

The National Emergency Authority: New Prospects or More of the Same?

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On September 16, 2007, the government decided to authorize the minister of defense to establish a start-up team for a National Emergency Authority (NEA) at the Ministry of Defense, and to this end approved an additional six positions over the current limit. Within ninety days the minister of defense is to submit to the government a proposal concerning the nature of the Authority, based on the recommendations of the start-up team. The proposal will include the new authority's structure, functions, jurisdiction, and required operating budget, as well as other matters concerning its activity.

The decision to establish the start-up team followed the June 10 government session, at which the deputy defense minister raised the idea of establishing a National Emergency Authority. This new entity was to constitute an overseeing body that would coordinate the actions of government ministries, local authorities, and other public organizations for preparing the home front's operations prior to and during an emergency.¹

Thus more than one year after the Second Lebanon War,² the government of Israel decided to establish a new umbrella organization for managing the home front. The functional specifications of the Authority were, for the time being, left to the debate and recommendations of the start-up team. But from the announcement one can already infer the following:

■ A special authority will be set up for handling the civilian home front, based on the recommendations of numerous bodies, including those of the state comptroller: "It is important that the government ensure that one central national organ will have both responsibility and authority and be able to

coordinate attention and effort in the management of Israel's home front under routine and emergency conditions."³

■ The prime function of the Authority will be to coordinate the actions of government, municipal, and volunteer organizations prior to and during emergency situations. The statement that the NEA is to focus on *coordinating* actions means that the Authority will not constitute the supreme national agent *responsible for deploying and managing* the civilian front during an emergency.⁴ Therefore, as long as there is no legislative change in the situation, responsibility for the civilian front will remain divided between different government ministries and

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national agencies, local authorities, and volunteer organizations, whose involvement is expanding as the official agencies gradually abdicate their responsibility for those who are in need of their services in both emergency and routine conditions.⁵

■ The Authority will be part of the Ministry of Defense⁶ and under the responsibility of the deputy minister. Thus the government finalized its previous resolution subordinating the national management of all the diverse civilian home front issues to the Ministry of Defense. This contrasts with recommendations of the National Security Council and the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee's subcommittee that examined the home front preparedness, which proposed subordinating the NEA to the Ministry of Internal Security. There were also some who suggested establishing a special government ministry for the systemic management of the civilian front.

The significance of these developments at this stage is twofold. On the one hand, the Israeli government indeed made a major and important move with the decision to establish the NEA. It implies official recognition of the centrality of the civilian home front in Israel along with the military front. The close interrelations between the military and civilian fronts is one of the key lessons of the Second Lebanon War, and the government's attention to this issue is warranted and creates a basis for constructing an updated system for facing future challenges. On the other hand, the wording and the implied directions of the resolution suggest a long and difficult path to creating a real change in the national system's management of the intricacies and challenges of the civilian home front.

There are several criteria for measuring qualitative changes in the national system's

approach to the civilian front. These include:

■ *Up-to-date legislation.* As strange as it might seem, current legislation is based on the Civil Defense Law of 1951, which refers to the mission of civil defense as follows: "to take all measures for defending the population against any attack from hostile forces or to minimize the consequences of such attack, with an emphasis on saving lives."⁷ Today the responsibility for the Civil Defense Law lies with the IDF Home Front Command, under the direction of the Ministry of Defense. This law needs to be updated, if not entirely changed, with appropriate reference to the diversity of public needs during an emergency, and primarily to the central question of responsibility of the various agencies handling different components of the civilian front.⁸ It is worth clarifying that the responsibility of the Israeli police (which operates according to the Police Act of 1971 and a specific government resolution), is defined as the organ responsible for "internal security" (as opposed to the IDF, which is defined as responsible for "external security"). It is imperative that the responsibility of the police be updated in context of the functions of the Home Front Command, which today, at least in theory, is fairly limited considering the needs of the civilian home front (mainly to shelter specifications, rescue, and relief operations).⁹ As long as there is no new and comprehensive legislation that provides a systemic response to the wide needs of the civilian front and clearly defines who is responsible for what and who coordinates and runs the show, the system will continue to suffer from the familiar and grievous lapses, as manifested in the last war.

■ *Designing a practical model for the division of labor in managing the civilian front.* The present situation encompasses a multiplicity

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of agencies, with no defined system for coordination between them. The 2006 war, when the home front was severely challenged, proved the problematic nature of the disorganized system. As analyzed in a parliamentary report issued by a special committee headed by MK Ami Ayalon, "there was no single director, but rather several organs working in parallel. The system functioned with a number of heads, with no national integrating body possessing an overall picture for managing the activities."¹⁰ It suggested that what is needed is a clear and regulated model acceptable to all parties that would determine the division of labor among them. Indeed, on the face of it, there is perhaps an advantage in assigning one body to be responsible for the entire system, to prepare it in advance and to run it in an emergency. In such a case it might have been desirable to appoint a special minister for the civilian home front matters, or assign a special minister in the prime minister's office. However this scenario seems unrealistic considering Israel's political setting. It is unlikely for the different government ministries involved in managing the civilian front¹¹ to consent to accepting the authority of another ministry or minister (apart perhaps from the prime minister's office). Under these circumstances it seems reasonable to assign the leading position to the Ministry of Defense, but this would necessitate the institutionalization in a precise manner of the nature of the mutual relationship between the different ministries and agents, and the nature of the Ministry of Defense's responsibility for this integrative system. It might be advisable that in areas that are clearly of a security nature (matters connected with active and passive defense, prevention, protection, shelters, rescue and relief), the responsibility and au-

thority should be assigned to the Ministry of Defense, to be executed by the Home Front Command of the IDF. Areas of clearly civilian significance and nature should be dealt with by other ministries, such as the ministries of Social Welfare, Health, and Education. In any case, strong coordinating mechanisms will be needed, such as ministerial committees and/or directorial committees, to enhance the necessary inter-ministry integration.

■ *Reducing dependency on the IDF and the Home Front Command.* It seems that one of the reasons for conferring on the Ministry of Defense the responsibility to establish, build, and manage the NEA (beyond political considerations) is its organizational and budgetary strength and its control over the IDF and the Home Front Command. This is a sound consideration, mainly because of the need in times of crisis for abundant and available manpower. But there are other considerations for constructing the NEA with limited dependency on the Home Front Command. First, despite the linkage between the military and the civilian front during war, those who lead them may have contradictory or opposed considerations and interests. The IDF General Staff must be focused on the military front; therein lie its main challenges and the essence of its responsibility. It cannot and should not be occupied with considerations of the civilian front. Second, leaders of the home front must be sensitive and attentive to the hardships of the civilian population and prepared to come up with appropriate responses. Due to the weighty social component of the civilian front, it is especially important for those in charge to be experienced professional citizens, with mastery of civilian facilities and mechanisms. They could certainly be assisted by reserve soldiers who have received prior training

and are recruited for this purpose; however, dependence on them should be minimal and primarily technical.¹²

■ *Empowering the role of the local authorities.* Continuing the previous argument, organizational updating requires assigning a central role to the local authorities for all matters concerning the psycho-social care of the population in times of distress. The central role of the government should be in setting standards for meeting the challenges of the civilian front, designing a national long range work plan, budgeting the various agencies, and assisting weaker local authorities. On the other hand, the local authorities must be assigned full responsibility for the management of the challenges on the civilian front. Only the professionals of the local authority are sufficiently familiar with the citizens, their needs, and the appropriate responses. This is especially the case with regard to the weaker segments of the population, such as the elderly, children, those at risk, and the underprivileged segments of the society. Emergency situations cause a sharp rise in needs of support. It is only those who care for those people on a routine basis who can attend to them in times of severe crisis. The prerequisite for meeting such challenges is professional long term preparation. Some of the local authorities, particularly the stronger ones, are already heavily engaged in this endeavor; others must follow suit. The NEA should take upon itself the mission of ensuring that the entire local system is adequately prepared for emergencies, based on structured criteria and a precise and budgeted work plan.. The Authority must not try to replace the local authorities. The Authority's role must be limited to enabling the local authorities to deploy themselves fully and professionally for emergency scenarios.

■ *Adequate utilization of volunteers and philanthropic resources.* During the last war the state's oblivion to some of the social services¹³ brought on a large and positive on-rush of aid work by numerous volunteer organizations. This is doubtless of great benefit and testifies to the strength of Israeli society. It is important that the non-profit NGOs are incorporated ahead of time in the deployment of the local authorities, so that their contribution is effective, helpful, and directed to the places where it is truly needed.

The establishment of a National Emergency Authority is an opportune moment for constructing a suitable response to the severe challenges expected on the civilian front in times of war. Construction of the model, currently underway, will greatly influence the system's success in functioning efficiently and beneficially during crisis situations. If the start-up team for the Authority succeeds in developing a smart model that correctly exploits the advantages of the various agencies, there is a real chance for a quantum leap in managing the civilian home front.¹⁴ The government of Israel must make sure that the new Authority integrates a correct balance between the various organs involved in the mission, with the central area of civilian care performed by civilian professionals.

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Notes

- 1 Announcement by the government secretary of September 16, 2007.
- 2 See Meir Elran, "The Civilian Front in the Second Lebanon War," in *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Dimensions*, eds. Meir Elran and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot and INSS, 2007).
- 3 State Comptroller's report on the deployment and functioning of the home front during the Second Lebanon War, July 2007, p. 12.
- 4 The office of Deputy Defense Minister Vilnai made it clear that activating the Authority

would not exempt other government ministries from responsibility in their respective areas. The role of the Authority will be to manage, supervise, and coordinate between all of the bodies and authorities when needed, *Haaretz*, September 16, 2007.

- 5 Government resolution 1577 determines that designated government ministries will continue to bear responsibility for matters under their jurisdiction in emergency situations. Staff work will also address interfaces between the Ministry of Defense and the designated ministries. Regarding the issue of the Authority's responsibility, see statements by Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilnai in the Knesset committee's discussion on deployment for the systemic management of the home front during emergencies and performance during times of war, September 9, 2007.
- 6 Already on April 15, the government decided (resolution 1577) on entrusting the minister of defense with overall responsibility for handling the home front during emergencies, and determined that supreme responsibility for handling the home front in all emergencies (special home front situations, war, and emergencies caused by natural disasters) would be in the hands of the minister of defense.
- 7 The Legal Code 71, March 1951.
- 8 The deputy defense minister during a Knesset discussion: "I intend to propose a home front law. It is no coincidence that since 1951 the Civil Defense Law has been in place. I have met with people who have tried to pass a home front law for many years, but weren't successful in doing so for a thousand and one reasons. I hope that this time – with the atmosphere that has been created, the lessons learned, and the deep insights of the state comptroller's report – it will be easier...I will do everything possible so that by the time the Knesset takes its next recess, we arrive at a situation where a home front law is in place, integrating all of the bodies within the home front system."
- 9 The Home Front Command's website states its mission: "an integrated national service of readiness and response for civil defense during states of emergency." In theory, the Civil Defense Law, upon which the establishment of the Home Front Command was based, grants it the authority of command and control over auxiliary organizations (Magen David Adom, firefighting, and so on) in times of war. However these powers are not granted to the Home Front Command unless a state of war, as defined by the Civil Defense Law, is declared.
- 10 The committee headed by MK Ami Ayalon for examining the preparedness of the home front during emergencies – preliminary report, September 2006.
- 11 These ministries include the Ministry of Defense – responsible for the IDF and the Home Front Command; the Ministry of Internal Security – responsible for the police; the Ministry of the Interior – responsible for local authorities; plus the Ministries of Health; Social Services; Education; Finance; Industry, Trade, and Labor; and others, each with its relevant piece of the functional and budgetary pie.
- 12 Recruiting reserve soldiers to assist the civilian system could be vital in cases of widespread human disaster, or in the event of the paralysis of civilian systems, as happened at times in different places during the Second Lebanon War. See for example the State Comptroller's report, p. 496, which determined that within some of the local authorities, about two thirds of the workers were absent during the war.
- 13 See the SHATIL report, Citizens on the Front Lines, summarizing the failures in the management of the home front during the Second Lebanon War from a civilian viewpoint, February 2007, p. 32, on the absence of a sovereign authority and reliance on civic society.
- 14 Correct reorganization will of course not be enough. The new authority must ensure more adequate budgeting for the needs of the civilian front. According to Ofer Shelah, *Maariv*, July 20, 2007, a total of 367 million shekels was allocated in 2006 for civil defense at the Home Front Command, representing 1 percent of its total security budget. In the budget for 2007, a year in which the security budget grew by more than ten billion shekels, 407 million shekels – less than 1 percent of the security budget – was allocated for civil defense.