

Peace Summit May Bar Ba'athists and Radicals

Author: [Nasir Kadhim](#)

Conference delegates won't sit down to talk to groups they deem to be terrorists.

Iraqi politicians are pushing for the exclusion of former Ba'athists and representatives of extremist groups from a national conference in Cairo aimed at bringing stability to the country.

The gathering of Iraqi representatives in the Egyptian capital on November 19 is an Arab League-sponsored initiative to bring together different factions following a year of political turbulence and bloodshed.

The meeting, which comes a matter of weeks before parliamentary elections, will prepare the ground for a much larger reconciliation conference in Iraq next year.

The gathering is assuming huge importance because while the political process has moved forward in the last year or so, some fear that the country may be on the brink of civil war.

"We need someone who can take us out of this bloody quagmire," said Muhammad Hamza, a 36-year-old driver in Baghdad.

Like many here, he blames the US-led occupation for Iraq's woes, but also acknowledges that the insurgents bear some responsibility, "We know that there is an honourable resistance, but it has been misguided by terrorism. All that is happening in Iraq now is terrorism."

Political and religious leaders from several different Iraqi parties and groups have endorsed the Cairo conference but strongly opposed the inclusion of former Ba'athists and representatives of extremist groups. At least 60 figures, many of them government officials, have agreed to attend, reported al-Sabah newspaper.

Arab League vice-president Ahmed bin Hilli, who has yet to officially announce which parties will participate, is said to be pushing behind the scenes for Ba'athists to be present.

The league also has not indicated how it would host the preliminary conference without Iraq's most antagonistic groups.

"We will not accept that this conference become a platform for terrorism and for high-level Ba'athist officials of the former regime," Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'afari is reported to have told a press conference with visiting US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice.

Ba'athists are willing to participate, said Kamil al-Jabbouri, a former Ba'ath Party member. He said he is affiliated to a group of ex-party members that was contacted about taking part in the gathering. But he refused to identify his group or who contacted him.

"The path toward a secure Iraqi future will not be fulfilled without the Ba'athist involvement because they

are not a small part of the Iraqi society," maintained Jabbouri.

Representatives of parties invited to the gathering would not tell IWPR whether they would boycott the talks if ex-Ba'athists or Sunni extremists attended. However, they made it clear they would not sit down with groups they deem to be terrorists.

"Excluding the Ba'athists is more than fair," asserted Qasim al-Sahlany, a leader in Ja'afari's al-Dawa Party. "Why should those dwarfs be able to come back and spread their corruption? The Iraqi people are not willing to be ruled by tyranny and oppression again."

Sheikh Hamid Awda, a senior member of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, said the council would not hold reconciliation talks "with the terrorists and blood-suckers".

Many Sunni Arabs have refused to participate in Iraqi politics, claiming they've been marginalised by the new Iraqi political system that includes a Shia-dominated parliament and an autonomous Kurdistan. Fighting between Sunni Arab insurgents and US and Iraqi forces, together with a surge in extremist attacks this year, have crippled the country's security and economy.

Many Iraqis and their leaders were initially wary of the Arab League initiative, which secretary-general Amr Musa pressed during a five-day visit to Iraq last month. Musa's convoy was fired upon when he entered Baghdad, and he was criticised by leaders for not supporting Iraq and intervening in the country's crisis earlier. Some were also suspicious that the US was behind the initiative.

Musa managed, however, to win the support of sceptical Iraqi Kurdish and Shia leaders, including the rebel cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, as well as some Sunni Arab parties, notably the Sunni Arab Iraqi Islamic Party, which faced a backlash from some of its supporters after it backed Iraq's constitution in last month's referendum.

Ala al-Maki, a member of the Iraqi Islamic Party's politburo, expressed hope that the conference would end recent sectarian strife and unify Iraq. He said he had been disturbed by the assassination of Sunni Islamic scholars and the burning of Shia mosques.

Maki also maintained that it was important to include groups resisting the US occupation, such as Sadr's Mehdi militia. He did not comment on whether Ba'athists and representatives of radical groups should be included.

Communist Party spokesman Khalid al-Musawi welcomed the initiative, saying it "stretches helpful hands to the Iraqi people". But he maintained that Iraqis, not the Arab League, should determine who attends the conference, and insisted that body act as a mediator rather than push an agenda.

Tired of the violence, many on the street said they supported the conference.

Reflecting widely-held sentiments, Amir al-Janaby, a 22-year-old university student, said, "Iraq is wounded. The Arab League initiative is a peace initiative, even if (the league) proposed it late and did not stand with Iraq as terrorism killed its people."

Nasir Kadhim is an IWPR trainee journalist in Baghdad.

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