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Maliki Cracks Down on Shi'ite Rival: 45 Killed In Karbala Clash

By Jason Ditz

July 2, 2014

After a bloody crackdown on Sunni Arabs, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki saw violence soar for months, and most of the Sunni portion of the nation now taken over by ISIS. Kurdistan, likewise, is one foot out the door to secession.

The lesson apparently unlearned, Maliki's forces attacked the offices of a popular cleric in the Shi'ite holy city of Karbala today, aiming to arrest him for public criticism of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's call to arms to fight the rebels.

Major fighting ensued with a militia loyal to the cleric, Mahmoud al-Sarkhi, and at least 45 people have been killed already. The military has put Karbala on full lockdown, and Sarkhi escaped by the time the military finally broke into his house.

What with Karbala being the most important city in Shi'a Islam, the fighting sparked a major reaction across Iraq's Shi'ite territory, which is to say the only territory Iraq has left. Pro-Sarkhi fighters attacked a police station in Diwaniyah, while protesters blocked major roads in the southern port of Basra.

Sarkhi has a long history of running afoul of the mainstream religious leaders in Iraq and Iran, and in 2007 supporters of his actually attacked the Iranian Consulate in Basra to protest

unfavorable coverage of his sermon on Iranian TV. Still, with Iraq already flying apart at the seams, the crackdown appears to be another agitation that Maliki can ill-afford.