

## **Sunnis Aid Shia Stampede Survivors**

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Blood is flowing again in the Sunni heartland – but this time it’s being donated by people who want to help injured Shia compatriots.

Abdul-Jabbar al-Dulaimi expressed his sympathy with survivors of the stampede in Baghdad that killed about 1,000 people last week in the most practical way possible – by going to the Abdul-Aziz mosque in the Sunni heartland town of Fallujah to donate blood.

"With tearful eyes and broken hearts, we offer our heartfelt condolences to families of those martyred, whose souls have been elevated to God," said al-Dulaimi, a 26-year-old Sunni who spoke of the suffering of those he called his "Shia brothers".

Sunnis across Iraq have expressed similar sentiments following the August 31 tragedy in which a crowd of Shia pilgrims marking a holy day were panicked by fears a suicide bomber was in their midst. In the chaos, many were trampled to death on the bridge leading to the Shia shrine, while others were drowned after jumping into the river Tigris in desperation.

In addition to the fatalities, about 800 people were injured – and mosque leaders in Fallujah, located only 50 kilometres from Baghdad, as well as the other Sunni areas rose to the challenge, calling on local people to help with blood donations or other services. At least four of Fallujah’s biggest mosques were transformed into ad hoc blood donation centres.

"We can only offer our deep condolence to the families of the innocent martyrs, gone in the blink of an eye," said Sheikh Adul-Ghafur al-Dulaimi, imam or prayer leader at one of the city’s mosques, al-Furqan. He added that Sunnis and Shias should be united since all are enduring the same troubled times.

Many of the Sunnis interviewed by IWPR spoke of their sadness over the stampede casualties in the context of a broader alliance which they felt was needed to get US-led Coalition forces to leave Iraq.

"As our Shia brothers stood by us when we turned to them after the American assault on Fallujah, so today we should stand by them," said Aliya Muhsin, a 46-year old-housewife.

Mohammed al-Isawi, a 19-year-old Fallujah resident, rushed to the mosque nearest his home the moment he heard the calls for blood.

"This disaster must become an eternal torch and serve as a lesson for us," he said. "We Sunnis and Shias cannot descend into sectarianism, nor fall into the hands of those who call for it.

"This is an opportunity to unite our voices against the occupiers and dismiss them."

In Baghdad, Ahmed Abdul-Ghafur al-Samarai, the new head of the Sunni Endowment, the government body in charge of Sunni mosques across the country, suggested that if US forces had not been in Iraq, the tragedy would never have happened.

Prayers for the dead were held at Um al-Qura, a Sunni mosque in the capital, on September 2.

At another Sunni place of worship in Baghdad, the al-Kubaisi mosque in the Shurta neighbourhood, many in the congregation were in reflective mood.

"The catastrophe that our Shia brothers have undergone is a profound agony," said the imam, Sheikh Abdul-Sattar al-Kubaisi. "We must hope it's the last moment of grief."

One of the congregation, Faris Jamil, 38, said he thought the tragedy had been created deliberately by groups seeking to ignite conflict between Iraq's Shia and Sunni communities.

"We should prove the opposite," he said. "I hope the injured recover quickly and that they encourage the sons of those who were martyred to have patience."

Nasir Kadhim is an IWPR trainee.

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