The Israeli Home Front Command: Missions, Challenges, and Future Prospects

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The Israeli Home Front Command has undergone many phases of change until having reached its present level of preparedness for providing the adequate response to man-made security challenges. This level of performance raises several serious questions regarding its capacity to serve as Israel's primary agent of response to major disruptions, extensive man-made security hazards, and natural novel risks. Its future success in standing up to wide-scale challenges will depend not only on its own level of preparedness, but also on its capacity to work together with the other governmental agencies, the local authorities, NGOs, and the civilians as a whole. This will also depend on the level of societal resilience of the Israeli public. The Home Front Command is well aware of this precondition, and is investing lavishly to enhance it. But above all, it has to be remembered that the ultimate challenge is still ahead of us, be it security related or by natural cause, like a major earthquake.

Keywords: Home Front Command, resilience, man-made risks, natural hazard

Introduction

The IDF Home Front Command (HFC) was established as a territorial military command in 1992, as part of the lessons learned after the Gulf War, when – in a side theater – the Israeli civilian rear was attacked by thirty-nine Iraqi Scud ballistic missiles. While the actual damage to the Israelis was negligible, the psychological effect, however, was profound and opened a new era in the long history of military conflicts between Israel and its adversaries. From that episode until today, the nature of wars in the region has been completely transformed, placing the home front at the core of

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the military confrontations. This is in total contrast to the past, when the conflicts where shaped by the engagement of military formations on the borders and beyond them. This historical shift raises a series of questions that are still being debated in Israeli military discourse: What are the best strategies for protecting the civilian home front? What is the role of defense versus deterrence and offense in that sphere? Is it primarily the military's mission to protect the civilian front from the security threats it repeatedly faces? And consequently, how much should the IDF invest in this front, at the expense of its purely military missions?

These are the main issues that will be dealt with in this article. It will open with a historical analysis, followed by an examination of the HFC's present and foreseeable challenges. The article will conclude with some thoughts regarding the future role of the HFC and other agencies in providing appropriate answers to the various threats that challenge the Israeli civilian front.

Historical Background (1948-1992)

In May 1948, when the State of Israel was founded and as the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) began to take shape, the Civil Defense (HAGA) was also established, and entrusted with the mission of "Bombardment Defense Service."[1] This took place following heavy bombings of Tel Aviv by the Egyptian Air Force, which resulted in 172 fatalities, many of them women and children.[2] LTC Mordechai Nimtza-Bi (1903-1949) was appointed to command the new force.[3] In 1951 the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) passed a law defining HAGA's legal status. It specified its mission as "to take all measures required to protect the civilian population from attacks by hostile forces, or to limit the results of such an attack, with an emphasis on saving lives."[4]

Generally speaking, from the War of Independence until 1990/1991, the Israeli home front did not face any real external threat, apart from occasional terrorist attacks. This was the case during the 1956 Sinai Campaign, the Six-Day War of 1967, the War of Attrition along the Suez Canal in 1968-1970, the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and the First Lebanon War of 1982. During these clashes, the civil defense was not challenged. HAGA units were neither equipped nor organized for dealing with major threats to the civilian population. The overriding notion was that the IDF was capable of sealing the borders to the extent that the regular police force, together with other civilian agencies, would be able to provide an adequate response to

any threat. The outcome was a slow deterioration of HAGA's professional effectiveness, and its marginalization in terms of resources.

In addition to HAGA, elements of HAGMAR, the Israeli Regional Guard, were incorporated into the rear forces. Initially, this quasi-military body was formed to protect the agricultural communities along the borders. Following the Yom Kippur War, it was decided to reinforce HAGMAR; in August 1977, HAGMAR was incorporated into the HAGA framework.[5]

The Immediate Background for the Establishment of the HFC

Operation Desert Storm in Iraq completely changed the course.[6] After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the consequent US attack, the Iraqis attempted to draw Israel into the crisis. Indeed, on the night after the opening of the Coalition's attack (January 17-18, 1991), Israel was hit by a salvo of six conventional Scud missiles launched from western Iraq. Such attacks continued almost nightly throughout the Gulf War, mostly targeting the city of Tel Aviv. Altogether, by February 28, thirty-nine missiles had landed in Israeli territory; one person was killed and three others suffered heart attacks.[7]

It would be safe to state that Israel was far from being prepared for the Iraqi missile offensive. In terms of military defense, it had to resort to direct US support, manifested by the Patriot anti-missile batteries. Passive physical defense was scarce, particularly the one designed to deal with chemical warheads. Civil response capacities were minimal, mostly composed of primitive early-warning and alert systems; improvised "sealed rooms"; hastily distributed gas masks; as well as hastily established national information-dissemination systems. Many Tel Aviv residents left their homes, especially at night, thus raising a sharp public controversy on the issue of mass civilian evacuation under fire. Overall, public anxiety was quite high;[8] although in retrospect, the general impact of the episode on Israeli security doctrine was relatively minimal.

By and large, the country was ill-prepared for such a threat. The late General Ze'ev Livne, the first commander of the HFC, stated two decades later that the civilian rear was prepared for the war according to the standards of World War II.[9] This was the case both conceptually and practically. The surprise factor, that the country could be attacked by ballistic missiles, can presently be perceived as unrealistic. It was well-known that the Iraqis possessed the military capabilities. It should have been assumed that they might use them. This was not Israel's first major strategic surprise. Another

one happened in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. These should shed light on the possible severe impact of surprise attacks and on the country's need to prepare itself for future strategic surprises. In any case, it was clear that Israel's home-front capacities required drastic change.

The Establishment of the HFC

On February 2, 1992, almost a year after the end of the Gulf War, the Home Front Command was established as the fourth IDF command. General Ze'ev Livne was appointed its first commander. This was not an easy decision for the IDF leadership. The notion of granting the HFC even the image of a territorial command, supposedly equal to the other commands, was alien to the IDF's DNA, which is still uncomfortable with the concept of defense as a viable strategy. Hence, it was clear from the beginning that even though the HFC was officially declared to be a territorial command, its standing and, consequently, its resources would be far from equal to those of the other commands. The front combat commands would continue to share the primary burden and responsibility for the ground forces operations within their respective theaters of war. It was assumed that the HFC could not be trusted to effectively engage with serious challenges from hostile forces operating in critical arenas.

Three major considerations shaped the initial model of the HFC.[10] The legal consideration granted the HFC with the professional responsibility for the civilian rear, but denied it any authority in the field. The second consideration was operational, perceiving the HFC as a force designed to relieve the territorial commands from dealing with the civilian rear in times of conflict. Thirdly, the organizational consideration was meant to enable greater effectiveness and efficiency in coordinating with the other civilian emergency first-response forces. Based on that, the mission of the newly established HFC was:

a. To design and disseminate the doctrine of the civil defense;
b. Together with the civil agencies, to guide and train the civilian population in order to prepare it for emergency and equip it with the necessary means of defense;
c. To direct and guide first-response agencies in fulfilling their duties in the civil defense sphere, and to activate them and employ the equipment they hold;
d. To coordinate the activities of government ministries, local authorities, and the private sector in the realm of civil defense;

e. To act under the authority of the minister of defense to secure lives and property in circumstances not necessarily directly related to civil defense.

The functions of the HFC were officially defined as follows:[11]

a. To serve as the primary professional authority for all matters relating to civil defense, including rescue and recovery and handling hazardous materials;
b. To serve as a civil defense service;
c. To serve as the chief operational command for the activation of the units deployed in the rear;
d. To serve as the general headquarters for the buildup of the HFC units;
e. To serve as a territorial command.

These directives, while well-intended, raised some critical problems, which turned out to be real obstacles to the HFC's effective operation in years to come. The HFC was positioned from its inception as a relatively weak organization wedged between regular military commands on the one hand and civilian agencies on the other. It had to carve its professional base of operations in a narrow space between well-entrenched and relatively robust organizations that possessed legitimacy, reputation, resources, and professional clout. The net result created serious limitations on the young HFC, which was not provided with the necessary means to properly fulfill its mission. Indeed, the military high command, which was not supportive of the move,[12] as well as some of the high-ranking officers of the newly established HFC, did not grasp at the time the depth and breadth of their responsibility. For them, the HFC was meant to represent merely a quantitative or organizational expansion of the old HAGA. The only difference for them was that rockets and other high-trajectory explosives replaced the previous threats from aircrafts, against which the Israeli air force had managed to build an effective defense. At the time, and for another fifteen long years, the HFC was supposed to provide physical protection from enemy bombardments and to save lives. The security situation during those years (1992-2006) contributed to this narrow approach and to the HFC's marginal position. In fact, it was hardly called upon to participate in the dramatic security conflicts of the period – the First Intifada (1987-1993) and Second Intifada (2000-2004) – during which the civilian population was severely challenged.

The only positive development at the time was the one related to the sphere of passive defense. Based on the lessons of the Gulf War, Israel entered a new era in which it became obligatory for new residential buildings to

have a fortified room that could provide adequate shelter from conventional explosive and chemical weapons. Consequently, all new dwellings since 1994 have been equipped with shelters. The HFC was entrusted with the role of controlling this venture. Altogether, these shelters presently are found in more than one-third of all apartments in the country.

The Turning Point

The Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006[13] found the HFC at its lowest ebb regarding its operational capacity.[14] Years of neglect, a paucity of means, and mostly a misguided conceptual framework contributed to the insufficient preparedness for the asymmetric war against Hezbollah. In this unbalanced hybrid conflict, the IDF suffered from numerous shortcomings,[15] only a few of which involved the HFC. Still, the challenge to the home front during the thirty-three days of that conflict was severe. Altogether, close to 4,000 rockets – an average of 120 a day – were launched against civilian targets in the northern part of the country. Although only less than a quarter of those actually reached populated centers, this was sufficient to cause 39 civilian fatalities, more than 2,000 injured, and approximately 12,000 buildings damaged, most of them slightly. Hundreds of thousands of inhabitants abandoned their homes for the duration of the conflict, and the total losses to the national economy reached about thirty billion Israeli shekels.

Despite these relatively moderate damages, it has been agreed that the home front was far from prepared for the challenge. The most important reason for the poor performance of the HFC was related to the issue of responsibility and accountability for the home front. Theoretically, the relevant laws, originating back in 1951 and later reinstituted in the 1990s, granted the civil defense system and later the HFC the authority to provide protection for the civilian rear. These regulations, however, are far from granting the legislative umbrella necessary for the HFC to operate effectively in the field. In fact, the 2006 Lebanon War attested to the fact that the HFC was unable to provide civilians with what was necessary under rocket fire, whether in the physical sense of passive or other means of defense, or in the broader sense of psycho-social civilian response. It was not only the HFC that was unprepared to provide the needed services; other agencies, including the national police force, the first-response civilian organizations, and numerous NGOs, were hardly prepared, not to mention the lack of meaningful cooperation between them.[16]

Furthermore, in the years before the 2006 war, the HFC had mostly focused on the establishment of search and rescue units,[17] and other tactical and logistical forces. It did not perceive its mission to holistically prepare and assist the population at large under emergency situations.

The Renewed HFC: Profile and Challenges

The 2006 conflict marked a turning point in the history of the HFC and the entire approach to the home front in Israel. The failures of the HFC and the lessons learned from previous conflicts brought about changes which contributed to better performance in the home front. Still, these changes have not yet resulted in the necessary transformation of preparing the home front as a whole to cope effectively with the growing challenges, posed by both man-made and natural hazards.

The 2006 Lebanon War was the second conflict – after that of 1990/1991 - which engaged the civilian rear in a widespread rocket and missile attack. It introduced Israel to the hybrid military conflict, which is characterized by parallel engagements on the military and civilian fronts. The initial concept was that the HFC was meant to relieve the armed forces from civilian concerns, so that they could focus solely on the military sphere. This proved to be a faulty assumption. One of the major lessons of 2006 was that it was practically impossible to disentangle the two fronts and operate separately on each, as one front influences the other in various ways. On the one hand, risks to civilians are a major factor for military decision-makers in determining what they should accomplish at the front in order to minimize or remove enemy threats to the rear. On the other hand, the events at the military front have a strong impact on the mood, morale, and resilience of the civilians. These central issues still need to be confronted and resolved.

Under these circumstances, the national strategy for the home front has, at least theoretically, undergone a transformation, beginning with the conceptual transition of the HFC from having a "narrow" to a "broad" approach regarding its core missions.[18] Hence, the HFC presently perceives itself as the leading body responsible not only for technical and logistical operations in the civilian sphere, but also for the entire spectrum of the civilian emergency routine, which encompasses all the needs of the civilian population and infrastructure in times of crisis. Consequently, the HFC now prepares itself in parallel tracks: It conducts its traditional missions by providing adequate and sophisticated early-warning systems, issuing

instruction for sheltering,[19] evacuating civilians from wreckage, and disseminating information to the civilian population on all relevant risks. When the chemical threat was present – until it was neutralized in Syria[20] – the HFC was also engaged in distributing gas masks, a massive logistic undertaking.[21] Presently, the HFC takes upon itself wider responsibilities for the enhancement of social resilience, even if at times encroaching on functions that traditionally have been the province of government ministries and local authorities. The HFC today understands and invests heavily in the realm of the behavior of the civilian population in emergency situations, at the preparatory stages, as well as during crises.[22]

These developments stem from dramatic external changes in the area, which make homeland security in Israel more complex and demanding:

a. The high-trajectory weapon systems possessed by Israel's immediate adversaries are becoming increasingly abundant and effective. Israel is presently faced with rockets and missiles of various types, which have reached a staggering number of more than 150,000 held by Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Together they not only cover the entire populated areas of Israel, but have gradually become more sophisticated and precise. The future trend will be a lethal combination of short- and medium-range statistical rockets and longer-range guided missiles, which represent a serious threat, primarily to critical infrastructures and military bases. Generally speaking, published HFC scenarios envisage an onslaught of up to 700 rockets and missiles per day for a possible duration of more than thirty days.
b. The high-trajectory threat represents a massive man-made hazard for the State of Israel and the HFC, even if one takes into consideration the highly sophisticated robust three-layered active defense system,[23] which is gradually being introduced into the IDF. Despite the system's proven effectiveness, as tested successfully in recent rounds of conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, it should be taken into consideration that no defense system can provide a hermetically sealed response. The quantities of explosives and barrages of warheads expected to be launched against Israeli targets will constitute a profound challenge for the civilian population and the infrastructure, and consequently for the HFC.[24] It can be added that the civilian high confidence in the active defense systems might paradoxically represent a special challenge for the HFC, causing people to possibly refrain from adhering to early-warning calls and not take the necessary precautionary steps.

c. Since 2006, Israel has undergone three consecutive rounds of active hostilities against Hamas in Gaza.[25] Each of these rounds produced rocket attacks of varying intensity against civilian population centers in Israel. The last one in summer 2014 lasted fifty days, during which more than a hundred rockets and mortars on average were launched daily.[26] As far as the HFC is concerned, these episodes were all relatively minor compared to the overall potential damage that Hezbollah could inflict upon the Israeli home front. This means that the HFC must be prepared for more severe scenarios in the future. An important lesson that can be learned from these rounds is that the civilian population in Israel is highly resilient, even if future conflicts might pose greater risks and overshadow past experiences in this context.
d. Despite its clear focus on man-made security conflicts, the HFC is cognizant of the natural hazards and tends to invest some resources in it. The Israeli case focuses on the risk of earthquakes, which might call upon intensive intervention of the HFC, both in search-and-rescue operations and in massive evacuations.[27] This is a demanding field for the Israeli authorities, as it represents a field of less preparedness[28] compared with that of the man-made security risks.[29]

To fulfill its tasks in these changing circumstances and meet the growing needs, the HFC has been undergoing a major buildup in its organization and order of battle. Presently it engages more than 65,000 soldiers, about 90 percent of them reservists, whose number is declining due to cuts in the IDF's general reserve forces. Apart from a professional general headquarters, located in Ramla, the HFC maintains six regional headquarters, which correspond to the national police force's territorial division; four new regular rescue regiments (Shahar, Kedem, Ram, and Tavor), which are incorporated into a newly-established brigade; numerous reserve regiments, some of them specifically for rescue missions; and medical, logistic, and light infantry units. The HFC operates a military school (Training Base #16), in which all its recruits and units are trained.[30] The HFC invests heavily in training its own units, as well as conducting numerous drills together with other first responders and the population at large. At the same time, the HFC is a life saver and an enabler of an "emergency routine" for the population in times of disruption.[31]

In order to assess the role of the HFC in the Israeli homeland security field, it would be worthwhile to shed light on the overall governmental home front structure. Here, the most striking fact is that Israel has no

official regulatory body that is legally defined as the chief authority on home front affairs. Unlike the military establishment, which is clearly hierarchical, and headed by the Ministry of Defense, the civilian sector does not have a leading organ. It has been advocated repeatedly in the past that, because of the complexity and sensitivity of the civilian front, it is imperative that such an entity be established and entrusted with the responsibility for directing and coordinating the many bodies that play a role on the civilian front. This entity should guide and inspect the different public agencies at the national and local levels, the private and industrial sectors, as well as the NGOs.[32] This was almost realized in 2011, when the Ministry for Homeland Defense was formed, only to be closed three years later, mostly because of political considerations and strong opposition on the part of the Ministry of Defense and the HFC.[33]

Resulting from the lessons of the 2006 War, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) was established in 2007.[34] It was initially designed to coordinate and synchronize the activities of all organizations operating in the civilian front, without infringing on the jurisdiction of any other government agency in the field. NEMA has passed through several stages since its inception, including a short period when it was subordinate to the Ministry of Homeland Defense. Presently, NEMA is under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense, but neither it – nor any other agency – plays the needed role of official supreme authority for the home front.[35]

If the HFC and NEMA are expected to find the appropriate *modus operandi* to work smoothly together, all the more so is the case with regard to the HFC's working relations with other agencies. The HFC does not have jurisdiction and priority over the other government ministries and agencies. Consequently, it requires the right framework for horizontal collaboration. This is the reality in most cases. However, it can deteriorate into controversy and friction in face of challenging circumstances. A worthwhile example may be found in the HFC's relations with the local authorities, perceived to be critical for engaging the citizens. This brought the HFC to establish a framework of Liaison Units to the Local Authority (LULA).[36] The rationale behind this important and successful model is that the community, represented by the local authority, should be the "cornerstone" of emergency management. This concept, while theoretically sound, is far from being actually realized in many localities in Israel, especially the weaker ones. Still, LULA has been found to be a meaningful collaborative factor in the

field, affording the HFC good access to municipalities and, through them, to the communities at large.

Conclusions

In the twenty-three years since its inception, the HFC has built itself up gradually into a robust and resourceful machine, the largest operational agency in the challenged Israeli civilian front. It would be impossible to perceive the beleaguered homeland security scene in Israel without it and without its high-profile presence in emergency situations. It would be safe to suggest that it operates as a dynamic agency, with high and flexible learning capabilities, and a reasonable proven performance level. The truth is that, apart from the failed conduct in 2006, the HFC has not faced any major operational hurdle, as the three rounds of high-trajectory assaults from Gaza against the civilian home front amounted to no more than a low-to-medium level threat. The real test is still waiting, either from major man-made or a severe natural disruption. The HFC is well aware of the high stakes involved in this sphere, and has continuously invested heavily in the long and challenging journey of preparation for the expected and perhaps also the unexpected scenario. Its success in future large-scale disruptions will depend not only on its own capabilities, but also on those of the military at large and those of the civilian agencies, the level of cooperation between them, and the rate of the preparedness and resilience of the nation at large.

Indeed, the key to the HFC's future success lies not only in its operational capacities to protect the civilian rear, to mitigate the damage, or to effectively respond to the various challenges. It also will be gauged by its ability to prepare itself and the Israeli society for its core mission enhancing and preserving national resilience in future emergencies. In 2009, the HFC defined its approach to the concept of national resilience as follows:

> We examine the options of the HFC's influence on national resilience in emergency situations and adopt a broad approach . . . and particularly how it impacts the preparedness of civilians, local authorities and government ministries. The HFC's contribution is made primarily by guiding and preparing in the fields of civil defense. The HFC will be ready to assist . . . in issues which are not within its responsibility by law, but rather from the understanding of the national need . . . to

> continuous (civilian) functioning and the preservation of a reasonable 'emergency routine.'

And as a consequence:

> The capacity of the HFC to impact . . . the strengthening of national resilience is manifested in two dimensions: firstly, in building up our force and its operation . . . and secondly, in preparing the civilian population and the rear at routine times, in order to improve its preparedness for emergencies. The preparation of the population will be carried out particularly by preparing shelter infrastructures, training and guiding the civilian population and . . . assist populations with special needs.[37]

This focus on the civilian resilience represents a true understanding of the essence of disaster management. The HFC should be commended for this holistic approach and for its efforts to enhance the social and physical civilian capacities, which contribute to social resilience. This raises a basic question, however, as to the role of the military – and the HFC as its arm – in engaging in purely civilian processes, particularly in a democratic society. In most countries, this sphere is understood to be the domain of the civilian authorities, which are normally supposed to be equipped to deal with the civilian population at routine times and in crises. It is one thing for the military to provide protection for citizens from enemy attacks, or support the civilian efforts with technical and logistic assistance when needed. Taking an active role, or rather a proactive role, in civilian matters, such as the conduct of schools or the behavior of people with special needs, is quite another matter. There is a fine line here between what is suitable for the military to be engaged in, and what is not. The Israeli HFC should be sensitive to this distinction, especially in a situation that lacks normative guidelines and a clear division of labor between military and civilian homeland security agencies.

A final reference should be made to the initial set of questions that were raised in the introduction to this article: What is the best strategy for protecting the civilian home front? The answer lies in the adoption of the balanced "all hazard" approach, which would give the proportional priority to the security challenges, but which would also properly address the challenges of natural hazards. In the security realm, the suggested strategy should strike the right balance between the robust required investment

in the sphere of resistance, namely deterrence, protection, active defense, and mitigation on one hand, and the sufficient investments in the field of resilience, both in the community sphere and the infrastructure domain.

What is the role of defense versus deterrence and offense in the homeland security strategy? It is suggested that in the Israeli case, the offensive approach and its associated arm of deterrence are both significant and worthwhile. However, Israel has learned, during years of low intensity, hybrid conflicts, that the offensive posture alone carries profound challenges, both operational and diplomatic. It also does not provide a total response to the complex challenges This frames the defensive approach as a valid complementary strategy, which, of course, warrants the needed resources for both active and passive protection, but mostly the broad investments in ensuring the resilience of the national systems. Those should focus on the capacity of the impacted systems to bounce back rapidly following major disruptions.

The role of the military to protect the civilian front from the security threats is clear, but complex. It is expected from any military anywhere to harness its multiple resources in order to assist its respective communities in time of need. Quite another question is to what extent should the military – in this case the IDF –be entrusted with the mission of serving as the national primary first responder to any threat? In the Israeli case, which is characterized mostly by security-based challenges, the HFC is the only viable candidate for the mission. Consequently, the HFC has to be well prepared to stand up to the challenge, which means also that it should enhance its professional capacity to successfully deal with the civilian environment in the most severe circumstances. This means that the HFC still has a long way to go in building itself for the mission. To achieve a high capacity for success, it needs the understanding and support of the IDF and the government as a whole.

Notes

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