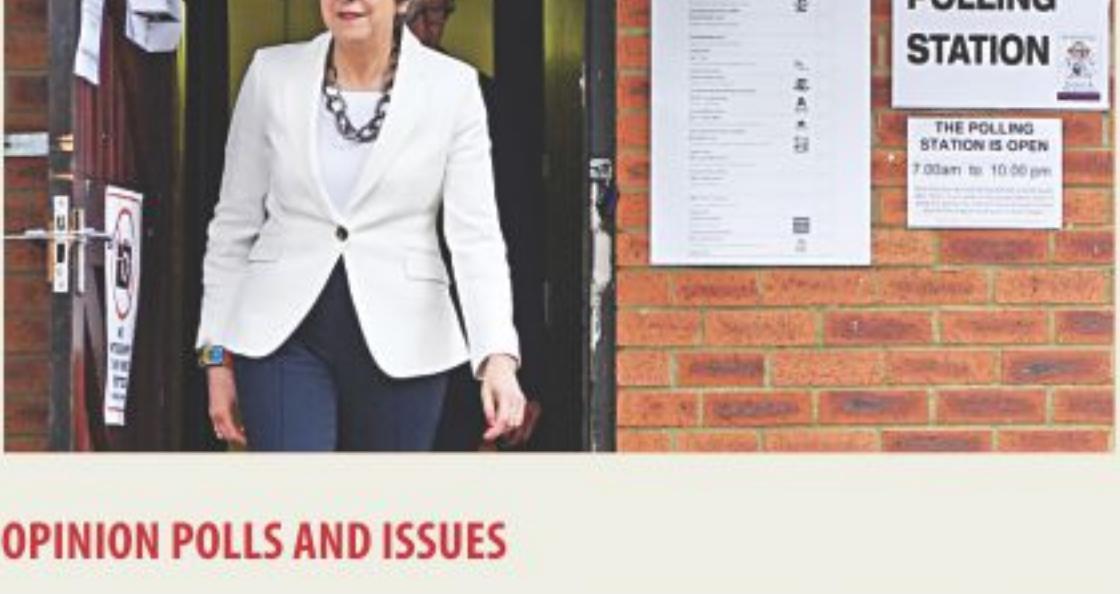
The vote will determine who gets to negotiate Britain's departure from the EU over the next two years, and the strength of mandate that the government will have in parliament for five years. Britain's new leader will also have to deal with the aftermath of a terror rampage in a nightspot hub in London on Saturday night, the third Islamist attack in the country in less than three months. It holds veto power at the United Nations, where it is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council along with China, France, Russia, the United States.

## HOW DOES THE ELECTION WORK?

There are 650 constituencies across the UK, meaning 326 MPs are needed for an absolute majority in parliament's lower House of Commons. May had a slim working majority of 17 at the dissolution of the last parliament and called the election in a bid to strengthen her position going into the Brexit talks. Each constituency is won on a first-past-the-post basis, meaning the candidate with the most votes in that seat becomes its MP. Despite the focus on the party leaders, voters are not directly choosing their prime minister, only their local MP. A parliament is elected for a maximum of five years.

## VOTING

The polls are open from 7:00am (0600 GMT) until 10:00pm (2100 GMT) on June 8. There are around 47 million registered voters. British, Irish and Commonwealth residents aged 18 and over can vote, plus British citizens living abroad who have been registered to vote in the UK within the last 15 years. Citizens must register to vote and voting is not compulsory.



## OPINION POLLS AND ISSUES

Polls suggest the Conservatives are on course for victory. However, Labour might be able to form a government with backing from smaller left-wing parties. The main issues are Brexit, terrorism, the state-run National Health Service, immigration and the economy, according to polls.

## WHAT HAPPENS AFTERWARDS?

The vote-counting begins immediately after the polls close and by dawn on June 9 the picture of who has won should be clear. As soon as possible, the head of state, Queen Elizabeth II, asks the person most likely to command the confidence of the Commons to become prime minister and form an administration. This will typically be the leader of the largest party and would happen only once the likely nature of the government is clear. Parliament meets on June 13 to elect a new speaker and swear in MPs. The state opening of parliament by Queen Elizabeth takes place on June 19. The Brexit negotiations are also due to start in the week beginning June 19.

SOURCE: AFP



A police officer stands on duty outside a polling station in Tower Hamlets, London, Britain, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Israel advances settlement plans despite Trump plea

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has advanced plans for more than 3,000 homes in West Bank settlements this week, despite US President Donald Trump's call to hold back on such projects as he seeks ways to restart peace efforts.

Israel pushed forward with the plans as it also marked 50 years since the Six-Day War, fought from June 5-10, 1967 and which began its continuing occupation of the West Bank.

A total of 3,178 housing units were advanced in a number of different settlements, the Peace Now NGO that tracks settlement growth told AFP on Thursday.

They are the first new settlement announcements since Trump's visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories last month, when he tried to encourage both sides back to the negotiating table.

Trump has called on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to hold back on settlement building for now, but the right-wing Israeli leader has been under intense pressure from settler leaders.

The powerful settler movement wields heavy influence in Netanyahu's right-wing governing coalition.

On Tuesday, a defence ministry

planning committee advanced 1,500 units, while more than 900 more were added on Wednesday, Peace Now said.

In a separate process, 688 homes were advanced by the committee late on Wednesday and will now go out for a 60-day public comment period during which objections can be filed.

The plans are at various stages in the process and the units are in a number



of settlements across the West Bank.

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas condemned the plan for the new housing units.

More than 600,000 Israelis live in settlements in the West Bank, including in annexed east Jerusalem.

They live alongside some three million Palestinians.

Settlements are considered illegal

under international law and are seen as a major obstacle to peace and the so-called two state solution -- the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Israel blames Palestinian incitement and intransigence for the ongoing conflict.

While the majority of the planned homes are in pre-existing settlements, some will be built in the first new official settlement in some 25 years, Peace Now said.

Last month, Trump visited Israel and the Palestinian territories, meeting both Netanyahu and Abbas as he seeks what he has called the "ultimate deal".

However, Trump has given no details about how he plans to restart talks, and there is deep scepticism over whether such an effort would have any chance of success.

Netanyahu has said he still supports a two-state solution, but peace advocates say his actions show otherwise.

The Palestinians have previously demanded a settlement freeze as a precondition to returning to negotiations, but there have been suggestions Abbas has dropped this since Trump came to power.

## Trump battles to save presidency

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump has faced down a litany of scandals in his nearly 71 years, surviving bankruptcy, divorce, lawsuits and vulgar exposures.

But less than six months into his White House tenure, he finds himself locked in his toughest fight yet -- the battle to save his presidency.

Former FBI director James Comey appeared in the Senate and testify under oath that, before he was fired, Trump urged him to shelve a major counter-espionage investigation and demanded his "loyalty".

That has opened the door to allegations the president may have obstructed justice, which could possibly lead to impeachment charges.

Pundits and punters will argue the legal merits of those allegations long after Comey's must-see testimony.

But the ultimate judgment will be political and for now, the odds are stacked in Trump's favor.

Only Congress can prosecute a sitting president and Republicans -- even those who reluctantly backed Trump and decry him in private -- are loath to commit political fratricide and oust a democratically-elected president without a cast iron reason.

Trump seems determined to put that support to the test.

He enters this political battle armed with a street-fighting temperament that has proven as much a liability as an asset



for his presidency.

For the last 150 or so days, Trump has lurched from crisis to crisis, tweeting away his public support and increasingly alienating allies who hold his political fate in their hands.

Inside the White House, aides describe a miasma of frustration, anger and resentment as Trump undermines his staff and rips up plans with unscripted remarks or Twitter outbursts.

That tendency was on display Wednesday. At 7:44 am, Trump announced the nomination of Christopher Wray to replace Comey as his FBI director.

White House press secretary Sean Spicer and his deputy Sarah Huckabee Sanders were kept in the dark, officials said, and it took them hours to catch up and make the case for Trump's pick. Top Republicans including House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate leader Mitch McConnell were not told of Wray's nomination when they visited Trump at the White House the day before, according to sources familiar with the meeting.

To Washington watchers, the steadily ebbing loyalty among those in the West Wing and on Capitol Hill is almost palpable. Trump believes his bareknuckle style plays to his base -- something that is much needed with a recent poll showing his approval rating hovering just above 30 percent.

It remains to be seen whether that will be enough. Through unpopular outbursts, and by bucking his staff and Republicans allies during a crisis, he may be kicking away a pillar holding up his increasingly fragile presidency.

## Chinese exam authorities use drones to catch cheats

REUTERS, Beijing

Chinese education authorities have gone high-tech to catch cheaters as millions of high-school students take their "gaokao", the annual university entrance exam seen as key to landing a lucrative white-collar job.

So high are the stakes and so competitive is the exam that some students resort to cheating.

Over the years, students have used wireless cheating devices disguised as erasers, belts and watches. Some also use tiny earpieces to communicate with accomplices helping them outside the exam room.

The innovations have forced authorities to step up their game in response.

Exam centres this year have deployed metal detectors, facial and fingerprint recognition technology, cellphone-signal blockers, wireless detectors and even drones in their fight to root out cheating, media reported.

Even before the exam kicked off in earnest on Tuesday, security officers had arrested 52



people nationwide. Cheaters and their accomplices face up to seven years in jail.

Universities in Shandong province have banned students from taking leave on Tuesday and Wednesday, to prevent any of them from posing as real exam takers, the official Xinhua news agency said on Wednesday.

Cheating is more common for papers that include multiple choice questions such as mathematics and English.

Some papers, however, such as essay-writing, confound the cheats.

Essay-writing is an important section of the Chinese paper, and topics vary from province to province.

In Beijing, students this year had to write about either their vision of China in 2049, the centennial of the foundation of the People's Republic of China, or about relationships.

Students in nine provinces were told to introduce China to foreigners using key words like "Belt and Road initiative", "biking sharing", "high-speed railway" or "mobile payment", in a test of their knowledge of economic trends.



Iraqis stand in line to receive food aid in western Mosul's Zanjili neighbourhood on Wednesday, during ongoing battles as Iraqi forces try to retake the city from Islamic State (IS) group fighters.

PHOTO: AFP

## Eiffel Tower turns off light for Iran

AFP, Paris

The Eiffel Tower will turn its lights out on Thursday as a mark of respect for the victims of deadly twin attacks in Tehran, which were claimed by the Islamic State group.

"Tonight, at midnight, the Eiffel Tower will turn off its lights in homage to the victims of the attacks in Tehran. Paris and Parisians stand in solidarity" with the victims, Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo said on Twitter.

Wednesday's attacks at Tehran's parliament complex and the shrine of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini killed 17 people and wounded more than 50.

They were later claimed by IS, the first the group has claimed inside Iran.

Iran said earlier Thursday that the five Iranians who carried out the killings had spent time in IS strongholds in Iraq and Syria.

The Eiffel Tower has turned out its lights, an iconic feature of Paris' nocturnal skyline, for several previous attacks, notably the Orlando shooting as well as last Saturday's attack in London which killed eight and for which IS also claimed responsibility.

The lights also went off last December in solidarity with besieged residents of the Syrian city of Aleppo, as well as in a show of respect for victims of the March 2016 Brussels bombings and the November 2015 Paris attacks.

The international coalition forces are working with use

## OFFENSIVE TO LIBERATE RAQA FROM JIHADISTS

## Fierce clashes in IS bastion

AFP, Qamishli

US-backed fighters yesterday battled the Islamic State group as they tried to push further into the jihadists' Syrian bastion Raqa, two days after finally entering the northern city.

The Syrian Democratic Forces alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters began the battle for the city earlier this week after seven months of fighting to surround the jihadist stronghold.

On Wednesday, an AFP journalist entered the city with SDF fighters and witnessed heavy clashes in the Al-Meshleb neighbourhood, with IS firing multiple mortar rounds towards the advancing forces.

He said part of the neighbourhood was under SDF control but US-led coalition planes were still carrying out strikes against IS fighters elsewhere in the district, one of the largest in Raqa.

IS fighters were armed mostly with light weapons including Kalashnikovs, and were also returning mortar fire on IS positions.

The SDF did not allow journalists to return to the city yesterday where fighting was continuing.

"Our troops are advancing in Al-Meshleb and control parts of it," SDF spokesman Talal Sello told AFP.

The international coalition forces are working with use

on the ground in the battle for Raqa in a highly effective manner," he added.

The US-led coalition said it had carried out 22 strikes near Raqa on Wednesday, hitting IS fighting positions and vehicles as well as a weapons cache and a training camp.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said the SDF now controlled around two-thirds of Al-Meshleb and was some 400 metres (yards) from the neighbouring Al-Senaya district.

"IS has snipers monitoring Al-Meshleb neighbourhood and has laid mines extensively throughout it," the Observatory said.

The group said the district had been emptied of its civilian population before the SDF entered, and IS had dug defensive trenches and tunnels in the area in a bid to hold off attacking forces.

Fighting was also continuing on the western outskirts of the city, the monitor said, adding that US special forces were actively participating in battles on several fronts.

Around 500 US military personnel, not all of them special forces, are believed to be participating in the battle for Raqa.

Captured by the jihadists in 2014, Raqa has become synonymous with IS atrocities including beheadings and public displays of bodies, and also emerged as a hub for planning attacks abroad.

## Iraqi Kurds set date for statehood vote

AFP, Arbil

Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region will hold a historic referendum on statehood in September, its presidency said Wednesday, despite opposition to independence from Baghdad and possibly beyond.

The decision to set the date for September 25 was made at a meeting attended by Kurdish leader Massud Barzani and representatives of the region's political parties, the presidency said in a statement.

"It will be on that day when the people of the Kurdistan region, as well as those living in the disputed areas, will cast their votes on whether they accept independence," it declared.

Often described as the world's largest stateless people after being denied their own country in the wake of World War I, Kurds are spread between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

The referendum sets the stage for what may be Iraq's first major crisis after the end of the operation to recapture Mosul from jihadists, which temporarily united rival Iraqi federal and Kurdish forces that will still be deployed in close proximity in the north.

Iraqi Kurds largely support the idea of an independent state, but a yes vote would only be the start of a contentious project that would face major internal and external challenges.

The region is made up of three provinces that are run by an autonomous regional government and protected by their own security services, providing the basis for a potential state.