

Detroit terror attack: Britain sends counter-terrorist forces to Yemen

Britain has dispatched a special counter-terrorist unit to Yemen as the mountainous Arab state emerges as the new frontline in the war against al-Qaeda, The Sunday Telegraph has learnt.

By Sean Rayment, Defence Correspondent, Adrian Blomfield and Richard Spencer in Sana'a and Philip Sherwell in New York

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Radical Islamist Shebab rebels in Somalia ready to cross the Gulf of Aden to support their extremist Arab allies in YemenPhoto: REUTERS

The force is training Yemeni military and will assist in planning operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the group which claimed responsibility for the Christmas Day attack on a US airliner.

The disclosure comes as Western security analysts warn that the failed underwear bomb plot will serve as a test run for future overseas attacks by an increasingly sophisticated outfit still honing its terror techniques.

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"The bomber was inexperienced, dispensable and an unknown quantity," said a senior diplomat in Sana'a. "They would only have given him a 50-50 chance of succeeding. It was a proof of concept mission."

As concerns grow about Yemen's role as a hotbed for extremists, Gordon Brown will this month host a crisis meeting to seek ways to prevent the country becoming a failed state stronghold for al-Qaeda. The US on Friday doubled its security assistance to Sana'a to \$140 million this year in an effort to combat the spread of extremists in the ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden.

The country's status as a terror breeding ground is under fresh scrutiny following the failed attempt by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to blow up a plane over Detroit on Dec 25 with explosives hidden in his underwear after he was trained and equipped by al-Qaeda in Yemen.

Even before the attack, Britain quietly sent a military unit, believed to be about 30-strong and include members of the SAS, to train and mentor Yemeni forces in surveillance and strike operations, intelligence gathering, hostage rescue and interrogation techniques.

It is understood that the detachment is being assisted by members of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, MI6. They will be focussing on British-based jihadists who are now travelling to Yemen for terrorist training - as Abdulmutallab did after earlier becoming radicalised while studying at University College, London.

Up to 20 British nationals travelled to the country this year to be trained by the local "branch" of al-Qaeda, according to Whitehall sources. Senior British military commanders and diplomats also believe that Yemen has now become the reserve base for al-Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A Government spokesman said: "UK Ministers and senior officials continue to work closely with their Yemeni counterparts to pursue those who seek to spread terror and extremism in Yemen, the wider region and beyond. The UK government will continue this support through 2010."

The disclosure that Britain has a military presence in the country follows the announcement last month that the US was sending special forces to the country to bolster the fight against al-Qaeda.

They have already conducted covert operations within Yemen, using unmanned Predator drones from bases in nearby Djibouti to attack terrorist safe houses. It also provided intelligence and missiles for three recent air strikes in Arhab, Abyan and Shabwa provinces.

On Dec 24, a US-supported strike destroyed a house in the remote mountain valley of Rafd where radical cleric Ayman Awlaki, an inspiration for terror plotters in Britain and the US, was thought to have been meeting with al-Qaeda leaders. But Awlaki told a Yemeni journalist last week that he was about two miles away when the missiles struck.

And US special operations commanders who just returned from Yemen described the challenge of trying to tackle al-Qaeda in such a remote mountainous tribal state where the writ of the central government barely reaches outside the capital.

"The problem they found is that there really are no easily identifiable physical targets," Dan Goure, a Pentagon adviser, told *The Sunday Telegraph*. "There are no camps or bases as such, just houses where individuals meet. In that sort of terrain, it's a real challenge to get your man. Your only real hope is to hunt someone down and put a Hellfire missile on top of them, but it's extremely tough."

As an indication of the mounting international concern about Yemen, Downing Street announced the high-level meeting for Jan 28 as Mr Brown described the impoverished state as "both an incubator and potential safe haven for terrorism".

In a sign of the region's volatility, senior leader of the radical Islamist Shebab rebels in Somalia responded to the international focus on Yemen this weekend by vowing to send fighters across the Gulf of Aden to support their extremist Arab allies.

The capability and confidence of al-Qaeda in Yemen has strengthened as some fighters have returned from Pakistan and others have sought refuge there from a crackdown in neighbouring Saudi Arabia.

But most significantly, the faction has been strengthened by the return to the battlefield of some released Yemeni and Saudi detainees from Guantanamo Bay and a mass 2006 prison break-out of radicals, including the alleged leaders of the attack on the USS Cole in the port of Aden that killed 17 American sailors.

The government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a dictator who has been in power for 30 years, is further weakened by civil conflicts with Iranian-backed Shia rebels along the border with Saudi Arabia and secessionist tribes in the south.

The presence of Awlaki is also believed to be a lure for some Western Muslims attracted by his fluent English pitches for jihadism on the internet.

Abdulmutallab, who came to Sana'a to study Arabic in August, despite speaking the language excellently, and then disappeared in late September, met with the cleric during his time there, according to Yemeni and US officials.

In the old city, an architectural treasure classed as a world heritage site by the United Nations, the faithful last week scurried through narrow alleyways amid the cacophony of competing calls to prayer from more than 100 mosques.

Through the use of a sophisticated propaganda machine that employs both the internet and the oratorical skills of radical clerics, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has drawn militant foreign Muslims to the country with increasing success. "They used to go to Afghanistan and Iraq, but now more of them are coming here," said another diplomat.

The Sharqain Mosque, located in modern building beyond the walls of the historic quarter, is a particular cause of concern for Western and Yemeni intelligence.

Espousing the doctrinaire beliefs of the Salafi tradition of Sunni Islam, the creed adopted by most al-Qaeda adherents, the mosque attracted some 200 faithful to noon prayers on Friday, nearly a third of them not Yemeni.

A worshipper said that representatives of militant organisations often circulated in the congregation in an attempt to groom new recruits. "If

they think you are interested, they come and talk to you and tell you about what they do," he said.

Another institution that has attracted attention is the Iman University, an Islamic college for 6,000 students. Its rector, Sheikh Abdel Majid al-Zindani, is listed by Washington as a "specially designated global terrorist" for his alleged links to al-Qaeda.

Every year, hundreds of young men from around the world enrol at the university, although attendees deny that the college is either "radical" or supportive of terrorism.

Others studying at the university said a number of British students had been at the school until the beginning of the year, but their residence permits had been revoked by the government.

According to diplomats, at least six Muslim men with British passports have been arrested and deported from Yemen in the past year after they were intercepted on a road leading to territory near the Saudi border held by Shia rebels.

There are also reports that a number of foreigners have joined the Arabian peninsular "branch" of al-Qaeda, known by security services as AQAP. A Yemeni journalist who interviewed the group's leader a year ago said he saw Muslims holding Australian, German and French passports at a training camp southeast of Sana'a.

The group has become markedly more ambitious in recent months, aiming for target beyond Yemen's border. In August, it sent a suicide bomber with explosives hidden in his rectum to Saudi Arabia to assassinate Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the head of the kingdom's anti-terror campaign. The minister narrowly survived a blast that blew his assailant to pieces.

The Detroit bomb plot was an experiment with the same kind of explosives, although this time they were sewn into the his underpants.

Indeed, US national intelligence director Dennis Blair last week issued a sombre warning to his agencies. "Al-Qaeda and its affiliate organisations, as well as individual suicide terrorists, have observed our defences and are designing future attacks to circumvent them," he said. "These attacks will be even harder to uncover, interpret and stop. We must anticipate other types of attacks...and improve our defence to stay ahead of them."

Western intelligence and diplomats fear that the group is fine-tuning its expertise with potential lethal effect. It is little wonder that Sen Joe Lieberman, head of the Homeland Security committee, couched the battle for the impoverished land in stark terms. "Iraq was yesterday's war," he declared. "Afghanistan is today's war. Yemen will be tomorrow's war. That's the danger we face."

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/yemen/6924502/Detroit-terror-attack-Britain-sends-counter-terrorist-forces-to-Yemen.html>