Principal Lessons of the Major Home Front Exercise:
Turning Point (2) for the Civilian Front?

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On April 6-10, 2008, Israel conducted a national exercise to examine the home front's preparedness for war. The exercise, "Turning Point 2,"[1] was defined as "the largest of its kind" ever held in Israel and was to be based on the main lessons learned from the deficiencies of the Second Lebanon War[2] as far as the civilian front is concerned.[3] The most important of these lessons was the need to establish a National Emergency Authority (NEA[4]) as the body entrusted with integrating and coordinating the activities of the many entities assigned to manage challenges faced by the civilian front during an enemy attack (as well as other major disasters, such as earthquakes or incidents that incur heavy casualties).

The threat scenario that was drilled as part of Turning Point 2 was based on a military confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians (from the Gaza Strip), Hizbollah (from Lebanon), and Syria. The Iranian threat was not directly included. The attack scenario – based on recognized current inventories – depicted enemy rockets and missiles fired simultaneously at most parts of the country, including Syrian use of chemical warheads. Attacks on civilian targets were characterized as continuous and massive, and the number of casualties as high.[5]

The exercise was planned and run by the National Emergency Authority, which was also the main object to be examined.[6] It involved two major parts. The first part, which was conducted at the staff level, began before the exercise was actually underway with several rounds of discussions, assessments, and decisions made by the different governmental and military agencies, led mainly by the Ministry of Defense. It envisioned five days of fighting and sustained attacks on various targets on the civilian front. This part culminated with a Cabinet session – the first time that a Cabinet session was held as part of such an exercise – in order to take decisions regarding management of the war on the home front. The second part included a series of events drilled on the ground at various sites. Home Front Command forces and other organs entrusted with handling multi-casualty events, including the national police, firefighters, and Magen David Adom (Israeli Red Cross), participated.

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The main innovation of this exercise was the introduction of the NEA as the leading authorized coordinator responsible for the home front, both for the decision makers in the government and the Ministry of Defense on the one hand, and the operative organs on the ground on the other. The purpose of the exercise was to draw the principal conclusions that would enable the consolidation of the new authority, including its legislative formalization within the framework of the Home Front Law (which the deputy minister of defense, in charge of the civilian front at the Ministry, anticipates within three years). All other institutions and organizations involved with home front affairs responded as per familiar accepted practices.

The exercise was accompanied by extensive media coverage, due to efforts of the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Defense, which tried to paint a picture of major progress on the politically sensitive issue of the home front. At the same time, the external resonance surrounding the exercise was due to the particular security circumstances of the period.[7] In any case, the impression was that the media coverage went well beyond what was appropriate for an exercise of this sort. This led to criticism of the media that it was helping create an exaggerated picture of the civilian front's readiness, which at the same time was liable to foster a sense of unnecessary anxiety in the public.

In assessing the objectives, scope, and media coverage of Turning Point 2, this article deals with two central questions. First, to what extent did the exercise succeed in anticipating problems and tightening the weak links in the civilian front's systems? Second, how significant and effective is the improvement in the civilian front's preparedness in light of the threats it is supposed to tackle?

The Achievements

Any exercise based on a reasonable plan to test the preparedness of systems, particularly those vital to protecting the civilian front in Israel's current situation, is appropriate, important, and worthwhile. This is especially true of Turning Point 2, which was meant to examine and improve a vital and complex civilian system. Periodic and continued drilling is essential, especially in light of the deficiencies revealed during the Second Lebanon War.[8]

Moreover, the exercise has special significance in raising the awareness – within the general public, but primarily within the government establishment – of the prominence of the home front and its special needs and challenges. It seems that the Second Lebanon War did indeed spawn a wider understanding both among the public at large and among the decision makers about the vital nature of the home front as a component commensurate in importance with the military front. Some have previously pointed to civilian front defense as a critical factor requiring prominent reference in Israel's national security doctrine (joining the existing triad of deterrence, early warning, and decision),[9] to embed the organizational and infrastructure preparedness necessary for civil defense in light of the growing threats.

Although the exercise reflected the understanding among decision makers of the critical nature of the subject, including its political repercussions, this awareness has yet to be translated into more concrete actions concerning the enhancement of the actual capabilities of the civilian defense system. The public debate in Israel over the issue of the right ratio of investment in the military front versus the investment in the civilian front is still in its early stages. However, there seems

to be a growing understanding of the need to divert national resources from the longstanding clear preference for military-offensive capabilities over the civilian-defensive systems. If the last exercise contributed to this end, then the investment in it was worthwhile.

Not less politically significant was the convening of a Cabinet meeting as part of the exercise. For many years there were those who claimed that strategic IDF exercises are flawed, as the larger span of strategic considerations was not "played out" by the government or its authorized representatives. From time to time, the IDF itself appointed a senior retired political figure to play the role of the prime minister in such exercises. The fact that this time the government held a special Cabinet meeting as part of the exercise is further proof of the understanding of the political leadership in Jerusalem that the issue of the home front is sensitive enough to deserve the highest state involvement with the questions and dilemmas on the agenda. Less important is what was actually discussed and what decisions were taken as part of the Cabinet meeting. Even if the move reflects primarily a cynical political maneuver,[10] it has inherent value, as long as it does not remain a one-time show but rather becomes part of future routine.[11]

The NEA: Can it do the Job?

The National Emergency Authority is still in its early stages.[12] The Authority, established as a central lesson of the Second Lebanon War, is supposed to address the absence, noted repeatedly during past security crises, of a senior body to coordinate and direct activities of all the many institutions trying to meet the challenges posed by emergencies and mass disasters. It is difficult to evaluate the strength of an organization in its infancy, one that is still trying to find its way within Israel's complex bureaucratic morass. What can be said about the Authority at this point is that its very existence represents a positive step in regulating the relationships between the multiple governmental, municipal, and NGO organs that operate on the scene in case of emergencies on the civilian front.

Turning Point 2 does not provide an unequivocal answer as to the extent that the NEA's organizational features and scope of responsibilities do in fact meet the challenge. From the outset it was not clear that placing the NEA – a body whose necessity is questioned by no one – within the Ministry of Defense was the optimal structural model. Some argued that especially in wartime, the Ministry would be focused on managing the military front and the IDF's operations and would not be able to command the attention necessary for the home front, with the complexity of challenges involved in managing a population in crisis.[13] The present exercise did not give a convincing answer to this question, in part because it did not include activating the army on the military external front simultaneously with the civilian systems. Reports by the NEA itself attest to "excellent" coordination between the various bodies before and during the exercise.[14] However, it is questionable whether the exercise could simulate the chaotic situation on the home front in the event of a major war. Even if the various organs that operate on the national level through the coordination of the NEA indeed came to a complete understanding and unity of action, this by no means ensures the tactical collaboration necessary on the ground in the absence of a clear and authorized commanding position that leads, coordinates, and controls all the operative elements in a given emergency.

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Overall, the exercise demonstrated some important achievements in terms of promoting the preparedness of the civilian front. However, there is still a long road to turning these achievements into solid, proven assets.

Unsolved Challenges

While the exercise was apparently successful in promoting some important issues at the government level and perhaps also with regard to some issues within the national decision making system, its contribution to improving the tactical deployment systems that actually grapple with the challenges on the ground is smaller. In the vital sphere of tactical deployment, cooperation, and control, there was little innovation in this exercise. The tools deployed in the past were also deployed in the current exercise, without giving a novel and innovative response to the most acute problem revealed by the events of the past and in particular by the Second Lebanon War: the issue of control and management of emergency scenes on the ground.

As important as the proper management of the civilian home front might be on the national strategic level, it would not by itself be sufficient and will not provide the adequate response for the actual complex challenges that a targeted population might encounter on the ground. This is analogous to proper management of the military front at the national and General Staff levels without adequate management of the campaign on the battleground. Just as the IDF prepares itself for future wars from the national strategic level to the tactical level, the same must apply to the civilian front. There is no real alternative to the establishment of a joint decentralized system that is responsible for the management of disasters in the field. Since at stake are civilians in acute stress and demoralization, coupled with scenarios of possible collapse of essential infrastructure systems, the problem of control seems even more complex and sensitive. The fog of war and the difficulty of supplying adequate responses in real time to an attacked civilian population are liable to create challenges of major proportions that culminate in one major issue: who will lead this campaign?

Turning Point 2 did not supply a sufficient answer to this basic question. The establishment of the NEA in and of itself does not solve the critical problem of control and management of severe, simultaneous, and continuous emergency events in separate locales. It is not designed for it, and it is doubtful that the concept behind the establishment of the Authority was to see it in such a capacity. Here lies the primary stumbling block: those who shaped the model for the NEA may have considered the super structure. The issue of viable solutions to the decentralized systems on the ground is still far from institutionalized. Without a legal and formalized determination of the system responsible for crisis management at the ground tactical level, the entire structure is liable to

collapse under pressure. The NEA or any other official state body in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv will not be able to respond to what is happening simultaneously in different places around the country. There is no alternative other than to decentralize the disaster management system. The only body capable of handling acute challenges of warfare against civilians on the home front is the one that knows (even if with limitations) how to run the population centers in routine times, i.e., the local authority.

In fact, there are already more than a few local authorities in Israel that have made significant progress in preparing for emergencies. Numerous mayors (who by law also serve as the head of the local Emergency Economy system) have been active for years to establish the necessary connections between the municipal organs and the other bodies responsible for responding to emergencies, such as the Home Front Command field units,[15] the police, and others. Other local authorities are less prepared for the challenge, including many charged with the welfare of people of a low socio-economic level. Indeed, there is an urgent need to encourage those communities and to assist them with guidance and the necessary budgets. This is an appropriate and formidable task for the NEA.

Is the Civilian Front More Prepared Than Before?

Turning Point 2 was presented as a significant step in preparing Israel's home front. Indeed, the exercise yielded some important outcomes that may potentially contribute to building up the country's capabilities to handle future acute challenges. However, as much as there are no immediate solutions with regard to the military front, there are no magic answers for the civilian front. What is needed is intensive, long term work of building up forces and capabilities. In the complex field of protecting the civilian front the effort is even more difficult. Unlike the military, which is hierarchical in nature and has a longstanding tradition of building, drilling, absorbing lessons, and drawing conclusions, the civilian institutions are not as sensitive to such processes; they may even strike them as alien.

Moreover, the present exercise, as important as it was, dealt with only limited aspects of the broader picture. The threats against the civilian front are many and varied; the required responses must be varied in kind. In order to protect the civilian front in an optimal manner, what is needed is the development of a multi-layered concept and application, which should include:[16] prevention or removal of the threat; strengthening of Israel's deterrence capabilities; guarantee of the IDF's offensive capability to minimize the threat to the population centers; construction of active and passive defense;[17] and finally, construction of integrated models to address adequately the needs of the population under stress. Only joint efforts at all of these layers will truly enhance the preparedness of the civilian front. In this context, Turning Point 2 can serve as an important springboard for improvement, but in itself the exercise cannot be viewed as a turning point. At most, it is one step on the long road that still lies ahead.[18]

Finally, every exercise, including this one, can generate many lessons concerning what was and was not achieved. This could become the NEA's finest hour, if it draws the right conclusions, without bias; if it manages to point to the missing links; and especially if it succeeds in positioning itself as the influential official agency committed to assimilating the lessons learned over the long haul.

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This would be its primary achievement and the most significant contribution of Turning Point 2.

Notes

1 The name, supposedly picked at random, was intended to signify yet another major step for the rectification of the home front defense system, which was found inept in the 2006 war.

2 The leading report on the preparedness of the home front and its functioning during the Second Lebanon War was published by the state comptroller in July 2007 (2 volumes: a summary and the full report). The Winograd Commission opted not to investigate the subject in depth, and issued only a few general comments.

3 The term "civilian front" properly connotes equal importance to developments on the military front, especially given the likely prominence of this sector in future conflicts.

4 RHL, or "Rahel" is Hebrew.

5 There were those who felt that the scenario chosen suffered from gross exaggeration, while others assessed the array of threats presented by the drill as severe but reasonably realistic. See Ron Ben Yishai, "Threat to the Home Front the Like of Which We Have Never Known," Ynet, April 6, 2008. Removing the Iranian threat from the scenario significantly reduced the extent of the future potential threat and its repercussions.

6 IDF Spokesman, April 6, 2008: "The National Emergency Authority, which was established last September after conclusive findings of the Second Lebanon War, will be in charge of directing the drill and controlling homefront security forces."

7 The overt Israeli concern about a violent Hizbollah response to the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, talk about tension on the Golan Heights, blunt condemnations by Israeli leaders of the Iranian nuclear effort, as well as the announcement – unconnected, in fact, to the exercise – that gas mask kits would again be distributed to the public.

8 Meir Elran, "The Civilian Front in the Second Lebanon War," in *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives*, eds. Shlomo Brom and Meir Elran (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007), pp. 103-19.

9 Dan Meridor, who headed the committee formulating Israel's security doctrine in 2006, made public reference to the major component of civil defense. See *Maariv*, August 31, 2006, and also *Haaretz*, October 3, 2006.

10 "The ministers were bombarded with scenarios, but it was difficult to impart a sense of true emergency," *Haaretz*, April 11, 2008..

11 Yoel Marcus, "The Government's Participation in the Exercise: Preemptive Butt-Covering for the Next Investigating Commission?" *Haaretz*, April 8, 2008; Jonathan Lerner, "And What About the Government's Preparedness?" *Haaretz*, April 14, 2008.

12 Meir Elran, "The National Emergency Authority: New Prospects or More of the Same?" *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 3 (2007): 16-20.

13 This was the recommendation of the National Security Council to the government before the decision to establish the NEA within the Ministry of Defense. See also the editorial in *Haaretz*, April 10, 2008.

14 "Everyone worked in a coordinated fashion," reported Brig. Gen. (ret.) Zeev Tzukram to *Yediot Ahronot*, April 11, 2008.

15 The liaison unit of the Home Front Command for the local authority was established for emergencies and meant to be activated in them, in order to foster cooperation in emergencies of different sorts.

16 See Meir Elran, "Turning Our Back on the Civilian Front," *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 2 (2007): 4-10.

17 The public debate about physical reinforcement of structures (homes, schools, etc.) is extensive. The most accepted policy is still the one determined by the prime minister, i.e., "We will not reinforce ourselves to death." On this point, see Meirav Arlosoroff in *The Marker*, "Does Anyone Remember the Home Front?" March 5, 2008, and "No One Is Telling the Home Front the Truth," March 6, 2008.

18 The Home Front commander on the website of the IDF spokesperson, April 9, 2008: "We want to run the drill every year, and the Home Front Command will definitely drill every year."