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Contagion, War, and Strategy:
Lessons from Military Campaigns for Coping with Coronavirus

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For all the significant differences between fighting pandemics and waging wars, both challenges are matters of life and death that involve complex and multidimensional campaigns. Both require superior crisis management and policy decision making from a broad and integrative perspective, as the quality of these measures may well decide the future of the nation and the civilian population. The cumulative experience of the Israeli defense establishment offers lessons and insights — in terms of intelligence, strategic and operational planning, home front protection, force buildup, and decision making processes — that are relevant to management of the coronavirus crisis, efforts to limit its costs, and perhaps even the discovery of ways to extract and benefit from latent opportunities.

The coronavirus crisis, which is still at its outset, has already been described by many as a war. It is true that unlike in previous familiar wars, the enemy is neither human nor visible. Yet despite the significant differences between the two situations, fighting a pandemic shares some common traits with warring against humans. Both challenges are matters of life and death, involving complex and multidimensional campaigns that draw on issues of public health, the military, the economy, society, public perceptions, and politics. Both require commanding multi-faceted professional expertise, be it medical or military, in order to manage the crisis and make fateful policy decisions for the future of the nation and its population. The cumulative experience of Israel's defense establishment offers relevant lessons and insights for managing the coronavirus crisis, reducing its costs, and perhaps even using it as an opportunity. This article presents some examples with relevance to managing the campaign against the pandemic.

Just as war requires a situational awareness of the enemy and of one's own forces as a premise for planning and orchestrating the fighting, a pandemic requires a situational picture of one's population, with a map charting the carrier, infected, sick, and recovered populations, including in other countries. Just as intelligence gathering is one of the main efforts of the IDF and the State of Israel, so too the pandemic requires a broad testing apparatus that operates over time. Sharp, accurate intelligence allows for surgical precision strikes as an alternative to indiscriminate "carpet bombing," and in normal times effective

security screening weeds out terrorists from among an innocent populace, allowing for flights, travel, and the movement of workers at a reasonable level of security risk. Similarly, a broad and reliable testing capability would on the one hand allow for the identification of the sick, the carriers, and the infected, so they can be treated and isolated and contagion prevented, and on the other hand help prevent widespread and ongoing economic and social collateral damage resulting from healthy people quarantined and the economy paralyzed. Broad-based and effective testing may allow for a dramatic reduction in the quarantine of people who are not sick or infected and give them the "all-clear"; for the location of asymptomatic carriers who are not involved in any known infection incidents; and for a gradual resumption of crucial manufacturing activity and even of international aviation – particularly if a reliable and swift test is available before, during, and after the flight, akin to today's universally accepted counter-terrorist security checks.

Any military operational method reaches a culminating point where utility wanes and costs rise due to changing circumstances and the enemy's adaptation capability. Just as the utility of striking enemy sites that were analyzed in advance (pre-planned targets) declines over time because of enemy adaptiveness, so too can we expect a reduction in the efficacy of quarantine and social distancing when the sweep of infections increases significantly, the number of healthy people dwindles, and the number of recovered and immune people grows steadily. While directing the measures against the disease, It is important to designate the conditions under which their efficacy erodes while their costs continue to spiral, and to define the signs that identify this development.

In any war, the military must contend with managing the battle, and in tandem, with planning the next battle, the continuation of the campaign, the war's conclusion, and its aftermath. A proven military method for dealing with this complex challenge is the division of responsibility among various bodies: the tactical commanders deal with the present and the contact zone, while the operative and strategic commands focus on the upcoming stages and the deeper battlespace. As part of the campaign against the coronavirus, the National Crisis Management Center (MANAL) can be activated in a manner similar to the IDF's Supreme Command Post (MITZPE). In running the campaign against the virus, planning and crisis management resources should be divided between those addressing the current stage and those charged with the subsequent stages, including the anticipated end of the pandemic. From the picture emerging in Israel it appears that most of the attention of the crisis management apparatus is directed at the current phase, and, to judge from media reports, it is unclear which planning efforts, and on what scale, are devoted to the next stages, providing a North Star orienting present efforts. To the extent that such efforts are underway, it is important to inform the public about them — rather than just about the nearest horizon — as a way to enhance public confidence and sense of security.

In war, the civilian home front represents a significant fighting front, with public perception forming a center of gravity of societal resilience. Churchill was famed for his epic speeches during World War II that combined a daunting visage, given what was yet to come, with uncompromising determination to fight until victory. Trust in the leadership and an understanding of the situation are the key to a country's stability, including during a crisis, whether medical or military. Alongside the need to spur the public to act responsibly, it is important to avoid frightening it with unlikely, worst case scenarios. Given the mortality rate in Italy, citing what is happening there as an extreme possibility for Israel appears excessive and irresponsible, given the fundamental differences in demography (the median age in Italy is 45.9 and 20 percent of the population is over the age of 65, while in Israel the median age is 30 and only 10 percent of the population is over the age of 65) and in conduct. Contrary to wartime, where the great importance of keeping secrets and plans from the enemy is vital, such considerations are irrelevant to a pandemic, and the Israeli government should function with maximum transparency toward its public. It is important that the public be informed of the situation, professional assessments, future plans, expected difficulties, and also the hopes for a better future.

On a strategic level, it is important to define the over-arching purpose of the campaign. As in war, the desired outcome after the crisis should be outlined, and it is not enough to make do with a one-dimensional purpose like "minimal losses from coronavirus" without addressing the state of the economy, society, government, and other elements of national security as an objective for the day after the crisis. It is important to understand the strategic challenge posed by the epidemic, which combines a direct threat to public health, in terms of morbidity and mortality, with an additional grave threat of severe and protracted self-inflicted harm to the economy and society as a result of government decisions and public conduct. This threat can ultimately lead to indirect consequences, including morbidity and mortality resulting not from coronavirus but from a scarcity of resources, with a severe blow to national resilience and national security. Every effort should therefore be made to avoid an Israeli Pyrrhic victory over the virus at the price of economic suicide and harsh damage to society — and especially to its weakest members.

National decision making must be predicated on a choice between a range of strategic alternatives, each representing a different balance between policy ends, various ways and means, and even different time frames. In the major conflicts for which the IDF prepares, the emphasis is on shortening the campaign, due to the hefty price that protraction exacts from the home front and the economy. The option currently in play for the struggle against the coronavirus emphasizes "flattening the curve" in order to prevent a collapse of the health system and mass fatalities ("Italy"), with the cost being that the epidemic continues over time and heavy damage is wreaked on the economy. In order to validate the option selected, it is important to present the alternatives in their entirety, with their full range of

ramifications in terms of health, the economy, and security, over time. In addition, different methods for attaining the same objective should be assessed, such as "raising the bar" of the health system's capacity in parallel to "flattening the curve" — for example, by increasing the number of respirators in Israel and slowing the spread through focused quarantines, predicated on expansive testing, as an alternative to a comprehensive lockdown or "relaxed lockdown."

Israel's short wars left little time for force buildup processes during the fighting, in contrast to the major techno-military upgrades witnessed during the world wars. The current suppression processes (quarantine and "flattening the curve") were designed to buy time for building up medical capabilities such as means of testing, protection for medical teams, hospital beds, artificial respiration equipment, and further down the line, treatments and vaccines. Israel, to the extent possible, should focus its scientific-industrial capabilities on advancing swift solutions for the coronavirus challenges, and should avail itself, where possible, of imported capabilities. If Israel manages to present technological solutions that are applicable, rapid, and advanced, and proves them at home, it will be able to leverage this success abroad. Beyond the medical realm, the shockwaves of the coronavirus crisis have gravely damaged broad swathes of the global economy and opened up market shares to competition by early birds who hasten to capitalize on them. If Israel succeeds in identifying these fields and creating conditions for the industrial and hi-tech sectors to return to competitive capability soon, it could turn the coronavirus crisis into an opportunity for itself.

In conclusion, war is a realm of uncertainty; similarly, more is unknown than known in the current pandemic. A process of deliberation, planning, consulting, and decision making that is orderly and integrated is essential to overcome the inherent difficulty, in wartime and now. Just as the IDF has begun to integrate its forces in the medical-tactical response — setting up hospitalization facilities, and dispatching road teams to conduct coronavirus testing in civilian homes, among other missions — it also has relevant capabilities on the strategic level. Even though the crisis is not, in essence, military, the IDF's General Staff and its former personnel possess relevant professional methodology for supporting national decision making and the processes underway in the National Security Council, together with health, economic, and security experts. As the Winograd Commission report stated, quality work procedures in the national security cabinet must begin with the professional staff's procedures. This is also true of the State of Israel's war against the current pandemic. At this stage, the security cabinet's work, like parliamentary oversight of government decisions, does not meet these quality standards.