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**Patterns of Military Activity in the Battle against the Coronavirus:  
Lessons for Israel from Other Nations**

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**A survey of the involvement of democratic nations' militaries in the anti-coronavirus campaign identifies five, escalating levels of action: (A) logistical and medical support for agencies serving civilians; (B) transfer of military supplies and equipment to civilian networks; (C) assistance to police forces in maintaining order; (D) assumption of operative responsibility for the management of individual civilian networks; (E) direct management of the entire system of governance. The IDF is required to assist the country's civilians in accordance with the political echelon's directives at levels A through C, employing its many capabilities as circumstances evolve, with the Homefront Command spearheading the effort. Any shift among levels deepens friction with civilians, and hence mandates extreme caution and sensitivity. A shift to Level D, under circumstances of an acute immediate threat to public health (an example being the situation in Bnei Brak) would constitute a significant escalation, demanding careful deliberation. A shift to Level E should be considered only in mass-disaster conditions, and hinge on a decision by a comprehensive apparatus that commands a high level of public legitimacy – a framework that does not exist in Israeli law and experience.**

No military in the world prepared for a civilian scenario on the scale of the coronavirus pandemic. Even so, most of the world's militaries – in autocratic and democratic countries alike – began mobilizing in recent weeks to help tackle the spread of the virus. Frequently they have done so at the behest of the political leadership, which, especially in democratic countries, is understandably prone to summon military assistance to civilians in an emergency situation that many – among them US President Trump – designate a “war.” Notwithstanding budget cuts, most democratic countries' militaries still have at their disposal many resources that can also be relevant to management of the struggle against the coronavirus. Some of these resources are material; others – more significantly – are human: a disciplined and organized workforce that is rich in experience and adaptability.

The following paragraphs outline a taxonomy of five levels of military activity, in ascending order of the degree of contact between the military and the civilian population.

The levels range from assistance to direct management of services to control over the civilian sphere.

### **Level A: Logistical and Medical Support for Agencies Serving Civilians**

This basic level includes the military activities that thus far have been most commonplace during the present crisis: employing military transport facilities for civilian purposes and allocating military personnel to crucial industries (in Taiwan, for example). A shared feature of all of these instances is the limited exposure to civilians of the militaries, which are employed solely to provide backing to citizen networks.

### **Level B: Assignment of Military Supplies and Equipment to Civilian Agencies**

This level of military operations, launched on the orders and with the oversight of the civilian echelon, escalates the interface with civilian sectors:

- i. In extreme cases of lockdown (as in India) the military is called upon to distribute combat rations in remote villages.
- ii. Use of the military's medical infrastructures to reinforce the civilian health system, for instance, by deploying military hospital ships to areas of contagion (as in the United States) and military field hospitals (Britain, India). In Switzerland and Mexico, military medical teams have been sent to reinforce hospitals, and in South Africa, doctors and nurses were mobilized from reserve forces.
- iii. In Britain and Canada, the militaries have been called on to provide crucial medical equipment stockpiled in preparation for biological warfare.

### **Level C: Assistance to Police Forces in Maintaining Order**

Decisions to limit the movements of citizens, or to order a total lockdown (as in India), necessarily increases the burden on police forces, especially given the danger of a collapse of public order and a proliferation of robbery and looting. In such conditions, militaries are called upon to provide support, mainly by performing constabulary missions. Such was the case during instances of natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina in the United States, or the recent protracted wave of brushfires in Australia). With the spread of the coronavirus, the sight of armed soldiers in the public sphere became routine in Italy, Spain, Hungary, Malaysia, Mexico, and Peru. In the United States, where the governors of almost all states have declared a "state of emergency," National Guard units have been mobilized and briefed on how to fulfil such missions. To date, no soldier has reportedly resorted to live fire. Even in India, where the police and military are hard-put to enforce the lockdown, use of force has been limited to clubbing.

### **Level D: Assumption of Operative Responsibility for the Management of Individual Civilian Networks**

This is currently a theoretical scenario in all the countries assessed, and would only materialize with the collapse of one or more of the civilian mechanisms (the health system, for example). In several countries (Britain, India) the military has drawn up contingency plans for such cases, where in any event it would be the government that summons the military to implement its policy in the civilian sphere.

### **Level E: Direct Management of the Entire System of Governance**

At this level, conventional boundaries between the military and the civilian population are almost entirely obliterated. In democratic countries this scenario could occur in any one of the following circumstances:

- i. Failure of civilian rule to function in the face of mass-disaster
- ii. Capitulation of the political system to pressures exerted on the legitimate government by segments of the civilian populace
- iii. Widespread infection among the national leadership leading to its incapacitation to function.

In such cases, the government might call upon the military leadership to take charge of the management of the campaign against the coronavirus. Alternatively, the heads of the armed forces might themselves conclude that they must assume the reins of government. *Newsweek* reported (March 18) that preparations – which began after the 9/11 attacks – have been made in the United States for such a possibility. At this time, at issue is the possibility that the spread of the contagion would not allow an orderly succession of the handover of power as set out in the US Constitution. According to the investigative report, a senior officer (head of the US Army's Northern Command) has already been named as temporarily responsible for running the country "in extraordinary circumstances."

In democratic countries, a number of considerations are likely to impact on a decision to use the military in the struggle against the coronavirus:

- i. To what extent are existing civilian agencies estimated to be capable of coping with the scale of the contagion and the ensuing damage.
- ii. How much do the military commanders themselves wish to deepen their involvement in the civilian sphere, even when ordered to do so by the political echelon? Some might express clear discomfort, especially given the danger that increased exposure to civilians could increase the danger of infection to troops. The chief of India's General Staff said explicitly: "As commander of the military, my first mission is safeguarding the health of my forces," and thus demanded that the involvement of "unprotected" soldiers, i.e., those lacking appropriate medical protection kits, be limited to assistance missions.
- iii. Is the military equipped to take part in the struggle against the coronavirus, especially in constabulary roles? Few militaries have established units dedicated to such missions.

- iv. Normative considerations: in recent decades, the Western world has witnessed an increasing tendency to employ military forces for domestic needs, especially in Western Europe, usually within the framework of the "war on terror" or with the goal of preventing illegal migration.

Conversely, the German constitution forbids any use of military forces within the country; US law conditions "domestic" use of federal military forces (as opposed to the National Guard) on the explicit approval of both houses of Congress after the president declares a "state of emergency"; in other democratic countries (India, Canada, the UK), the law necessitates legislative approval for a government declaration of a "state of emergency" before the military can be activated.

### **Lessons for the Israeli Case**

The commitment to serve the Israeli public is a cornerstone of the IDF's identity and image as a "people's army" that functions for the sake of the nation. Ever since its establishment, the IDF has indeed acted within civilian domains. As such, even under conditions of a crisis that does not fall into a conventional national-security category, the IDF will deploy its considerable assets and varied capabilities at the forefront of the effort. Focus will be on the Homefront Command and an emphasis placed on its logistical capabilities and expertise in the realms of data collection and analysis.

There are caveats to this commitment, reflecting additional state considerations. One is linked to the IDF's particular mission: protecting the country, guaranteeing its existence, and attaining victory in war. This is the first priority and one that the IDF must meet under any and all circumstances. To that end, it must take care to conserve its capabilities, *inter alia*, by safeguarding its soldiers from infection. The second caveat reflects the need to safeguard the country's democratic character, principally by ensuring that the IDF does not cross the red line of absolute subordination to the elected political echelon. Even during the current crisis, neither the political nor the military leadership must lose sight of these two caveats, which remain categorical imperatives.

The corona pandemic is a harsh crisis that is liable to become even more severe, but it is not a war, which has other characteristics (armed clashes to achieve political goals). The current trial should thus be framed as a challenging natural phenomenon that compels the nation to undertake a determined civilian struggle to stamp out the contagion.

In this situation, the IDF should indeed provide as much assistance as possible to the country's civilians, in accordance with and under the oversight of the political echelon. Given its many capabilities, it should do so at levels A through C of the taxonomy outlined above, in a gradual manner and as circumstances evolve, placing the Homefront Command at the forefront of its effort. Should there be a shift from logistical and technological

assistance to direct contact with civilians, then diligent care, sensitivity, and oversight will be required to avoid friction. A shift to Level D – operative management of the struggle, including in the local sphere – would constitute a significant escalation that should be authorized only when there is an acute immediate threat to public health, for example, the case of Bnei Brak. A shift to Level E – direct military responsibility for national rule – can take place only in the most extreme conditions of countrywide mass-disaster. That being the case, it would necessitate, especially during the State of Israel's current, sensitive political turmoil, a comprehensive apparatus that commands a high level of public legitimacy, a framework that does not exist in Israeli law and experience.

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