



INSS Insight No. 233, December 12, 2010

In the Wake of the Carmel Fire:

Another Opportunity to Construct a Strategy of Preparedness

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The massive fire on Mount Carmel (December 2-5), the most severe in Israel's history, shed a disconcerting light on the status of the emergency services in Israel and the degree of preparedness of the civilian front for extreme crises. Although the poor situation of the fire services is presently the subject of public criticism, it is imperative to expand the scope of the discussion and use the unfortunate events as an opportunity to draw conclusions and formulate a holistic strategy that will significantly improve the capacity to face future challenges. Focusing exclusively on the restructuring of the fire services squanders the opportunity. Instead, the episode should prompt formulation of a comprehensive strategy that will cover the whole gamut of expected hazards, man made – such as war and protracted terrorism, including rocket attacks, and Hazmat risks – or natural disasters, primarily earthquakes, with potential enormous damages. Only an "all hazards" approach will provide a true chance for an appropriate deployment for the threats.

Such an endeavor is not simple. It must be crafted carefully with expert professionals, drawing on international experience and know-how. Long range strategic planning is essential, even if changes are implemented gradually, due to the expected bureaucratic obstacles. Such a national plan will hopefully provide an integrated rational and balanced model, suited for the specific needs of Israel, in which the war scenario looms high in priority.

A proposed new national strategy should encompass five major elements:

- a. *Responsibility, authority, and control:* The recent tragic events demonstrated once again that this important issue is yet unsolved. According to Israeli regulations, the national police assume responsibility as a first response to massive disasters, unless the scope necessitates the transfer of responsibility to the military, namely the Home Front Command. During the fire it was the police (and the Minister of Internal Security) that assumed the overall responsibility; circumstances were such that the Prime Minister was able to be at the scene and hence influence decision making. While this was a reasonable solution for the particular event, it may well

not apply in more extreme circumstances. Generally speaking, it is best if the organ responsible for the first response will also be responsible for preparation of all the systems requisite for the challenges. Hence, what is needed is an optimal organizational model that assigns the overall national responsibility to the PM (or a senior minister in the Prime Minister's Office), with responsibility for the preparedness of the local communities assigned to the mayors, who will also assume authority for orchestrating the first response efforts in a crisis situation.

- b. *Preparedness as a supreme issue*: As disasters result in casualties and damage, a principal goal is usually to mitigate the damages as much as possible. The proper way to achieve this goal is meticulous preparation. Shortcuts or improvisations do not provide viable alternatives. There is no substitute for real and balanced investments in preparing communities for expected calamities, both for the first response stage and also for the following stages of secondary response and recovery.
- c. *Construction of an integrated robust mechanism*: NEMA (National Emergency Management Authority) was established in 2007, in light of the lessons of the Second Lebanon War. It is still struggling to establish itself as the coordinating organ whose main role is to ensure smooth cooperation between the multiple emergency agencies. NEMA should be a robust central organization with authority over the operational agencies, and the organization that sets the policy and standards and is responsible for the overall preparedness process. It needs the legislative and practical means to fulfill its obligations. Collaboration in the theater of operations is a precondition for a successful handling of disasters, particularly in a scenario in which there are multiple extreme challenges in different locations, as expected in an earthquake or a military confrontation.
- d. *Focusing on the civilian aspects*: The dominant military-centric approach should be balanced and complemented by a perception of the threats from a civilian perspective, which casts the people, the community, and the civilian infrastructure in center stage. The IDF and the HFC are valuable national assets, but in a war situation the IDF might well be engaged in its primary missions and will not have the resources to supply the necessary assistance to the civilian front. This must be the responsibility of the local authority, which in advance must be equipped with the necessary means and tools to meet its responsibilities successfully, with the help of the other agencies and the HFC. Massive damages to the civil population necessitates social, psychological, and medical responses, all found primarily in the civil sector.
- e. *Societal resilience as a primary component*: Prevention and mitigation of disasters and provision of an appropriate first response are critical issues and merit a suitable investment of resources. At the same time, the long term damages and challenges of recovery are often more serious and overwhelming, and therefore, this element must be properly integrated when building the whole preparedness

system. Societal resilience is manifested in the capacity of the public to contain the consequences of a disaster, to react to the disaster in accordance with its magnitude, to adapt itself to the challenges, and to return to full and normative functionality as quickly as possible. An active, prepared, and involved community has the best potential to be a resilient community, as is a community with an influential inclusive leadership that supports and encourages social networks and voluntarism. It is possible and important to prepare the communities for emergency situations. The expenses are not prohibitive, and the returns are substantial. There are important starts in this direction in Israel (for example, the "Resilient Town" project). These should be given high priority and join other initiatives to promote societal resilience.

These five elements should also be grounded in legislation. There are currently efforts to legislate a Home Front law in the Knesset; this law should serve as a normative basis for construction of a vibrant system that will be able to confront the future expected challenges effectively.