

**Iraq mosque bombing kills seven worshippers**  
**Reporting By Raheem Salman; editing by Patrick Markey, Reuters**  
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A bomb explosion killed at least seven people and wounded 25 in front of a Sunni Muslim mosque in Iraq's Diyala province as worshippers were leaving after Friday prayers, police and medics said.

A surge of attacks by Sunni Islamists have targeted Shi'ite Muslims this year in growing sectarian confrontation, although officials say insurgents also hit Sunni religious sites as part of their campaign.

The bomb went off near the gate of the mosque, targeting worshippers and enveloping the mosque in white smoke. Witnesses said shoes and pieces of clothes were scattered outside.

"We were about 250 worshippers, we were just leaving when the explosion went off. Police were not protecting the mosque and people had to be taken to hospital in cars," Ahmed al-Karkhi, one of the wounded, told Reuters by telephone.

Iraq still struggles with tensions among its Shi'ite majority and Sunni and ethnic Kurds who make up a fragile government. Sunni insurgents and Shi'ite militias killed thousands in 2006-2007 when the bombing of an important Shi'ite shrine triggered sectarian mayhem.

"The main reason to hit mosques is to incite the sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shi'ites," said Sheikh Asaad al-Mahsayki, a local council member. "Sunni armed groups began to target the mosques to create tension."

Sunni Islamist insurgents tied to al Qaeda have stepped up their campaign of attacks this year with a string of suicide bombing attacks on Shi'ites and on security forces. Car bombs hit five Shi'ite mosques in Baghdad last month.

Al Qaeda's local wing, Islamic State of Iraq, has said it will keep up attacks and security officials say the group is gaining ground and recruits in the western desert bordering Syria, thanks in part to a boost from the neighboring war.

Al Qaeda in Iraq this week announced it had merged with the al Nusra Front fighting against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria where an increasingly sectarian war is stirring up Iraq's own delicate mix of Shi'ite, Sunni and ethnic Kurdish.

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