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National Home Front Exercise "Solid Stand":
Doubts concerning Civilian Preparedness for an Emergency
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The "Solid Stand" nation-wide home front exercise conducted by the Home Front Command (HFC) took place this year on the third day of the general staff exercise, which was held on March 11-15, 2018. The exercise dealt with a multi-front conflict, with the northern front – Syria and Lebanon, through Hezbollah – representing the central threat to the Israeli civilian home front. The exercise was intended to advance cooperation between the Home Front Command and the various emergency and rescue organizations, so as to enhance the public's readiness for war. In practice, the volume of information that was delivered to the civilian sector was very limited. Consequently it was reported that "following the first siren, the rescue call centers were flooded with questions from terrified people who knew nothing about the drill" (Tal Lev-Ram, *Maariv*, March 14, 2018).

The home front exercise provides an opportunity to point to several challenges that raise severe dilemmas concerning Israel's civilian preparedness for a future conflict, which is expected to be more challenging than in past rounds.

The IDF recognizes that the next conflict will take place on two fronts. On the military front, the IDF will operate defensively, but mostly offensively, in order to achieve victory over its adversaries in the shortest possible time. On the home front, the public will be expected to demonstrate reasonable functional continuity in face of massive attacks of high trajectory weapons against both the population centers and critical infrastructure. Israel needs the civilian functional continuity as a vital component of its deterrence. Without a reasonable level of ongoing performance of the civilian sectors, even a major military success will not produce the needed depiction of victory, certainly if extensive demoralization prevails in the civilian sector. For this reason, the IDF exercise enabled a realistic assessment of the substance and quality of the necessary close interface between the military and civilian fronts, while mapping the existing gaps so as to ensure HFC capabilities to achieve their complex missions as the IDF's agent at the civilian front level.

As the exercise was conducted as a classified military affair, the inclusion of civilians in it was restricted. The opportunity for civilian agencies, such as government ministries,

local authorities, and social organizations, which fulfill a critical role in a large scale emergency, to participate in it was also limited. This limited civilian inclusion left the civilian population passive in the needed ongoing preparedness effort, which diminishes their capabilities to stand up to future emergency challenges. Hence, a wide gap was exposed between the expectations that the public will be an important element in a future conflict and its limited participation in what is likely to occur in the next conflict.

This unwarranted state of affairs is also reflected in the consistent and deliberate policy by the government and the military, ostensibly not to frighten the public by exposing the current assessment of the severity of the developing threat and its likely materialization. The IDF Chief of Staff openly addressed precisely this point in an interview with Haaretz on March 30, 2018, when he said that the public did not thoroughly understand the gravity of the threat of rockets from the north in wartime, but at the same time he did not believe that "it is necessary to alarm it every day with new threat scenarios." He added that there was no doubt that for a few weeks the home front in Israel would have to deal with an emergency situation, and that what is likely to happen at the home front would be more severe than was experienced in the Second Lebanon War (2006). The Chief of Staff added, "The enemy has identified the home front as our weak point and will therefore aim most of its firepower at it." This assessment calls for a serious discussion on what might improve the public's preparations for an emergency: Will the familiarity and comprehension of the threat enhance the public's readiness, or can the public be relied on to know how to respond even if it is surprised by the gravity of the disruption? Social psychology studies show that reinforcing the public's self-efficacy in coping with severe disruptive scenarios - joined by effective measures for engaging with the dangers, as well as advance familiarity with the risks - significantly bolsters civilian preparedness for emergencies.

The exercise was based on a scenario of a multi-front conflict that focused on the northern threat. It included massive bombardment of civilian targets, coupled with Hezbollah ground efforts to conquer communities proximate to the border. In this context too, neither civilians nor the local authorities, the basic building blocks of the home front, were full parties in the exercise. Another manifestation of the lapse in civilian preparedness is the insufficient sheltering of facilities and homes in the northern communities, as admitted by the Minister of Defense on March 25, 2018. Similarly, there is less than adequate readiness for likely situations of mass evacuation of civilians from their homes in case of severe attack on their communities. In the next conflict, this acute problem is liable to cause public tumult and demands that the government provide extensive solutions for which it is currently unprepared.

The exercise highlighted yet another known challenge, concerning the less than requisite level of systematic jointness between the state agencies responsible for providing the holistic response to the civilian home front in emergency situations. The exercise far from exhausted the possibilities for practicing collaboration between the IDF, through the HFC, and the civilian authorities, including the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA). This is a grave systemic deficiency that must be redressed. In the absence of legislation and mutually agreed arrangement between the various state agencies involved, especially between NEMA and the HFC, there is no agency that is responsible for the conduct of the home front. In these circumstances, each of these agencies attempts to grab a larger role for itself. This is likely to cause a lack of coherence and potentially severe lacunae in the needed home front readiness, certainly in a scenario of a high intensity conflict.

From the HFC's perspective, the picture presented here is quite challenging. On the one hand, the HFC is an irreplaceable professional force that provides the public with essential support and serves as an essential link between the civilian front and the military front. On the other hand, there is still no adequate understanding within the IDF of the HFC's importance in strengthening the home front as a sector vital to the IDF's successful achievement of its mission in future conflicts. Every exercise improves the system's capabilities for fulfilling its missions. The updated threat scenario anticipates difficult unprecedented challenges to the home front. It appears that the home front's preparedness is less than what is needed, particularly on the northern front. Such a situation mandates renewed thinking and large scale investment, with an emphasis on the issues raised here. Without substantial improvement in the home front's readiness, the country's societal resilience stands the risk of being compromised in the next conflict. This will necessarily have a negative impact on the IDF's achievements and on the perception of the termination of the next war. Without a major improvement in the civilian readiness, the government's room to maneuver in the realm of managing the future conflicts against Hamas and Hezbollah will also be impaired.