

## **Factsheet: Israeli forces' misuse of 120mm and 155mm artillery**

Amid the ongoing conflict, the Israeli military has conducted offensive operations in the occupied Gaza Strip and parts of South Lebanon in which it has used U.S.-made weapons in attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including attacks that human rights organizations have said should be investigated as war crimes. This factsheet focuses on the Israeli military's use of 120mm and 155mm artillery since October 2023 and provides an overview of relevant U.S. weapons sales and transfers to the Israeli government during this period as well as incidents of civilian harm based on publicly available information from non-governmental organizations and media reporting. It is not intended to be exhaustive.

### **About Merkava Tanks**

The Merkava is an Israeli produced battle tank that uses U.S. parts and components that are critical to its capabilities and ability to operate. The Merkava's main 120mm cannon can fire Israeli, U.S., French, and German made projectiles.<sup>i</sup> The tank can also be equipped with the M2 Browning .50 caliber machine gun,<sup>ii</sup> which is American-designed and can use US-made ammunition.<sup>iii</sup> U.S. based manufacturers of the Browning machine gun include General Dynamics Ordnance and Tactical Systems.<sup>iv</sup> The Merkava tank's MT883 engine was developed by the German company MTU and is manufactured under license by Renk in the U.S.<sup>v</sup>

### **About M109 Howitzers**

The M109 is a U.S. designed self-propelled howitzer that fires 155mm artillery rounds, which can carry different payloads, including white phosphorus. The Israeli military has several units of the US-origin M109A5 and M109A2 models.<sup>vi</sup> M109 howitzers are manufactured by BAE Systems, a British defense and aerospace security company, which has contracts with the U.S. military through a Special Security Agreement.<sup>vii</sup> Furthermore, BAE Systems, Inc. (formerly known as Bae Systems North America) is an American subsidiary of BAE Systems and one of the largest suppliers of howitzers to the U.S. Department of Defense. The M109 Howitzer has been used by Israeli military forces for decades.<sup>viii</sup> The Israeli military is intending to replace its M109 howitzers with Roem, a fully automatic artillery 155mm/52 caliber Elbit Systems gun.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Recent U.S. Sales and Transfers of 120mm and 155mm Artillery**

Human rights organizations have documented unlawful attacks by Israeli forces amid the ongoing conflict and during past offensives, including in 2008-9,<sup>x</sup> 2014,<sup>xi</sup> and 2021.<sup>xii</sup> This pattern has included the unlawful use of 120mm tanks and 155mm artillery by Israeli forces.<sup>xiii</sup> Despite the overwhelming evidence of a broad pattern of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by the Israeli authorities, the Biden administration has continued to transfer and sell weapons to the Israeli government without sufficient oversight or vetting. These transfers and sales have included 120mm and 155mm munitions/rounds/cartridges.

On August 13, 2024, the State Department announced the approval of a possible sale to the Israeli government of 32,739 120mm tank cartridges and munitions.<sup>xiv</sup> Prior to this, the Pentagon provided Israel with 155mm artillery shells in October 2023.<sup>xv</sup> In November 2023, it was reported

that the Pentagon was “quietly” ramping up military assistance, which included 57,000 155mm artillery shells.<sup>xvi</sup> On December 9, 2023, the Biden administration bypassed Congress<sup>xvii</sup> and approved a sale to Israel of 13,981 120mm tank cartridges.<sup>xviii</sup> On December 29, 2023, the State Department approved a sale to Israel of 4,792 155mm artillery ammunition,<sup>xix</sup> with the Biden administration bypassing Congress a second time for equipment including fuses, charges, and primers needed to fire the 155mm shells.<sup>xx</sup>

## **Misuse of artillery in the occupied Gaza Strip and Lebanon**

### ***1. October 9-11, 2023 - 155mm White Phosphorous artillery: northern occupied Gaza Strip***

Amnesty International<sup>xxi</sup> and Human Rights Watch<sup>xxii</sup> have gathered compelling evidence documenting the use of white phosphorus artillery shells by the Israeli army in densely populated civilian areas in Gaza. On October 9, 2023, the Israeli military positioned M109 155mm Howitzers and 155mm white phosphorus artillery shells about one kilometer away from the Israel/Gaza border fence.<sup>xxiii</sup> Videos and photos verified by Amnesty International’s Crisis Evidence Lab showed M825 and M825A1 artillery shells, which are also labelled D528, the U.S. Department of Defense identification code for white phosphorus-based rounds.<sup>xxiv</sup> On October 11, 2023, Amnesty verified that an attack took place on Gaza harbor and nearby hotels as well as in the district of Zeitoun, near Aljondy Almajhool Park, where white phosphorus ammunition was being used with what seemed to be high standard explosive artillery shells.<sup>xxv</sup> *The Arkansas Times* confirmed that the shells had been manufactured at the Pine Bluff Arsenal in Arkansas.<sup>xxvi</sup> Human Rights Watch found that the Israeli military’s use of white phosphorus in the densely populated Gaza Strip magnifies the risk to civilians and violates the international humanitarian law prohibition on putting civilians at unnecessary risk.<sup>xxvii</sup>

### ***2. October 10-16, 2023 - 155mm White Phosphorous artillery: Dhayra, Al-Mari, and Aita al-Chaab, Lebanon***

Amnesty International documented the use of white phosphorus in southern Lebanon by Israeli forces in four separate incidents, between October 10 and 16, 2023. One attack, on the town of Dhayra on October 16, 2023, must be investigated as a war crime, because it was an indiscriminate attack that injured at least nine civilians and damaged civilian objects. The Lebanese Italian hospital treated nine people from Dhayra, Yarine, and Marwahin who were suffering from shortness of breath and coughing due to inhaling white phosphorus.<sup>xxviii</sup> Houses, cars, and land areas were burned in the attack, and remnants were left behind that reignited when exposed to air.<sup>xxix</sup> Amnesty’s investigators also gathered compelling evidence indicating the use of white phosphorus in three other incidents between 10 and 16 October, in the border towns al-Mari and Aita al-Chaab, by verifying videos and photos of these attacks.<sup>xxx</sup> *The Washington Post* located and identified remnants of three 155mm artillery rounds made by ammunition depots in Louisiana and Arkansas in 1989 and 1992.<sup>xxxi</sup> Human Rights Watch also identified the use of white phosphorus by Israeli forces in 17 municipalities throughout south Lebanon since October 2023, five in which white phosphorus munitions were unlawfully used in populated civilian areas.<sup>xxxii</sup> According to Lebanon’s Ministry of Public Health, at least 173 people have been injured since October 2023 due to prolonged exposure to white phosphorus as of May 28, 2024.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

### ***3. October 13, 2023 - 120mm tank rounds, near Alma al-Chaab, Lebanon***

On October 13, 2023, Israeli forces struck a group of seven journalists in a likely direct attack on civilians that must be investigated as a war crime.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The attack killed Issam Abdallah, a journalist with Reuters, and injured Thaier Al-Sudani, a Reuters photographer; Maher Nazeh, a Reuters photojournalist; Christina Assi, a photographer for AFP; Dylan Collins, photojournalist for AFP; Carmen Joukhadar, a reporter for Al Jazeera, and Elie Brakhya, a photojournalist for Al Jazeera. An Israeli Apache helicopter, and likely an Israeli drone, hovered above them for more than 40 minutes before the first strike. Israeli forces had observation towers, ground elements, and air assets deployed to closely monitor the border. All of this should have provided sufficient information to Israeli forces that these were journalists and civilians and not a military target. Amnesty International<sup>xxxv</sup>, Human Rights Watch<sup>xxxvi</sup>, Agence France Presse<sup>xxxvii</sup>, and Reuters<sup>xxxviii</sup> determined that the first strike, which killed Issam Abdallah and severely injured AFP videographer and photographer Christina Assi, was a 120mm tank round fired by an Israeli Merkava tank from the hills between al-Nawaqir and Jordeikh in Israel. The 120mm tank round was most likely an M339 projectile, manufactured by Israeli IMI Systems.

### ***4. November 20, 2023 - 120mm tank rounds: Beit Lahia, occupied Gaza Strip***

On November 20, 2023, Israeli tanks were seen approaching the Indonesian hospital from the Sheikh Zayed area in the town of Beit Lahia, according to Al-Haq.<sup>xxxix</sup> That day an Israeli tank shelled the hospital killing at least 12 Palestinians in the facility.<sup>xl</sup> The hospital's director Dr. Marwan Al-Sultan said that the strike hit the post-operative care department.<sup>xli</sup> Al-Haq also found that fires broke out in the vicinity of the hospital to the east of the area due to heavy shelling by Israeli forces.<sup>xlii</sup> According to testimonies collected by Al-Haq, Israeli forces had completely cut off the hospital from its surroundings and put it under siege.<sup>xliii</sup>

### ***5. December 17, 2023 - 120mm tank rounds: Khan Younis, occupied Gaza Strip***

On December 17, 2023, an Israeli tank fired shell hit Naser Hospital in Khan Younis, according to Defense for Children International Palestine.<sup>xliv</sup> When an Israeli tank fired at the hospital, the tank shell, which did not explode, struck 12-year-old Dunia Abu Mohsen in the head killing her and injuring several others.<sup>xlv</sup> Dunia had been recovering in the hospital after losing her leg in an Israeli airstrike that killed her parents and siblings.<sup>xlvi</sup>

### ***6. January 8, 2024 - 120mm tank rounds: Khan Younis, occupied Gaza Strip***

On January 8, 2024, Israeli forces attacked a shelter run by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) where more than 100 MSF staff and their families were seeking safety.<sup>xlvii</sup> Malak Abu Saada, the five-year-old daughter of an MSF staff member died from injuries sustained from the attack.<sup>xlviii</sup> Three other people sustained minor injuries.<sup>xlix</sup> Prior to the attack, MSF had notified Israeli forces of the location of the shelter and MSF reported that no evacuation orders were issued before the strike.<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times*<sup>li</sup> analyzed photographs of the munition remnants and identified it as a 120mm Israeli tank shell shown with Hebrew markings, which was also independently verified by Human Rights Watch.<sup>lii</sup>

### **7. January 24, 2024 - 120mm tank rounds: Khan Younis, occupied Gaza Strip**

On January 24, 2024, an Israeli tank fired<sup>liii</sup> at the UNRWA Khan Younis Training Facility and struck a building housing 800 displaced people.<sup>liv</sup> According to UNRWA, at least 13 people were killed and 56 injured, 21 of them critically.<sup>lv</sup> At this location, 43,000 internally displaced people were registered in and within close vicinity of the training center, which is being used as a shelter. According to UNRWA, the organization shares the locations of all its facilities, including shelters, directly with Israeli authorities and received assurances that people inside would be safe.<sup>lvi</sup> UNRWA also reported that this was the third direct hit on the compound since October 2023.<sup>lvii</sup>

### **8. January 29, 2024 - 120mm tank rounds: Gaza City, occupied Gaza Strip**

On January 29, 2024, three Israeli tanks surrounded Hind Rajab, a six-year-old Palestinian girl, trapping her in her family's car for several hours after killing six of her family members in the town of Tel al-Hawa.<sup>lviii</sup> Military vehicles were consistent with Israeli Merkava tanks and were approximately 270 meters from Hind's car for several hours.<sup>lix</sup> Two humanitarian aid workers from the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) sent to rescue Hind were also killed by Israeli forces. Forensic Architecture identified that the ambulance driven by the PRCS workers was hit by Israeli tank ammunition, specifically American 120mm M830A1 High Explosive Anti-Tank Multi-Purpose-Tracer (HEAT-MP-T) tank rounds which were found near the vehicle and left an exit hole in the door of the ambulance. According to the American Friends Service Committee, the serial number on the exploded M830A1 round found inside the ambulance suggests that it was made in 1996 at Iowa Army Ammunition Plant by Mason & Hanger.<sup>lx</sup> The PRCS workers had been coordinating with the Israeli army to receive permission to rescue Hind prior to their killing.

### **9. February 20, 2024 - 120mm tank rounds: Al-Mawasi, occupied Gaza Strip**

On February 20, 2024, according to MSF, an Israeli tank fired on a house where MSF staff and their families during an offensive military operation in Al-Mawasi.<sup>lxi</sup> Bullets were also fired at the MSF building hitting the front gate, the building's exterior, and the interior of the ground floor. The attack killed two MSF staff family members, specifically the daughter-in-law and wife of an MSF staff member, and injured 6 other people, five of whom were women and children.<sup>lxii</sup> MSF reported that the house was clearly marked as an MSF building and that Israeli forces had been informed of the precise location of the shelter.<sup>lxiii</sup>

### **10. May 28, 2024 - 120mm tank rounds: Al-Mawasi, occupied Gaza Strip**

On May 28, 2024, the Israeli military launched at least three tank shells at a location in the al-Mawasi area of Rafah – designated for months by the Israeli military as Gaza's "humanitarian zone" – which killed 23 people and injured many more.<sup>lxiv</sup> Amnesty International's weapons experts analyzed photos of fragments of the weapon used and identified the ordnance as 120mm tank rounds. Satellite imagery indicates there were Israeli military positions within 120mm cannon range on the morning of the attack.<sup>lxv</sup> Amnesty International's research found that the apparent targets of the attack were one Hamas and one Islamic Jihad fighter. This strike, which failed to distinguish between civilians and military objectives by using unguided munitions in an area full

of civilians sheltering in tents, likely was indiscriminate and should be investigated as a war crime.<sup>lxvi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Army Technology, “Merkava 4 Israel Defense Forces Main Battle Tank,” July 10, 2020, at: <https://www.army-technology.com/projects/merkava4/?cf-view>.

<sup>ii</sup> The Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research, *Investigation of the El-Chaab incident regarding Reuters*, March 7, 2024, p. 47, at: <https://www.tno.nl/en/newsroom/2024/03/investigation-el-chaab-incident/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Military.com, “.50 Caliber Round,” at: <https://www.military.com/equipment/50-caliber-round>.

<sup>iv</sup> General Dynamics Ordnance and Tactical Systems, “M2AI .50 Caliber (12.7mm) Heavy Machine Gun,” at: <https://www.gd-ots.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/M2AI-50CAL-Heavy-Machine-Gun.pdf>.

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<sup>ix</sup> The Defense Post, “Israel Fields ‘World’s First Fully Automatic’ 155mm Howitzer,” June 10, 2024, at: <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2024/06/10/israel-fully-automatic-howitzer/>.

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<sup>xi</sup> Amnesty International, “Black Friday” Carnage in Rafah during 2014 Israel/Gaza Conflict, July 29, 2015, at: <https://blackfriday.amnesty.org/>.

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<sup>xiii</sup> See Amnesty International, *Fueling Conflict: Foreign Arms Supplies to Israel/Gaza*, February 2009, at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/mde150122009en.pdf> and Oxfam, *Artillery Shells Transfer: Oxfam Policy Brief*, October 2023, at: [https://webassets.oxfamamerica.org/media/documents/Artillery\\_Shells\\_Transfer\\_Policy\\_BriefingNote\\_1.pdf](https://webassets.oxfamamerica.org/media/documents/Artillery_Shells_Transfer_Policy_BriefingNote_1.pdf) and

Human Rights Watch, *Rain of Fire: Israel’s Unlawful Use of White Phosphorus in Gaza*, March 25, 2009, at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/03/25/rain-fire/israels-unlawful-use-white-phosphorus-gaza>.

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<sup>xvii</sup> Politico, “State Department OKs sale of tank ammunition to Israel in deal that bypasses Congress,” December 9, 2024, at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/12/09/state-department-tank-ammunition-israel-00130960>.

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