



The Army Banks On Its Tanks

by Arieh O'Sullivan

(Reprinted with permission from *The Jerusalem Post*)

JERUSALEM (August 15) - When he was chief of General Staff, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak said a major problem in the territories was not how to use tanks, but how to avoid using them. The image of Palestinians destroying a 60-ton main battle tank would wreak havoc on the IDF's reputation of invincibility and serve as a further blow to deterrence.

But tanks have slowly been introduced into the 10-month conflict in the territories, and the IDF believes they have been very effective.

Yesterday's assault on Jenin proved the IDF faces no real barriers when dealing with the Palestinians. It moved into the town center with impunity, some tanks coming under light-arms fire which bounced harmlessly off their armor. Soldiers remained inside with their hatches shut and suffered no casualties.

The main impact of a tank in the territories is deterrence. The main effectiveness of a tank is its weapons systems — most importantly, its night vision. Its thermal cameras can pick up targets over a kilometer away and quickly relay the information to engaging forces. Many Palestinian snipers and armed squads have been located and dealt with this way.

"Today, most of the successes in the territories are due to the tanks there," said a senior tank officer.

Officers and soldiers alike say that the minute a tank appears on any scene, the shooting stops and the gunmen flee. "They are afraid," said a senior tank officer. "Not only

that, but when our soldiers see a tank they feel more assured."

The major threat to a tank is not from anti-armor rockets; the Palestinians are not believed to have any that could cause serious damage. A tank's vulnerability is in the possibility that hostiles will clamber onto it and overcome its crew. For this reason, the IDF has a strict doctrine of enforcing a "dead zone" around its tanks, allowing no one to approach.

"Remember that photograph of the young Palestinian standing in front of a tank and throwing a stone at it?" said a senior officer responsible for developing the doctrine for using tanks in the territories. "Well, that won't be allowed anymore."

"There are red lines for every tank position which no one passes. No one will get to a tank. That is the rule," said another officer.

In principle, a tank marks its dead zone with machine-gun fire. In practice, this has yet to be done.

In fact, tanks may only open fire with their cannon upon receiving authorization from the brigade commander. They must verify three things: the source of enemy fire; that no civilians are endangered; and that the cannon fire will be effective. When tanks do open fire, their rounds are more lethal than those of attack helicopters.

Senior tank officers denied that the increasing urbanization of the "battlefield" seriously hampers the use of armor.

"Sure, we are like a bull in a china shop. But that is not going to stop us from being there," said one officer.