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How Can the Lockdown Be More Effective?
Summary of a Conference at INSS

Tomer Barnett and Itai Brun

A conference at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) on September 30, 2020 was held against the backdrop of the ongoing coronavirus crisis, the decision to impose a new lockdown, and the evident inability by decision makers to formulate and implement a consistent and effective policy. The primary questions addressed at the conference were how might the lockdown be made more effective, and how might morbidity be reduced. The conference emphasized the need to balance public health and socioeconomic considerations, which in turn would enhance the public's compliance with the imposed restrictions and guidelines. The discussion centered on two principal problems: the lack of public trust in the government, and the absence of a dedicated mechanism, or "system," to manage the crisis. There was a consensus among participants about the need for the lockdown, as well as the need to emerge from it gradually. At the same time, participants were divided on a number of issues: using the IDF to manage the crisis, the value of scare tactics to increase civil obedience, and the actual level of public compliance with the rules and directives.

On Wednesday, September 30, 2020, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) held a conference entitled: "How Do We Exit the Lockdown? Urgent Steps for Coping with the Second Wave of the Coronavirus." The conference focused on what can be done to make the current lockdown in Israel more effective, reduce morbidity, and allow an exit from the lockdown within a few weeks. In addition, the conference sought to clarify basic tenets for striking a balance between public health and socioeconomic considerations, so as to heighten the public's compliance with the imposed restrictions and directives.

The conference was moderated by Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun, INSS Deputy Director for Research and Analysis. Participants included: Prof. Gili Regev-Yochay, director of Sheba Medical Center's Infectious Disease Epidemiology Unit; Moshe Bar Siman Tov, former director general of the Ministry of Health; Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland, former National Security Adviser; Shai Babad, former director general of the Finance Ministry; Michal Cohen, director general of the Rashi Foundation and former director general of the Ministry of Education; Dr. Liraz Margalit, researcher on behavior in the digital age at IDC, Herzliya; Tal Shalev, political reporter and commentator for *Walla News*; INSS Managing Director

Brig. Gen. (res.) Udi Dekel; INSS senior research fellow Dr. Zipi Israeli; INSS senior research fellow Brig. Gen. (res.) Assaf Orion; INSS distinguished research fellow and former IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. (ret.) Gadi Eisenkot; and INSS Executive Director Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin.

At the start of the conference, three scenarios were presented for how the crisis might evolve under the current lockdown, which was newly tightened a few days earlier. One: public compliance with the lockdown will contain the spread of the pandemic and bring morbidity down to fewer than 1,000 new cases per day. Two: the current situation persists, with the number of new cases steady at 5,000-8,000 a day. Three: Israel loses control over the spread of the pandemic, with more than 10,000 new cases logged per day, along with a total lack of public trust in the decision making process and an undermining of the prevailing national order.

Over the course of the conference, the participants described an ongoing politicization of the struggle against the pandemic, skewed decision making resulting from pressure by various interest groups, a lack of credible data, and the lack of a defined mission, clear goals, and well-founded and agreed-upon parameters for success or failure. All of these relate to two core problems in managing the crisis: the absence of a well-run and effective “system,” or mechanism for managing the process, and a severe crisis of public confidence in the government. All speakers agreed that there has been a steady erosion in these two parameters since the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis. The solution proposed for the blatant lack of a system to manage a national crisis of this kind is the formation of a professional staff that is given authority and has a formalized working method, and can serve both as a staff unit for the “coronavirus cabinet” and decision makers, and as a command center for administering the various relevant agencies.

The participants noted that contrary to the first wave of the pandemic, this time the public is not afraid of morbidity, mainly because the worst-case scenarios described at the outset of the crisis last spring have not been realized. Also mentioned was that the Israeli public has lost a significant degree of cohesion and sense of partnership, as well as a willingness to sacrifice – characteristics that over the decades have allowed it to surmount grave crises. In order to confront the current challenges, which are directly linked to public distrust in the government, a proposal was made to place health care workers at the forefront of public messaging, as the healthcare system enjoys high levels of public trust and has largely been removed from the tensions and conflicts in Israeli society. The public should rally around the health care system like it rallies around the IDF in wartime. Another idea to boost public trust was to devise a social contract that would be formulated as a binding document, defining the responsibilities that both public and the government take upon themselves during crises.

In the second part of the conference, steps were discussed to reduce morbidity and maintain it at a lower rate. The speakers deemed it crucial that the exit from the lockdown be staggered – first with an opening of businesses that do not entail public assembly or face-to-face customer service, then with a gradual freeing-up of businesses with face-to-face customer service, and only later with a re-activation of tourism and leisure businesses, cultural events, and education in its complete framework. A gradual opening of the economy requires a slow and cautious opening of the school system, beginning with early childhood classes and lower grades (with cohorts kept in capsules). The educational system should acknowledge that the coming school year will be different from any prior year, focus as a first stage on a skeletal number of subjects, and place an emphasis on bolstering personal and emotional contact with the pupils.

It was also emphasized that the government should use the time afforded by the lockdown to create a crisis management mechanism – handing over management of the event from politicians to the professionals, studying and learning from experience, and setting clear goals and benchmarks. Another core factor that will dictate the lockdown's success is the ability to lend the public hope and offer an outlook for the end of the process. If the public knows a lockdown is of limited duration and guided by a clear exit strategy, it will find it easier to comply with restrictions. An oft-cited axiom is that we must learn to “live in the presence of the coronavirus” – and indeed this mantra should be infused with meaning, explained, and used to help the public understand the current reality.

It is not possible to discuss managing the coronavirus crisis without touching on the political system in Israel. The crisis in Israel erupted after a year and a half of successive election campaigns in a period of unprecedented domestic strife. Four aspects of the political stalemate that make it particularly hard to take and implement decisions within the framework of crisis management were highlighted. One is the political clout of the ultra-Orthodox (haredi) sector and its representatives in the political establishment, which sways government decisions on coping with the coronavirus crisis (and in general), as well as decision making by the opposition, which considers how eventually it might be able to benefit from this sector's power. The second is the centralization of leadership and management with the Prime Minister, who lags in responding and decision making, while also being under indictment – a situation that perforce saps faith in the government. The third is the weakness of Blue and White in the cabinet, where the party's members do not hold portfolios directly connected to the crisis management and thus are unable to materially influence decision making (while at the same time proving relatively unskilled at the political game). Compounding all of this is the weakness of the opposition, which is not able to come together, and the weakness of the Knesset, which is not able to counterbalance the executive branch. Against this backdrop, a sense pervades among the

public that “it’s all politics” – with the erosion of public trust in the government an inevitable result.

As part of the discussion of the pessimistic forecast, in which Israel loses control over the spread of the virus, the possibility was discussed of transferring responsibility to the IDF. This proposal was opposed by some participants, who argued that use of the IDF as a unit for managing and being responsible for the civilian sphere is reserved for extreme situations, and that in their view the current crisis is not on this level (at least for now). Other points of disagreement among the participants were the value of instilling fear in the public to increase civic obedience, and the degree of actual compliance with the rules and guidelines on the part of the public.

The lack of public trust in the government impacts directly on the degree to which the public complies with rules and directives imposed on it during the lockdown. While there are no absolute data on the scale of non-compliance, as a possible solution to the challenge a proposal was made to increase the fear and pressure in order to encourage the public to heed the directives. On the other hand, it was noted that scare tactics were considered a main reason for the success of the lockdown during the first wave of the pandemic – and the same level of fear cannot be recreated after the nightmare scenarios do not materialize. Furthermore, it is human nature to adjust to new situations, even menacing ones, and to stop fearing them. In this context, it was posited that the phenomenon of non-compliance does not cut across society evenly, but rather centers on the haredi sector, and this is an issue that should be resolved if there is to be progress toward a differential exit from the lockdown.

At the close of the conference, it was emphasized that the State of Israel now finds itself in a severe public health crisis that exposes root problems of Israeli society. On the one hand, the public is not concerned, and on the other, it does not believe. The heart of the problem is that there is no public faith in the leadership, there is no clear definition of benchmarks and goals, and there is no learning process; all these stem from the fact that the crisis is not managed. In order to cope with the situation, there is no avoiding a total general lockdown that will flatten the morbidity curve and allow management of the multi-faceted event. Until morbidity is reduced and a way is found to encourage the public to heed the directives, a lockdown will have to be maintained. Furthermore, the only way to improve the situation includes talking about the elephant in the room: If the coronavirus pandemic in the haredi sector is not tackled, differential methods will not help and the problem will not be resolved. At the same time, it is important to note that Israeli society has not yet totally lost its sense of solidarity and shared destiny. These feelings can be rekindled, with their attendant practical aspects, if the public knows that the leadership is guiding it to safe shores.