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Covid-19 and the Securitization of National Crises in Israel's Strategic Approach

Reliance on the Security Community As a "Comfortable Necessity"

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Israel's first response to the Covid-19 crisis demonstrated a security-based approach to a non-military national crisis. Faced with a first-of-its-kind non-military crisis of national magnitude, the government reactivated a pre-established, well-rehearsed policy protocol. It assigned the security community with the operational management of the crisis and responsibility over key strategic roles. Israel's reliance on this community is an outcome of both the health system's weakness as well as an overarching mindset – shared by both the leadership and the public – that perceives the security community as the optimal manager of national crises. This approach curtails the development of civilian crisis capacities and enhances future dependency on the security community in national crises. It bears consequences on Israel's performance in future civilian crises: first, on its ability to devise an optimal response, second on its level of readiness to confront security threats during such crises, and third on public transparency.

In its 72 years of existence, Israel has experienced several national crises, from short events such as the 1967 War, to longer crises such as the Second Intifada (2000–2005). Nevertheless, the thread connecting these crises is that they were all of a military nature. Whether in the case of broad military offensives, ballistic missiles, or terror attacks against its civilian population, the Israeli experience of national crises is solely based on human-made military challenges. The Covid-19 crisis therefore presents a first-of-a-kind crisis in Israel's history — a threat to public health as well as to its economic resilience, in which the national security dimension plays only a marginal role.

The Securitization of the Covid-19 Crisis

The concept of securitization relates to the attempt to reframe a range of non-military topics and agendas as matters of security. On the national level, securitization refers to the perception of threats through a conceptual "widening" in which several subjects of national importance are placed

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under the category of national security. On the practical level, securitization is often used to provide legitimacy for the state to employ extraordinary means as well as raise the public's sense of urgency. In the Covid-19 crisis, securitization is often mentioned in relation to the discourse used by leaders to describe the crisis and justify unusual measures. Israeli leaders have framed the Covid-19 pandemic as a national security crisis from its early phases: For example Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu defined the crisis as "a war against an invisible enemy." These statements by the Israeli leadership are hardly unique. Leaders of other nations, including several European nations, have used the same discourse in their public appeals.

Nevertheless, in the Israeli case, this definition of the crisis as a matter of national security had a direct operational implication. The Israeli approach transformed the security apparatus into a central component of the national campaign to contain Covid-19 in the early phase. Using military forces to support civilian authorities in times of crisis is a common practice that has been utilized by several European countries during national crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the level of involvement of Israel's security community (SC) — the Ministry of Defense (MOD), the National Security Council (MALAL), the intelligence community, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) — differs from these European examples in principle. In most cases, the security apparatus' involvement in Europe was limited to fulfilling auxiliary logistical roles such as transporting equipment (France) or manning call centers (Germany). In Israel, however, the security establishment took a leading role in crisis management during the initial phase, as well as responsibility over core strategic tasks that, in most countries, were fulfilled by public health professionals. Hence, Israel's early response to the Covid-19 crisis demonstrated securitization, not simply in conceptual, but mainly in practical terms.

The dominant role assigned to the security apparatus in this crisis can be considered an outcome of both necessity and preference. On the one hand, it emanates from the fundamental weakness of Israel's civilian systems in dealing with national emergencies. This weakness is underscored when compared to the vast organizational and technological capacities and experience accumulated by the security apparatus for this purpose through years of crisis management. Nevertheless, it also emanates from a mode of strategic thinking that tends to treat the SC as the most capable and reliable actor to deal with national crises, including non-military events. The two dimensions — the weakness of the civilian systems and reliance on the SC in national crises — are interlinked. Israel's focus on the SC as a generic tool to manage non-military crises reduces the urgency of building professionalized capacities for crises within the civilian system. This, in turn, perpetuates the weakness of civilian organizations and necessitates using the security apparatus during national crises.

Israel's Reliance on the SC – A Mindset Rather Than an Ad-hoc Instinct

"Decision-making (in the Covid-19 crisis) should not be based solely on health experts as they only see one aspect of the whole picture … (fighting) a pandemic requires a different perception and type of activity. It is a sort of medicine and war defused together" (Former Minister of Defense Naftali Bennet).

At first glance, Israel's turn toward the SC in the early phase of the crisis (February—June 2020) may appear as a reflexive measure. In this scenario, facing a strategic surprise, the leadership turned to the only body that had proved itself in previous crises — the security community. That may well have been the case in assigning the intelligence community with crisis-related duties. Nevertheless, when it comes to crisis management, the Israeli government appears to act on a pre-established logic that perceives the SC as the leading national resource to deal with civilian crises.

This mindset appeared in Israeli governmental planning before the current outbreak. In 2007, in response to the avian flu outbreak, the government had prepared a national "readiness plan for the health system for a flu pandemic." This plan stated a clear division of labor between the SC and the health system during pandemics. The MOD was assigned the role of managing the crisis on the national level with the help of the National Emergency Authority (RACHEL) and the IDF's Homefront Command. The Ministry of Health's (MOH) responsibility was restricted mainly to the medical aspects of the crisis, such as managing the hospitals and health centers, clinical monitoring, and acquiring vaccines. Moreover, this approach was also demonstrated during the potential outbreak of the swine flu in 2009, when MALAL managed the effort to ensure the supply of vaccinations vis-à-vis their French counterparts.

The preference to assign the SC to handle national crises of a civilian nature is apparent in the gradual marginalization of Israel's National Emergency Authority (RACHEL). RACHEL was established in 2007 as a response to the failure to adhere to civilian needs during the Second Lebanon War (2006). The aim was to create a hub of expertise in treating a broad range of civilian crises situations that has the capacity to plan, manage, and coordinate national efforts, both in preparation for and during national crises. Among the scenarios it was designed to confront are earthquakes, other natural disasters, and specifically also pandemics. Originally, RACHEL was meant to serve as an independent body subordinate to the PM or one of the ministries, but in 2014 it was subordinated to the MOD. In the last few years, its organizational role was downgraded severely, as its core authorities over the allocation of resources and priority-setting in times of crisis were transferred to the IDF. This organizational marginalization led to the resignation of its director a few months before the Covid-19 outbreak.

Israel's security-based approach to national crises can be attributed to four mindsets. First, it relates to Israel's basic perception of pandemic threats. Viewing the SC as a natural candidate to manage pandemic outbreaks is partially based on the fact that much of the attention given in Israeli strategic thinking to pandemics has been devoted to the scenario of human-made threats of biological warfare. In this context, one of the leading bodies in Israel that deals with pandemics on a daily basis is the Institute for Biological Research (IIBR), which was established in 1952 to "provide the State of Israel with scientific response to chemical and biological threats." The mindset is also apparent in the government's decisions to assign partial responsibility for the crisis management of pandemics to the Deputy Minister of Defense for Civil Defense (who is also in charge of IIBR) as part of his/her overall responsibility on non-conventional warfare threats. Second, in the specific context of national crises, it can be attributed to Israel's "strategic memory" — to the long history of military crises that have shaped the country's leadership and public thinking about national crises as a whole. For Israelis, some of these military crises serve as more than simply national challenges: They are a part of what Brent Steele defined as "autobiographical narratives" — the stories that shape a collective (as citizens of a nation) perception of "self." This thinking was strongly demonstrated by the leadership's discourse, which often related to the crisis as another war in the long chain of military conflicts, which Israel is compelled to "win." Third, it relates to the underlying assumption embedded in the leadership's mindset that management expertise of security threats can easily be converted into non-military contexts. Whether in Israeli politics, business administration, or the public sector, senior SC members are considered to be natural candidates for top management positions based solely on their past security-related experience. Lastly, on the broad level, it can be attributed to a general trend of securitizing matters of national importance in Israeli strategic thinking (e.g., the topics of Arab minority rights, demography, and migration).

The First Resort: Designating the SC as the Main Management Tool of the Covid-19 Crisis

The Covid-19 crisis in Israel can be divided into two main phases ("waves") demarked by two periods of drastic lockdown enacted by the government. The initial phase stretched from the appearance of the first cases and the first government restrictions on air travel (Feb. 21) to the gradual, yet comprehensive lockdown of economic and social activity (Mar. 19—25). However, the reopening of the education system and other social and economic segments led to a "second wave." In its nadir, Israel had one of the highest rates of Covid-19 infections per capita in the world. This development led the government to implement a second major lockdown (September 18), which was partially eased in the second half of October.

The leadership's management approach in the early phase of the crisis was shaped by two main factors. First and foremost, it was motivated by Netanyahu's ambition to keep decision-making under his tight control. While some observers saw this decision as being politically motivated, the logic behind the decision was explained by the need to act fast and decisively by circumventing bureaucratic procedures. Second, this approach was driven by the perception that the SC (in this case MALAL) is the most suitable operational system to manage a crisis of such magnitude, alongside MOH senior officials.

The combination of these two factors resulted in the decision to manage the crisis through MALAL, which was officially tasked in early February by the PM with integrating and coordinating the campaign on the different levels of national activity. In this framework, key MOH officials (mainly the Director General) were deeply involved in the decision-making process. However, the role of operational integrator was given to MALAL. Directly subordinated to the PM and serving in peacetime mainly as the staff forum for the PM on strategic affairs, MALAL mostly (but not exclusively) deals with the more traditional sides of national security, i.e., the Israeli military, national resources, and diplomatic affairs. The majority of its senior officials have served as senior members in the IDF and intelligence community. Although officially designated to deal with a wide range of strategic military and civilian issues, since its founding in 1999, MALAL has dealt with pandemic scenarios only once (in 2009 — see above). Moreover, during the last decade, it has served mainly as an advisory body and not as an operational unit. Despite these deficiencies, MALAL was assigned the crisis management role for the Covid-19 crisis.

The decision to appoint MALAL to handle a pandemic is especially meaningful considering the fact that Israel has several civilian bodies which, in theory, were designed to manage matters of public health in times of crisis. The decision to marginalize or ignore these bodies is not based solely on preference — it is also a matter of necessity deriving from the relative weakness of Israel's civilian crisis capacities, especially in the health system. Years of budget cuts and transfers of authority have left these organizations relatively weak and curtailed their basic abilities to manage crises of a broad magnitude. RACHEL is a prime example: Israel's first large-scale civilian crisis should have been a defining moment for the organization that was established exactly for this purpose. Nevertheless, in this time of great need, the crisis found RACHEL in a precarious position, and the government abstained from using it, nor did it bother to appoint a new head to RACHEL during the first phase of the crisis.

The same marginalization of civilian authorities in the context of crisis management appears in the case of the MOH. Theoretically, the ministry has several units that deal directly with pandemic emergencies — among them the Ministry's Emergency Department and the Center for Disease Control. Nevertheless, in practice, these units were only partially operational, and their experts had a relatively marginal role in decision-making during the early phase. The systemic deficiencies of the health system in dealing with crisis situations were

known to the heads of the MOH before the crisis, as became apparent during a national pandemic exercise that was conducted by RACHEL in 2019. However, very little was done to address them.

The self-perceived role of the MOD in crisis management became apparent when former Minister of Defense Bennet launched his short-lived attempt to present a strategic long-term plan to contain Covid-19 (March 2020). The plan called for the full transfer of authority over crisis management to the IDF and the MOD. The assumption that the Minister of Defense is the right person to deal with the strategic planning of the long-term health crisis is yet another illustrative example of Israel's security-based approach to national crises.

In a later phase of the crisis, a certain change in the leadership's mindset regarding the need to appoint public health practitioners to manage the crisis can be attributed to the appointment (July 23) of Prof. Ronni Gamzu to the role of national Covid-19 project coordinator. As a leading public health expert, Gamzu's appointment can be seen as an attempt to shift from a generic to a specialized crisis management approach. Nevertheless, even in this case, the prominence of the security-based mindset is apparent in the fact that three of the five individuals reportedly considered for the position were retired IDF generals with no previous public health experience.

Public Approval of the Security Community's Management Role

The decision to assign a crisis management role to MALAL has been the subject of public criticism since the early phase of the crisis. However, a closer look at this critical debate demonstrates the centrality of the SC as a tool of crisis management, not only in the leadership's view, but also in public opinion. Public criticism mostly focused on Netanyahu's decision to restrict decision-making to his close circle and on MALAL's limited ability to coordinate multiple efforts. Nevertheless, relatively little attention was given in the Israeli media or the public debate to the decision (or rather the need) to hand over management authority of this non-military crisis to a national security unit. Instead, the debate was focused on which of the two components of the security community — the MOD or the PM's national security advisers (MALAL) — is more suitable to manage the crisis. For many of the country's opinion leaders, the SC's dominant role in civilian crisis management was almost considered as a given.

Moreover, because the SC — and the IDF specifically — generally enjoys a relatively high level of public trust, its involvement in this crisis is perceived by the public as a welcome development. In a recent survey (November 2020), 65% of Israelis expressed their wish for the IDF to manage the crisis.

Repurposing SC Capacities: Reassigning the Health System's Strategic Tasks to the Security Community

The prominent role of the SC in crisis management appeared in the decision to assign its members with strategic duties and responsibilities that were originally designed to be handled by the health system. One prime example is passing operational responsibility for the crucial task of tracing and interrupting the chain of Covid-19 infections to the MOD and the IDF (October 2020). In previous plans, this task was supposed to be carried out by the MOH. However, in reality, operational responsibility was transferred to the MOD while the MOH maintained only a regulatory role. For this purpose, the IDF's Homefront command created a special command unit ("Alon"), which includes thousands of analysts and soldiers, demonstrating once more the SC's efficiency in providing fast solutions to close the operational gaps left by the civilian system. The command took over responsibility for tasks such as conducting epidemiological investigations and managing the isolation sites.

Beyond compensating for the civilian system's operational weakness, Israeli

leadership and senior SC officials sought to convert the community's advanced technological capabilities and crisis expertise into assets in the Covid-19 crisis. This systematic effort was demonstrated by the creation (March 2020) of "the National Command Center to Fight Corona." Led by the head of Mossad, Israel's Institute for Intelligence and Special Tasks, this body aimed to utilize the advanced capabilities of Israel's intelligence community in the fight against Covid-19. It dealt with a wide range of strategic tasks, including acquisition of necessary medical equipment, increasing local production of crucial materials, and analysis of global trends and developments. Assigning Mossad the leading role in acquiring critical materials is an illustrative example of this "conversion" effort. In this case, Mossad's international network and experience in working behind the scenes were used to ensure the country's stockpile of necessary supplies in a competitive global reality of limited resources.

The same idea of converting the SC's expertise was utilized in the controversial decision to involve Israel's General Security Service (Shabak) to identify citizens who had been in the vicinity of infected individuals. Shabak's electronic surveillance capability to monitor the movements of terrorists was repurposed to interrupt the chain of infection. Shabak reportedly used its unique and highly secretive database of electronic data (known as the "Tool"), which, in coordination with other mechanisms, became the main instrument to retrace the movements of infected individuals. Shabak's utilization of its tracking capabilities vis-à-vis Israel's general public, which was authorized (March 17, 2020) by the government under the special emergency regulations, has since been a topic of public criticism and legal and parliamentary debate. In April 2020 it led several human rights organizations to make an appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court. The court approved Shabak's monitoring in principle, but it limited the duration to one week, after which the government was required to regulate its activity through primary legislation.

The SC's cutting-edge technology was also utilized to the fullest through the involvement of Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate (AMAN). AMAN's analysts have used their advanced intelligence analysis capabilities and software to integrate data from various sources and medical facilities, analyze infection patterns in Israel, and identify infection hubs. Much more than an auxiliary contribution, these actions by AMAN have had a direct effect on national policy. For example, it was AMAN's analysts who first identified synagogues as hubs of infection — an insight that later resulted in the sensitive decision to limit prayer. In addition, AMAN has also assumed responsibility for the analytical task of monitoring and informing decision-makers about global epidemiological developments and trends of the pandemic.

Systemic Outcomes: A Reliance That Carries Multilayered Implications

An initial analysis underscores the Israeli SC's flexibility in adapting quickly to a new operational context by utilizing their capabilities for the benefit of public health. In this context, the SC utilized the three main organizational advantages of the Israeli national security apparatus in times of national emergencies: centralized control, quick decision-making, and close proximity to decision-makers. These features were valuable in allowing Israel to act swiftly and decisively in the initial phase of the crisis. In fact, the contribution provided by the SC in the uncharted terrain of a pandemic was so comprehensive that one might forget that the task does not fall within their field of expertise in the first place.

However, the Covid-19 crisis has provided unmistakable evidence of the systemic weakness of Israel's civilian crisis capacities, with emphasis on the public health system — in all matters related to operational capabilities, let alone crisis management capabil-

ities. Moreover, the MOH had to rely on the SC's capabilities even for the execution of some of its key professional tasks, such as managing epidemiological investigations. National crises often serve as a litmus test to identify weak links in the system, which tend to collapse under sudden pressure. The Covid-19 crisis provides a clear indication of the limited ability of civilian authorities to manage a national crisis of global proportions based on their own capacities.

On the level of national mindset, Israeli reliance on the SC disincentivizes investment in civilian capacities for crisis situations. It therefore perpetuates the weakness of civilian organizations and necessitates using the SC in times of civilian crisis. On paper, Israel has several civilian bodies that were created to manage national pandemics. Nevertheless, in times of an actual health emergency, a lack of trust by the leadership, and years of undermining of authorities, in addition to cuts in resources crippled these units' ability to act when they were needed most.

The willful reliance on the SC to manage civilian crises has three main implications on Israel's resilience in current and future national crises: first, on its ability to devise an optimal response to civilian crises; second on its level of readiness to confront security threats that are likely to appear during civilian national crises; and third on the level of public transparency and governmental due process in times of crisis.

The role assigned to the SC during a civilian crisis indicates a "one solution fits all" approach, as it treats the multifaceted event of a civilian crisis as an event that can be managed with generic crisis management capacities. Nevertheless, similar to security crises, civilian crises require tailor-made approaches and adaptive solutions to changing needs. The marginalization of professional bodies that specialize in different types of civilian crises hinders Israel's ability to mobilize and fully utilize relevant knowledge sources in times of need. As the crisis is ongoing, it is difficult to assess the performance of non-specialized SC units as crisis managers. However, initial signs indicate that this model is suboptimal for the systematic incorporation of professional knowledge and experience. In this context, senior MOH officials have already criticized the SC's lack of professional experience in health crisis management as well as in fulfilling specific professional tasks. Nevertheless, this deficiency is not only related to the specific case of Covid-19 or that of pandemics — it is likely to impact Israel's ability to cope with a broad range of civilian crises, such as environmental or natural disasters. Each of these complex crisis scenarios requires a specialized and well-trained apparatus that allows a nation to fully utilize its scientific and technological resources.

Moreover, Israel's security community has several structural disadvantages in managing large-scale civilian crises. First, the SC is built upon a hierarchal structure, whereas public engagement on the national level (and especially in public health crises) requires "horizontal" cooperation and dialogue with parallel systems. It necessitates close and simultaneous deliberation with several hubs on the sub-national level, such as municipalities, local health centers, the private sector, and workers' unions — bodies and entities the SC has little experience engaging with during peacetime. Adjusting national efforts to this dynamic reality requires a deep understanding of legal, political, and bureaucratic processes. This SC deficiency became apparent in MALAL's relative failure to cooperate with local authorities and adapt governmental decisions to different municipal contexts in the early phase of the crisis. Moreover, the SC is known to be somewhat of an outsider within the Israeli civil service. Operational limitations reduce the level of inter-ministerial interaction between the MOD and the civilian bodies in routine times, which curtails the SC's relevance of serving as an integrator during a multi-layered civilian crisis involving several governmental units.

Reliance on the SC during a national crisis on a global scale could hinder Israel's level of readiness to deal with national security threats during national civil crises. Large-scale civilian crises, especially ones

of a global magnitude, are likely to have distinct implications for national security. As the Covid-19 pandemic has proven, global crises present an opportunity for regional actors to challenge the status quo. It is a period in which the country's national resources are already stretched thin, and international attention is diverted elsewhere. A combined threat whereby Israel could face a national security threat in addition to the non-military crisis is highly likely. The attempted cyber attack on Israel's water systems attributed to Iran (April 2020) and Hamas' recent threats to renew rocket attacks are two examples of such a predicament. Diverting the SC — in terms of both attention and resources — away from its core task of protecting national security increases the likelihood of organizational overstretch in times of civilian crisis. In such a scenario, instead of protecting Israel's vulnerable flanks in precarious times, the SC might be tied up attempting to carry out the civilian authorities' tasks for them.

Lastly, based on the Covid-19 precedent, involving members of the Israeli security and intelligence community in strategic civilian tasks might limit the level of public transparency of policy planning and implementation in times of national crises. This concern derives from the fact that, by nature, intelligence organizations, their tools, decisions, and activities are rarely exposed to public oversight. This concern is multiplied in regard to Shabak's involvement in the compulsory monitoring of the general public, as this task has direct implications on the civil liberties and right to privacy of Israeli citizens. Shabak's monitoring sets a precedent in which capabilities that were designated to be directed at external enemies are being directed at Israeli citizens under the justification of special emergency regulations. As stated by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Esther Hayut (April 2020): "… redirecting tools that were developed to fight hostile entities against Israeli citizens … is a step that is likely to keep allies of democracy awake at night."

Conclusions

Whereas in most developed countries Covid-19 crisis management was handled by professionals trained to manage health crises, in Israel the management — and some core strategic tasks — was handled mainly by the security apparatus during the early phase. The crisis has exposed the fact that Israel does not have an effective professional equivalent to the Robert Koch Institute in Germany or the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, let alone an integrative body designed to deal with multiple crisis scenarios such as the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Instead, it has a security community that is perceived as both the main management tool and the trouble-shooter in civilian national crises.

The strategic role assigned to Israel's SC in the Covid-19 crisis is illustrative of the securitization of national crises in Israeli strategic thinking. In this context, this approach was not limited to one political group or professional segment of Israel's policy circle, but rather appears to be a broad strategic narrative that has influenced the political leadership and public opinion leaders alike. It manifests as a shared, deep-rooted approach to national crises that one might consider to be an item of strategic culture.

Dr. Gil Murciano is an Associate in the research project "Israel and its regional and global conflicts: Domestic developments, security issues and foreign affairs." The project is located within SWP's Middle East and Africa Division and is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

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