

## **Iraqi Insurgency Supporters Rally in Damascus**

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The Association of Muslim Scholars, an Iraqi Sunni group staunchly opposed to the United States-led occupation of Iraq, vowed in a conference in Damascus this week to continue fighting foreign soldiers in Iraq.

The association – made up of political, religious and tribal Sunni Iraqi figures – held a four-day conference that focused on ridding Iraq of US-led forces. The conference, which ended on July 28, was not organised by the Syrian government and Syrian officials did not attend. It was the first time that five-year-old association held its conference in Damascus.

The US and other western nations have accused Damascus of supporting terrorism in the Middle East, including aiding former Iraqi Ba'athists and insurgents that have carried out attacks in Iraq.

The association is a fundamentalist Sunni group whose power in Iraq has waned as Sunni groups have joined forces with the US to fight al-Qaeda and other radical organisations. Sunni Arabs largely boycotted Iraq's local council elections in 2005 and have limited political power as a result. But Sunnis – who held power in Baghdad under former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's regime – are expected to participate in new elections which the US is pushing to be held this year.

In the conference, the association remained steadfast in its support for the insurgency against the US presence in Iraq and the government in Baghdad, arguing that the Iraqi authorities are illegitimate because they were elected during an occupation.

“What was taken by force cannot be restored by any other means,” said Harith al-Dhari, the association's secretary-general.

He claimed that the majority of Iraqis “reject the occupation and believe in the option of resistance”.

Dhari, who has expressed opposition to al-Qaeda in Iraq, was re-elected to another two-year term at the conference.

Praising the insurgency as “brave”, Dhari predicted that resistance to foreign forces would spread throughout Iraq and accused some Iraqi leaders of promoting partition. Sunni Arabs have expressed concern that Kurds in the north and Shias in the south may break up the country if provinces are given substantial power under a federalist system.

While the association is known as a Sunni Arab group, conference participants included Iraqis from various backgrounds such as Kurds, Turkoman, Shias, Sunni Arabs and Yazidis.

Association spokesman Muhammed Bahsar al-Faidhi said the groups were uniting “to mobilise resistance as the only option to liberate the country”.

He said the association aimed to create a political and economic vision for the future of Iraq, and “build a patriotic army without partisan and sectarian nepotism”.

Jawad Al-Khalisi, secretary-general of the National Iraqi Founding Conference and a leading Shia anti-occupation figure, praised his countrymen for not being drawn into a civil war, claiming that the US had wanted conflict between Iraqi groups.

The president of the Southern Iraq Tribes Council, Kadhil Al-Anizan, said that over 120 tribes in Shia-majority southern Iraq were involved in fighting foreign forces and that only seven were not members of the anti-occupation council.

Kanan Amin, spokesman of the High Command of Jihad and Liberation, an alliance of several armed groups, said in an interview with the al-Basra website that more than thirty jihadi groups had united at the conference.

The participants downplayed US and Iraqi government claims that Iraq is stabilising and that the insurgency is running out of steam.

“I say to [our] enemies, ‘Do not be happy, for we are stronger today than any other time’,” said Al-Dhari. “We insist on continuing [our] struggle until full liberation of the country’s soil.”

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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