

The Civilian Front: Between Needs and Responses

Meir Elran

It is generally accepted that on the whole, the systems responsible for the civilian front functioned poorly during the Second Lebanon War. This article examines the extent to which the situation has improved since the failures of the summer of 2006. An analysis of the systems during Operation Cast Lead can answer this question at least partially and serve as a limited test of how much the gaps between the needs and responses were closed.

The problem with such a review is that there is no formal or accepted yardstick to analyze the degree of implementation of the lessons learned from past failures. In Israel, the field of civil defense still lacks a comprehensive approach that would reach necessary conclusions and take required actions. This is not to say that in the last two and a half years there have been no improvements in organizations that deal with the civilian front. On the contrary: the growing public awareness has created a new dimension of influence over the decision makers and functionaries, particularly at the Home Front Command, which was the target of extensive criticism following its poor performance in 2006. Still, the overall balance remains unsatisfactory, which is a reason for concern mainly because of the increased external threat to the civilian front.

This article identifies the threats to the civilian front and examines the investments made in building the responses to the growing risks.

Identifying the Threat

This article deals only with security threats to the civilian front. In principle, it would be proper to add risks posed by natural disasters, such as major earthquakes – which are rare in Israel – or large scale man-made disasters. Despite the differences in nature and ramifications of the various security and civilian risks, all deal with severe challenges to the civilian population and warrant similar planning, preparations, and responses in terms of mitigation, containment, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. Therefore, both in terms of efficiency, cost, and management considerations, it is important that the response to large scale disasters be dealt with in a unified form, whereby specific answers will be given to every dimension of threat against the civilian population. This concept of “all hazards” is accepted in most countries, including Israel, despite the limited reference here to non-security disasters.

The security threat against the civilian front falls into three major categories. Their common denominator is the process of creating the threat, which includes motivation, development of capabilities, planning, and launching explosives towards the target, usually a civilian population center or in rarer cases, sensitive infrastructure installations. Attacking population centers is usually intended to spark chaos and demoralization. In most instances, the main effect of the attack lies not in fatalities and direct damage, rather in the indirect blow to morale, the derailment of everyday routine, the creation of extended situations of uncertainty, frustration, and fear, and the weakening of the citizens’ trust in their political leadership. All of these are intended to undermine national resilience.

Threat of direct terrorism

Terror attacks, which peaked during the second intifada, have in recent years been greatly suppressed, largely because of continuous IDF and General Security Services activity in the West Bank since the spring of 2002. Together with the security fence, this activity has succeeded in creating a reasonable prevention measure. As long as the basic security components in the West Bank remain unchanged, large scale terrorism on the scale of 2000-2004 will presumably continue to represent a potential threat, but will materialize only at a fairly low level.

High trajectory rocket attacks

In recent years high trajectory rockets, from Hizbollah in Lebanon and from Hamas and other organizations in the Gaza Strip, have posed the major threat to Israel's civilian front. In the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead the capabilities of the adversaries were indeed severely damaged. However, because of Hizbollah's quick regrouping and the apparent similar pattern in the Gaza Strip, the high trajectory threat remains the most relevant challenge in the foreseeable future. An improvement in the quality of the rocket weapon systems is to be expected, particularly in terms of range and precision. As such, more population centers in Israel will be under growing threat from both the south and the north. Even though the high trajectory weapon is, statistically speaking, of limited lethal potential, its main effectiveness lies in creating an anxious civilian atmosphere, interrupting the routines of communities over time, and challenging the decisions makers who are then required to provide an answer to this severely elusive challenge.

Even though the threat is presently more likely to emerge from Lebanon or the Gaza Strip, one should also consider a similar threat from the West Bank, should the security situation there change. In such a scenario, the center of the country, with its large and dense communities and main infrastructures, would be vulnerable.

Long range ballistic missiles

The main challenge of long range ballistic missiles fired at Israel stems from Syria and Iran. Both countries have the military capabilities to attack the civilian front in the entire area of the State of Israel, with a relatively high degree of precision and with conventional payloads of up to 1000 kg. Syria's unconventional capabilities, particularly chemical, pose a singular threat against the civilian front. When planning for the future, particular consideration should be given to the Iranian nuclear threat, which requires planning appropriate responses well ahead of time, also at the defensive level, considering its unique risks to the civilian front.

Assessing the Threat Responses

Since the Second Lebanon War many steps were taken to provide a response to the threat against the civilian front. Operation Cast Lead may serve as a test case for assessing the progress, even though the actual challenge from Gaza was rather limited and revealed only a fraction of a full-fledged threat against the civilian front, in particular in a scenario of a multi-front confrontation. This survey relates to the following levels of response and preparedness: the conceptual level, the degree of actual national investments, and the issue of responsibility.

The conceptual level

The distinction between the “front,” the arena where the armed forces conduct the operations against the enemy, and the civilian “rear,” though still widely held in Israel, is clearly anachronistic. In contemporary and future scenarios, the civilian population is and will remain at the eye of the storm of any military confrontation, and represents a central target – at times the exclusive target – of the enemy’s attack. The question is to what extent Israel’s decision makers and the upper echelons of the IDF and the defense establishment have internalized the significance of the change in the enemy’s operational doctrine and its growing capabilities. The core of this transformation means that the IDF’s clear military advantage might be challenged and perhaps become irrelevant if the civilian front is not sufficiently prepared for a massive and continuous onslaught.

The answer to this question is not unequivocal. While the awareness of the special needs of civil defense grew in Israel following the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead, it was not manifested in satisfactory practical terms. It is doubtful that there is indeed a full awareness in the highest echelons that in future confrontations, what happens on the civilian front will have no less of an effect on the outcome of the campaign than what happens on the military front. This is by no means an academic question. It requires a high degree of balanced national investments in the various components of the civilian front’s operative preparations and capabilities, more than has been the case to date. It also requires the same measure of seriousness and professionalism that have characterized the preparedness of the security forces for the military front. This challenge is not trivial by

any means. The bureaucracy and political state of affairs of the civilian organs and agencies involved with the management of the civilian front adds to the complexity of realizing this vision, certainly in comparison with the much more cohesive military establishment. The picture emerging now is ambiguous. Quite a bit has been achieved and some of the improvements are in the right direction, but the overall trend in the government remains as traditional as ever: clear priority for investing in the military offensive basket over the defensive needs of the civilian front.

The investment level

Clearly there is not one single response to the range of threats posed to the civilian front. A balanced response would comprise multiple layers requiring investment in different fields. One of the main problems is that Israel does not have a single, central organ to be in charge of strategic planning, budgeting, and preparing and managing the civilian front. As long as this remains the case, each of the agencies involved will continue to deal with its own domain, with no central control and without a mechanism to determine a formal, long term set of priorities. Such a mechanism was – and still is – lacking, even after the establishment of the National Emergency Authority.

In practice, it is impossible to measure the extent of investments in the civilian front. This is especially true with regard to military expenditures, such as development of anti-rocket and anti-missile defense systems. In recent years there has been important progress in promoting active strategic defense, particularly with regard to the Iranian ballistic threat. There has also been some more hesitant progress in the development of active tactical defense systems against short range rockets (e.g., the Iron Dome system). The absence of such systems in the course of Operation Cast Lead was readily apparent. Greater efforts may now be expended in this area in order to reach rapid operational deployment of effective tactical defense systems.

Still less progress has been achieved in all matters of passive defense (bomb shelters, reinforcement of buildings, personal protection kits). This was true before Operation Cast Lead even with regard to the critical issue of preparing communities near the Gaza Strip and in the more distant centers,

where it became clear that the long range Grad rockets pose a real threat. The government's decision in December 2008 to budget the expansion of shelters at more than 600 million NIS was made after years of that region being targeted by rocket fire and after serious arguments between local leaders and the government ministries. It is still unclear whether this decision will be implemented in practice, and if so, to what extent and at what pace. The vital importance of sheltering devices, if only selective – e.g., in educational institutions – was well demonstrated during Operation Cast Lead. Full reinforcement of the schools within rocket range might have obviated the sweeping decision to suspend the entire educational system in the south and avoid its far reaching implications and impact on the daily routines in the entire region. The government's 2008 decision about the distribution of personal protection kits, based on the professional recommendation of the Home Front Command, has been delayed due to withholding of the required financing. The significance of these delays and the doubts about implementing decisions that have already been made is that preparedness in the area of passive defense is insufficient and does not meet the required needs.

On a more positive note, the Home Front Command applied a number of important lessons, particularly in terms of investing in qualitative and quantitative improvements in the warning and information systems for the civilian population and in terms of cooperation with the local authorities. An example is the system of liaison units with the local authorities, which overall proved their value in Operation Cast Lead. The growing awareness of the centrality of the local authorities as the leader in managing emergency situations is one of the important emphases called for by the National Emergency Authority. This represents an understanding that the better prepared local authorities are for emergencies, the better they will function when emergencies happen – as was the case during Operation Cast Lead. Even if much remains to be done in this area and there has still been no real breakthrough in terms of appropriate budgeting for the actual needs of local authorities, particularly the weaker ones, one may conclude that in this vital area there has indeed been important progress since 2006.

Despite this somewhat optimistic note, the total picture in terms of investment in direct psycho-social management of civilian populations

under threat remains problematic. Some local authorities have taken important steps in terms of preparedness and strengthening operational capabilities for emergencies, together with the Home Front Command; some local authorities have set up professional agencies for dealing with their citizens in times of crisis. However, there has not been sufficient effort on the part of the central government to budget on a state level the required tools for the local authorities, except in some towns very near the Gaza Strip border. The events of Operation Cast Lead exposed this gap. The result is that relatively strong local authorities are acting with their own means to promote their capabilities. Weaker local authorities – and they are the majority – are doing much less and are leaving their residents with relative deficiencies in important areas.

Thus the trend of assigning relatively low priority to the civilian front continues. Closer scrutiny shows that the investment in military-affiliated active systems is relatively high, particularly regarding active defense systems against strategic threats. In comparison, the government allots relatively low priority to means and systems that are civilian and passive in nature and are designed to defend the population, mitigate the effects of an attack, and offer a second response to immediate and other victims.

The responsibility level

In Israel there is no official agency or ministry that has full responsibility for preparing the civilian front for emergencies and for managing it during crises. In official reports dealing with the deficiencies of the system during the Second Lebanon War, the question of responsibility was noted as of key significance.

Aware of the problem, the Israeli government decided in 2007 to establish the National Emergency Authority (NEA, in Hebrew, “Rahef”). This was an important move, designed to set up a leading agency for managing the civilian front. However, the move did not provide an adequate response to the question of responsibility. The NEA – in its own view and in the view of others operating in this field – is not at the top of the pyramid, and is not considered a professional authority with political power capable of mobilizing budgets for building a comprehensive civil defense system. At present, the NEA serves at best as a staff agency striving to create a

comprehensive approach and to create a measure of coordination between the other agencies. It does represent the civilian front and its outstanding problems before the government, but it is doubtful whether given Israel's political and bureaucratic conditions, the NEA will have the necessary influence and power to make decisions and make a difference. It seems that as in the past, the Home Front Command will continue to serve as the focal point for the wide range of activities of the civilian front, both because of its legal status (determined by outdated legislation hailing back to 1951) and because of its organizational strength. The Home Front Command will apparently maintain its supremacy also as a result of its being part of the IDF, with all the public reputation and status. The tendency of some civilian agencies to distance themselves from assuming responsibility and their preference to act on the basis of military directives contribute to entrenching this state of affairs.

This picture was fairly consistent during Operation Cast Lead. While the NEA did stress the strengthening of local authorities, in practice most of the work was accomplished by the Home Front Command. During the fighting, the NEA tried to focus its efforts mainly on operating volunteer organizations. The result was that the Home Front Command remained the strongest and most influential agency affecting the management of the civilian front.

This pattern has several advantages. The events of Operation Cast Lead proved again that the IDF is capable of assembling in a relatively short amount of time the resources required to fulfill national missions, even if these are patently civilian. Whether it is appropriate that in times of national crisis military officials are the ones who decide on the daily routine of civilians is a different and open question altogether. For now, the law allows it and hence grants legitimacy to civilian agencies to avoid assuming responsibility for the security of the citizens and for the "emergency routine." However, the long term consequences remain problematic. In order to cope successfully with the challenges facing the civilian front, what is needed is a comprehensive civilian oriented response, led by the most senior civilian organ, which will lead the entire system, with all its components, including the Home Front Command and the Israel Police. It will have to be responsible for the adequate preparations for emergencies.

The leading body to manage crises on the ground should be the local authorities. The Home Front Command would join other agencies to work with the local authorities as an important professional resource providing its expertise and unique tools such as warning systems and rescue forces. The IDF and the police would also continue to provide available personnel in crises, according to the needs determined by local authorities.

Conclusions

The relatively successful management of the civilian front during Operation Cast Lead does not essentially alter the assessment that there has not yet been a sufficient transformation in the system responsible for this front. The challenge was limited, and therefore the preparations made since 2006, shortcomings notwithstanding, were sufficient.

What is required and has not yet been realized is the formulation of a comprehensive national systemic approach that would serve as the accepted basis for a legally mandated, central, and senior government agency. This agency would be in a political position to decide and enforce the set of responses to the challenges facing the civilian front. A combined balanced response would comprise various capabilities: deterrence, prevention, active and passive defense, and psycho-social care for the population under attack. Some of these components are already in various stages of development, such as strengthened warning systems, mechanisms for cooperation between the Home Front Command and local authorities, and improved civilian information dissemination systems. The problem is that these more advanced components do not coalesce in a combined effective system. As long as they remain organizationally unconnected, localized improvements do not provide a holistic response to the growing needs.

Israel does not exist in a vacuum. As proved by the campaigns of 2006 and 2009, the threats against the civilian front are increasing, and Israel does not appear to be able to overcome them solely through its military offensive might. The civilian front continues to be exposed to attacks by ever improving high trajectory weapons. Therefore, under current political and military circumstances, it is necessary to engage in a thorough process of constructing the entire range of capabilities for the civilian front. In this race, Israel is not in an auspicious position. The problem lies first and

foremost in the realm of its strategic approach to the question. In the test of investments, the progress Israel is making is too slow, particularly in three components: building an active-tactical defense system; strengthening the system of selective passive sheltering; and strengthening the mitigation and rehabilitation mechanisms for the civilians subject to a prolonged, casualty-ridden conflict.

Therefore, it is imperative to focus on renewed strategic planning for the civilian front. It must be manifested in an updated decision regarding the organization of the system; legislation reflecting the required structure of response and a centralized budgeting; and delegation of responsibilities to distinguish between the agencies responsible for preparedness and the ones responsible for managing crises and large scale disasters. Preparedness ought to be the purview of the state, which will formulate policies, set priorities, and allocate resources. Crisis management ought to be the purview of the local authorities assisted by the Home Front Command, the Israel Police, and the first response agencies (e.g., Israeli Red Cross, firefighters, and so on), as well as the volunteer organizations. Only such a combined response, side by side with the continuing efforts to build the IDF's deterrent, offensive, and defensive capabilities, may convince the public that the state is indeed tending to the public's personal welfare in realistic scenarios of future confrontations. Such a process is necessary not only in order to promote the level of preparedness of the civilian front; it is crucial also in order to build public trust in its leaders, which is a precondition for fostering national resilience.