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Photo by: (EVP)

100 American firefighters ready to assist in case of war

By YAAKOV LAPPIN
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Forty put on standby during Carmel fire, but weren't brought here because focus was on aerial control of blaze.

Around one hundred American firefighters are ready to fly to Israel within a few hours' notice and assist the Fire and Rescue Service in the event of a major war involving hundreds or thousands of rockets on the home front, resulting in multiple blazes around the country, or an earthquake.

The US firefighters, most of whom are based in Texas and New York, have completed qualification courses in the US and in Israel designed to get them adjusted to Israeli firefighting guidelines, according to Adi Zahavi, international director of the Emergency Volunteers Project (EVP).

The EVP utilizes donations from around the world to locate foreign volunteers to help Israeli emergency services, and pay for all aspects of their training and travel requirements.

The program has seen Israeli fire-fighting instructors visit the US for courses three times this year, while American firefighters have also traveled to Israel to learn firsthand about local fire-fighting guidelines, to ensure they could merge into the Fire and Rescue Service in the event of a war.

"Our aim is to create a small army of emergency personnel who, during a war or a prolonged crisis, can arrive in Israel and assist," said Zahavi. "We completed a qualification course with Texan firefighters just two week ago," he added.

The courses are aimed at getting the American volunteers used to working with far less manpower than they are used to back home, and responding to fires with less equipment and smaller crews. The American firefighters were not flown to Israel last week during the Carmel forest fire since the bulk of aid required to deal with that disaster involved aerial fire planes rather than ground crews, Zahavi explained.

But within five hours of being put on standby last week, many were ready to make the trip to Israel and tackle the blazes.

"The Carmel fires were not the ultimate situation they were trained for. The training is for a time of war. But when we put them on standby, 40 firefighters were ready to go. We prepared their air tickets. But they did not fly because operationally there was no need," Zahavi said.

"During a war, personnel numbers will be a vital issue. Let us be smart and prepare beforehand. If we won't need it, this can remain a backup option," he added.

Four additional qualification courses are planned for 2011.

Zahavi said the program was also an excellent opportunity for American firefighters to get to know Israel and forge relationships with their Israeli counterparts, a point echoed by Yoram Levi, spokesman of the Fire and Rescue Service.

"We support this program, of course. We joined it this year. The *hasbara* element is as important for us as the operational dimension. It gives us an opportunity to

explain the Israeli point of view better," he added.

"In the case of a war, we will be totally understaffed according to our estimations, unless the government adds to our ranks following the Carmel fires. But it will never be enough. We will need many people during a multi-front war, or an earthquake, and they do not exist here. The backup has come from the EVP's program," Levi said.

More information on the program is available at <http://evp.org.il>.



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