

Western Iraqi Province Sides With Syrian Uprising

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Sunni-dominated Anbar province in aid fundraising drive in support of Syrian rebels.

Local leaders in the western Iraqi province of Anbar, bordering on Syria, have pledged humanitarian support for the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus.

The move follows last week's veto by China and Russia of a United Nations resolution condemning the Syrian crackdown in which, according to the UN, more than 5,000 people have been killed since unrest began in March 2011.

Activists in the Sunni Arab-majority province plan a number of measures including a campaign to collect aid donations and setting up a camp for those fleeing the violence.

Hundreds of people took to the streets of the provincial capital Fallujah this week, chanting slogans and waving banners in support of the demonstrators in Syria, and calling on Baghdad to sever relations with Damascus.

Hamid al-Hayis, a tribal leader who heads the Anbar Salvation Council, part of the American-backed Sahwa (Awakening) militia, said the protest reflected growing anger at developments in Syria.

"The Syrian people are being slaughtered every day," Hayis said. "People here will no longer remain silent. They have begun losing patience and are showing their frustration."

Commenting on the fundraising drive to help the Syrians, Hayis said, "This idea came up after tight security measures were imposed by Syrian border troops, making it difficult to deliver the food and medical aid which we have been sending into Syria over the past few months."

Anbar provincial council is also working on establishing a camp to cater for any influx of refugees across the border.

Sadun al-Shalan, the deputy head of Anbar's regional administration, told IWPR that the camp should be ready by the third week of February and would be designed to accommodate between 1,000 and 1,500 people, with food supplies, drinking water, medicine and all other essentials on hand.

This show of support in Anbar province could embarrass Baghdad.

In 2010, relations between the two countries soured when Baghdad accused Damascus of supporting al-Qaeda and Baathist insurgents, and recalled its ambassador. The relationship subsequently recovered, however, so that in December 2011, Iraq refused to approve the economic sanctions which the Arab League imposed on Assad's regime.

Many Sunni Iraqis suspect that Baghdad's sympathetic view of Damascus has a lot to do with Iranian influence in both capitals. But Iraqi government spokesman Tahsin al-Sheikhli rejects any suggestion of bias, insisting that Baghdad simply respects its neighbour's sovereignty.

"We regard what's going on in Syria as an internal matter," he told IWPR. "Just as we don't like others interfering in our affairs, we are not going to interfere in theirs."

Sheikhli did not comment directly on the aid effort in Anbar province, but reiterated that Iraq would not wish to do anything to destabilise Syria.

"We have traditional and economic relations with that country. In addition, instability in Syria would have a negative impact on Iraqi security," he said, adding that many Iraqi nationals were still living in Syria.

More than one million Iraqis left for Syria in the wake of the United States-led invasion in 2003.

Observers say the sympathy that Anbar residents have shown for the Syrian uprising cannot be solely attributed to fellow-feeling between Sunni Muslim communities, as other Sunni areas of Iraq have not mobilised in the same way. Instead, they argue, cross-border kinship is a major factor – many major Arab tribal groupings are represented in both Anbar and Syria.

As Shalan put it, "Regardless of political issues and the relationship between the two governments, Syrians are our relatives, we are from the same tribes, and it is our duty to help them."

Tribal loyalties and the obligations that come with them often take precedence over formal state

structures, experts say.

Social scientist Abdul Khaleq al-Shemmari said, “It is shameful for a man to refuse hospitality to another member of his clan, even if such hospitality might place his government in trouble. Tribal values are sacrosanct – it isn’t an option to dissent from these traditions.”

Shemmari noted that events in Anbar placed the Baghdad government in a difficult position.

“If it disagrees with its peoples’ traditions, it will lose their support,” he said. “But if it approves of its people’s actions, it will lose its regional allies.”

Abeer Mohammad is IWPR editor for Iraq.

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