

The Mount Carmel fire and the “existential threat” to Israel

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At least 42 people have died in fires that swept through the forests on Mount Carmel near Haifa, Israel's third largest city, ravaging an area of more than 30 square kilometres. It spread quickly as a result of the dry conditions and easterly winds and is estimated to have caused damage worth US\$455 million.

The worst fire in Israel's 62-year history, it has left a terrible toll. Most of the casualties occurred when a prison bus carrying police and prison officers on its way to evacuate 500 prison inmates was trapped by the flames. Thirty-three people have been hospitalised, including three who are in a critical condition.

More than 250 homes have suffered extensive damage; at least 70 of which the government believes will have to be rebuilt. More than 17,000 people were evacuated, including more than 5,000 from Tirat Carmel, 3,000 from Haifa, several villages, two prisons and a mental hospital. At least 12,500 acres of land were razed, 5.5 million trees burnt and half the Carmel Nature Reserve destroyed. It is believed that the forest will take 40 years to recover.

Israel mobilised its firefighting service, ground-based armed forces and civilians for the rescue effort. But within a few hours its fire service, which has no aerial firefighters, was overwhelmed. In the event, the fire took 77 hours to bring under control, and then only after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for an international rescue effort.

The government hired an Evergreen Boeing 474 super tanker, the world's largest fire fighting aircraft, to dump 40 million tonnes of water and flame retardant and put out the flames. A total of 34 international firefighting aircraft from Turkey, Greece, Russia, France, Britain, the Netherlands, Finland, Norway, Germany, Belgium, Spain, and Cyprus fought to bring the fires under control.

Israel's Arab neighbours, Jordan and Egypt, sent help. The Palestinian Authority sent fire trucks to help put out the fires near the Israeli Arab towns of Tayibe and Barta'a, while 21 Palestinian firefighters came with three trucks to help on Mount Carmel.

The fire is believed to have been caused accidentally and spread rapidly in the dry conditions when it was not put out in time. The authorities have ruled out terrorism and arson, although that did not stop police from arresting eight Israeli Arab youth in nearby Druze towns on suspicion of causing additional fires through arson or negligence. All have now been released, including two who were detained for three days.

Netanyahu called a national day of mourning, and announced a miserly US\$35 million compensation fund for the fire victims, ordering the Finance Ministry to pay the victims immediately. Yuval Steinmetz, the finance minister, and Treasury officials had opposed paying out this trivial sum to all the victims—arguing that that paying compensation to people without insurance would only encourage others not take it out in the future.

The government has rejected demands for an independent commission of inquiry, and instead called for the state comptroller to investigate the fire and report within a few days. While Netanyahu also announced a new squadron of firefighting planes for the air force, and the establishment of a new national Fire Authority, he said nothing about an even more pressing issue—the lack of manpower for the existing trucks. Neither did he say where the funds would come from.

The fires, which were small compared to the bushfires in Victoria, Australia, last year, have caused far more than physical destruction. They have been called “Netanyahu's Katrina”, exposing for all to see Israel's complete inability to protect its citizens. This is

due to a toxic mixture of the right-wing economic and social nostrums long espoused by all the state parties, and their exclusive focus on military spending funded in large part by the United States.

Israel is famous for its high-tech inventions and has the most powerful air force in the region and a huge arsenal of nuclear bombs, and has plans to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities a thousand miles away. Yet it did not have the resources to deal with a fire.

It is not as though Israel is a poor country. It was recently admitted into the OECD, the club of the world's richest nations. The weather conditions were not unexpected. The region has faced the worst drought in years. After an exceptionally hot summer, autumn temperatures are still unseasonably high. Little rain has fallen this autumn, or indeed since the flash floods in the winter.

Moreover, the Carmel was known to be a tinderbox. Professor Avi Perevolotsky, a senior researcher at the ministry of Agriculture's Research Organisation, told the *Jerusalem Post*, "Experts knew that this was the most likely area for a fire of this type". Yona Yahav, mayor of Haifa, told *Ynet News* said that the problem was well known and that it was "just a matter of time until a calamity occurred".

But Israel's firefighting service has, like many other public services, fallen victim to the free market policies of successive governments—most notably under Netanyahu's term as finance minister. A few hours into the blaze, and the firefighters, with ancient trucks, had run out of materials.

Again, this was no surprise. A 2007 report by the state comptroller had criticised the fire service, characterising it as the weakest of Israel's emergency services. Only a year ago, a study by the Interior Ministry showed that Israel has fewer firefighters per capita than any other advanced country, and firefighters blocked the roads in protest at their out-of-date and dysfunctional equipment and cuts to the service. Earlier this year, another report by the state comptroller said that the fire service had deteriorated significantly since its last report.

But the government refused to make funding available to the service. While Eli Yishai, the interior minister from the ultra-orthodox Shas party, was adept at getting funds for the expansion of settlements in east Jerusalem, religious seminaries for his party's

supporters, the \$370 million electronic border fence in Sinai and a detention centre for migrants and asylum seekers, he did nothing to secure Israel's emergency services. Now, to stave off calls for his resignation, he is blaming the Finance Ministry for the fiasco.

Israel is no more ready to prevent a chemical or aviation disaster, yet its deficiencies have also been known for years. A 2007 report commissioned by the government made 75 recommendations concerning major problems in civil aviation safety. Gilad Erdan, the minister for environmental protection, acknowledged in the wake of the fire that his ministry does not have the resources to handle a major industrial accident. Recent health minister reports show that Israel could not respond to a major epidemic, while the budget reports show that there is no earthquake preparedness.

The fires have revealed that the "existential threat" to Israeli working people lies not with Palestinians or its neighbours in the region. In the event, Israel's neighbours responded magnificently—including Turkey, which Israel had only recently accused of sponsoring terrorists—and its immediate neighbours, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

The support from the PA is particularly ironic in view of the fact that Palestinians from the West Bank are not allowed to enter Israel. As Ibrahim Aish, the head of the Palestinian firefighting team, told the *New Scotsman's* Ben Lynfield, "For a long time I have dreamed of visiting Haifa, but to my great sorrow I have come on a day of sadness filled with fire".

The existential threat lies with the readiness of Israel's financial oligarchy to sacrifice the lives, property and welfare of Israeli workers and their families for its own selfish interests.



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