

The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service and the Long War Against Militancy

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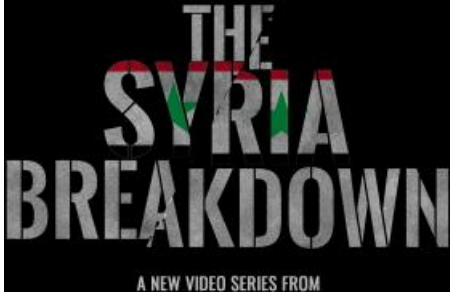
A compact size, high pay, and rigorous standards have helped the service thrive, but now it needs sustained support to become a lasting monument to U.S. good intentions in Iraq.

When the last pocket of the self-styled Islamic State (ISIL) was eradicated in west Mosul last week, it was fitting that the 36th Commando Battalion struck the final blows. The 36th was the first Iraqi special forces unit to be developed after Saddam's fall. Today it is the longest serving component of the Counter-Terrorism Service -- a force of fewer than 8,000 elite troops built by the United States, and the most militarily and politically reliable force at the disposal of the Iraqi government.

The Iraqi Army and Federal Police have regained some public trust since their collapse in June 2014, when Mosul and around twenty other cities fell to ISIL, but only two forces in Iraq have retained the faith of the Iraqi people throughout the war. One is the Counter-Terrorism Service, known in Iraq as the "Golden Division," a model for multi-ethnic and cross-sectarian nationalism. The other is the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the volunteer units raised by a religious fatwa and government orders in June 2014, which has fallen under the leadership of an Iranian-backed U.S.-designated terrorist, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis...

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