

Support Gathers for Sunni Leader

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BAGHDAD, Nov 20 (IPS) – The arrest warrant issued last week by the Iraqi government for Sunni leader Dr. Harith al-Dhari has sent shockwaves through the government, and galvanised much of the Sunni population.*

Iraq's minister for the interior Jawad al-Bolani told reporters that al-Dhari was wanted for inciting terrorism and violence. At the same time, Vice-President Tariq al-Hashimi said the warrant was “destructive to the national reconciliation plan.”

Sixty-five-year-old Harith al-Dhari heads the influential Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), the leading Sunni religious leadership of Iraq. Al-Dhari is currently in Jordan; he left Iraq five months back for fear of personal safety. The AMS is known to have contacts with the Iraqi resistance, and has been opposed to the U.S. occupation and the U.S.-backed Iraqi government.

AMS has refused to participate in any political activity under the occupation, and has insisted on withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq so that elections and other activities would be “honest and transparent.”

Al-Dhari denounced the warrant for his arrest as “proof of the failure and confusion of the Iraqi government,” and suggested that Shia ministers were attempting to divert attention from security scandals that showed links between the militias and police.

The Shia-dominated government is seen by Sunnis as responsible for widespread killing of Sunnis through its ‘death squads’. Shias are the second largest denomination among Muslims, who believe that Prophet Muhammad's teachings were best propagated by his cousin Ali rather than a caliphate as believed by Sunnis. In Iraq Shias form about 60 percent of the population of 25 million. The minority Sunnis had been dominant under the regime of Saddam Hussain, a Sunni Muslim.

Al-Dhari called on Iraqis to be patient and not get dragged into such “conspiracies.” He said he would attend a court if government officials also came before the same court to be questioned for crimes against the Iraqi people. But Sunni parties are now threatening to withdraw from the unstable government.

The move by the Iraqi government has angered many Shias as well. The Shia movement al-Khalissiya, led by Sheikh Jawad al-Khalissi in Baghdad, has opposed the arrest warrant. The group is also opposed to the occupation, together with the AMS and other leaders who are a part of the Iraqi Foundation Conference.

“It was a silly warrant that will only increase anger against a corrupt government,” al-

Khalissi stated on al-Sharqiya satellite channel. Al-Khalissi went on to praise Dhari for defending Iraqis regardless of their sect or religion.

Other groups are also supportive of the Sunni leader. "Al-Dhari is the main Sunni figure, and his association is considered the main Sunni representative in the region," Talal Saied, a member of the Communist Party told IPS in Baghdad. "He was officially invited by most governments in the region to visit their countries as a recognised leader, although he did not represent any government office. He never talked for the Sunni sect alone and always forbade sectarian killings against all Iraqis."

Harith al-Dhari inherited some of his reputation from his grandfather Sheikh Dhari who led the resistance against the British occupation of Iraq in the early 20th century. Sheikh Dhari killed Lt. Col. Gerald Leachman of the British army who was sent to Fallujah to quell rising resistance.

Harith al-Dhari's continuous opposition to the occupation has made him the enemy of the United States and its Iraqi collaborators, while earning him widespread respect from most Sunni and many Shia political and religious leaders.

Former Iraqi interim prime minister Iyad Allawi, who has known ties to the CIA, has also condemned the warrant against Dhari.

Sheikh Ali Karbalaai, spokesman for Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, severely criticised the warrant and called on the government to recognise the dangers of such acts against the solidarity and security of the Iraqi people.

On the other hand, the Shia parties in power and their officials who have often been accused of being loyal to Iran have led a harsh attack on al-Dhari, and accused him of provoking sectarian problems. These groups have been supported by President Jalal Talibani and the Kurdish parties.

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