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Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Sistani Issues Call to Arms to Fight al-Qaeda

By Jason Ditz

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Notoriously reluctant to involve himself in security affairs, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the top Shi'ite religious leader in Iraq, has issued a call to arms today, urging everyone who is able to do so to take up arms and fight the advancing al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

AQI fighters (also called ISIS) have been seizing cities left and right in Iraq these days, including some major ones like Mosul. The losses have so far been in the Sunni-dominated part of the country, but the fighters are rapidly nearing Shi'ite territory.

Sistani's unprecedented call has seen considerable response already, as volunteers are loaded into trucks and sent northward, toward the AQI front. The Iraqi Army, by contrast, continues to drop its weapons and flee whenever approached.

The first stop is Samarra, a city in the middle of the Sunni Triangle, but one which also is religiously important to Shi'ites, and a common stop for pilgrims. The Shi'ite volunteer forces arrived just as the Iraqi military was fleeing. Early this morning, the first clashes began in Samarra, and AQI seems to be trying to sway the overwhelmingly Sunni locals to their side against the Shi'ites.