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What Can Be Learned from the National Home Front Exercise?

Meir Elran and Alex Altshuler

Israel's annual home front exercise took place on May 31-June 4, 2015. The practice of conducting large scale annual exercises of this type began following the Second Lebanon War in 2006, which revealed major defects in home front preparedness for emergencies. Conducting such exercises regularly is important, because it places the issues of home front readiness in a prominent place on the national agenda. Furthermore, it facilitates practicing responses for a broad range of threat scenarios, and exposes areas in need of improvement in Israel's array of solutions to the dynamic challenges facing the civilian front.

This year's exercise focused on complex scenarios of missile attacks (some of which would be highly accurate) that might cover most of Israel's populated areas, as well as an attempt to penetrate a border community. Even if the experience of the past decade has made a large segment of the Israeli public well aware of such scenarios, this awareness is largely shaped by the major success of Israel's active defense system in the two recent rounds of conflict with Hamas. Most of the Israeli public has no direct memory of severe damage and fatalities caused by rocket attacks, although these are liable to occur in the future, given the enhanced capabilities of the enemy – especially Hezbollah – regarding quantity, range, and accuracy of weapons, and the power of the warheads borne by rockets and missiles. This, together with the cyber component, might generate a scenario of severe risk, in which the Iron Dome system, in its present order of battle, will not suffice to provide the nearly total protection provided in the recent rounds of conflict against Hamas. It is therefore necessary to significantly expand the Iron Dome system and begin operational deployment of the David's Sling (Magic Wand) system as soon as possible. At the same time, it is also important to prepare the civilian population for situations in which the defense wall is not sufficient, which will necessitate adequate preparation for massive attacks against populated centers and critical infrastructures. This last challenge requires special attention, given the possibility that the provision of essential services (such as power supplies) to the public at large and the defense forces will be affected.

There are a number of important lessons to be learned from the 2015 national exercise:

- a. The home front exercise was conducted at the same time as a large scale IDF exercise. The two exercises were in fact likely connected, highlighting the close relationship between the military and civilian fronts, which requires close conceptual and practical collaboration before and during an emergency. Such a nexus is essential in Israel's security environment, where events on one of the two fronts directly affect the other. This is the strongest argument to support the control by Ministry of Defense of the entire spectrum of home front preparedness. This control, however, also requires the Ministry of Defense and the IDF to be sensitive to civilian special needs in times of crisis.
- b. There must be effective integration and collaboration at all levels – from the top echelons down to the field units – between the various agencies that participate in managing disruptions. Exercises of this type undoubtedly improve the cooperation between the involved organs; this is the particular responsibility of the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), lately reassigned to the Ministry of Defense. This restructuring clearly facilitates the necessary close cooperation between NEMA, as the national integrator, and the Home Front Command, as the leading executive agency. But beyond that, much work is needed in order to bolster the dialogue and understanding between the other agencies involved in the home front, including the various government ministries and executive agencies, among them the Israel Police, the Israel Fire and Rescue Services, and the Magen David Adom medical service.
- c. The local authorities are justifiably presented as the “basic building block” in coping with emergency situations. Some have done quite a bit to enhance their operational capabilities in this sphere. Nonetheless, not all are sufficiently prepared to provide their populations with the range of responses needed in a severe emergency. A comprehensive effort, under government direction, is therefore required, beginning with a basic survey that will give a true picture of the preparedness of respective local authorities for an emergency, as well as urgent action to rectify the lapses revealed by the survey. Past cases in Israel and elsewhere have shown the importance of the local authorities and other community services in the successful management of mass disasters.
- d. Cooperation should be enhanced among the relevant social agencies, both those financed by the authorities and those operating in the community as NGOs. These organizations play a key role in all aspects of the social response: in the communities, provision of therapy, maintenance of the emergency routine, enhanced resilience, and attention to people with special needs. In future exercises, more attention should be paid to the participation of civil society organizations.

- e. It is questionable whether it is necessary to have the public at large seek shelter under sirens twice in one day. Instead, we propose assembling large audiences, such as high school and university students, as a force multiplier for community action, as was partly done in the recent exercise. Such a measure will enhance the situation awareness of the younger generation and pave the way for large segments of the communities to bolster their readiness to cope with emergency situations.
- f. Dealing with mass evacuation of civilians from areas under attack as part of the exercise represents an emerging change of attitude by both the IDF and NEMA, indicating a willingness to acknowledge the legitimacy of evacuation and recognize the need to prepare effectively for it. The exercise examined a scenario of evacuating tens of thousands from their homes. Future expected threat scenarios would call for preparing for massive evacuation on a far larger scale and for relatively long periods, to areas far beyond the range of the enemy's rockets and missiles. Nonetheless, the substantial logistical challenge involved in such a scenario is far less acute than the issue of morale vis-à-vis evacuating civilians under enemy fire, a very sensitive solution in the traditional Israeli narrative.
- g. The legislative challenge: The exercise focused on a variety of command and control aspects that arguably can function without a normative constitutional framework. At the same time, comprehensive legislation that is in line with the dynamic security situation in Israel can facilitate adequate preparation for emergencies far more effectively and coherently. The government should devote serious effort to advance homeland security legislature, which it has failed to do since 2007.

In conclusion, the importance of the exercise lies in its annual occurrence and its enhancement of the operational cooperation between the various agencies involved. While this year's exercise was described in the media as designed to test the response to extreme events, future exercises should deal with scenarios caused by incidents that cause more extensive damage than Israel's existing capabilities are able to sustain. Such scenarios are certainly possible – whether caused by terrorist elements (for example, serious damage to electricity power sources leading to a blackout of several days in large areas of the country), or by natural events (for example, earthquakes). Thorough study of the significance and consequences of different extreme events will bolster Israel's ability to meet severe challenges successfully.