



## Al Qaeda claims Iraq attacks, Baghdad anti-terrorism HQ assault



By Raheem Salman\

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BAGHDAD (Reuters) - Iraq's al Qaeda affiliate has claimed responsibility for a wave of attacks across the country in June and July it said were part of a new offensive against the Shi'ite-led government.

Once at the heart of the insurgency against U.S. troops in Iraq, al Qaeda now targets mainly Shi'ites and local security forces in an attempt to stir up the kind of sectarian tensions that drove Iraq to the edge of civil war four years ago.

Though weakened by years of fighting American and Iraqi forces, security experts say the al Qaeda wing has gained new life from the Syrian turmoil next door, which is drawing funds and Sunni Islamist fighters to its cause.

Al Qaeda's local wing, the Islamic State of Iraq, said in a statement on a radical Islamist website the latest attacks were part of a new offensive declared by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who has also threatened U.S. targets.

At the start of the month, two car bombs exploded near the Baghdad counter-terrorism unit holding al Qaeda prisoners, killing at least 19 people, before gunmen wearing suicide vests stormed the building to try and free fellow insurgents.

Only after a gun battle were security forces able to reclaim control of the building. All the gunmen were killed in the fighting, which Iraqi authorities blamed on al Qaeda.

### INSURGENTS STILL A THREAT

"A group of believers from the Sunni people launched an operation targeting a building of the Safavid project and a pillar of its security in this country, the headquarters of the anti-terrorism directorate," the statement said.

Safavid is a reference to the ruling dynasty of Shi'ite Iran from the 16th to 18th centuries which at times also controlled parts of modern-day Iraq.

Since Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki came to office, Iraq has edged closer to Iran which is influential over several Iraqi Shi'ite parties.

A group of al Qaeda prisoners earlier this month also tried to tunnel out of Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison.

Al Qaeda in Iraq and other Sunni Islamists are hostile to Iraq's Shi'ite-led government which many minority Sunnis feel has sidelined them from power-sharing agreements since the fall of Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein.

Six Sunni Islamist insurgent groups are still active in Iraq since the last American troops withdrew in December, including former members of Saddam's Baathist party. Insurgent groups often work together in a network of loose alliances, making tracking violence complex, security officials say.

July was the bloodiest month in the last two years with 325 people killed in bombings and attacks.

Iraq's violence is sharply down since the height of the war in 2006-2007 when sectarian slaughter killed tens of thousands of Iraqis. But insurgents have still been capable of carrying out at least one major, complex bombing a month since December.

(Writing by Patrick Markey in Baghdad; Editing by [Barry Malone](#) and Jon Hemming)

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