



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## Coronavirus and the Modern State

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The modern state is based primarily on the logic of routine, which is fundamentally different from the logic of emergency. Because the demand for assistance from state institutions is especially great in times of emergency, there is a need to reexamine the system of linkages that the state maintains in routine times and to create a balance between the logic of routine and the logic of emergency.

The coronavirus crisis, which has brought much of human interaction to an abrupt halt all over the world, offers an opportunity to reconsider the overt and covert aspects of the ways human life is managed—first and foremost the state’s roles and obligations toward its citizens.

The Enlightenment and the scientific revolution in Europe heralded the rise of modernity, which entailed a fundamental shift in thinking about human prosperity. Under the new political and scientific conditions, a hope arose that human life could flourish and be protected from disaster. Whereas for generations, people turned to God to make their hopes a reality, they increasingly came to demand a prosperous, safe life from the state.

The coronavirus has triggered a great upheaval, made all the more dramatic by the revelation of the modern state’s helplessness in the face of a wide-scale, calamitous event. We are being forced to see that there is an unbridgeable gap between the standards and conventions of proper state management during routine times and the logic of dealing with a state of emergency.

### **The challenge of adjusting to a state of emergency**

Most of the “strategic management” experts in Israel have criticized what they view as the lack of an institutional-state organization for managing the coronavirus crisis. They assume that all emergency situations resemble each

other in their basic characteristics and hence should be managed by a designated organization and by experts trained in advance. They expect a ready-made operative approach and tools prepared beforehand, while totally rejecting any reliance on improvisation and “management on the fly.”

This line of thinking betrays a basic misunderstanding. The operation of modern systems in routine times does indeed require centralized, organized, and systematic management—but a multidimensional surprise disaster calls for rapid, holistic adjustment to an unprecedented situation. The impulse to fall back on a familiar, preexisting organizational format is not helpful; indeed, it is the main obstacle to proper adjustment to a brand new scenario.

The evacuation of the British army from Dunkirk at the end of May 1940 by thousands of civilian boats and civilian volunteers was entirely improvised. It was part of Winston Churchill’s creative adjustment to dire circumstances that none of his military commanders foresaw. Devotees of advance preparation would turn such an event into an organizational lesson in institutional preparedness for the next incident—so that if a need for a rapid mobilization of civilian boats ever occurred again, everything would be in place.

But it is impossible to anticipate the nature of the next emergency, which is likely to differ fundamentally from its predecessor. In times of emergency, a good leader is one who can improvise and adjust rapidly to completely unforeseeable events and make difficult decisions without a full picture.

The Talmudic sages, who thought deeply about human limitations in the face of the unpredictable and uncontrollable, worked out two patterns for the logic of leadership by distinguishing between “Messiah ben Joseph” and “Messiah ben David.” The former establishes a method, a law, and an organization (as when Joseph prepared the Egyptians for the seven lean years), while the latter breaches a fence and overturns arrangements and conventions. The former devises patterns of behavior for routine conditions while the latter adapts to the challenge of emergency by infringing the boundaries of routine.

There is a basic differentiation here between a leadership and managerial system that is appropriate to routine conditions and a leadership and managerial system that suits times of emergency. The question, then, is what system of linkages should exist between them, and which of the two should take precedence when building a conceptual infrastructure of state institutions.

### **Preparedness for an unprecedented event**

Modern humanity expects that the state’s management will be so stable during routine periods that emergencies will be handled without any

disruption. Like an off-road vehicle with shock absorbers that prevent any jolting of the passenger compartment even under rough driving conditions, the state is expected to prepare “shock absorbers” for disastrous events in advance. But this expectation is fundamentally misconceived, because an emergency scenario is likely to be unprecedented. Even a vehicle with perfect shock absorbers can be swept away by a flood.

Dr. Efraim Laor, who has researched and been personally involved in dealing with great disasters of previous decades (Chernobyl, the tsunami in Thailand, and powerful earthquakes), asserts that a mass-casualty disaster is by nature an unprecedented event that upends established systems of knowledge with regard to facts and working assumptions. Therefore, expecting decision-makers to handle such an event in accordance with standards, procedures, and concepts prepared during routine times is a sure recipe for failure.

The modern managerial approach strives to link preparations under routine conditions to emergency situations. Reality, however, reveals a gap between the two situations that cannot be logically bridged. The inability to base the whole system on a single method and a uniform pattern of managerial excellence mandates an awareness of the essential difference between those who excel in management of routine and those who excel in times of emergency. A leader who fits the bill in routine times is not necessarily one who will be effective under emergency conditions.

And therein lies the problem of the modern state, which is based primarily on the logic of routine and denies the fundamental differentness of the logic of emergency. The more the system excels in proper management under routine conditions, the less it is prepared to deal with an unprecedented emergency scenario.

Thus the coronavirus crisis calls for a fresh consideration of what can be expected from the modern state. Because the demand for assistance from state institutions is especially great in times of emergency, there is a need to reexamine the system of linkages that the state maintains in routine times and to create the necessary balance between the logic of routine and the logic of emergency.

*Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoen is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.*