

Calls to reopen Baghdad bridge between Sunnis, Shiites

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Talks are underway to reopen the key bridge linking Shiite and Sunni districts of the Iraqi capital closed almost three years ago due to bloody sectarian violence, a top official said on Friday.

"We have exchanged messages with Sunni officials from the Adhamiyah district over the reopening of the bridge," said Hazem al-Araji from Moqtada al-Sadr's group in the Kadhimiyah area.

Almost 1,000 people were killed in 2005 in a stampede on Al-Aima bridge triggered by a mortar attack and rumours that a suicide bomber was among several thousand Shiite pilgrims marking a religious holiday.

Araji said his office had contacted influential Sunni religious leader Sheikh Abdul Ghafur al-Samarai during the current Muslim feast of Eid al-Adha, adding the reopening of the bridge would be highly "symbolic".

The bridge which spans the Tigris River was closed in February 2005, even before the stampede disaster, after tensions between Iraq's two main Muslim and became a symbol of the divisions within the country.

"Kadhimiyah represents the Shiites of Baghdad and Adhimiyah represents the Sunnis. We must reopen the bridge. It is the people who want it. There is a will from both sides to reopen the bridge," said Araji.

"The government must take measures to make the reopening of the bridge possible," he said, suggesting the introduction of checkpoints.

"The reopening must be carefully prepared and security must be put in place to avoid incitements," he said.

Shiites celebrated the start of Eid al-Adha on Friday, while Sunnis began the feast period two days earlier.