

THE IDF AND THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC

SHAUL SHAY

The International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at the Reichman University, Herzliya, Israel

Abstract

The COVID-19 epidemic was a global surprise and during 2020, militaries were deployed around the world to engage in the campaign against COVID-19. These engagements took various forms.

The Israel Defense Force's experience and cooperation in large-scale national emergencies have been tested in natural disasters, security or health-related situations. The military's engagements were instrumental as well in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic due to its resources and hierarchical discipline, especially in light of its centrality in Israel.

The purpose of the article is to describe the manner and extent of the involvement of the IDF in the national fight against Corona, to examine the lessons that can be learned from this, and to answer the question of whether, even in a future crisis, the Israeli government will assign a central role in dealing with the epidemic to the IDF, or whether it would be more appropriate to strengthen the civilian bodies so that they can cope with the challenges in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, IDF, Home front command, Directorate of Military Intelligence, Vaccination, Ministry of Health

Corresponding author: Dr. Col. Res. Shaul Shay
The International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT)
Reichman University Herzliya, Israel
E-mail: sc.shaulshay@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 epidemic was a global surprise. COVID-19 entered Israel on February 21, 2020, when 11 Israelis aboard a cruise ship returned home and entered quarantine in Israel's first coronavirus ward at Sheba Medical Center. That same day, doctors discovered that one of the travelers had the virus. Then, Israel began its fight against the COVID-19 (1).

The Ministry of Health in Israel was responsible at the national level for dealing with the COVID-19 epidemic but it did not have the operative tools to manage the crisis and to enforce government policy on the matter and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was soon called upon to assist in the fight against COVID-19.

Ever since its establishment, the IDF has been involved in civilian missions. Given its logistical, technological, and operational capabilities, it was only natural that the IDF would be extensively involved in the country's

response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government declared a national state of emergency in March 2020, following the high infection rates and it was both legitimate and legal to use the IDF.

On July 23, 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed a "Corona Project Manager", whose main goal was to lead and manage the national program to fight COVID-19 by integrating professional and executive bodies. Professor Roni Gamzu took on the position of Israel's first coronavirus coordinator in late July 2020. Gamzu established Israel's coronavirus headquarters, recruited the Home Front Command, and built a system to increase testing, decentralizing it from the Central Virology Laboratory at Sheba. He also increased efforts to cut the chain of infection and helped design the protocol that enabled Israel to focus on super-spreaders instead of everyone with a positive COVID test result. He also established desks to deal with the ultra-Orthodox, Arab, and senior citizen communities and their diverse needs (1).

As part of the war against the COVID-19 epidemic, the IDF had to act on two levels at the same time:

1. To protect the soldiers from the COVID-19 epidemic in order to maintain the army's ability to fulfill its security tasks.
2. To help the various authorities of the state to fight the COVID-19 epidemic at the national level.

AIM

During 2020, militaries were deployed around the world to engage in the campaign against COVID-19. These engagements took various forms. As the comparative analysis of Stuart Cohen and Meir Elran indicated that the IDF were deployed more extensively relative to other democracies' militaries to address COVID-19 (2).

IDF's experience and cooperation in large-scale national emergencies have been tested in natural disasters, security or health-related situations. The military's engagements were instrumental as well in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic due to its resources and hierarchical discipline, especially in light of its centrality in Israel. However, problems remain concerning this deployment. For example, it should be taken into account that the IDF may be busy with its main task of protecting the State of Israel from its enemies and will not be able, under these circumstances, to allocate considerable resources to a civilian mission.

The purpose of the article is to describe the manner and extent of the involvement of the IDF in the national fight against Corona, to examine the lessons that can be learned from this, and to answer the question of whether, even in a future crisis, the Israeli government will assign a central role in dealing with the epidemic to the IDF, or whether it would be more appropriate to strengthen the civilian bodies so that they can cope with the challenges in the future.

METHODS

Methodologically, the military involvement and deployment can be seen as part of the 'securitization of COVID-19'. The concept of "securitization" was initially developed by Ole Waever to make a major contribution to the so-called "widening-deepening" debate in security studies, which had begun in the 1980s and inten-

sified with the end of the Cold War. The "widening" dimension was defined as the extension of security to issues or sectors other than the military, such as global health, the environment, or the economy (3).

Global political leaders have referred to the pandemic situation as both a threat and a war, positioning COVID-19 within a security discourse. The methods of labeling the virus as a security issue range from merely identifying COVID-19 as a threat, to declaring war. Therefore, the construction of threat justified the use of exceptional measures at both domestic and international levels. In this case, securitizing the pandemic meant that states adopted a security discourse framing COVID-19 as a high national security threat, and therefore, among other means, they deployed their armed forces (4).

The article draws on official reports (IDF website), articles, news, and policy texts from the case of Israel.

RESULTS

The central role played by the IDF in the State of Israel's fight against COVID-19 and how the decision-makers in Israel also adopted the security terminology regarding the fight against COVID-19 indicate that Israel's case study is indeed compatible with the concept of "securitization".

The IDF's efficient and quick response to these needs contributed greatly to the success of the State of Israel in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, but it must be remembered that the IDF has other missions and tasks and it should not be assumed that it will be able to contribute its capabilities and resources to civilian tasks at any time of crisis.

The key takeaway from the COVID-19 crisis is to develop a comprehensive methodology of national crisis management and to set up a new national virus protection system in order to minimize any future virus situations impacting both the national as well as civilian levels.

DISCUSSION

The efforts to protect the IDF against the COVID-19

The main task of the IDF is to protect the sovereignty of the country, the security of its residents,

and its strategic interests. Therefore, the IDF had to protect its forces from the COVID-19 epidemic to maintain the army's ability to fulfill its missions.

It could be expected that when the entire world is dealing with an epidemic, the terrorist organizations will refrain from carrying out attacks, however, the Palestinian terrorist organizations did not stop the attacks against Israel and the IDF had to respond to the terrorist threats during this period.

In 2020 Hamas and other terrorist groups including the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) launched rockets from Gaza toward Israel, some of which landed in civilian areas. According to the IDF the "Iron Dome", Israel's air defense system, intercepted many of the rockets. The West Bank saw 60 terror attacks in 2020, up from 51 in 2019.

The IDF's priorities were clearly defined - above all, to maintain IDF's operational readiness to protect Israel (5). The IDF has implemented the following essential policies to limit the spread of COVID-19 and maintain its operational capabilities (6):

Any soldier suspected of coming into contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 was placed in a 14-day home quarantine.

All meetings in the IDF were limited to 10 people, gatherings in closed spaces were limited to 50 people, and gatherings in open spaces were limited to 100.

All soldiers were expected to maintain a distance of at least 2 meters from one another.

All soldiers were required to wear masks in all civilian and military situations.

Units reduced the sizes of shifts as much as possible, including gatherings and meetings.

Commanding officers were strictly separated into two shifts.

Since March 2020, the IDF operated an alternative transport system for military personnel. In order to maintain maximum operational capacity, 260 buses drove between bases across the country Sundays through Thursdays and followed strict guidelines to ensure the health of the soldiers aboard (7).

The vaccination of the IDF soldiers

The Israeli government realized at an early stage of the epidemic that the solution would be found in vaccinating the people and the IDF was the priority. The highlight of Israel's successful efforts came at the end of December 2020, when it managed to secure enough Pfizer vaccines for all citizens and then inoculate them in only months.

Israel launched its COVID-19 vaccination campaign on December 20th, but preparations for it began months earlier. Throughout 2020, Israel signed vaccine purchase contracts with several pharmaceutical companies at the forefront of COVID-19 vaccine development (8).

The purpose of the IDF's vaccination campaign was to vaccinate all military personnel in the shortest amount of time from the moment Israel received its first doses and to carry out the campaign in an efficient, safe, and professional manner.

All IDF service members received the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, administered by staff from the IDF Medical Corps who trained at the School of Military Medicine under the supervision of certified nurses. Vaccines were available across 22 complexes throughout the country in order for each unit to have access to its nearest compound.

In March 2021, with 83% of IDF soldiers vaccinated and zero IDF deaths from COVID-19, the IDF reached its goal as the first military and the largest organization in the world to be vaccinated against COVID-19 (9).

The IDF supports civilian authorities in fighting the COVID-19 epidemic

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, the IDF has been the leading force in the battle against the virus in Israel. The IDF successfully fulfilled a wide variety of tasks that should have been carried out by other ministries and organizations of the Israeli government.

The Home Front Command

Much of the military support was provided or coordinated by the Home Front Command (HFC), the arm of the IDF specializing in civilian protection, usually in

times of conflict, and experienced in cooperating with local authorities.

HFC provided logistical support to civilian authorities that supplied aid to the civilian population, such as food, medication, and essential services to the elderly.

Throughout the pandemic, the IDF has managed and facilitated the use of six hotels across the country to host COVID-19 patients who display only mild symptoms of the virus. Of these hotels, four hosted people who have tested positive for the virus, and two hosted quarantined civilians (6). The HFC has also been operating several COVID-19 “drive-through” testing locations across the country, making testing more accessible for civilians, in addition to initially being charged with operating hotels for recovering COVID-19 patients who did not require medical support (10). At the end of March 2020, the Israeli government decided to allocate 1,400 soldiers of the HFC to assist the police in enforcing lockdowns and maintaining public order (11).

In July 2020, when it became apparent that the Ministry of Health was unable to operate an effective system of epidemiological investigations, the HFC was charged with the task and established the “Alon” (Oak) Coronavirus Command Center, as well as the “Ella” (Terebinth) Unit. The latter uses a special digital system, developed by the IDF’s SIGINT Agency, Unit 8200, and the Cyber Defense Directorate.

On September 21, 2020, Israeli Minister of Defense Benny Gantz together with Chief of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi approved the establishment of the “Ella” Unit for Epidemiological Investigation. Approximately 600 soldiers and dozens of reservists were allocated to the unit to help reinforce and extend the epidemiological investigation efforts under the command of the “Alon” Task Force of the Home Front Command (12).

During 2021 these units performed 706,271 investigations, carried out 13,540,000 PCR tests, and operated 28 hotels for quarantine purposes. In no other democracy have the armed forces been tasked with similar missions (13).

In the field of public information, the HFC operated a call center that provided guidelines and other necessary information regarding COVID-19 for civilians, and its troops distributed leaflets in several languages (in Arabic, Russian, and Amharic as well as Hebrew and

English), explaining the significance of complying with the government instructions (14).

The Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI)

The involvement of the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) in the COVID-19 crisis was multidimensional (15). Conscripts and some reservists from Israel’s elite 8200 intelligence unit, and the high-level technological Unit 81, have been engaged to help find solutions to some of the tremendous medical challenges posed by COVID-19.

The DMI’s technological unit created information management software for the coronavirus testing labs and conducted epidemiological analysis of COVID-19 patients to determine hotspots where the infection spread in order to help the local authorities focus their efforts on preventing the disease from spreading in their vicinity.

Additionally, the DMI established the National Information and Knowledge Center for the Fight against COVID-19. The central task of the center was to analyze the spread of the virus and identify risks and opportunities, in addition to providing governmental organizations with data analysis, global information, and recommendations to assist policy formulation. The center was headed by an officer with the rank of colonel and included a team of officers and soldiers of the technological arena of the research division at the DMI. During its activity, the center published 748 reports on various topics, including reports on the level of morbidity about the means and capabilities available to the state.

The technological unit of DMI, known as Unit 81, was responsible for designing sophisticated gadgets, such as monitors for remote control operations, personal protection gear, and designated ambulances.

The unit has worked with the Ministry of Health, Magen David Adom—Israel’s Emergency Medical Services—and hospitals across the nation to find innovative solutions to some of the medical challenges Israel has faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unit 81 has adapted thousands of BiPAP home ventilation devices into ventilators for COVID-19 patients in Sheba Hospital and manufactured up to 1,000 protective masks a day for military and civilian medical teams to counter the shortage of masks in Israel. The unit also developed special shields and sepa-

rate air conditioning systems in approximately 50 ambulances, to enable drivers to evacuate COVID-19 patients without endangering themselves (16).

The DMI's secret units were also called to support the crisis response. In April 2020, The Israeli Navy Marine Commando Unit, Shayetet 13, developed a solution to increase limited oxygen supplies for civilians. The unit has converted an operational production line into a medical oxygen compressing system that follows required health protocols (16).

The IDF Medical Corps

The main mission of the IDF Medical Corps was to maintain the health of the army, but despite the burden on the IDF medical system, it also helped the civilian system.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Rambam Hospital in Haifa, the IDF established two hospital wards dedicated to treating patients with moderate symptoms of COVID-19. This was the first time in history that the IDF was formally tasked with providing medical care for Israeli civilians. Dozens of patients were treated by personnel from the IDF Medical Corps (14).

The IDF played an important role in vaccinating the Israeli public by utilizing military doctors and nurses. The HFC also has been tasked with the mission of coordinating vaccination campaigns in schools and vaccination sites in local authorities, to make the vaccines as accessible as possible to the Israeli public.

Assistance to special communities

Israel is a small country but holds great demographic and geographic diversity. Therefore, every region, town, and municipality faced very different battles in the fight against COVID-19.

The support to ultra-orthodox Jewish populations

Soldiers from elite combat reconnaissance units have been deployed to the ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak, which the government has declared a "restricted zone".

This step was taken after unsuccessful efforts to make its residents comply with the nationwide shelter-at-home and social distancing regulations, which have caused the city, one of the most densely populated in Israel, to become a major hot spot for COVID-19.

In Bnei Brak, soldiers were helping evacuate the elderly into hotels facilitated and managed by the IDF and provided additional assistance such as distributing food and medication and providing welfare and logistical assistance (11).

The support to the Israeli Arab population

To help Israeli Muslims prepare for the month of Ramadan, the IDF Home Front Command has launched a public awareness campaign in Arabic to provide instructions to the Israeli Muslim public on how to celebrate Ramadan while adhering to medical guidelines. Arabic-speaking reservists have assisted in various Israeli Arab municipalities across the country (11). The IDF also delivered food and essential supplies to Muslim families across the country.

The IDF has worked closely with the Ministry of Health and Bedouin community leaders to initiate a variety of efforts to assist the Bedouin community in fighting the virus. The efforts included sending information via text messages, providing informational pamphlets, visiting homes and mosques, giving appropriate guidance to hospitals, and transferring sick patients from authorities to designated recovery hotels (14).

The IDF's support to Palestinians in Gaza and Judea in Samaria

The Palestinian Authority was responsible for the health and health care of Palestinian residents of Gaza and the West Bank. This included responsibility for providing vaccinations against COVID-19. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the IDF Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) cooperated with the Palestinian Authority to facilitate the transfer of critical medical equipment to Palestinians in Judea Samaria and Gaza (15).

In addition to the thousands of COVID-19 test kits and PPE gear that have been transferred into the Palestinian territories, COGAT has also coordinated joint medi-

cal workshops and online tutorials for Palestinian and Israeli medical personnel (6).

Although the Gaza Strip is controlled by the terrorist organization Hamas, which strives to destroy the State of Israel, the IDF allowed the COVID-19 epidemic the transfer of humanitarian aid and medical equipment to the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip. The IDF worked closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) to deliver essential supplies—including testing kits, PPEs, disinfectant materials, lab equipment, fuel and food—into Gaza.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Lessons learned from three years of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country should ensure Israel is more prepared for the next public health emergency, whatever that may be, said COVID-19 coordinator Prof. Salman Zarka. “We need to formalize the processes we developed for managing COVID-19, so we can roll them out again,” he said (1).

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, the IDF has been the leading force in the battle against the virus in Israel. The IDF successfully fulfilled a wide variety of tasks that should have been carried out by other ministries and organizations of the Israeli government.

The central role played by the IDF in the State of Israel’s fight against COVID-19 and how the decision-makers in Israel also adopted the security terminology regarding the fight against COVID-19 indicate that Israel’s case study is indeed compatible with the concept of “securitization”.

The IDF’s efficient and quick response to these needs contributed greatly to the success of the State of Israel in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, but it must be remembered that the IDF has other missions and tasks and it should not be assumed that it will be able to contribute its capabilities and resources to civilian tasks at any time of crisis.

The Home Front Command is the only entity in the IDF whose main mission is to assist the civilian sector during war, and therefore this entity will be able to fulfill the tasks it performed during the COVID-19 epidemic in the future if required.

The key takeaway from the COVID-19 crisis is to

develop a comprehensive methodology of national crisis management and to set up a new national virus protection system in order to minimize any future virus situations impacting both the national as well as civilian levels.

The government should take all necessary steps to develop the bodies and operational methods to deal with national crisis situations such as the COVID-19 crisis and make sure that the system that will be built will maintain its ability to respond to unexpected challenges in the future.

A transition plan needs to be in place for moving from “routine” to “emergency” mode of decision-making and government operations and following successful virus containment to restore routine life as soon as possible. This includes the establishment of an ad-hoc cabinet to manage the crisis, aided by a dedicated operations headquarters.

The establishment of ad-hoc intelligence capabilities in the Ministry of Health is needed. Just as in military conflict, it is vital to gather and analyze all information available to deal with the crisis, in conditions of great uncertainty. This is the situation always faced by intelligence services.

The Ministry of Health has stated that “as part of learning lessons from the COVID-19 epidemic it was decided to establish a National Information and Knowledge Center in the Ministry of Health that will assist in research and gathering relevant information for warning and dealing with national health crises, and replace the DMI’s Information and Knowledge Center.

The crisis ought to be managed 24/7 from a central operations room or command headquarters, headed by a prominent official such as the head of the National Security Council. This will best coordinate the activities of all relevant agencies. An advisory board should operate alongside this headquarters, tasked with thinking ahead and preventing the tendency to deal mainly with urgent matters rather than with the most important issues.

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S A Ž E T A K

IDF I EPIDEMIJA COVID-19

SHAUL SHAY

Međunarodni institut za politiku suzbijanja terorizma, Sveučilište Reichman, Herzliya, Izrael

Epidemija COVID-19 bila je globalno iznenađenje, a tijekom 2020. godine vojske su bile angažirane diljem svijeta u borbi protiv COVID-19. Ti angažmani su se odvijali u različitim oblicima. Iskustvo i suradnja Izraelskih obrambenih snaga (IDF) u situacijama velikih nacionalnih izvanrednih stanja testirani su u prirodnim katastrofama, sigurnosnim i zdravstvenim krizama. Vojni angažman pokazao se ključnim i u suočavanju s pandemijom COVID-19 zahvaljujući svojim resursima i hijerarhijskoj disciplini, osobito s obzirom na središnju ulogu IDF-a u izraelskom društvu. Cilj ovog članka je opisati način i opseg uključenosti IDF-a u nacionalnu borbu protiv koronavirusa, ispitati koje se pouke mogu izvući iz tog iskustva te odgovoriti na pitanje hoće li izraelska vlada i u budućim krizama IDF-u dodijeliti središnju ulogu u upravljanju epidemijama ili bi bilo prikladnije jačati civilne institucije kako bi mogle samostalno odgovarati na buduće izazove.

Ključne riječi: COVID-19, IDF, Zapovjedništvo domovinske obrane, Uprava vojne obavještajne službe, cijepljenje, Ministarstvo zdravstva

Autor za korespondenciju: dr. pukovnik u pričuvi Shaul Shay
Međunarodni institut za politiku suzbijanja terorizma (ICT)
Sveučilište Reichman, Herzliya, Izrael
E-mail: sc.shaulshay@gmail.com