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Al-Qaeda claims killing of 48 Syrian soldiers in Iraq convoy attack



Al-Qaeda's Iraqi front group claimed an attack on a convoy in west Iraq that killed 48 Syrian soldiers and nine Iraqi guards, in a statement posted on jihadist forums on Monday. The soldiers had entered Iraq for medical treatment and were being transported through the western province of Anbar on their way back to Syria when the attack took place on March 4, according to the Iraqi defense ministry. Iraq's Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has long warned that Syria's increasingly sectarian war might spill over the border and reignite his own country's combustible Shi'ite-Sunni mix.

Suicide bombers have already stepped up attacks in recent weeks to a frequency Iraq has not suffered in years.

Reviling the Shi'ite-led government it sees as oppressing Sunnis, the al-Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq group is trying to gain legitimacy by linking its struggle to the Sunni insurgency against Assad, security experts say.

Invigorated by the conflict in neighbouring Syria, insurgents are gaining ground and recruits in Iraq's Sunni heartland, regrouping in the vast desert where the Euphrates river winds through both countries, security officials say.

"We warn all sides in Syria against moving their armed struggle onto Iraqi lands or violating the sanctity of its borders," Iraq's defense ministry said after the attack on the Syrians, which it blamed on infiltrators from Syria. "The response will be harsh and decisive."

Syria's crisis has always been delicate for Iraq's Shi'ite leadership. Baghdad is close to Iran, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's ally, but insists it takes no sides as the conflict next door widens a regional Shi'ite-Sunni divide.