

WG 3 (Psychological Health)

## Emerging Themes from Israeli First Responders' Experiences: Intersection of War and Disaster Response

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### **Background and Rationale:**

As Israel continues to face the challenges of prolonged warfare, the experiences of first responders reveal parallels between wartime emergency response and disaster-related deployments. This study explores the psychological and operational frameworks shared by these contexts, with a focus on cross-cultural differences in emotional processing and psychological support. Insights from this study aim to improve resilience training and mental health interventions for first responders.

### **Research Methodology:**

This qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) first responders who participated in the Champlain Towers collapse in Surfside, Florida, June 2021, alongside American first responders. The overall sample included participants with diverse roles within both teams, emphasizing their psychological and operational experiences during prolonged crisis response. Using a phenomenological approach, data for the Israeli team has been collected through semi-structured interviews and will be analyzed through preliminary thematic analysis to identify relevant themes that map onto concrete recommendations for prolonged disaster response and other ongoing response efforts such as the current war.

### **Preliminary Findings:**

The initial analysis of the Israeli interviews highlighted key themes: (1) the emotional and mental toll of sustained operations, including stress, fatigue, and the cumulative impact of prolonged exposure to distressing situations; (2) the importance of structured psychological support mechanisms, with daily debriefing sessions used by the IDF team to mitigate trauma relative to other protocols utilized by other teams who were present, and (3) the challenges of preserving team cohesion under prolonged stress, balancing individual coping strategies with collective performance; and (4) participation in a prolonged response call prepared first responders to certain aspects of the current war. These preliminary themes pertain to maintaining well-being and operational effectiveness.

### **Conclusions:**

This portion of the overall study suggests that best practices from prolonged disaster response have the potential to enhance resilience and performance in both military and civilian emergency operations. Initial insights from Surfside highlight the value of comprehensive psychological support, proactive leadership, and culturally tailored debriefing processes. As U.S. and Israeli military collaboration deepens, these preliminary findings provide a foundation for integrating cross-cultural disaster response knowledge into broader crisis preparedness strategies, promoting both individual well-being and team effectiveness.

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## The Mental Challenges of an RPA Operator: Insights from My Personal Experience

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### **Background and Rationale:**

The RPA operator community has demonstrated remarkable resilience, regularly managing what can sometimes feel like apocalyptic scenarios. However, the Iron Swords War, combined with the unique yet routine psychological challenges of our profession, has pushed operators to their limits. Based on my experience as an RPA operator I distilled several contributing factors, some of which in my humble opinion are unique to remote warfare:

### **Distant Battlefield:**

Our missions take place tens to hundreds of kilometers away: we are not physically threatened. In addition, sensory input is predominantly visual, albeit limited, with some auditory information available, while tactile and olfactory perception, are absent.

### **Target Intimacy:**

The operator team remains above the battlefield longer than any other element. We maintain a broad and detailed situational awareness, and today's sensors provide profound insights into target characteristics - age, gender, body language, illness, etc. We maintain a 360-degree perspective, observing the target for prolonged periods before ultimately eliminating it.

### **Transitions:**

The physical distance between an operator's peaceful home to the control station - where they engage in high-intensity combat - is minimal. The psychological shift required to navigate this transition is immense. Likewise, transitioning back to normal life after being immersed in warfare presents significant challenges.

### **Vigilance Fluctuations:**

During a four-hour shift, RPA operators may execute low-intensity mission objectives, only to be suddenly redirected to high-stakes operations requiring extreme vigilance. These fluctuations can happen multiple times within a single shift, shifting rapidly between calm and crisis.

### **Accumulated Engagements:**

For an RPA operator, the number of enemy engagements and confirmed kills over a 12-month period of intense combat is unprecedented. No sniper or Special Forces operative comes close to these figures.

### **Conclusions:**

When these factors are combined into daily operations, RPA teams bear a significant mental burden. Being a remote warrior requires psychological skills that in my opinion have been largely overlooked and the operator's ability to endure this constant pressure relies almost entirely on innate skills.