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Exiting the Second Lockdown, Living in the Presence of Covid-19, and Anticipating the Stage Beyond: Recommended Strategy

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This document was written a number of weeks after the second nationwide lockdown was announced. As expected, the measure succeeded in lowering the infection rate, albeit at a high economic cost and a new spike in unemployment. At the same time, Israel is witnessing rising friction with the ultra-Orthodox community, more extensive public protests, and diminishing public trust in the authorities, related in part to the government's problematic handling of the multilayered crisis.

The purpose of this document is to propose an integrative strategy for exiting the second lockdown and returning to a new routine in the presence of Covid-19, looking at the immediate, medium, and long terms. It recommends new mechanisms to maintain public health, an optimal level of economic activity, and a functioning society. This is proposed for the long period in which coronavirus infection is expected to continue, and then the recovery phase following the pandemic. The national objectives that guide the proposed strategy are: to keep the pandemic under control, to ensure long-range national resilience, to mitigate economic and social damages, to maintain government functioning, and to prepare for the post-Covid-19 era. This proposal is based on discussions held at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) with the participation of Institute researchers and outside experts.

Summary of the Proposal

	Current government approach	INSS proposal
1. Crisis management	Narrow, political, short-term approach, tactical and responsive in nature.	Broad, professional, long-term, and differential approach, based on a strategic approach that derives the short-term objectives from the long and medium-term goals. Expected duration: winter 2021 and beyond.

2. Social distancing policy	Conducted by trial and error, characterized by ongoing fluctuations ("accordion style") and influenced by sectoral pressures.	Social distancing according to professional criteria, based on cost-benefit healthcare, economic, and societal considerations. A core parameter, to be enforced by the authorities: preventing large gatherings for a long time to come.
3. Gradual exit from the lockdown	R=0.8, 2,000 cases per day.	Gradual and cautious exit, while canceling restrictions immediately that are epidemiologically unfounded. At the first stage, 500-1000 new cases per day, R = 0.8. Transition between future stages of easing the restrictions in a differential manner, according to national and local morbidity data, while distinguishing between localities, with red zones remaining under lockdown until a positive change in their classification.
4. Management of the post-lockdown routine in the presence of the coronavirus	Not yet decided.	Differentiation by locality (using the traffic light model). Focus on restrictions and enforcement in red zones, along with functional differentiation according to economic and social criteria: allowing the reopening of businesses without public visitors; strict observance of purple standard guidelines; reopening of schools in stages; and opening Ben Gurion Airport.

5. Education system	<p>No comprehensive plan.</p> <p>The system is characterized by centralization and lack of communication between the Ministry of Education and the schools.</p>	<p>Operating the system according to economic and student needs: reopening schools for children up to age 10, functional differential outline, delegation of responsibility to local authorities, the community, and schools. Emphasis on students' psychological needs and weaker sectors.</p>
6. Enforcement	<p>Selective and influenced by political considerations and pressure, not uniform, lack of personal example.</p>	<p>Professional enforcement according to clear, transparent, and equal criteria, without exemptions for particular groups and without extraneous violence –awareness of social sensitivities.</p>
7. Professional messaging	<p>Doesn't exist. A plethora of speakers and opinions, with no clear official position.</p>	<p>Establishment of a messaging mechanism and appointment of a professional spokesperson under the auspices of the staff (see #8). Full and transparent reporting, prominence of physicians and epidemiologists. Particular messaging at the municipal and sectoral levels. Focus on the health risks.</p>
8. Staff to control and manage the multilayered crisis	<p>Political, centralized and narrow management. Weakened Cabinet and parliamentary oversight. Lack of a professional central organ to assist the Coronavirus Cabinet.</p>	<p>Immediate establishment of a multilevel crisis management mechanism in the Prime Minister's Office to coordinate all the relevant systems based on the policy of the Coronavirus Cabinet.</p>

9. Addressing the social crisis	Limited attention paid to social challenges. Primarily lateral economic assistance.	The impact of the crisis on society must be addressed in depth. Economic aid should be focused on weaker populations and those particularly hurt by the pandemic and lockdowns (deciles 3-5, mainly in the private sector). Targeted budgeting and care by the community and local authorities for those suffering from emotional problems, violence, and other social ailments.
10. Informed planning of the campaign as a basis for decision making	No planning exists. Lack of authoritative and transparent data.	Establishing an advanced and integrated central planning system for all areas of the crisis and for different time periods, based on authoritative data, research, and experience, with the assistance of professional expertise.
11. State budget	Due to political disputes there is no budget. This negatively affects the state's performance and economic standing.	Immediate approval of the 2020 and 2021 budgets, to include an economic plan to exit the crisis and beyond. Careful management of resources, based on defined criteria; special investment in health infrastructures. Preparation of an economic plan for 2021.
12. Socio-political relations	Problematic government conduct has led to a dramatic drop in public trust and social solidarity.	A profound systemic shift toward a fundamental approach of mutual sensitivity, transparency, fairness, personal example, empathy, and partnership at all levels.

The Coronavirus Crisis as a Challenge to National Security

The multilayered crisis in Israel – health, economic, societal, and political – is likely to endure for a long time. Until a comprehensive medical solution is found and implemented, Israel will have to adopt a disrupted – or certainly different routine – in the presence of the coronavirus. The consequences of this crisis may well continue for years to come, in the

economy (public debt) and society (unemployment, inequality, and amplified social tensions), and perhaps also at the political level.

Israel has always been a heterogeneous country, composed of diverse sectors. In the past, during security crises, the Jewish public knew how to unite and operate successfully against a defined enemy. This crucial sociopolitical phenomenon has been challenged in the current crisis, both because the virus is not an external human enemy, and because of the politicization of the crisis management. The emerging picture is characterized by a significant decline in national solidarity, a focus on the particular interests of specific communities and sub-communities, and an unravelling of the vital connection between the political leadership and the public. Hence the significant erosion of public trust in the Prime Minister, the government, the political system in general, and to some extent, in the public service. All of these contribute to a dramatic decline in national resilience, constitute an obstacle to constructive conduct in the face of the pandemic, and create a risk to national security in the broadest sense of the term.

The systemic lapse in planning for and managing a complex civilian crisis has been exposed. Israel entered the crisis without a national mechanism for decision making and for managing mass disasters, and has not succeeded in constructing one since the outbreak of the crisis. This has worsened Israel's overall situation in the second wave of the pandemic.

The political-legislative-leadership crisis in Israel, ongoing for almost two years, complicates any effort at campaign management. It undermines public trust in the authorities, its willingness to comply with the social restrictions, and careful defensive conduct during the pandemic. Without an end to the politicization of the crisis, reflected in part by guidelines that lack any public health justification and by apparent arbitrary and inconsistent enforcement, the public will continue to struggle to accept necessary restrictions, even as it continues to suffer what is commonly known as "pandemic fatigue."

Not one of these fundamental problems is expected to disappear in the near future, certainly not without a profound cultural-socio-political change in the State of Israel.

Basic Assumptions for the Short Term

- a. The current singular crisis is caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Despite advanced efforts in the medical field, it is unclear when a comprehensive and available medical solution will be found. Therefore, a national approach should be based on managing daily life in the presence of the coronavirus for an extended period of time, while minimizing damage in the health, economic, and societal spheres. Even if a medical solution to the pandemic is found, the harsh economic and social consequences will remain for a long time. Thus, the phase of systemic recovery in the post-Covid period should be anticipated and prepared for now.
- b. Uncertainty over when the pandemic will end requires careful management of budgetary, human, organizational, and other resources so they suffice for all

- national requirements over an extended period of time. Special attention must be given to the healthcare system to provide effective and diverse services to all sectors. Also, national resources must remain available in the short and long term, to maintain daily functioning, ensure there are sufficient resources for the future, and address unforeseen crises (for example, a security crisis).
- c. The return to the second nationwide lockdown was prompted primarily by the health-related consequences of the hasty exit from the first lockdown. As a lesson from this experience, Israel must exit the second lockdown cautiously and gradually, subject to health indexes throughout the country and in individual communities.
 - d. Prominent among the main hotspots that caused a surge in morbidity rates and led to the second lockdown were large gatherings in the form of religious services and events in the ultra-Orthodox sector, weddings in the Arab sector, and contagion in schools. These hotspots require careful attention and special treatment, both for health reasons and for their impact on the general public.
 - e. The second lockdown was imposed on a weaker Israel, in both economic and societal terms. Consequently, the exit point for the entire country and especially for socially weakened and economically challenged sectors (tourism, aviation) will also be weaker. Hence the need for a differential policy that strengthens particular sectors, with priority given to weakened sectors that have been hit particularly hard.
 - f. Managing the exit from the lockdown requires the application of a cost-benefit approach, balancing the health, economic, and social curves. As a guiding principle, restrictions should be eased on work and places where the health risk is relatively low and the economic and social contribution is high. For example, restrictions should remain for crowded locations, but they should be eased in spacious industrial settings. Calculated differential management of social distancing is required to save billions of shekels while carefully taking into account the level of risk.

Thresholds for Phased Exit from the Nationwide Lockdown

The government has been consistently vague in setting infection thresholds that allow for easing the lockdown and for the gradual transition to a differential “traffic light” model. There are a number of reasons for this, some epidemiological, some social, and some political. Initial statements put the threshold for exiting the lockdown at a daily infection rate (N) of 2,000 new cases per day and a decrease in the reproduction rate (R) to 0.8. Indexes at that level do not allow for a broad reopening of the economy, and barely mark a cautious starting point for a gradual process of lifting restrictions.

Despite the paramount importance of economic and social considerations that necessitate a gradual opening up of the economy, it is correct to delay the process of exiting the current lockdown until there is a significant chance of curbing the infection rates in a manner that removes the danger of a new outbreak on the scale of the September surge. Israel cannot afford to lose control of the virus again, especially in light of the coming

winter and flu season. Therefore, a lower rate of coronavirus infections (500-1,000 per day) is best for commencing a nationwide easing of restrictions. Red zones should remain under lockdown until their classification is changed. This is an essential condition for success: it would enable better control of infection and morbidity and mitigate concerns of collapse of the healthcare system. The more that contagion declines and stabilizes at low levels, the more the risk of a third lockdown will decrease. Opening of the economy at low infection levels will also enable the healthcare system to manage the expected increase in infection when the restrictions are lifted.

However, there can also be exceptions to this design. There are critical fields where gradual easing of restrictions can be allowed at an early stage, according to "purple standard" regulations, such as in green zones and regarding restrictions imposed without any epidemiological justification, such as the 1 km limit on movement from home or work, or restrictions on small-scale commerce.

A critical system-wide threshold condition for easing the lockdown should be strict enforcement and prevention of mass gatherings, especially in closed spaces. In Israeli terms, this means mainly prior approval of the guideline and especially strict enforcement of restrictions on gatherings in all sectors and in all public areas. The rules for preventing gatherings should be uniform and simple. In red zones there should be tighter general enforcement.

Israel should rigorously prepare for the possibility of renewed high morbidity due to the coronavirus, possibly with the influenza virus that is expected to appear in the winter. Any significant increase in morbidity should immediately lead to tightened restrictions, especially in infection hotspots.

A Multi-phased Approach to the Multilayered Crisis

Notwithstanding the importance and urgency of dealing with the current acute crisis, proposed here is a national framework that addresses four interconnected components of the multilayered crisis, which require parallel planning and execution.

1. ***The controlled exit from the lockdown*** includes two reference groups:
 - a. Guidelines for the general population:
 - i. When possible, depending on infection levels, the lockdown will be lifted on a cautious, gradual, and differential basis. Priority should be granted to business that do not have walk-in customers and whose contribution to the GDP is high.
 - ii. At the same time, the differential and phased opening of the education system should be allowed, with priority to pre-school to third grade, employing a full pod model without any compromises. Outdoor learning should be practiced, along with upgrading of distance learning and assistance in purchasing computers to broaden the learning circle.

- iii. Differential (not lateral) economic compensation should be provided, with an emphasis on groups that have been hurt by the crisis more than others (in particular deciles 3-5, the self-employed, and small and medium business owners). This must be done cautiously, while preserving resources for future recovery.
 - iv. Differential enforcement will be difficult to comprehend and implement among the population. Restrictions therefore require strict enforcement, according to priorities, headed by the complete ban on mass gatherings. It is imperative to provide the police with authority, resources, and public and governmental support so that it can enforce the differential restrictions and at the same time maintain law and order and defend the democratic system. As a rule, there should be no distinction between sectors, but there must be a differentiation between red zones and other localities.
 - v. Effective enforcement necessitates public knowledge and understanding of the specific restrictions. This calls for a professional, clear, authoritative, precise, transparent, and credible messaging system that must address the entire country, but also specific sectors and communities. The professional public messaging service should formulate the public information policy, shape daily messages, and engage in a dialogue with the public through the established media, social networks, and local authorities. This should be promoted alongside messaging efforts at the local level, which is expected to translate the general messages to the particular local communities.
 - vi. The education system demands special attention. Beyond its basic contribution to the younger generation, it enables increased employment among parents challenged by the coronavirus. Clearly the entire 2020-2021 school year will be disrupted. Activities should be planned in a differential manner on the basis of the following principles: A sharp transition from the centrality of the Ministry of Education, which should only set policy and standards, to decentralization to local authorities and educational institutes; creative solutions in the field, such as outdoor learning in small groups; preference to lower age groups and provision of emotional support; less reliance on distance learning; for older students, focus on core subjects only; and above all, assistance to weaker populations as a priority.
- b. Establishing a Professional Organizational Framework*
- i. Israel is at a critical stage that requires decision making processes based on clear and credible information and data and professional considerations that take into account the risks for the immediate, medium, and long terms. Israel is currently far from possessing the competence required to manage complex crises such as the current one. Hence, a small professional state mechanism to support the political decision making and the implementation of policy should be established immediately, even if this is a belated

measure. Such a mechanism should manage the entire scope of the interconnected multilayered crisis and integrate government and public systems, while working under the supervision of the Coronavirus Cabinet. Such a change is necessary and possible if the Prime Minister, together with the Coronavirus Cabinet, concentrates on setting the grand policy and allows the designated central organ to do its job.

- ii. Increased cooperation with the local authorities is required, along with added responsibility placed on services granted locally, in close cooperation with the IDF Home Front Command. Not all local authorities are up to the task; however, most can assist in relating to residents, primarily those who require specialized help. In large towns it is also important to build community networks and to recruit volunteers among the youth, senior citizens, and others. Local authorities should be funded in order to support weaker populations. Delegation of powers to local authorities should be considered, including in the field of enforcement. The overall main purpose is to empower local authorities and society in its entirety.
- iii. The national budget for the years 2020 and 2021 should be passed immediately, including a detailed economic plan for the coming year and a less detailed plan for the following period. In the absence of a budget, the government will struggle to perform and Israel's credit rating will be at risk.
- iv. A concerted effort should be made to improve the medical system's capabilities to treat coronavirus patients in severe condition while at the same time minimizing the damage to essential services to other groups. At the same time, testing for infection must be enhanced – both serological tests to check the immunity of patients who have recovered from the coronavirus and mass testing capacities should be introduced to enable the monitoring of large numbers of patients. Fast completion of the contact tracing mechanism should be ensured, to break chains of infection.
- v. A central national data and research center for all fields related to the multilayered crisis should be established. The center should coordinate data gathering efforts according to needs, and should analyze and distribute its findings to decision makers and the general public with maximum transparency.

2. Differential Management of the New Routine in the Presence of the Coronavirus

The working assumption should be that the next phase will continue until the end of 2021. The primary goal in this phase needs to be minimizing damage to the economy and society while weathering the continued reality of the coronavirus. During this period, a balance is required between medical, economic, and social considerations, with priority to the former. Management of this phase should be based on professional, not political considerations. As to the operation of differential tools: we endorse the differential-geographic approach based on the traffic light model, even if it presents a serious political challenge. Israel is a densely populated small country, and geographical differentiation between localities is

difficult to implement. "Mixing" of populations is common and isolation of communities in question is difficult. Also, decisions to isolate entire (red) communities, which are commonly ultra-Orthodox, will face political and social challenges.

Hence, it is possible and necessary to rely primarily on a differential-functional approach (to complement the differential-geographic approach). This would mean, for an example, opening businesses without walk-in customers, schools for younger children, and services for the elderly in accordance with risk levels. This principle can also be implemented regarding public welfare and leisure activity.

3. *Attention to the Recovery Stages*

The second phase is expected to take a long time, and will not end abruptly on a given date. The main challenge thereafter will be economic recovery through rapid growth and a sharp reduction in unemployment. Therefore, parallel to the ongoing management of the acute crisis, planning for the post-coronavirus phase should commence early, with a view to enable and promote "bouncing back" through economic growth. This is a national mission of major gravity that necessitates a broad consensus, complex and multi-dimensional systemic planning, cautious decision making based on choice between various alternatives, and above all, the investment of significant resources. This is a huge challenge due to the national expenditure involved.

Examples of issues that should already be addressed: planning and execution of large-scale professional training, acceleration of digital transformation processes; enhancement of communication infrastructures, and technologies that will broaden the possibilities for distance work and learning. This is an opportunity that may enable easing of some of the bottlenecks that afflict Israel in transportation, housing, and office space. The assumption is that some patterns of life in the post-coronavirus period will be very different from those that preceded the crisis.

In addition, there will also be the need to focus on assistance to those who were left behind. One of the main efforts required will be to expand employment opportunities for the unemployed. The goal will be to restore unemployment to a level of around 4 percent by the end of the period, alongside an improvement in work productivity. Later in the period, there will be a need to reduce the budget deficit and the debt-to-GDP ratio, in order to return to levels that were standard prior to the crisis

4. *Public Reforms to Deal with Future National Challenges*

The main opportunity presented by the pandemic is to draw basic lessons from the current crisis and build mechanisms to prepare for national disasters, while learning how to live normally during such disasters without giving up on democracy. This will require a concerted effort to create a series of profound changes in fundamental cultural, social, economic, and political domains, whose weaknesses have emerged in the current period. This is a process in which government and society must work together on the basis of a renewed social accord.

Conclusion

The assumption that Israel can successfully deal with the current crisis with existing tools seems unfounded. Israel must, from now until the end of the second lockdown, make a series of fundamental decisions, centering on the recognition that it is necessary to formulate a new comprehensive policy based on quantifiable national goals, along with the establishment of mechanisms to manage the multilayered crisis and the eventual recovery from it.

The immediate goal is to contain the pandemic. This will take time. Only after that will it be possible to open the economy in phases, in a cautious and gradual manner. Israel needs to rely on a differential-functional approach to prevent a third lockdown. The next goal is stabilization, probably long-term, based on a different routine of life in the presence of the coronavirus. During this prolonged phase Israel must prepare the long-term process of socio-economic and political recovery and growth, so as to try to ensure its success.