

# Popular Mobilization Messaging

This Research Paper examines the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Unit's (PMU) messaging on the organisation's website and social media platforms through early January 2017 to develop a more nuanced understanding of the PMU's outlook, both present and future. After providing an overview of the PMU's media presence online, the paper discusses how the organisation promotes its core narrative: that it is a cross-confessional and patriotic force for the defence of all Iraqis against a brutal and evil IS. The paper then addresses the PMU's use of messaging to refute the sectarian portrayal of the organisation in some quarters before turning to the way the PMU approaches regional and international states in its media. Finally, the paper summarises the PMU's messaging strategy and discusses how this strategy implies a less threatening future for the organisation than is often anticipated.

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Author:  
James Garrison

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# About the Author

## James Garrison

James Garrison is an officer in the United States Army and is currently completing postgraduate studies in law at the Australian National University with funding provided by the General Wayne A. Downing Scholarship. The views and opinions expressed here are solely those of the author and do not represent those of the United States Army or any part of the United States government.

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## Introduction

In the wake of the Iraqi Army's shocking defeat in the face of Islamic State's (IS) assault on Mosul in June of 2014, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the paramount Shia cleric in Iraq, issued a fatwa calling upon Iraqis of all sects and ethnicities to stand with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) against the onslaught.<sup>1</sup> The resulting military formation became known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Arabic (الحشد الشعبي).<sup>2</sup> Although Sistani's fatwa swelled the PMU with new recruits, from the outset the organisation has been dominated by preexisting Shia militias, including Muqtada al-Sadr's Peace Brigades, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Badr Organization and Harakat al-Nujaba. Today the PMU is believed to contain elements of 40 or more component militias, several of which are considered terrorist organisations by the United States.<sup>3</sup> Many of these groups have long pursued aggressive anti-Sunni and anti-United States agendas while receiving support, if not direction, from Iran through the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Thus, the Iraqi government's decision to incorporate these militias as a security apparatus in parallel to the Counter-Terrorism Service has generated significant apprehension among Iraq's Sunni population, regional Sunni states and the Iraqi government's Western allies.<sup>4</sup>

Gauging the intentions of the PMU's leadership is difficult. Actions can speak louder than words, hence any reports of PMU involvement in forced displacement and torture of Iraq's Sunnis gain a lot of attention from outside observers.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the manner in which the PMU promotes its organisation and activities to supporters also provides insight into how the group perceives itself as well as the roles it might take on in the future. Even if the PMU conceals aspects of its agenda from this audience, its propaganda also shapes the options available to the organisation by creating a set of expectations within its support base.

The evaluation of the PMU's official messaging which follows reinforces some fears while indicating that others are far from inevitable. On the problematic side, the PMU demonstrates a clear hostility towards regional Sunni states, particularly Saudi Arabia. The PMU is also sowing doubt amongst its supporters about the United States' role in the conflict with IS and its long-term intentions vis-à-vis Iraq. On the other hand, the PMU's core narrative is that of a cross-confessional force fighting on behalf of the entire Iraqi nation against an evil and corrupt IS – this is a vision which most Iraqis and international observers can support. The organisation's discretion with regard to certain topics is also critical. Unlike some of its component militias, the PMU

<sup>1</sup> Al-Sistani's PMU fatwa can be accessed at his website: <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/in-news/24908/>; the PMU's deputy commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, supported this version of the PMU's founding in a recent television interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8X-XeAXoA8&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>2</sup> Nibras Kazimi has presented compelling evidence that former Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force commander, Qasem Soleimani, were already laying the foundations of the PMU in early 2014: "The origins of the PMUs", *Talisman Gate, Again*, 1 July 2016, <https://talisman-gate.com/2016/07/01/the-origins-of-the-pmus/>. The PMU is also widely referred to as the Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF; this paper's utilisation of PMU reflects the organisation's own use of the term on its media platforms.

<sup>3</sup> Z. Gulmohamad, "A Short Profile of Iraq's Shi'a Militias", *The Jamestown Foundation*, 17 April 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/a-short-profile-of-iraqs-shia-militias/>.

<sup>4</sup> B. Roggio and A. Toumaj, "Iraq's prime minister establishes Popular Mobilization Front as a permanent 'independent military formation'", *The Long War Journal*, 28 July 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/iraqs-prime-minister-establishes-popular-mobilization-front-as-a-permanent-independent-military-formation.php>; see also H. Hassan, "Shia militia law adds to the challenges in Iraq", *The National*, 27 November 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/shia-militia-law-adds-to-the-challenges-in-iraq>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: "Iraq: Ban Abusive Militias from Mosul Operation", *Human Rights Watch*, 31 July 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/31/iraq-ban-abusive-militias-mosul-operation>.

headquarters claims that it looks to the Iraqi government rather than Iran for guidance. Similarly, even though several PMU-affiliated militias are also fighting in Syria on behalf of the al-Assad regime, the organisation's leaders have clearly stated that official PMU involvement in Syria will only occur if ordered by the Iraqi prime minister. What emerges from this analysis is an organisation that is far more moderate and Iraq-focused than the violently anti-Sunni Iranian proxy caricature that many fear.

The following analysis is derived from both primary and secondary sources on the PMU in Arabic and English. The bulk of the primary sources consist of content posted to the official PMU website at al-hashed.net and the organisation's associated Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts through early January 2017. Secondary sources consist of a variety of articles from both regional and Western journalists and analysts. These sources are largely utilised to provide examples of where the PMU's actual conduct diverges from their official narrative and to discuss how the PMU's official messaging reinforces or challenges prevailing views on the current and future role of the organisation.

This article unfolds in five sections. The first provides an overview of the PMU's internet-based communications apparatus as a foundation for the rest of the article. The second section examines the PMU's core narrative – that the organisation is a cross-confessional and patriotic force for the defence of all Iraqis against a brutal and evil IS. The third section discusses the PMU's attempt to counter its reputation as an anti-Sunni and Shia-only force. In the fourth section, the article discusses the PMU's approach to regional states and conflicts, including Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War. The fifth section turns to the PMU's attitude towards the West. A conclusion follows which summarises the main points of the article.

## 1. How the PMU Reaches its Audience

The analysis of the PMU's communication strategy in this article focuses on the organisation's activities on its website and social media outlets. The PMU's primary official outlets are al-hashed.net and Team Media War accounts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.<sup>6</sup> Almost all of the content on these platforms is presented exclusively in Arabic. The PMU uses al-hashed.net to post many of the organisation's official statements as well as videos and articles about the organisation, the progress of the fight against IS in Iraq, Iraqi security and political issues and the broader worldwide campaign against IS. The PMU then reposts links to this content on their Facebook and Twitter accounts, as well as shorter propaganda messages and photographs in a format more suited to these social media platforms.

The PMU began establishing its media presence online in the summer of 2014, shortly after the formation of the organisation. Their Facebook account went up on 11 July 2014 and their Arabic language Twitter account followed in September, but they did not post significant amounts of content until 2016. As of October 2016, Team Media War had nearly a million likes on Facebook and 84,000 followers on Twitter – by January 2017 the group's number of Twitter followers stood at 165,000. Other accounts on these social media platforms have made claims to represent the PMU leadership, but Team Media War undertakes efforts to control the PMU narrative by publicly denying

<sup>6</sup> Team Media War accounts can be accessed at <http://al-hashed.net/>, <https://www.facebook.com/teammediawar>, <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar> and [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3BanCF\\_QOAgmxbaglyAw8Q](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3BanCF_QOAgmxbaglyAw8Q).

links to specific individuals and platforms who go off-message and discouraging PMU supporters from viewing their content.<sup>7</sup> Beginning in September 2016, the PMU took a further step to reinforce the official status of the al-hashed.net and Team Media War by distributing memos which described the organisation of the group's media apparatus while praising its integral role in the overall fight against IS.<sup>8</sup>

PMU content has also shown a steady advancement in terms of professionalisation and breadth of content, particularly since the spring of 2016. The organisation's website was overhauled twice in 2016 – each redesign has involved major improvements to the website's format as well as new content. Infographics mirroring those produced by IS are one of the more recent innovations.<sup>9</sup> These mark the conclusions of major battles with figures of enemy fighters killed, equipment destroyed and land retaken. Some seem specifically intended to counter nearly identical IS products.<sup>10</sup> The PMU's videos are also steadily increasing in quality. The typical montages of battlefield footage from earlier days, often captured by mobile-phone cameras, are being augmented by more slickly produced and staged videos. Officially sponsored music videos, labelled by the PMU as *anasheed*, are another recent addition.<sup>11</sup> The PMU is also making increasingly effective use of social media tools on platforms like Twitter, such as the use of hashtag campaigns to increase supporter participation in message dissemination.<sup>12</sup> Team Media War even recently branched into the film scene – in late September 2016 the organisation sponsored an international film festival in Baghdad under the slogan “cinema confronting terrorism” which reportedly included 150 films.<sup>13</sup> The number of personnel assigned to Team Media War is unclear, but the organisation seems to be sizeable – a video posted in September included a shot of at least twenty individuals who had participated in making the film.<sup>14</sup>

The PMU's messaging is still generally limited to an Arabic-speaking audience. Although a splash page indicating a choice between content in Arabic, Kurdish and English has intermittently come up when accessing al-hashed.net, the Kurdish and English links have never been active – the organisation's English Twitter account was only established in November 2016.<sup>15</sup> Content on this platform is similar, if not identical, to that posted on the organisation's Arabic platforms. Somewhat oddly, it took over a month of posting English content for the PMU to denounce an account called Iraqi PMU

<sup>7</sup> For example, on 21 June 2016 the organisation's Team Media War Twitter account identified several fake accounts, claiming that these accounts do not represent the PMU nor is the PMU responsible for their content. Twitter has since removed one of these accounts while the other two have content emphasising the Shiite character of the PMU and, to a lesser extent, the Counter-Terrorism Service. These accounts also have explicitly anti-American content (@Mnaf2346Www and @SaeefaaS). On 21 August 2016, al-hashed.net posted a story claiming that a Facebook account claiming official affiliation with the PMU was fake. Although the PMU story criticised the account for its denigration of Shiite clerics (*marja'iyah*), the account's postings prior to the denunciation were more focused on politics and highly critical of al-Maliki in particular.

<sup>8</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/08/بالوثيقة-هيئة-الحشد-تصدر-تعليمات-خاصة/> and <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/05/الهيكل-التنظيمي-لمديرية-الإدارة-المركزية/>.

<sup>9</sup> The PMU posts infographics at: <http://al-hashed.net/category/انفو-غرافيك/>.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/07/10/الفلوجة-المحررة/>.

<sup>11</sup> These videos depart significantly from the *anasheed* produced by IS and other extremists in that the PMU's products include musical accompaniment, which is forbidden by the latter's religious doctrine. The PMU posts *anasheed* at <http://al-hashed.net/category/اناشيد/>.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: #To the nation, the Hashd protects you, <https://twitter.com/teammediawar/status/769566584415412224?lang=en>.

<sup>13</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/25/بالصور-انطلاق-مهرجان-العراق-السينمائي/>.

<sup>14</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/08/بالفيديو-الاعلام-الحربي-ينتج-انشودة-عبد/>.

<sup>15</sup> This splash page is not currently active; the PMU's English Twitter account can be found at <https://twitter.com/warmediateam>.

English which claimed an official affiliation with the PMU and had been posting content since the spring of 2016.<sup>16</sup>

Several of the organisation's offices, like the Office of General Logistical Support and Infrastructure, also appear to have established presences on social media, but many of these proved to be short-lived or attracted only limited audiences.<sup>17</sup> Platforms claiming association with the PMU's Office of Ideological Guidance have been more successful in reaching audiences and continue to post content.<sup>18</sup> Some of the messaging on these platforms is far more sectarian, demonstrative of Iranian influence and aggressive than what is posted on al-hashed.net. The authenticity of these platforms is unclear; the official accounts do not provide links to these sites, but they also do not denounce them the way they have with the imposters described above. Ultimately, regardless of their validity, these platforms appear to be far less influential – the Twitter and Facebook accounts linked to the Office of Ideological Guidance enjoy far fewer supporters than their official counterparts.<sup>19</sup>

The PMU's media apparatus also reflects the organisation's underlying structure as a conglomeration of mostly pre-existing militia groups, some of whose leaders have assumed prominent positions within the umbrella organisation. Three individuals feature most prominently in the PMU's messaging: Jamal al-Ibrahimi, commonly known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Hadi al-Ameri and Ahmed al-Asadi. Al-Muhandis has long been associated with the Iranian-affiliated Iraqi militia Kata'ib Hezbollah, and is currently referred to as the deputy leader and field commander of the PMU.<sup>20</sup> The organisation's media apparatus features al-Muhandis in articles and photographs on a near daily basis, covering topics ranging from his leadership on the front line against IS to more mundane portrayals of his day-to-day management of the organisation. Al-Muhandis' prominence within the PMU is troubling for many analysts – in 2009 he was designated by the United States' Department of the Treasury as an individual posing a threat to the stability of Iraq.<sup>21</sup> Kata'ib Hezbollah was simultaneously designated as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" by the United States' Department of State. The statement accompanying this designation refers to al-Muhandis as an adviser to the IRGC Quds Force notorious commander, Qasem Soleimani, and describes al-Muhandis' role in attacks against the United States' forces in Iraq in 2007 and 2008, as well as a series of bombings and an assassination attempt in Kuwait in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup>

Al-Ameri is the leader of the Badr Organization, an Iraqi Shia political party and paramilitary organisation which effectively controls the Iraqi Ministry of Interior.<sup>23</sup> Al-Ameri himself is a polarising figure, infamous because of his organisation's suspected links to the large-scale murder of Sunni civilians during Iraq's 2006–2008 sectarian

<sup>16</sup> The content on the fake account was fairly similar to that on the PMU's official Arabic account, with one major exception – the fake account regularly acknowledged the assistance provided by the United States and other coalition partners in the fight against IS. See: <https://twitter.com/warmediateam/status/813116937823731714>.

<sup>17</sup> Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Logistical.support.iq/>. See also the Office of Martyrdom and Sacrifice, <https://www.facebook.com/tebaba214>.

<sup>18</sup> Office of Ideological Guidance Platforms include <http://hshed.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/hshed> and [https://twitter.com/hashid\\_shabe](https://twitter.com/hashid_shabe).

<sup>19</sup> As of 28 September 2016, the Office of Ideological Guidance had 376,830 likes on Facebook and 1,375 followers on Twitter, compared to 999,904 and 84,000 for the official outlets.

<sup>20</sup> Kata'ib Hezbollah denied the link to al-Muhandis when he was still a member of the Iraqi parliament and stated that their leader remained hidden from the United States' intelligence services, <http://www.kataibhezbollah.com/ar/pages/news.php?nid=53&gid=6&sw=المهندس>.

<sup>21</sup> "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq", U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2 July 2009, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> S. George, "Breaking Badr", *Foreign Policy*, 6 November 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/>.

conflict.<sup>24</sup> In a manner similar to the PMU's coverage of al-Muhandis, the organisation's media apparatus highlights al-Ameri's role as a commander on the front lines against IS. Al-Asadi is the PMU's spokesman and the secretary-general of a smaller PMU Shia militia called Kata'ib Jund al-Imam, as well as a member of parliament.<sup>25</sup> He is regularly quoted with regard to the PMU's position on Iraqi political events and also represents the organisation abroad in conferences, such as at the recent meeting of the United Nations' Human Rights Council.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, the actual head of the PMU, Fali al-Fayyadh, is rarely featured. Al-Fayyadh, who is also Prime Minister Abadi's national security adviser, is referenced occasionally in articles which discuss the Iraqi government's support of the organisation and appears at events such as a press conference marking the two-year anniversary of the PMU's founding.<sup>27</sup> However, al-Fayyadh appears to be largely absent from the battlefield, and hence from the majority of the PMU's propaganda online.

Other prominent leaders from IRGC-backed militias, like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's Qais al-Khazali and Harakat al-Nujaba's Akram al-Ka'bi, are regularly quoted or otherwise covered by the PMU's media. Although such content mentions their PMU membership, their militia affiliations are also referenced and they normally appear in photographs flanked by the banners of their original militias rather than those of the PMU.<sup>28</sup> The PMU's constituent militias also generally retain their own online media platforms from before the formation of the PMU.<sup>29</sup> These platforms often disseminate messages which depart from or directly contradict those on the PMU's official platforms – their content tends to be more reflective of Shia religious themes and anti-Sunni than the PMU's, and these militias are also more inclined to link their operations in Iraq to a regional Shia-Sunni struggle. Despite this dissonance, many of these platforms are still listed by one of the PMU's infographics as pro-PMU sources of news.<sup>30</sup> This indicates either that relationships between the constituent militias and the PMU umbrella organisation may still be somewhat tentative, or that the PMU is intentionally manipulating its organisational structure to portray different messages to different audiences.

## 2. Core Narrative

The PMU owes its existence to the conflict with IS, and this struggle forms the backdrop for the PMU's core narrative – the PMU is a group of Iraqi citizens from each of Iraq's sects fighting on behalf of the Iraqi people against IS (see Figures 1 and 2). PMU content supporting this narrative takes two broad forms: content emphasising the heroism, sacrifice and battlefield prowess of the PMU's fighters and content which vilifies, denigrates and illustrates the weaknesses of IS.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. For more on Badr, see: P. Smyth, "Should Iraq's ISCI Forces Really Be Considered 'Good Militias'?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 17 August 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/should-iraqs-isci-forces-really-be-considered-good-militias>.

<sup>25</sup> P. Smyth, "There Is No 'Good' Shia Militia in Iraq", *The Daily Beast*, 17 April 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/04/17/is-there-a-good-shia-militia-in-iraq.html>.

<sup>26</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar>.

<sup>27</sup> The article has been removed. It was originally accessed 31 August 2016 at: <http://al-hashed.net/هيئة-الحشد-الشعبى-تشيد-ب-انجودر-نيس-الوز>. Al-Fayyadh's two-year anniversary speech is Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC7aOovQwC4>.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/12/الخز علي-تحريير-الموصل-قبل-الشر-قاصو-الح> and <http://al-hashed.net/2016/08/27/حز-كتة-النجباء-الاستكبار-العالمى-و-السم>.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example: Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq at <http://www.alahad.tv.iq> and <http://ahlualhaq.com/>; Kata'ib Hezbollah at <http://www.kataibhezbollah.com>; Harakat al-Nujaba at <http://www.alnujaba.com> and Muqtada al-Sadr at <http://jawabna.com/en/>.

<sup>30</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/06/15/الاعلام-الناقم-والاعلام-الناصر>.



Figure 1: Emphasising Goal of Destroying IS



Figure 2: The PMU as Servants of the Iraqi People



Zahera Harb provides a useful concept for this type of approach, which she describes as “liberation propaganda”:

A national media campaign aiming to free occupied land [...] It is propaganda to the home front that seeks to keep the nation united to achieve emancipation. It additionally aims at diminishing fear of the enemy and emphasising the ability and credibility of resistance fighters to lead the nation towards liberation. It is a propaganda that aims at demonising the enemy's abilities and credibility. Significantly, liberation propaganda also seeks to establish fear of the resistance among the enemy audience – yet centrally it is a propaganda



campaign that considers credibility and factuality as its main features.<sup>31</sup>

Whether or not the PMU is intentionally copying the Lebanese Hezbollah model which Harb describes, “liberation propaganda” is an accurate description of the majority of their official content.<sup>32</sup>

The first thing the PMU tries to show its followers is that the PMU, and the ISF more generally, is succeeding in the fight against IS. Battlefield updates are a staple of the organisation's postings on their website and social media accounts. Combat footage is usually uploaded on a daily (if not hourly) basis, particularly during periods of intense fighting like the clearance of Fallujah. The PMU tries to give supporters a feel for the situation on the front line as embedded media personnel equipped with helmet cameras and other advanced camera equipment brave enemy fire to interview the organisation's fighters. Other products provide more general descriptions of ongoing operations, such as the regular posting of maps depicting the latest PMU advances into IS-held territory. Major operations are often summarised in infographics which provide statistics on the numbers of IS fighters killed, equipment destroyed and villages liberated.<sup>33</sup>

The PMU also seeks to build legitimacy and credibility by portraying itself as a formal organisation capable of conducting large operations with its ISF partners. As part of this effort, PMU leaders are regularly shown conferring with commanders from the Counter-Terrorism Service and other ISF units during operations (Figure 3).<sup>34</sup> In other moves intended to represent the group's formalisation, the irregularly clad PMU fighters from the early days of the organisation are increasingly being supplanted by photos of fighters in standard uniforms with patches displaying the organisation's insignia; vehicles are similarly painted in a standard fashion with common insignia.<sup>35</sup> A video posted in September 2016 shows recruits undergoing drill and ceremony training as part of their preparation for the fight against IS.<sup>36</sup> Many PMU propaganda pictures also showcase the organisation's heavy weapons, including armoured vehicles and artillery, which demonstrate the organisation's evolution from a collection of lightly armed and irregular militia fighters.<sup>37</sup> Such messages support the PMU's ongoing efforts to increase its legitimacy as a permanent and critical organisation within the Iraqi Security Forces.

<sup>31</sup> Z. Harb, *Channels of Resistance in Lebanon: Liberation Propaganda, Hezbollah and the Media* (I.B.Tauris, 2011), p. 233.

<sup>32</sup> The PMU's list of pro-PMU media outlets uses the term “Axis of Resistance” as a heading to describe Arab channels with favourable views of the organisation, implicitly linking the PMU to the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah alliance. The infographic is available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/06/15/الإعلام-الناقم-والإعلام-الناصر>.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/07/10/الفلوجة-المحررة>.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/772842438239084544?lang=en>; <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/759817972965748738?lang=en> and <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/783635028806868992?lang=en>.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/773639924725719042?lang=en>; <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/754169622908301312?lang=en> and <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/773925917030805509?lang=en>.

<sup>36</sup> Posted to the PMU's Facebook account on 26 September 2016.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/756886485656272896?lang=en>.

Figure 3: Operational Planning



In a similar vein, the celebration of the martyrdom of PMU fighters in operations against IS forms a key part of the organisation's overall narrative. Although it does not regularly publish figures on how many fighters it has lost, it is not trying to hide the fact that it is losing fighters in combat.<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, highlighting its losses provides the PMU with an opportunity to showcase the critical role that it is playing on the battlefield. Previous incarnations of the group's websites featured pictures of martyrs scrolling across the bottom of the main page. PMU leaders are also regularly shown attending the funerals of fallen fighters or otherwise meeting with martyrs' families.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, even its fictional representations of operations against IS portray martyrdom as a likely scenario. In part one of a series of *anasheed* videos an Iraqi mother is seen dispatching her son to defend the nation.<sup>40</sup> In the second instalment, this PMU fighter is shown dying on a hospital bed where he sings about the "gift" of martyrdom.<sup>41</sup> The video closes with his mother expressing her joy at this outcome. However, it is important to note that however much the PMU extols the virtues of martyrdom, the organisation does not explicitly or implicitly encourage suicide operations like the bombings or the *inghimasi*-style commando tactics utilised by IS.<sup>42</sup>

The messaging described above has obvious utility as a method for recruiting fighters, but the group has recently attempted to more directly engage PMU supporters and deepen their relationship with the organisation. The PMU's media apparatus clearly views social media platforms and the internet in general as an important battleground in the overall fight against IS; these are arenas in which PMU supporters who are incapable of joining combat units can still contribute to the struggle. In a Team Media War music video posted on 7 September, PMU media personnel are portrayed as digital warriors defeating IS by combating their narrative and ideology online.<sup>43</sup> Some of the

<sup>38</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/707998976616886272?lang=en>.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/755454004373618690?lang=en>.

<sup>40</sup> Part 1 is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6YkNPAdsE>.

<sup>41</sup> Part 2 is available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/06/المنشد-على-الدلفي-مايعبر-ون-الجزء-الثاني>.

<sup>42</sup> For more on IS suicide tactics see C. Winter, "Suicide Tactics and the Islamic State", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 10 January 2017, <https://icct.nl/publication/suicide-tactics-and-the-islamic-state/>.

<sup>43</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/08/بالفيديو-الاعلام-الحربي-ينتج-انشودعاب>.

PMU fighters are uniformed, but others are cloaked behind the Guy Fawkes masks associated with the hacker collective Anonymous in an appeal to PMU supporters to act independently to combat the messages of IS on social media platforms. Such appeals appear to resonate within the PMU's audience – within a week of being posted, the video had already garnered over two million views.

PMU messages also highlight the links between the organisation's fighters and the society that they are protecting. A well-produced video posted to Twitter in September shows civilians preparing homemade sweets to distribute to PMU fighters on the front lines in celebration of Eid al-Adha.<sup>44</sup> Several other videos portray an idealised version of life amongst the marshes in the south of Iraq and typically end with young men picking up uniforms and arms before heading off to protect this fragile and humble society.<sup>45</sup> Other posts show PMU supporters waving flags at the recent Olympic Games in Rio, praise the United Nations' decision to list the marshes as a protected site under UNESCO, and celebrate a recent football victory in an effort to represent the intimacy of the PMU-society relationship.<sup>46</sup> As a relatively new organisation that is still in the process of embedding itself as an official Iraqi security institution, the PMU will probably continue to cultivate the political support of its civilian base.

The positive portrayals of PMU fighters described above appear alongside content emphasising the evil, brutality, cowardice and impending demise of IS. Content illustrating IS's tactical losses is a standard part of Team Media War's daily Twitter and Facebook posts. These include photos and videos of dead IS fighters, abandoned fighting positions and destroyed equipment. Although some of these images are gruesome, captions claim that the IS fighters were killed in direct combat or as a result of airstrikes rather than in the execution style common within IS propaganda.<sup>47</sup> Captured IS fighters are also frequently shown, and although photos display these individuals' fear and despair, PMU content avoids any indications that these prisoners are being tortured or otherwise retaliated against (Figure 4).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Available at: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/775285484075573248?lang=en>.

<sup>45</sup> The best example is available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/05/انشودة-الر-ادود-احمد-الساعدي/>.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/761632125154123776?lang=en>; <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/754721920076156928?lang=en>; and <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/773071734694088705?lang=en>.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/769850348550971392?lang=en>; <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/769751789294026756?lang=en>; <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/713667291595014144?lang=en>; and <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/768877452915515393?lang=en>.

<sup>48</sup> Available at: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/760115992647335936?lang=en>.

Figure 4: Humane Treatment of Prisoners



The PMU's messaging platforms also undertake efforts to highlight the acts of savagery perpetrated by IS against Iraqis, particularly the Shia. The Camp Speicher massacre, where IS fighters executed a large number of Shia air force cadets, is particularly prominent.<sup>49</sup> A number of posts and articles during the battle of Fallujah centred on the capture of IS members who participated in the massacre, and on operations undertaken by the PMU's intelligence apparatus to recover documents and other information about IS atrocities from caches in newly liberated territory.<sup>50</sup> IS's genocidal acts against the Yazidis are also referenced as evidence of IS's depravity.<sup>51</sup> In a statement intended to demonstrate the PMU's role in stopping such crimes, the group showed off their capture of a sword used by IS during executions in Jazeera Khalidiya.<sup>52</sup> Condemning all of these crimes regardless of the sect of the victims is also part of the PMU's effort to combat accusations of sectarianism, a subject which will be addressed in the next section.

<sup>49</sup> For more on the Speicher Massacre, see "Iraq hangs 36 men for Camp Speicher massacre", BBC News, 21 August 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37148060>.

<sup>50</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/06/01/قوات-الحشد-تعثّر-على-مستمسكات-لشهداء-عسب/>.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/07/15/الكشف-عن-وجود-1200-طفل-ايزيدي-محتجز-لدى-داع/>.

<sup>52</sup> Available at: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/765253329433796608?lang=en>.



### 3. Addressing Sectarianism

The most challenging obstacle that the PMU's propaganda needs to overcome is the characterisation of the organisation as a violent sectarian actor.<sup>53</sup> The PMU's history places them at a disadvantage as they undertake this effort. Fundamentally, the PMU does contain several Shia militias with histories of targeting vulnerable Sunni populations in Iraq – Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah are particularly notorious. Prominent reports of PMU involvement in the forced displacement, torture and extrajudicial killings of Sunnis in territory reclaimed from IS only exacerbate this problem.<sup>54</sup>

The PMU tries to combat this image in two ways. First, since the PMU cannot hope to hide the piety of its Shia fighters or its origins in a sermon from Iraq's paramount Shia cleric, the organisation makes an effort to highlight the cross-confessional aspects of its force wherever possible. Thus, while religion and expressions of faith are frequently featured in the PMU's messaging content, Christian and Sunni references will generally appear alongside Shia ones (Figure 5).<sup>55</sup> Second, some of the more polarising Shia figures within the PMU, like the axe-wielding Abu Azrael, do not appear in the PMU's official propaganda.<sup>56</sup>

Figure 5: I am Sunni, I am Shia, I am Kurdish, I am Christian



<sup>53</sup> For more on the sectarian accusations against the PMU and the response of Sunnis within the organisation's ranks, see R. Tollast, "Inside Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", *The National Interest*, 23 May 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/iraqs-shia-militias-arent-bad-you-think-16291?page=2>.

<sup>54</sup> Amnesty International, "Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye: The Arming of the Popular Mobilization Units", 5 January 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/5386/2017/en/>, and M. Lynch, "Sectarianism and the Campaign to Retake Fallujah", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 17 July 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/63834>. The PMU's response to the Amnesty International report is available at: <https://twitter.com/warmediateam/status/817128645156282368>.

<sup>55</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/08/25/البصري-المسيحيون-جزء-مهم-من-الحشد-الشعب>.

<sup>56</sup> T. Wyke, "ISIS' worst enemy is back: Axe-wielding 'Angel of Death' surfaces outside Fallujah and vows to 'pulverise' the militants still in the besieged Iraqi city", *Daily Mail*, 9 June 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3631941/ISIS-worst-nightmare-Axe-wielding-Angel-Death-surfaces-outside-Fallujah-vows-pulverise-militants-besieged-Iraqi-city.html>.

The PMU's effort to emphasise its inclusive character seems to have picked up in the spring of 2016 during the run-up to the fight in Fallujah. Before this time, the iconography of Shia components of the PMU was far more prominent in official content, particularly that of more violently anti-Sunni groups like the aforementioned Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah.<sup>57</sup> Nasrallah from Lebanese Hezbollah even appears in PMU messaging from this period, and Shia flags and slogans are common.<sup>58</sup> However, by the end of March the PMU began to post messages on Twitter and Facebook about how the organisation is made up of all of the components of Iraqi society. Recent postings on the organisation's website claim that between a quarter and a third of the organisation is non-Shia.<sup>59</sup>

The operation to liberate Fallujah provided a further opportunity to showcase the inclusive nature of the PMU. Twitter and Facebook content from this period is a mix of battlefield imagery and posts describing the assistance provided by the PMU to Sunni populations fleeing IS-held territory. One repeatedly posted series of images shows a PMU fighter carrying a local, presumably Sunni, child to safety during the liberation of Fallujah (Figure 6).<sup>60</sup> Similar content was posted in anticipation of the Mosul operation.<sup>61</sup> More recent content related to the PMU's participation in the ongoing battle to liberate Mosul utilises similar imagery.

Figure 6: Saving Children in Fallujah



This type of coverage also extends to updates on improved conditions in areas liberated from IS. Some of the earliest PMU content focused on the one-year anniversary of the liberation of Tikrit and the city's return to normality.<sup>62</sup> The PMU's official outlets have been even quicker to distribute content showing similar scenes of

<sup>57</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/706565717836099584?lang=en>.

<sup>58</sup> Available at: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/706530751295188993?lang=en>.

<sup>59</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/06/15/الإعلام-الناقم-والإعلام-الناصر>.

<sup>60</sup> Most recently posted to Twitter on 2 October 2016,

<https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/782327488890503169?lang=en>. For an earlier posting, see: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/738697876491108352?lang=en>. Another video shows a PMU fighter appearing to be shot while rescuing a civilian; <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/744607820910305280?lang=en>.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/773925917030805509?lang=en>.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/715282177815142400?lang=en>.



Sunni families returning to their homes and life returning to normal after the liberation of Fallujah and other parts of al-Anbar in the summer of 2016.<sup>63</sup>

The PMU also reacted strongly to Western and Gulf media reports of summary executions of Sunni civilians and other abuses carried out by PMU fighters. In addition to posts on all of its platforms denouncing the accusations, the PMU went so far as to publish an infographic which associated Western and Gulf media outlets with “indignation” (ناقم) and pro-PMU outlets with “victory” (ناصر).<sup>64</sup> The PMU also responded with posts showing al-Anbar’s Sunni leaders praising the PMU.<sup>65</sup> In addition, there is evidence that the PMU’s leadership has taken a proactive role in preventing incidents.<sup>66</sup>

Iraq’s religious minorities are not the only ones with concerns about a Shia supremacist PMU. Observers have predicted a conflict between the PMU and the Kurdish Regional Government over the latter’s territorial expansion into areas which its Peshmerga forces have liberated from IS.<sup>67</sup> The PMU and Peshmerga have already come to blows in Tuz Khormato.<sup>68</sup> If the PMU needs an enemy to justify its existence in a post-IS environment, the Kurds could well be it – there is already plenty of tension between the central government in Baghdad and the Barzani government in Irbil (Hawlêr). Nevertheless, the PMU has yet to use its formal propaganda apparatus to stoke anti-Kurdish sentiment within its popular base. To the contrary, an article posted on 21 September discusses PMU cooperation with the Peshmerga and local tribal militias as these forces began to move on Mosul.<sup>69</sup> As these operations continue to unfold, the depiction of the Peshmerga’s role in the liberation of Mosul within the PMU’s official media will provide an indication of the PMU’s likely post-Mosul stance on the Kurds.

## 4. Stance on Regional States

The PMU has to carefully balance its inclusive narrative with its approach to regional states. Western media reports on the PMU are full of references to Iran’s role in providing material aid, training and operational leadership along with strategic and ideological guidance to the PMU, but the PMU makes almost no mention of Iran on any of its platforms. It is not difficult at all to find pictures of the notorious head of the IRGC’s Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, touring battlefields in Iraq alongside PMU leaders; Soleimani’s mere presence is often considered proof enough of Iran’s control of the PMU.<sup>70</sup> Curiously, none of these pictures seem to find their way into the PMU’s official content. As demonstrated by the very public attempt by a PMU contingent in Basra to rename a street after Iran’s former supreme leader, some PMU contingents clearly hold

<sup>63</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/777018491102695424?lang=en>.

<sup>64</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/06/15/الإعلام-الناقم-والإعلام-الناصر/>.

<sup>65</sup> On 5 June, al-Ibrahimi met with Sunni clerics, who praised the role of the PMU in the liberation of civilians in Fallujah from the oppression of the Islamic State. Article available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/06/05/قيادة-الحشد-الشعبى-أبو-مهدى-3-المهندس-ي->

<sup>66</sup> See, for example: PMU guidance to fighters before the battle for Fallujah: <http://republicsumer.blogspot.com.au/2016/05/the-popular-mobilisation-forces.html> and al-Sistani’s guidance, <http://www.sistani.org/english/archive/25036/>.

<sup>67</sup> M. Saadoun, “Iraqis already arguing over land they haven’t yet freed from IS”, *Al-Monitor*, 20 September 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/nineveh-mosul-kurdistan-iraq.html>.

<sup>68</sup> M. Bozarslan, “Why Tuz Khormato clashes were more than just local skirmishes”, *Al-Monitor*, 5 May 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/turkey-iraq-tuz-khormatu-new-sunni-shiite-front.html>.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/08/29/الاتحاد-الوطني-الكر-دستلى-يؤكد-ضرو-3/>.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/iraqisecurity/status/607558916340346881> and <https://twitter.com/shiapulse/status/607280587464798209>; for more on Soleimani see J. Siegel, “The myth of Iran’s military mastermind”, *The Daily Beast*, 5 June 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/05/the-myth-of-iran-s-military-mastermind.html> and D. Filkins, “The shadow commander”, *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>.

Iran and its theocratic form of government in high esteem.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, PMU leaders like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's Qais al-Khazali and Harakat al-Nujaba's Akram al-Ka'bi have made high-profile visits to Iran during which they claim allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the theocratic *velayat-e faqih* doctrine which forms the basis of Iran's Islamic Republic.<sup>72</sup> Although such activities are well covered by the international media, including Iran's, the PMU's official outlets make no mention of them.

The PMU's lack of comment on the role played by Iran is likely to be motivated by concerns that overt links to Iran, much less professions of allegiance, might detract from the PMU's legitimacy and internal unity. Iraqi patriotism is a core aspect of the PMU's overall narrative – the organisation's links to the Iranian regime detract from the credibility of that message. There is clearly concern within parts of the Iraqi population about the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of a powerful political bloc, as well as Saraya al-Salam, a PMU militia, has recently condemned Iranian attempts to meddle in Iraqi politics, as have his supporters in rallies where chants of "Iran Out Out" and taunts directed at Qasem Soleimani are common.<sup>73</sup> There is also widespread resistance within the Iraqi Shia community to the spread of Iranian religious influence within Iraq, particularly with regard to the Iranian regime's interpretation of the *velayat-e faqih* concept of government where spiritual and temporal authority are fused in a single individual.<sup>74</sup> Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani does not support the Iranian regime's interpretation of this doctrine – he is not only the primary spiritual authority for most Iraqi Shia, but the new recruits who flooded the ranks of the nascent PMU in the summer of 2014 were often responding to his fatwa. As a result of these conditions, publicising Iran's support of the PMU would probably incur costs for the organisation.

Nevertheless, when the subject does arise, the PMU does not deny its links to Iran. The PMU certainly receives some level of support from the Iranian government, even if the full extent is unclear. Several of the PMU's most powerful militias, particularly Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba, certainly acquire significant levels of aid from Iran.<sup>75</sup> Renad Mansour argues that Prime Minister Abadi is achieving some success in leveraging the Iraqi government's support of the PMU to gain greater control over the organisation and that this indicates that the support the organisation receives from Iran must be of less significance.<sup>76</sup> Abadi's recent moves to further institutionalise the organisation as a security force prohibited from involvement in Iraqi politics may further isolate the group from Iran.<sup>77</sup> The opposing view holds that power is flowing in the opposite direction: through the PMU, Iran has essentially captured a large share of Iraq's security bureaucracy and managed to get the Iraqi government to pay for it.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>71</sup> A. Taher, "Iraqis wary of political role for Popular Mobilization Units", *Al-Monitor*, 21 July 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/basra-pmu-khomeini-iraq-iran.html>.

<sup>72</sup> A. Toumaj, "Iraqi militia leader receives warm reception in Tehran", *The Long War Journal*, 9 September 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/iraqi-militia-leader-receives-warm-reception-in-tehran.php>.

<sup>73</sup> A. Mamouri, "Why Shiites are divided over Iranian role in Iraq", *Al-Monitor*, 12 May 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/sadrist-stances-iraqi-shiites-opposing-iranian-policy.html>.

<sup>74</sup> N. Blanford, "Iran, Iraq, and two Shiite visions", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 20 February 2004, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0220/p01s02-woiq.html>.

<sup>75</sup> P. Smyth, "The Shiite jihad in Syria and its regional effects", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects>.

<sup>76</sup> R. Mansour, "From militia to state force: the transformation of al-Hashd al-Shaabi", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 16 November 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/61986>.

<sup>77</sup> On 28 August 2016, Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission announced a ban on PMU participation in upcoming local and parliamentary elections. See O. al-Jaffal, "Will Popular Mobilization Units participate in Iraqi elections?", *Al-Monitor*, 4 September 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/popular-mobilization-iraq-election.html>.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example: B. Roggio and A. Toumaj, "Iraq's prime minister establishes Popular Mobilization Front as a permanent 'independent military formation'", *The Long War Journal*, 28 July 2016,

Such observers often see the PMU as an Iraqi version of the IRGC. They are not alone – there are also reports of PMU leaders describing their organisation in similar terms.<sup>79</sup> A trend in this direction alarms some Western observers who fear that the PMU will take on two key traits of the IRGC: engagement in paramilitary activities abroad, whether against Israeli or Western targets or in support of Iran's regional allies, and the IRGC's domestic role in combating dissent and as an enforcer of extreme Khomeinist social norms. Ali Aghuan believes that a battle is currently taking place within the PMU to determine whether or not the organisation will evolve along these lines.<sup>80</sup> He identifies three major factions inside the PMU, one in the form of Muqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salaam, which is allied with a second faction formed by a group of militias loyal to al-Sistani. The third and more powerful bloc is composed of militias like Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat al-Nujaba; this faction is doctrinally aligned with Iran and is trying to cement its control over the PMU's command. As described above, this final faction is featured far more prominently in the PMU's messaging – al-Mahdi and al-Ameri appear in the PMU's media on a daily basis, while Sadr and al-Sistani are rarely mentioned. Nevertheless, this faction has yet to promote its pro-Iranian stance and support of Khomeini's *velayat-e faqih* system of theocratic government. Either way, the PMU seems poised to play a central role in determining Iraq's political future.<sup>81</sup>

Regarding Iraq's neighbour to the west, the PMU's media made little mention of the Syrian Civil War prior to the beginning of the battle for Mosul. This was a notable omission since a number of the PMU's Shia component militias have been very publicly involved in combat operations on behalf of the al-Assad regime for years.<sup>82</sup> Although many of these fighters returned to Iraq after IS's rampage through northern and western Iraq in the summer of 2014, there are still large numbers of Iraqi Shia fighting in Syria who might otherwise be available for operations in Iraq. Avoiding this subject made sense for a PMU leadership that was trying to project an image of a cross-confessional and nationalist Iraqi force – Iraqi Shia fighting for religious reasons in a conflict increasingly characterised by a sectarian divide did not fit into this narrative. However, since the beginning of the Mosul operation, the PMU has grown increasingly vocal about the potential for the group to operate in Syria. Such a future move is usually couched in terms of denying IS a safe haven from which to threaten Iraq rather than the relying on the explanations employed by groups like Harakat al-Nujaba, who justify their involvement in Syria in terms of protecting Syria's Shia population and shrines like Sayyidah Zaynab.<sup>83</sup> The PMU's leaders are also clear that the organisation will not intervene in Syria without being directed to do so by the Iraqi prime minister. However, regardless of how the leadership may try to couch any future intervention in Syria, such

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<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/iraqs-prime-minister-establishes-popular-mobilization-front-as-a-permanent-independent-military-formation.php>.

<sup>79</sup> J. Aziz, "What are Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units doing in Beirut?", *Al-Monitor*, 18 August 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/lebanon-host-secret-meeting-iraq-pmus-western-diplomats.html>.

<sup>80</sup> A. Aghuan, "The Popular Mobilization Forces' Unfinished Mission", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 13 September 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-popular-mobilization-forces-unfinished-mission>.

<sup>81</sup> For a recent analysis of the PMU's role in intra-Shia political conflict, see R. Mansour, "The political battles in Baghdad after the battle for Mosul", *War on the Rocks*, 3 October 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/10/the-political-battles-in-baghdad-after-the-battle-for-mosul/>.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example: M. Chulov and K. Shaheen, "Sectarian fighters mass for battle to capture east Aleppo", *The Guardian*, 29 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/29/aleppo-attack-foreign-syrian-fighters-plan-shia-islamic>.

<sup>83</sup> See, for example: Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' January 2017 interview with al-Maydan: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8X-XeAXoA8>. For more on Iraqi Shia fighting on behalf of the al-Assad regime, see P. Smyth, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its regional effects", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects>.

a move would probably generate considerable opposition from Iraq's Sunni population. There are three main reasons for the PMU's leadership to indicate a willingness, if not a desire, to intervene in Syria despite the likely backlash from Iraq's Sunnis. First, from a practical standpoint, if Iraq succeeds in pushing IS out of its territory, the threat the residual organisation poses to Iraq will be amplified by control of sanctuaries in Syria. Second, as soon as its forces are no longer involved in active combat operations, Iraq's Sunni community and Western allies will probably pressure the government to demobilise some or all of the PMU's formations – ongoing operations in Syria would provide a rationale for the continued existence of the organisation. Finally, and more worrisome, the passage of legislation to formalise the PMU in late November 2016 may have given the PMU's leadership the confidence to publicly lean closer towards participation in a broader Iranian-led 'Axis of Resistance' which is fighting in Syria, Yemen and along the borders of Israel.<sup>84</sup>

Further afield, the PMU makes no effort to conceal its hostility towards the leadership and media of the Sunni Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain. The organisation stops short of calling for violence but often claims that the Gulf States are sponsoring IS; recent posts use the term "Gulf terrorists" interchangeably with the Arabic pejorative for IS.<sup>85</sup> Such messages are particularly advantageous for the PMU because they cast the Gulf States' hostility towards the PMU as a result of these nation's disappointment in the face of the victories the PMU has achieved against IS. In a good example of this type of message, on 29 June 2016 the group's Twitter account referred to the Saudi Foreign Minister as the foreign minister for IS alongside pictures of captured IS vehicles with Qatari and Saudi licence plates.<sup>86</sup> Another post shows well over a hundred mugshots of Saudi suicide bombers who struck Iraq after 2003.<sup>87</sup> The PMU describes the mood created in the Gulf by their successes against IS as "panic".<sup>88</sup> The PMU is also extremely sensitive to opposition voiced by these states against the PMU's participation on the battlefield and its increasing institutionalisation under the current Iraqi government. Just as they do with IS, the PMU's media apparatus often portrays the internet and related information media as battlefields in the organisation's struggle against these hostile foreign powers. Thus, they condemn media organisations like Al Jazeera for sponsoring and propagating support for IS.<sup>89</sup> Media outlets in the Gulf are reciprocating this hostility; Al Jazeera and other media outlets in the Gulf have been unequivocal in their condemnation of the PMU and its increasing formalisation.<sup>90</sup> The PMU also features in Gulf outlets' discussions about an Iranian-led Shia alliance.<sup>91</sup>

The PMU does not completely compromise its non-sectarian stance when engaged in Saudi-bashing. To the contrary, it often casts its opposition to the Gulf States on the grounds of their oppressive political systems and geopolitical leanings; Bahrain, especially, is an easy target for PMU criticism of its treatment of its majority Shia

<sup>84</sup> In his January 2017 interview with al-Maydan, al-Muhandis discussed his long-term links with Lebanese Hezbollah, particularly with Imad Mugniyeh and Mustafa Badr al-Din, who are widely believed to have led the organisation's external operations until their deaths in 2008 and 2016 respectively. For more on these individuals, see A. Barnard and S. Chan, "Mustafa Badreddine, Hezbollah military commander, is killed in Syria", *The New York Times*, 13 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/14/world/middleeast/mustafa-badreddine-hezbollah.html? r=0>.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/819214118011994112>.

<sup>86</sup> Available at: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/748296569116569600?lang=en>.

<sup>87</sup> Available at: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/752011009762725888?lang=en>.

<sup>88</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/07/27/ال-الإعلام-الخليجي-غز-ع-من-ال-لوية-الحشد-ال->

<sup>89</sup> See the caption on the infographic at <http://al-hashed.net/2016/06/15/الإعلام-الناقص-وال-الإعلام-الناصر>.

<sup>90</sup> Even Al Jazeera's encyclopedia entry for the PMU focuses on the negative aspects of the group: <http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/movementsandparties/2015/3/9/الحشد-الشيعي>.

<sup>91</sup> A. Mamouri, "Shiite alliance against Saudis grows tighter", *Al-Monitor*, 6 September 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/shiite-sunni-iraqi-saudi-sectarianism-yemen-houthis.html>.

population.<sup>92</sup> In a recent statement, al-Muhandis condemned Saudi Arabia for similar reasons as it “fights against the people and freedoms” in Syria, Iraq and now Yemen.<sup>93</sup> Attacking the Saudis on a broader front, the PMU posted a series of caricatures of the ruling family which implied that they are the lackeys of the United States and the Jews under the hashtag #the cursed tree (Figure 7).<sup>94</sup> The series also included criticism of the Saudis’ interpretation of Islam, implying that IS’s ideology is derived from Saudi doctrines. Thus, the PMU can argue that its opposition to the Gulf States is based on their behaviour and specific religious doctrines rather than the sect of their leaders.

Figure 7: Anti-Saudi Messaging



## 5. How the West is Weak and Possibly to Blame

Regarding the United States and its Western allies, the PMU’s official content questions the motives of the anti-IS coalition while generally stopping short of advocating violent measures against coalition forces inside Iraq. The United States is usually portrayed as either a weak power unable to defeat IS, a meddling power attempting to reoccupy Iraq, or a deceptive and manipulative power which is actively backing IS. Given this mindset, the PMU makes almost no mention of the support provided by the United States-led coalition. While the group highlights particularly effective airstrikes against IS, the nationality of the aircrew carrying out the strike is usually left unsaid unless the airstrike was carried out by Iraqi pilots. The roles of coalition trainers, planners and other supporting activities also generally go unmentioned. There are occasional references to the weakness of the United States and its Western partners, but these

<sup>92</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/06/21/المهندس-حدين-اسقاط-الجنسية-عن-آية-الله/>.

<sup>93</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/10/09/المهندس-مستنكر-احجز-ر-ة-صنعاء-ال-سعودي-دع-ع/>.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/772844155726925825?lang=en> and <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/772822805318598656?lang=en>.



seem intended to build up the stature of the PMU and ISF as the only forces willing and able to deal with the worldwide threat posed by IS.

When the PMU does reference the United States, it most commonly takes the form of criticism for intervening in Iraqi affairs or claims that the United States is planning to renew its occupation. In the aftermath of the liberation of Fallujah, denunciations of a renewed United States “occupation” of Iraq were issued by several of the PMU’s subcomponents – these statements were reprinted on al-hashed.net.<sup>95</sup> Similar concerns about long-term American involvement are also articulated in other content posted by the group, such as *anasheed*.<sup>96</sup> The PMU is clearly resentful of United States-led efforts to limit the PMU’s participation in operations like the inevitable attempt to liberate Mosul, and has also posted articles describing the United States’ supposed efforts to break up the state of Iraq.<sup>97</sup>

Accusations that the United States is directly supporting IS are also featuring more frequently in PMU content. Polling data from 2015 shows a widespread belief amongst Iraqis that the United States secretly controls IS.<sup>98</sup> Recently, the PMU has increased the amount of content which reinforces such rumours, mixing facts with conjecture. For example, the PMU joined in the general media incredulity when it was revealed that IS’s new military commander, Gulmurod Khalimov, was trained by United States before he defected from the Tajik military.<sup>99</sup> However, they went a step farther and claimed that this indicated that the United States was a direct supporter of IS through the provision of weaponry and training. Later, in September, the PMU posted images of American helicopters that it claimed were seen ferrying IS commanders around the battlefield (See Figure 8).<sup>100</sup> Such messages may be part of an information campaign preparing the PMU’s supporters for operations against coalition forces.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>95</sup> See, for example: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/07/27/الحشد-الشيعي-لا-تجمعنا-ارض-ولا-اسماء-مع/>.

<sup>96</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/05/انشودة-الر-ادود-على-الذلف/>.

<sup>97</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/12/الخز-علي-امير-كا-تسعي-لنقسيم-العراق-عبر/>.

<sup>98</sup> L. Sly, “Iraqis think the U.S. is in cahoots with the Islamic State, and it is hurting the war”, *The Washington Post*, 1 December 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iraqis-think-the-us-is-in-cahoots-with-isis-and-it-is-hurting-the-war/2015/12/01/d00968ec-9243-11e5-befa-99ceebcbb272\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iraqis-think-the-us-is-in-cahoots-with-isis-and-it-is-hurting-the-war/2015/12/01/d00968ec-9243-11e5-befa-99ceebcbb272_story.html).

<sup>99</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/05/كيف-تلقى-قائد-داعش-العسكري-ي-تدر-بيات-علي/>.

<sup>100</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/26/طائرات-امير-كية-تتفد-انز-الاف-ي-صحراء-ال/>.

<sup>101</sup> M. Saadoun, “Will PMU attack US troops in Iraq?”, *Al-Monitor*, 3 October 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/10/pmu-iraqi-us-mosul-battle.html>.



Figure 8: Claiming that US is Assisting IS



## Conclusion

A *nasheed* titled “the Operetta of God’s Mobilization”, neatly summarises the PMU’s core narrative.<sup>102</sup> In a fictional operation, PMU members rescue Christian women, including a nun, from enslavement and death by stoning at the hands of rapacious Islamic State fighters. Lyrics include “NATO has been defeated”, alongside positive references to a common front extending from Beirut to Baghdad. The video ends with the martyrdom of one of the PMU fighters. Taken together, the video efficiently packages several core PMU themes: it links to the larger Shia community’s struggle but also presents fighters as non-sectarian; Western influence is claimed to be ineffective; PMU members are portrayed as brave and effective fighters; and martyrdom is represented as probable and ultimately positive.

The PMU’s media activity online is not always reassuring. Despite its best efforts to showcase its diversity, inclusiveness and domestic focus on Iraqi security, the PMU is clearly dominated by Shia militias who feel a degree of solidarity with their co-religionists on battlefields within the wider region. The organisation may be willing to accept a degree of Western support in its fight against IS, particularly if it is channelled through other parts of the ISF, but also deeply distrusts the intentions of these partners. In contrast, the PMU is far more explicit in articulating its hostility towards the Saudi, Qatari and Bahraini governments. While it stops short of urging violence, the PMU

<sup>102</sup> Available at: <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/05/أوبريت-حشد-الله-ميادة-الحناء/>.

portrays these countries as IS sponsors and consequently as a threat which will remain after IS is defeated inside Iraq.

The PMU's messaging also points to more positive outcomes. For an organisation that contains individuals and groups which have often been labelled as terrorists, the PMU's media is undertaking a substantial effort to portray the organisation as a cross-confessional force fighting on behalf of all Iraqis. Rather than celebrating their latest crimes against the opposing sect the way that IS does, the PMU depicts its fighters as the liberators of the mostly Sunni communities in areas under IS control. Even if individual militias continue to harbour the anti-Sunni and anti-Western feelings that many fear, at the organisational level the PMU seems to be moderating both its conduct and its rhetoric. As the PMU becomes more integrated and dependent upon the Iraqi government for material support and legitimacy, it will face increased pressure to adhere even more closely to the government's overall goal of promoting Iraqi unity.

Ultimately, today's PMU is an organisation defined by its conflict with IS – everything else is tangential. If and when that conflict ends, the PMU will need to find a new identity. While its messaging cannot provide a definitive answer on how the organisation will evolve in a post-IS environment, it helps to illuminate the outlines of a future agenda. While the PMU will probably continue to be somewhat anti-Western and opposed to the Sunni regimes in the Gulf, it will likely be far more nationalist and inclusive, and less inclined towards the types of anti-Sunni actions and naked promotion of Iranian interests at the expense of Iraqi ones than many fear.

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# Popular Mobilization Messaging

James Garrison

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## Contact ICCT

ICCT  
Zeestraat 100  
2518 AD The Hague  
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 763 0050  
E [info@icct.nl](mailto:info@icct.nl)