

INSS Insight No. 1066, June 13, 2018

Management of the Civilian Front by the Home Front Command:
Significance and Implications

Meir Elran

Following years of uncertainty regarding who was responsible for Israel's civilian front prior to and during emergencies, a recent decision by the Minister of Defense positioned the Home Front Command (HFC) as the operative arm that will prepare the civilian front for emergencies and coordinate the local authorities and the emergency agencies in real time. On the face of it, this is a logical decision, considering the HFC's robustness as part of the IDF, with all of its assets and budgets. However, a fundamental question is whether a military body should lead quintessential civilian missions and be responsible for their execution, even under severe security threats. Moreover the optimal implementation of this new decision stands to be problematic and will require the construction of a new HFC, possessing substantial authorities and national resources. Thus the IDF is now obligated to do all that is necessary to best implement the decision and contribute its share in transforming the HFC into an effective agency with national capacities, for the purpose of guaranteeing the resilience of the civilian system and its ability to successfully contend with any disruption, war, or natural disaster.

On May 21, 2018, it was announced that the Minister of Defense had accepted the recommendations of a committee of experts headed by Maj. Gen. (res.) Avi Mizrahi, on regulating the interactions and the spheres of responsibility and authority between the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA) and the Home Front Command (HFC). It was also announced that:

- a. NEMA will serve as the national staff for home front preparedness on behalf of and under the Minister of Defense. It will engage in drafting and delineating the national strategic policy vis-à-vis this realm. Within this framework, NEMA will supervise the direction, budget allocations, and coordination between the emergency agencies.
- b. HFC will be the operative arm of the defense establishment that will prepare the home front for emergencies and coordinate the preparedness of the local authorities and the emergency agencies. HFC will also operate the consolidated district system and the National Emergency Economy system.
- c. The budget will be significantly increased in order to enable adapting the home front's preparedness to the updated reference scenarios.

The committee's full report was not published, and the short press release does not clarify the full picture. Nevertheless, one can understand that the announcement represents a crucial and far reaching decision by the Minister of Defense, who was reinstated in June 2014 as the one in charge of the civilian front on the government's behalf, after the Ministry of Home Front Defense was disbanded (following serious disputes with the Ministry of Defense and the HFC). The main organizational implication of the decision is a significant reduction in NEMA's responsibilities, which will now become a small advisory staff to the minister, without operational authority. This is in contrast with NEMA's expanded responsibilities in recent years, and in line with the strengthening of the HFC and its positioning as the primary authority at the helm of managing the civilian front in Israel.

NEMA was founded as one of the lessons learned from the failure in home front management during the Second Lebanon War (2006). HFC, which at the time considered itself mandated with narrow responsibilities limited essentially to search and rescue activity, failed to meet the new ongoing challenge of the broad arsenal of high trajectory weapons aimed primarily at civilian targets. NEMA was intended to create and maintain government level coordination among the ministries and other agencies and to develop the integrated preparedness of the national system for security emergencies and natural disasters. Concurrently, the HFC widely expanded its operating concept and the spectrum of its activities in the civilian realm, mainly through strengthening its association with the local authorities, which are perceived as the "pillar" of the civilian front.

Since then, although important components of civil defense have been improved and many structural changes in the system have been implemented, the gap between the intensifying threat and the overall systemic response has not been narrowed sufficiently. In addition, the strained relations between NEMA and HFC have not been adequately ironed out. These failures made it extremely difficult to advance the entire system, especially through fostering vital cooperation among the various components. Above all, the issue of authority and responsibility was not institutionalized, either by legislation or de facto, and no adequate answer has been provided for the question: who is responsible for managing the civilian front?

This question has now ostensibly been answered: the HFC is now positioned as the authority responsible for all of the emergency systems (although it is not clear how it will do this vis-à-vis the civilian systems at the state level), prior to and during emergencies. On the face of it, this is a logical decision, considering the HFC's robustness, both as part of the IDF, with all of its assets and budgets, and also because now it will presumably be clear who is "in charge." However, the optimal implementation of this new decision requires a new orientation, which will be problematic for all the familiar reasons relating

to Israeli bureaucracy. Managing emergencies is a complex venture, which requires administrating numerous decentralized civilian systems under pressure (government ministries, local authorities, and various other agencies), each with its own agenda and each finding it difficult to work together, even in normal conditions.

Under these circumstances, it is doubtful whether the HFC will, as a military body, succeed in promoting cooperation among the civilian authorities and ensure that their preparedness is at the level required to properly accomplish this challenging national mission. Furthermore, a fundamental question is whether a military body should lead quintessential civilian missions and be responsible for their execution, even under severe security threats (and it is likewise unclear whether the HFC will be responsible for managing non-military related threats, such as a major earthquake). In any event, success in accomplishing these missions will require substantial investment by the military, in time and attention, meticulous planning, and extensive budget resources. Yet it is far from certain whether the IDF, focused on military efforts, is indeed interested in exerting the major efforts required for full civilian front preparedness.

And indeed, while HFC is quite satisfied with the Minister's decision, one can assume that the military command will have reservations about the expansion of its responsibility to include the civilian front, which is laden with landmines. Evidence of this reserved approach lies in the latest public version of the IDF Strategy (April 2018), which is conspicuously devoid of any reference to the civilian front, apart from the critical military mission of defending it actively and passively, while "maintaining the continuous war effort and the home front efforts through protection and self-defense." The updated IDF document emphasizes the offensive domain, whereby priority is given to "shortening the duration of the fighting...in order to return the citizens...to routine life as soon as possible."

This approach is commendable. However, the HFC's primary role is to be optimally prepared for circumstances – from now on, as the national operative authority – when the IDF does not necessarily succeed in accomplishing the "shortening of the duration of the fighting and minimizing the damage to the State" (for a variety of reasons, and not only military ones). From now on, the HFC, within the framework of the IDF, will be responsible for preparing the entire civilian front for contending with severe and perhaps even protracted disruptions of critical civilian systems, some of which are certainly unforeseeable. It will also be responsible for administering the entire spectrum of efforts in the complex civilian realm. The key question here is: will the military take all this upon itself?

Full implementation of the Minister of Defense's decision will require the construction of a new HFC, possessing substantial authorities and robust national resources. The Minister of Defense himself spoke in public recently about the need for a five-year plan ("Northern Shield") for protecting the communities in northern Israel within the range of 45 km from the border, at a cost of NIS 5 billion (this, while civilian sites in central Israel are unprotected and less than adequately prepared). The press release from the Ministry of Defense does refer to a significant addition to the budget for promoting home front preparedness, but several questions remain: Will the emergency budget of the various ministries be increased within the framework of the Ministry of Defense budget? Will the necessary additional allocations come at the expense of the IDF budget or as an addition to it, as the Ministry of Defense is demanding, although this was already rejected by the Ministry of Finance? These are key issues that will require top-echelon discussion and agreement, which could delay implementation.

These and other questions will be examined in the coming months by work teams. Building the requisite civilian emergency system will obviously take years. In the meantime, the civilian front is inadequately prepared, even according to those involved in the matter, mainly in northern Israel, where the most major threat looms, and in southern Israel, where the danger of escalation is intensifying. At the moment, it appears that the leverage of Israeli deterrence is successfully postponing the next wide-scale confrontation. However, deterrence is often illusory and temporary. Now that the decision has been made about leading the civilian front, the IDF is obligated to do all that is necessary to best implement the decision and contribute its share in transforming the HFC into an effective agency with national capacities, for the purpose of guaranteeing the resilience of the civilian system and its ability to successfully contend with any disruption, war, or natural disaster.