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Intellectuals seek focus on human rights

By Gareth Smyth in Beirut

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A group of Arab intellectuals will on Monday publish an appeal to their governments to press for the removal of Saddam Hussein to avoid a war that "threatens with catastrophe the peoples of the region".

But the petition also seeks to shift international emphasis from Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction to its human rights record.

It calls for "the rule of democracy in Baghdad, and for the stationing across Iraq of human rights monitors from the United Nations and the Arab League".

The call has been endorsed by 30 leading signatories, including Edward Said, the Palestinian author, Yusri Nasrallah, the Egyptian film-maker, Sadik al Azm, philosophy professor in Damascus, and Abdallah Yusuf Sahar-Muhammad, professor of international relations at Kuwait University.

Arab public opinion, more or less reflected by Arab governments, is against US strikes on Iraq. At the same time the Arabs - including the Iraqi opposition to Mr Hussein - are concerned that the US has not clarified what kind of regime it wants to install in Baghdad.

"Despite all the assurances [from the US] about involving the opposition and wanting representative government in Iraq, the tangible results are not there," said Hamid Bayati, a senior official in the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the main Shia Muslim opposition group.

Chibli Mallat, the Lebanese lawyer who drafted the Arab intellectuals' petition, said he hoped it would attract more signatures next week and then be presented by dissident Iraqis to the UN Security Council.

"If Saddam isn't forced to flee, there will surely be a war. But it must be a war for Iraq and not a war on Iraq," he said. "It must be to secure the rights of the Iraqi individual."

The call is likely to receive a mixed reaction from the Iraqi opposition. Hoshiyar Zebari, a leading official in the Kurdistan Democratic party, expressed scepticism that Mr Hussein would ever resign, despite apparent recent pressure from Saudi Arabia.

"The talk of asylum originated in Baghdad," he said.

"The idea is to buy time, a tactic to postpone the conflict. Saddam will never leave Iraq."

But Mr Zebari said the Kurdish parties controlling northern Iraq would welcome human rights monitors and would support their introduction across the rest of the country. "For 10 years we have wanted the struggle to be about human rights as well as weapons of mass destruction."