

U.K. Ministry of Defense Accidentally Reveals British Reaper Drones Firing Thermobaric Missiles into Syria

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The Ministry of Defence has revealed for the first time – seemingly accidentally – that British drones are firing thermobaric weapons in Syria. The disclosure comes in an [Freedom of Information \(FoI\) response to Drone Wars](#) detailing the use of Reaper drones over the previous three months.

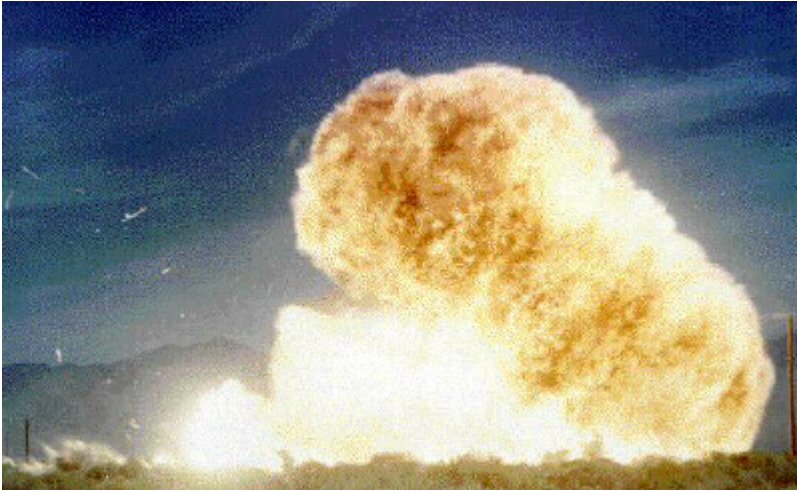
In the response, officials give a breakdown of the type of Hellfire missiles fired, stating that 19 AGM-114N4 and 44 AGM-114R2 had been used. The ‘N’ version of the missile uses a Metal Augmented Charge (MAC) warhead that contains a thermobaric explosive fill using aluminium with the explosive mixture. When the warhead detonates, the aluminium mixture is dispersed and rapidly burns. The sustained high pressure explosion is extremely damaging, creating a powerful shock wave and vacuum. Anyone in the vicinity is likely to die from internal organ damage.

Thermobaric weapons, sometimes called ‘vacuum’ weapons have been condemned by human rights groups and, as [the Times reported in 2008](#) ,

“the weapons are so controversial that MoD weapons and legal experts spent 18 months debating whether British troops could use them without breaking international law.”

The ‘debate’ came to an end when a ‘Yes Minister’ solution was offered – they “redefined” the weapon as an ‘enhanced blast missile’.





Test of thermobaric missile warhead

In 2010, the MoD specifically [refused to answer questions in the House of Commons](#) by then Oxford East MP Andrew Smith on whether British drones were firing the thermobaric version of the Hellfire missile. Thanks to this diligent answer from an MoD official we now know they are.

However, the answer raises new questions. Given the extremely harmful nature of the weapon why are so many – roughly a quarter of the weapons fired from British drones in the first three months of the year – being used? Has the use of this weapon been at the same level since 2014? Or are they being used more frequently now?

The revelation comes alongside news that UK drone strikes have hugely intensified in Syria since January. In the first three months of 2018, UK drones fired as many weapons in Syria (92) as they have over the previous 18 months. And, despite the MoD regularly insisting that its Reaper drones are primarily used for surveillance and intelligence gathering, UK Reaper drones have now fired more weapons in Syria than the UK's dedicated bomber, the Tornado.

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