

US forces accused of firing white phosphorus into Mosul and Raqqa

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Videos published by the Amaq news agency show artillery exploding over Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria that analysts believe could be white phosphorus rounds. Amaq, which often publishes information provided by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) sources, claims that the areas which are shown being bombarded are ISIS-held sectors of the cities still populated by large numbers of civilians.

One video was posted on June 4, showing a daytime barrage on what is said to be the Zanjiji district of western Mosul. An ISIS flag is flying at the top of one of some multistory buildings in the foreground of the area being bombarded. The artillery shells explode in the fashion of white phosphorus munitions, igniting fires.

A second video, dated June 8, shows several explosions, again consistent with white phosphorus shells, over the surrounded ISIS “capital” of Raqqa. The artillery also appears to immediately trigger intense fires.

Many militaries around the world still use white phosphorus munitions, ostensibly as a means of rapidly creating a dense smoke screen. It can, however, be used as an incendiary weapon. The “smoke” it produces sets alight combustible materials and causes horrific burns to human flesh. It was used extensively during World War II by US and allied forces to attack enemy troop concentrations and set areas ablaze. It was widely used during the American wars in Korea and Vietnam.

In 1980, the use of white phosphorus as an incendiary weapon to target civilians was ruled a war crime under international law.

It has continued, however, to be used to set ablaze urban areas and terrorize civilian populations. Documented or alleged cases include: the 1994 Russian assault on Grozny in Chechnya; the April and

November 2004 US attacks on the Iraqi city of Fallujah; the 2006 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon; the 2008-2009 Israeli assault on the Palestinian city of Gaza; and by American forces in Afghanistan during the so-called “surge” ordered by the Obama administration in 2009.

There is overwhelming evidence that the US Marines—commanded by now secretary of Defense James “Mad Dog” Mattis—used white phosphorus as an incendiary, not smoke-creating, weapon over civilian-populated areas of Fallujah. The Bush administration and Pentagon dismissed allegations of criminality, asserting that it was legitimate as American forces were seeking to force armed insurgents out of their defensive positions.

In a widely cited statement in November 2005, Lieutenant Colonel Barry Venable explained US military tactics regarding its use as an antipersonnel weapon: “When you have enemy forces that are in covered positions that your high explosive artillery rounds are not having an impact on, and you wish to get them out of those positions, one technique is to fire a white phosphorus round into the position because the combined effects of the fire and smoke—and in some case the terror brought about by the explosion on the ground—will drive them out of the holes so that you can kill them with high explosives.”

US Marine artillery batteries, fielding 155mm howitzers and equipped with white phosphorus rounds, are participating in the assaults on both Mosul and Raqqa. An estimated 200,000 civilians are trapped in the ISIS-held areas of both cities.

Upon taking office in January, the new administration of President Donald Trump signaled that it had ordered the lifting of “restrictions” on American forces fighting ISIS that were purportedly limiting civilian casualties.

Over the months since, the number and intensity of US air strikes on Mosul and Raqqa have dramatically increased, along with the toll of civilian deaths and injuries.

Secretary of Defense Mattis has stated on several occasions that the US and its local Iraqi and Syrian proxies are now implementing “annihilation tactics” against ISIS.

Prior to the allegations of war crimes relating to the use of white phosphorus, evidence had already emerged in Mosul of the torture and extrajudicial murder of alleged ISIS fighters by US-backed forces.



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