



The State Comptroller
and Ombudsman of Israel



State of Israel

December 2023

Special Report

Public Complaints during First Weeks of "Swords of Iron" War

The Ombudsman

HIGHLIGHTS





Opening Remarks of the State Comptroller and Ombudsman and the Head of the Office of the Ombudsman

This special report is hereby presented to the Knesset (Israeli parliament), under Section 46(b) of State Comptroller Law, 5718-1958 [Consolidated Version]. The report reviews the manner in which the civilian population coped with the emergency situation during the first six weeks of the "Swords of Iron" war, and especially their interaction with the Israeli government authorities in relation to the issues arising from the situation.

On the morning of Saturday, 7.10.23, Shemini Atzeret 5784, the Hamas terror organization launched a murderous surprise attack on the communities of the Gaza envelope and its environs, while simultaneously firing missiles and rockets over the south and center of Israel. In the days following the attack on 7 October, tens of thousands of people living in the communities in the Gaza envelope were evacuated from their homes, while still contending with the difficult traumas they had been left with from the attack. As a result of the outbreak of fighting on the northern front, tens of thousands of residents were also evacuated from their

homes in the communities along the northern border.

The State of Israel was required, in an instant, to meet the many needs of the civilian population as a result of the war - giving immediate treatment to the survivors of the barbarous massacre; providing the necessary services and support for the hundreds of thousands of persons displaced from their homes; assisting the large sectors of the population contending with a massive bombardment of missiles, sometimes without sufficient protection, and so forth.

Two days after the outbreak of the war, we began visiting communities in the Gaza envelope and the South, hospitals and evacuation centers in the north of Israel, accompanied by staff of the Office of the Ombudsman and the state audit divisions. From conversations with evacuees, it transpired that the government ministries and institutions had not taken immediate and sufficient action to handle the evacuees in the first days of the war. While at a later stage the government bodies did begin to assist the evacuees and provide them with the aid that they required,

this only highlighted the failings in the actions of the government bodies at the outbreak of the war, which were not as required and expected of them.

Throughout the year, both in normal times and in times of crisis, the Office of the Ombudsman deals with the investigation of complaints of the public against public bodies in the State of Israel - government ministries, local authorities, government companies, and so forth. From the outset of the war, the Office of the Ombudsman realized that in light of its role and the professional experience of its staff, and due to its ability to reach quickly and efficiently all relevant sources within the civil service, it needed to take immediate measures to give as much assistance as possible to the population requiring aid due to the emergency situation. The Office decided that it would not wait to be contacted but would initiate steps for quickly and efficiently reaching those requiring its assistance.

Therefore, as early as 12.10.23, five days after the outbreak of the war, we established the Office of the Ombudsman hotline. The hotline initially operated 24 hours a day, six days a week; today it operates as required to meet the needs of all those calling it.

Furthermore, the staff of the Office of the Ombudsman began visiting the evacuation centers across the country, from Tiberias in the North to Eilat in the South, in order to provide the evacuees with updated information about their rights, to assist them in real time and where appropriate, to launch an investigation of their complaint with the public body. To date, the staff of the Office of the Ombudsman have visited over 80 evacuation centers throughout the country.

The Office of the Ombudsman focused on delivering swift and efficient aid for persons who filed complaints pertaining to the emergency situation. It provided reliable and updated information about the rights granted as a result of the war, served as a mediator between the individual and the government authorities,

and its staff lent a listening ear for people in distress.

In the many interactions between the staff of the Office of the Ombudsman and the public during the first six weeks of the war, numerous issues arose that required the immediate attention of the public bodies. The problems raised by the people contacting the Office of the Ombudsman were, among others, lack of availability of the public bodies and their help centers during the first days of the war; uncertainty pertaining to the rights of persons who had been harmed by the emergency situation; and lack of rights take-up by some people due to digital illiteracy, which prevented them from exercising their rights online.

The responses received by the Office of the Ombudsman's teams from those turning to the Office were moving and heartwarming, proving that the Office was concentrating its resources in the correct channels during the war.

This special report of the Office of the Ombudsman speaks for all the people who contacted the Office and expressed their arguments and pain, reflecting through their eyes the hardships of the individual and the effects of the war on the civilian population.

Furthermore, this special report contains citations from the letter of the State Comptroller and Ombudsman to the Prime Minister of 13.11.23, in which the failings and discrepancies pertaining to the civilian population are presented, as disclosed during our visits throughout the country - in the communities of the Gaza envelope and the South, in the communities in the north of the country, in the hospitals and evacuation centers. It should be pointed out that the failings and discrepancies presented in the letter, which are mentioned in the special report, do not constitute an audit report or the findings of the investigation of a complaint, but give a picture of the situation and provide insights stemming from conversations with hundreds of office-holders and citizens and from the direct observation of the

facts on the ground.

In recent weeks, we have been seeing the prioritization of the delivery of swift and high-quality services for the residents of Israel by sectoral ombudsmen and public complaints commissioners in the government ministries, local authorities and public bodies. The Office of the Ombudsman, which serves as the "professional home" for these sectoral ombudsmen and inquiries commissioners, maintains constant contact with them and through this cooperation succeeds in aiding the many people seeking its services.

This special report is the first report on the "Swords of Iron" war to be tabled by the State Comptroller and Ombudsman in the Knesset. The report gives a preliminary overview, in real time, of how the civilian population is coping. We attach high importance to the report – both in relation to the public bodies, to improve the service delivered by them, and in relation to the general public, whose voice deserves to be heard. And yet, the report is not the final word. Our office is currently formulating a comprehensive office audit program pertaining to the different aspects of the war. This program will reflect in a poignant and uncompromising manner the gaps and failings in the

modi operandi of the government bodies during the war, especially in its first days, as well as in the period preceding it.

We wish to thank all the staff of the Office of the Ombudsman for their commitment to aiding the public turning to the Office of the Ombudsman in this difficult and complex time. We are not blind to the fact that many of the staffs' relatives are participating in the war effort, and the willingness of the staff to take part in the multifarious activities of the Office of the Ombudsman at this time, out of a deep conviction of mission and purpose, notwithstanding their worries about their relatives serving on the front line, is not to be taken for granted.

The Office of the Ombudsman will continue to reach the public requiring its services and assist all persons whose rights have been violated – both in normal times and in times of war.

We shall conclude by expressing our sincere condolences to the bereaved families, our hopes for the safety of the soldiers defending us and the swift return of all the hostages, and our prayers for the rapid recovery of the injured.



Matanyahu Englman
State Comptroller
and Ombudsman



Dr. Esther Ben-Haim, Adv.
Head of the Office
of the Ombudsman



Highlights of the Special Report Public Complaints during First Weeks of "Swords of Iron" War

On the morning of Simchat Torah, 7.10.23, the Hamas organization launched a murderous surprise attack on IDF bases and Israeli communities in the Gaza envelope, while rockets were simultaneously fired onto communities across the country. During this attack, over 1,200 people were brutally killed and murdered, and thousands were injured. Hamas terrorists abducted to the Gaza Strip some 240 Israelis of different ages. Many communities were ravaged and their residents forced to leave their homes. The Israeli government declared war on Hamas, and the IDF entered the "Swords of Iron" war. At the same time, the Hezbollah organization started carrying out attacks on the North.

In light of the security situation in the North and South, and in fear for the safety of the residents of the Gaza envelope and those living near the security fence in the North, the government instructed the evacuation of some 126,000 residents from these communities to guest houses and hotels throughout Israel. Furthermore, in conversations between the State Comptroller and Ombudsman and sources in the field, it transpired that some 130,000 additional residents from communities that had not been evacuated by the government had decided to evacuate themselves to guest houses, in light of the missiles being fired by Hamas and Hezbollah operatives.

The enormous loss of lives following the heinous attack by Hamas, the evacuation and self-evacuation of hundreds of thousands of residents from their homes and the deployment of hundreds of thousands of reserve troops - all these created a new reality which had to be addressed comprehensively by the government ministries and authorities.

Two days after the brutal surprise attack on 7 October 2023, the State Comptroller and Ombudsman began a series of intensive onsite visits. The visits, which were accompanied by representatives of the Office of the Ombudsman, focused on the communities along the confrontation lines in the south and north of the country, and on towns and cities that had taken in evacuees. Visits were made to local authorities, hospitals and hotels which were accommodating evacuees, the aim being to ascertain, at close range, discrepancies in the handling of civilians by government bodies and in meeting the needs of the residents of the State of Israel during the existing crisis. The State Comptroller and Ombudsman immediately brought certain discrepancies to the attention of the relevant bodies, for the instant handling of them. On 13.11.2023, the State Comptroller and Ombudsman sent a letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, informing him of the failings and main discrepancies pertaining to the handling of the civilians, as disclosed during the many visits conducted by the State Comptroller and through the investigation of individual complaints received by the Office of the Ombudsman.

From the outset of the irregular event, the Office of the Ombudsman decided to take advantage of its strong points and abilities - its status and rich experience, its overall perspective of all the public bodies and its good working relations with them - to find solutions to the various difficulties generated by the emergency situation and to lend a listening ear to the public. The Office of the Ombudsman brought to the attention of the various bodies, in real time, the hardships disclosed by the complaints and the discrepancies transpiring from them. The Office of the Ombudsman thus acted as a mirror for the public bodies, enabling them to amend the defects and minimize the discrepancies.

The Office of the Ombudsman worked energetically and swiftly and as early as 12.10.2023, in the first week of the "Swords of Iron" war, established a designated hotline (the hotline) through which complaints relating to the emergency situation could be filed easily and accessibly, and which served as a source of information for persons contacting it with regards to their rights. The Office of the Ombudsman even operated for the first time a designated WhatsApp platform. Furthermore, in the period under review,

staff of the Office of the Ombudsman visited 64 evacuation centers in hotels across the country, in order to ascertain the problems of the evacuees and make the filing of complaints accessible to them.

On 19.12.23, the State Comptroller and Ombudsman filed with the Knesset (Israeli parliament) a special report pertaining to the first six weeks of the war. The report reviews the overall activity of the Office of the Ombudsman during the period under review and describes the inquiries received by the Office of the Ombudsman relating to the emergency situation and its handling of selected complaints.

The aim of the current report is to show the discrepancies revealed in the solutions and services provided by the government authorities, as disclosed in the framework of the hotline and in the meetings with the evacuees in the guest houses throughout the country. Furthermore, the report will review the solutions provided by the staff of the Office of the Ombudsman for these people and the ways in which they assisted them to cope better with the difficult situation.

We hope that this report will encourage the public bodies to continue working in an orderly and systematic fashion to improve the services provided for the public in general and for the evacuees in particular, and that by virtue of it the public will become acquainted with the actions of the Office of the Ombudsman and will take advantage of its services, for the resolution of its problems with the various authorities.

Key Data



43

days - the period
under review (7.10.23 - 19.11.23)



1,843

number of calls
received on the hotline



1,329

number of inquiries*
relating to the emergency situation
that were opened at
the Office of the Ombudsman



0117

43%

percentage of inquiries
received by the Office
of the Ombudsman from
residents of the South
during the period
under review



59%

percentage of telephone calls
relating to the emergency situation



40%

percentage of inquiries
relating to the emergency
situation that were handled
immediately through
the giving of advice and guidance



140

number of inquiries
received via WhatsApp



67.8%

percentage of complaints** that were
rectified out of all the complaints
whose investigation was completed



64

number of visits to evacuation
centers, from Tiberias in the
North to Eilat in the South



53.6%

percentage of
inquiries of women



24/6

503

hours of activity
of the hotline,
24 hours, six days a week

* Inquiry - contact with the Office of the Ombudsman, including a request for information or a complaint about a public body.

** Complaint - claims of the complainant about an act of a public body that directly injures him/her.