

# Turning Our Back on the Civilian Front

**Meir Elran**

The state comptroller's report on the preparedness and performance of the home front during the Second Lebanon War<sup>1</sup> determined that the State of Israel's political and military leaders, each within the confines of his/her office, failed in the decision making, preparations, and performances with regard to the home front. The serious defects were defined in terms of neglect and abandonment; or to borrow from the imagery of the state comptroller, "an eclipse" of governmental function.<sup>2</sup>

In the comptroller's thick and detailed report, with its incisive survey and harsh criticism of the many serious defects in the home front's preparedness and the deficient performance of the relevant agencies during the war, few new observations emerged. The problems were apparent during the war itself, and were subsequently investigated and documented in numerous media articles<sup>3</sup> and in the reports of public committees. These include the initial (September 2006) and final report of the Knesset Defense and Foreign Affairs sub-committee, headed by Ami Ayalon, which defined the government's handling of the home front as a "failure of leadership." A report by the NGO support group Shatil<sup>4</sup> spoke of "the sovereign's absence," and described "a serious picture of communities that were neglected, local government systems that collapsed, and a government that did not provide for the needs of its citizens."

Beyond the exposure of the serious findings, there is an important common thread to these reports: they have apparently succeeded, perhaps in greater measure than in the past, in sparking public debate on the issue of civilian defense. Public awareness of the issue's urgency has grown, even if it is still questionable to what extent it has prompted a sufficient response from the bodies responsible for actual systemic change of the grim situation. A year after the war, the picture is far from optimal, and while words abound, deeds to bridge the gaps between problems and solutions remain few and far between.

The purpose of this essay is to contribute to the public debate via an analysis of some of the main issues critical to Israel's civilian defense abilities, and to propose a model for the overall improvement in management of future threats.

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## Not a Rearguard, but a (Civilian) Front

The question of civilian defense in Israel exposes the fallacy of the conventional distinction between “front” and “rear.” According to traditional mythos, our soldiers fight the enemy on the battlefield, the site of the heroic action. Their combat demands the staunch support of the public as well as tremendous prior investments. The battlefield is where the war is decided. The rear is traditionally considered of secondary importance, a theater that is supposed to be protected by transferring the combat arena swiftly to enemy territory. According to this logic, management of the home front is peripheral, colorless, lacking in glory, and perhaps in the final analysis not really worthwhile.

In practice, this myth was false in many of Israel’s wars. While there was certainly tremendous value and legitimacy to the IDF’s celebrated image, its glorification came at the expense of the home front, which was not warranted. In any case, since the 1991 Gulf War, when thirty-nine Iraqi Scud missiles transformed the civilian front into the principal theater, a process of change has begun. The second Palestinian intifada, particularly the period between September 2000 and May 2002, was essentially a war that was conducted on the civilian front. The number of civilian casualties was far greater than the number of soldiers killed or wounded. The battle that continues in Sderot and the towns surrounding Gaza is also conducted primarily on the civilian front. Most of all, however, the Second Lebanon War was characterized by its clear emphasis on the civilian front.

This characteristic is not coincidental. It is a function of Israel’s enemies’ understanding that their chances of attaining significant achievements on the traditional front through

conventional military encounters are slim. This is particularly the case in a symmetrical war between the IDF and any one of the militaries surrounding Israel, or a conventional war against a coalition of forces. Hence the enemy’s interest in attacking the civilian front, which enables bypassing the direct military encounter via long range high trajectory rockets or missiles. This logic guided the Syrians in building their missile force, including their chemical weapons arsenal. This is the logic that formed the basis of the Iraqi missile force during Saddam Hussein’s rule, as well as Iran’s military buildup, which is meant both to deter Israel and to realize its potential military ability if deterrence fails.

From the point of view Israel’s enemies, attacking the civilian population, Israel’s soft underbelly, should yield important achievements in an asymmetrical war. This was the operational logic behind Palestinian suicide terrorism – which is essentially a chilling form of standoff weapon – in the second intifada. This was also the logic behind Hizbollah’s force buildup in the years prior to the war and its utilization during the war: attacking the civilian population in order to expose the weakness in the social fabric of Israel, as per Nasrallah’s famous “spider web”



*Building damaged by a Katyusha rocket, Bat Galim, Haifa.*

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theory.<sup>5</sup> This is the scenario that will apparently recur in future confrontations.

For this reason, there is particular importance to the conceptual positioning of the “rear” in its appropriate position – as a civilian front that is prepared, developed, and ready for war, alongside the military front.<sup>6</sup> Both fronts are important, and both deserve special attention. Investing in one while neglecting the other could harm Israel’s strategic abilities. This essential conceptual change by itself will have no significance if the necessary practical applications do not take place in the realms of strategic planning, budgeting, and actual construction of national and local systems.

### **A Multilevel Response to a Multilevel Problem**

Just as the military front is not composed of one component and requires various integrated solutions, so is the home front, which is far from being a homogeneous entity and demands a similarly multifaceted response. Indeed, the civilian front is more complex than the military one, and requires far greater creativity and sensitivity in providing appropriate solutions. In essence, defense of the civilian front is made up of a number of layers.

*The first level is political and diplomatic, and can be advanced via peace or long term ceasefire arrangements with one’s neighbors, in order to minimize the risks of war and the threats against the civilian front. This is the ultimate answer, but in Israel’s current situation, not yet realistic.*

*The second level is the creation of strategic deterrence, which should establish a situation of long range military stability, as has been the case on the Syrian front since the Yom Kippur War. This is an appropriate answer to the*

civilian front, as long as it lasts. The complex question of what happened to Israel’s deterrence image due to the Second Lebanon War is beyond the scope of this discussion.<sup>7</sup> It presumably contributed in important ways to the strengthening of Israeli deterrence both vis-à-vis Hizbollah and vis-à-vis the Syrians. But deterrence on its own can be insufficient. Unexpected developments may spur deterioration and the shattering of stability in an unplanned manner. This is certainly true in the Middle East, as evidenced by the 2006 war.

*The third level is prevention, primarily at the first stage of the war should it erupt. As shown by the first phase of the Six Day War, and in a different vein by the first hours of the Second Lebanon War, the elimination of the long range firepower capabilities of the enemy is the preferred solution. The IDF has continued to enhance this important capability, which is intended to shield the civilian front from at least a significant portion of the enemy’s threat. From the experience of the Second Lebanon War, however, it is clear that preventive capability is not guaranteed.<sup>8</sup> It depends on high quality, exact, and updated intelligence. The enemy is aware of the importance of hiding its offensive capabilities and of the need to build its force in a varied manner that enables an attack on the civilian front with mobile or other measures that are difficult to identify and destroy.*

*The fourth level is the interception of missiles and rockets after they have been launched. Israel’s defense establishment has apparently managed to find a solution to the threat of long range ballistic missiles, but this is not the case for primitive short term rockets. The Katyusha onslaught from southern Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and the Qassam rockets launched from the Gaza Strip toward*

Sderot show clearly that this dimension has not yet been solved, and create a serious hole in the defensive envelope of the civilian front. Presumably the recent decision to renew the development of the Nautilus and other systems could provide some solution, though only in the future. Moreover, the huge gap between the cost of developing an efficient defense system against the negligible investment involved in building the threat is an ongoing issue.

*The fifth level is the physical protection of civilian targets, such as sensitive national installations, and shelters in public buildings<sup>9</sup> and residential homes. It is blatantly clear that a comprehensive solution is not monetarily feasible<sup>10</sup> and raises sensitive social issues.<sup>11</sup> The Sderot experience of the past years provides a fitting reflection of the problem on the one hand and the difficulty in finding solutions on the other. Until now, the state has supplied limited solutions only, which generally are more a response to political pressures than an orderly assessment of the real needs.<sup>12</sup> Another more problematic issue is the civilian protection against chemical agents. The debate surrounding protection kits, their distribution, their collection, and all that derives from this testifies that the comprehensive solution is not on the horizon. Israel is still protected in an improvised and partial manner.*

*The sixth and most basic level is attending to the needs of the individual and the community. Once deterrence fails, preventive actions are only partially successful, interception has limited effects, and protection remains lacking, it should be assumed that in a future confrontation the enemy will succeed in launching missiles or rockets of one kind or another and in attacking the civilian infrastructure. In the last war, Hizbollah launched*



about 4000 rockets. Roughly 900 of them hit population centers, more than half (471) in Safed alone. Rockets caused the deaths of thirty-nine civilians and seriously wounded 107 people, with another 138 moderately wounded.<sup>13</sup> From these numbers, one can perhaps anticipate the risks of an attack on the civilian front in a future war,<sup>14</sup> mainly if it is conducted from the Syrian front (without assessing what might happen should Iran also enter the picture). The amount of direct damage expected in this case will require an appropriate solution, different in scope and in kind from that which existed in the last war.

Another important element is cognitive in nature. In a war where the civilian front plays an active role, there is added value to national resilience as a decisive strategic factor in Israel's ability to withstand the challenges posed by its enemies. There are many definitions of national resilience.<sup>15</sup> Suffice it here to suggest that national resilience can be measured by society's ability to react appropriately to a trauma, and to return to routine as soon as possible in a short time after the event. Alternatively, the lack of resilience

*L-r: Haifa mayor Yona Yahav, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and Union of Local Authorities chairman Adi Eldar, following a tour by the prime minister in Haifa, July 18, 2007*

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will be measured by an inappropriate reaction and the inability to return to routine in due time. In the Second Lebanon War, Israeli society demonstrated a reasonable level of national resilience.<sup>16</sup> There are those who claim that had the war continued beyond the thirty-three days, Israel would have witnessed a more serious damage to its national resilience. Perhaps. It is clear, however, that national resilience is also dependent on confidence among the public that the authorities are doing all they can to provide the citizen with the personal security and the psycho-social treatment required during a war that targets the civilian front.<sup>17</sup> Regarding this dimension, the public today seems quite skeptical.<sup>18</sup> In order to strengthen national resilience, there is a need to rebuild the public's trust in its leaders' ability and intention to engage seriously with this important and sensitive matter.

### **The Proposed Model for the Civilian Front**

The following model is proposed to address this multilevel problem that demands an integrated multilevel solution, to be constructed and managed by the responsible agencies.

It is imperative that a national emergency authority<sup>19</sup> be built, which will be responsible at the highest level for the strategic management of the civilian front. This will provide a solution for the main deficiency exposed in the last war, whereby responsibilities were blurred and divided among the many entities involved in the effort. This authority, which must be civilian in nature<sup>20</sup> and backed by appropriate legislation, should determine strategy, long range goals, planning, budget requirements, standards, and supervision measures. It must build a model of appropriate coordination between the various agencies.

In practice, the model should be constructed on the following pillars:

■ The Defense Ministry will be responsible for the elements of deterrence, prevention, interception, and protection via the IDF, the Home Front Command, and the other relevant military agencies.

■ The local governments will be responsible for handling the psycho-social care for citizens, as well as for all the physical aspects of the emergency and the return to routine, as per the doctrine that the national authority will formulate. Only those elected to handle the citizens and communities in daily life can tap the knowledge necessary for the activation of the systems during emergencies. There is no one who can replace the local governments in this task. They should be assigned and equipped to ensure coordination and integration with the other agencies acting in their sphere, such as the Home Front Command (with an emphasis on shelter, evacuation, and rescue), the Israel police, Magen David Adom, the fire department, and others. Some of the stronger municipalities are already prepared for this task.<sup>21</sup> Others still need to invest heavily in advanced preparedness and can be assisted by the national authority. Still others, the weaker ones, will need assistance for years.<sup>22</sup> This is necessary also for narrowing the gap between strong and weak,<sup>23</sup> with all its ramifications as to the sense of deprivation of the weak and its impact on national resilience.

■ The third sector, with its philanthropic organizations, should be integrated organizationally within the framework of the local authorities. Its contributions are socially beneficial and must be encouraged.<sup>24</sup> But it is imperative that the situation that existed during the last war, where the non-profit organizations and NGOs – with their particu-

lar agendas – replaced the governmental and municipal authorities be altered.

In conclusion, it is likely that improvisation will continue in the future to be a leading factor in the preparedness of the Israel to protect the civilian front. But this will not be sufficient. Against the scenarios expected in the coming confrontations, there is no alternative to an orderly constructed system, based on a clear multilevel model, in order to ensure that alongside the achievements required on the military front, similar achievements will be registered on the civilian front. Avoiding concerted action may exact a heavy cost.

## Notes

- 1 State Comptroller's Office, "Preparedness and Performance of the Home Front during the Second Lebanon War," July 2007.
- 2 Summary report: concluding chapter and findings, section 4.
- 3 See, for instance, the series of articles in *Haaretz* by Ruth Sinai about the home front during the war, August 2006 – October 2006.
- 4 Shatil and Kochav Hatzafon, "Civilians at the Front: Summary of the Failures in Handling the Home Front in the Second Lebanon War from the Civilian Viewpoint," February 2007.
- 5 Speech at the celebration of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. The exact quotation is: "This Israel, which possesses nuclear weapons and the strongest air force in the region, is nothing but weaker than a spider web."
- 6 The committee to draft Israel's security doctrine, headed by Dan Meridor, proposed the addition of a fourth dimension – civilian defense – to the traditional pillars of deterrence, warning, and decision. See *Maariv*, August 31, 2006, and *Haaretz*, October 3, 2006.
- 7 See Yair Evron, "Deterrence and its Limitations," pp. 34-45, in *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Dimensions*, Meir Elran and Shlomo Brom, eds., Tel Aviv Yediot Ahronot and the Institute for National Security Studies, 2007.
- 8 Giora Romm, "A Test of Rival Strategies: Two Ships Passing in the Night," pp. 46-57, in *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Dimensions*.
- 9 *Haaretz*, April 29, 2007. An examination of some of the local authorities reveals that since the war, there has not been a significant improvement in the state of the shelters – both on the front line and in the large cities. Many public shelters in the localities are not equipped for long periods of refuge. Construction of protected rooms in buildings proceeds slowly.
- 10 *Haaretz*, July 12, 2007. According to the director general of the prime minister's office, 5 billion NIS are lacking for protection of the home front.
- 11 Prime Minister Olmert at the Caesaria conference, according to Ynet, June 28, 2007: "We cannot protect ourselves from everything. In the short term, we cannot provide all the personal security we would like."
- 12 "The Great Protection Failure," Ynet, May 20, 2007.
- 13 According to Health Ministry data quoted in *Yediot Ahronot* on June 22, 2007. To these must be added a further 2,442 lightly wounded and 2,782 who suffered from shock.
- 14 Maj. Gen. (res.) Ze'ev Livne, who was the first commander of Home Front Command: "The next war will see a mass of rockets from different directions: Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and the territories. Tens of thousands of missiles and rockets will be fired toward Israel during the war. This is an absolutely reasonable number to expect." *Yediot Ahronot*, July 6, 2007.
- 15 On national resilience and its definitions, see Meir Elran, *Israel's National Resilience: The Influence of the Second Intifada on Israeli Society*, Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Memorandum no. 81, January 2006.
- 16 Meir Elran, "The Civilian Front in the Second Lebanon War," in *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Dimensions*, pp 101-18. See also "Feelings and Positions of the Public in Relation to the War in the North," *National Opinions* 12, August 2006, B. Y. Cohen Institute for Surveys of Public Opinion, Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Studies.
- 17 Avi Bleich, "Personal Resilience, Social Resilience, Regarding Emotion," *Natal* bulletin 19,

- April 2007. See there also Prof. Mooli Lahad, "You, Me and the Next War."
- 18 Ynet, July 11, 2007, "CEOs Admit: Israel is not Prepared for an All-out War." Also: *Haaretz*, June 30, 2007: "They are not Leaving the Bunker." Residents of the north are convinced that another war is unavoidable, and are preparing to the best of their abilities.
  - 19 See the full report of the state comptroller on the preparedness of the home front July 2007, page 4: "The government must quickly investigate the possibility of a national central body unifying responsibility and authority and able to concentrate attention and effort and coordinate the handling of the home front in times of routine and in times of emergency, including formulating the concept, building the force, and training it."
  - 20 The government's decision of April 2007 to assign the Ministry of Defense with the responsibility for managing the civilian front basically reinforces the current situation. It does not relate to the establishment of a national authority and does not meet the need for placing responsibility on the most senior civilian party.
  - 21 See, for instance, the model of preparedness of the Tel Aviv Municipality, the Population Treatment Headquarters and the "Resilience Center" that was established for the purpose of distributing information on this essential matter to other local authorities throughout Israel.
  - 22 See: Miriam Beiling, "Social Capital and its Contribution to Coping with Crisis Situations in the Communities of the Gaza Strip," *Florsheimer Institute for Diplomatic Studies*, September 2006.
  - 23 The Israel Democracy Institute published in June 2007 the findings of a forum led by Dan Meridor, which dealt with the issue of the home front and the front line communities. Its conclusion: "The State's ability to take care of its citizens without depending on economic ability has been harmed." *Haaretz*, June 17, 2007.
  - 24 Summary of the state comptroller's report 2007: "The enlistment of the private sector... contributed significantly to filling the gap left by the state authorities. At the same time, the authorities did not act to organize assistance in an orderly fashion and direct it to the places most in need of it."

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