

Fallujah's Kurds Flee

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A community displaced once before has to flee again to avoid being caught up in Baathist and Islamist resistance.

Hundreds of families from Fallujah who refused to join the fight against the United States military have sought refuge in the Kurdish area of Iraq.

At least 300 Kurdish families – perhaps 1,800 people in all – have fled the town and are now with friends or family in Sulaimaniyah, Arbil, Kirkuk, Kalar and Khanaqin, say Kurdish officials.

Some refugees were intimidated by accusations that they sided with the Americans, while others feared being driven by former Baathists, Iraqi Islamists, and foreign fighters to take part in the conflict.

"Most of our neighbours were Baathists and they wanted our men to resist the Americans," said Suraya Osman, 25, a Kurd born in Fallujah.

She and her family were living in the Jolan district, the scene of heavy fighting. Their house was destroyed in a United States bombing raid, so they moved to the house of her in-laws on another street.

"I noticed that all the surrounding houses had heavy machine-guns, mortars and rocket-launchers mounted on their roofs," said Osman.

She fled the city together with her husband and three children, and they are now staying with a relative in Kalar, about 150 kilometres north-east of Fallujah.

Osman's support for the US is unshaken by the destruction of her home. "How can we be against the Americans?" she asked. "They freed us from Saddam."

Her family was one of thousands expelled from their home in Kurdistan to central and southern regions of Iraq by the Baath regime in 1975, after the collapse of a Kurdish revolt. That was the first of several waves of deportations of Kurds with suspected ties to the separatist movement.

In Kalar alone, 140 families recently have registered with the Ministry of Human Rights, Internally Displaced and Anfal Victims, according to the ministry's director in Kalar, Aryan Rauf. He said there were many more in the cities of Sulaimaniyah, Kirkuk and Khanaqin, totalling about 300 families in all.

According to Rauf, most of the refugees are temporarily housed with families but the ministry is working with the Red Cross and Kurdistan Children's Nest, a local non-government organisation, to supply them with tents and blankets.

Othman Rahman, 61, is originally from the village of Shirwana outside Kirkuk, but has been working as a taxi driver in Fallujah since 1975.

"Our entire neighbourhood was Baathists and people from the former regime," he said. "They used to force us to help them and fight the US army."

Rahman says he will not return to Fallujah regardless of what happens.

"They hated us because they thought we brought the Americans into Iraq," he says. "They don't know that we believe that the US has given us back our country."

Raad Mahmoud, 25, spent four years of his life hiding from the former regime to avoid being drafted for military service. Since the fall of the regime he has been teaching English in Fallujah.

Now he is hiding in Kalar from various groups which wanted him to fight. He noted that various Islamic groups such as the members of the Wahhabi sect were active in the city.

"They were urging ordinary people and tribes to fight the United States, saying they [the US] are infidels and against Islam," he said.

In addition, Mahmoud saw Fallujah people being mobilised by "former regime elements who have lost everything they had, but maintained their personal connections with some of the people".

According to Mahmoud, they "had endless amounts of ammunition".

Mina Saeed, an elderly woman, fled Fallujah last week with her son's family. She says she witnessed the small child of a neighbour shot dead by fighters "just because he saluted the US planes flying overhead".

"When I saw this, I realised there is no life for us there," she said.

When shopkeeper Ali Hasan, 45, a shopkeeper, decided to leave Fallujah for good after the fighting started, a local Arab agreed to buy his land - but the man's friend talked him out of it.

"He told him that they would kick us out or kill us anyway and he could have the land for free," said Hasan. "And that's what happened."

Kurds who fled Fallujah are unanimous that it was getting too violent and threatening for them to remain.

"Living in Fallujah was getting very dangerous for us," said Suraya Osman.

"The Baathists used to threaten us with death even when our children had a fight in the streets," she said. "God knows what they would have done if we'd told them we wouldn't fight the Americans."

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