



PERSPECTIVES

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Should the IDF Manage the COVID-19 Crisis?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The claim that management of the COVID-19 crisis by the IDF's Home Front Command would have resulted in a far better outcome is based on the illusion that all emergencies have a common denominator that enables organizations to prepare for and deal with them effectively. But this is a false assumption.

In times of crisis, it is natural for people and societies to put their trust in organizations that were built to deal with emergencies. But emergencies are not all the same, and can in fact set new precedents. Even when they contain familiar elements, such as collapsing buildings in an earthquake, each disaster is unique in terms of nature, scope, and intensity.

The degree of damage to vital infrastructure such as power plants, hospitals, roads, bridges, and communications largely determines the status of the event as a precedent-setting crisis. Organizations like the IDF's Home Front Command are geared toward dealing with certain disaster scenarios, but they can find themselves unprepared to handle hitherto unknown emergencies.

Even armies, for all their constant preparation for war, can be thrown dangerously off balance in the face of unprecedented developments. For example, the IDF mishandled the first year of the Palestinian intifada that broke out in December 1987. Similarly, the execution of the Gaza disengagement in the summer of 2005 necessitated six months of thorough preparation. As commander of the IDF and police forces during that operation, I can attest to the complexity of the preparations required to adapt the structure and modus operandi of forces to an unprecedented mission.

A distinction must therefore be drawn between two types of emergencies: those that are familiar and conform to the modes of preparedness and standard operating procedures (SOP) of existing emergency organizations,

and those that are unprecedented and require a brand new organizational and operational logic in the face of an unpredictable and unfamiliar situation. In such circumstances, existing emergency organizations may find themselves ill-prepared for their unique new challenge. The COVID-19 crisis is by every possible measure an unprecedented state of emergency.

Therein lies the trap attending the arrogance of the modern state, which should avoid unqualified promises to successfully manage unprecedented emergencies through routine organizational and administrative tools and SOPs. Unique disasters necessitate a brand new mindset and modus operandi.

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