Responsibility and Authority (or lack thereof)
on the Israeli Home Front

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Among the many issues raised at the sixth annual INSS conference on the preparedness of the home front on July 25, 2013 was the lack of a clear, normative definition of authority and responsibility for management of the Israeli home front. The full severity of this lapse arose seven years ago, following the exposure of failures on the civilian front during the Second Lebanon War, and it has since been discussed repeatedly in various forums and committees. It has generated the design of several systemic models and was the basis for the drafts of the Home Front Law, which though drafted years ago is still on legislative hold. This lapse was also the focus of a series of critical reports by the state comptroller (most recently in July 2013), and it is scheduled to be addressed and resolved by the Prime Minister in the near future.

The organizational framework of the military front is based on normative clarity regarding the questions of hierarchy, authority, and responsibility, which enables coordinated operation of the systems in the face of serious challenges. In contrast, the home front, which is much more complex and faces complicated challenges, has no actual arrangement. All the relevant answers to questions of responsibility and authority on the civilian front are a patchwork, creating ambiguity (intentional, according to some cynics) and constant confusion and tension, well beyond what is expected between bureaucratic systems. This makes emergency preparedness management, as well as the crisis management itself, very difficult. However, a proper arrangement – normative and organizational – would enhance preparedness vis-à-vis the growing threats to the civilian front.

Where then is the crux of the problem, and why has it not been solved?

The root of the problem is that by definition, the challenge to the home front is directed mainly against civilians and civilian systems, and thus it (primarily) requires inherently civilian responses. On the other hand, in Israel there is still a common assumption – and consequently, norm – that the defense establishment and the IDF are the ultimate

response providers to the challenges, certainly those that originate with an external enemy. Hence there is an almost natural tendency to see them as the main element that will and should address the problem. The reality of the past few years has further bolstered this inclination, as the existence (since 1992) of a strong, professional, and increasingly sophisticated body such as the IDF Home Front Command further enhances the leading role of the Command and the IDF in the entire system.

Coping with the increasingly complicated threats to the civilian front requires an integrated and coordinated response by numerous bodies, most of them civilian: the government ministries, the municipalities, the industrial-business sector, the not for profit sector, and the civilians themselves, including those with special needs. Behind this issue stands a fundamental, important question: to what extent should the IDF and the defense establishment set priorities, plan responses, and guide the civilian institutions, which have distinctive civilian needs, on how to prepare for and act during an emergency? This question has only become more complicated in recent years, especially since the establishment in 2007 of the National Emergency Authority, and later, the Home Front Ministry in 2011, both of which were formed from the outset as part of the Ministry of Defense.

There are three main approaches to the regulation of this issue:
a. The approach of the defense establishment, which is primarily interested in maintaining the current situation, with the Defense Minister positioned to be the primary authority at the top of the pyramid engaged with the civilian front, and the Home Front Command as the leading agency in whatever is associated with preparing for and managing emergencies. This approach contends that this setup has proven itself to be adequate so far, and that it allows reasonable cooperation with the various organs while relying on the undisputed robustness of the defense establishment, especially as the threat is essentially a security one.
b. The approach of the National Security Council (NSC), which was asked to prepare the material and recommendations for the government's deliberation, holds that the normative and systemic formation should be fundamentally changed, with the Ministry of Internal Security positioned at the top. This proposal, which originated in past recommendations of the NSC, argues that the defense establishment should be released from the onerous burden of the home front and allowed to focus on managing offensive and defensive campaigns on the military front. Their proposal is also based on existing laws and governmental decisions, which grant the Israel Police (conditional) authority and responsibility during serious disturbances and mass disasters, and also on the transfer of responsibility to the firefighting and rescue service to the Internal Security Ministry (2011/12).
c. The Home Front Ministry argues that the issue of authority and responsibility for the civilian front is the core of its existence, and that only a government office whose

exclusive mission is to protect the home front can and should hold all the regulatory powers and needs to be the one to set national policy and priorities in whatever is related to the civilian front. According to this approach, the Home Front Ministry does not need to serve as the "commander" of the different first responders, but should determine how they will operate in the process of preparing for an emergency, according to the reference scenario it draws. As such, the Home Front Ministry must also coordinate between the relevant organs and make sure the necessary cooperation among them prevails.

The heated debate between the various approaches is now underway, and it is doubtful that it will end anytime soon, even if a clear decision is taken in the near future. The debate, however, should seriously take into consideration the following main points:

a. A clear decision should be taken as soon as possible, one that will allow the proper setup that also commands the legislative normative backing.

b. In any case, the challenging issue of integration, coordination, and cooperation between the first responders will remain critical. In any future structure, this should be a leading priority, and be perceived as a major benchmark for the efficacy of the restructured system. .

c. Subsequent consideration should be given to a comprehensive, second-order organizational change that would lead to the establishment of a combined staff for the first responders, based on the model of a gendarmerie in several Western countries that is responsible for enforcing civil public order in general, and the systemic response to mass disasters in particular.

d. It is imperative that any arrangement take into account the implications of the capacity of the local authorities to fulfill their roles adequately as the keystone of the local response to large scale emergencies. There are several powerful municipalities that have already established worthy models of municipal frameworks for responding to emergencies. Many others, weaker socio-economically and in terms of their political leadership, could learn from these models while accepting support from the government, so that they will also be able to organize themselves properly for future emergencies.