

Gunmen kill aide to Shiite cleric in Iraq

By Stephen Farrell

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BAGHDAD: A senior aide to the radical anti-American cleric Moktada al-Sadr was assassinated as he returned home from Friday prayers in Najaf, raising the likelihood that tensions would climb still higher between Sadr's loyalists and the Iraqi government forces they have been battling.

The police declared a curfew in Najaf, the holiest Shiite city in Iraq, and deployed reinforcements on the streets, fearing a backlash after the murder of the aide, Riyadh al-Nuri. Security officials there said Nuri, who was related to Sadr by marriage, was killed in al-Adala neighborhood, half a mile east of Najaf, when unknown gunmen ambushed him outside his house and opened fire, killing him instantly. Iraqi security forces carried out a major offensive in Basra last month, but it was widely criticized as poorly planned and the government failed in its attempt to disarm Shiite militias, particularly the Mahdi army founded by Sadr. In recent days, the two sides have been engaged in heavy fighting in Sadr's eastern Baghdad stronghold, Sadr City.

Within hours of Nuri's killing, Sadr's office in Najaf issued a statement from the cleric accusing the United States and Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's government of responsibility, laying blame for his killing at "the hands of the occupiers and their tails."

The statement added: "I promise before God and the Iraqi people that I will never forget this blot, and the occupier will never feel safe in our land, while I am alive." Nuri's sister is married to Sadr's brother, Sadrist officials said.

Still, Sadr's spokesman Salah al-Obeidi urged the cleric's followers to be calm and "not to be dragged into others' plots," the Associated Press reported.

Within an hour of the killing, a rocket, apparently fired at the Green Zone, struck the Palestine Hotel in central Baghdad, the site of two suicide truck bomb attacks in 2005 that killed at least 6 Iraqis and wounded more than 40.

Hotel officials, guards and neighbors initially said no-one was injured in Friday's attack, saying the missile punched through a foot of concrete and destroyed a first floor room on the east side of the hotel. But police later claimed that three people had been killed.

Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's office issued a statement condemning the killing of Nur and ordered an investigation. He called on the security forces to "be ready to resist anyone who tries to disturb the security situation in the holy city of Najaf."

Nuri's brother Ahmad Jassem al-Nuri said Friday: "All I know is that they killed him after Friday prayers. I am on my way to Najaf now."

Najaf is the Iraqi seat of the Shiite religious establishment known as the hawza, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and houses the tomb of Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and one of the most revered figures in Shiite history.

In recent years it has endured a number of assassinations. These include Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, Moktada al-Sadr's father who was killed by assassins in 1999 under Saddam Hussein's regime; Sheik Abdel Majid al-Khoei, son of the late Grand Ayatollah Abolqassem al-Khoei in April 2003 shortly after the invasion; and Ayatollah Mohammed Baker al-Hakim, a prominent Shiite leader and politician who was killed by a car bomb in August 2003.

Sadrists officials said memorial services will be held in al-Tusi Mosque in Najaf on Saturday, and in Baghdad, Syria and Iran.

In Baghdad, the remains of the attack on the Palestine Hotel were inspected by American troops at the scene, who determined that the rocket was probably a Katyusha. That type, along with other rockets and mortars, have frequently been fired at the Green Zone from Shiite-dominated areas in east Baghdad, including Sadr City.

American and Iraqi government forces have been fighting on the southern edge of Sadr City in recent days intending, among other things, to curb such attacks.