

Special Publication, April 5, 2020

Israel's Policy against the Coronavirus: Findings from a Strategic War Game

Itai Brun, Udi Dekel, and Noa Shusterman

On March 31, 2020, a war game was held at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) simulating a cabinet session about the coronavirus crisis, attended by cabinet ministers, advisers, and experts (played by INSS researchers and other participants with relevant expertise). The war game, led by Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun and conducted through Zoom, considered Israeli policy on the coronavirus crisis and, in particular, strategic options for exiting the lockdown after Passover. The war game was part of the Institute's formulation of recommendations for Israeli policy on the crisis. The following is an account of the war game and a discussion of policy decisions taken within the framework of the game and actions to be taken in the coming weeks.

The Situational Picture and Forecast for the Coming Weeks

The discussion commenced with an analysis of the current situation and an assessment regarding the coming weeks, with Prof. Jacob Moran-Gilad presenting the public health aspects, Dr. Avihai Lifschitz the economic aspects, and Brig. Gen. (ret.) Dr. Meir Elran the societal aspects:

- a. The medical analysis highlighted the reduction in the overall rate of infection, along with the populations that have shown disproportionately high rates of infection (ultra-Orthodox Jews), and the expected rise in the number of severely ill patients. Also emphasized was the noticeable lack in information about various aspects of the spread of the virus in Israel.
- b. The economic analysis highlighted the rise in unemployment (which was then 23 percent) and projections of more than 1 million jobless (or on unpaid leave) by Passover. The analysis further emphasized the slashed GDP (down by some 40 million NIS a month, under current limited activity), the drop in tax revenue, and the expected increase of the deficit.
- c. The societal analysis highlighted Israeli society's high level of fear of the disease and concern at the economic consequences of the crisis. The lockdown burdens households, and it was assessed that while overall Israeli society has heeded the government's directives, a continued lockdown is liable to see less strict adherence to these instructions.

The Strategic Objective and the Range of Options

Brig. Gen. (res.) Udi Dekel and Brig. Gen. (res.) Assaf Orion, who together in the game represented the National Security Council, presented Israel's strategic objective vis-à-vis the coronavirus crisis, as well as strategic options for exiting the lockdown. The working assumption is that the coronavirus crisis will persist for many months, and that until a vaccine is found, preparations should be made for living with the disease. The proposed strategic objective is to preserve conditions that would allow for a speedy recovery in health, economic, and societal parameters while sparing Israel intolerable costs (high mortality, collapse of the health system, collapse of the economy, disruptions of the governance systems) — all while detecting and creating opportunities to advance Israel's interests that might emerge against the backdrop of the crisis.

The strategic concept presented was to transition from a policy that gives the public health issue near-absolute precedence, to a policy with greater balance between public health and society, i.e., gradually jumpstarting economic activity while controlling the level of serious morbidity and preventing a collapse of respirator capacity if hospitals are flooded with severely ill patients. In this regard, it was stressed that quarantines should be maintained for populations with high risk of morbidity, while in parallel, easing restrictions on lower-risk populations.

The range of alternatives presented included some extreme options that were rejected. Among these: a total lockdown, a continuation of current restrictions, and an immediate removal of all restrictions. The options that were debated seriously were differential alternatives, designed to achieve a balance between health considerations and restarting the economy:

- a. A health-based alternative, which in essence means imposing and easing restrictions in accordance with morbidity risk — in other words, freeing up populations that are at low risk (in terms of age, geography), and immune cohorts, for crucial economic and social activity.
- b. An economy-based alternative, which in essence means flagging industrial branches, factories, and businesses that are crucial for economic growth, and constructing a sound testing system that would “clear” workers and their surroundings.
- c. A society-based option, which in essence means easing the lockdown in a manner that would allow a return to a more vibrant society during the ongoing presence of the coronavirus, with an emphasis on the educational system, activity in the public sphere to encourage the reconstruction of small businesses, and more.

The National Security Council's recommendation was to combine the options and craft them as sequential steps for a gradual exit from the lockdown — beginning after Passover,

with the economy-based option, and later, following a reality check and experiential learning, preparing the society-based option.

Cabinet Recommendations

The health minister (played by Col. (res.) Dr. Ofir Cohen Marom) recommended the health-based option, which in his view should be implemented in a slow and gradual manner — particularly given the difficulty to be expected in renewing lockdown restrictions in the event of a mistake. He therefore argued for freeing up the economy in accordance with the risk level presented by different workers and additional health criteria, rather than industrial branches or the degree to which they are essential to the economy. To that end, intelligence-gathering capacities (testing and surveys) should be improved so as to form a picture of the number and location of the infected, and serological tests carried out to diagnose those with immunity. The health minister stressed that at-risk populations will have to remain at home for a long period, and that therefore alternative means should be found for keeping them occupied.

The finance minister (played by Yossi Kotchik) labeled the economic situation catastrophic — with one million unemployed, tens of thousands of small businesses ruined, and a sharp drop in tax returns. Kotchik pointed to chain reactions that will lead people to lose the means to buy food and pay rent — not as a result of the virus, but due to the economic shutdown. In his view, the economy must return to activity in rapid successive stages, with 600,000 people going back to work in the month after Passover. Capabilities for collecting intelligence to build a more accurate picture of the epidemic should be improved, so as to locate the sick and permit a differential closure and quarantine policy. Remote learning should be institutionalized and, possibly, the school system's summer vacation canceled. He added that the budget pie needs to change, with a cut to defense spending.

The minister of labor, social affairs, and social services (played by Dr. Carmit Padan) recommended giving priority to the weaker populations in access to welfare benefits, which are the first to suffer. In her view, the tax burden on those who were economically hit hardest should be eased significantly, according to National Insurance Institute data; an aid plan for the self-employed should be created, with the assistance of the local authorities in responding to the needs of the entire population; the loneliness problem among the elderly, who will not go back to their routines in the near future, must be addressed, with a suitable assistance apparatus created.

The justice minister (played by Col. (res.) Adv. Pnina Sharvit Baruch) emphasized the need to ensure that discrimination is prevented when employment resumes. She recommended addressing this matter through legislation rather than through emergency regulations.

The internal security minister (played by retired Deputy Police Commissioner Alon Levavi) emphasized additional parameters that should be weighed while making policy decisions to exit the lockdown. Inter alia, consideration should be given to national holidays after Passover, as well as to the familiar phenomenon of an increase in brush fires in the summer, which intensifies the pressure on the emergency services. In his view, a release from the lockdown must occur in stages, with the health and the economic options combined but priority given to the health-based option.

Discussion

Participating in the discussion were Prof. Eran Yashiv, Prof. Gili Regev, Brig. Gen. (res.) Israela Oron, Brig. Gen. (res.) Dr. Sasson Hadad, and Lt. Gen. (ret.) Gadi Eisenkot. The opinions of the cabinet ministers were also considered. The discussion focused on the following issues:

- a. The need for additional data, which can be gleaned only through significantly more testing, was underscored. There was a sweeping consensus among participants that the government and health system are operating under extreme conditions of heavy fog, which can be lifted – at least partially – with data and information attained through a combination of widespread testing, surveys, and monitoring.
- b. The population and economy must be prepared to function in new, unfamiliar conditions, including after the exit from the lockdown: wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, not congregating in the work place, remote learning, and so on.
- c. The need to prepare for the winter of 2021: concern about widespread flu and the coronavirus occurring together.
- d. The need to provide special assistance to small businesses and prepare them for changes that the pandemic will spell when ordinary life resumes.
- e. The need to assist the Palestinian Authority and the Gaza Strip population in coping with the pandemic.
- f. As for shortfalls in national messaging, there was a broad consensus that a national spokesperson should be appointed to brief the public on the situational picture and explain, in a manner appropriate for each target audience, the logic behind decisions that are made. Furthermore, an effective and tailored messaging strategy is needed for the ultra-Orthodox and Arab publics.

The Prime Minister's Summary

The prime minister (played by Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin) approved the strategic objective that was outlined, and designated the right policy for Israel at this time:

Transitioning from a policy of sweeping social distancing to "living with the coronavirus," i.e., continuing the fight against the coronavirus while jumpstarting the economy. In his

view, the anti-coronavirus campaign is a marathon, not a sprint. At any moment, national security challenges might join the issues that demand immediate attention.

After the contagion is successfully contained, a strategy must be crafted for a gradual and measured transition to management of the health system, economy, and society in accordance with the strategic model of "living with the coronavirus." Assuming that the flattening of the curve of the number severely ill patients on respirators continues as a trend after Passover, a gradual easing of the lockdown can be implemented.

The rationale of the new policy is differentiation according to serious morbidity risk and contribution to the recovery process, while jumpstarting the economy: a vetting of populations and sectors, dictating when they will return to activity, will be conducted according to place of residence, medical status, age, demographic sector, essential industries, and levels of morbidity and immunity. At the same time, a public message must be delivered: that this does not constitute a release from the restrictions, and strict discipline and adherence to published directives and guidelines must continue. A return to work will also be done with the greatest possible maintenance of social distancing ("two meters") and continued enhanced hygiene measures: hand-washing, masks, gloves, surface sterilization.

The new policy will be predicated on the following principles and efforts: restraints to shield the population at high morbidity risk (protection); stepped-up restrictions on areas of high infection (defense); a relatively relaxed policy toward populations with a low morbidity risk; a broader intelligence picture, with tracking questionnaires and widespread testing over time (forewarning); a gradual easing of restrictions within the health framework and ongoing review regarding the impact on morbidity; and a priority on easing restrictions in accordance with the contribution to renewed economic and societal activities.

The prime minister's summary listed:

- a. An inter-ministerial "coronavirus cabinet" will be created to head the action during the crisis period. This cabinet will include seven ministers and will craft policy combining a reduction in economic damage with the safeguarding of public health. A strategic planning team should operate alongside the cabinet, subordinate to the prime minister, and include leading experts with experience in strategic planning and relevant fields.
- b. The fight against the pandemic is waged in the absence of intelligence. Thus, the issue of testing must be taken out of the hands of the Health Ministry. A scientist who enjoys public trust (for example, the president of the Weizmann Institute of Science) will head a committee that will be given two weeks to devise a way to achieve an optimal intelligence picture, using a range of testing and other

- capabilities. The tests (virological, serological) must be variegated, increased, and broadened to scales that would allow the release or isolation of populations in a differential manner. A comprehensive map of the spread of the pandemic, with regional, sectorial, and age-based resolution, is necessary for a broad-based restoration of economic functions. The defense establishment will give of its advanced resources and capabilities generously in order to help find technological solutions and ease bottle-necks.
- c. A team to restore the economy will be set up, led by the finance minister and with the health minister, education minister, and defense minister, to decide on easing of the lockdown according to parameters of age, geography, and economic needs.
 - d. The finance minister will present a plan for required economic action to reduce the drop in GDP from 40 million shekels to 15 million shekels a month.
 - e. Other teams to be set up: to create a safety net for weaker populations, under the welfare minister; to devise a way to complete the school year, under the education minister; and a diaspora team, in light of the increase in anti-Semitism in the world, under the minister for diaspora affairs and in partnership with leading Jewish organizations.
 - f. An "opportunities team" should be set up to examine strategic opportunities for Israel that the crisis might generate, led by a senior, noteworthy figure who has a background in national security and statecraft.
 - g. A media professional who enjoys public trust should be appointed as chief government spokesperson and ensure uniform yet tailored messaging.
 - h. The defense minister will prepare a plan for the contingency of a broad and severe spread of the virus in the Gaza Strip, including aid for the population there and a mitigation of the negative consequences of such a development for Israel.

It is important to coordinate measures with the Palestinian Authority to the greatest extent possible, and to avoid any situation that might endanger cooperation with the PA. Inter alia, annexation measures and the application of Israeli law in the West Bank should be halted for at least half a year.