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Closing the Home Front Defense Ministry

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Home Front Defense Minister Gilad Erdan's letter of resignation and his recommendation that the ministry be closed and its powers transferred to the Defense Ministry will apparently lead to the end of yet another sad story in Israel's attempts to construct a system that can best cope with the serious threats to the civilian front.

Over the past year, the disagreement between the Defense Ministry and the Home Front Defense Ministry over handling of the civilian front – in which the IDF's Home Front Command was also an active party – intensified severely. The controversy was a true reflection of the lack of stability and continuity in building the system, long characterized by a random, patchwork approach. This has led to ongoing rivalries within the professional echelons.

This article will not discuss the political aspects of the recent development. Rather, it will attempt to shed light on the various ramifications of the lack of clarity as to which government body has the authority and responsibility for enhancing the robustness of the civilian front and managing it during emergencies. This fundamental issue has been on the public agenda for years and witnessed several failed experiments since the Second Lebanon War (2006). These included the establishment in 2007 of the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), which in 2012 was integrated into the Home Front Defense Ministry, established in 2011, together with the National Economy Emergency System (NEES), which became part of NEMA.

The core of the problem is that unlike with the military front, where there is a clear hierarchy as well as clarity and general consent as to who is responsible on each level, there is no such structure for the civilian (home) front. The numerous civilian bodies that deal with the home front are decentralized, with no common norms, organizational structure, and professional language. The diversity of these bodies creates ambiguity within the political-strategic echelon and on the professional level. The coalition-based government structure in Israel, along with the high risks associated with the civilian front,

makes it extremely difficult to formulate an integrated, coherent, and agreed structure for decision making. The unsatisfactory result is evident on the ground.

The apparent closure of the Home Front Defense Ministry after three years of rivalries and attempts at self-definition will likely not solve the real problem, although it may alleviate it somewhat, as a few of the bureaucratic obstacles will be removed. However, even if the ministry is closed, several complex challenges will remain, including:

1. The lack of consensus within the political leadership on the question of authority and responsibility for the civilian front, which is clearly reflected in years of successive failures to produce legislation that would make it possible to build a coordinated system to deal effectively with the consequences of emergencies.
2. The need for institutionalized understanding and recognition of the distinction between the defense machineries – active and passive – for the civilian front, which are under the clear responsibility of the IDF, and the systems for handling the population and civilian infrastructures prior to, during, and post emergencies, which are under the responsibility of the civilian authorities, both central and local. It appears that the latter component is the one that deserves a fresh comprehensive approach, systemic planning, careful allocation of resources, and horizontal and vertical coordination. The absence of all these reflects a serious gap in home front preparedness. Even if the seniority of the Defense Ministry on the strategic level is (again) made clear and translated operationally to the Home Front Command (and all IDF units), the challenging question of who is in charge of coordinating the many civilian emergency agencies will remain: Who will decide on priorities in investing resources in building civilian protection and shelter systems? Who will set the required standards for preparedness for the civilian population, the local municipalities, and civilian critical infrastructures? Who will decide how to operate and allocate first responders between incidents spread out during an emergency? Who will coordinate between the national police and the firefighters (who are subordinate to the Ministry of Public Security) and the Home Front Command? The relatively minor experience of the snowstorm in December 2013 proves that the gaps are far from trivial and could result in serious damage when there is a real challenge.
3. The assumption that the defense establishment will be able to play a central role on the civilian front is neither realistic nor rational. Perhaps the best example in this respect concerns the dramatic disparities between different municipalities in terms of their level of preparedness. While some have made considerable progress toward an appropriate level of preparedness, many are still far from the level that is needed. Does the defense establishment want or need, to take upon itself the task of building their capacities prior to a serious emergency? Is it even able to do so? Furthermore, in a democratic country, is it appropriate that the IDF, through the Home Front

Command, be responsible for the civilian population in an emergency (for example, a decision on whether to close or open schools?) This issue is connected to an even more complex topic, concerning the missions, the operational mode, and the organizational affiliation of the Home Front Command in the long term, which also requires further consideration.

The closure of the Home Front Defense Ministry provides another opportunity for creative thinking and bold decision making on this critical issue. Proposals made in the past (such as granting the overall responsibility to the Ministry of Public Security) were either rejected or only partially adopted, mostly following a crisis (such as transferring the responsibility for the firefighting services from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Public Security following the large fire on the Carmel). Even the expanded personal involvement of the Prime Minister in the decision making processes on these issues has not created a new, positive situation. The system has remained without an agreed and binding concept on the national level and without sufficient control of the buildup and the operations on the tactical level.

Given this unfortunate experience, it would perhaps be appropriate to consider a new organizational template, one that would not aspire to full and probably impossible centralization, but would attempt to construct a more flexible system, decentralized but orderly and agreed upon. Such a system could be based on a division of labor in which on the national level, each of the government ministries would be responsible for its own territory (as is the practice now), according to an orderly long term national budgeted plan. Such a plan must be based on a comprehensive national doctrine for the civilian front, which would be approved and later controlled by a special “cabinet” for the Home Front, headed by the Prime Minister, and would serve as the primary decision maker on the national level. The responsibility for the operational aspects would be divided according to the following principle: the IDF would be responsible for active defense systems and for early warning. The municipalities would have the responsibility for managing response operations during emergencies in their respective territories. They will be assisted with prearranged support by the first responders, while the mayors will be responsible for their actual deployment. Some of the local governments are now ready for this responsibility. Others must receive significant help and training, which should be provided by a special government task force to be established for this purpose. This suggestion is not without problems, partly because today, first responder mechanisms are controlled nationally, which requires careful planning and coordination in advance and might also necessitate the creation of control centers (perhaps under the Ministry of Public Security) that would enable the needed adjustments to be made between the services during an emergency. Rehabilitation missions, which are essential, costly, complicated, and lengthy, should also be positioned under government responsibility.

The overall proposed structure is feasible for the medium term. Its implementation requires legislation.

Continuing with the present orientation is not a viable option, and almost any agreed outline is preferable. Israel can take advantage of the situation in the region – Hizbollah, Hamas, and Syria are relatively weak – to prepare the civilian front to meet the challenges it will face in the future. Addressing the challenge of authority and responsibility for the civilian front is an essential requirement for the successful national response to what is presently perhaps the primary security challenge.

