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The Recent Round of Fighting with Islamic Jihad:
Lessons for the Civilian Front

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During the two days of fighting (November 12-13, 2019), Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched 450 projectiles at Israel, some of them toward the Tel Aviv metropolitan area. The damage caused to the home front was minimal, and the military and civilian apparatuses functioned reasonably well. However, casting this recent round as an Israeli success as far as the level of robustness of the home front is misleading. It is liable to cause complacency that might have an adverse effect on the motivation to improve the civil preparedness for a future large scale conflict. The closure of schools and the economy in the center of Israel raises questions concerning what led to this decision, and might indicate that there are doubts about the system's preparedness. This article proposes lessons to enhance the capacity of the home front to stand up successfully to the severe scenarios of a conflict with Hezbollah and Hamas.

During the recent round of fighting (November 12-13, 2019), Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched 450 projectiles at Israel in response to the killing by the IDF of senior commander Abu al-Ata. A map of the launchings shows that most were aimed at the Israeli localities bordering the Gaza Strip, many at the town of Sderot, and quite a few at Ashkelon and further north, including a small number of rockets toward cities in the center of Israel. The IDF Spokesperson stated that 90 percent of the launchings at populated areas were intercepted by the Iron Dome missile defense system, and 60 percent of the rockets landed in open spaces. Overall, the damage caused was relatively limited. The average number of launchings each day (200) was similar to the numbers of the Second Lebanon War and the three main rounds of fighting against Hamas in the Gaza Strip (and excluding the round of May 2019, in which nearly 700 projectiles were fired in two days). This number is much lower than the potential launching capacity of Hezbollah and Hamas.

From the perspective of the Israeli home front, Islamic Jihad is a relatively small splinter organization with military capabilities far below those of Hamas and Hezbollah. Hence, its ability (which presumably affects its intentions) to conduct a prolonged offensive against Israel is rather limited, particularly as it acted alone in the recent round, without the supportive involvement of Hamas. According to assessments published in the media,

the organization showed poorer capabilities than expected by the IDF, also due to suppressive surgical actions taken by the IDF to foil the rocket barrages on the ground. When the round was over, the IDF reported that the organization's arsenal still contains several dozen long range rockets capable of reaching the Tel Aviv region and further north. The organization also refrained from launching anti-tank missiles, heavy mortars, and drones in its possession, which reduced the risk to the civilian home front.

In general, the Israeli home front functioned adequately in the face of this limited challenge. The military apparatus succeeded in disrupting the main threat with the Iron Dome defense system, which was assisted by other land systems. The civilian apparatus, and mainly the local municipalities, contributed to the efforts as well. However, the recent round, though limited in time, scope, and risks, suggests a number of critical lessons for strengthening the home front's capacities in accordance with the scenarios of broader future conflicts that Israel can expect with Hezbollah and Hamas. Principal insights concern:

- a. *The Home Front Command's concept of sheltering*: The physical defense doctrine is based on the fusion of three layers – close availability of shelters; pinpointed early warning; and maximum alert and response by civilians to the instructions of the Home Front Command. This concept was validated. It serves not only to save lives, but it also provides Israel with a leeway of political and military maneuverability. Fatalities would have leveled severe pressure on the decision makers to escalate the IDF response, which could have deteriorated into a large scale war in the Gaza Strip, a far from desirable scene for Israel at this time. Consequently, investment in physical sheltering should be continued. However, this is far from being fully applied (for example in northern Israel), despite previous decisions taken by the government.
- b. *The Israeli defensive capacity*: The level of the Israeli response to the fire launched from the Gaza Strip was reasonable for the (limited) level of the threat. At the same time, the defensive success of the last episode does not represent the chances of success in the future conflicts, because the rate of preparedness of both the military (including Iron Dome) and the civilian echelons for the actually expected high risks scenarios is low-to-medium (except in the areas bordering the Gaza Strip). This requires broad and recognized investments in known defensive components. Furthermore, perception of success in the last round is liable to blur the public's awareness, as civilians might conclude that Israel is adequately prepared to cope with the high trajectory threat to the home front. This misreading is liable to detract from the necessary motivation to improving home front preparedness. It is therefore necessary to present to the public the updated threat scenario and its

dire expected consequences for individuals, communities, and the entire civilian population in Israel.

- c. *Risk management of the home front:* The recent round raised the question regarding the level of risk that must be taken in managing the home front. Early in the first day of the round, the Home Front Command decided that schools should be closed including in the Tel Aviv area, for the first time since the 1991 Gulf War. The decision was likely taken following an intelligence warning or assessment that a rocket attack on the Tel Aviv is imminent. This decision, together with the (temporary) recommendation to "non-essential" workers not to go to work, left about a million students and 80,000 teachers outside the schools, created confusion, and in fact halted large segments of the Israeli economy. But beyond that, it raised questions about the reasoning behind the decision, certainly in a case in which there might be an acute risk to large populated regions in the center of Israel as well as to critical infrastructure. If the inclination is to shut down the economy in the face of a limited threat from the minor Islamic Jihad, what policy will be pursued in the circumstances of a massive conflict with Hezbollah or Hamas? Will the economy be shut down for a long period as a precautionary measure? If so, what compensation will the state grant the workers and businesses affected by this prolonged shutdown? Will the compensation be a binding derivative of the decision?
- d. *Authority and responsibility:* The discussion about the Home Front Command decision raises another question, highlighted by the media in conjunction with the question of the targeting of the Tel Aviv area – who, and by what law, makes national decisions on matters pertaining to the management of the home front before, during, and after large scale security disruptions? Clearly, the Home Front Command and the heads of the local authorities, between whom there is an understandable and unresolved tension, have a crucial role in the decision making circle. Clearly, however, the more grueling and longer the campaign, the more complex the considerations are, which involve not only social and economic but also political aspects. One example was the promise made by the Minister of the Interior to the Ashkelon municipality to classify the city as part of the Gaza Strip envelope, which would grant it the benefits given to the challenged localities in close proximity to the border. This step, if fully implemented, will have large scale budgetary consequences. Another example is in the evacuation of civilians from their homes under fire, as happened again to 30 percent of the residents in the area bordering the Gaza Strip. Again – is the state prepared for mass evacuation? Who decides on this sensitive issue? Will those evacuated be financially compensated? The lack of clarity about the issues of authority and responsibility in these perilous

domains again raises the need for legislation, which has not taken place, despite repeated efforts since 2007.

- e. *Economic ramifications*: In the current round, attention was paid to the economic cost, primarily because of the shutting down of the central region. The damage resulted mainly from high trajectory weapons fired that disrupted ordinary life and the economy, leading to a loss of income. The most sensitive sector to economic disruption is the private sector, above all the entertainment and tourism businesses. On the macro level, gross domestic product in Israel is 5.3 billion NIS per working day, and the business sector's output is 3.4 billion NIS per day. In this particular case, the loss in GDP was relatively small, and the economy may even have profited if an improvement now takes place in the security situation. Nevertheless, the occurrence highlights the scale of possible losses in GDP when the economic routine is severely disrupted for a prolonged period. It also reflects the significant economic contribution of rocket interception systems, together with their constructive role in functional continuity.
- f. *Emergency public communications*: This issue has two main aspects. One involves the media coverage in an emergency situation that commonly hides the serious aspects pertaining to the disruptive emergency experience of civilians, due to the commercialization of the messaging. The second involves the more significant patterns of communication between the national leadership (as opposed to the local one) and the public at large. Once again there was no direct and open dialogue with the citizens, which was managed primarily through the IDF Spokesperson. A clear example of this was the government's repeated refraining from announcing that a ceasefire had been reached. This announcement was left to the other side.
- g. *Civilian resilience*: Most of the burden of withstanding the barrage of rockets again fell on the residents in the vicinity of the Gaza Strip. Despite the apparent prosperity in this region and the evidenced functional continuity during and between the rounds of conflict, the professional local apparatus needs additional support from the state authorities. This does not involve just budgetary grants; it also concerns recognition of their critical function in promoting and preserving societal resilience in crises and between rounds of conflict.

As a bottom line, portraying the last round of violence against Islamic Jihad as a success in the sensitive context of the home front is liable to have a negative impact on public complacency concerning home front preparedness. Without seriously addressing the critical issues, this is bound to contribute to further delays in enhancing basic elements of preparedness for a foreseeable conflict and its severe consequences.