

Turning Point 4: The National Civilian Front Exercise Ramifications for the Nation's Preparedness

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Background

On May 23-27, 2010, Israel held its annual nationwide emergency exercise, whose purpose was to “improve preparedness and response to an emergency in Israel, at the national and system-wide levels, based on joint operation in a war scenario.”¹ The exercise was described as the largest ever to have taken place to date and involved over 150 organizations at all echelons: government ministries, the Home Front Command, the Israel Police, Magen David Adom (MDA), firefighting and rescue services, local government, infrastructure authorities, and others. In addition to drills at the command centers, there were on-site activities. A special administrative organ was set up to coordinate the activity of the “third sector” in the exercise. Thirty-five local governments were directly involved in the exercise for two days, and government ministries were required to assist them in supplying critical services for civilians in an emergency. An important component was the call for the involvement of the entire population in one of the segments of the exercise: the public was asked to follow emergency procedures and take shelter after a siren was sounded throughout the country.

Turning Point 4 was the fourth nationwide exercise of its type. It represents the implementation of one of the important lessons derived from the Second Lebanon War (2006), which in the case of the management of the civilian front was defined as a chain of misconduct and failure on the part of the different echelons, “from the prime minister to the Home Front Command, who failed miserably in their decision

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making, in their situation assessments, and in the execution of caring for the civilian population and guaranteeing their normal routine.”² In many ways, the Second Lebanon war marked a turning point in the way Israeli government institutions relate to preparing and managing the civilian front. A National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA, Hebrew acronym RAHEL) was established (April 2007) to coordinate and integrate emergency response among the various agencies. The Home Front Command was strengthened, and to a great extent it changed its operational concept to include more comprehensive management of the civilian public during an emergency. In addition, it was decided to hold a series of varied exercises throughout the year to test different scenarios of mass disasters and military confrontations and the systemic responses to them.

The Contribution of the Exercise to Public Preparedness

Drilling the systems and the public, with an emphasis on joint functioning and connectivity, is of unquestionable value in preparing a nation for military confrontations, especially when the public and the civilian front are the clear, preferred targets. Israel is currently a model for emulation for many other countries that are diligently studying Israel’s practices of preparedness and drilling.³ In the Israeli context, the system exercises are particularly important in two categories.

The first is in the systemic sense, as a means to improve coordination and cooperation between the multiple response agencies at the state government and local levels. Coordination between large bureaucratic entities is always complex, as has been demonstrated time and again in Israel and elsewhere, especially in cases of mass casualty disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2004). This is especially true in Israel, given its unique, continuous security challenge and the lack of a single, authorized, responsible body to manage the systems involved and to coordinate their activities.⁴ Ostensibly, once it was decided to establish NEMA, this organ became charged with the coordination at the government level.⁵ Yet in practice, three years after its establishment, NEMA is still small in size and weak in terms of the authority needed to handle such a weighty task successfully. Its ability to impose an organizational culture, policy, and means to ensure coordination and integration in an emergency situation is fairly limited. Most of the agencies

view the IDF's Home Front Command as the strongest operational organization, because of the relative abundance of its resources, its professional expertise in the relevant fields (e.g., search and rescue), and its status and prestige as a military unit. The Home Front Command thus assumes the leading role in practice, coordinating the work in the field, even if it is not the exclusive authority on the scene. The issue of authority and responsibility is clouded and ill defined, both at the national and at the local level, and leaves much room for gratuitous conflicts and struggles for prestige. This undesirable situation will not change until legislation establishes which organ should be in charge and lead the management of the civilian front at the national and local levels. Until then, there is no alternative to frequent drilling of the different systems in order to create at least a basic measure of familiarity with the threat and the response doctrine and practices, as well as the procedures and regulations. The necessity of the exercise was proven yet again, especially at the local level, which is claimed to be – at least in official declarations – the cornerstone of the response system of the civilian front.

The second category is the engagement of the general public. The accepted notion in disaster management is that citizens who are prepared and involved in an active community, capable of defending itself and providing its needs with adequate local solutions, represent the bulk of the nation's social resiliency and the ultimate response to the challenge.⁶ This is true even when the institutional response agents are limited in capability and availability. Conversely, a passive public is far more vulnerable, and quickly becomes a heavy burden on the community, damaging social resiliency.⁷ A comprehensive study recently undertaken by the American Homeland Security Institute (a research institute funded by the US Department of Homeland Security), dealing with a detailed comparison between Israel and the United States in public engagement in coping with terrorism,⁸ devoted an entire chapter to the question of public involvement in preparedness and emergency exercises. The important assertion of this chapter, praising Israel's efforts (compared with the American ones), determines that

To mitigate the effects of terrorism, the public needs to be prepared to respond and recover from the possible consequences of a terrorism-related catastrophe. It is in this context that the grassroots participation in emergency readiness and preparedness training/drills plays a significant

role in allowing the public to familiarize itself with procedures and skills of emergency response and recovery.⁹

In context of its recommendations, the document states,

To develop a culture of resiliency...more will need to be done to advance the notion that preparedness is a joint responsibility for the government and the public, requiring both entities to take an active role. However, these roles should not be independent of each other; their coordination is essential for true national preparedness.¹⁰

In light of these assertions there seems to be a special significance to the Home Front Command's focus on activating the public in the annual exercises to the extent possible. Despite the indifference of a large part of the public (in 2009, some 40 percent participated in the limited portion of the exercise by responding to the siren calling for the public to take shelter), the very fact that the exercise receives extensive publicity and that some population sectors – especially schools – are closely involved, creates a degree of exposure and encourages public engagement and the assimilation of information, albeit partial and indirect. This is a substantive contribution to the enhancement of the public's readiness to face future emergency scenarios. In the future, it will be imperative – not only in the exercises – to underline this crucial issue of activating the public, including the use of community volunteers such as high school and college students, the business community, and others.

Issues for Future Consideration

Although the main thrust of the exercise focused – correctly – on familiar scenarios of rocket and missile attacks on populated centers and strategic civilian infrastructure installations, it was reported that the exercise also involved some sensitive questions that may in the future play a more prominent role in the public's consciousness and in the preparedness for a war on the civilian front. Among them:

Mass Evacuation. A scenario involving extensive evacuation, which has been part of the Israeli scene since the 1991 Gulf War, is not a simple challenge for the government, which faces a difficult dilemma already in the preparation stage and certainly at a time of confrontation. On the one hand, civilian evacuation (not to say flight) is liable to reflect massive demoralization, fear, and system disintegration. As such, it may express

national weakness or be perceived as such by the enemy, striving to generate precisely these results when directing its terrorist activities. On the other hand, past experience has proven that what is needed is a measured, rational approach to the phenomenon, which reflects a natural impulse stemming from legitimate anxiety that is difficult to prevent or minimize. On the horns of this dilemma, the Israeli government chose not to adopt a sweeping decision on evacuation in 2006 and hardly intervened in the mass movement southwards.¹¹

Over the years, as the missile threat against Israel has grown – nearly all of Israel is now within range of high trajectory enemy fire – the need to formulate a systemic approach to this issue is called for as part of the public preparedness. Indeed, in the current exercise, it was reported¹² that the Home Front Command is formulating a detailed program for mass evacuation of civilians from areas under attack and that preliminary aspects of the program are ready to be reviewed by the Command. It was also reported that according to the head of the Home Front Command,¹³ the state must take responsibility for its citizens even in a mass evacuation and through prior, organized planning to assist local authorities in absorbing the evacuees. As part of the last exercise it was reported that the Home Front Command examined the option of Jewish evacuees from Petah Tikva taking shelter in the Arab town of Taibe.

Response to cyber terrorism. In a speech given at the Institute for National Security Studies, the head of IDF Military Intelligence alluded extensively to this field, asserting that cyberspace allows small nations and individuals to gain potential power that in the past was reserved only for the great superpowers: “Here we see the potential for force operation that...is capable of inflicting damage on military forces and on states’ economic lifelines, without limitations of time or range...The powers have recognized that there is a new world to be reckoned with.”¹⁴ Exposure of such acknowledgment of this threat may still be sparse, but the issue itself and the inherent threats against the civilian front are familiar and

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have been discussed extensively throughout the world for years.¹⁵ As part of civilian front readiness it is necessary to relate to future cyber threats, particularly against national infrastructures that rely on information and communication systems. The current exercise reportedly addressed the issue of defense against cyber threats, and appropriately so. It will be necessary to discuss this critical issue more thoroughly in the future, despite its high degree of sensitivity, during and between the home front exercises.

Relating to non-conventional threats. Like the previous exercises, the current exercise included a segment devoted to the response to chemical attacks. Previous exercises reportedly dealt with responses to biological and atomic threats as well. This testifies to the prevalent assessment in the defense establishment that the weaponry in Syrian hands is also liable to fall into Hizbollah and Hamas hands, thereby requiring adequate preparation. At the same time, the Home Front Command saw fit to take advantage of the drill to highlight the gap regarding the decision to equip all citizens in Israel with personal protection kits: today, the budget allocated to this goal is sufficient to distribute personal protection kits to not more than two thirds of the population. This issue requires attention, not only because of the actual shortage of kits, but also because it is liable to reflect neglect on the part of the state's decision makers in an area defined by the Home Front Command experts as one that necessitates appropriate resources to meet the defined needs. Civil defense in the face of non-conventional arsenals and other weapons of mass destruction requires additional thinking and perhaps even widespread education and systemic drilling in order to enhance public awareness and readiness, particularly as the challenge in these cases is not only the physical response in and of itself, but also the possible outbreak of large scale panic among the public and the need to contain and manage it rapidly and effectively.

Conclusion

The organizers of the exercise appear satisfied with the drill and the lessons learned from it. Indeed, holding a series of sequential exercises, including the annual national drills, is an important development and should be continued, though not necessarily with the identical patterns familiar from previous years. Future exercises should perhaps be

expanded to include other scenarios, such as earthquakes or hazardous materials spills, which require particular attention in preparedness and handling.

The importance of training the systems to promote cooperation and coordination and the significance of inclusion and engagement of the public in these scenarios demand serious attention. Inter-system coordination is critical; without it, the system as a whole will not function as it should. Yet even an optimal level of coordination is not sufficient to provide the needed response to the multiple sites of impact that can be expected in a major, multi-front conflict. In such circumstances there is no alternative to rely on the public at large, on its capacity to provide aid, and most of all, to depend on its social resilience. The latter would best be expressed by the rapid return to routine, perhaps even to an improved situation, which allows effective attention to the damage to life and property, even at a time when state resources are in short supply.

This is the critical issue that demands attention, planning, preparation, and training beyond what has been done to date. It would be wrong to place the burden of the civilian front squarely on the shoulders of institutional first responders, whether of the central government – which, in essence, is the situation today – or those operated by the local government. It is important to move away from the top-down model and to adopt a more balanced approach, empowering a bottom-up concept. In practice, this means continuing to improve the capacities of the institutional organizations and their synchronization, while at the same time developing two other channels. The first has already earned some attention, but needs to be expanded, namely, strengthening the capabilities of the local governments to manage the disaster in its zone, while building on the skills of the local system itself and its command and control of forces that will be allocated to them in time of emergency. The second is empowering the public and its capabilities, encouraging volunteer networks, and developing local informal leadership to improve the public's capability to provide for itself and its victims as required. There is a tremendous potential in the public at large, and only a fraction of it is tapped. Moreover, engaging the public at large will help not only to mitigate damage and minimize casualties, but will also nurture its social resiliency.

This issue, like others connected to the basic notion of engaging the civilian front in the face of the multi-faceted terrorist threat, requires an ongoing, sometime Sisyphean, effort every day of the year. Exercises like Turning Point 4 will undoubtedly continue to strengthen the abilities of the various agencies involved and will in all likelihood also improve coordination between them. However, this is not enough to shape and stabilize the system, to formulate its approaches, or to change basic patterns currently characterizing the scene. For this to happen it is necessary to engage in an open public debate and reach difficult decisions on key issues that have not yet been taken. The most important of these are: the role of the civilian public in Israel's overall security concept; the place of civil defense in relation to the components of military deterrence and attack; responsibility and authority to manage the civilian front in routine times and in emergencies; the role of the IDF and the Home Front Command in relation to the civilian institutions, and especially local government; the role of civilians, volunteers, and the civil society in systemic responses to emergencies; and a doctrine of utilizing the nation's resiliency, including its "hard" components (the economy, infrastructures) as well as its "soft" ones (society, culture, politics, and leadership). Until a comprehensive systemic doctrine is formulated and agreed on with regard to these fundamental issues, emergency drills will not achieve significantly more than technical and methodological improvements – important though these may be – of the existing system.

Notes

- 1 The National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), <http://www.rahel.mod.gov.il/SiteCollectionDocuments/goal.ppt#482,1>. According to the Home Front Command the purpose of the exercise is "to improve the preparedness of the organizations *and the public* to cope with emergencies" (emphasis added). See <http://www.oref.org.il/1000-he/FAQ.aspx>. <http://www.oref.org.il/404.aspx>.
- 2 Summary of the state comptroller's report: "The Preparedness of the Civilian Front and Its Functioning in the Second Lebanon War – Summary / Main Findings," July 2007.
- 3 Seventy visitors from thirty countries, more than in previous years, came to observe the drill, IDF Spokesperson, May 25, 2010.
- 4 Deputy Minister of Defense Matan Vilnai, head of the National Emergency Management Authority, in an interview with Amos Harel, *Haaretz*, May 26, 2010: "Over 400 command centers are involved in this drill. It's as if the whole world is involved. We have to determine inter-relations between all of

these, and to coordinate all the respective organizational cultures. You cannot imagine how hard it is to create a joint blueprint for responsibility and authority, with every organization convinced that it can do the job best, and can do it by itself."

- 5 Government Decision 23B of December 19, 2007, limits the authority of NEMA in emergencies to that of a command center advising the minister of defense.
- 6 Fran H. Norris, Susan P. Stevens, Betty Pfefferbaum, Karen F. Wyche, Rose L. Pfefferbaum, "Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy for Disaster Readiness," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 41 (2008): 127-50; Michael T. Kindt, *Building Population Resilience to Terror Attacks: Unlearned Lessons from Military and Civilian Experience*, The Counterproliferation Papers, Future Warfare Series No. 36, USAF Counterproliferation Center, Air University, Alabama.
- 7 See, for example, M. Lahad, A. Ben Neshet, "From Improvising in Trauma to Developing a Doctrine: How Communities Cope with Terrorism – Preparation, Intervention and Rehabilitation," in A. Sommer and A. Bleich (eds.), *Early Interventions After Disasters and Terrorism: The Israeli Experience* (Tel Aviv: Ramot Publishers, 2005). Also see Amanda Ripley, *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes – and Why* (NY: Crown Publishers, 2006); and Wendy A. Schafer, John M. Carroll, Steven R. Haynes, and Stephen Abrams, "Emergency Management Planning as Collaborative Community Work," *Journal of Homeland Emergency Management* 5, no. 1 (2008).
- 8 "Public Role and Engagement in Counterterrorism Efforts: Implications of Israeli Practices for the U.S. / Final Report," Homeland Security Institute, April 2009.
- 9 Ibid., p. 79.
- 10 Ibid., p. 103.
- 11 Gilead Shenhar, David Gidron, Kobi Peleg, "Mass Population Displacement under an Unclear Evacuation Policy during the Israel-Lebanon War 2006," *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* 5, no. 1 (2008).
- 12 Amos Harel, "IDF Formulated Mass Evacuation Program for Civilians in Missile Attack," *Haaretz*, May 20, 2010.
- 13 Home Front Command Headquarters, Population Department, "Civilian Defense Doctrine of Local Government," May 2007, pp. 72-73.
- 14 "Security Challenges of the 21st Century," December 2009, <http://www.inss.org.il/events.php?cat=257&incat=&read=3572>.
- 15 See, for example, Frank J. Cilluffo and J. Paul Nicholas, "CyberStrategy 2.0," *Journal of International Security Affairs*, April 2006; and Michael Chertoff, *Homeland Security: Assessing the First Five Years* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 95-103.