

## *A Rarely Seen Weapon Destroys a Helicopter in Afghanistan*

Another Afghan helicopter was hit in January by an anti-tank guided missile in southern Afghanistan, in a swath of territory long contested by the Taliban.



**By Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal**

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An Afghan helicopter was attacked in the country's south this week by what United States and Afghan officials say was a missile rarely seen in the hands of the Taliban, raising new concerns for a beleaguered Afghan military and questions about who supplied the weapon.

On Monday, a Black Hawk helicopter was returning from a medical evacuation mission in Helmand Province and was preparing to land. It is unclear if the helicopter had touched down or was hovering just feet off the ground when it was struck by an anti-tank guided missile, American and Afghan officials said. At least two of the crew members aboard were wounded, one critically.

It was the second attack of its kind this year. In January, another Afghan helicopter was hit by an anti-tank guided missile in the same area near the Kajaki Dam, a swath of territory long contested by the Taliban, the officials said. Initial reports at the time were inconclusive about what had struck the helicopter.

American and Afghan officials claim the weapons used in both strikes were most likely supplied by Iran, but they offered no evidence to support the assertion. The accusation would be alarming if true, as the influx of anti-tank guided missiles could not only give the Taliban a tactical advantage over the Afghan military but also suggest Tehran was trying to undermine the American mission as it is poised to wind down. Iran has denied supplying weapons to the Taliban.

Anti-tank guided missiles, which come in many variants, are common in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, having been captured from military bases and supplied by countries such as the United States, Russia and Iran. But the weapons have been rare in Afghanistan, U.S. military officials said.

In the 1980s, the C.I.A.-backed program that funneled arms and supplies to Afghan insurgents fighting the Soviet Union provided a cache of anti-tank guided missiles. And in 2008, the Taliban captured at least one missile and its launcher from the French.

In 2017, Osprey Flight Solutions, a private company that assesses threats to commercial aviation in conflict zones, tracked a shipment of the weapons into Afghanistan from Pakistan.

“Existing evidence suggests that acquisition and use of portable anti-tank missiles by armed groups in Afghanistan is limited, especially in comparison to places like Syria,” Matthew Schroeder, a senior researcher for the Small Arms Survey, which tracks the prevalence of anti-tank guided missiles and other weapons in war zones, said on Thursday.

Anti-tank guided missiles require training and multiple people to effectively fire them; for the most part, they are unwieldy. But they are capable of accurately hitting a target from kilometers away — well outside the range of small-arms fire — making them dangerous to vehicles, outposts and stationary aircraft. That makes their potential emergence in Afghanistan especially troubling for the Afghan military, which fights its battles mostly from checkpoints.

Shooting at helicopters that are on or near the ground, such as the two incidents in Helmand Province this year, is a tactic that has been used often by insurgent groups during the conflict in Syria.

Afghanistan’s defense ministry said in a statement soon after the attack this week that the Black Hawk had crashed “due to technical issues while it was attempting to land.” In the days since, security officials admitted privately that the aircraft was attacked.

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One senior Afghan security official said it was near certain that the helicopter had been hit by an anti-tank missile, but an investigating team was sent to the Kajaki district on Tuesday to explore further. A second senior official said he was unaware of this kind of weapon being deployed against aircraft in Afghanistan beyond the two incidents in Helmand Province this year.

“Based on what I heard from locals, the helicopter was shot by the Taliban,” said Attaullah Afghan, the head of the provincial council in Helmand. “The Taliban have got new weapons that they can use against helicopters when it’s on the ground — a kind of rocket attached to long wire used against tanks and helicopters. A similar weapon was used against another aircraft that had landed in Kajaki.”

While Iranian officials have acknowledged their diplomatic channels with the Taliban, they have repeatedly rejected accusations in recent years of providing material support to the group. They say they support the Afghan government in resisting the Taliban’s quest for a return of their Islamic Emirate, which was hostile to neighboring Iran.

“What is important is that we believe in preserving the current constitution and the political system, we support the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the government,” Abbas Araghchi, Iran’s deputy foreign minister, said in a recent interview with the Afghan channel ToloNews. “Unlike other countries, we haven’t come to give weapons or money to the Taliban.”

In January, after a U.S. drone strike in Iraq killed Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, a top Iranian military officer, many Afghan officials, including the country’s president, Ashraf Ghani, were worried that Iran would use its reach in Afghanistan’s messy battlefield to retaliate against the Americans and intensify the Afghan conflict. Around the time of Mr. Ghani’s inauguration in March, a series of rocket attacks similar to those launched by Iranian-backed militias in Iraq seemed to amplify the officials’ concerns. One hit an area around the presidential palace.

Images from the attack on Monday, verified by a U.S. military officer familiar with the incident, show the burning U.S.-supplied Black Hawk along with a bundle of guiding wire, a distinct feature on some types of anti-tank guided missiles.

## **Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan**

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public

punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

For the duration of the war, U.S. military intelligence officers have repeatedly made claims of weapons and supplies flowing from Pakistan, Iran, Russia and other Central Asian countries to the Taliban, but often with little proof. American officials have closely tracked the appearance of surface-to-air missiles and other threats to aircraft, as any type of foreign involvement with such types of weapons would be contentious and substantially increase the risk to American and Afghan forces.

Since anti-tank guided missiles are not designed to specifically target aircraft, their introduction to the conflict is less likely to draw significant condemnation from the Americans, the U.S. military officer said, though it would certainly be an escalation. The United States provided such weapons to Syrian opposition fighters in 2014 and portable surface-to-air missiles to Islamist fighters in the 1980s.

About 60,000 Afghan security forces have been killed since 2014, when U.S. forces began drawing down. And since the beginning of the year, despite a peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban in February, Afghan troops and civilians continue to suffer heavy losses.

Speaking at an event in Kabul on Tuesday, Mr. Ghani said 3,560 Afghan forces had been killed and nearly 6,800 others wounded since the deal between the United States and the Taliban. The casualties are possibly higher, some Afghan officials suggested, with many doubting that the number included the losses of pro-government militias who bear the brunt of the fighting. And from Jan. 1 to June 30, 1,282 civilians were killed and 2,176 were wounded, according to a United Nations report released on Monday.

On Tuesday, after weeks of deadly attacks on Afghan forces, the Taliban announced a three-day cease-fire for the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha. The announcement came soon after Mr. Ghani said a prisoner swap that had faced opposition from his government would be completed and that direct negotiations with the Taliban would start in a week.

But the violence continued right up to the time of the cease-fire, with a car bomb detonating at a crowded roundabout in Pul e Alam, a city about 40 miles south of Kabul. Officials said the target was a security convoy, but the 15 people killed and 30 wounded were a mix of civilians and military.

Under the deal between the United States and the Taliban, which initiated the phased withdrawal of American troops, direct peace negotiations between the Afghan sides were conditioned on swapping 5,000 Taliban prisoners with 1,000 Afghan security forces held by the insurgents.

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