

The Civilian Front in Operation Cast Lead: Proper Functioning in Face of a Limited Challenge

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The challenge to the civilian front at the national level in the course of Operation Cast Lead was fairly limited. Those individuals affected undoubtedly underwent in their own immediate circles a difficult if not traumatic episode. However, in terms of the general public and from the perspectives of the state and even those communities within range of the rockets, the actual threat against the civilian population was relatively limited. This is true not only in terms of the number of launches,¹ but also in terms of the direct and indirect impact on individuals: three fatalities, thirteen severely or moderately wounded, several dozen lightly wounded, and several hundreds who were treated for stress symptoms. Thirty-five families were evacuated from their homes because of rocket damage. The daily routine in southern Israel was only partly affected. The major disruption occurred in the educational system, which was virtually shut down; by contrast, the average attendance of workers in factories in the south stood at over 85 percent.² Few residents of the south left of their own volition, and there was no need to organize evacuations or send people elsewhere for respite. The conduct of the population was usually restrained, orderly, and focused, which contributed to the low number of casualties. By every measure of comparison, whether with regard to the bleak forecasts presented to the public before the confrontation, or the Second Lebanon War (a daily average of 140 Hizbollah rockets), or the total potential threat against the civilian front in a multi-front confrontation,

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the civilian front underwent limited turmoil, which was somewhat artificially inflated by the media.

This paper focuses on the performance of the systems responsible for the civilian front and its implications for the future, and on the public's resilience and its effect of on the management of the confrontation and its outcomes.

During Operation Cast Lead the systems responsible for managing the civilian front functioned rather well. Two systems in particular stood out, in striking contrast to 2006: the IDF Home Front Command and the local authorities. Overall, the Home Front Command learned and implemented the lessons from its problematic performance in the past. The warning systems that were developed and deployed generally proved effective, with the exception of some local glitches.³ The close ties with the local authorities, strengthened by the newly formed and trained liaison units, were productive, as were the direct dialogue and cooperation with the government ministries. Information dissemination to civilians functioned effectively and was appropriately restrained in its rhetoric. Above all, the Home Front Command assumed a leading position for managing the civilian front. There is an important albeit mixed message in this: on the one hand, it was demonstrated once again that when the IDF enlists its power and organizational skills in the service of essentially civilian tasks it is capable of making

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effective contributions. That is the upside. On the other hand, the question is to what extent it is appropriate in a democratic country for the military to be responsible for managing clearly civilian matters. A clear example was the decision, taken primarily by the Home Front Command, to close the entire school system in the south. Even if this decision was taken in consultation with the Ministry of Education and the local authorities, it was the military that led the move, despite its social civilian ramifications.

The achievements were perhaps even more noteworthy regarding the local authorities. Unlike in the north during the Second Lebanon War, the local authorities in the south, generally speaking, operated effectively and in a confidence-inspiring fashion. This is true not only

in terms of their technical performance, important in and of itself, but perhaps of even greater significance was the conduct of mayors and heads of local and regional councils, some of whom were new in their positions, who demonstrated restrained guidance, stood at the helm, and assumed responsibility. This may reflect an advanced stage of a process, slow but important, of gleaning a major insight on the municipal level, namely, that local governments and their professional staffs can and should have a decisive role to play not only in peacetime, but also during times of crisis and disaster. This understanding is crucial in building capabilities at the local level and in establishing a strong civilian society that can cope successfully with challenges involving quasi-military threats.

The message suggested here is clear: in face of future threats it is necessary to continue the balanced building of the civilian front's capabilities and the systems in charge of managing it. The relative successes of Operation Cast Lead must not lead to the conclusion that we have closed the gap between the threat potential and the response capabilities of the home front. We have not. The growing rocket and missile capabilities of Israel's enemies still pose a real threat for the civilian home front that should be met effectively. In this complex task, the National Emergency Authority can play a crucial role and faces a difficult challenge.

The question of the public's resilience vis-à-vis the threat must also be evaluated critically. Public resilience is defined as a socio-political phenomenon, reflecting the response of the public (unlike the individuals directly affected) in relation to the intensity of the traumatic stress it experiences, and in particular its ability to return quickly to routine life. A public responding appropriately to trauma and returning quickly to routine conduct may be defined as having a high resilience level, and vice versa. Based on this definition, it appears that in the course of Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli public in general and the population in the south did not experience a real trauma, with the exception of those who were hit directly by rocket fire. The scope and nature of the damage inflicted during the 22

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days of fighting did not produce substantive public stress for southern Israel, and certainly not when compared to the north during the Second Lebanon War. Without a doubt, there was distress of varying degrees experienced by many individuals and communities. However, the scope of damage and casualties, which decreased steadily starting the second week of the fighting, the performance of the systems in charge, the public mood, and what was seen as an IDF military success,⁴ all greatly mitigated the potential for trauma and its effect on the public's conduct. Daily routine dominated in most cases and population segments (with the important exception of the schools). The high public morale, as well as the sweeping support for the political and military leaderships, remained consistent during the entire operation. The stamina and strength of the nation did not undergo as difficult a test as was anticipated before the operation or as we might expect in an extensive confrontation in the future.

The conclusion is that proper advance preparation of the civilian front, in tandem with continued investment in related military, civilian, and philanthropic systems, proves itself in the hour of need. Given the high potential for future threats against the civilian front and the strategic risks therein, it is necessary to continue to balance all the components of possible responses: strengthening Israel's deterrence and prevention capabilities; foiling and destroying high trajectory weapon systems; developing effective active defense systems, including tactical ones; strengthening passive defenses, including selectively fortifying sensitive locations (such as the schools); and improving psycho-social services under the leadership of the local authorities. It is important to continue the efforts begun in the wake of the Second Lebanon War and maintain the momentum. It is necessary to devise a comprehensive, multi-year national plan, appropriately budgeted, and to manage its ongoing implementation in a centralized fashion. This will improve the chances for successful performance on the civilian front in the next confrontation as well.

Notes

- 1 Based on an announcement made by Izz a-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, 345 Qassams and 213 Grads were launched in the course of the operation. This constitutes a daily average of 23 rockets over the course of the entire operation, a daily average of 37 rockets during the

first week, 21 during the second, and 15 during the third. Furthermore, several hundred mortar bombs (412 according to the organization) were fired.

- 2 *Kalkalist*, January 15, 2009.
- 3 The extended range of the rockets beyond 20 km, even though anticipated by Israel's intelligence services before the operation, did not bring about – perhaps because of a lack of time – full preparations on the part of the Home Front Command, local authorities, and residents in outlying areas.
- 4 On January 13, 2009, 78 percent of respondents to a *Haaretz* poll said that the operation was a success. On January 18, 2009, immediately after the ceasefire, in a poll published by Israel TV's Channel 10, the number of respondents who viewed the operation as a success plummeted to 41 percent – a number equal to that of those who viewed the operation as a failure.