Assistance from the Intelligence Community in the Fight against the Corona Pandemic

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The coronavirus crisis has prompted Israel to take intelligence capabilities that were developed to combat hostile countries and terrorist organizations and – in unprecedented fashion – use them to collect and study data on the pandemic. Indeed, it has been shown that the intelligence community can potentially help in non-security areas. On the other hand, the penetration of the intelligence community into civilian space in Israel, particularly to track citizens, raises ethical dilemmas and legal issues. Overall, it appears appropriate that Israel uses the capabilities of the intelligence community in order to improve the medical intelligence picture for civilian consumers of the information, including the Ministry of Health. However, this must be done under strict supervision and control, and with full transparency for the public. It is also necessary to define the intelligence objectives, the tasks, the means, the duration of operations, and what will ultimately happen to the collected data.

With the outbreak of the coronavirus in Israel, the Israeli intelligence community joined the campaign against the pandemic, bringing with it unusual means that were ordinarily not intended for use in the civilian space. At the request of the Ministry of Health, the Israeli Security Agency (ISA) is using digital tracking capabilities to find individuals who are tested positive for coronavirus and people who have been exposed to infection. Prof. Sigal Sadetsky, head of Public Health Services in the Ministry of Health, noted that it is important to maintain Israel's "fantastic achievement" in this context (*Haaretz*, April 23), and that this is the key to an exit strategy (April 30). However, the issue has aroused widespread public criticism, and was brought to the Supreme Court and the Knesset. In tandem, the Mossad, through its unique set of contacts, has led efforts to purchase critical medical equipment all over the world. According to an IDF spokesperson (*Haaretz*, April 24), the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID; in Hebrew known as AMAN) has also contributed significantly to the national struggle against the virus, using its capabilities in research and information technologies, including artificial intelligence and machine learning (*Israel Hayom*, March 2).

In ordinary times, data collection and research for civilian medical needs in Israel are outside the MID purview. The focus of MID's corona-related activity is apparently the Corona National Information and Knowledge Center, which was set up on the instructions of the Ministry of Health when the pandemic erupted. MID heads the Center, which according to the Center's website, is the official information body of the joint control center of MID and the Ministry of Health, with its headquarters in the Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer. Staffed by researchers and technology experts from all MID units, together with medical and academic personnel, its purpose is to provide information and insights to assist the struggle against the virus. Products include the publication of morbidity data in different regions of Israel and information about the spread of the pandemic and the response in other countries, including relevant medical research. The Center distributes a daily report about the spread of the coronavirus in Israel, with recommendations for health policy. For example, the survey of April 18 examined the question of "what can be learned from how Asian countries balanced prevention of the epidemic with the preservation of economic activity?" while the report of April 19 stressed: "We recommend continued monitoring of worldwide trials and treatments using Colchicine, with an understanding of its potential value." MID also helped the National Security Council (NSC) collect unclassified information from the internet about exit strategies all over the world for emerging from the crisis, and made it accessible to the NSC team.

The media have reported that the technological section of the MID Research Division is engaged in the integration and analysis of data, and Unit 8200 has set up an advanced system of communications and sensors, which transmits developments with regard to corona testing in ongoing fashion. In this framework, the Ministry of Health has obtained a special control "dashboard" that receives vast amounts of data on testing from all sources: health service providers, Magen David Adom, laboratories, institutes, and hospitals. MID is also involved in the logistical aspect of testing with the General Staff reconnaissance unit (Sayeret Matkal), and in the technological development of ventilators.

The primary research work on the coronavirus crisis is conducted by the Ministry of Health by means of testing, morbidity analysis, tracking of global outbreak hotspots, and contact with foreign and international medical bodies. The Ministry works with various research institutes that specialize in epidemiology and health policy. The Ministry of Intelligence, which is not part of the intelligence community, also publishes studies on the subject. In recent years the Ministry has started engaging in fields relating to national civilian intelligence such as medicine, climate, economy, demography, and technology.

Implications

The involvement of the intelligence community in the corona crisis can be approached from two angles. First, the intelligence community is collecting data on the pandemic from around the world, to understand how other countries are confronting the challenge. This activity is unusual in Israel, as it does not involve security data and research, although it meets the principle that guides bodies like MID in the collection and analysis of information about enemies ("the other") rather than citizens of Israel, as well as the activity of intelligence organizations in other countries that are also interested in threats to national security that are not only defense related. The other angle is the activation of ISA data collection and technological research capabilities that were developed to deal with hostile countries and terror organizations that threaten Israeli citizens, and use them for medical purposes, including surveillance of the public. It appears that the involvement of the intelligence community in the civilian sector in Israel is greater than what occurs in other Western democracies.

The engagement of Israeli intelligence organizations in areas that are not security related, when Israeli citizens are the objects of data collection and research, raises a number of questions, including: Is there any tension between such activity and democratic principles? Can military intelligence personnel make a sharp turn to engage in civilian matters? Should this role of intelligence organizations be regulated and even expanded to cover the provision of intelligence to civilian government ministries, including information about non-security related national threats? And finally, should this activity be limited to emergencies, or can it be conducted in routine times as well?

Harnessing the capabilities of intelligence and security agencies for tasks in the civilian sector has advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, during the corona crisis, the intelligence community has proven that it has special capabilities that can be tapped quickly in a national crisis. The community is naturally used to operating systematically, intensively, and continuously day and night in emergencies. It has impressive abilities in the field of collecting and processing data using advanced technologies and trained personnel. On the other hand, the use of security organizations to collect and research data on the Israeli public that is not intended for security purposes could be a slippery slope for Israeli democracy. The collection and processing of information about civilians from open sources is not automatically acceptable in ethical terms, and is not in keeping with the tasks and values of the intelligence community (apart from the activities of the ISA for security purposes only). In addition, the additional tasks taken on by the community could be at the expense of its other missions. Moreover, intelligence personnel involved in research on pandemics could be perceived as authorities on the subject even if they lack professional expertise.

Recommendations

Overall, it appears that Israel is correct to use the capabilities of the intelligence community to improve the medical information picture, but this must be done cautiously, in a focused and controlled way. There must be a separate cost-benefit analysis for each move. Civilian consumers of intelligence, and above all the Ministry of Health and the NSC, must determine which capabilities make the largest contributions and are essential at each stage of the crisis. There must be strict processes to ensure inspection and transparency, including definitions of intelligence objectives, tasks, means to be used, duration of the activity, and what will ultimately happen to the collected material.

The corona crisis has revealed a critical need to manage intelligence in the public space, in a way that civilian government ministries are not used to. The MID can help the Ministry of Health and other offices with knowledge on methods and technologies of processing data. Consequently, it is worth considering adding to the ongoing tasks of the intelligence community the provision of intelligence about national threats in civilian matters that are not purely security related, such as epidemics, climate change, waves of migration, food security, and energy. This should be done in coordination with entities that are engaged in these subjects in the relevant ministries, including the Ministry of Intelligence, but without intelligence activity among the Israeli public by the intelligence community.