

Blood unites Iraqis

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*Despite the violence that continues to rip communities apart across Iraq, civil society organisations are coming together in the search for a better future, writes **Nermeen Al-Mufti** in Baghdad*

Last Sunday, only one day before the Eid Al-Adha holiday, was one of the bloodiest days that Iraq has seen in recent months, with 13 car bombs and many road-side bombs being detonated in the central and southern provinces of the country, killing and wounding dozens of people, among them many women and children.

While the Iraqi security forces announced a code red alert for the Eid, the UN declared September to have been the bloodiest month in Iraq since 2008, with 979 people having been killed across the country.

The violence has been targeting mosques, markets, cafés and schools. The first day of the Eid began with more than 10 people killed and 28 wounded when an IED exploded as worshippers were leaving the Al-Quds mosque in Kirkuk after finishing prayers.

In order to protest against the ongoing violence, Dary for Relief and Medical Care, an NGO, has begun a campaign entitled “To be United through our Blood — Donate to Save your Brother,” the aim of which is not only to provide blood for the country’s blood banks but also to indicate that there are no real sectarian, religious and ethnic differences among Iraqis.

Donating blood is a way of expressing solidarity with the rest of the nation.

A group of young Iraqis have organised the work of the NGO, and though their sects, religions and ethnicities may be known through their names they refuse to answer questions regarding their origins. The only answer they give to such questions is that “we are all Iraqis.”

The first round of the campaign took place in the well-known Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad, and these young Iraqis managed to collect 400 donors with the help of a number of activists and volunteers who believe in peace and humanity.

The second round took place in a car park in one of Baghdad’s mixed neighbourhoods, and here too they managed to collect hundreds of donors.

Young activist Ahmed Agha, who volunteered for this noble task, said that “the purpose of the campaign is to provide a reserve blood supply for hospitals in Baghdad and other Iraqi provinces in cooperation with the Ministry of Health.”

He added that Iraqis were being targeted every day by terrorism, thousands were dying or being injured every month, and that every effort should be made to help the victims of terrorism and to spread the spirit of citizenship among Iraqis.

The idea began three years ago during the bloody sectarian war in the country that killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. According to Agha, it was at this time that “we began working on this idea, and though we had to confront many obstacles we eventually found many specialised health workers who supported it.”

Miaad Khudayir Shimmery, then a medical student at Baghdad University and now a doctor, was among the first to support the idea. Agha added that “we worked together for months to set up an NGO that would provide eight health programmes for the poor. Many young Iraqis, both men and women, volunteered to work with us. Our first programme is to provide blood reserves for hospitals suffering from shortages because of the violence.”

“We have been publicising our work through Facebook, Twitter, on public transportation and among our own families, relatives and friends. We now have a list of 400 donors who are ready to donate blood at any time, day and night.”

Dary is financed by membership fees of \$20 paid by every member. But despite their commitment, these young Iraqis still face many obstacles, some of them put in their way by the country’s politicians, and they suffer from an absence of governmental support.

To continue their work, Agha said, they need the support of the Iraqi Ministry of Health, the UN and international organisations working in the healthcare field. The group does not accept financial support from political parties because these do not give their support without conditions.

Despite the daily obstacles, Dary activists are proud of their humanitarian work to bring about a present and future Iraq that is not crippled by sectarian and ethnic differences.

Another group of young Iraqis are trying to do their best for the country by uniting the efforts of young Turkmen. Ali Turkmen Bayatli, one of the group’s leaders, is working with a group of other Turkmen to hold a conference in Baghdad.

“We are a group of young Turkmen who are not involved in politics, and we are looking for ways to go beyond the stumbling blocks that are dividing Iraq. We are independent, finance ourselves, and do not intend to repeat the faults committed by the politicians,” he said.

Although these young Turkmen are clear about the work they want to do, some Iraqi politicians, especially those who have gained from the power-sharing established in the country, are against them, thinking that they have their eyes on the March 2014 elections.

“We are not after parliamentary or any other political posts,” Bayatli said, adding that “through uniting the efforts of the young Turkmen we can save the future of the community and help protect the unity of Iraq.”

On their Facebook page, these young Turkmen have declared themselves to be against sectarianism and have said that they do not belong to any political party. The organisers are also spending hours explaining the targets of the forthcoming conference.

The Turkmen are the third largest ethnic group in Iraq, they say, and the first to raise the

unity of Iraq as a slogan in April 2003. For Bayatli and his colleagues, the forthcoming Turkmen conference in Baghdad will help to show the contribution of young Turkmen in deciding their country's future.

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