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# Killers Stalk Politicians as Iraq Seeks Government

By **TIMOTHY WILLIAMS** and **ZAID THAKER**

MOSUL, Iraq — Since Iraq's parliamentary elections in March, killers in this violent northern city have stalked members of the Iraqiya Party, which won the most seats, part of a nationwide outbreak of violence directed at officials and other civic leaders.

Some 150 politicians, civil servants, tribal chiefs, police officers, Sunni clerics and members of [Awakening Councils](#) have been assassinated throughout Iraq since the election — bloodshed apparently aimed at heightening turmoil in the power vacuum created by more than three months without a national government.

[During the past 72 hours alone](#), at least eight Iraqi police officers, an Iraqi Army general, a government intelligence official, a member of an Awakening Council, a tribal sheik, and a high ranking staff member of Baghdad's local government have all been assassinated in either Baghdad or Mosul.

The level of violence is low compared to the worst here over the last seven years, yet deeply unsettling because it seems so precisely focused.

It is certainly unsettling to Dildar Abdullah al-Zibari, the local leader here, who is fairly certain there are those who would like him and others dead.

Since March, he says, killers have stalked members of Iraqiya, which is now locked in a struggle with a coalition led by Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#) to form a government. [Ayad Allawi](#), who heads the Iraqiya Party, has spoken in recent days about a foiled plot to kill him at Baghdad's international airport. Mr. Maliki said that he, too, had been a target of assassination

attempts and that it was a risk all Iraqi leaders had to come to terms with in the current unresolved political climate.

Here in Mosul, one of the last pockets of regular fighting in Iraq, political leaders believe that the continuing effort to form a government is driving the killing and the general sense of fear among politicians representing Iraqiya.

Four Iraqiya Party members have been gunned down in recent months, three of them in and around Mosul. There have been more than a dozen unsuccessful assassination attempts during the past several weeks, party officials said. They have responded by variously arming themselves and going into hiding.

Instead of the car bombs of the past, the current weapons of choice are hit squads equipped with guns fitted with homemade silencers, or “sticky bombs” — small but deadly explosives attached to vehicles with adhesives or magnets.

Iraqiya officials say they suspect that the Iraqi Army and police are involved in hunting them down and no longer bother to report murder attempts to the authorities.

“The security forces are controlled by politicians, and I don’t expect professionalism from the army because I don’t have political clout in Baghdad,” said Mr. Zibari, deputy chairman of the Nineveh Province provincial council. “Anything could happen at any time.”

Members of Mr. Zibari’s party speak darkly about the inevitability of more killings. “We’re afraid for our members in Parliament, and also for the candidates who didn’t win the election,” said Zuhair Muhsin Mohammed al-Araji, a newly elected Iraqiya member of Parliament from Mosul. “Some candidates have moved out of their houses, and some have temporarily left their jobs to protect themselves.”

The fear among Iraqiya officials in Mosul is not unusual in Iraq, where anyone in a position of influence is vulnerable to threats, kidnapping and worse. But while political leaders during Iraq’s recent violence typically knew who wanted them killed, party leaders in Mosul say politics in the city have become so tumultuous since the election that narrowing the possibilities down to a single group is no longer possible. The list is endlessly long and contradictory, vague to the point of including every possible enemy: Party leaders put near the top of their lists Iran

and its Shiite militia allies in Iraq, which Iraqiya believes are bent on eliminating it because of the party's popularity among Sunnis, and its criticisms of Iran's influence in Iraqi politics.

On the other hand, party officials say, Sunni extremist groups like [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#) might be behind the slayings because of the groups' history of trying to systematically eliminate Sunnis who cooperate in the democratic process.

Iraqiya says it also suspects Kurdish political parties, which are vying with Iraqiya for political predominance in the province.

Still another theory suggests that the Qaeda cell operating in Mosul is financed and operated by Iranians and Kurds as a way to cover their tracks.

But Iraqiya officials here save most of the conjecture for the government of Mr. Maliki, which they say has employed dirty tricks to keep them out of power.

Most of the victims, they point out, have belonged to the Iraqiyun political faction of Iraqiya, which they believe signals an orchestrated attempt to frighten Iraqiyun into breaking away and joining Mr. Maliki.

"The people in power want to keep their power," Mr. Zibari said recently, in Mosul's heavily guarded provincial council headquarters building. "I am more frightened of the central government than I am of [Al Qaeda](#)."

Mr. Maliki's government has denied any role in a campaign of violence against Iraqiya. They blame Al Qaeda, but acknowledge that it is far from clear whether Iraq's army or police have played a role.

"Nobody can say with complete assurance that our security forces are not infiltrated or have not been compromised," by insurgents, said Ali al-Moussawi, an adviser to the prime minister.

But Mr. Moussawi said Iraqiya was exploiting the killings to gain political leverage.

"It is a dangerous thing to use security as part of political bargaining," he said. "No one should use it for their political benefit or to try to weaken the prime minister or his coalition."

Instead of complaining, Mr. Moussawi said Iraqiya should be thankful for the security gains

made in Iraq by Mr. Maliki. “Who settled down the security situation in the country — angels or the government?” he asked.

Despite those improvements, Mosul and Nineveh Provinces are combustible. They are divided among Sunni Arabs, many of whom hew to **Baath Party** principles; Kurds, who are seeking to integrate parts of the province into semi-autonomous Kurdistan; Christians, who continue to be killed and forced to flee; Turkmen, Yazidis, and others.

Atheel al-Nujaifi, the provincial governor and a member of Iraqiya, said the party’s members in Mosul were being killed because Iraqiya held both the governorship and a majority of seats on the provincial council, and therefore exercised a great deal of power.

“We are caught in the middle between Iran, Al Qaeda and the conflict with the Kurds,” Mr. Nujaifi said. “I don’t think there’s any way to run from it. This is the destiny of our country.”

The governor said he was unconvinced that Iraqiya members who were recently elected to Parliament and who are now staying at a highly secured Baghdad hotel would be any safer than they had been in Mosul.

“It might be even hotter at the Rashid Hotel,” he said.