

An Assault on Urban Areas: The Revised Reference Scenario for the Home Front in Israel

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The principal security threat to Israel from its two main adversaries today – Hezbollah and Hamas – consists of high trajectory weaponry aimed at civilian targets. According to *The IDF Strategy* (2015), the IDF's new challenges include “an increase in the threat of fire on the home front (characterized by: capacity, accuracy, warhead size, survivability), and an attempt to pose a strategic threat to national vulnerable sites and the national economy.”¹ In the framework of the discussions between the security authorities and civilian agencies, a special effort has been made in recent years to define the reference scenario² for the home front, in order to create a common language that can characterize the security threats as a basis for appropriate civilian preparedness. This important and innovative measure culminated in the formulation of the reference scenario by the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), which was presented to the Ministerial Committee on National Security Affairs on June 15, 2016.³ Following approval, adapted versions of the reference scenario were distributed to the government ministries, local authorities, and other civilian agencies for the purpose of calibrating the actions aimed at promoting readiness for a security emergency.

The reference scenario deals with a long list of threats to the home front. Prominent among these is the scenario presenting the defense establishment's revised perception of “the assault.” This is portrayed as a robust attack by a large scale barrage of high trajectory explosives against

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selected targets in Israel, designed to cause unprecedented disruption to the civilian home front and the economy as a whole. It appears that the prevailing assessment in the security establishment is that Hezbollah and possibly also Hamas will strive to concentrate their efforts so as to transform the assault and its impact from that of “harassment,” as was the case in previous conflicts, to “severe disruption” to the home front in Israel.

This article will discuss the “assault” scenario,⁴ analyze its significance for the home front, assess the existing inadequacies in Israel’s preparedness to stand up to this revised scenario, and present recommendations for system-wide action.

The “Assault” Scenario

The composite scenario includes diverse security components – some of them not different from previous conflicts characterized by the launching of high trajectory weapons. The main innovation concerns new features of what is termed an “assault” that might take place simultaneously on the northern and southern fronts.

The “assault” scenario suggests, presumably on the basis of evidence concerning the enemy’s improved military capabilities, that Hezbollah might adopt a revised offensive strategy in the next conflict. As Hezbollah has significantly enhanced its rocket and missile buildup, which is believed to have increased tenfold over the past decade, it is presently assumed that the organization can be more aggressive in a future war, based also on its combat experience in the Syrian civil war and on its own lessons from the Israeli military buildup and experience in the recent rounds of conflict.

The main components of the scenario can be summed up as follows:

First, the next conflict on the home front could emerge from one theater, in either the south or north, or from both theaters simultaneously. It might break out unexpectedly, without warning or orderly preparations, and possibly continue for up to several weeks.

Second, the more severe attack will come from Hezbollah, which is expected to focus on the Israeli home front, perceived as the weakest and most sensitive link in the Israeli systemic chain. Hezbollah’s high trajectory enhanced capabilities enable it to widen the scope of targets from Israeli civilian population centers to essential targets, such as civilian installations (seaports and airports), critical infrastructure (such as power production facilities), and military assets, especially air force bases and concentrations of ground forces.

Third, Hezbollah's main offensive force will continue to consist of high trajectory weapons, which now number up to approximately 130,000 rockets and missiles – including several thousands of medium range and several hundred long range weapons.⁵ Also included are an unknown number of short range rockets with exceedingly heavy warheads, capable of causing severe damage.⁶ In addition, according to the testimony of the former Home Front commander, Major General Yoel Strick, Hezbollah has guided missiles with significant precision capability, enabling it to strike individual targets, amounting to 0.9 percent of the total number of explosives expected to hit Israel (in other words, many hundreds, and possibly thousands of precise missiles).⁷ To this impressive order of battle one should also add unmanned aerial attack vehicles (UAVs) with explosive payloads, shore-to-sea missiles, and offensive cyber warfare capabilities.

Fourth, this arsenal enables Hezbollah to attack Israeli targets simultaneously by two complementary modes. The first is the bombardment with short and medium range rockets with low statistical accuracy (these make up to 95 percent of Hezbollah's arsenal), mainly for harassment purposes. Hundreds of these missiles are likely to be launched continuously on each day of fighting. The second mode might take the shape of an "assault" – the focused launching of dense barrages aimed at a limited number of Israel urban population centers and civilian critical assets. This mode of attack is expected to consist of hundreds of rockets, launched in barrages, probably toward two or three urban areas, particularly in the north, with a possible preference for the densely populated Haifa Bay area, where critical infrastructure facilities are located. The "assault" is expected to take place early in the conflict, possibly as a surprise attack, designed to paralyze the targeted urban area, challenge the IDF's active defense systems, and cause numerous fatalities and wide property damage, so as to affect the public routine and morale. Heavy damage to critical infrastructure might seriously disrupt the emergency routine and the economy's ability to recover fast. Another round of "assault" may possibly occur in later stages of the conflict.

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Fifth, the expected "assault" is designed not only to cause serious demoralization and chaos in Israel and furnish "victory pictures," but

also to undermine the Israeli public capacity and willingness to stand up to the challenge. This in turn might impact negatively on the resolve of the decision makers concerning the political outcome of the conflict.

Sixth, at the same time, pinpointed short range ground attacks are considered possible against Jewish communities close to the Lebanese border, in order to expand the scope of the threat quantitatively and qualitatively, and enhance the expected “victory pictures.”

By and large, the new “assault” scenario adds likelihood and gravity to the expected military threat, based on Hezbollah’s existing and emerging capabilities on the one hand, and the apparent weaknesses of the home front in Israel on the other hand. The IDF has vastly improved its intelligence, offensive, and defensive capabilities to thwart the threat. Yet since the level of civilian readiness has lagged behind, future processes to further enhance preparedness are necessary to lessen the damages and their social and political consequences

The Significance of the “Assault” Scenario

The best way to analyze the revised scenario is in the context of Israel’s experience in four previous conflicts with Hezbollah and Hamas, all of which were based on the challenge of various types of high trajectory weapons. In principle, the new version of the scenario constitutes a significant addition to the kinetic threat the Israeli home front has experienced in the past, which can be summed up as follows:

- a. Despite its distinct military advantage, the IDF did not succeed in defeating its enemies and halting the threat of the high trajectory weapons to the home front.
- b. The IDF’s ground offensive maneuvers were limited in scope, and led to no substantial military achievements. Most Israeli military offensive activities were based on massive firepower, carried out principally by the air force.
- c. Both Hezbollah and Hamas succeeded in maintaining a rather stable level of high trajectory weapon launchings during the entire campaign, at an average rate of 120 statistical launchings per day. Less than one quarter of these was effective to any degree.
- d. When Israel’s active defense became operational, it proved to be a significant factor in limiting the threat and consequently the damage, hence reducing the sense of anxiety among Israelis and expanding the leadership’s capacity for political maneuvering.

- e. As the overall impact on the home front in terms of casualties and property damage has been quite low, the level of preparedness of the civilian response systems have been proven to be sufficient. At the same time, the level of anxiety and confusion among the Israeli public, as reflected mostly in the media, was greater than the actual damage. Still, large numbers of people abandoned their homes in the areas that came under heavy attack.
- f. The level of social resilience among the Israeli public, as reflected in bouncing back and recovery after the military campaigns, was high.⁸
- g. In general, the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge, despite the questions relating to their conduct, have contributed thus far to Israeli deterrence.

The general picture regarding these military rounds is mixed and not particularly encouraging, considering the balance of power between the IDF and its non-state enemies. Added to this picture is the double layer of the revised scenario: the major expansion in the quantitative, but also qualitative kinetic capability of Israel's enemies, and the "assault" scenario based on these extended capabilities. Against these significant developments stand the improvements in Israel's military capabilities, primarily those of the order of battle (limited in comparison with the needs) of the active defense system Iron Dome.

The IDF formalized and published its military response doctrine to the non-state threat in the form of *The IDF Strategy*, which focuses on the use of offensive massive ground forces and airborne extensive firepower,⁹ designed to achieve clear military successes in the shortest time possible. It is not known how the adversaries will interpret this publically attested offensive doctrine, or the repeated statements made by the military and the political leadership concerning Israel's determination to use its military power to achieve a clear victory in the next conflict.¹⁰ It is also not clear whether these declarations will indeed be fully carried out, which will naturally depend on the unknown circumstances of the next conflict. On the defensive side, the IDF holds that most of its assets will be harnessed first for necessary military operational continuity, then at the defense of the national critical infrastructure, and only in third place stands the mission of securing the population centers.¹¹ At any rate, the expected "assault" scenario could well represent a major challenge for the home front in the next conflict, as stated by senior functionaries who are responsible for constructing responses to these issues.¹²

Under these circumstances, how will the home front operate in the next conflict, according to the revised scenario? The general picture can be assessed through several prisms. First, most of the threats depicted in the new scenario have already materialized in the previous conflicts with Hezbollah (2006) and Hamas (2008-2014), but these are expected to widen significantly in the next round, possibly by up to tenfold. In other words, there will probably be many hundreds, up to about 1,000 launchings each day of fighting. Even if these attacks involve mostly statistical armaments, posing mainly “harassment,” they are liable to become a major “disruption.”

Second, the extent of the expected damage in targeted towns, in the framework of the “assault,” will be much graver than Israeli localities have experienced in the past. The number of civilian fatalities will be much higher (estimated at several hundred during the next war).¹³ The scope of evacuees is expected to be very high, even in comparison with the Second Lebanon War.¹⁴ Severe damage is liable to be caused to critical infrastructure, with significant grave ramifications for the civilian and possible military routine. Major disruptions in electrical supply, domestic and international transportation, communications, and health, welfare, and education services are expected, accompanied by substantial disturbances in the labor market.

Third, the ability to withstand the expected burden on the first response agencies – the Home Front Command, Israel Police, Magen David Adom, the fire fighters, hospitals, local authorities, and other parties, including non-governmental organizations – will likely be more limited. Previously, these agencies were called upon to respond to the damage mostly in a sequential format, hence the rescue, evacuation, and aid operators were able to move from one event and theater to another in time. In a future scenario of multiple simultaneous attacks, the challenge will be much graver. The forces will be insufficient to provide reliable services, and the IDF will have to allocate reserve forces, with inferior professional training.

Fourth, the public’s level of anxiety will probably be higher than in the past, which could adversely affect its behavior. The media, especially the digital social media, will contribute its less than supportive share, which will not help calm the public, which will need reliable information and guiding instructions. This is expected to become a major challenge in the effort to establish an “emergency routine” during disruptive circumstances.

The Level of Preparedness for the New Challenges

The new scenario establishes a very high threshold for the security threats to the home front. The fact that staff work has progressed and the new scenario has been formulated, presented to the cabinet, confirmed, and subsequently distributed among the official agencies in the government and in the local authorities has generated movement in the right direction. Priorities have been dictated for the allocation of means to the local authorities whose risk threshold is now classified as higher. On the less positive side, the heads of the local authorities who in the past did not pay serious attention to emergency preparation are not expected to alter their indifference and invest more in the needed preparedness. By and large, it appears that the new reference scenario has so far not led to a substantive change in home front readiness, which the head of NEMA recently characterized as “medium plus,” and as one that requires additional investments in various fields.¹⁵ As in the past, each government ministry involved in the matter is responding at its own pace and in accordance with its own concept of the importance of systematic investment in emergencies, in comparison with other urgent needs. The familiar pattern in Israeli bureaucracy persists, which tends not to allow for systemic and structured planning, while the political leadership is not giving emergency preparedness the necessary priority. Moreover, it was decided to disseminate the reference scenario – and particularly the section dealing with the “assault” – only to the governmental echelon and that of the mayors, but not to the public at large, in order to avoid panic while highlighting the enemy’s threats. Some of the mayors did distribute parts of the information to residents, but only on a selected basis, not sufficient for the purpose of raising public awareness. The information did reach the media, but the little that was communicated publicly did not make any substantial or lasting impact. The public remained indifferent, and therefore has not been active in preparing itself for the consequences. As a result, there has not been any real advance in readiness on the personal or family level. Memory of the previous conflicts faded, and along with it, some of the knowledge accumulated about what should be done in an emergency.

While the threat is not existential, another round of conflict, especially if it is prolonged, entails heavy casualties and extensive property damage, and has a serious negative impact on public morale, will constitute a severe strategic blow to Israel.

A prominent example highlighting the limited preparation on the home front for the “assault” scenario is the subject of mass evacuation of civilians from communities under rocket attack. As in the past, civilians can be expected to leave their homes on their own initiative and on a large scale during a conflict, and certainly in the areas attacked in the “assault.” The numbers will probably be much higher than those of the Second Lebanon War, estimated to be close to one third of the population in the north.

The lessons of Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014 have reshaped the thinking within the establishment on the crucial issue of mass evacuation during a protracted attack against civilian communities, and generated a change in the IDF approach. While in the past the prevailing trend was to oppose mass evacuation, or at least to not encourage or approve and budget it, senior voices in the IDF have recently legitimized¹⁶ evacuation of civilians from the area of conflict in communities close to the border. Accordingly, the defense establishment has agreed to prepare for such an eventuality. New plans have been devised to facilitate the evacuation of civilians from 93 small communities, and evacuation sites around Israel have been selected and prepared.¹⁷ Additional evacuation plans are in various stages of completion.¹⁸ The common denominator of these plans is threefold: first, they deal with a relatively small number of evacuees, and only in the border areas; second, implementation of the existing plans is contingent upon a political decision, which in the past was not taken, probably for reasons of traditional ethos and possibly budget constraints; third, there are no plans for mass evacuation of civilians from large urban centers at a distance from the border, which are liable to suffer serious damage in accordance with the new scenario of the “assault.” Mass evacuation without pre-established organization during a security emergency will pose a major challenge and will harm the public morale, especially in a protracted conflict. This will have negative consequences for social cohesion and resilience, and therefore on the public view of the conflict, the government, and the role of the IDF.

The establishment’s limited attention to the question of mass evacuation in the next conflict reflects the prevailing government approach to the entire spectrum of emergency management of the home front. In other words, the professional echelon is taking important steps to provide an adequate response to diverse issues, but the general status of preparedness remains insufficient and does not correspond to the official forecasts of the threat. This gap between the predictions and the response requires

systemic treatment at all levels, including the public at large. Much work remains to be done.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Formulation of the reference scenario for the home front and its approval by the Israeli cabinet is an important step in the promotion of Israel's readiness for an emergency. This is also a significant achievement for the National Emergency Management Authority. At the same time, it appears that the positive progress has exposed the widening gap between the growing threat to the home front and the response it requires.

To what degree the reference scenario will actually materialize in the next conflict cannot be known in advance, while the IDF offensive and defensive action will likely have a direct impact on the dimensions of the threat. Nevertheless, the "assault" scenario clearly highlights what is expected for the home front in the next conflict with Hezbollah and/or Hamas, reflecting the possibility of a major increase in the level of the threat. Against this increase, there is no sufficient progress in the level of the Israeli civil response. While the threat is not existential, another round of conflict, especially if it is prolonged for several weeks, entails heavy casualties and extensive property damage, and has a serious negative impact on public morale and does not end with a clear achievement for Israel, will constitute a severe strategic blow to Israel.

The IDF is apparently laboring to promote its military capacities to achieve victory in the next conflict. The civilian sector must likewise make the needed progress in its capacities to deal with the threat to the home front. This is a more difficult task, due to the great complexity of the civilian challenges. Failure in the test of the revised scenario, particularly in standing up to the risks of the "assault," will have a negative impact on the outcome of the next conflict, as well as on the level of the IDF military achievements.

An urgent national effort is now required in order to adapt the civilian response to the challenges posed by new scenario. Parallel action is necessary in a number of fields:

- a. It is necessary to formulate a general and agreed security doctrine for the home front in Israel as a basis for legislation and other measures that will define the goals, tasks, and responsibility for managing preparation and conduct before and during the future conflict.
- b. Binding regulation is needed to enforce the authority of the National Emergency Management Authority over the various government

- ministries in all matters pertaining to preparations for an emergency, manmade or natural.
- c. Systemic national long term support and assistance must be rendered to the local authorities that are incapable of taking care of their needs in matters pertaining to preparations for and management of an emergency.
 - d. Ongoing information dissemination to the public concerning the challenges involved in the revised scenario for an emergency should be guaranteed. This is necessary for enhancing the level of preparedness on the personal and family level and in order to make individuals responsible for the security and safety of their homes and families.
 - e. A national long term plan for home front preparedness must be drafted, and include targets, timetables, benchmarks, and budget allocations, while a system of regulation, enforcement and supervision of the emergency response agencies must be devised.
 - f. There is no alternative to the prime minister and the Ministerial Committee for National Security Affairs as the principle governors for managing national manmade and natural disasters. Past experience has proven that such active leadership results in clear progress and actual achievements.

These requirements are essential but difficult to achieve. Unless they are carried out, the gap between the growing threats and the response to them cannot be narrowed. The risk of an outbreak of another conflict between Israel and Hezbollah and Hamas is eminent. The damage it might inflict on the home front is expected and known. Relying exclusively on the IDF's offensive and defensive capacities will not ensure the required level of security of the home front. Systemic and continuous preparation of the different facets of the home front can significantly reduce the extent of the damage – in casualties, infrastructure, and communities – and help Israel overcome its enemies in the next round of fighting. In order to succeed, the general public and the relevant institutions on the civilian front must be equal partners to the IDF on the military front. The government must assume tight and active overall responsibility for the two overlapping fronts.

Notes

- 1 *IDF Strategy*, August 2015, Chapter 2, Section 4B, p. 11. See English translation at <https://www.idfblog.com/2015/11/23/idf-strategy/>.
- 2 "Reference scenario" is a term used by the IDF to define a possible scenario for which a response is to be devised in advance. The "reference scenario"

- should be regarded as a decision based on a reasonable assessment defining the level of the threats and attacks for which the enterprise and emergency teams will prepare in order to provide a response, not a precise prediction of what will occur.
- 3 Israeli Cabinet Resolution B/120: "The composite reference threat and the composite reference scenario for the home front shall constitute the basis for preparing a work plan by the government ministries that will be drawn up in accordance with the instruction of the National Emergency Management Authority in the Ministry of Defense, and with its aid."
 - 4 In its raw form, the scenario is a classified document. The content of this article is based exclusively on published media sources and the authors' understanding with respect to what is known.
 - 5 The organization has 130,000 rockets of various types: Grad missiles with a range of up to 40 kilometers, Fajr missiles with a range of up to 75 kilometers, Iranian-manufactured Zelzal missiles with a range of up to 200 kilometers, Fateh and M-110 missiles with a range of 250 kilometers, and Syrian Scud missiles that cover a range of 700 kilometers. For particulars on the matter, see "The Red Line: The Weapons the IDF Cannot Accept in Lebanon," *Mako*, May 7, 2015, <http://www.mako.co.il/pzm-magazine/Article-1e5eefb304f2d41006.htm>.
 - 6 These are relatively short range Burkan rockets with especially heavy warheads weighing 200 and 500 kilograms. See the discussion in *Rotter.net*, <http://rotter.net/forum/scoops1/89047.shtml>.
 - 7 Interview with outgoing Home Front Commander Major General Yoel Strick in Yoav Limor, "The Next War Will be Different," *Israel Hayom*, February 9, 2017, http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=40419.
 - 8 For example, see Meir Elran, Zipi Israeli, Carmit Padan, and Alex Altshuler, "Social Resilience in the Jewish Communities around the Gaza Strip Envelope during and after Operation Protective Edge," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 7, no. 2 (2015): 5-31, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/social-resilience-in-the-jewish-communities-around-the-gaza-strip-envelope-during-and-after-operation-protective-edge/>.
 - 9 *IDF Strategy*, chapter 3, nos. 16-17.
 - 10 For example, Defense Minister Liberman: "What should be clear to everyone is that as far as we are concerned, the infrastructure of the Lebanese army and Lebanon and the infrastructure of Hezbollah are the same thing." See "Liberman Changes Approach – and Names New Objectives for the Next War in Lebanon," *Walla*, March 13, 2017, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/3047744>, and Liberman at the 10th INSS Conference, January 2017: "The next war in Gaza will continue until victory."
 - 11 *IDF Strategy*, chapter 3, no. 20.
 - 12 Interview with Strick, in Limor, "The Next War Will be Different."

- 13 The number of fatalities is liable to reach 350-500. See Lilach Shoval, "The IDF Presents: This is What the Next War Will Look Like," *Israel Hayom*, September 15, 2016, <http://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/413323>.
- 14 The Home Front Command is preparing for approximately 750,000 evacuees, *ibid*.
- 15 Amir Buhbut, "Information from Sensors and Satellites: The IDF Revolution in Warning Civilians in Wartime," *Walla*, June 5, 2016, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2967388>.
- 16 For example, former Southern Command commander Major General Sami Turgeman said, "I personally think that evacuating the population is a victory for Hamas, and we were therefore in no rush to use this tool. This proved to be a preconception. A distinction should be made between a regular emergency and an emergency... in the next campaign, evacuation will be necessary and unavoidable, and together with the Ministry of Defense, we are devising an organized plan for evacuation in cooperation with the local authorities and communities, because a poor evacuation can cause more damage than benefit," in Naama Engel Mishali, "GOC Southern Command: Hamas is not Sbang and Over," *NRG*, May 11, 2015, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/694/222.html>.
- 17 This plan, called "A Safe Distance," encompasses 16 local authorities with 64 communities in the north and 29 communities in the south, not including Kiryat Shmona and Sderot. According to the plan, it is believed that it will be necessary to evacuate and absorb 70 percent of this population, amounting to 54,000 people. The addition of Sderot and Kiryat Shmona adds approximately 38,000 more people. See Michael Rotenberg, "Safe Distance," *Davar Rishon*, July 13, 2016, <http://www.davar1.co.il/24220/>.
- 18 On the "Motel and Guest House" plan, see draft document at http://www.health.gov.il/Subjects/emergency/preparation/DocLib/nehelim/3_1.pdf, and Tomer Simon, "My House is (no Longer) My Fort – On Evacuating the Population in Israel in Emergencies," January 1, 2017, <http://ready.org.il/2017/01/population-evacuation-in-emergencies-in-israel/> for particulars.