

Andrew Eiva Confronts General Doron Almog, Commander of Israel's Southern Command at JINSA Symposium

Last night (Jan 6) I attended a presentation by General Doron Almog, Commander of Israel's Southern Command here in Washington, D.C., hosted by JINSA (Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs), considered a hard-line pro-Israel think tank:

Although about a hundred people paid \$30 each to attend the briefing in Root auditorium (not a single yarmulke among them), I was the only one who sat in the front row and within one meter of General Almog, whose main theme was the promotion of the Yesha wall project based on his leadership in implementing the Gaza wall:

I put a two-part question to him on the training and armor vehicles of the PA forces. I will try to quote our discussion as closely as possible. The quotes are in *italics*, while my subsequent thoughts and analysis are regular type in parentheses. Quotes that were stressed by Almog or myself are in **bold and underlined**.

Q: My name is Andrew Eiva and I live here in Washington. I was a Green Beret at the time when you were in the raid on Entebbe and I want to convey to you my professional respect for what you and your comrades did there. (Almog nodded in a friendly way.)

My two part question deals with PA training and armored vehicles:

First, the training. According to my sources, **battalion level** PA military training was **confirmed** to be taking place in Gaza, with one battalion per month from January to July of 2000. The training included preparation for attacks on Yishuvim. I would like to hear from you if such battalion level attack training has continued since you took command in Gaza (He took command about Sept 2001 I think).

The second question - armored vehicles: The PA forces reportedly have 42 BRDM armor vehicles and 50 BTR-152 armored vehicles, **a total of ninety armor vehicles.** Can you say how many of them are in Gaza and how many are in Judea and Samaria?

A. General Almog: (Almog paused five to ten seconds, then slowly and tensely) Who was your source? (!!!!!)

Q AE: Lieutenant Colonel Gal Luft, formerly of the IDF, concerning the battalion level training by the National Security Force in Gaza, which took place in **your area.**

A. Gen. A.: (Another 5 second or so pause) I am aware of training, but I am unaware it is conducted at battalion level. Company level, platoon level and individual training takes place, but not battalion level **attack** training.

(AE comment - He seems to say? imply? admit? that company and platoon level attack training takes place, but not battalion. As a former infantry battalion training officer in the US Army myself, most unit readiness training occurs in the way Almog describes. The goal is to produce a combat-ready battalion at the end of such a month-long training cycle. **A steady one-month dose of training was highly rare when**

I served in the US peacetime army in the seventies, and **I knew of one month of steady training to take place only if combat was expected.** Such combat readiness has a limited shelf life of two to six months, depending on variables such as morale, turnover, professionalism of officers and NCO's, and refresher training. Because of the difficulty of maintaining sufficient units trained for a first strike, reports of training are crucial for determining PA capability to conduct an overnight eviction operation against numerous Yishuvim.)

(Almog continues:) I am also unaware it is directed at *yishuvim*. I would like to also say the PA forces in Gaza are primarily organized at brigade, not battalion level, with three brigades in Gaza, one in the North, one in the South and one along the Fence.

(AE comment - The “brigade level” report by Gen. Almog slightly corroborates the report we got from an Israeli intelligence source near Shechem, describing preparations and organization for three PA brigade level forces targeted against three Yishuvim around Shechem. Yeshans also managed to uncover a secret Arab commando battalion whose existence the IDF's Colonel Shaked grudgingly seemed to concede when cornered in public by a Yeshan from Itamar.)

(Almog continues:) However, I have concern about **terrorist** application of this training. On December 31st (year indistinct), the first mortar attack took place on a settlement, on Netzarim. We later tracked down the PA Lieutenant Colonel who carried it out.

(AE comment - Since Lieutenant Colonels normally command battalions of hundreds of men, Almog may be playing down the PA threat by pointing out that in the case of the PA, lieutenant colonels are wasting their time on smalltime mortar attacks.)

(Almog continues:) Arafat has incorporated Hamas units into the PA forces (AE comment - I assume he means adding Hamas gunslingers to PA payroll), seeing it as a way to keep them out of trouble. Now about your question about the BTR-152's:

(AE comment - Note how he slyly ducks any mention of the 42 BRDM vehicles, which are hard to deny because they are written down in black and white as permitted to the PA by the Oslo accords.)

(Almog continues:) We destroyed all eleven of them in an airstrike. (Eiva comment: “all eleven?” - Where are the other 39 BTR-152's reported by British intelligence sources?)

(Another audience member interrupts:) What are BTR-152's?

(Almog answers interruption:) BTR-152's are armored personnel carriers, **old** armored personnel carriers (Almog's wry smile while emphasizing “old” garners several audience snickers from the JINSA staff in the back of the room.) It is possible several of them may have been repaired and hidden, and perhaps there are several more hidden that we don't know about, but they don't really constitute a threat.

My overall thoughts concerning Almog's responses concerning PA training and PA armor:

First the training:

Almog's response tends to confirm that training continues in Gaza at least at company level. It is interesting to note that in 1998 and 1999, this training was often taking place at night around at least a dozen Yishuvim in Judea and Samaria. When Yeshans complained about night after night of PA shooting and night fire to IDF officers, the IDF officers claimed these were Arab wedding celebrations. Sones even got a written claim from the Prime Minister's Office in 1998 that these Arab training exercises were actually "Arab weddings." In the face of these bizarre IDF claims, Sones would say to other puzzled Yeshans, "Who are you going to believe, the IDF or your own eyes and ears?"

Then, Mordechai Sones completed and published his First Strike report in June of 1999, exposing the Arab preparations and the apparent bizarre coverup by several IDF Colonels and spokesmen. Thousands of copies were distributed throughout Yesha and various pro-Israel web sites posted it.

The "wedding celebrations" subsequently went silent, an interesting and dramatic Palestinian readjustment of nuptial procedures.

What Sones and I did not realize until several weeks ago was that battalion level training to attack Yishuvim had apparently not ended but had shifted to Gaza, starting in January of 2000, and, based on Almog's response, is probably continuing today. Almog's claim that the training was not against Yishuvim was necessary for him, because an admission on his part would have undermined the long and secret preparations involving a small network of between 20 and 50 senior policy officials and IDF officers concerning the Yesha eviction project.

Second, the Armored Vehicles:

Almog's concession of 11 BTR-152's and total avoidance of BRDM'S contradicts previous official IDF admissions when cornered (they will avoid the question unless cornered). For example, when *Maariv* cornered the IDF spokesman concerning the reports of BTR-152's and BRDM's in December of 1998, the IDF spokesman totally avoided any mention of BTR-152's, admitting only the 42 BRDM's authorized by Oslo. The IDF never gets its story straight on this.

In responding to the question about armored vehicles, Almog said "they are not a threat." Of course they are not a threat to the IDF, being a collection of old-fashioned Soviet armored personnel carriers.

But the armor vehicles are the key element for swiftly neutralizing Yishuvim defenses, before any armed Yeshans have time to get out of bed and take their rifles and deploy. The armored vehicles provide a swift, surgical way to burst through specially designed *yishuv* gates which will buckle instantaneously under the impact of an armored vehicle and speed past the IDF gate guard who will only have an M-16 rifle which will barely scratch the paint of a BTR-152 or BRDM.

It is possible the Yishuvim gates were standardized for this purpose in advance at the same time when this secret eviction plan was adopted sometime before Oslo.