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Earthquake in Israel: An Inevitable Threat, Severe Damage – Yet Still on the Margins of Threat Perception

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The Threat Perceptions Index recently published by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) presents a troubling paradox. Only 14 percent of the public view a large-scale natural disaster as one of the three main threats to Israel over the next five years, and only 5 percent regard it as the most significant threat. Among the experts surveyed, the figures are even lower: 10 percent and 3 percent, respectively. Yet when the public was asked what would happen if such a scenario were to materialize, 64 percent estimated that the damage would be severe or very severe, and 58 percent believed that the country's level of preparedness was low or very low. In other words, the public does not deny the severity of such a disaster, nor does it place much trust in the country's preparedness for it, yet it still fails to perceive it as a main threat. This gap warrants discussion, particularly regarding the scenario of a major earthquake—the most severe natural disaster relevant to Israel.

The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) recently presented an index based on public opinion surveys conducted in February and July 2026, as well as an expert survey conducted in February. The surveys examined the perceptions of the Israeli public and experts regarding a range of major threat scenarios facing the State of Israel—security, diplomatic, social, economic, and environmental.

Among the large-scale natural disasters that Israel could face, this article focuses on a major earthquake, the most severe disaster scenario relevant to Israel. Given its location along the Dead Sea Transform, minor earthquakes occur in Israel daily, while major ones occur at long intervals. Over the past millennium, notable earthquakes are known to have occurred in 1068, 1202, 1546, 1759, 1837, 1927, and 1995. All were at a magnitude of over 6.2, and all caused extensive damage and numerous fatalities.

An earthquake is an exceptional threat on the list of examined threats. Diplomatic, security, social, and economic threats all depend on a chain of decisions and events. For instance, for the Iranian nuclear threat to materialize, Iran would need to acquire a military nuclear capability, decide to use it, possess the ability to launch a nuclear weapon at Israel, and succeed in penetrating Israel's defense systems. Each link in this chain may or may not materialize. An earthquake, on the other hand, does not depend on an enemy's intent, deterrence, intelligence, or human decision. A major earthquake will occur sooner or later. As the familiar saying goes: A strong, destructive earthquake in Israel is not a question of *if*, but *when*. While we have no ability to prevent it, we have considerable ability to reduce its damage.

An important methodological caveat is required here. The survey asked about threats over the next five years. There is currently no scientific way to determine whether a destructive earthquake will occur

specifically within this time frame. Therefore, the fact that only 25 percent of the public assess the likelihood of a large-scale natural disaster occurring in the next five years as high or very high does not necessarily indicate a lack of understanding. It does, however, demonstrate the extent to which a short time horizon shapes threat perceptions. In the July comparative summary, which included 16 scenarios, a natural disaster ranked 13th in terms of perceived likelihood. In other words, a threat that is certain to materialize over the long term and for which preparations are necessary is pushed to the bottom of the list of priorities because there is no certainty that it will materialize in the coming years.

A comparison with other threats highlights this. 43 percent of the public assess the likelihood that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons within the next five years as high or very high, and 61 percent make the same assessment regarding a large-scale missile attack. This is not a professional determination that these scenarios are indeed more likely; it is a measure of perception. Yet this gap reveals that the public gives greater weight to threats within the familiar political-security arena, which are the subject of daily public discourse, than to an earthquake whose timing remains ambiguous.

The gap becomes even more pronounced when shifting from the question of likelihood to that of damage. 64 percent of the public assess that the damage caused by a natural disaster, should one occur, will be severe or very severe —ranking it 6th out of the 16 scenarios. Among experts, the gap is even more striking: 73 percent assess that the damage will be severe or very severe, yet only 10 percent ranked a natural disaster among the top three main threats. That is to say, even those who assess the consequences of the event as extremely severe do not necessarily perceive it as a main threat.

The expected damage is also perceived as cross-cutting: 61 percent of the public anticipate severe disruption to the functioning of state authorities, 67 percent to personal security, 68 percent to economic security and standard of living, and 63 percent to mental and social resilience. This is therefore not a localized threat, but rather a scenario capable of simultaneously harming most components of national resilience.

The public's assessment of the severity of the potential damage is not unfounded. The national reference scenario forecasts over 7,000 fatalities, approximately 8,600 severely injured, around 37,000 lightly injured, roughly 29,000 buildings destroyed or severely damaged, and about 290,000 buildings sustaining light to moderate damage. In the immediate aftermath of a major earthquake, some half a million people could be displaced, while approximately 170,000 could remain without long-term housing. When factoring in the reconstruction of buildings and infrastructure, temporary alternative housing, treatment of casualties, debris removal, the disruption of economic activity, and lost GDP throughout the years of recovery, the total cost to the economy can be estimated at upwards of NIS 1 trillion, potentially reaching NIS 1.5 trillion. In a worst-case scenario, the cost to the economy could even exceed this figure.

Then comes the figure that should be particularly disturbing: only 8 percent of the public believe that state preparedness for a natural disaster is high, 30 percent assess that some degree of preparedness exists, and 58 percent believe that preparedness is low or very low. This is one of the highest rates of perceived lack of preparedness among all of the scenarios examined. This combination is the heart of the problem: the public assesses the likelihood as relatively low, the damage as high, and preparedness as low. From a risk management perspective, this is precisely the type of scenario that cannot be left unaddressed until its immediate likelihood appears high.

In the case of an earthquake, public concern regarding the lack of preparedness is not unfounded. A January 2024 State Comptroller's report found that only 3.5 percent of the buildings in need of reinforcement had actually been reinforced; approximately 60 percent of hospitals are either not earthquake-resistant or their level of earthquake resistance is unknown; and only about 5 percent of the approximately 1,600 educational institutions requiring reinforcement had been or were in the process of being reinforced.

Thus, despite possessing geological "intelligence" and the certainty that a strong earthquake will occur sooner or later, the state is doing very little in terms of preparedness. Although positive steps have been taken, including the establishment of the "Tru'a" (Alarm) system for short-notice alerts and government work on a long-term rehabilitation plan, what has been done remains vastly insufficient to close the gap between the current and required levels of readiness. The survey data adds another layer: it is not only the government that struggles to translate knowledge into action; in the public consciousness as well, the threat remains on the margins.

Why is this the case? The survey itself cannot prove causality, but three main explanations can be proposed.

The first is the gap between the time horizon of the threat and the time horizon of human beings and governments—along with the accompanying political incentive. An earthquake could occur tomorrow morning or in several decades. The cost of reinforcement and preparedness is immediate, whereas the benefit will only manifest in an unknown future, perhaps long after the government that made the investment is no longer in power. Furthermore, the success of prevention is almost invisible. A reinforced bridge that did not collapse, a retrofitted school where students were unharmed, or a hospital that continued to function do not generate a "picture of victory." In contrast, post-disaster search, rescue, and assistance are tangible, photogenic, and immediate actions. Research by Healy and Malhotra (2009) found, in the American context, that voters reward politicians for post-disaster relief spending, but do not reward them to the same extent for pre-disaster preparedness investments. A structural incentive is thus created to underinvest in prevention and preparedness.

The second explanation is attention. War, missiles, terrorism, and Iran are present threats: they feature an adversary, headlines, intelligence, budgets, ongoing discussions, and sirens. An earthquake issues no ultimatum and generates no strategic warning months in advance. As long as the ground is quiet, it is easy to defer it from the agenda. In the Israeli system, which is saturated with immediate security threats, the competition for attention is particularly fierce. This is a hypothesis that the survey does not prove, but the pattern of the rankings is consistent with it.

The third explanation is institutional. The responsibility for earthquake preparedness is fragmented among government ministries, local authorities, the Inter-Ministerial Steering Committee, the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA/RACHEL), Home Front Command, and additional bodies. When there is no single body possessing comprehensive responsibility, authority, and budget, it is easy for each entity to only partially fulfill its role, while assuming that overall responsibility lies elsewhere. This division of responsibility also makes it difficult to establish a binding multi-year plan and to assess over time whether progress is actually being made.

These explanations, and others, are liable to create a self-perpetuating cycle: the public does not rank the threat highly, so political pressure to address it remains weak; the government does not place it high

on its list of priorities, so it remains outside the public's attention; and in the absence of sustained action, the public also receives an implicit message that the threat is likely not urgent. Only after a major earthquake elsewhere does a brief window of attention open—and it is liable to close before a multi-year policy can be built.

The conclusion is not that the public should be frightened, but rather that national security policy cannot be derived solely from the public's scale of fears or from the perceived likelihood of an event occurring in the next five years. Responsible risk management must weigh likelihood, severity of damage, vulnerability, and level of preparedness. In the case of an earthquake, uncertainty regarding the timing is not a reason to wait; on the contrary, it is the reason to start early, since reinforcing buildings, infrastructure, and systems is a process that takes years.

From here the policy implications are clear. A single national entity must be given responsibility, authority, and a dedicated budget; a multi-year plan must be formulated for reinforcing public buildings, infrastructure, and residential buildings according to priorities based on risk and vulnerability; the plan should include measurable targets and annual reporting to the government and the Knesset; and the training and preparedness of the public and local authorities must be strengthened. A dedicated budget on the order of NIS 1 billion per year—about one-tenth of a percent of the state budget—could serve as a starting point for a substantive and ongoing plan, instead of a series of unfulfilled decisions.

In light of this, the new Threat Perceptions Index is more than a mirror of what Israelis fear. It is also a mirror of what we have difficulty seeing. The role of leadership is not merely to respond to the threats the public ranks highest; it must also protect the state from severe threats that fail to compete for our daily attention.

The question is not whether a destructive earthquake will occur within the next five years—this we cannot know. The question is whether, over the next five years, we will do what needs to be done before it occurs.

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