

The Civilian Front in Operation Protective Edge

Meir Elran and Alex Altshuler

The response to the complex challenges facing the civilian front during Operation Protective Edge was, generally speaking, more successful than in previous similar military confrontations (the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Operation Cast Lead in 2008-9, and Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012). The damage caused by the 4,382 rockets and mortar bombs¹ fired by the Palestinian factions from the Gaza Strip at civilian targets in Israel during the 50 days of fighting was relatively small, certainly in terms of human casualties (with seven civilian deaths, two of them due to rockets and the rest from mortar fire).

The relatively limited daily average of some 86 rockets and mortar bombs,² significantly lower than in previous clashes, created somewhat moderate interference with the civilian routine, with the exception of the populated areas in the south. The damage to the economy was quite reasonable, relative to the length of the campaign.³ The total damage was lower than had been predicted by the scenarios that were published by the defense establishment, evidenced by a relatively small number of acute emergency cases in most parts of the country. However, the communities located within the 20 km range of the Gaza Strip were exposed to some 60 percent of the rocket and mortar bomb launches, while those located within the 40 km range of the Gaza Strip were exposed to 32 percent of the launches.⁴ The most extreme damage occurred in the localities in the so-called “Gaza envelope,” which bore the brunt of the mortar bomb launches and were most immediately and severely threatened by the relatively surprising challenge of the offensive tunnels. The combination of the two-pronged offenses – from above and below – was indeed a significant threat that represented a major blow to the

sense of personal security and morale and led to the self-initiated evacuation of most of the area's residents (who returned home shortly after the ceasefire).

The duration of the operation was much longer than expected by the reference threat scenarios, based mostly on the experience of the previous rounds of fighting in the last decade. Although overall the Israeli public met the protracted challenge well, the extended nature of the operation, its complexity, and the fluctuations on the military front created new challenges for the public. Although there were several ceasefires during the operation, they did little to contain the psychological impact of the lengthy campaign. One might have expected that the several lulls would ease the pressure on the civilians and allow individuals, communities, and organizations to re-muster their energy. In fact, however, they only created a sense of uncertainty, frustration, and helplessness for many, as expressed by criticism of what was deemed as Israel's pursuit of too restrained an approach to the Hamas attacks. Another noted expression was found in the blatantly growing extremism among segments of the population toward the "other," especially the Arab minority in Israel.

Against this complex background, several systemic lessons in the context of the civilian front can be learned.

Societal Resilience

The most important lesson has to do with the Israeli public's societal resilience as manifested during the fighting. Unlike the common connotation when used by politicians and the media, societal resilience does not refer to robustness or to public cohesiveness in the face of broad trauma or an external severe threat. Social resilience, in its pure form, represents the capacity of a society – local or national – to respond flexibly to a serious disruption (e.g., security threat) in proportion to its severity; in other words, to allow a temporary lessening of normal functioning and bounce back quickly to society's previous identity and conduct level, while giving room for modifications and adaptations.⁵ In terms of the Israeli public's functioning and based on public opinion surveys conducted during the operation, one may conclude that Israelis generally demonstrated a high level of functional stability in the face of the measured Hamas challenge. More importantly, Hamas' strategic objective – chaos and demoralization within the Israeli public, so as to exert pressure on the government to ease the economic and security restrictions imposed on the Gaza Strip – was completely foiled.

The functional resilience of the public may be measured both tactically and strategically. Tactically, the public behaved well during the rocket attacks. It reduced its routine conduct to a reasonable degree and generally returned to normal behavior immediately thereafter. An important exception to this generalization was the Gaza envelope population, whose challenge was significantly more substantial. Most residents in those localities left their homes, generally even before the offensive tunnels dug from the Gaza Strip became a primary concern to the public and the military. At the same time, not all residents of the area behaved in the same manner. Some communities chose not to evacuate or to evacuate only in smaller numbers, testifying to different attitudes among different communities, presumably with different characteristics.⁶ Alternatively, one could argue that the proactive evacuation of the residents manifests a valuable functional flexibility – a primary component of social resilience.

Strategically, the Israeli public demonstrated its societal resilience by quickly returning to normal levels of function following the campaign. This includes the residents of the Gaza envelope and the south as a whole, who returned to their routines, albeit after publicly expressing hesitations and complaints regarding the political situation and what they viewed as the government's misjudgment. A few days after the fighting stopped, the school year, including in kindergartens, began on time, including in the areas that were the hardest hit in the Gaza envelope and in towns where prominent local leaders had publicly called for keeping the children out of school even after the ceasefire went into effect. Communities that hesitated in sending the children back to school also returned to their routines a few days later. All of this indicates high social resilience, even higher than that demonstrated following the Second Lebanon War.

Social resilience is not a predetermined and fixed trait that must be continuously cultivated over time through deliberate action and professionally guided programs, long before the outbreak of a crisis. Furthermore, following a crisis, it is important to create growth engines of social and economic resilience in areas prone to serious danger, in accordance with the relevant threats. Such actions can create higher public fortitude in preparation for possible future disruptions of serious proportions and allow for rapid recovery after a future crisis. In this context, the full implementation of the government's decision to strengthen differentially the economy of the southern regions is most important. On August 10 and 31, 2014, the government decided on

a broad program, including the allocation of 1.3 billion shekels over the next five years to the Gaza area communities to promote social, economic, and security programs. Decisions designed to strengthen the more distant southern communities were taken later, at an overall budget of an additional 2 billion shekels. Still, the residents of the south need an attentive ear and a warm shoulder to lean on; this is no less important than the necessary material support. Executing those plans with sensitivity and understanding on an ongoing, unwavering basis will raise the chances for significant empowerment and enhance social resilience among these residents.⁷

Another lesson relates to the conduct of national leaders and, even more importantly, that of local leaders. Inclusive leadership and public trust are key components of social resilience.⁸ Generally speaking, the nation's leaders conducted the campaign in a measured, calculated manner, and together with the military created an appropriate level of trust, even if it wavered and then declined to some degree during the second half of the campaign.⁹ Toward the end of the operation, the residents of the south and the government differed over the question of prioritizing the special needs of the areas threatened by Hamas. The possible renewal of hostilities in the near future might broaden these gaps and the consequent mistrust, accentuated by local leaders, many of whom have openly challenged the government's policy. At the same time, political leaders in the south have shown a particularly high level of leadership, thereby enhancing the resilience of their constituencies and serving as a source of inspiration for the Israeli public at large.

Active Defense

There is no doubt that the success – operationally and in terms of morale – of the Iron Dome system made a major contribution to the outcome of Operation Protective Edge. The 735 interceptions it scored represented a serious countermeasure to Hamas' rocket offensive; the system saved lives directly in Israel and indirectly in the Palestinian Gaza strip, and positioned itself as a central element of Israel's security doctrine.¹⁰ The system also proved itself as a generator of a high sense of personal safety in the public at large, and likewise gave the political echelon wide space to maneuver and make difficult decisions without the pressure of mass casualty events. The public's trust in the system grew stronger through the campaign, to the point at which there was some risk that people might disregard the directives on seeking shelter. The military success of mitigating the threat was largely

assisted by the air force's offensive moves designed to reduce the potential of Hamas' rockets on the one hand, and by the public's conduct in seeking shelters as instructed by the IDF Home Front Command, on the other.

At the same time, it is important to realize that in terms of the rocket threat, this round of hostilities was relatively minor. Israel should be prepared for much more severe scenarios, especially with regard to increased accuracy, range, quantities, and warhead payload of high trajectory weapons. This is already the case, to a large extent, with the Hizbollah arsenal,¹¹ but improvements are also expected with Hamas' capabilities, which will turn at least part of their rockets into missiles, allowing a much greater hit percentage of civilian, military, and infrastructure targets in Israel. An upgraded threat will require much more robust and effective protection systems by the active defense forces. Moreover, as significant as the last achievement was, any resistance system has its limitations and will never be hermetic. An appropriate response to future threats requires many more Iron Dome batteries¹² as well as continued upgrading of its technical and operational capacities.

Civil Defense

The overall functioning of the public during the so-called "state of routine emergency," considering the long duration of the conflict, was quite high. The safety procedures were well observed, allowing most Israelis to maintain an essentially normal way of life between rocket barrages and alerts. The professional directives and emergency information provided by the IDF Home Front Command were critical, clear, and instructive. An additional important contribution was manifested by the dramatic increase in the number of the warning zones (now approximately 210),¹³ which reduce the frequency of interruptions to civilian life per person and region, and consequently help minimize the damage to the economy. The future full scale introduction of the cellular-based warning system (via personal text messages¹⁴), which was operated initially during Operation Protective Edge, will further improve the public's risk awareness and conduct during emergencies.

All these factors considered, it seems that the current state of the shelter system is reasonable, though it requires local improvements, especially in zones that at present have virtually no protection, such as the unregistered Bedouin communities and localities with mobile/temporary housing. The widespread use of mobile concrete shelters (*miguniyot*) seems like an effective and inexpensive solution, if they are readily available for the population at

large. Looking to the future and anticipating a more severe threat, an orderly, multi-year national program must be designed and enacted soon. Given its high costs, it must selectively prioritize specific defensive needs. Special emphasis must be placed on protecting critical national infrastructures, including the electric grid, the gas and water supply systems, and the transportation nodes. The sensitivity of this challenge was made clear with the short halt of international flights to Israel, which should be viewed as a wake-up call for the possibility of real, widespread interruption of necessary services supplied by the critical infrastructure installations. This is a risk that Israelis are not familiar with and so far is not at the center of attention of the decision makers. This must change drastically, and soon.

In the legal/normative sense: on July 8, 2014, the government declared a “special situation” for the civilian sector in the south. Later, the government decided to begin implementing the country’s “Emergency Economy System” (*melah*). These decisions allowed the country to call on the human and material resources required by emergency needs. At the declarative level, the decision sent a message that the population was being taken care of. Still, the demands from local politicians to expand the enactment of the Emergency Economy to other locales were not met, primarily due to economic considerations.

Conclusion

Israel’s civilian front met the challenges posed by Operation Protective Edge well, given the measured scope of the interruptions on the one hand and its extended duration on the other. Expressions of social resilience were generally high, and the disruption to routine life was relatively low, except in the greater Gaza area.

Nonetheless, the civilian front’s successful coping with the challenges of the last round should be measured against the limited posture of the opponent. Given much more extreme threat scenarios, especially on the part of Hizbollah in the north, much more thorough preparations must be taken. This requires a qualitative leap in the overall deployment of the civilian front, both in the realm of social resilience, as well as in reference to the active and passive defenses. Israel cannot rest on the laurels of Operation Protective Edge, and must prepare for more threatening scenarios. This will require conceptual, operational, technological, and organizational improvements for the entire system.

Notes

- 1 Non-classified sources provide diverse data, though fairly close in number. As of now, no sources distinguish between rockets and mortar bombs.
- 2 Some suggest that the daily average was around 100, since there were no more than ca. 50 days of fighting in this round.
- 3 See Haim Bior, "Survey": Two-thirds of Businesses Suffered a Drop in Activity since Operation Protective Edge," *The Marker*, August 21, 2014, <http://www.themarker.com/career/1.2412406>.
- 4 Data from *Haaretz*, August 28, 2014.
- 5 F. H. Norris, S. P. Stevens, B. Pfefferbaum, K. F. Wyche, R. L. Pfefferbaum, "Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy for Disaster Readiness," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 41 (2008):127-50.
- 6 There are different social forms of residence, which impact on the social structure of the communities. Even among the kibbutzim there are differences between the secular and religious groups, and those that have relatively large segments of newcomers who joined the communities' expansion projects.
- 7 Meir Elran and Eran Yashiv, "The True Victory is the Social and National Resilience," *The Marker*, August 17, 2014.
- 8 G. Ben-Dor, "The Social Component of Social Resilience: A Working Paper," Herzliya Conference, 2003, http://www.herzliyaconference.org/_Uploads/1152socialstrength.pdf.
- 9 For survey results showing Israel as victor, see Sofia Ron-Moriah, "New Survey Shows: Netanyahu is the Big Winner of Protective Edge," *NRG*, September 5, 2014, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/617/977.html>.
- 10 For data source, See Yuval Azoulay, "Iron Dome: 8 Facts about the True Queen of Protective Edge," *Globes*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000953639>.
- 11 Quantitatively and qualitatively the Hizbollah threat is roughly 10 times that of the Hamas threat before the last round. The threat scenario from the Lebanese front shows a daily average of more than 700 rockets and missiles per day, to include large scale barrages of dozens of launches at a specifies given target.
- 12 In prior studies we have suggested a necessary order of battle of 16 Iron Dome batteries.
- 13 See Gili Cohen, "This is How the Alarm System in Israel Works," *Haaretz*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2413887>.
- 14 Homefront Command Website, <http://www.oref.org.il/907-he/Pakar.aspx>.