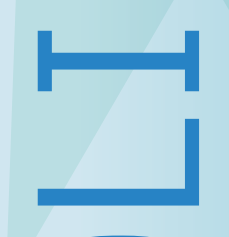




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The Popular Mobilisation Units as a Relief Agency: Can the Coronavirus Pandemic Accelerate Institutional Transformation?

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Introduction

On 26 February 2020, days after a seminary student in the city of Najaf tested coronavirus positive, the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), *al-Hashd al-Sha'abi*, scrambled and set up the 'awareness' (*Wa'i*) campaign to tackle the pandemic. The PMU mobilisation is part of the Iraqi government's effort to tackle the pandemic. The PMU's aim is to protect its personnel and more broadly the Iraqi public from contracting the virus. The campaign has involved pre-emptive efforts of two types: advocacy and health measures.¹ Since the 2017 push back against Islamic State (IS), the PMU has occasionally used several of its internal directorates for contingency schemes related to relief and natural disasters.

The PMU is an umbrella organisation composed of a plethora of brigades, most of which are Shia, to combat IS. After the city of Mosul fell into the hands of IS in 2014, the highest Shia authority in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, issued a fatwa, i.e. a religious ruling asking all capable Iraqis to take up arms to protect the country. Several Iran-backed Shia paramilitaries that engaged in armed resistance against US-led military occupation translated Sistani's fatwa into action by establishing the PMU.

The support of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in forming the PMU by training and arming brigades helped shape the

1. Tamer Badawi, 'Iraq's PMU Throws Weight Behind Countering COVID-19', *Al-Monitor*, 8 April 2020 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/iraq-pmu-coronavirus-covid19.html>

POLICY BRIEF



nascent security umbrella organisation into one similar to the Basij,² Iranian mobilisation battalions run by the IRGC. In Iran the Basij is a decentralised multi-role force that Tehran mobilises in times of crisis. The Basij operates primarily in security and secondarily in civil missions but it has also become embedded in the Iranian economy.

Using the PMU's intervention against the coronavirus pandemic as a marker, the point of departure of this brief is that Iraq's poor governance allows the PMU to expand its role in the civil realm as a relief agency similar to the Basij, due to both civil imperatives and its ambitions.

Backed by victories on the battlefield against IS and precedents of PMU civil relief missions being sanctioned by the state, several of the organisation's senior leaders eye a role for it in the reconstruction economy. In the specific case of countering coronavirus, the PMU's currently fledgling role in the health realm allows it to project itself as part of Iraq's post-conflict health reconstruction.

The sustainability of the PMU's functioning as an auxiliary relief agency and the role that several of its senior leaders endeavour in the economic realm, however, face two types of challenges: endogenously, its potential inability to maintain sufficient institutional coherence as a result of internal cleavages; and exogenously, its inability to cope with multiple concurrent challenges. It is currently facing an escalating geopolitical conflict between the US and Iran which it is part of, a resurgence in the activities of IS and a protest movement that challenges Iraqi politicians and paramilitaries allied with Iran. All these factors feed the agency's inter-group cleavages and make collective action more challenging, including in the civil realm.

This contribution aims to explain the impacts of the aforementioned variables on the PMU's expanding civil activities. I draw on open-source data and to a lesser extent on face-to-face and WhatsApp interviews with officials in the Commission that runs the PMU in autumn 2019 and spring 2020.

2. 'The Revolutionary Guards' Commander: The Popular Mobilisation Forces Were Established Based upon the Model of Iran's Basij,' Basnews, 26 November 2017 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/fa/news/middle-east/395490>

More Than One Hashd Is Combating the Coronavirus

'Our forces that are on vacation [from the battlefield] take part in coronavirus prevention measures in Basra.'³ This is how a PMU leader from the 7th brigade depicted the organisation's division of labour while grappling with the resurgent threat of IS sleeper cells. The PMU's directorates and brigades mobilised themselves within the framework of the 'awareness' campaign in coordination with health authorities to disinfect streets, create isolation facilities, manage burials of the deceased, deploy field-hospitals, distribute food baskets and enforce curfews in many parts of Iraq under the jurisdiction of Baghdad.⁴

Two of the PMU's directorates are visibly behind the anti-pandemic campaign; the Directorate of Medical Treatment and the Directorate of Logistics. Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the PMU's medical services mainly consisted of aiding the families of PMU soldiers killed in battles and aiding Iraqi civilians injured in IS attacks. However, more broadly, the PMU deployed field-hospitals for pilgrims in the city of Karbala on the occasion of the Arbeen pilgrimage⁵ and hospitals in some other parts of Iraq that are open to the public such as the city of al-Qa'im.⁶ This allowed it to build its anti-pandemic campaign based on previous experience with the Iraqi public.

To implement the 'awareness' campaign, the PMU has deployed between 3,000 and 5,000 personnel.⁷ By April 2020, PMU brigades had reportedly disinfected around 3,000 sites.⁸ The PMU is deploying six field-hospitals

3. 'The PMU Forms a Crisis Cell in Basra to Confront Coronavirus,' Al-Alam TV, 8 April 2020 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <https://bit.ly/3dpaeol>
4. Tamer Badawi, 'Iraq's PMU Throws Weight Behind Countering COVID-19.'
5. 'Special Coverage – The PMU Offers Hospitals to Serve the Arbeen Pilgrims' (in Arabic), YouTube, posted on 17 October 2019 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARvo6Pfp7mk>
6. 'The PMU's Medical Directorate Offers Medical Services in the City of Qa'im/ Western Anbar' (in Arabic), YouTube, posted on 10 December 2019 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfNrMb4k56w>
7. Tamer Badawi, 'Iraq's PMU Throws Weight Behind Countering COVID-19.'
8. Mohammad al-Bassam, 'Iraq: The Hashd Factions Enters the Field of Coronavirus Confrontation,' Al-Arabi al-Jaddid, 4 April



in the southern provinces of Dhi Qar, Babil, Karbala and Muthanna, with more deployments planned in the northern and western provinces of Ninawa and Anbar.⁹ It will therefore be deploying around one-quarter of its field-hospitals, given its disclosure in early 2018 that it had 30 field-hospitals.¹⁰ The hospital it deployed in Muthanna has 100 beds and 14 ventilators, so it can be estimated that all the hospitals deployed by the PMU have a total of 600 beds and 84 ventilators.

While the PMU's directorates have deployed field-hospitals, 'awareness' serves more as a loose campaign for local and factional initiatives rather than an exclusively centrally planned campaign coherently fusing the activities of the brigades. Decentrality is a structural feature in the PMU inspired by the politically harmonious Basij, which is why brigades can operate independently of each other in the security and civil realms. However, in the case of the PMU, decentrality is practically based on cleavages informally delineating the PMU's brigades into different camps. In this context, several brigades are keen to maintain identities that transcend that of the PMU.

The external paramilitary/political entities that PMU brigades are connected to have also run initiatives with no reference to the 'awareness' campaign. This is prominently the case of Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), a potent paramilitary force with three PMU brigades affiliated to it. KH has declared that it is deploying five field-hospitals in different Iraqi provinces in coordination with the PMU's directorates. Each hospital has 20 to 30 beds.¹¹ This means that all of KH's field-hospitals combined may have the capacity to accommodate up to 150 beds. This represents one-quarter of the number of the beds in the PMU's

field-hospitals deployed for the pandemic. It is therefore unclear under which framework the KH brigades operated in combating the pandemic. This also applies to the shrines brigades, as will be explained below.

Cleavages and institutional confluences are thus reflected in the PMU's inability to maximise collective action among its brigades in part because political divisions remain a fundamental characteristic, especially in the absence of strong leadership. The PMU's decentralised structure is based on three core Shia camps.

1) The *al-Hashd al-Wala'i* camp (the PMU of the Guardianship – referring to the Guardian of the Islamic Jurist/Supreme Leader in Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) comprises the strongest brigades associated with paramilitaries either allied or aligned with Iran, which have the upper hand in the PMU both quantitatively and qualitatively. With some exceptions, this camp has mainly run its anti-pandemic operations under the banner of the 'awareness' campaign.

2) The *Hashd al-Atabat* camp (the PMU of the Shrines) is composed of four brigades associated with the Shia shrines in Najaf and Karbala and is loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. These brigades were key constituents of the PMU but they have less power than the Guardianship camp. While the *Atabat* brigades are nominally a part of 'awareness,' they do not frame their anti-pandemic activities as such in social media accounts. Moreover, the brigades are instrumental in distributing aid as part of a mega-campaign called *Maraji'yat al-Takaful* (The Marji's Solidarity) by the Grand Ayatollah to economically assist distressed people under the government-imposed lockdown.

3) The Sadrist camp of brigades is associated with the influential cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. The camp is composed of three Saraya al-Salam brigades. These brigades were set up to fight IS but they are in essence based on the leadership of the Jayish al-Mahdi paramilitary, which was disbanded in 2008 after fierce battles with the US-led military occupation. The brigades operate their anti-pandemic and aid activities as part of the *Hamlat Watan* (The Homeland Campaign) declared by al-Sadr.

The gradual institutionalisation of the PMU since the issuance of the organisation's law in 2016 limitedly insulated the brigades from the external paramilitaries that established them. This was further clarified in decree no. 237 issued by former PM Adel Abdul-Mahdi in July

2020 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <https://bit.ly/2VLwKkQ>

9. Isabel Coles and Nazih Osseiran, 'Iran-Backed Groups in Lebanon and Iraq Seek Public Support Through Coronavirus Fight,' *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 April 2020 (accessed: 28 April 2020). https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-backed-groups-in-lebanon-and-iraq-seek-public-support-through-coronavirus-fight-11587980816#_=_
10. 'Al-Muhandis: We Possess 30 Field Hospital that Treated 60,000 Injured Soldier and 300,000 Injured Civilian' (in Arabic), YouTube, posted in 13 January 2018 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJAVumFwCXw>
11. 'Kata'ib Hezbollah Launches an Initiative to Establish Hospitals in 5 Iraqi Provinces' (in Arabic), YouTube, posed in 23 March 2020 (accessed: 28 April 2020). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hf4dC5drdTw&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1omo8sgXSwgxyGmjf8y_N_vn221eloXth2gM9KQ9jXC-IRzx8ML5mqWiQ



2019 ordering, among several other things, the exclusive use of numerical codes to refer to brigades and the termination of political affiliations.¹² Another decree, no. 331, was issued in September 2019 to reform the PMU's bureaucratic structure and contain the vast authority of the top leadership.¹³ In June 2020, the PMU Commission issued an order to the brigades that largely reiterates decree no. 237.¹⁴ However, how genuine and effective these reforms and orders are, is a matter of debate.

The Assassination of Al-Muhandis Has Weakened the PMU's Civil Capabilities

The assassination of the PMU's Chief of Staff, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, by the US in January 2020 is a setback in the PMU's lengthy institutionalisation as a fully professional security organisation. Al-Muhandis was the umbrella organisation's charismatic leader and architect and his abrupt absence left the PMU in disarray and therefore less prepared and willing to undertake reforms. Furthermore, in the absence of a linear and consensus-based succession, geopolitical stand-offs promote sub-identities over a collective one in the PMU.

Although he belonged to the *Wala'i* camp, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis managed to keep the three camps bonded together to act in times of crises, albeit with increasing difficulty and unsustainably. The US escalation against Iran and its allies and proxies in Iraq has undermined the PMU's already weak cohesion and eroded its organisational ability to act in critical times either through the umbrella organisation's central organs, i.e. its directorates, or sub-organisational means, i.e. its brigades.

According to a senior physician associated with the PMU, the umbrella organisation was slow to prepare and establish 'awareness' as internal coordination at the directorate level was poor. The PMU leadership did not quickly allo-

cate funds for the campaign even after it was organised.¹⁵ This contrasts with the PMU's better organisation of a contingency campaign to tackle floods in eastern Iraq in the spring of 2019 thanks to skilful management attributed to al-Muhandis.¹⁶

In the post-Muhandis era, intra-PMU cleavages have been widening between the *Wala'i* camp and the *Atabat* camp over the succession to al-Muhandis as the *Wala'i* camp moved to appoint the Secretary-General of KH, widely dubbed 'Abu Fadak,' against the will of the *Atabat* camp. However, even when al-Muhandis was in his position, intra-PMU fissures surfaced in the summer of 2019 in the aftermath of Israeli airstrikes against PMU sites.

In March 2020 the rift between the two sides culminated in a request by the four *Atabat* brigades to separate from the PMU and operate under the Iraqi Ministry of Defence.¹⁷ In April 2020, the caretaker PM Abdul-Mahdi signed an executive order to link the four brigades, administratively and operationally, to the Iraqi Commander-in-Chief instead of the PMU's Commission.¹⁸ However, the new PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi has cancelled his predecessor's order upon a visit he made to the PMU's headquarters in May 2020.¹⁹

If the *Atabat* brigades are removed entirely from the PMU in the future, this will affect the umbrella organization's civil activities. For example, as the website of the PMU displays the efforts of the brigades individually, the measures of the *Atabat* brigades are highlighted among those of the other brigades. The screening of content related to coronavirus on the PMU website from 28 February to 1 April 2020 shows that the activities of the *Atabat* brigades constituted around 20 percent of the PMU's total media

12. Inna Rudolf, 'The Hashd's Popular Gambit: Demystifying PMU Integration in Post-IS Iraq,' ICSR, November 2019 (accessed: 28 April 2020), 24. <https://icsr.info/2019/11/21/the-hashds-popular-gambit-demystifying-pmu-integration-in-post%E2%80%91iraq/>

13. Ibid., 25.

14. The PMU Commission Issues a Statement to All its Formations Concerning Regulations that Govern its Operations, PMU, 3 June 2020 (accessed: 8 June 2020). <https://bit.ly/30iXQSP>

15. Tamer Badawi, 'Iraq's PMU Throws Weight Behind Countering COVID-19.'

16. Ibid.

17. Suadad al-Salhy, 'Iran and Najaf Struggle for Control Over Hashd al-Shaabi After Muhandis's Killing' The Middle East Eye, 16 February 2020 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-and-najaf-struggle-control-over-hashd-al-shaabi-after-muhandis-killing>

18. 'Abdul-Mahdi Disengages Shrines Forces From the PMF,' Shafaq News, 22 April 2020 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <https://www.shafaq.com/en/iraq-news/abdul-mahdi-disengages-shrines-forces-from-the-pmf-document/>

19. WhatsApp correspondence with the Iraq expert Husham al-Hashemi, June 2020.



coronavirus coverage.²⁰ Therefore, if the *Atabat* brigades are no longer part of the PMU, the organisation will lose manpower and expertise that it needs to constitute itself as a formidable actor in the civil sphere.

The multifaceted identity of the brigades benefits the PMU Commission, which uses their social capital to re-brand its image for multiple audiences. The existence of the *Atabat* brigades has long bolstered the religious prestige of the PMU thanks to the brigades' allegiance with and direct link to Grand Ayatollah Sistani.

The PMU Seeks a More Institutionalised Role in the Civil Realm

Provided the PMU contains its cleavages and remains institutionally cohesive enough to be a unitary actor, the umbrella organisation's deployment for civil purposes may increase in the future. A multitude of crises are likely to hit Iraq in the upcoming years due to low crude oil prices, surging poverty, worsening climatic conditions and environmental degradation. These brewing crises may lead to governance breakdown and displacement in several provinces, therefore expanding areas of limited statehood.

A number of policy analysts have suggested engagement in reconstruction as an incentive for PMU brigades and members to undergo disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. In the opposite direction, the PMU leadership is aiming to engage in reconstruction in an expansive capacity to empower the organisation, in part to become a self-sufficient entity. Appealing models for the PMU include Egypt's Armed Forces Engineering Authority and Iran's Seal of Prophets Construction Headquarters, *Gharagahi Sazandegi Khatam al-Anbiya*,²¹

20. The author has reviewed a sample of 147 Coronavirus-related pages in the news section of the PMU's official website (<http://al-hashed.net/>) from 28 February to 1 April. Brigades associated with the Badr Organisation (9 brigades, numbered 1, 4, 5, 9, 10, 16, 21, 22, 27), a major force allied with Iran, came first with 44 reported activities (approximately constituting 29%). Brigades associated with the shrines (4 brigades, numbered 2, 11, 20, 44) came second with 29 reported activities (approximately constituting 20% of the sample). Various groups, most of which are aligned with Iran, came third. Note: there could be a non-significant margin of error in categorising and counting brigades.

21. Interview with a senior official in the Popular Mobilisation Committee and an assistant to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Baghdad, September 2019.

which belongs to the IRGC and implements large infrastructure projects.

A senior member of the PMU has said that former PM Abdel-Mahdi proposed that the PMU should set up a company to be contracted for infrastructure projects.²² For example, the PMU would like to use such an entity to construct social housing complexes for its personnel in the cities of Amarah and Nasiriyah in southern Iraq.^{23 24}

It has been reported that in early 2019 the PMU sought to transfer to itself the ownership of Mutasim, a state-owned construction company, from the Ministry of Construction, Housing, and Municipalities, but this did not materialise.^{25 26} Articles 54, 55 and 61 of the Military Penal Code Law No. 19 of 2007 prohibit Iraqi armed forces from involvement in moneymaking businesses and diverting military capabilities to private interests.²⁷ It is therefore unclear if the PMU's attempt to acquire a company or establish one goes against this law. If it does contradict it, an amendment to the law or a legal loophole would be needed to permit the umbrella organisation to move forward with the scheme.

In 2018 a spokesperson for the PMU estimated that the umbrella organisation had 20,000 engineers (fighters holding engineering degrees) and 2,500 technicians.²⁸

22. Interview with a senior official in the Popular Mobilisation Committee and an assistant to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Baghdad, September 2019.

23. Ibid.

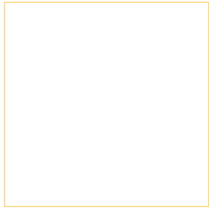
24. The ambition to establish companies for the PMU might be driven in part by the educational backgrounds of the umbrella organisation's leaders. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the PMU's former Chief of Staff, earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering (this is why his nickname is 'al-Muhandis,' which means engineer). Faleh al-Fayyad, the President of the PMU, earned a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering.

25. 'The Mutasim Contracting Company is Disengaged from the Ministry of Housing and Assigned to the Popular Mobilization Commission,' Kham News, 5 January 2019 (accessed: 28 April 2020). <https://bit.ly/2WbjIMx>

26. Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 'Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces,' The Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, March 2020, (accessed: 28 April 2020), 115. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/honored-not-contained-the-future-of-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>

27. Ibid.

28. 'Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State' The International Crisis Group, 30 July 2018 (accessed: 28 April 2020), 11. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/>



While such figures may be inflated, they reflect the ambition of the PMU leadership to utilise its personnel's expertise. Within the framework of reconstruction work, the PMU brigades have been engaged in various civil activities such as collecting rubbish,²⁹ repairing roads and water pipes³⁰ and tackling floods in coordination with local communities, municipal bodies and civil state institutions.

While it is unclear if the brigades received remuneration from the state or local authorities for these tasks, many of them rely on direct and indirect exogenous financial inflows. Many brigades levy taxes at checkpoints on regional and trans-border trade routes to outsource labour costs,³¹ allegedly run extensive smuggling networks (e.g. of oil),³² and position themselves as business intermediaries.³³ The July 2019 decree sought to end profit-generating activities run by PMU brigades. However, it is believed that these activities continue to thrive and are unofficially tolerated by the government.³⁴

There are three drivers of the PMU leadership's interest in having a formal corporate role for the PMU in the economy. First, potential financial restraints on the PMU because of the decline in government revenue from crude oil create an economic imperative to the benefit of the institution (which will very likely feed rent-seeking practices). Second, this allows the PMU to maximally

[middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state](https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/the-hashd-is-dead-long-live-the-hashd/)

29. Ibid., 11.

30. Nancy Ezzeddine, Matthias Sulz and Erwin van Veen, 'The Hashd is dead, long live the Hashd!', Clingendael, July 2019 (accessed: 28 April 2020), 11. <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/the-hashd-is-dead-long-live-the-hashd/>

31. Tim Eaton, Christine Cheng, Renad Mansour, Peter Salisbury, Jihad Yazigi and Lina Khatib, 'Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa,' Chatham House, June 2019 (accessed: 28 April 2020), 34. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/conflict-economies-middle-east-and-north-africa>

32. Ibid., 44.

33. Nancy Ezzeddine, Matthias Sulz and Erwin van Veen, 'From Soldiers to Politicians? Iraq's Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi 'on the March,' Clingendael, November 2018 (accessed: 28 April 2020), 11. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/PB_From_Soldiers_to_Politicians_0.pdf

34. For example, while the 8th point in the decree no. 237 (July 2019) stipulates that 'economic offices' should be shut down, the PMU Commission's order in June 2020 reiterates key part of decree no. 237 but it does not make any explicit reference to prohibiting economic activities.

utilise its manpower and politically benefit from job-creation. Profits generated from corporate activities can then be injected into social service provision, notably health. Third, beyond the economic utility, pivotal Shia paramilitaries and political movements that have vast influence in the PMU, mainly the Badr Organisation, see the Iranian military model as a source to be emulated.³⁵ This model has an economic dimension and is part of the IRGC-Basij's perceived success story as an omnipotent military force in both Iran and its neighbourhood.

Conclusion

An economic slowdown caused by the pandemic coupled with plummeting crude oil prices will fuel poverty and produce more social fragility in Iraq, as in several other countries in the MENA region. In a weakly centralised state such as Iraq, sub- and non-state actors are likely to spearhead responses to fill governance gaps as social safety nets.

For example, the coronavirus pandemic may prompt the PMU and associated paramilitaries to prolong and increase the deployment of field-hospitals for the Iraqi public for medical purposes other than coronavirus treatment. A potentially growing role for the PMU in post-conflict health reconstruction raises the question of whether the PMU will have a role in shaping Iraq's public health policy.

Escalation between Iran and the US triggers different intra-institutional dynamics in the PMU: both cohesion and fragmentation. Brigades associated with paramilitaries in the Iran-led regional axis of resistance will be further tied together while the gaps between brigades with different political agendas are likely to widen if escalation recurs. This will further harm the PMU's ability to maximise its organisational capabilities to undertake civil relief missions. Effective interventions by the PMU will require containing divisions and maintaining cohesion between

35. Interview with Mohammad al-Ghabban, former Iraqi Interior Minister and a Badr Organisation affiliate, Baghdad, September 2019. For example, when the author asked about how much the integration of the PMU in the Iraqi security architecture and implementation of reforms will yield formidable results, al-Ghabban replied that it took the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in Iran 10 years to be institutionalised in the form we see today and therefore it will also take a long time to properly institutionalise the Popular Mobilisation Units in Iraq.



brigades, with a continued effort to insulate them from external paramilitaries/political entities.

Moreover, the involvement of the PMU in multiple confrontations means it is likely to divert less attention to relief missions. For example, brigades that distanced themselves from the US-Iran conflict, especially the four *Atabat* brigades and Saraya al-Salam brigades, have apparently directed more efforts into anti-pandemic activities compared to other brigades. The notable exception is KH among the paramilitaries and brigades closely aligned with Iran that have been militarily engaged in multiple fronts (but examples other than KH may exist among this camp).

The anticipated decrease in the Iraqi government's revenue from crude oil exports in 2020 – and possibly beyond – is likely to put pressure on the PMU budget. This may in turn increase the appetite of brigades or beneficiary paramilitaries/political entities that the PMU is connected with to engage in licit and illicit revenue-generating activities.

An economic crisis will create incentives for the PMU's leadership to pursue the creation of a conglomerate to hedge against budgetary challenges. However, with the absence of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the PMU's ability to design and negotiate such a project is likely to be weaker, at least in the short term.

If the expansion of the PMU's bureaucracy into the economic sphere materialises, it may trigger more internal discord³⁶ and generate public controversy. Unlike the case of the IRGC-Basij in Iran, the PMU lacks a fixed guarantor in the Iraqi political system that can protect such engagement, probably making a corporate role in the economy amenable to political vicissitudes.

36. It is unlikely that there will be a consensus in the pro-Iran camp in the PMU on an economic role for the organisation. For example, former PMU Spokesperson and current MP Ahmed al-Asadi in a televised interview with al-Sharqiya Channel justified the idea of associating Mutasim with the PMU (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYBy8-KmnXQ&t=4566s>) while Haraket al-Nujaba's spokesperson Nasr al-Shammari in a televised interview with al-Forat TV Channel opposed the idea of an economic role for the PMU when asked about associating Mutasim with the PMU (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywdClJtYs9w>).

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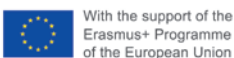
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