

## **Prince" Loses Favour in Amara**

**Author:** [Dhiya Rasan](#)

Former freedom fighter sees his reputation eroded by unrealistic expectations and unfair criticism.

The governor's office in Amara stands derelict, its doors and windows smashed after nearly a week of demonstrations in this provincial town that spreads along the Tigris River on the flat, dry plains of southern Iraq.

Equally battered is the reputation of the district's former favourite son: the ex-guerilla chief and folk hero Karem Mahud al-Mohammedawi, who is also an appointee to the Governing Council and brother of the governor.

Dubbed "Prince of the Marshes" for his years of fighting against Saddam's army in the wetlands of southern Iraq, Mohammedawi formerly commanded immense respect which allowed him to intervene in disputes between local citizens and the ruling Coalition.

Today, however, Mohammedawi stands accused of nepotism and of neglecting the needs of the citizens - charges that might not be fair, but ones that reflect the declining popularity of anyone associated with the Coalition.

Worse, Mohammedawi's clansmen are even charged with shooting dead six demonstrators in the town.

Mohammedawi counters that by saying the demonstrators were killed in the crossfire when former Saddam fidayeen shot from the crowd at the governor's guards.

According to Mohammedawi, the trouble flared up on January 8, when some 50 university graduates showed up at the governor's house to protest the lack of jobs. He told them to come back in two days to discuss the issue.

But instead of receiving a few dozen graduates for a discussion, the governor's office was later engulfed by an angry crowd numbering thousands. Shots rang out, and six of the demonstrators were left dead.

Mohammedawi says the governor's guards were fired on by Ba'athist provocateurs among the demonstrators. Eleven men, some of them former members of the Saddam Fidayeen paramilitary force, were caught in a nearby building, and are now under arrest.

"I was not involved in killing these people," Mohammedawi said. "What happened in the demonstration was a violation of the internal security of the city."

"The governorate council [a Coalition-supervised body that represents the region] will know what is behind this incident," he insisted.

But the families of many of the victims still hold him responsible.

Among the victims was 16-year-old Mahir Abdelwahid, a secondary school student and a member of the well-known al-Abouda tribe.

"Mahir came out with me in the morning carrying a job application file," said his brother, Saad. "We were both chanting with dozens of people, demanding a solution to unemployment.

"We were pushed by increasing enthusiasm towards the governorate building. We were in front of the demonstrators. We were very happy to practice our new freedom, given to us after the fall of the regime. Then a few minutes passed. I heard gunfire, and was surprised to see my brother fall down with a bullet in his head."

"Some people put a piece of cloth on my brother's head in an attempt to stop the bleeding. At that time he was still alive, but I couldn't do anything for him – just shout and cry," Abdelwahid said.

Locals said Mohammedawi sent his relatives to try and speak to representatives of the victims' tribes, but that tribal elders refused to meet them.

"These tribes also didn't hold the ceremony of accepting condolences for their sons," said one prominent member of the al-Suwaid tribe. Refusal to accept condolences is a sign that a victim's family wants revenge.

The shooting is another event that undermines the once lustrous reputation of the onetime Pince of the Marshes.

"We were happy when Mahoud [al-Mohammedawi] was chosen for the Governing Council," said police officer Khudeir Mahmoud. "But when he held power in his hands, we found out that he only supports those who are close to him, without taking care of the other citizens of the governorate."

Mohammedawi also stands accused of packing the governorate guard and other posts with members of two tribes, the al-Nuwafi and the Albu Etta, which formed the backbone of his guerrilla army during the war with Saddam.

Local Shia religious scholars even have criticised Mohammedawi for agreeing to the appointment of a new provincial council through a Coalition-supervised selection process, as opposed to through direct elections.

Direct elections are a mainstay of the Shia political agenda these days, and Shia leaders have campaigned hard – even inciting massive protest marches – in support of them.

Meanwhile, other angry citizens vow that Mohammedawi has until January 26 to get them government jobs, or he will face a new round of unrest.

Mohammedawi says he has communicated the problems of the governorate to Iraq's Governing Council, but that "the unemployment problem cannot be solved in a few days".

In Amara, the clock is clearly ticking.

Dhiya Rasan is an IWPR trainee journalist.

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