

Planning Seen in Iraqi Attacks on U.S. Helicopters



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WASHINGTON, Feb. 17 — Documents captured from Iraqi insurgents indicate that some of the recent fatal attacks against American helicopters are a result of a carefully planned strategy to focus on downing coalition aircraft, one that American officials say has been carried out by mounting coordinated assaults with machine guns, rockets and surface-to-air missiles.

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Associated Press Television News

The crash of a Marine CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter, shot down near Karma on Feb. 7, was captured on video. Its crew of seven was killed.

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The documents, said to have been drafted by [Al Qaeda](#) in Mesopotamia, show that the militants were preparing to “concentrate on the air force.” The contents of the documents are described in an American intelligence report that was reviewed by The New York Times.

Seized near Baghdad, the documents reflect the insurgents’ military preparations from late last year, including plans for attacking aircraft using a variety of weapons.

Officials say they are a fresh indication that the United States is facing an array of “adaptive” adversaries in [Iraq](#), enemies who are likely to step up their attacks as American forces expand their efforts to secure Baghdad, the Iraqi capital.

“Attacks on coalition aircraft probably will increase if helicopter missions expand during the latest phase of the Baghdad Security Plan or if insurgents seek to emulate their recent successes,” notes the intelligence report, which analyzes the recent helicopter crashes.

The American military has said that seven helicopters have been downed since Jan. 20, a figure that exceeds the total number of coalition aircraft shot down in 2006.

After downing the helicopters, the insurgents often laid ambushes for the American ground troops they expected to come to the rescue, sometimes using roadside bombs

that they placed in advance. American troops were attacked in five instances in which they rushed to the scene of aircraft that had been shot down, military officials said.

The intelligence report supports the concerns expressed by an American general this month that militants were adapting their tactics in an effort to step up attacks against helicopters. Such strikes have increased since the United States expanded its military operations in Baghdad in August. From December to January, the number of anti-aircraft attacks rose by 17 percent, according to an American military report.

Insurgents in Iraq have boasted about the helicopter downings and posted video of some of the wreckage on militant Web sites. While Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia has claimed it has “new ways” to shoot down the aircraft, some American analysts believe they are probably not employing new types of weapons but rather are making more effective use of arms already in their inventory.

The insurgents try to plan their attacks by studying flight patterns near American bases and along supply routes, according to the intelligence report.

In several recent helicopter downings, the attackers used a variety of weapons, including shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and unguided rockets that cannot be diverted by the flares helicopters disperse to fool heat-seeking systems.

Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, which the intelligence report says leads the insurgent group known as the Islamic State of Iraq, has claimed responsibility for shooting down three of the helicopters. Those helicopters were downed near Taji, Karma and in Diyala Province.

While the captured documents point to careful planning, it is not entirely clear whether this is an effort by some of the militant commanders in those areas or a nationwide strategy by the group.

Maj. Gen. James E. Simmons, a deputy commander of the American-led multinational force in Iraq and an Army aviator, told reporters this week that multiple weapons systems had been used against American troops before, in attacks south of Baghdad last year.

“This is not a new tactic,” he said. “But it is the first time that we have seen it employed in several months.”

“We are engaged with a thinking enemy,” he added. “This enemy understands based on the reporting and everything else that we are in the process of executing the prime minister’s new plan for the security of Baghdad. And they understand the strategic implications of shooting down an aircraft.”

He said that American commanders in Iraq have met to consider how to counter the shift in insurgent tactics, but he refused to discuss specifics.