IDC war game simulates multilateral response to Eilat rocket attack

* By TOVAH LAZAROFF

In a “war game simulation” held at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya on Thursday, players representing Israel’s security cabinet decided to respond swiftly to an attack from Sinai, in which 17 people were killed and dozens wounded when two rockets hit Eilat.

Among the simulated casualties were five children, seven Israeli tourists, two French citizens, four Americans and couples from Russia and the UK.

The security cabinet, comprising former senior officials, ordered a strike on the Gaza Strip, where the terrorist attack was said to have been planned by the Army of Islam, while at the same time agreeing to coordinate its actions with Egypt, the United States and the international community.

The prime minister — played convincingly by the former head of the National Security Council, IDC Prof. Uzi Arad — ruled after hearing the views of his security cabinet members (Eitan Ben-Eliahu as defense minister, Roni Milo as foreign minister, Maj.-Gen. (res.) Yitzhak Eitan as chief of staff, Jacob Perry as director of the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency), and Col. (res.) Lior Lotan as director of military intelligence) that the IDF should retaliate immediately with a massive air strike — but not a ground operation — on terrorist targets in Gaza.

“We have to react,” he said. “We cannot wait.”

The three-stage simulation was held under the guidance of Dr. Boaz Ganor, the founder and executive director of the Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the IDC, and was moderated by Steve Linde, editor-in-chief of The Jerusalem Post.

In the second stage of the simulation, major parties in the region played by academics and former officials, including Hezbollah, Syria, Egypt, Iran and al-Qaeda — decided, for the most part, not to get directly involved in the escalation following the Israeli military strike, which, according to a mock report on CNN, killed dozens in Gaza.

Yitzhak Levanon, a former ambassador to Egypt who lectures at The Lauder School of Government at IDC and who played Egyptian President Mohamed Morsy, urged Israel to boost its security ties with Cairo.

“There are common mutual interests between us and Egypt,” he said. “The degree of cooperation should be upgraded.”

In the third stage, the US ambassador (played by Michael Singh, managing director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy) vetoed a Security Council resolution condemning Israel’s excessive response presented by the German ambassador (played by Dr. Daphne Richemond-Barak, head of the International Law Desk at IDC) and supported by other members of the council.

The war game, which at times appeared eerily real, “demonstrated the complexity of the situation,” Ganor said afterwards. “It was also sending a message to the parties in the region: Don’t do anything that might not be in your own interest.”

The Israeli cabinet, he said, should “be prepared” for the scenario of a deadly terrorist attack from Sinai, while Egypt should be urged to reassert its control over the peninsula to stop terrorist groups from launching attacks from the area.

Prof. Alex Mintz, dean of The Lauder School of Government, said he found it reassuring that all parties had opposed an escalation of the violence following the Israeli retaliation.

The organizers of the conference barred journalists and the dozens of participants from recording the proceedings, apparently so that they would not be broadcast and misinterpreted. Ganor said the lessons of the war game would be documented and distributed here and abroad.

“I was really impressed by the simulation,” a student at IDC remarked afterwards. “It was a very realistic portrayal of what could happen. A wake-up call.”