



INSS Insight No. 874, December 8, 2016

The Fires across Israel: Insights and Lessons for National Security

Meir Elran

The wave of fires on November 22-26, 2016 throughout Israel – 1,773 in number – resulting from extreme weather conditions (heat, aridness, and winds), should direct the attention of the public and the decision makers to the risks of natural disasters in general, and those caused by large scale fires in open areas in particular (in contrast to house fires). This is a growing phenomenon caused by accelerated global climate change. Figures from the Israel Fire and Rescue Commission show that there were over 28,000 fires in open areas in 2014 and in 2015. Nine people were killed in fires in 2015; 17 in 2014; 18 in 2013; and 23 in 2012. The average annual number of deaths from fire in Israel is low on an international scale: 0.11 fatalities per 100,000 residents (compared with 1.4 in Greece, 1.2 in the United States, and 0.5 in the Netherlands).

The question of arson aside, and despite the low number of injuries, the subject of multiple fires should arouse public discussion, renew professional deliberations, and lead to system-wide decisions about Israel's abilities to respond successfully to natural and other mass disasters. Several conclusions emerge in this context, based in part on lessons from other countries.

Natural disasters are liable to exact very high prices. Israel has been fortunate not to experience severe and costly natural disasters in recent decades. The last high magnitude disaster occurred on July 11, 1927, when an earthquake killed over 300 people and caused severe damage. Up-to-date official estimates predict thousands of fatalities when an earthquake on a similar scale occurs. Although the potential for a major earthquake in Israel is high, the country's systemic preparedness for an event of this type, and those liable to follow it, such as a tsunami, is poor. The level of preparedness is particularly low in comparison with the awareness and preparedness for high risk security disruptions, which are much more frequent, but which cause relatively less damage. Note that some of the preparations for emergency security scenarios in Israel are part of the response to natural hazards, although the latter also require specialized professional skills and preparation that are lacking in Israel

Adequate preparations should be made for unexpected extreme events. The recent wave of fires highlights the need for advance preparation for diverse scenarios differing from those previously experienced. This generalization is valid for both man-made hazards, such as security conflicts

threatening the home front, which rightfully attract serious attention, and natural disasters, due to their potentially damaging consequences. Preparing for novel scenarios represents a serious challenge, both in conceptual and budgetary terms. It is not easy for decision makers to divert their attention from the familiar scenarios, especially those that are security related. Still, sophisticated analysis of extreme – albeit rare – scenarios, and balanced consideration of appropriate responses for more common events, are essential for devising the necessary scale of preparedness.

It is essential to prepare for simultaneous and multiple threat scenarios. As with the recent wave of fires, and as was the case during the past decade, in the three rounds of major security events, the theaters of acute disruptions were spread over several and relatively remote locations. Many of the recent fires occurred in a row, making it possible to move forces and efforts from one site to another. With simultaneous fires, certainly if they persist of an extended period of time, a greater allocation of trained forces and special equipment will be necessary in order to respond to the challenge. To meet this need, a reserve corps of firefighters should be established that will facilitate flexible and prolonged operation of the force. This need will be more acute when the severity, extent, and duration of the scenarios is more extreme. In the most recent fires, the necessary additional forces were recruited from 14 countries. This option is hardly available in security scenarios, which Israel has traditionally faced alone.

High professional skills and horizontal cooperation constitute a key to successful management of mass disasters. Weakness in these areas characterized the principal barriers in the great fire event in the Carmel Forest in 2010 in which 44 people died. This time there appeared to be a significant improvement in three important fields: (a) The firefighting system is undergoing a revolution, not yet completed, in organization, operations, and equipment; (2) Coordination and cooperation between the responding agencies in general, especially between the police and the firefighting agencies, have improved; (3) The mechanism for receiving assistance from foreign firefighting agencies made it possible to greatly increase the domestic capacities for providing a flexible response. The important progress in these areas requires maintenance and further enhancement, in order to cope with more dangerous and prolonged future challenges.

Evacuating civilians from their homes is a complex process requiring meticulous advance preparation. At the peak of the fires, tens of thousands of residents were evacuated from their homes. Few of them made use of the evacuation sites opened for them, and most found temporary non-institutional solutions. From this perspective, the evacuation in the recent event should not serve as an example for drawing applicable systematic lessons for future scenarios, which are liable to require far more extensive evacuation and the provision of complex solutions for the evacuated population, possibly for a prolonged duration. This matter has indeed recently appeared on the agenda of the relevant agencies. At the same time, it does not appear that there is

an adequate holistic nationwide and local response for more extreme situations, in particular for people with special needs.

The rehabilitation system is still being tested. It is estimated that several hundred buildings were completely ruined or extensively damaged in the fires. Meeting the challenge of rapid financial compensation and complete reconstruction of the buildings, so that the residents can return to their homes, will be a criterion for the government's readiness and ability to cope with this sensitive issue. Past experience, including in the world at large, indicates that this is a challenge with a string of severe failures, amounting to long delays in the processes of compensation and reconstruction. The authorities are expected to make the necessary effort, including beyond what is formally required, to conclude this matter as fast and as effectively possible, taking into account the discomfort of the affected civilians. The fact that the number of people involved is not very large will make it easier to achieve this goal.

Arson is an integral part of fires. In Israel, a third of the fires in open areas over the past two years were, upon investigation, classified as cases of arson. This is also the prevailing situation in other countries. In Australia, which has been afflicted with fires in open spaces, one third to one half of the fires in an average year resulted from arson. Arson was the definite cause in thirteen percent of the cases, and the suspected cause in 37 percent. Arson can stem from a long list of factors, one of which is malicious political and nationalistic background – a phenomenon called “pyro-terrorism.” The professional literature suggests that on the map of global terrorism, over 5 percent of the attacks were caused by deliberate arson. It is still premature to assess how many of the hundreds of fires in the most recent wave had a hostile background, and what were the motives and characteristics of the perpetrators. In the past, malicious arsonists were found on both sides – Jews and Arabs. Clearly, steps should be taken to reduce this phenomenon by both preventive and punitive measures. These measures, however, should reflect the realization that arson is not the main operational tactic of anti-Israeli terrorism, and that arson, including in the most recent case, is not the main reason for the fires.

In conclusion, the recent wave of fires should be regarded as an example – albeit limited in severity – that enables a process of systemic learning. Fires in open spaces, including in Israel, are expected to become increasingly common. Israel has shown that it is able to learn and implement the right lessons. If the relevant responsible agencies focus their attention on drawing operative conclusions as a basis for better preparedness for more severe cases, to include novel extreme hazards, Israel might be ready to deal more effectively with mass disasters, both natural and man-made.