

Militants sharing bomb expertise (IRAQ)

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"What we're seeing is an increase in the evolutionary pace of IED (improvised explosive device) design," said Ben Venzke, CEO of IntelCenter, a Washington counterterrorism firm contracted by the U.S. military to study insurgent tactics. "It's increasing at a pace we previously haven't seen."

Insurgent groups are passing around videos and other training aids to teach the most effective bombmaking techniques. "There is definitely a program to share information," said Maj. Dean Wollan, intelligence officer for the U.S. Army's 3rd Brigade Combat Team, operating in this area north of Baghdad.

Sometimes explosives experts from one cell are sent to other areas to learn new techniques, then return to train others, Venzke said. One captured video shows in three-dimensional animation every component of a roadside bomb, how to build and use it, and where to place it for the biggest impact, he said.

Roadside bombs are the main weapon used against U.S. forces in Iraq. They are usually made from explosives or artillery shells and can be detonated remotely or triggered when a vehicle passes over.

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Roughly half of U.S. deaths and injuries in Iraq are caused by roadside and car bombs, according to the Pentagon's Joint IED Defeat Task Force. "IED attacks are the enemy's primary means of engaging us," said Army Col. Daniel Allyn, deputy director of the task force.

Nearly 2,000 U.S. servicemembers have died in the war in Iraq, about 78% of them from hostile action.

Although roadside bombs are growing more common, U.S. forces are getting better at detecting them before they can be detonated and better at using armor to protect against the blasts. The task force says that has reduced the casualty rate.

The Pentagon generally characterizes the insurgency as a loose network of cells and groups without a strong centralized command. Their motives and backgrounds vary.

If rivalries exist between groups, insurgents seem to put aside their differences when it comes to helping one another become more effective against a common enemy.

"The concern is that one group gains an effective technology, and it becomes almost Darwinism," said Lt. Col. Shawn Weed, division intelligence officer for the 3rd Infantry Division, which is responsible for Baghdad and surrounding areas. "They'll share that with other groups."

Another motivator is money. Cells pay for the best technology, sometimes several thousand dollars for a well-built, well-planted unit, Weed said.

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