

How Washington Can Salvage Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Dec 3, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and cofounder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to Iran-backed militias.



Brief Analysis

CTS is the most successful U.S. partner force in Iraq, which is why Iran-backed terrorist groups are trying to penetrate and corrupt it.

If the incoming Trump administration implements the latest plans put forth by the U.S.-Iraq Higher Military Commission, Washington will withdraw its forces from some Iraqi base locations by September 2025 and then transition to a fully bilateral security partnership (i.e., without the coalition wrapper) in 2026. This will put more strain on Iraq's security forces to prevent an Islamic State (IS) resurgence—particularly the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), a 14,000-strong unit that remains the **best achievement (<https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-best-thing-america-built-in-iraq-iraqs-counter-terrorism-service-and-the-long-war-against-militancy/>)** in America's blighted history of costly and mostly unsuccessful efforts to build partner capacity in the post-Saddam military.

Unfortunately, CTS has **shown signs of succumbing (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/maintaining-best-thing-us-built-iraq-continued-support-iraqi-counterterrorism-service>)** to the same Iran-backed militia penetration, politicization, and corruption that has weakened other Iraqi forces. Washington has substantial leverage on this matter due to its generous funding and other support for CTS, but it must act quickly to check the deterioration and regain influence with its closest counterterrorism partner in Iraq. Prevention is the only viable U.S. option to head off a new security breakdown—particularly since Washington may not be willing to redeploy forces to Iraq for another intervention if CTS falters and IS resurges.

A Rare U.S. Success Story in Iraq

Known in Iraq as the "Golden Division," CTS became a model for multiethnic, cross-sectarian nationalism over the years. When one-third of Iraqi army and Federal Police brigades **collapsed in June 2014**

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/long-haul-rebooting-us-security-cooperation-iraq>), CTS

spearheaded counterattacks at Tikrit, Bayji, Ramadi, and eventually Mosul. The force kept fighting due to the essential correctness of its U.S.-directed conception, recruitment, leadership, and training. In particular, its compact size meant that selection and training could apply **rigorous standards**

(<http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=50603>) akin to those used for recruiting U.S. Special Operations Forces. During a May 2008 CTS intake, for example, only 18 percent of 2,200 candidates graduated.

The force's small size also led to it receiving **far better pay, living conditions, and equipment**

(<http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA545722>) than other troops. With salaries nearly double those of typical Iraqi army soldiers and equipment almost identical to U.S. Special Forces, CTS was able to develop elite esprit de corps and retain skilled manpower, including many of the country's best officers. Unique among Iraq's forces, it also developed the beginnings of a **strong noncommissioned officer cadre**

(<https://www.csis.org/analysis/withdrawal-iraq>).

On the battlefield, CTS undertook "**industrial scale (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/kill-capture/transcript/>)**" counterterrorism operations for nearly seven years, at a grueling tempo unmatched by any other special operations force in the world. By the time the United States completed its withdrawal in 2011, the unit had developed into a finely tuned counterterrorism machine and solidified its reputation as one of the best of its kind in the Middle East. It later reaffirmed this status in the struggle against IS. Prior to the latest U.S. budget (see below), CTS was receiving \$22 million annually from Washington—the largest per capita American investment in any Iraqi security agency.

How Militias Are Ruining CTS

To be sure, CTS has experienced troubling periods before. Under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, for example, it was politically corrupted to the point where Iraqis began to call it "**the dirty brigade**

(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/the-force-leading-the-iraqi-militarys-fight-against-isis-went-from-dirty-division-to-golden-boys/2016/07/25/8e6b0164-389e-11e6-af02-1df55f0c77ff_story.html)

." Back then, the deterioration started at the top, and this trend has resurfaced during the current year-long slide.

In October-December 2023, the senior leadership that had led CTS against IS was **almost completely purged** **(<https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Major-leadership-changes-in-Iraq-s-CTS-under-new-commander>)**. Commander Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi was removed that November and replaced with another CTS veteran, Karim al-Tamimi. Also replaced were the force's two-star operational commander and all three brigade commanders of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces.

Although CTS was never perfect, it was **much less corrupt** **(https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/david-witty-paper_final_web.pdf)** than most Iraqi security forces, but that appears to be changing rapidly since last year's reshuffle. For example, various contacts indicate that U.S.-provided ammunition has been diverted from the unit's Area IV training site to other military locations such as Bismayah, where it is either sold or given to militia units belonging to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—a practice that U.S.-Iraqi end-user agreements explicitly forbid. The diversion includes at least one and perhaps two large shipments, containing 150,000 rounds of 5.56 mm and 12.7 mm ammunition, each with a street value of around \$75,000. CTS is supposed to use this U.S.-taxpayer-funded ammunition to conduct live-fire training at a scale similar to U.S. Special Forces. Instead, the diversion has contributed to a deterioration in CTS training even as Washington continues footing the ammunition bill—to the tune of \$2.59 million in the fiscal 2025 foreign operations budget.

Other troubling examples of apparent CTS corruption in 2024 include:

- fraudulently charging the Iraqi government for construction work at the New Academia training site in Habbaniya, undertaken by engineering troops from the CTS Brigade Support Battalion with U.S.-provided equipment;

- establishing loan-shark operations that charge troops 25 percent interest at U.S.-provided brigade life support facilities;
- covering up the large-scale theft of U.S.-provided night vision equipment;
- promoting an officer responsible for allowing corruption—Brig. Gen. Arkan Jalal Fadl al-Tikriti—to the training arm of CTS headquarters after he was removed from leadership of the Area IV training academy amid investigations.

Even more worrisome, U.S.-designated terrorist organizations such as the Iran-backed militias Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq have been penetrating CTS:

- Last year, Washington objected to an officer becoming the new CTS intelligence chief due to his close family ties with such militias. In response, however, he was named the new CTS counterintelligence director instead—a post that was established for the express purpose of keeping Iran-backed groups and other security risks out of the service.
- CTS gave the Kataib Hezbollah-owned company Manahil al-Khalij \$12 million out of its 2023 budget, meaning that the U.S. government inadvertently funded a designated terrorist group via general budgetary support to CTS.
- In February-March 2024, CTS trained an intake of elite PMF personnel on force-protection and small-unit tactics originally learned from the U.S. military, potentially compromising the effectiveness and safety of any future U.S. Special Forces operations against the Iran threat network.
- In at least one case in 2024, materials from the scene of a terrorist drone launch against a U.S. base were collected by CTS and then disappeared before American authorities could obtain biometric data from them.

Similarly, the CTS recruitment process—once a model of nondenominational meritocracy—is being rapidly compromised (a trend the author noted as far back [as December 2023](#)

[\(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqs-new-regime-change-how-tehran-backed-terrorist-organizations-and-militias>\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqs-new-regime-change-how-tehran-backed-terrorist-organizations-and-militias)). The 2024 force generation intake of over 3,000 new CTS recruits was meant to be chosen by lottery as normal; anonymous online applicants are typically selected at random and then asked to bring their unique ticket numbers when they arrive for training. This year, however, as few as 750 arrivals had tickets, while 2,250 had been preselected by Shia militias, terrorist groups, and associated factions. These 2,250 names were previously provided to Abdul Karim al-Sudani, the secretary of the Prime Minister’s Office, who passed them on to CTS commander Karim al-Tamimi. Sudani’s list apparently included around 2,000 spots for recruits from three U.S.-designated terrorist groups: Asaib Ahl al-Haq (1,000 spots), Kataib Hezbollah (500), and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (500). The remainder were split between pro-Iran groups such as the Badr Organization and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (180), along with other players associated with the Coordination Framework umbrella group (70 spots, many of which were sold off as part of a corruption racket). Unless this broken lottery process is repaired, members of terrorist groups will receive U.S.-funded and U.S.-delivered training in sensitive Special Forces tactics.

Stopping the Rot

CTS is one of the most cost-effective efforts the United States has supported in Iraq. Between 2003 and 2011, it received [around \\$450 million \(<https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-best-thing-america-built-in-iraq-iraqs-counter-terrorism-service-and-the-long-war-against-militancy/>\)](https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-best-thing-america-built-in-iraq-iraqs-counter-terrorism-service-and-the-long-war-against-militancy/)—less than 2 percent of the \$24.2 billion put into supporting the overall security forces, and the only part of that effort to truly succeed. The unit is still worth saving today despite its deterioration, but Washington must act quickly and robustly. Although pushing Iraq on these issues runs the risk of severing U.S. access to CTS, such access is arguably becoming less worthwhile and more counterproductive—even unlawful—by the day. U.S. officials should therefore take the following steps:

- **Remind Iraq that the United States funds CTS.** Although U.S. funding for the service [will be cut substantially](#)

https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_CTEF_J-Book.pdf) in the FY 2025 budget (from \$22 million down to \$9.3 million), this is still the force's largest external source of cash by far. It includes \$2.59 million for ammunition and \$2.24 million for facilities renovation—both of which were mentioned above as known avenues of diversion to terrorist groups. If CTS does not reverse its recent militia penetration, this funding should be ended in full. If the force proves willing to make the required changes, however, Washington should consider returning its funding to previous levels (i.e., \$22-25 million).

- **Require new CTS leadership.** To restore U.S. confidence, Baghdad needs to change the force's leadership starting at the very top, perhaps reaching back into retired CTS leadership cadres to provide stopgap coverage. The new leadership would then need to repair the ethos of how CTS is administered and recruited, and also improve its operational effectiveness in the field, which is declining due to training failures and other problems. U.S. officials should explicitly warn that CTS funding is at risk unless leadership and procedural changes are delivered.
- **Expand vetting of senior CTS ranks.** Iraqi Special Operations Forces brigade and battalion commanders and higher-level CTS leaders are already subject to U.S. vetting under the Leahy Law, but this process should be extended to their service outside CTS. For example, Tamimi may have been involved in [violently suppressing civilian protests in 2019](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exposing-and-sanctioning-human-rights-violations-iraqi-militias) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exposing-and-sanctioning-human-rights-violations-iraqi-militias>) when he headed Iraq's International Zone Special Forces Division; these activities were never fully investigated, but they may provide cause for removing him as CTS commander. A full U.S. counterintelligence review of senior CTS figures should also be undertaken.
- **Audit the end-use of U.S. materiel and funds.** The U.S. government [has publicly audited CTS in the past](https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA545722.pdf) (<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA545722.pdf>) and should undertake a detailed new investigation in the near future, focusing on reports that U.S. funds are being diverted to terrorist groups, other militias, and criminal networks. Under the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, Congress mandated that the State Department, Defense Department, and director of national intelligence provide a report certifying that no PMF units received U.S. funding; this requirement should be implemented in future defense budgets as well.

Michael Knights is the Bernstein Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and co-creator of its [Militia Spotlight platform](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight>). ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The Trump Administration Will Have Avenues for Constructive Palestinian Engagement](#)

Dec 3, 2024

◆
Neomi Neumann

[\(/policy-analysis/trump-administration-will-have-avenues-constructive-palestinian-engagement\)](/policy-analysis/trump-administration-will-have-avenues-constructive-palestinian-engagement)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to End the War in Gaza: Lessons from Lebanon

Dec 2, 2024



Stuart Eizenstat,
Dennis Ross

(/policy-analysis/how-end-war-gaza-lessons-lebanon)



IN-DEPTH REPORTS

The (Next) Battle for Northwest Syria: U.S. Policy Implications

December 4, 2024, starting at 4:00 p.m. EST (2100 GMT)



Anna Borshchevskaya,
Andrew J. Tabler,
Aaron Y. Zelin

(/policy-analysis/next-battle-northwest-syria-us-policy-implications)

TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)