

Evacuation of Israeli Communities during an Emergency: Dilemmas and Proposed Solutions

Yonatan Shaham and Meir Elran

In recent years, and especially since Operation Protective Edge (July-August 2014), the issue of evacuation of communities during a future confrontation has been discussed widely among the Israeli public and within the defense establishment. Evidence of the increased interest in this topic can be found in the simulation for officials conducted by Israel's National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA) during the National Emergency Week in June 2016, which dealt with organized, government-initiated evacuations and the state of the independent evacuees. This article analyzes the issues of initiated evacuations, independent evacuees, and the population that remains in the communities under threat during a future confrontation.

The assessment of the Israeli defense establishment is that a future military confrontation is likely to be far graver than in the past. According to the head of NEMA, the new war reference scenario approved by the government indicates that the civilian front must be prepared to handle hundreds of fatalities, thousands of injured, tens of thousands of evacuees, and a significant number of PTSD victims. Also anticipated are prolonged blackouts and major communications disruptions, and assessments are that weak segments of the population (the elderly, new immigrants, the disabled, and other special needs populations) in the regions under threat will suffer significant hardships and will need practical and/or functional assistance.¹

The evacuation of a population, whether during a war or following a natural disaster, is an exceedingly sensitive and complicated endeavor,

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encompassing not only the public ethos and policy considerations, but also complex budgetary, legal, logistical, and operational considerations. This article reviews the current state of affairs and the primary dilemmas in this regard, and presents recommendations for systemic contending with potential scenarios. To this end, the accepted terminology used by emergency agencies relative to the populations under discussion is defined as follows: “*evacuees*” are people whom the government, at its initiative, decides to evacuate en masse and transfer to designated safe locations; “*independent evacuees*” are people who decide of their own volition to evacuate or who are advised to do so by their community leaders; “*those sheltering-in-place*” or “*populations continuously remaining in shelters*” are those who remain in bomb shelters in their neighborhoods for a prolonged number of days or even weeks, and are unable or refuse to leave; “*homeless*” are those whose homes were destroyed and who lack housing solutions, even temporarily. The task of absorbing the evacuees at various safe locations is enormously complicated, but as Israel is presumably capable of contending with the challenge, this article will not address the issue in detail.²

Background

Heightened attention to the subject of evacuation of communities began even before Operation Protective Edge. In 2012, the government decided on the “host hotel” plan to accommodate evacuated populations. Within the scope of this plan, every local authority was required to build a capability to absorb evacuees, up to 4 percent of its population, a process that is still underway.³ Since Operation Protective Edge, there has been a quantum leap in the establishment’s engagement with this issue, as the “host hotel” plan was not activated during Operation Protective Edge and the residents of many communities, especially kibbutzim on the front lines and other communities in the Gaza envelope – either on the level of individual families or by decision of the entire community – chose to evacuate independently of their own accord while government agencies took a passive stance and reached divergent opinions. This reached a peak with the IDF Chief of Staff’s “Anemone Speech,” calling on residents to return to their homes, but shortly thereafter, the rocket fire resumed and residents evacuated once again.⁴ The death of four-year old Daniel Tragerman in Kibbutz Nahal Oz following a mortar attack injected a new urgency to the question of mass evacuations. Residents of Nahal Oz and other communities began saying that “to evacuate is also to be a Zionist, courageous, and correct.”⁵

This triggered a resumption of the theoretical debate about the meaning of mass evacuation of civilians under conditions of war and high risk. This is in contrast to the prevailing narrative espoused in previous years, the so-called “patriotic” stance that “civilians should not be evacuated in the face of enemy fire,” because this, ostensibly, is tantamount to “surrender” to enemy pressure.

History, of course, tells a different story. Israeli communities were evacuated during the War of Independence and during the Yom Kippur War, by government order.⁶ During periods of low intensity conflict, such as in northern Israel during the period of attrition prior to the First Lebanon War and during the Second Lebanon War, large segments of many communities evacuated at their own initiative, without government order. In some cases hundreds of thousands of civilians independently evacuated and “tent cities” were erected, some sponsored by philanthropists.⁷ Some Tel Aviv residents evacuated independently during the 1991 Gulf War, when the city was hit by Iraqi Scud missiles.⁸ This is not the place to debate the question of how the “patriotic” narrative of “standing tall” and refusing to evacuate developed. Also unclear is to what degree the government’s indecision about evacuation was affected by budgetary and legal considerations. The fact is that in recent periods of low intensity confrontations, the government abstained from making a decision about declaring a state of emergency, which is the legal and operational foundation for initiating an evacuation. Clearly this is not happenstance, and budgetary considerations play a part.

In any event, during and since Operation Protective Edge, high ranking IDF personnel, including the GOC of the Southern Command, said that the failure to reach a decision about evacuating communities was a mistake. It appears that since then, the defense establishment has come to recognize that in a wide scale future confrontation, large segments of the population will want to evacuate, and that there is also defense-operational value to evacuating particular communities that are close to the borders.

Accordingly, operative plans are being prepared for initiated evacuations of communities by the IDF and for evacuee absorption in civilian facilities run by the Emergency Services Authority (the Ministry of the Interior authority in

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charge of evacuations, relief aid, and handling of casualties), in conjunction with the Home Front Command and NEMA. Yet notwithstanding the growing engagement in operational and logistics issues, there is no clear cut national framework in the form of a government decision or directive, or even in the form of a declared policy from the political echelon. The absence of such an agreed national framework leads to a situation where each agency develops its own policy, and consequently, today there are significant clashes and disagreements among the various agencies tasked with handling emergencies.

Government-Initiated Evacuations

Today there are two governmental plans for initiated evacuations and absorption of evacuees, so that they will receive food, supplies, and lodging as needed: the first is the “host hotel” plan, which is designed for evacuating a large population of up to some 100,000 people. Most of the absorption sites in this plan are schools. The second plan is a “motel” plan, which is designed for absorbing evacuees from organized communities on the borders, such as kibbutzim and other collective communities. According to this plan, the entire community is supposed to relocate to the same absorption area, the aim being to preserve the community framework.⁹ These two plans focus on the operational-logistics aspect of evacuation and absorption, such as selecting and preparing the absorption facilities and identifying populations requiring special attention. Concurrently, the Ministries of Health, Immigrant Absorption, and Welfare are preparing their own plans for evacuating special needs populations requiring ongoing supervision, such as hospital wards and patients needing artificial respiration, who will be evacuated to receiving institutions, or together with their community, if the entire community is evacuated. The IDF is preparing the operative plans for carrying out the evacuation itself and has begun running drills in cooperation with the communities.¹⁰ The assessments are that even after evacuation, a skeleton population will remain in the community for minimal upkeep of local economic activity.

As a lesson from Operation Protective Edge, the question of evacuation is now included in the IDF’s situation assessment, and presumably will be reviewed continuously as soon as a confrontation breaks out. Today, there is a consensus among the various agencies that the evacuation of communities close to the border must be considered in a number of instances: first, if the physical threat against the community is of high magnitude and it is

not possible to defend it adequately, such as a threat of massive mortar fire or a threat of infiltration from tunnels; second, if the IDF's assessment is that its operational investments in efforts to defend the community exceed the investments required to evacuate the community; third, if it is not possible to maintain routine life in the community due to the mandatory self-defense policy of staying more than 72 consecutive hours in shelters, or due to consecutive days of blackouts. In principle, the evacuation of special needs populations is expected to occur before the evacuation of the general population of that same community, due to the logistical difficulties involved. Special needs populations would also be evacuated from communities not designated for complete evacuation.

It appears that the question about implementing these plans is essentially political and depends on the gravity of the threat posed. Past experience suggests that the government will prefer to abstain from making a decision, certainly an early or a binding decision, and will opt to postpone to the extent possible any decision about implementing the plans, definitely the broader plan, unless intense public pressure ensues. The operational echelons assess that it is reasonably likely that the smaller scale "motel" plan will be implemented during a future confrontation in the northern or southern sectors, and that the likelihood of the implementation of the "host hotel" plan is much slimmer, as this involves larger population and involves extensive preliminary groundwork and very challenging logistics. Inter alia, this would involve absorbing masses of evacuees at schools, which can be expected to lead to significant disruption of the running of educational institutions in the receiving communities and to a diminished ability to maintain routine life in those communities. Maintaining functional continuity during an emergency, which is dubbed "emergency routine" in security jargon, is perceived as a critical component of preserving social resilience during a confrontation.

One of the key implications of this approach is that major urban communities near the borders, such as Kiryat Shmona, Shlomi, and Sderot, would not be evacuated during a future confrontation.¹¹ Similarly, the likelihood of government-initiated evacuations of major urban communities in central Israel is very slim,

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despite debates about a scenario of a “blitz attack” on densely populated urban areas.

Independent Evacuees

Unlike the question of initiated evacuations, which are covered by joint plans and consensus among the emergency agencies, the question of independent evacuees is disputed among the various agencies, and between the same agencies and the heads of the local authorities. There is a lack of agreement and much ambiguity about the anticipated magnitude and character of independent evacuations, as these were marked by differing characteristics in the past, depending upon the particular circumstances. A survey conducted by NEMA in May 2016 found that 14 percent of the population would want to evacuate in the event of a massive missile attack.¹² According to the assessment of the Home Front Command GOC, 20-30 percent of the population who have experienced a “significant threat” (a non-specific term) would evacuate at their own initiative.¹³ Since about two million people reside in the Haifa and northern districts, the number of people in the north alone who would want to be evacuated or would evacuate independently can be expected to exceed 200,000. The assessment is that the independent evacuees would find lodgings by themselves at hotels and guest houses, or stay with relatives or “foster” families within the scope of local organizing efforts, or would camp in open areas, such as in public and national parks.

The IDF and the Home Front Command are, in principle, in favor of encouraging the population to stay in their communities and not evacuate independently, under the approach that home is “the most protected place there is.” From their perspective, in the future war scenario, the threat of rockets is expected to encompass nearly all areas of Israel, and therefore independent evacuees will not substantively improve their personal safety. On the other hand, remaining inside the home and community, finding the best solution for shelter, and complying with the instructions of the Home Front Command will optimally enable an emergency routine that relies on the community and the local infrastructure.

If, however, the state voices its commitment to take care of civilians who evacuate independently, this would likely increase the magnitude of the phenomenon, and therefore, the Home Front Command’s current policy is to publicize messages encouraging civilians to remain in the vicinity of their homes during future confrontations. On the other hand, other

authorities, such as the National Security Council, believe that the state is highly responsible, if not equally responsible, both for those who are evacuated and those who evacuate independently. According to the deputy chief of the NSC in charge of the home front, during a war, the political echelon will order taking care of independent evacuees, and therefore, the preliminary groundwork must be done now. In his assessment, some of the population under threat will decide to evacuate independently, despite the establishment's messages to remain in their homes.¹⁴ NEMA's position in this regard has not yet been spelled out, but there have been attempts to find interim solutions, such as sheltering independent evacuees in facilities that would be designated as "host hotels" and ensuring lodging only, without providing food and other services.

Notwithstanding the differences in the approaches of the various agencies, all agree that if tent cities are erected again, as during the Second Lebanon War, this will signify a failure on the part of the state. Therefore, the assessment is that if this phenomenon does materialize, limited assistance will be provided to independent evacuees, pursuant to ongoing evaluation, through the local authorities and with the assistance of government authorities.¹⁵ The backdrop to this is the complaint voiced by local authorities, including the strongest among them, that they are incapable of providing a solution for a significant volume of independent evacuees in their jurisdiction without state assistance. The differences in approach among the various bodies currently prevent formulation of a plan or a national framework – even de facto – on the subject.

Sheltering-in-Place

There are likewise those expected to remain in their threatened communities, including some sheltering-in-place – those who remain for a prolonged period of days and even weeks in bomb shelters and cannot, or refuse to leave the shelter due to the threat, the frequent sirens, physical limitations, or fear. Estimates are that this phenomenon, which occurred during the rounds of fighting in the Gaza Strip and the Second Lebanon War, will visit hundreds of thousands of people throughout the country during future full-scale confrontations. Efforts by the Home Front Command to improve the warning system so that pinpointed alerts can be issued with high spatiotemporal accuracy are one of the measures to reduce this phenomenon. The assessment is that this phenomenon will be more prevalent in older neighborhoods where buildings have no residential protected space

(*mamad*), and which house, for the most part, weak populations, such as the elderly, new immigrants, people in low socio-economic situations, the disabled, and others. A separate issue in this regard relates to the Arab population in Israel given that the sector has suffered in previous security incidents and enjoys a level of protection and emergency preparedness far lower than those afforded to the Jewish population.

The major challenge in handling the sheltering-in-place population is providing vital services, such as water and food, as well as maintaining sanitary conditions. Since extensive and prolonged damage to vital infrastructure, such as the electric grid, transportation, and communications is liable to occur, difficulties in providing the required services will arise. In extreme cases, prolonged stays in bomb shelters will prevent people from stocking supplies and will incur sanitation and sewage problems. These, coupled with the stress of prolonged stays in shelters, could lead to enhanced tensions and even to outbreaks of violence among those sharing a bomb shelter.

All of the emergency agencies concur that the handling of those sheltering-in-place, both those in municipal bomb shelters and those in residential protected spaces, is the responsibility of the local authority. However, clearly not all local authorities are capable of meeting the challenge. Security officers in strong local authorities believe that they can undertake the endeavor, provided that supplies of water and food will be delivered to their local authorities. Thus, for example, the mayor of Haifa raised his concern that food trucks might refuse to enter the city and that it might be necessary to “pull” food into the city limits.¹⁶

There is a major concern about the ability of weak local authorities who struggle to function in routine times to tend to the population sheltering-in-place. This concern intensifies in light of the statements by high ranking officials in the Home Front Command and elsewhere in the IDF advising that every local authority must prepare to function without assistance and that it is impossible to promise that the IDF or the Home Front Command will assist local authorities in reaching and distributing supplies to those sheltering-in-place,¹⁷ as was done, for example, in Safed during the Second Lebanon War. On the other hand, the Home Front Command has exerted substantial efforts in recent years to strengthen the local authorities’ capabilities to contend with emergencies, and although there is still much room for improvement, the majority of the local authorities have made a quantum leap in their capabilities. Furthermore, it appears that official

statements notwithstanding, Home Front Command forces are preparing to provide significant assistance to struggling local authorities, including with the relay of focused messages encouraging the population to leave their bomb shelters during the breaks between alerts.

In the final analysis, it is clear that the issue of sheltering-in-place has not been resolved and is liable to pose another significant challenge during a future confrontation.

Limits of the State's Responsibility and Possible Gaps in Expectations

The issues discussed in this article highlight the need to reexamine the lines of responsibility and authority dividing the state and its institutions and the civilians at large. It is evident that those engaged in the practicalities of these issues are concerned that large segments of the public expect the state to take care of the entire situation during an emergency, and consequently will not undertake even minimal preparations such as stocking supplies of water, food, and medicines for a number of days, preparing means of communications, and so on. Clearly, the larger the population of those who can take care of themselves during an emergency, even for a few days, the more the state will be able to assist those who are less capable of coping with the challenge. Furthermore, there is a concern that good operational achievements, including the defense solution provided by the Iron Dome system, will generate unrealistic expectations among the public in relation to a future conflict that might include a wider threat to the civilian front. In light of this, it was decided as of 2016 to launch a public campaign, led by the Home Front Command, to improve the public's self-preparations for emergencies, be it war or a natural disaster. It is doubtful that this campaign has changed much in the public's complacent attitude.

In this context, the issue of communicating with the public, prior to and during a war, becomes imperative. On the one hand, informing the public about the future war scenario may prompt the public to make the necessary preparations and reduce the number of independent evacuees, assuming that the public understands that rockets can fall anywhere in the country, and therefore there is no point in evacuating. On the other hand, it is impossible to assess the effectiveness of such a message in reducing the number of independent evacuees. The dilemma becomes even greater when either a wide scale independent evacuation or a particularly dire threat scenario might adversely affect the population's resilience and its ability to cope with the challenges of war. The current institutional approach

is that civilians should be encouraged to prepare for a substantial threat, already during times of calm but without relaying the complete and detailed threat scenario. In real time, messages will be given to boost the public's capacity to cope, with the view that these messages will also help reduce phenomena of independent evacuees and sheltering-in-place.

Insights and Recommendations

The increased engagement in initiated evacuations, independent evacuees, and sheltering-in-place reflects a perceptual change in the Israeli defense establishment. There is increasing recognition that the ethos of "standing one's ground" at any price in threatened communities is no longer relevant, considering the gravity of the threat and given that this ethos has eroded steadily during and following the Second Lebanon War, with wide scale de facto independent evacuations. During the recent conflicts in Lebanon and Gaza, the government and the defense establishment reacted to developments as they occurred and provided only a partial solution to the challenges regarding the issue of evacuation, and then only toward the end of the fighting. Today, government agencies call for a more active policy on this matter. In fact, significant progress has been made in recent years in the ability to evacuate populations, at least in limited numbers, and to offer minimal assistance to the population in need. Nevertheless, some critical questions remain. This situation, if not corrected in time, might lead to serious consequences to the population and to the society's resilience.

First of all, the absence of a binding national policy – typical of the government's approach that usually prefers not to assume binding commitments in advance – might have grave implications. True, there is a general directive from the political echelon regarding initiated evacuations, in the form of the "host hotel" plan, but it focuses mostly on the operational-logistic aspects. No national approach has been formulated in relation to basic questions such as who should be evacuated, according to which priorities, and under what circumstances, and who is in a position to make the decision. The agencies operating in the field have tended to interpret the vague directive spontaneously, according to their understanding, even if it is not consistent with the political echelon's approach. A quintessential example is the consensus among the operational agencies about avoiding the evacuation of cities like Kiryat Shmona and Sderot. This key issue requires regulation that will also be acceptable to the heads of the local

authorities, which will necessarily be key actors during the emergencies, alongside the security agencies.

The repeated statements that a decision about evacuations will be taken in accordance with ongoing evaluations on the ground raise concern that the government will be dragged along by the events and public pressure, or will take action according to narrow political, image-related, or economic considerations. This concern is echoed by statements made by residents and community leaders close to the southern border, indicating their lack of confidence that they will be evacuated at the initiative of the defense establishment, which might be overruled by nonprofessional considerations. Therefore, they decided to prepare themselves for independent evacuation, not coordinated with the authorities, taking upon themselves all of the implied costs. While a common yet vague approach still exists in relation to initiated evacuations that rely on partial guidance from the political echelon, when it comes to independent evacuees and those sheltering-in-place, there exist profound differences in approach between the various bodies. In light of the complexity of the matter and the need for high echelon coordination, there is considerable concern that in real time, action taken will not be effective.

An examination of the existing plans and approaches raises concern that the current policy will strengthen the strong and weaken the weak. The population designated for initiated evacuation within the scope of the “motel” plan is a strong population, organized in community frameworks in kibbutzim and moshavim. Unlike them, the urban population under threat is not planned to be evacuated under any scenario. Among urban residents, the strong who are not evacuated will evacuate independently. The weaker urban residents will have difficulties finding a solution. It is evident that those sheltering-in-place is the issue that is the least organized. This relies, first and foremost, on the local authorities, when some of them are struggling and will encounter difficulties supporting the population and will also demand significant assistance from the Home Front Command. If this situation materializes, very acute internal tensions among the population can be expected to arise, which will exacerbate the tensions already existing in routine times and adversely affect the social resilience, especially under circumstances when social resilience is highly challenged and particularly crucial.

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The findings of this study indicate a need to promote the issues of evacuation and handling of independent evacuees and of civilians remaining in threatened regions. The main recommendation is to formulate a comprehensive, binding national approach. The key components of the approach include initiated evacuations of communities close to the borders, including urban communities, based on materialization of the threat, and assignment of evacuee absorptions to facilities other than schools, such as community centers and institutions of higher education, in order to minimize the disruption of the routine in the receiving communities. In the absence of wide scale preliminary preparations, it will be impossible to effectively and efficiently handle large numbers of independent evacuees simultaneously with the other efforts. Therefore, a message should be conveyed to the population, even before a confrontation, of the advantages of remaining in their homes, and certainly if they have residential protected spaces, as a safer place to stay during a materializing threat. Concurrently, the public's ability to prepare for threats should be strengthened, particularly, an allocation of significant resources to strengthen the local authorities, with an emphasis on weak populations – strengthening that will yield benefits in routine times as well.

Until now, including during the more severe confrontations such as the Second Lebanon War, the security challenge was limited and the civilian front was reasonably capable of withstanding it. Future scenarios are liable to pose a far greater challenge that will require new solutions. Wide scale evacuations of populations for relatively long periods could pose such a challenge. It is incumbent upon the Israeli government to prepare now, so that it will be possible to utilize all necessary resources during an emergency to ensure that a potential mass evacuation will not become a mass disaster in and of itself.

Notes

- 1 Statement by the head of NEMA, Brig. Gen. (res.) Bezalel Treiber, the National Emergency Conference, June 27, 2016.
- 2 For the purpose of this study, interviews were conducted during June-August 2016 with personnel in NEMA, the Home Front Command, and the National Security Council, security officers at local authorities, and residents and functionaries in communities on the borders or designated for evacuation.
- 3 Government decision no. 4877.
- 4 Yossi Yehoshua, "The Anemone Speech," *Ynet*, August 10, 2014.

- 5 Interview conducted on June 28, 2016.
- 6 Adi Hashmonai, "The Untold Story about the Evacuation of Golan Heights Communities," *NRG-Maariv*, September 11, 2013.
- 7 Yael Barnovsky, "We Drew Conclusions from the Tent City in Nitzanim," *Ynet*, May 23, 2007.
- 8 "The Gulf War in Tel Aviv," Municipal archives of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, <http://tel-aviv.millennium.org.il/NR/exeres/6F3B8AFC-6AB0-47AC-A624-E72CDE059538>.
- 9 Yoav Zeitun, "91 % of Israelis: We will Not Send Our Children to School during a Rocket Attack," *Ynet*, May 29, 2016.
- 10 Ahiya Ravid, "Preparing for the Third Lebanon War: Evacuation Drill of Residents on the Northern Border," *Ynet*, June 14, 2016; Noam Amir, "Eisenkot is Waiting for Nasrallah," *Maariv*, September 14, 2016.
- 11 Statement by GOC Home Front Command, Maj. Gen. Yoel Strick, National Emergency Conference, June 17, 2016.
- 12 "Only 14% of Civilians: 'We will Want to Evacuate during a Rocket Attack,'" *Channel 2 News*, May 29, 2016.
- 13 See note 11.
- 14 Interview with the Deputy Director of the National Security Council in charge of the home front, Brig. Gen. (res.) Ze'ev (Vova) Zuk-Ram, July 4, 2016.
- 15 See note 11. Statement by the Deputy Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Yair Golan, National Emergency Conference, June 27, 2016.
- 16 Mayor of Haifa, Yona Yahav, National Emergency Conference. June 27, 2016.
- 17 See note 15.