

## **National Home Front Exercise 2021 – More of the Same?**

**Meir Elran** | No. 1536 | November 21, 2021

**The National Home Front Exercise took place during the first week of November. In it, the IDF's Home Front Command and the Ministry of Defense's National Emergency Management Authority, along with other emergency authorities, practiced what was defined as a "wide-ranging emergency scenario" with the goal of strengthening the coordination between them. The exercise focused on functional challenges, important in themselves. Yet there are gaps in preparedness for dealing with security emergencies and with mass disasters, including failure to involve civilians in the exercise, low public awareness of the challenges, gaps in sheltering, and defective preparation for mass evacuations of civilians. Thus, there is quite a long way to go toward achieving the required level of readiness for defending the civilian front against the growing capabilities of the enemy, above all Hezbollah.**

The National Home Front Exercise took place during the first week of November. In it, the IDF's Home Front Command (HFC) and the Ministry of Defense's National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), along with other emergency authorities, practiced what was defined as a "wide-ranging emergency scenario" with the goal of strengthening the coordination between them. The exercise was accompanied by an exercise for IDF command posts and was based on a scenario of a clash with Hezbollah with Iranian involvement. Among other things, its purpose was to examine implementation of the Mizrachi Committee recommendations (2018), which referred to the division of responsibilities in emergencies between the NEMA and the HFC. The exercise was based on lessons from the past, with emphasis on last May's Operation Guardian of the Walls – the fourth round of fighting between Israel and Hamas. The exercise involved the HFC, NEMA, Israel Police, Fire Service, Magen David Adom (MDA) – Israel's national emergency medical, disaster, ambulance and blood bank service – as well as various government ministries, local authorities in the north and south of the country (as part

of the warning exercise), and the Supreme Economic Committee for Emergencies (SEC).

Specifically, this exercise involved dealing with the following challenges: evacuation and reception of civilians in emergencies (in two villages on the northern border); responding to unconventional weapons; evacuating the residents of a special-needs institution under fire in collaboration with the MDA; routing casualties between hospitals to avoid overload; a rocket hit on a factory causing an explosion of hazardous material and evacuation of the wounded; and alerts of rocket and missile launches, benefiting from the extended warning time for places in the north thanks to technological improvements in the warning systems.

The exercise was presented on the IDF website (October 31, 2021) as the “flagship exercise” of emergency organizations, simulating a multi-arena operation and including a response to high-angle precision launches, rapid pace of firing, and focused fire on Israeli towns along the border fence. NEMA head Yoram Laredo stated, “This was an unprecedented event, the first time there has been an exercise of this scope with full cooperation between us and the army.”

Such an extravagant statement is surprising, particularly given the [striking remark](#) by Home Front Commander Maj. Gen. Uri Gordin during the exercise that he was “not sure that the public in Israel understands what is happening or what will happen, if one day a northern operation opens up. 2,500 rockets a day, some of them precision missiles, and some falling deep into built-up areas of the distant Israeli home front.”

The exercise and its communication to the public require some clarifications:

- a. There is no question about the importance of practice for the systems responsible for home-front readiness for security clashes and mass natural disasters. It contributes to the necessary coordination between them, both during preparations and of course in actual emergencies. Such coordination is a condition for orderly actions in the broader civilian space, which does not follow hierarchical patterns and requires a shared language and culture. This issue is always challenging and makes it hard to maximize capabilities of dealing with situations of uncertainty and chaos,

particularly in circumstances when the civilian routine is severely disrupted.

- b. Against this background, regrettably – and not for the first time – the active involvement of civilians in the exercise was avoided. Although there was limited cooperation from a number of local authorities, this is not enough. Drills for entire civilian communities are an essential component of preparing for emergencies. Importantly, it is not just a matter of physical preparedness: The mental preparation of the general public for cases involving security clashes is even more difficult to accomplish. It depends above all on familiarity with the threat. There can be no readiness in the absence of such awareness. Indeed, how can the public understand the significance of the threat to the civilian front if the army and security policy makers have over the years consistently and deliberately avoided explaining to the public in thorough and concrete terms what could happen in the next widespread conflict with Hezbollah and others, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and perhaps even Iranian forces? The relatively minor experience of the Israeli home front in the five clashes with Hezbollah and Hamas in the last 15 years cannot teach the public anything about what to expect in such future scenarios, which might even involve Iranian forces. As long as civilians are not aware of the dangers, are not sufficiently drilled each year, and are not involved in the preparations for such events, it is impossible to conclude that Israel is ready for them.
- c. Another important area where Israeli preparedness for hostilities in the civilian sector is defective is defense. Gordin stated during the exercise, “There are gaps in defense and there will be many more gaps in defense for many years to come. Our job is to help civilians even in the face of these gaps to act correctly.” In Israel there is a suitable model of defense that was built within recent years in the Gaza perimeter, facing the relatively lesser threat of Hamas. Back in July 2018, the Cabinet passed a resolution (302/b) regarding the need to prepare a long-term plan (2019-2030) to defend the north and improve preparations for earthquakes, with a budget of five

billion shekels. Yet so far nothing has been done, while 2.6 million Israeli residents (some 28 percent of the population) live without standard protection. Among them, 50,000 live within six miles from the northern border. And behold, just this month it was announced that this program is entering the implementation phase, when according to the budget framework approved by the government, it is meanwhile only happening in nine villages.

- d. The absence of sufficient defenses highlights a further systemic defect in preparations for emergencies, relating to the evacuation of civilians from their homes in the event of an attack with high-angle weapons. According to the government resolution, some 300,000 people need proper preparation for evacuation during hostilities. There are, of course, plans for such eventuality ("hostels" to receive all 300,000 and a "safe distance" to receive evacuees from places within two-and-a-half miles from the border). Until now, even when the need arose, the government avoided activating these plans and in previous rounds of fighting any evacuation was individually initiated. Moreover, even if a decision was taken for extensive evacuation in the event of future hostilities (or a destructive earthquake), it is doubtful that the country is ready to absorb such large numbers of evacuees.

Given these gaps in basic preparedness, the matters that were exercised this time seem relatively trivial despite their functional significance. They failed to achieve the necessary breakthrough in the protection of the civilian front in the face of the enemy's growing strength. In any expected major clash with Hezbollah, the civilian front, including essential infrastructures and the population throughout the country, will be greatly affected. Even effective active defense against high-angle weapons cannot provide a complete answer. The expected damage will be serious and will erode Israel's ability to prevail, even if the IDF attack systems record significant achievements, which is open to doubt given the results of the clashes with Hamas last May. Public and general declarations about the progress in preparations on the home front are not enough in the absence of the necessary practical steps, investment of considerable resources, and the involvement of civilians and essential infrastructures in

intensive preparations for security confrontations. The situation described here is even worse in terms of readiness for natural disasters such as devastating earthquakes.

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