



The Meir Amit Intelligence
and Terrorism Information Center

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Terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip have recently once again made use of phosphorus-containing 120-mm mortar shells



One of the phosphorus mortar shells located in Israeli territory
(Eshkol Regional Council PR department)

Overview

1. **On November 19, a phosphorus-containing mortar shell was fired at Israel from the Gaza Strip. It was part of an unusual attack consisting of four rockets and seven mortar shells, which may have been fired in response to the killing of Islam Yassin, an Army of Islam operative** who was planning to abduct Israelis in the Sinai Peninsula. The Israeli Foreign Minister instructed the Israeli ambassador to the UN to submit a complaint to the UN Secretary General and to the Security Council chairman (Israel's Foreign Ministry website, November 19, 2010).

2. **In a previous incident which took place on the morning of September 15, 2010,** one day after the Sharm el-Sheikh summit,¹ terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip fired an exceptional number of rockets and mortar shells at Israel (about 10 rockets). The mortar shells landed in the Eshkol Regional Council territory. **At least two of them were 120-mm mortar shells which contained white phosphorus.**² No casualties or damage were reported.

3. **Terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip have used phosphorus-containing mortar shells before.** In Operation Cast Lead, a number of such mortar shells were fired on IDF forces, probably by Hamas. Prior to these two incidents, however, terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip avoided making routine use of such mortar shells.



One of the phosphorus-containing mortar shells found in Israeli territory (Eshkol Regional Council PR department, November 19, 2010)

¹ Following up on the re-launch of direct negotiations in Washington on September 14, a summit was held in Sharm el-Sheikh between Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu and PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas. The summit was also attended by Egypt's President Mubarak, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and U.S. special envoy George Mitchell.

² Following are technical details on the 120-mm phosphorus mortar shell: **warhead**—white phosphorus, a substance which spontaneously ignites on contact with oxygen and creates a smoke screen; **diameter**—120 mm; **length**—about 60 cm (2 feet); **weight**—about 13 kg (29 lbs.); **range**—about 6 km (4 mi).

Implications of the phosphorus mortar shell fire

4. **A phosphorus shell is a mortar shell based on white phosphorus.** The phosphorus ignites on contact with oxygen. The shell continues to burn as long as the ignition substance inside remains in contact with oxygen. Phosphorus shells are mostly used to hit exposed infantry, create smoke screens, and obstruct visibility for forces on the ground.

5. The collateral damage caused by phosphorus-containing mortar shells is relatively small compared to regular explosive mortar shells; **however, they may have a major negative impact on morale. On contact with the human body, the phosphorus may cause extensive burns and even damage to internal organs. The shells can also cause fires and set crops on fire.**



Smoke caused by a 120-mm mortar shell

Terrorist organizations' reaction to charges of using phosphorus shells

6. In the two incidents, **Hamas denied** using phosphorus-containing mortar shells:

a. **Hamas administration spokesman Taher al-Nunu claimed that Foreign Minister Lieberman's remarks on the use of phosphorus shells were untrue.**

He said they were designed to cast the "resistance" (i.e., the terrorist organizations) in a negative light and provide an excuse for Israel's own use of such ammunition (Al-Quds TV, November 20, 2010).

b. Spokesman **Sami Abu Zuhri** claimed that no "phosphorus bombs" had been fired at Israel and that Israel was making an attempt to justify its intensifying military operations against the Gaza Strip and divert public opinion on the international scene (Palestine-info, September 15, 2010).

c. On the other hand, an Al-Jazeera reporter said that the use of phosphorus was hardly a surprise. Al-Jazeera crew doing a research piece on the activity of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades (the Hamas military wing) **had discovered that they recycled white phosphorus from Israeli shells found in the Gaza Strip and stored it in the Gaza Strip, apparently for future use** (Al-Jazeera, September 16, 2010).