

Shiites deported from Gulf lament injustice

By Kareem Shaheen

BEIRUT: When Hassan Alayan was summoned to the immigration authorities in the United Arab Emirates, he was not prepared for what happened next. After 27 years in the UAE Alayan, a Lebanese Shiite, was asked to leave the country.

“Can they compensate me for 27 years?” he asked.

Alayan was told to leave back in 2009. Now he heads a committee representing Lebanese citizens deported from the UAE, and worries that more members of the Lebanese Shiite community in the Gulf will be expelled as a result of new sanctions levied by the Gulf States against Hezbollah.

Hezbollah fought alongside the Syrian regime in the border province of Qusair, prompting condemnation from the Gulf Cooperation Council, which pledged to impose sanctions on the party and target its financiers in the region.

Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah responded by dismissing the allegations, claiming that the party had no presence in the Gulf.

Recent reports alleged that Qatar had deported Lebanese citizens, though the country’s new emir said in a recent meeting with President Michel Sleiman that they would not be targeted for expulsion.

“If Hezbollah did something that they find unacceptable, what do the others from the same sect have to do with it?” said Alayan, who is representing a total of 400 families, all of them Shiites, deported since 2009.

He said there were many more who did not contact his committee for fear of causing problems for their families who remain in the Gulf.

“It is a collective death sentence, in the emotional sense,” he said.

Alayan argues that there is a deliberate targeting of Shiites, particularly in the UAE, as a way of putting pressure on the “economic nerve” of a community that supports Hezbollah.

But he said that the governments of the GCC ought to make distinctions.

“Not everybody is with Hezbollah or the Amal movement,” he said, echoing a statement made by several current and former Shiite residents in the Gulf.

He denied that any of those deported represented a security threat, saying they would have been held in custody and interrogated rather than be sent back to Lebanon.

He pointed to the fact that the UAE had recently held a trial for a group of detainees accused of trying to undermine the regime.

“If I’m accused for security reasons I should be arrested and interrogated,” he said.

Ali Faour, a doctor who lived in the UAE for nearly 20 years before being deported in mid-2009, agrees that the issue has nothing to do with security.

“Hezbollah does not have centers or companies or economic activity in the Gulf,” Faour said.

“Not every Shiite is Hezbollah.”

Faour said the deportations amounted to discrimination that violates international treaties.

“They are judging a human being on a sectarian basis,” he said. “This is alien to our culture.”

Faour said he regrets trying to build a future in the Gulf only to be told to leave for no clear reason:

“My feeling is that I picked the wrong country to spend my youth in.”

Ali Farhat is a more recent deportee. After 15 years working at a restaurant in the city of Al-Ain in the UAE, he was told to go back to Lebanon. He arrived just under two months ago.

“Orders from above,” he said, referring to the explanation given to him by the authorities.

Farhat said that members of the community were constantly worried they would have their residency permits revoked.

“For a while we have been living there, stressed, knowing that we were going to leave,” he said. “Just waiting for a phone call.”

Farhat, who has one daughter, said that many of his friends were also deported and that he believed Shiites were being specifically targeted.

“They assume we are with [Hezbollah],” he said. “If we were with them we wouldn’t have left.”

He said that none of his friends had a relationship with Hezbollah, and that some of them were not religious enough to pray.

Though he expects the number of deportees to increase with the announced crackdown by the GCC, Farhat dismissed the possibility that he was deported for security reasons.

“Someone who was never stopped once by a police car in 15 years, what kind of security issue does he have?” he said.

Alayan, who runs the committee representing deportees, said the Lebanese state had done nothing to rehabilitate recent arrivals from the Gulf or provide them with social support. Efforts to discuss the issue with the UAE have come to naught.

But for Farhat, the issue is more real than politics.

“I worked in the same place for 15 years, they were like my brothers there,” he said. “But what can I do?”

“I lived with them for 15 years – it’s not a game.”

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