

Assassins Stalk Former Leaders

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No one knows who the killers are or why they are on such a murderous mission.

Assassins are systematically stalking former leaders of Baghdad's municipal districts, police and witnesses say. But nobody knows why the campaign of terror is underway or who has launched it.

Rashid Hadi, former head of the southern Baghdad district of al-Bayaa, was killed on January 2 when he left home to distribute petrol-rationing cards to area residents.

"A black [BMW] car stopped near the district head. He turned his head, then fell down on the ground," said Ziad Tarik, a neighbour who saw the killing while standing outside his house, some 70 metres away.

"We thought it was a heart attack," Tarik said. Others had the same idea, including Dr Anmar Hamza al-Jibori, the forensic specialist who first examined the body.

"At the beginning it seemed to me a cardiac arrest," Jibori said. "However, I asked my assistant to raise up the cloth over the dead man, and I saw a small wound in his breast, like a hole made by a cigarette.

"I found that there was a very small bullet which penetrated his breast without causing bleeding. So, I sent these details to the criminal evidence office in Baghdad."

The shooting was strikingly similar to the recent murders of four other Saddam-era Baghdad district heads: Barakat Jabar al-Azawi of al-Amin; Hassan Abood al-Karagoli of Ur; Harith Fadil al-Ani of Dubat; and Dawood Salam al-Mifirgi of al-Muwasalat.

"The three first crimes were carried out by a group that used a BMW, according to the testimony of eyewitnesses," said Lt. Col. Mohammed Salman, the officer in charge of the investigation. "No one witnessed the other crimes.

"We discovered also that the weapon was of the same type [in all the attacks]. That and the car tracks on the ground near the scene were enough for us to conclude that the same group carried out all the assassinations."

The reputations of the five murdered district heads varied – from kind-hearted men who overlooked the presence of army deserters to Ba'athist zealots who easily could arouse the desire for revenge.

Many of the inhabitants of al-Bayaa believe their former district head, Rashid Hadi, was killed to shut him up.

"When Saddam Hussein's regime fell, the American forces captured our neighbourhood district head," said al-Bayaa resident Haydar Hussein.

"We heard that he gave the Coalition a list of 100 names of members of the former Iraqi intelligence service," Hussein said, adding that many Coalition raids were carried out on the homes of the Fidayeen Saddam paramilitaries and intelligence operatives in al-Bayaa.

"We the inhabitants of al-Bayaa accuse [the Fidayeen Saddam] of carrying out these attacks for fear of the district head informing the Coalition of their whereabouts," Hussein said.

That's one motive for one murder. But even as the police seek other explanations, as well as culprits, former district heads throughout the city are doubtless looking over their shoulders in fear.

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