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How (Un)Prepared is Israel for an Emergency?

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The State Comptroller's report on Israel's unsatisfactory level of preparation for an emergency caused by war, security events, and natural causes was published on September 9, 2015. The new report, which follows a series of reports on this matter, criticizes the government for a long list of serious failings in preparation for emergencies. The most important of these are "severe problems in construction of the national system for the home front" and "absence of comprehensive legislation for dealing with the home front." Together these constitute a "severe deficiency, whereby no agency has the authority to enforce guidelines for emergency preparations in the local authorities." The report further asserts that "it has not been established who is responsible for dealing with the home front during emergencies." All these serious allegations, as well as many others presented in the report – more detailed and equally insightful – were already raised in the past. The State Comptroller's criticism, however, like that of many experts in the field, has until now not led to the necessary comprehensive handling of these critical issues. The question therefore arises whether Israel, nine years after the grand home front failure in the Second Lebanon War, is indeed unprepared for major emergencies.

The answer to this question is complex. There is no doubt that substantive progress has been made in a number of important areas that substantially enhance the physical defense capacity against high trajectory weapons. The most significant of these is the active defense system, especially Iron Dome, against short range rockets, and the David's Sling (Magic Wand) system against medium range rockets, which will likely become operational in the near future. In the most recent campaigns against Hamas, especially Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, Iron Dome provided the civilian front with near-hermetic protection – even though in the larger scale campaigns expected in the future, mainly against Hizbollah, the challenge may well be much more difficult. The active defense might not provide a total solution, certainly if the order of battle is not multiplied, as it will have to grant reasonable defense simultaneously for IDF bases, critical national infrastructure, and population centers. Another important systemic improvement is the national early warning system and the dramatic increase in the number of the alert zones (currently 250), which make it possible for most civilians to

follow an "emergency routine" even during rocket and missile attacks. The establishment of a system of Home Front liaison officers to the local authorities likewise reflects the important change in awareness of the Home Front Command, which has been preparing itself to readily provide multi-faceted active assistance to the civilian communities in emergencies.

At the same time, there are still many striking deficiencies that cast doubts on the seriousness of the official national approach toward home front defense. The most important unaddressed question is the authority and responsibility for advance civilian preparedness for emergencies, which adversely affects the level of management and coordination in crises. In most cases, the cliché that the local authority is the "basic cornerstone" of disaster management is unfounded. At the governmental level, too, the Ministry of Defense has no meaningful capability or authority to impose its position and priorities concerning emergency handling on the other ministries. The situation is no less ominous in the preparedness of critical national infrastructure, such as in the crucial issue of security of the electric grid. In contrast to the military front, which is relatively well organized and prepared, no one is responsible for the extremely sensitive civilian front. The repeated efforts to regulate this issue through legislation have failed. If the situation does not augur well in security related preparedness, it is decidedly worse in the critical realm of preparation for natural disasters, particularly severe earthquakes, where the damage liable to result in the absence of effective preparation is far higher, given what are likely to be lengthy, expensive, and painful recovery efforts.

Why, then, do the respective governments in Israel not adopt the necessary measures regarding the home front, even though they know that in any military conflict, the civilian population and economy are expected to face a serious challenge? Why do they not raise the priority of emergency management, given their understanding that many more casualties are bound to emerge from a major natural disaster? There are several explanations, all of which must be addressed in an open public debate, in order to effect the necessary changes.

One explanation lies in the Israeli security ethos, which assigns a clear priority to military related threats over natural hazards, and clearly favors an offensive approach, rather than defensive solutions to the security challenges. A clear manifestation of this attitude was expressed in the IDF's initial vehement opposition to construction of an active defense system. A current echo of this minimalistic attitude lies in the recent "IDF Strategy" released by the Chief of Staff, as well as the clear preference given to procurement and force buildup of offensive components. The leading school of thought in the defense establishment still holds that offensive capabilities represent the best solution to any current military or terrorist challenge: they will enhance the deterrent dimension, and if that fails, they will enable the IDF to remove the threat. This, in essence, is the core military formula to provide the solution for the Israeli Home Front, which is expected to

“demonstrate its resilience,” while waiting for the offensive stroke and IDF firepower to destroy the rocket challenge. The problems repeatedly associated with the offensive operation have not eroded the clear preference for it. This approach, it is argued, might jeopardize the necessary attention to the defensive dimension. Even so, the investments in the realm of preparations for security challenges are dramatically larger than the attention and resources granted for preparations for natural disasters.

Another explanation lies in the nature of Israeli politics and government. The structure of the coalition in Israel gives each minister responsibility for his or her ministerial activities, which generates an inherent obstacle to the broad multi-dimensional and inter-governmental measures essential for the adequate civilian home front preparations and operations. Even the necessary cooperation between the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Public Security, and between the IDF and the police and the other first response agencies, is still far from optimal. Furthermore, the structural, budgetary, and political weakness of most of the local authorities, many of whose leaders hope that the next mass disruption will not happen in their term of office, also creates a clear obstacle to preparations for an emergency. In general, preparatory steps taken in Israel are usually small and incremental, in the absence of an agreed conceptual strategic envelope. The ongoing power struggles between political and bureaucratic groups play a key role, and make it difficult to focus attention on major advances that would assign emergency preparedness to its rightful place.

In addition, the Israeli public, which is quite familiar with military hazards, lacks sufficient knowledge, awareness, and understanding of the risks involved in natural disasters, especially earthquakes. There is a widespread feeling that it will not actually happen in Israel, that the preparations for an emergency are a problem of the local and national agencies, and that a flexible response can always be improvised. These feelings have been affirmed in recent years by the success of the active defense system: if we are protected, then there is no real problem, and therefore no need for advance preparation, and no room for public pressure on the government to elevate emergency preparations on the list of national priorities.

The conclusion is therefore that only a transformation in awareness – in the public at large, the government, the IDF, and the local authorities – will make it possible for emergency preparedness to command its proper place. Another possibility, of course, is to wait for a major disaster and the ensuing large number of casualties and great deal of damage, and only then learn lessons and bring about a change in the picture. That is also what happened in many other countries. The problem is that in Israel, the security threat and risk of natural disasters are real and current. It appears that in Israel’s situation, there is no substitute for the Prime Minister’s leadership in advancing the necessary changes that are recognized and largely embraced by all those involved in the home front mission.