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Covid-19 Challenges for the Israeli Police

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The Covid-19 pandemic has created a new situation for the Israel Police (IP). Instead of focusing on criminal offenses and personal security, the IP are called on to give high priority to the enforcement of pandemic-related regulations and restrictions on the general public. This new reality demands of the IP much sensitivity, along with the need to make fine distinctions among situations and population groups in the fulfillment of two primary objectives: enforcement of the government's instructions to contain contagion, and maintenance of public order in protest demonstrations. At the same time, the IP are called to continue with their traditional missions. It appears that even if the IP are usually successful in maintaining the desired balance between protecting the public and protecting Israeli democracy, there are still cases in which some police officers and commanders and senior figures in the organization damage the police's legitimacy and the public trust. This article proposes a two-stage approach to enhance the IP's capabilities and performance, based on recent lessons. The goal of the immediate stage is to make the police's operational conduct more efficient during the pandemic's multilayered crisis. This should start with the immediate appointment of a permanent police commissioner; continue with reorganization of the police force according to the new array of missions; and include enhanced public messaging in a transparent and open dialogue with local community leaders, civil society, and protest leaders. The second stage should include long-term structural reforms in the IP, as one of the most important actors in the public system dealing with crisis management at a national level.

The multifaceted health, economic, social, governance, and political crisis emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic has positioned the Israel Police (IP) as one of the most critical links in the public apparatus dealing with the ongoing challenges. This constitutes a fundamental shift in police priorities – from a national agency assigned to combat crime, associated generally with individual criminals, to one that must focus on enforcing public order among large, mostly law-abiding groups under profound social stress and grave uncertainty.

In a rare public statement, Acting Police Commissioner Motti Cohen stated, "The IP is a mirror of Israeli society...We have reached a watershed that requires each of us to stop and explore where we are headed as a nation and as a democratic society...The police

will always be there...to defend and strike the proper balance fairly and equally for the benefit of all parties, the peace and security of the public, and the resilience and continuity of our country" (*Maariv*, August 28, 2020). It is questionable, however, whether Cohen's words have indeed penetrated all IP ranks, and whether the police are capable of striking a correct balance in pursuit of the goal of protecting both the public and Israeli democracy.

Israel Police Missions

According to the [IP Ordinance](#) (2019), the police are tasked with enforcing the laws of the State of Israel concerning criminal law (a responsibility not assigned to any other authority); maintaining public order; protecting personal safety and property; and bearing responsibility for internal security. These tasks must be performed lawfully while respecting basic individual rights. Thus, the police are mandated to expose and prevent crime; investigate crimes; apprehend criminals and bring them to justice; protect personal safety and property; maintain public order while protecting the freedom to conduct legal demonstrations and protests; and regulate road traffic.

To fulfill these functions, the Israel Police function as an essentially centralized national security agency striving over the years to instill a mindset of commitment and service among its commanders and officers. [This has shaped](#) the police's formal values, including: *national responsibility* – service for "the benefit of the public...as representatives...of Israel...in all circumstances, neutrally and professionally, with objectivity, equality, and tolerance"; *service* – "We will act as servants of the public for the purpose of defending its freedom...to maintain its way of life according to its worldview and according to the spirit of the law...so that the feeling of personal security...and its confidence in the police will be enhanced"; *restraint and proportionality* – "we will act as professionals in the justified and proportional use of force...we will act with discretion, using the necessary force, and proper restraint...only in a justified and proportional manner."

This is not the place to assess the degree to which the IP have been successful in performing their functions in routine times under ordinary circumstances. Suffice it to say that [data indicate](#) that only 56 percent of Israelis trust the police, and 55 percent are satisfied with its performance.

The Challenges of the Covid-19 Crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic struck the IP with no prior doctrinal, organizational, or intellectual preparations. Like other public systems, the IP found itself facing a novel situation. Beyond dealing with individual cases of crime and upholding personal security, the police are now tasked with enforcing regulations and restrictions among all sectors of the general public. This new challenge comes at a time when the public itself is burdened by an unfamiliar situation, and the new encounters with the police have forced ordinary civilians to test the limitations of the police response under conditions of mutual stress. The boundaries between the permitted and forbidden for both the public and the police are blurred, thereby creating an unfamiliar gray zone of engagement. On the spur of the moment, without any clearly defined reference threat, police officers are pushed into difficult and frequently

improvised forms of conduct that demand creativity, flexibility, and learning through trial and error.

Since the outset of the pandemic, the situation has led to a new definition of police operations, extending into the heart of the civil society. This requires great sensitivity and a precise distinction between different situations and population groups on three main fronts: enforcing the government's instructions for avoiding infection (mainly wearing masks in public, preventing public gatherings, and enforcing lockdowns); maintaining public order in protest demonstrations; and continuing the IP's regular missions.

Whether the IP have successfully grappled with these three fronts is beyond the scope of this article. However, according to a [public opinion survey](#) conducted by the Hebrew University Institute of Criminology, during the first lockdown, 59 percent of respondents said they trusted the police to behave honestly in enforcing the emergency regulations. During the second lockdown, however, only 38 percent of respondents concurred. In April, during the first lockdown, only 17 percent believed that police activity in enforcing the Covid-19 regulations had a negative impact on the IP's relations with public. In the second lockdown, 52 percent reported a negative impact. Only 19 percent agreed that the police were taking the right decisions vis-à-vis civilians in the second survey (compared with 34 percent in the first). The percentage of respondents who said during first lockdown that the police were treating all people equally (24 percent) and fairly (31 percent), fell to 16 and 19 percent, respectively, during the second lockdown. These figures clearly paint a bleak picture of police relations with the public.

The main challenge facing the police today lies in the public demonstrations, which have put the pandemic-related issues squarely in the political domain, which in turn colors the government's entire handling of the multidimensional crisis. The current demonstrations constitute a rather novel phenomenon, and as in other democracies create a serious challenge to the legitimacy of the IP, not only among specific sectors, but also among the general population. The result is a dramatic drop in the public's trust in the police. Furthermore, the social contract between the public and the police is undermined in both the interpersonal sphere and in its operational conduct, which demonstrates uneven enforcement of health restrictions and regulations for protest demonstrations. Indeed, the IP's ability to achieve a uniform police conduct in practice under diverse protest scenarios is virtually nonexistent. There are many reasons for this, including the nature and changing dynamics of the events, the challenge posed by the protesters involved, and the judgment and perception of their own responsibility among local commanders.

In the police's overall concept and existing structure, a local commander facing mass events is not supposed to act selectively. And indeed, in most instances of friction, the police behave properly and succeed in maintaining public order. Indeed, most police commanders arrive at the current crisis with experience and confidence, and perceive themselves as servants of the public and the state. However, often, the local commander's conduct, and that of an individual police officer, depends to a large extent on his/her

judgment at a given moment. Lapses in judgment often feed the public's mistrust of the police and the erosion of its legitimacy.

Can the Police Meet the Covid-19 Challenges?

The IP are not the catalyst for the chaos currently enveloping Israeli society. Police officers sent on their assignments are exposed to the same virus as the public. The IP work in difficult circumstances created by the pandemic, which afflict the Israeli public as well, particularly those sectors whose health and economic welfare are more vulnerable and whose social or religious beliefs drive them to defy the Covid-19 restrictions; and above all by the unmanageable political situation in Israel. This leads to incongruous laws and regulations, some that reflect no clear rational transparency or any logical process of decision making. In order to meet expectations, the IP need a stable command, headed by a permanent commissioner, a clear policing doctrine extending to the lower ranks, and an approach by the Minister of Public Security that is not perceived as overly political. Like other public enforcement agencies, the police are subjected to constant criticism and assaults, primarily from the government and the Prime Minister, but also from critics of the government and special sectors, such as the ultra-Orthodox. All of this weakens the IP, complicates their work in the field, and undermines their legitimacy, thus generating long term damage to one of the most important agencies in any democratic country.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current situation challenges the IP as it seeks to fulfill both their new and their traditional tasks. The current public and governmental circumstances make a rapid improvement impossible. Therefore, proposed here is a two-stage approach to enhance the IP's capabilities and performance.

The goal of the immediate stage is to improve the effectiveness of the police's operational conduct for the duration of the current crisis. In this framework, needed are:

- a. Immediate appointment of a permanent commissioner for the IP (the position has been vacant for 19 months).
- b. Reorganization of the force – including the Border Police – according to the new set of tasks. This involves the reorganization of a professional and operational structure that can adapt to the new circumstances, focusing on enforcement in the general public.
- c. Revised division of the enforcement burden between the IP and the municipal authorities. The police will focus on tasks involving restoration of public order, and on assisting and providing security for municipal enforcement teams. The local civilian authorities will enforce the physical distancing restrictions (inspecting the public domain in a lockdown, opening businesses, wearing masks, as is the case in New York City, for example).
- d. Clarified enforcement procedures in potential friction situations (e.g., public protests, ultra-Orthodox communities). This will facilitate strict enforcement where needed, while providing local commanders with room for extended discretion. Such flexibility can provide an operational solution for diverse

- scenarios emerging in the field, and also give commanders support and reasonable room to maneuver in managing unfolding events.
- e. A major reduction of police enforcement in spheres that do not amount to critical spreading of the coronavirus infection (such as fines for not wearing masks in open spaces and intelligence agencies' monitoring of citizens' exposure to the virus).
 - f. The use of delayed institutionalized penalties (to avoid creating a direct confrontation between a police officer and the party being penalized) as an effective deterrence tool.
 - g. Task-oriented training and mental preparation for dealing with ordinary citizens, while being respectful of individual rights. Actions by police officers who have demonstrated superior professional ability of dealing with civilians should be highlighted, while disciplinary action should be taken against those who violate police orders.
 - h. Public relations, transparency, and an open dialogue with the public, local community leaders, civil society, and protest leaders.

The second stage will be based on lessons drawn from the present crisis. This framework requires extensive structural reforms in the IP as an important actor in the public system dealing with crisis management. This means strengthening the police, so they will be able to continue performing their full array of traditional activities, while at the same time dealing professionally with the new challenges. The emerging socioeconomic crisis has already seen a rise in crime and domestic and community violence. This is likely to increase in the post-pandemic period and will require extensive and challenging handling by the IP. At the same time, it will be necessary to provide a structural and legislative response for the police to cope with extended breaches of public order. The reform should also include renewed configuration to update the IP's role vis-à-vis the Ministry of Public Security and the Minister, the government, and the political leadership. A necessary condition for the success of these stages is rebuilding the IP's legitimacy and public trust in the organization.