



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Coronavirus: Improvisation Is the Key to a Successful Response

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,551, May 5, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus crisis is the kind of exceedingly rare and massively consequential event that overshadows all the lessons we have learned in the past. Tackling it requires an open, flexible, multidimensional, decentralized, and multicentric system of thought that is free of fixed organizational paradigms.

Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* opens with the well-known sentence: "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Applying this logic to emergency situations, one can say, "All routine situations are alike; but every emergency situation is an emergency in its own way."

Despite the fact that this unprecedented crisis has gone well beyond even the most outlandish predictions, experts continue to call for centralized management by an authoritative state organization that is prepared to deal with emergency situations. These experts assume that emergencies are fundamentally similar, have generic components, and can be handled by designated experts, organizations, and structures that were prepared in advance for the task—even in the case of an agent of destruction that none of these experts had even heard of before December 7, 2019.

The coronavirus can be defined as a surprise mass casualty incident (SMCI)—a unique phenomenon that differs from scenarios on the "calm to war" spectrum in that each stage of the event is "routine-breaking." Although the virus is not a case of a completely random chaotic phenomenon, it is an unprecedented SMCI with characteristics that humanity has neither researched nor experienced to date. This is evidenced by the multitude of diverse and even contradictory approaches and methods with which dozens of countries are attempting to contend with the virus.

Whereas life during periods of both calm and war is conducted in a relatively orderly and stable fashion within the contours of familiar and organized patterns, an SMCI entails more complex situations that characterize dynamic, nonlinear systems. Hundreds of variables can be involved simultaneously. SMCI situations should therefore not be compared to war, which differs diametrically in terms of operational logic, rules, doctrines, methods of operation, rates of response, and management tools. Viewing an SMCI as a case of war is fundamentally erroneous and likely to exact far more victims than those caused by the disaster itself. Unfortunately, many security officials have a hard time distinguishing between the two and are thus considerably hampering the struggle to overcome the coronavirus.

As noted, an SMCI is unprecedented by nature. This means that basic facts and assumptions have been upended, along with the sets of rules that regularize, channel, and impel operations. Those who turn to familiar frameworks and formats to tackle the current crisis—that is, who are resorting to tools and means that were prepared and used in the past—ignore the uniqueness of the event. Barring a miracle, this is a sure recipe for failure.

Uzi Arad, for example, who is a former national security adviser to PM Benjamin Netanyahu, has harshly criticized the government's handling of the coronavirus crisis, characterizing it as the sort of improvisation that he claims has always typified Israel's behavior. In his view, the name of the game is prior preparedness—organizational preparedness, preparedness in emergency stockpiles, and conceptual preparedness.

That argument reflects a basic misunderstanding of the unprecedented nature of an SMCI. To contend with a massive development that has never occurred before, decision-makers must employ an open, flexible, multidimensional, decentralized, and multicentric system of thought that is free of fixed paradigms. In an SMCI, thinking must be dynamic, intensive, and resolute at a pace of hours and even minutes, not weeks. That in turn necessitates a system that can form an instant picture of the situation and reach a diagnosis. A deeper picture will eventually emerge for leaders and managers, but that will take years of research and analysis of the event that will necessarily be conducted in hindsight. Right now, a managerial approach is needed.

Some see the defense establishment as the body best suited to fight the coronavirus, but it would probably fail, because an SMCI undercuts the basic defense mechanisms that underlie Israeli citizens' sense of security. The intelligence community cannot warn; the air force cannot intercept; ground forces cannot win; and Home Front Command would have a very hard time playing the role of rescuer.

The defense establishment carried out an extraordinary civilian-government policy when it evacuated Gush Katif in the summer of 2005. That was not, however, a case of an SMCI but a political decision that gave the IDF and the defense establishment wide margins of security: they had a year to get organized and half a year to train.

Because no SMCI had occurred in Israel before the coronavirus, the defense establishment has no experience in handling one. It has had to learn from others' experience while avoiding blind imitation. That experience is likely to indicate, among other things, that under SMCI conditions, resorting to standards that have been prepared and determined in advance is unnecessary and can even be constraining and damaging.

In an SMCI, what is presented as a purportedly "serious" solution—i.e., one that was not improvised on the fly in response to the developing situation—will likely turn out to be not just irrelevant but counterproductive, while what is contemptuously described as improvisation will turn out to have been the right response. This is the crux of the basic debate with those who criticize the leading role of the National Security Council in tackling the coronavirus. They characterize its decision-making as improvisation that does not exist in any advanced country with an organized national security council (such as Britain or the US), while noting that in such countries, the struggle to overcome the virus has not been entrusted to that body.

The concept of improvisation calls for critical consideration. There is no question that modern systems based on technology, such as rail and aviation systems, require organized and systematic centralized management. When an accident occurs in one of these, a specific failure can be diagnosed—technical, human, or managerial—stemming from a fault in the requisite systematic preparation. And here precisely is the difference between handling a systemic accident and dealing with a multidimensional surprise disaster that by nature includes more than technical aspects and necessitates (unlike a train or plane accident) rapid holistic adjustment to a situation that is without precedent. The natural urge to rely on familiar organizational formats that were prepared in advance is an obstacle to the proper handling of a serious crisis.

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