

US-Iran Tensions and Instability in Iraq: Role of the Popular Mobilisation Units

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Abstract

Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) is the largest umbrella organisation in Iraq encompassing more than 40 of these paramilitary forces with many of them having deep ties with Iran. Recent killing of the PMU leader Abu Mahdi al Muhandis along with his ally, the Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in a US drone strike concurred a huge loss for Iran and the PMU who had long enjoyed cooperation and influence within Iraq. The PMU, in the absence of its trusted leadership; is predicted to fall apart from within causing instability in Iraq which has been brought about by reckless war-mongering between the US and Iran. This research explores the strategic culture, structure and the role of PMU in bringing about stability in Iraq in the backdrop of continuous deteriorating Iran-US relations. This research argues that in order to make the PMU effective in cultivating peace in Iraq; it would be wise for important stakeholders like Iran and the US to understand its strategic culture and formulate their respective Iraq policies accordingly.

Keywords: Iraq, Iran-US Tensions, PMU, Paramilitary Forces, Strategic Culture.

Introduction

Since the unilateral US withdrawal from the The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018¹; relations between Iran and the US have continuously been on a downward spiral. The 2019 marked a serious deterioration of ties between the two countries with numerous instances when the region came precariously close to the brink of war. The final

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¹ Mark Landler, "Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned," *New York Times*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>

plunge was the assassination of the Iranian Quds Commander General Qassem Soleimani in a US drone strike. Iran retaliated by attacking the US airbases in Iraq that effectively pushed Iraq back into a war zone; this time caught in a US-Iran crossfire.

Disruptive steps taken by both the US and Iran initiated a chain reaction of instability within Iraq causing non-state actors, militias and other groups to create even more unrest in the country. Jamal Ja'far Muhammad Ali Al Ibrahim commonly called Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis ("the engineer"), the head of Kataib Hezbollah was also killed in the drone strike along with General Soleimani. Kataib Hezbollah is a Shia paramilitary faction of the larger Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU)/Hashd al-Shaabi which is an umbrella military organisation founded in 2014 to unify all Iraqi militias in fighting against the Islamic State (IS).²

Muhandis and Soleimani's assassination enraged different militias operating under the PMU umbrella creating serious security concerns for the US assets and troops housed in Iraq. A tedious phase of countrywide protests continued for months following these killings; first among pro-Iran Iraqi militias protesting assassination of their leaders and spreading anti-American sentiment in the country. Overlapping with these; the Iraqi public held demonstrations calling for radical changes in the prevalent political system and Iran's interference in Iraq's internal affairs. While this indicates that young Iraqis are becoming politically aware and active, it also shows deep mistrust between state and the people leading to instability to a great extent.

Since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, instability has grown exponentially. Erosion of the political system, sectarianism, lack of a long-term effective US role and subsequently, Iran's deep involvement in country's political and strategic landscape are some destabilising factors. Iran transformed its relationship with Iraq following Saddam Hussein's ouster in 2003 by cultivating loyalties of politicians and armed groups utilising commonality of faith combined with an easily permeable border.

All this is further exacerbated by poverty, unemployment and corruption while the threat of IS has also not been completely vanished. The security

² "Popular Mobilization Forces (Iraq)," *ALHASHDALSHAABI.COM*, <http://alhashdalshaabi.com/>

situation is also volatile as following Soleimani's killing Iraq has been constantly used as a battleground for Iran and the US to settle scores. This recent strain in the US-Iran ties has also called into question, the future of US-Iraq ties especially after the Iraqi parliament voted to oust the US troops. A symbolic yet meaningful move conveying general sentiment.

This research aims to analyse how the most recent deterioration of Iran-US ties has impacted the regional security situation particularly in Iraq. US-Iran tensions post-Soleimani's assassination have caused instability in Iraq as they have set off a chain reaction of unrest carried out by several pro-Iran militias in the region. These non-state actors contribute to the security situation as much as any regional state and such groups have existed in Iraq for a long time with two distinct groups taking center stage, namely:

- a) Popular Mobilisation Units/Forces (PMU)
- b) Kurdish Security Fighters (KSF)³

This research has chosen the case study of the PMU because numerous militias working under its banner have been utilised in Iraq as a crucial on-ground resource by Iran as well as the Iraqi government. At the same time, they have also fought against the IS alongside the US troops in the region. Thus, following research questions have been posed:

- i. How do US-Iran tensions affect regional security situation in the Middle East particularly in Iraq?
- ii. How will the non-state actors such as pro-Iran militias and Islamic State (IS) contribute to the turbulent security situation in the region?

Qualitative and descriptive research methodology has been used under which the deductive approach has been applied to first make an assumption, formulate a hypothesis, gather data to test the hypothesis. Primary sources such as official statements, speeches and interviews have been used

³ Erica Gaston and András Derzsi-Horváth, *Iraq After ISIL: Sub-State Actors, Local Forces and the Micro-Politics of Control*, Global Policy Research Institute, Berlin, 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Gaston_Derzsi-Horvath_2018_Iraq_After_ISIL.pdf

alongside secondary sources such as books, journal articles, policy papers and newspapers.

Conceptual Framework

a) Strategic Culture and A Case Study of PMU

In order to properly understand the role of non-state actors such as PMU in security affairs of Iraq and its relevance for Iran and the US, the concept of 'Strategic Culture' is applied.

The term 'Strategic Culture' was first coined by Jack Snyder in a report titled, "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options" in 1977.⁴ The term represented the military and security vision of any particular state in question and became an interesting subject for policymakers. The concept was previously applied only to comprehend state behaviour under the realist school of thought. However, the rise of non-state actors and entities posed this important question for students of International Relations: Can non-state actors have a strategic culture?

b) Strategic Culture & Non-State Actors

Garrett Pierman argues that non-state actors or groups that live beyond territorial boundaries, without state structure or international recognition are perfectly capable of having a shared identity and ideology. He defines 'Strategic Culture' as, "the socialised sets of norms, values and priorities which change with time and are informed by a shared, group identity which informs the logic of an actor's strategic thought."⁵

These groups can have a common historical premise for their struggle and a shared vision for their future with policy formulation and execution as means to fulfill their objectives much like nation-states. He also argues that such groups do not need international recognition for their ideology to become logical in their opinion, rather in many cases, international isolation

⁴ Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options*, (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1977), <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2005/R2154.pdf>

⁵ Garrett Pierman, "The Grand Strategy of Nonstate Actors: *Theory* and Implications," *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 4.

and condemnation strengthens their resolve.⁶ Contrary to realist belief, non-state actors can have goals that are disruptive to writ of the state they live in but make sense to them as a group. This approach to understanding their way of operation and end goals is crucial for countries to understand as they have evolved to be a potent threat to overall global security.

While the idea of territoriality is not crucial to being an important participant in international political affairs; there are a few pre-conditions as explained by Pierman that are to be met by a particular group to be thought as having a Strategic Culture. The PMU or Hashd al-Shaabi is a unique non-state entity that has been under loose state control for national security concerns but the group also meets requirements for having a strategic culture:

- i. Self-determined sense of identity as a group.
- ii. A defined historical narrative.
- iii. A leadership structure.
- iv. A culturally relative and logical means-ends thought process.

c) PMU & Strategic Culture

In response to the threat of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq — the government security forces felt ill-equipped to deal with the situation on their own and thus a rallying call for all militias came by *fatwa*⁷ of Ayatollah Sistani and Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki's call for volunteers to fight alongside Iraqi forces in June 2014.⁸ Thus, the PMU came into existence.

Self-Determined Identity

The first condition to having a strategic culture is identity. The PMU is unique in this respect as they encompass more than 40 different well-established militias that were separately active in Iraq, before 2014. It

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Fatwa, in Islam, a formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar (known as a mufti). Fatwas are usually issued in response to questions from individuals or Islamic courts,
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/fatwa>

⁸ Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş, *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology, and Strategy* (Berlin: Springer, 2017), 179.

could be well-argued that having diverse groups under one umbrella gives rise to identity crisis among all groups, endangering fulfillment of the main objectives like the fight against a common enemy such as the IS. However, the common identity of PMU group comes from:

- i. Full support of Iraqi government in form of salary & benefits equivalent to those of government employees in case of injury or death, formal budget allocation and provision of weapons.⁹
- ii. *Fatwa* by Ayatollah Sistani that offered religious legitimacy to different groups gathered under the PMU's umbrella giving them all the reason to believe their struggle is both logical, necessary and for the greater good.¹⁰

Defined Historical Narrative

PMU was conceived at a critical juncture in time when Iraq faced an existential threat in the face of IS who had taken over territory leaving a trail of blood in its wake. Weakened state structures with gaping holes in state's security apparatus were unable to resist the IS' countrywide expanse prompted those at the helm of affairs to unify all resources and fight to regain control of the country.

After failure to persuade the then US administration under Obama to step in and thwart the IS forces; Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri Al-Maliki envisioned a force which he called the "homegrown sons of Iraq" to step up and save the day.¹¹ The vision was shared by the Iranian Quds Force Commander General Soleimani and religiously endorsed by the Sistani's *fatwa* which provided enough spiritual impetus for all groups to unite under PMU.¹²

⁹ Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye The Arming of the Popular Mobilisation Units, Amnesty International (2017), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/586e061e4.pdf>

¹⁰ Mona Alami, *What Future for Iraq's PMU?* (Riyadh: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 2018), 10.

¹¹ Inna Rudolf, *From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units* (London: ICSR, 2018), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ICSR-Report-From-Battlefield-to-Ballot-Box-Contextualising-the-Rise-and-Evolution-of-Iraq%E2%80%99s-Popular-Mobilisation-Units-1.pdf>

¹² Ibid.

Leadership Structure

Although different from any other leadership structure in any such group around the world; the PMU has a leadership structure in place. The 40 or so sub-groups subscribe broadly to three leadership bases:

- i. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei
- ii. Muqtada al-Sadr
- iii. Ayatollah Ali Sistani

The legal status of the organisation puts it under the somewhat marginal control of the central Iraqi government. However, the longstanding political instability in the country has allowed Iranian interference and influence to grow to an extent that several sub-groups such as 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous) were reported to be under direct control of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq along with Kata'ib Hezbollah group whose leader was late Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (killed in a US drone strike with Qassem Soleimani) have alleged links to the IRGC which by default brings them under Ayatollah Khamenei's leadership.¹³

On the other hand, several groups like the Badr Brigades and the Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades) have derived support and guidance from Muqtada al-Sadr.¹⁴

Such broad based leadership structure is essential in a fragmented society like Iraq's due to different sectarian, ethnic and religious classes with their respective loyalties.

Culturally Relative Thought Process

The last pre-condition for having a strategic culture unique to PMU's character is being culturally relative and having a logical means-to-ends process for achieving their goals. While being predominantly Shia; PMU joins more than 40 militias who also include Sunni, Yazdi and Christian

¹³ Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye The Arming of the Popular Mobilization Units, *Amnesty International*. 2017, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/586e061e4.pdf>

¹⁴ Ibid.

brigades in its fight against IS' common threat. The end goal previously had been to defeat the rising power of IS which meant unification of ranks even with different sectarian and ethnic affiliations which the group managed to do so.

What complicates the future prospects of these multiple factions would be the ambiguity of a consolidated future objective. With Soleimani and Al-Muhandis' death — the future seems uncertain.

Iran-US Tensions and the Future of PMU

The unprecedented conditions in which PMU was founded and Iran and the US became unlikely allies in war against an unforgiving enemy, the Islamic State (IS) have best been described by Feisal al-Istrabadi in his book, "The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications" in the following words:

"Perhaps no utterance by the president of the United States (US) has been so quickly and so thoroughly proven wrong as when President Obama asserted that the Islamic state in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was a 'jayvee team.' Within a matter of months, ISIS rampaged through Iraq, occupying its second largest city, Mosul, in four hours."¹⁵

Thus, in the face of such menacing enemy; drastic measures had to be taken which meant an unlikely collaboration or alliance of sorts was forged between the US led coalition forces and Iranian backed militias. The US-led coalition acted as the 'air force' to the ground offensive by the Iranian backed militias and the Kurdish Peshmerga giving them cover as they fought the onslaught of the vicious IS forces.¹⁶ Without joining their resources, it would have been impossible for either the US or Iran to subdue IS forces. Unintentionally of course, Iran and the US could compensate for each other's shortcomings as for instance, it was reported that the swift support provided to frontline Kurdish fighters was provided by Iran rather than the US. This was due to the lack of bureaucratic rigmarole in Iran to

¹⁵ Feisal al-Istrabadi and SumitGanguly, *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications* (Washington DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2018), 173.

¹⁶ Murtaza Hussain, "Iran's Shadow War on ISIS," *The Intercept*, November 18, 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2019/11/18/iran-isis-iraq-kurds/>

approve such measures that is a pre-requisite to such actions in the US, thus, the Iranian support on ground became crucial.¹⁷

However, it was never the American intention to publicly or otherwise acknowledge the Iranian support in fighting the IS while Iran had long term goals in place for future political composition and loyalties in Iraq — once the war with the IS was over.

Participation of PMU in Elections

US-Iran bilateral ties were still strained at the time yet their joint effort to curb the IS threat was successful in breaking the backbone of the terror outfit PMU fighters were the main fighting base on ground apart from Kurdish fighters in the battle against the IS. However, after the IS threat subsided; the PMU members also took part in elections in the country, bringing a powerful presence to the parliament. The increase in their influence in Iraq was and is indicative of the deep inroads that Iran has created within Iraq through security and political lens of cooperation.

In the 2018 elections; the main components of the PMU which are the pro-Iran Shia groups banded together to form the Fateh Alliance for political participation. International human rights organisations expressed concerns over PMU's actions in the battle against the IS, on committing war crimes and instigating sectarian violence. The US has been wary of PMU's affiliations with Iran and the dominating role that it plays in Iraq which is essentially being controlled by Iran. Following the IS defeat, the PMU became a theatre of Iranian influence which resultantly makes them the US enemies. While the level of closeness to Iran varies among the PMU sub-groups, the Badr Organisation is the main PMU sub-group to enter the political race although this group identifies its roots from Iran; it is more inclined toward conforming to the Iraqi way of life.¹⁸

Ambiguous PMU Structure

As mentioned earlier, the PMU contains more than 40 sub-groups or militias that are loosely tied together with a common goal. These groups have always been diverse in terms of their ethnic and sectarian origins.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ IISS, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London: IISS, 2019), 134.
<https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-06-ch-4-iraq>

Following the IS' defeat, the PMU was praised for their patriotism and bravery but also urged to join the Iraqi army for legitimacy which they have refused to do from the start. There can be a number of reasons for their refusal to join Iraq's armed forces:

- a) They do not need to. According to the Hashd Law, the PMU and its affiliates have been formally recognised and made part of the government.¹⁹
- b) This sense of ambiguity gives its many diverse groups; room to maneuver through the haphazard political and strategic landscape of Iraq without having to answer to any government entity.
- c) Not becoming part of the Iraqi army is also a clever decision that favours and facilitates alliance with Iran. It makes the PMU more 'independent' to pursue cooperation and guidance from Iran.

US-Iran Tensions

Iran-US' troublesome relations are not a recent development and their competition over influence in Iraq is also not new. Even during their joint fight against the IS, both the US and Iran fought for control over tactics and ways to counter the IS offensive.²⁰ With the US re-imposition of sanctions against Iran in the aftermath of Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran and the US have been sparring back and forth with one another. The brinkmanship and war of words between the two has put the entire region in danger especially countries like Iraq which are deeply penetrated by both Iran and the US.

Unilateral US sanctions imposed against Iran also impact Iraq's ability to import essential goods and services from Iran. Iraq is heavily dependent on Iran for its gas and electricity needs and while the sanctions waiver by the US has now been provided, the duration was a mere 30 days as opposed

¹⁹ Renad Mansour, Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 28, 2017. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>

²⁰ Dina Esfandiyari and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 1 (January 2015): 2-13.

to the previous time period of 120-140 days.²¹ Iraq is also considering obtaining access to Egyptian gas through Syrian transit route.²²

Iran and Iraq share a long border which generates enormous economic activity. Iranian trade with Iraq is worth US\$12bn per year.²³ Thus, the US-Iran sanctions would also harm Iraqi economy and further cause socio-economic instability.

After months of excruciating sanctions, Iran turned to reckless measures such as the oil tanker attacks in the Gulf waters and the attack on Saudi oil facilities. It also kept increasing uranium enrichment although quite insignificantly but in clear violation of the JCPOA accord. Although the entire 2019 was extremely eventful in terms of the US-Iran strained relations, things took a turn for the worst in December. On December 27, 2019; a US defence contractor was killed in Kirkuk in an attack blamed on Kataib Hezbollah; a militant faction of PMU headed by al-Muhandis. As a result, US attacked Kataib Hezbollah's sites and killed 25 militia soldiers. This escalation involving Iran and its pro-militias from PMU prompted the US embassy storming by Iraqi militias who did not cause casualties but vented their anger over the killings.

On January 3, 2020 a US drone strike on Baghdad International airport killed the Iranian Quds force commander General Qassim Soleimani and the deputy commander of the PMU, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.²⁴ This was viewed as an act of war by Iran which then carried out several rocket attacks

²¹ Simona Foltyn, "US Extends Sanctions Waiver Allowing Iraq to Import Iran Gas," *Al Jazeera*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/extends-sanctions-waiver-allowing-iraq-import-iran-gas-200428190848872.html#:~:text=The%20US%20has%20extended%20a,to%20raise%20pressure%20on%20Iran>

²² News Desk, "Iraq Eyes Syria Transit Route for Egyptian Gas Imports," *Argus Media*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/2210305-iraq-eyes-syria-transit-route-for-egyptian-gas-imports?backToResults=true>

²³ Ahmed Twaij, "US Sanctions on Iran will Harm Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, December 21, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/21/u-s-sanctions-on-iran-will-harm-iraq/>

²⁴ News Desk, "US-Iran Tensions: Timeline of Events Leading to Soleimani Killing," *Al Jazeera*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/iran-tensions-timeline-events-leading-soleimani-killing-200103152234464.html>

on the US bases in Iraq resulting in no American casualties but effectively turning Iraq into a battleground for the US and Iran to fight it out.

There have been several instances of escalation in Iraq and the Gulf region overall which can be traced back to the volatile atmosphere created by the US-Iran tensions. Iraq's sovereignty and stability has been violated time and again due to policy decisions and actions of both Iran and the US creating a sense of deep mistrust between Iraqi government and its people. Soleimani's killing on Iraqi soil by a US drone strike was a classic example of Iraq being unwittingly used as a battleground by the US and Iran to settle their mutual score.

President Trump's decision to neutralise an Iranian general wielding enormous influence in the entire region was not only heavily criticised within the US but was also an ill-advised move regarding regional stability. It also brought to light important questions about the US policy priorities within Iraq, the country which was turned into a war zone by its 2003 invasion. Is it entirely legal and ethical for the US major security provider and stakeholder within Iraq to use its influence to square things out with Iran? the US long term policy toward Iraq has been fraught with missteps. Some of the crucial points to be thought upon are as follows: why were non-state actors such as the PMU and others, allowed to expand their influence for years without check? Why weren't the weak political entities and institutions helped to strengthen within Iraq to avoid Iran's destabilising interference in Iraqi politics?

The US security policy within Iraq after overcoming the immediate onslaught of the IS has been to fight with Iran while it should have been aimed at equipping Iraq to withstand unwanted Iranian involvement. These circumstances in which Iran used Iraq's fragile political and security setup to spread its influence led to a systemic weakening of state institutions all the while empowering actors like PMU. Thus, a strategic culture of influence followed religiously by the PMU factions on behest of Iran was perpetuated in the absence of a stable Iraqi state.

PMU's Reaction and Instability in Iraq

Not only Muhandis but Soleimani was considered a larger than life figure across all factions and militias of PMU. He was their leader, visionary and

their mentor and his death at the hands of the US forces has been viewed as an act of war by the US. This caused uproar within the PMU ranks which could mean further slippage of Iraq into an environment of instability and insecurity. On February 20, 2020, PMU announced the appointment of Abu Fadak al-Mohammadawi to Muhandis' position. Mohammadawi unlike Muhandis has had differences with other leaders and is not as close to Tehran as Muhandis was.²⁵

PMU fragmentation is predicted as four factions close to Ayatollah Sistani have objected to Mohammadawi's appointment: namely Al-Abbas combat division, the Ali Akbar Brigade, the Imam Ali Division and the Ansar Marhaia Brigade.²⁶ Iran's replacement of General Soleimani is Brig. General Esmail Ghaani as the head of the Quds force but many argue that he may not be able to fill those shoes. There are several ways in which fissures within PMU may take place:

- a) PMU factions are now looking up to Hezbollah's Lebanon leadership for consolidated support instead of Iran while many still favour Iran.²⁷ Hassan Nasrullah's limitation to travelling to Iraq will most definitely become a hindrance in Hezbollah's involvement in PMU's working.
- b) Soleimani and Muhandis made a powerful duo with the former speaking fluent Arabic and the latter fluent Persian, familiar with their mutual cultures, they both kept the diverse PMU factions together. It will be a tough double act to follow.
- c) PMU factions are also fighting amongst themselves for leadership and as much political control as possible.²⁸

²⁵ John Davison and Ahmed Rasheed, "Fractures Grow Among Iraq Militias, Spell Political Retreat," *Reuters*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-militias-idUSKBN21J5EZ>

²⁶ Hassan Ali Ahmed, "Iran Struggles to Regain Control of Post-Soleimani PMU," *Al Monitor*, February 23, 2020,

<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/iraq-iran-soleimani-pmu.html>

²⁷ Seth J. Frantzman, "The PMU Is Getting More Aggressive in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/07/pmu-iraq-suleimani-iran/>

²⁸ *Ibid.*

PMU's Role and Future of Iraq

Being a political as well as a security apparatus with state legitimacy granted by the Iraqi government; PMU has the potential to impact social and political landscape of the country. PMU forces and militias were accused of suppressing public protests against corruption, unemployment and political system by opening fire at defenseless crowds of people.²⁹

The decision to suppress protests most likely stems from a fear of losing power after years of enjoying it. It is understandable as the PMU were and are widely celebrated all over Iraq in various ethnic and sectarian sections of the society. PMU was established to fight the scourge of the IS and their fight has been glorified ever since. While they were crucial in curbing the threat of IS, the PMU factions became heady with all the legitimate power they were granted by the government. Instead integrating within Iraq's security forces, the PMU have stayed 'independent,' making it easier for their allies like Iran to yield power over them from the other side of the border.

However, about 60 per cent of Iraqi population is young³⁰ which means a whole new generation has grown up under the clout of ragtag militias with foreign political interference and they are dissatisfied with the status quo.³¹ This means unless the PMU factions realise that times are changing, it might be tough for them to maintain their dominance in the country.

Especially with Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi's new government in Iraq, there seems to be hope. He has shown an inclination to curb the role of militias (mostly under PMU) in state matters and has asked to bring them under the states' jurisdiction. He has also attempted to take to task, the members of these militias who were involved in attacks against unarmed civilian protesters.³² His religiously neutral demeanour combined with

²⁹ Patrick Cockburn, "Iraq Protests: Death Tolls Soars as Pro-Iran Militias Accused of Shooting Protesters," *Independent*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-protests-baghdad-death-toll-shooting-a9145716.html>

³⁰ Aaron O'Neill, "Iraq: Age Structure in 2020," *Statista*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/327299/age-structure-in-iraq/>

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Iraq's Prime Minister Renews Vow to Reform System Amid Setbacks," *National*, May 19, 2020.

experience as the former head of intelligence, certainly equips him to sort out the situation but the right kind of support from the US would be key.³³

Conclusion

Iraq is a conflict-ridden and divided country that has seen more than its fair share of violence and unrest. PMU as a force to be reckoned within the country cannot be ignored as a mere non-state entity as it represents a diverse cultural, historical and sectarian assembly of people. It has a distinct strategic culture allowing it to be independent from the Iraqi state as well as being part of the state through legitimised political activity. Being based in one country with leaders, ideology, inspiration and guidance coming from another country makes PMU — a distinct non-state actor with a unique strategic culture of its own. Its actions while being disruptive make logical sense for its own groups and members which makes the task of bringing about stability within Iraq all the more difficult. PMU stands united under loose political control of the fragile Iraqi government and it also stands vulnerable to external manipulation. Iran and the US have had ties with PMU, clandestine or otherwise, for the furthering of their respective agendas.³⁴ Both Iran and the US need to play a more constructive role in shaping up the future of security and stability in Iraq by taking into account the central role that PMU plays. It is time to understand the strategic culture.

³³ Fatima Raza, “Kadhimi: A New Hope For Iraq’s Multiple Challenges,” *ISSI*, June 1, 2020, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/IB_Fatima_Jun_1_2020.pdf

³⁴ Mustafa Saadoun, “Amid Rising Protests, PMU Prevents Confrontation with US,” *Al-Monitor*, November 3, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/11/iraq-pmu-fayyadh-iran.html#ixzz6YHouNx1G>