

UAE's relationship with Taliban questioned after Afghanistan bomb

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The [United Arab Emirates](#) is still in shock three weeks after five of its diplomats and aid officials were killed in a terrorist bomb blast in Kandahar while they were handing out relief goods.

At least seven Afghan officials were killed while the governor of Kandahar, Humayun Azizi, and the UAE ambassador Juma al-Kaabi were wounded. Mr Azizi's deputy, Abdul Ali Shamsi, a rising political star, was also killed.

There were several firsts, even for a devastated country like Afghanistan which has experienced every kind of warfare. Never before in the 39 years of conflict had Arab diplomats been attacked, let alone killed. In the past, Arab states have been friendly to the Taliban, and supportive of Kabul's government.

The bomb – hidden in a new sofa in the just-renovated governor's office – was by far the most sophisticated device used in an assassination attempt in the country. UAE diplomats and security officials told me the device had three compartments, which exploded one after the other ensuring that even late-arriving rescuers were hit by the blasts. The trigger mechanism was equally ingenious as the bomb appeared to have been hidden some days earlier. This was certainly not the usual crude Taliban bomb or walk-in suicide bomber with explosives strapped to his waist.

UAE counter-terrorism experts are now investigating the blasts. First, they have to establish if the diplomats were the real target – or was it the Kandahar governor and his notorious chief of police, General [Abdul Raziq](#), who is hated by the Taliban and has been the subject of many assassination attempts?

But, if the UAE diplomats were the target, who were the perpetrators? The Taliban initially claimed responsibility on the wires, then quickly denounced it when the diplomats were pronounced dead; they appeared highly embarrassed by the killings. The Taliban themselves do not have the skill to make such a bomb; the only groups that can would be al-Qaeda or the Haqqani network, which is an affiliate of the Taliban and responsible for many outrageous attacks in Kabul.

Otherwise, according to some local officials, the device must have been built by a state, which would point the finger at Iran, the UAE's proverbial rival and enemy.

The United Arab Emirates is a small country with fewer than 1m nationals and some 6m foreigners. Every Emirati seems to know someone who knows someone who knew one of the victims. The uncle of a young woman who attended one of my lectures on Afghanistan was killed in the blast, I was told.

Young Emiratis will not remember 1996, when the UAE, along with other Gulf states and especially Saudi Arabia, recognised the Taliban government but relations between them remained close until 9/11. The Gulf states allowed the Taliban to raise funds and turned a blind eye to the flow of arms and ammunition through their ports for the supply network through Pakistan.

The drugs trade and money laundering flourished and some Taliban bought properties and businesses in the UAE. The Arabs and the Taliban shared some fundamentalist Islamic beliefs, such as the influence of Wahabbism, they both hated the Shia and considered Iran the enemy.

But after 9/11, the UAE changed track, cracking down on extremists and ensuring that Taliban on their soil were not supporting their compatriots. Most significantly, it became the only Arab country to send troops to serve alongside US and Nato forces in Afghanistan after the Twin Towers attacks. These troops only returned home last year, while the government continued to fund aid projects.

UAE foreign policy is undergoing an overhaul. Although extremely close to Pakistan the country has been courting Islamabad's arch rival, India. Abu Dhabi crown prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan was treated like a superstar when he arrived as guest of honour at India's Republic Day march past on January 26.

Senior Emirati diplomats said a strategic dialogue with India was reviewing the big terrorist groups active in the region. Once an appendage to [US policy](#) in the Gulf region, the UAE is now reaching out to its old enemies Russia and Turkey. One longstanding demand from the west is for them to clean up the banking system so money laundering, drugs financing and donations to extremists dry up; officials say they are moving on that.

Whatever emerges about the perpetrators of the bombings that killed its diplomats, the UAE has much still to do against extremists in the region. Arab states have come a long way from those heady days in the 1990s when the militant groups gathered in Kabul had access to the Gulf states for business and supplies, but Kandahar showed how close terrorism can come.

The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia, most recently 'Pakistan on the Brink'

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