



PERSPECTIVES

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A Tale of Two Leaders: Netanyahu During the Coronavirus Crisis and Ben-Gurion During the War of Independence

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Criticism of the Israeli government's handling of the coronavirus crisis has focused on its "on the move" decision-making and lack of an "exit strategy." But a consideration of David Ben-Gurion's leadership during the War of Independence reveals personal perspective to be an essential element in decision-making and shows the necessity of learning in the midst of change.

Israel's Independence Day, celebrated this year in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, invites an interesting comparison between PM David Ben-Gurion's leadership during the War of Independence and PM Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership during the pandemic. Despite the limitations entailed by the events' dissimilarity, they can be considered in light of the unprecedented test each of them posed for the top leadership as well as their respective patterns of organizing and decision-making. Such a comparison can shed light on how strategy is made in a complex national reality.

Criticism of Netanyahu's management of the coronavirus crisis focuses on the supposed lack of an orderly plan, decision-making "on the move," and the absence of a professional organizational body with the qualifications and powers to deal with a situation of this kind. Most of all, Netanyahu has been criticized for failing to craft an "exit strategy" from the start of the crisis.

Yet David Ben-Gurion, too, when it came to making key decisions during the War of Independence, navigated in a centralized and entirely personal manner. From the war's beginning to its end, he had no orderly plan for how

to run it; he made major decisions on the move; and of course he had no exit strategy until its much later stages.

The wisdom of experts

When a national leader makes decisions in tumultuous situations, as in the coronavirus crisis, his staff is occupied with ensuring that his decisions are made in the most professional manner possible. For every problem, even on the strategic level, there is a certified, professional process of clarification. But that clarification is often subject to professional disagreement or controversy.

Ben-Gurion's centralized decision-making stemmed from the nature of strategic junctures. The choice of one path over another is not made solely by choosing one expert's advice over another's. It also involves values, beliefs, and opinions that the leader himself holds.

Consider, for example, a key decision Ben-Gurion made in April 1948. Flouting the position of the General Staff, he ordered a concentration of forces from all other fronts in an overriding effort to fight for Jerusalem. As Ben-Gurion explained in making his case: "If the country has a soul, then Jerusalem is its soul... The battle for Jerusalem is decisive, and not only from a military standpoint... That oath by the rivers of Babylon [if I forget thee, Jerusalem...] is obligatory today just as in those days; otherwise we will not deserve to be called the People of Israel." In that spirit he adjured the commander of Brigade 7, which had only just been established: "Jerusalem at any price."

Ben-Gurion's arguments involved national and value-driven considerations that went beyond professional military analysis.

In the case of a relatively simple medical dilemma, one might have to choose between, say, a medical opinion that recommends an operation and another that recommends against it. In such a situation, the decision—as Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman taught in his writings—requires a wide latitude for risk calculation that goes beyond the purely professional domain.

Ben-Gurion's method of decision-making naturally sparked sharp opposition. When members of the General Staff cast doubt on the achievability of the war objectives Ben-Gurion had presented to them, he said:

The adjudicators in every matter will not be experts but civil representatives of the people. It is not the expert who determines whether to wage war or not. Not the expert who decides whether to defend the Negev or not. The expert will state his opinion on how to do things, but the civil echelon will decide whether to do things...

Experts are needed... but decisions are based not only on the opinions of technicians regarding professional questions but on a general assessment, and for that the government is responsible.

A strategic decision by a leader goes beyond the purely professional recommendations that experts can provide.

A determined step into the unknown

Ever since the start of the coronavirus crisis, a multitude of “experts” have lamented the Israeli government’s lack of an “exit strategy.” But during the War of Independence, for a long period—almost a year—the leadership had no orderly plan for successfully reaching the end of the war. No such “exit strategy” could have been devised because the conditions for crafting such a concept did not emerge during that time span.

At the height of the war, on September 11, 1948, before the turning point of Operation Yoav, Ben-Gurion presented a broad overview of the course of the conflict from the moment of its outbreak. He described the lack of knowledge for a situation assessment:

Even before the events began, I asked our experts: Do we have a Hagana unit that can hold its own against a regular army? Let me cite an answer I received from one of the commanders, who is now a front commander... He told me last summer that there was no Hagana unit that had the training of a regular army. I asked: And the Palmah? He replied: Neither does the Palmah soldier have the training of a regular soldier... and if a Palmah battalion has to face a battalion of a regular army, it may not be able to hold its own.

Amid the anxiety of stepping into the unknown, the military experts hardly bolstered Ben-Gurion’s confidence in the chances of victory. Faith in the IDF’s operational capability was built by learning on the move. It was out of the friction of war, by adjusting to unforeseen developments as they occurred, that critical knowledge was gleaned without which it would not have been possible to start formulating an exit strategy.

It was according to this logic that the War of Independence was conducted from the start and from one battle to another. This logic was particularly apparent in the shift that occurred with the defeat of the Egyptian enemy in Operation Yoav, as the stage was set for the concluding battles—the Horev and Uvda operations.

The notion of an “exit strategy,” as it is commonly expressed, is used mainly by academics who scrutinize strategic events with the benefit of hindsight.

Ben-Gurion's approach to running the War of Independence presents an alternative to what academia regards as the requirements for strategic planning. Ben-Gurion's sensitivity to the way situations emerge, and his adroitness at exploiting, on the move, the possibilities that take shape in the course of battle, explain his strategic success at navigating the unknown.

If strategic dilemmas could be resolved entirely by resorting to expert opinion, we would not need leaders. Managing a railroad system is not akin to managing a complex, unprecedented, and largely chaotic event. Under crisis conditions, national leadership is ultimately judged on the basis of outcomes and can be examined primarily from a historical perspective.

With that said, the stature of a national leader can be seen from the start—in his acumen and his courage in deciding to take determined steps into the unknown.

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