

Terror News

SAS and US must create strike force

Deborah Haynes Defence Editor

Britain and the United States must re-create the special forces machine that devastated al-Qaeda in Iraq, with nightly raids and cross-border strikes to combat Islamic State, a former SAS officer said last night.

The joint US-British task force, headed by US General Stanley McChrystal, was a key factor in stopping the sectarian slaughter that consumed Iraq after the invasion in 2003.

Teams of SAS soldiers, Delta Force troops and US Navy Seals, working with the CIA and Iraqi intelligence officers, instigated multiple kill-or-capture missions against al-Qaeda targets at any time of day or night across Iraq. Insurgents were also hunted across the world.

The tempo of the operation, coupled with the accuracy of the intelligence, meant that insurgent leaders were preoccupied with staying alive, rather than plotting where next to launch a suicide bomb attack or plant improvised explosive devices.

"It was like a cog turning every night," the former SAS officer, who was intimately involved in the mission, said. "It turned phenomenally quickly and it whooped up a whole raft of good intelligence on everything al-Qaeda in Iraq were doing — funding, movements, planning. They couldn't move without us being aware of it. We suffocated them. They couldn't come up for air. It was just a phenomenal beast."

The mission, which lasted from 2004 until 2009, was run by the US Joint Special Operations Command under the name of Task Force 145, which later became Task Force 626. The SAS element, which focused on taking down a lethal network of bombmakers targeting Baghdad, was called Task Force Black.

Key to the success of the operation was that US and British special forces and spies were given the freedom to work as a unified network, pooling intelligence, chasing targets into other countries if that is where they went and feeding into a central hub that oversaw all that was going on, the former officer said.

"We had to form a network to defeat a network," he said. "It was a 24-hour counterterrorism operation. AQI couldn't bed down properly in the night

and they couldn't bed down properly in the day ... If a target guy is moving every night to a different bed space, he is on tenterhooks and he does not have time to plan anything, he has time to stay alive and cover his own tracks, but he is in survival mode. No matter how much of a tough guy jihadist they think they are, that gets to anyone."

If intelligence surfaced that a wanted individual was travelling in Africa, the special forces network had agreements with different countries to be able to launch raids outside Iraq or to use the particular nation's special forces to conduct the mission.

Six years later this same kind of task force should be rebuilt to deal with Isis in Iraq, Syria and wherever in the world its fighters were operating, the former SAS officer said. "What is needed is a task force with the permissions, capability and the mission to go hunt them full on and hunt them across their network and hunt every aspect of their network — your logistics, your funding, your facilitation, your command and control," he said.

"All of that needs to be hunted simultaneously in order to put them [Isis] into a maelstrom of s*** and tie them up. You just create havoc on top of them."

Britain, the US, France and Australia — countries that are all conducting air strikes against Isis in Iraq and Syria and have special forces on the ground — would be ideal to form the task force, but intelligence-sharing with other countries affected by the terrorist group would be vital.

"The whole thing that makes this work is the sharing of intelligence and transparency," the former SAS officer said. "It is when we build silos and intelligence not to be shared [that] you end up with fracture lines, and that is what these bastards exploit."

Raids could be launched at any time of day against the Isis capital Raqqa, in northeast Syria, just as the original task force repeatedly hit the al-Qaeda hub of Fallujah. Cross-border operations could also be conducted outside Iraq and Syria with the correct liaisons in place with other countries, the former SAS officer said.

"You would go after everyone — the money guy sat in Qatar, the kid pushing out the YouTube videos. It would be every piece of their apparatus and you would pull it all apart."