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Chronic Lapses in the Preparedness of Local Governments for Emergencies

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On December 20, 2011, the State Comptroller issued a new report submitting his critique of the local governments, including his findings regarding the state of preparedness of the local governments for emergency situations (chapter 1, pp. 3-89). In essence, there is nothing very new in the current report, which covers the period ending March 2011. The Comptroller returns to issues and failures discussed repeatedly in the past, including in his own reports. Among the issues discussed are the deficiencies in public shelters, the lack of accurate scenarios for emergencies (the responsibility of the Home Front Command), the shortage of benchmarks for assessing preparedness of local governments (the responsibility of the National Emergency Management Authority – Hebrew acronym RAHEL), the lack of data and preparedness reviews (responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior), the insufficiency of evacuation procedures (responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior), the lack of implementation of lessons learned from exercises, and more. There is nothing new about these assertions.

The most important and severe remark in the Comptroller's current report relates to an issue that is a primary obstacle to building an appropriate system of preparedness suited to the management of disasters: "Almost five years after the end of the Second Lebanon War and more than three years after the government's decision to establish RAHEL to serve as the coordinating organ for the Minister of Defense, who bears overall responsibility for the home front in emergencies, the entire topic of sharing responsibility...to ensure that the local governments are adequately prepared for emergencies has not been settled." Pointedly, he added: "Moreover, there is cause for concern that among the bodies responsible for preparing local governments for emergencies – a task unparalleled in importance – some are seeking to shy away from that responsibility, which includes the allocation of significant financial and human resources. Given that time is short, the task is complex, and the failure and neglect are chronic, the decision makers must determine as soon as possible who is responsible for preparing the local governments for emergencies, and approve the requisite resources and authorities."

This seems to be an unprecedentedly harsh statement. No one doubts the importance of preparing the local governments for emergencies. Local governments are the basic building block in the preparedness process of the civilian front for a military conflict. If there is no detailed and fully agreed-upon formula for the preparedness of the local governments, then with which level of government could there be?

The truth is that more than five years after the crisis of the civilian front during the Second Lebanon War, there is no one formal organ in Israel that has the responsibility for preparing the civilian front and managing it in times of crisis. Unlike the military front, regulated both by law and practice and managed through a clear hierarchy, the civilian front – which by its nature is more complex and difficult to manage – has no such agreed setting. The number of entities – state, civilian, military, and voluntary – that operate in this field is large. Cooperation among them calls for improvement. Above all, there is not a single body that bears responsibility for planning, budgeting, exercising, supervising, and managing the various systems and agencies. Over the years there has been an effort – thus far futile – to create a Home Front Law that would define, clarify, and regulate the issues of authority and responsibility in this critical sphere.

It is no secret that Israel is a country of improvisation, and at times we can be proud of it. However, when it comes to the critical issue of managing the civilian front there is no place for improvisation. There is, by contrast, a real need for leadership and guidance, which have direct bearing on assuming institutional and personal responsibility.

In January 2011, the Israeli government decided to establish the Ministry of Home Front Defense. In theory, this ministry would assume responsibility and authority over all necessary measures to construct and regulate the defense of the civilian front. Some suggested that this ministry was established for purely political reasons. Yet, its very emergence represents an important opportunity to institute a radical change and a new constructive order. However, even the minister himself has often declared that “there is no Ministry of Home Front Defense, only a Minister of Home Front Defense.” In other words, nearly one year after the government decision, there has been no change in the picture concerning responsibility and authority. Why?

An answer to this question might be found in the defense establishment's backyard. The role and range of activities of the defense establishment with regard to the civilian front are overwhelming, even if not exclusive. In practice, various branches of the IDF assume the entire job of defending the civilian front from external threats, in deterrence, in the traditional offensive capacities, and also – recently with even greater involvement – in active defense. The Home Front Command has significant presence and prominence in the civilian front, especially in recent years when the Command has expanded its areas of

activity and influence with regard to predominantly civilian processes. The establishment of RAHEL in 2007 under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense, ostensibly as a coordinating and integrating body, did not generate the anticipated change. Some claim that it has even complicated the picture; there is also talk of dismantling it if and when the Ministry of Home Front Defense assumes a sufficient managerial and administrative base. The Ministry of Defense, the IDF, the Home Front Command, and the Ministry of Home Front Defense (and RAHEL) form the only constellation that can take command and institute an agreed-upon working arrangement for the civilian front. Together they have the necessary political clout and functional accessibility. The converse is also true: as long as these bodies do not agree among themselves and decline to take the reins and spearhead the required arrangement, it is doubtful that it will ever come about.

As the most senior figure within this political and bureaucratic constellation, the Minister of Defense would do well to lend his weight and political position toward regulation of the civilian front's responsibilities and authorities, first within the defense establishment and thereafter throughout the national and local systems. Without a program of this sort, chances for enhancing the preparedness and proper management of the civilian front will remain slim. The failure will be documented in future reports the State Comptroller, but even worse, it will be acutely manifested when the threat scenarios against the civilian front are realized.

