



The World after COVID-19

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What will the world look like after COVID-19? Various possible scenarios were examined at INSS regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world in the coming years, and on the Middle East in particular: “continuation,” in which, after a hiatus of several more months, familiar global and regional trends resume; “reversal,” in which fundamental change takes place in the patterns that characterized life before the crisis, and the world prepares for an “illiberal” world order led by China; “breakdown,” in which all of the global actors emerge from the crisis battered and the precarious structure of the international system dissolves into chaos, reflected in part in a new wave of upheaval in the Middle East; and “reconstruction,” in which the United States regains its initiative and leads an international effort to restore the liberal world order and resolve burning conflicts.

This is not an attempt to predict the future, but rather a tool for planning that can help in thinking about the future in order to prepare for it. All of the scenarios pose weighty challenges for Israel that demand deliberation, monitoring, and preparation.

The two main variables in the scenarios are the level of control over the COVID-19 outbreaks and the scope of ongoing damage to economies as a result of the pandemic. The four scenarios are of course hypothetical and reflect possible “strategic stories” based on these variables and on additional developments, some of which have a basis in the current reality. The formulation of the scenarios attempts to overcome the failure of imagination that makes it difficult to see possible developments, yet cautions against exaggerating the impact of an event that is still underway or has yet to take place.

Merging the scenarios into one central story produces a reasonable scenario whereby presumably all the international

actors are engrossed in their domestic affairs in the near future. However, the competition between the great powers will continue, centered on the battle (already underway) over the narrative of the most effective way to cope with the crisis. The trend of influence moving east will continue and perhaps accelerate. Nation-states will gain strength given the effectiveness that most have demonstrated with respect to the pandemic. The world will not change completely, but it will be less free – the emergency measures and the employment of invasive surveillance measures will continue; less prosperous – there will be more unemployed people and more poor people; and less global – we will fly less, work from home more, and crowd together less in cities, and countries will ensure the stock of strategic reserves and the independence of essential industries.

The four scenarios present additional variations on the state of affairs. Each invites questions regarding the implications for Israel’s national security: in the first scenario (“continuation”), there should be an assessment of how the trends in the next one or two years will be different from those identified on the eve of the crisis, as the circumstances created during and because of the pandemic create a new context for the trends, which could reinforce or counter their intensity. In the second scenario (“reversal”), there should be a serious assessment of the possible implications of an “illiberal” world order led by China for the Middle East and for Israel. In the third scenario (“breakdown”), there should be an assessment of the possible nature of another wave of upheaval in the Middle East, and in particular the results of the collapse of governmental systems and the implications of the revival of the jihadist camp. In the fourth scenario (“reconstruction”), the implications of the new world order for the Middle East should be assessed.