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The Guardian

British couple seized in Afghanistan suspected of plotting UK terror attack

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A British couple seized by special forces in [Afghanistan](#) in an unprecedented operation are suspected of planning a terrorist attack in the UK, the Guardian understands.

The man and the woman were seized by British special forces in the western Afghan city of Herat and transferred to a "secure facility" in Kandahar, the Ministry of Defence said last night. The operation is highly sensitive and potentially a legal minefield, officials made clear.

There have been unconfirmed reports in the past about British-born individuals, some heard speaking with strong British accents, joining the [Taliban](#)-led insurgency in southern Afghanistan. However, this is believed to be the first time any terrorist suspects have been captured in Afghanistan, officials said.

The two are believed to be known to British security services and may have travelled to Afghanistan for training purposes or to contact militant groups there. Whatever their purpose in going to Afghanistan, British officials made plain that the capture of the couple was a "counter-terrorist" operation. Britain's special forces, of which there are about 500 in Afghanistan, work closely with the security and intelligence services there.

The couple were seized at a hotel in Herat, a prosperous commercial centre with close links to Iran, in a joint operation with the Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of

Security (NDS), according to defence officials. Officials described the operation as "terrorism-related" and "UK-led". The role of the NDS remained unclear last night.

The MoD: "We can confirm that two British passport holders were detained in an Isaf [International Security Assistance Force] operation conducted jointly last week by UK forces with Afghans in support ... Detention operations are a vital element of protecting UK, Isaf and Afghan forces and Afghan civilians from those who are assessed to pose a threat regardless of their nationality." As if to underline the legal sensitivities surrounding the operation, the MoD continued: "All detention operations in Afghanistan carried out under the remit of the UN mandated [ISAF] which includes those conducted by British forces, are conducted in accordance with international law and strict policy frameworks".

Nato forces can hold suspects for up to four days before releasing them or handing them over to the Afghan authorities. However, the period can be extended. The Foreign Office said: "The UK has a national policy of detaining beyond 96 hours in exceptional circumstances, in particular where it could provide information that could help protect our forces or the local population."

The Afghan authorities may insist the couple should remain in jail in the country pending a trial. The British authorities will have to decide whether there is sufficient evidence to extradite them to the UK.

Clive Stafford Smith, director of the legal charity Reprieve, which campaigns for prisoners' rights, has written to the Foreign Office to ask for clarification of the Britons' legal positions. He said: "We are extremely concerned – if they were to be transferred to Afghan custody, they would not only face the death penalty, but also would face serious torture as well."

The arrests came as the UK handed responsibility for security in Helmand's capital, Lashkar Gah, to Afghan forces on Wednesday in a step towards the planned pullout of British combat troops by the end of 2014. Nato troops have also handed over control of security in Herat, the fourth of seven areas to handover to Afghan control this week. However, the capture of the two Britons, and concerns about their possible intentions are not linked to the transfer of security to Afghan forces, officials said.