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The State Comptroller's Report on the Carmel Fire: Implications for the Preparedness of the Civilian Front

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As expected, the State Comptroller's report on the Carmel fire ("Report on the Carmel Fire of December 2010: Failures, Mistakes, and Conclusions, June 2012") sparked a fleeting local storm in the Israeli media and public. As over the past eighteen months, most of the uproar focused on the questions regarding the political echelon's responsibility for the disaster and the serious failures in the performance of the fire-fighting system.

As important as the issue is, this article's principal claim is that the main significance and the most important contribution of the State Comptroller's document – which he described as one of his most critical reports – is its exposure of the bitter truth about Israel's civilian home front and Israel's lack of sufficient preparedness for expected emergency scenarios. As such, the State Comptroller is harking back to many other grim reports he has issued in recent years that criticized time and again the inadequate state of preparedness to stand up to natural and man-made disasters. Indeed, the State Comptroller notes that "the fire on the Carmel is a manifestation of the dangers that Israel is liable to face in the future," and that Israel's "preparedness for putting out the fire can serve as an example of the state's preparedness for a mass disaster and a national emergency."

Appropriate preparedness for an emergency is based on four essential components:

1. Adequate operational preparedness capability of each of the many agencies associated with the civilian front, to respond to and mitigate the damage of a mass disaster. In this context, the Comptroller once again cites "serious shortcomings, failures, and blunders connected to the fire-fighting and rescue system, to the Israel Police . . . and to other bodies responsible for extinguishing and preventing wide scale fires, including local governments . . . and the security establishment." In the present report the criticism focuses on the fire-fighting system, which has been known as the weakest link (and which, though lately somewhat improved, is still far from the required standards). The reference to the local governments, a critical component in the response system,

repeats the sharp criticism of the Comptroller in his previous report of December 2011.

2. Cooperation among the first responders. This is a basic, mandatory component. There is no scenario in which one organ, no matter how robust, can cope with the challenges on its own. Collaboration and coordination are essential, and require prior preparation, planning, training, and investment of resources. Here again the State Comptroller notes the “serious shortcomings in the command and control, as well as the ability to coordinate and cooperate during such an event.” Specifically, he suggests that “the IDF and the Police still do not command satisfactory coordination for managing emergencies (even) during ordinary times.” This is a harsh message that requires immediate and long overdue correction in the realm of perception and doctrine, in the establishment of a common language, in a systemic inter-organizational deployment, in the conduct of joint assessments, and also in the incorporation of command, control and communication tools and joint operation centers. The report makes clear that Israel is not there yet.
3. A binding normative-legal basis for handling the civilian front in cases of emergency. Here again the Comptroller reiterates previous recommendations from his report on the Second Lebanon War that “the government must address the issue of the normative infrastructure for handling the home front in an emergency, so that it will be able to optimally implement its policy and decisions.” Since then, in spite of repeated efforts, the Home Front legislation – which is supposed to coordinate “all matters concerning the handling of the home front in times of emergency, to clarify the hierarchy of authority and areas of responsibility of each of the bodies in the home front, and to define the relationships between them” – has not been passed. This is a severe deficiency which must be corrected without delay.
4. A clear definition of responsibility and authority for the preparedness and operation of the civilian front. This issue has not been resolved either, which leaves a wide opening for friction, misunderstanding, and dispersed and uncoordinated activities by the operating agencies. Here too the State Comptroller repeats his recommendations that the government must construct “a central national body that will hold all the authority and responsibility... and coordinate all the necessary handling of the home front in...times of emergency.” The establishment of a National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA) in 2007 and of the Home Front Defense Ministry in 2011 has not fundamentally changed the practical and legal situation in which no one is in charge in this problematic and vital domain.

The Carmel fire, though exacting a heavy toll of forty-four lives, primarily from the bus incident, was a short and isolated episode. Presumably in the future Israel will experience

worse and much more prolonged and multifocal events that are likely to take higher tolls. As long as there is no fundamental transformation in the current approach, which prefers to highlight the progress (and indeed there has been some incremental progress in recent years), and as long as the government does not delve deeply into the matter, take binding and bold decisions, and ensure concrete actions in the four areas mentioned above, there will be no real change in the civilian front's state of readiness, in spite of increasing threats from abroad. Given the political-organizational reality in Israel, the Prime Minister must exercise his authority and take this important mission upon himself. It has been reported recently that the Prime Minister has started ongoing deliberations that produce practical decisions pertaining to the civilian home front. If this continues, it will signify a fresh start of a significant positive process that might alter the grim picture depicted by the State Comptroller.

