



INSS Insight No. 268, July 13, 2011

**The National Home Front Exercise:
The Improved Preparedness is not Enough**

Meir Elran

On June 19-23, 2011, the national home front exercise took place for the fifth consecutive year. The objective of the annual exercise is to improve the preparedness of the civilian front and its components – the various emergency services and the civilian population in general – to handle emergency situations, particularly the security challenges emerging from the reference scenarios defined by the IDF. Those in charge of the exercise created multiple test cases in order to produce, both in theory and in practice, appropriate responses to the updated threat scenarios. This year, based on assessments of how the threat against Israel has developed, new challenges were added to the scenarios of continuous rocket and missile attacks against the population centers. These included extensive damage to national infrastructures, whether the result of greater precision of the enemy's high trajectory weapons or of cyber attacks on critical civilian and military installations.

Given an expanded threat of this nature and the consequent emergency situation, expected to last several weeks in a real confrontation, the exercise examined response capabilities at three levels: a) the national systems at the level of the central government, the various ministries and their regional extensions, and the IDF, the Home Front Command, and the National Emergency Authority (Hebrew acronym RAHEL); b) the agencies operating in the field – local governments and first responders such as Magen David Adom, firefighters, the Israel Police, and volunteer organizations; c) the civilian population at large, which is perceived as the sector that in any given scenario is supposed to provide the immediate response for itself and its surroundings. The exercise comprised two major stages. It began at the staff level, with theoretical discussions, situation assessments, and staff work about the challenges and the required responses. At the second stage, the exercise was conducted primarily in the field, deploying the response forces and the civilian population. The exercise was overseen by the Minister for Home Front Defense through RAHEL, which served both as the administrative body managing the drill and as a participant, as per its mandate.

Several insights emerged from the exercise. First, the fact that Israel holds annual emergency exercises (since 2007) is a significant contribution towards preparing the civilian front. Next year, the national exercise will also focus – and appropriately so – on the scenario of a mass casualty earthquake. The participation of the many agencies in the exercise gives all of them an annual opportunity to review their assets and what they lack, and enables them to learn from their experience and set goals for further improvements. No wonder that many countries send delegations to observe the exercise, learn from it, and copy whatever is relevant to their situations back home.

A second important contribution of the exercise lies in expanding the knowledge and raising the awareness of decision makers and senior personnel at the government and municipal levels about emergency situations and their ramifications. Despite the impressive rhetoric, Israel still suffers from gaps between what is needed to respond to the threat and what actually exists. This is the case because many government ministries tend to ignore defer the needs of the civilian front, and because some local governments do not fully understand their responsibility and involvement in this domain. Therefore, when the exercise directly exposes senior personnel to the wide range of emergency challenges, it serves as critical leverage that can mobilize them to construct the necessary preparedness for emergencies in their sectors.

Third, the most worrisome operational problem, revealed yet again in this exercise despite the talk of improvements, touches on inter-organizational coordination. The root of the issue is that unlike the military front, there is no clear, legally binding and agreed-upon definition of the responsibilities and authorities for preparing the civilian front and managing it in an emergency, even though there are several government decisions on this matter. The recent establishment of the Ministry for Home Front Defense has not yet changed this situation. Problems of coordination exist not just between government ministries but also between the governmental headquarters on the one hand and their regional extensions and agencies on the other, as well as among the various first responders and their interaction with the local government. This severe deficiency must be systemically addressed, from the bottom up.

Fourth, the exercise mainly simulates traumatic events in a clearly civilian environment. Despite the massive participation of the IDF, the Home Front, and the Israel Police, the largest part of the work remains essentially civilian. Herein lies a fundamental problem: given the challenges, there is no real hope for creating a civilian functional environment that comes close to the operational efficiency of the military front. It is doubtful if the Israeli government, as well as the local government system, is built to create this form of modus operandi. Civilians, some of whom are unskilled, expect help from above. This exercise failed to meet this challenge.

Finally, and with regard to the civilian population: From the outset, the expectations for public participation in the exercise were modest. Even the drill of entering bomb shelters

is not really constructive. Because of the current security calm one cannot expect the public at large to be aroused from its complacency. As such, it would be more constructive to focus future drilling on high school students, members of youth movements, and college and university students. These groups constitute a robust potential population for first response engagement that can be relied on in an emergency to provide critical help for themselves and for their surroundings. Consequently, future drills are planned for a time when these groups are not on vacation.

In general, it appears that the achievements of the exercise justified the investment, as it is another stage in the process of improving the preparedness of the civilian front. Nonetheless, in face of the developing threat there is still no concrete knowledge of the degree to which the civilian front is adequately prepared for a security – or any other – emergency. There is a natural tendency to paint rosy pictures, and indeed there have been important improvements, particularly if 2006 is the basis for comparison. However, it is doubtful whether these improvements adequately match the developing security threat. Only a regulated process of measuring preparedness will give realistic answers to this critical question.

