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US Marines used a remote-controlled robot to handle explosives in Al Anbar province of Iraq. (Erik De Castro/ Reuters)

## Panel on Iraq bombings grows to \$3b effort

The Boston Globe

### Critics say it has been ineffective

By Bryan Bender, Globe Staff | June 25, 2006

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The growth comes amid complaints within the military that the group's emphasis on high-tech solutions -- mainly through big contracts to traditional defense companies -- has not succeeded in stemming the number of attacks.

The expansion of the task force from a small, quick-moving unit intended to bring creative thinking to the IED threat into a larger Pentagon department recently caught the eye of Congress. The House passed a bill earlier this month seeking to know the precise number of employees, where they work, and how much money is being spent on administrative overhead. The bill is pending in the Senate.

But concerns about the task force go beyond the size of its bureaucracy and its funding, which has mostly come out of the Pentagon's emergency war budget.

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#### THE JOINT IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICE DEFEAT ORGANIZATION

**MISSION:** "Focus all IED defeat efforts within the Department of Defense, while concurrently engaging other outside sources of potential solutions, to defeat current and future threats endangering joint and coalition forces."

#### PERSONNEL

2003 12-person task force  
2006 300+

#### THREE MAJOR EFFORTS

- "Defeat the device" with methods and technology that can neutralize or disable roadside bombs.
- "Defeat the system" by finding bombers before IEDs are placed.
- "Train the force" to deal with IEDs.

SOURCE: Joint IED Defeat Organization

JAMES BENNETT/GLOBE STAFF

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General John Abizaid , the head of US military forces in the Middle East, recently complained to members of the IED group that its emphasis on multimillion-dollar contracts to develop high-tech sensing equipment has been ineffective at curbing attacks by homemade bombs, according to a person who was present.

Abizaid said the office -- which last year was renamed the Joint IED Defeat Organization -- should focus more on nontechnical solutions, such as figuring out where the explosives are coming from and who is planting them, the official said.

A recent report commissioned by the Pentagon, written by a team of counter-insurgency specialists and provided to Abizaid, was blunt: ``The response to the IED has been primarily to increase force protection by emphasizing technical solutions which have proven insufficient," said the internal report, a copy of which was obtained by the Globe. ``Business as usual will no longer suffice."

The IED Defeat Organization, however, continues to expand. Earlier this year it outgrew its Pentagon office and moved to a giant office tower in Arlington, Va., a short walk from the Pentagon -- and from the offices of most leading defense contractors.

It is seeking to hire more staff, to work at offices in Washington, Iraq, Afghanistan, and at satellite offices at military bases in California, Texas, and Maryland. It also is beginning to draft its first formal budget request, officials say -- a clear sign of its bureaucratic permanence.

Interviews with current and former members of the task force -- all of whom requested anonymity because they are not authorized by the Pentagon to speak to the media -- revealed widespread frustration that money and other resources were going into long-term deals with major defense contractors.[Continued...](#)

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Interviews with current and former members of the task force -- all of whom requested anonymity because they are not authorized by the Pentagon to speak to the media -- revealed widespread frustration that money and other resources were going into long-term deals with major defense contractors.

"This is a perfect example of a Cold War mind-set," said one former official who held a senior post in the office and has since left government. "The office needs to be moved out of Washington and into Iraq if they are really going to solve this problem."

Some members of the House and Senate share the concern that by focusing on longer-term projects, the task force is squandering its mission to provide quick, on-the-ground solutions to homemade bombs, whether through technology or intelligence.

"We are just fighting a defensive war on these IEDs. They are becoming more lethal and our efforts are becoming less and less successful," said Representative Adam Schiff, Democrat of California, who wrote the provision, approved by the House, to require the office to provide a detailed progress report to Congress every 90 days.

Brigadier General Daniel Allyn, who took over as the office's deputy director for operations a year ago, said last week that his organization is not only focused on acquiring new technologies, but is also taking a "holistic approach" to the IED problem.

Allyn acknowledged that identifying new technologies has been a major thrust, but maintained that officials also are developing new programs to train military personnel to identify possible bombs.

It also is working on new ways to gather intelligence on who is making the bombs, Allyn said. The office has set up a training center in California and is expanding its outreach to foreign military allies, including

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countries such as Israel that have more experience dealing with IEDs, according to officials.

“Our mission is to eliminate the IED as a weapon of strategic influence in the war on terror,” Allyn said in a rare interview. “This is not a game. It has direct life-and-death implications.”

Allyn rejected the notion that the office is too close to the so-called “Big Seven” defense contractors -- giants such as Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and some of their smaller partners.

“Our industry partnerships range from the big guys to niche firms,” he said. “We reach out to a broad array of people. We are interested in the what -- not the who. We don’t have favorites.”

Allyn credits the office with helping to reduce by half the number of US casualties per IED attack over the past 18 months. Since late last year, he said, there has been a 25 percent increase in the number of IEDs that are deactivated by antibomb technology or the vigilance of bomb disposal units.

But officials briefed on the latest attack trends say Allyn’s figures provide an incomplete picture. The frequency and power of IED attacks have increased in recent months, according to military reports, and insurgents still are able to trigger bombs with cellphones, garage door openers, or simply by placing a rubber hose in the road to produce enough air pressure to activate a switch when a vehicle drives by.

IEDs remain the biggest killer of US troops, and have become a key weapon used against Iraqi security forces and civilians.

In an example of how insurgents have quickly adapted to US efforts to block the attacks, the percentage of IEDs that are buried under roads and gravel -- a tactic used to avoid bomb-sensors -- has tripled in the past two years, according to military data.

“We face a very capable and adaptive enemy,” Allyn said. “He has demonstrated the ability to learn and share that information widely.”

The current IED office grew out of a task force established by the Army in October 2003. At the time, Abizaid sent an urgent request to Paul Wolfowitz, then deputy secretary of defense, to establish what he called a “mini-Manhattan Project” -- a reference to the secret World War II project to develop the atom bomb -- to address the IED problem.

But as the threat grew and Pentagon money poured in -- more than \$6 billion to date -- the effort became larger than anticipated and its leaders acknowledge that it will be operating for many years to come. It hired high-priced consultants such as the Wexford Group, composed, in part, of former military officers. The IED organization also has handed out long-term contracts to develop new technologies.

The result has been dozens of new devices in development, some in Iraq and some being tested. They include the Warlock, which emits low-power energy to block the radio signals often used to detonate IEDs.

The Army has ordered thousands of them, but specialists have cautioned that the system may be only partly effective because it works only if it is on the same frequency as the bomb’s detonator.

There is also a device in development to short-circuit the electronics of IEDs; a microwave project to help locate stockpiles of explosives; and a new sensor in the works that is designed to detect traces of explosives as far as 30 meters away, according to government reports.

Foster-Miller Inc. in Waltham has provided the military with the Talon, a

remote-controlled vehicle with a mechanical arm to inspect and move IEDs.

More than 100 of the robots are being used in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another robot, the "Packbot," has been used to clear bombs and search suspected insurgent hideouts.

But in Iraq, many officers are losing faith that this technology will curb attacks.

The campaign "is poorly focused," stated the Pentagon assessment prepared for Abizaid's command. "A better strategy would focus on preventing Iraqis from becoming involved in the insurgency." It criticized the IED effort for failing to protect ordinary Iraqis from the homemade bombs and suicide car bombs.

The Pentagon "has given little attention to effects of IEDs on the [Iraqi Security Forces], the civilian population, and the Iraqi infrastructure," according to the assessment. "Protecting the population is one of the key precepts of counterinsurgency."

Some who work in the organization agree that it must look to means other than technology.

"You need to step back and look at the whole kill chain," said Starnes Walker, the chief scientist for the Office of Naval Research who was brought into the IED effort last year to help provide new thinking. "That goes from the making of explosives to the packaging to the idea of distributing it, actually positioning it."

He said the organization needs to continue funding physical sciences, but to devote more money and brainpower to "human, behavioral, and cultural sciences as well."

In some ways, however, Walker himself symbolizes the entrenchment of the organization's bureaucracy. He heads an offshoot of the organization called the Joint Laboratory Board.

It was created last December along with a Resource and Acquisition Board and a Test Board, all of which will help review projects and assess new ideas.

The Pentagon also has enlisted other federal agencies, including the Department of Energy, the Department of Homeland Security, and the National Science Foundation.

But many officers believe that more strategic thinking -- and less bureaucracy -- is what is needed.

Last year, at a meeting in Baghdad to discuss new technology to combat IEDs, Abizaid said that he had seen French film footage showing insurgents planting a homemade bomb in full view of Iraqi bystanders.

Abizaid said he was stunned by the "party atmosphere surrounding this event," according to one person at the meeting, who kept notes.

The commanding general's meaning was clear, according to the participant: Expensive Pentagon devices will not stop the bombings. Only people can stop the bombings. ■

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