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## Iraq battalion was sole group to stand up to Islamic State's summer surge



An Iraqi soldier peers out of a fighting position toward Islamic State territory in northern Iraq on Dec. 9, 2014. His battalion is the only Mosul-area Iraqi unit to have stood its ground against the militants' summer blitzkrieg.

JAD SLEIMAN/STARS AND STRIPES

By Jad Sleiman  
Stars and Stripes  
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FOR IRAQ AND SYRIA

GWER, Iraq — Two entire divisions — more than 30,000 soldiers — along with Mosul's entire police force disintegrated and fled from Iraq's second-largest city and

the surrounding area in June when faced with the Islamic State's lightning advance across much of northern Iraq.

Only one battalion of the once-formidable 2nd Division stood its ground amid the sudden collapse of Iraq's security forces in Mosul and Nineveh province.

Months later, nearly 2,000 of unit's soldiers hold



An Iraqi soldier points out Islamic State fighting positions in northern Iraq on Dec. 9 2014. His unit is separated from the Islamic State by a partially destroyed bridge spanning a river valley.

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the eastern half of Gwer, 30 miles southeast of the city. They wear Iraqi patches on their shoulders and carry American-made automatic rifles in compounds topped by the flag of the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government.

A heavily damaged two-lane bridge over the Great Zab river stands between them and the Islamic State positions on the far side.

“Before we saw ISIS we saw the refugees,” Capt. Ahmad Mansour Abdullah said, describing the events of this summer. He used an alternative name for the Islamic State. “Then we saw the army and the police, all leaving Mosul.”

Parts of the Iraqi security forces abandoned the city on orders from Baghdad, falling back to protect the capital as well as Tikrit. But many troops simply stripped off their uniforms and vanished. The result was a city of more than 3 million Iraqis under the control of the militants and vast armories full of American-supplied equipment plundered.

Fewer than 1,000 ISIS fighters are thought to have been involved in the initial occupation of Mosul. Years of command mismanagement and a Sunni population resentful of the Shiite-controlled government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had left the Iraqi army extremely vulnerable.

After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, American administrators abolished the old Iraqi armed forces and decided to rebuild the military from scratch. Although the new army was considered fully operational at the time of the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, many of its units simply dispersed when confronted by the fast-moving and highly motivated insurgents.

By the time the irregulars made it to the Iraqi lines at Gwer in September, their group had morphed into the Islamic State, bolstered by a steady flow of foreign recruits and the latest in captured Western weaponry.

“Everything from the M16 up, they had,” said Abdullah. This included artillery, heavy machine guns and armored vehicles, he said.

The Iraqis were initially pushed several miles back from their position on the river.

“We had good training, we had learned to fight,” said Sgt. Dlawar Said, who joined the post-Saddam Iraqi army the Americans began building in 2003 and who still wears a U.S. Army T-shirt. “We just had to regroup and catch up.”

Backed by peshmerga forces and Western airstrikes, they managed to throw the Islamic State insurgents back across the river to the eastern bank. The militants blew up the midsection of the bridge as they retreated.

The greatest dangers now come from mortars and sniper fire, the soldiers said. The men must sprint when they move across the roofs of some of their compounds to minimize their exposure.

But they don't fear the Islamic State overrunning their position anymore.

“ISIS has become weak, Said said, at least in part because “the Americans used to strike every day.”

Said returns to the subject of the fleeing Iraqi soldiers when he's interrupted by other



**Peshmerga near Mosul say Islamic State militants are weakening 'day by day'**

The farthest edge of the Mosul highway still controlled by Iraqi and Kurdish forces ends in towering concrete barriers. Immediately beyond are blackened craters blasted by speeding suicide car bombs and the Islamic State positions.



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men from his unit gathered nearby.

“We are men,” one of them said. “Men fight.”

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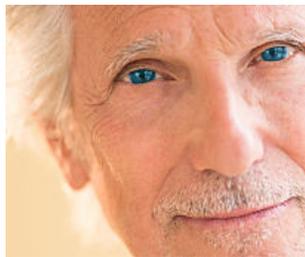
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by Taboola

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