The State of Israel's Information and Knowledge Needs in Civil Fields of Interest

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During the COVID-19 crisis, the State of Israel experienced a precedent-setting event, a national emergency that stemmed from a civil crisis, rather than a security or military one. One of the crisis's key characteristics was the issue of obtaining the information and knowledge needed to be able to contend with the situation. This included both data detailing what was happening domestically in Israel, but also data pertaining to what was occurring in the rest of the world: starting with acquiring data warning of COVID-19 outbreaks in other parts of the world and the virus' characteristics, and translating that data into strategic alerts; through information regarding the strategies adopted by different countries and international bodies to combat the virus, which helped shape the right strategy for Israel; as well as "tactical" learning from others regarding the effectiveness of certain tests and designated equipment, and options to procure them from around the world.[2]

The coronavirus pandemic is a clear example of the need for information and knowledge in the civil sphere regarding what is happening outside of Israel. This information is broadly relevant to national security, beyond the security-military level, and is needed for decision-makers to shape policy. It is easy for those working in the field of intelligence to find similarities between these information needs and those that the intelligence establishment provides on a regular basis as part of its security operations. It is no coincidence then that the intelligence community mobilized to help the health system with various aspects of information gathering, analysis and processing, and utilizing its advanced capabilities in these fields.[3]

In terms of scope, the mobilization of the intelligence community was impressive. So too was the speed at which necessary adjustments were made from military- and security-related research to civil- and health-related research, as well as the quality of outcomes that helped with crisis management decisions. However, this positive outcome also points to a

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[2] An example of a list of issues for intelligence clarification in the context of dealing with COVID-19 can be found in an article by Maj. Gen. (Res.) Giora Eiland, April 5, 2020, "Lessons to be Learned: Israel's Handling of the Coronavirus Crisis" at : https://jiss.org.il/en/eiland-israels-handling-of-the-coronavirus-crisis/. For details on the information outcomes of crisis management see publications (in Hebrew) on the website of the National Data and Information Center for the War on COVID-19, https://bit.ly/2WJ3GLj, by members of the intelligence community, and publications prepared by the Ministry of Intelligence as part of the campaign against the COVID-19 pandemic, prepared in part in response to special requests from various government ministries: https://bit.ly/2X2nVlY.

[3] Zeitun, Yoav, April 1, 2020, [in Hebrew]: "The Intelligence Directorate's Shadow War Against COVID: Gathering, Researching and Decoding Information", https://bit.ly/2TgC7Xm, ynet.co.il; Limor, Yoav, March 27 2020: "Intelligence Directorate Enlisted to Fight the Coronavirus", Israel Today (in Hebrew). https://bit.ly/369jJV.

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negative conclusion, in that the intelligence establishment's assistance during the crisis indicates a lack of adequate engagement in civil issues at the national level during periods of calm.[4]

While the intelligence community is engaged in various civil issues, especially in the fields of economics and, to some extent, global health, its scope is limited. Furthermore, it should be noted that over the last two or three years, the Ministry of Intelligence has attempted to identify and analyze global trends and investigate regional civil issues. In this context, it established an organizational framework that integrates intelligence and security bodies with civilian government ministries, as well as a laboratory to develop advanced technology, with the goal of extracting big data in order to identify new global trends. However, it is evident that the intelligence needs in the national-civil field are more numerous and broader than the response currently provided by the Ministry of Intelligence, and are not statutorily established.

Pointing out the disparity in this issue is nothing new. According to D. Siman-Tov and N. Alon, "Almost from the outset, the intelligence community has focused on security issues. The Intelligence Directorate, which had previously been considered the 'national assessor,' is part of the IDF and is therefore naturally focused on issues that interest the army. A central body like the Mossad, which in the past also dealt with civil issues, has in recent decades exclusively placed security issues at the heart of its work." As a result, the authors wonder, "Has the State of Israel been under an existential threat? In recent decades that necessitated a single-minded focus on the fields of security and policy, or in light of changes in the strategic global environment, is it time to rethink the role of the country's intelligence community?"[5]

In this article, I argue that the problem has worsened. **The coronavirus crisis has dramatically illustrated the widening disparity between the needs of the political echelon for information on civil strategic issues, above and beyond the security and military elements, and the ability of the intelligence establishment to meet those needs.**

This disparity is the result of two trends. On the one hand, the changing reality over recent decades towards an era marked by globalization, an explosion of information and disruptive trends has led to the expansion of the political echelon's need for information about a broader range of countries than in the past (both globally and regionally), including with regard to civil issues. On the other hand, the intelligence community is becoming increasingly focused on operative and operational intelligence designed to serve its counterterrorism needs, military operations between wars, covert operations and operational readiness, all in five main arenas (Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and Judea and Samaria).

The growing focus of the intelligence community on the operational field is necessary given the culture of operative threats, and the increasing complexity and changing

[4] Melman, Yossi, April 7, 2020: "An Epidemic? If It's Not War or Terrorism, It's Not 'National Security'", *Haaretz* (in Hebrew). https://bit.ly/36dquFV.

[5] Siman-Tov, D. and N. Alon, February 2018, "Should the Intelligence Contribution be Limited to Security Matters?" Journal of the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center, 80, 24-25 (in Hebrew).

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characteristics of warfare (emphasizing accuracy and the disappearance of enemies, which require more intelligence input by the military intelligence echelon), and also meets the political echelon's demands. However, the political echelon also needs additional, thorough and high-quality information on the non-security aspects of national security.

For simplicity's sake, I will artificially divide the fields of information into three separate worlds of content: information pertaining to the Middle East, information pertaining to the international arena and information pertaining to long-term trends.

Intelligence in the International Arena

The world order is experiencing changes and upheavals, with international relations becoming more complicated and dynamic, and the direct and indirect repercussions on Israel are becoming much harder to identify and understand. The potential global changes in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis are likely to deepen the transformation and complexity of our global reality. Identifying trends in these areas in a timely fashion, and applying systematic, in-depth and integrated research analysis, can help improve decision making. For example:

A. The increasing competition for power between China and the United States creates a series of challenges for countries caught in the middle, including Israel: i.e. the issue of cooperation between Israel and China on technology and innovation; or China's efforts to penetrate Israel's economy and lead economic projects of national importance. The question arises as to whether a more in-depth engagement with China could have shown Israeli decision-makers the implications of civil engagements with China earlier, including the consequences of those ties on Israel's relations with the United States.
B. The regional and global preoccupation with energy issues is continuously on the rise. In recent years, Israel has become a player in this market. Information on the intentions and moves of other players could have given Israel an advantage to better deal with the energy market.
C. Cyber warfare and disinformation have become an integral and inseparable part of world politics, especially with regard to incidents of economic espionage and attacks on systems which influence public awareness and democratic processes. An in-depth and comprehensive intelligence response in the fields of cyber and social media could help jumpstart a comprehensive national response to this challenge, one which goes well beyond the tactical defensive positions of the various cybersecurity bodies. This kind of attention could, for example, systematically spotlight ideas, phenomena and trends in the digital world that have the potential to pose risks to or present opportunities for Israel.

Intelligence Concerning Super-Trends

In addition to acquiring up-to-date intelligence to better understand international relations, it is also important for identifying super-trends and the variabilities derived from these

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trends, and consolidating them. These trends already play a role and are likely to profoundly affect the international system and Israel in the long term as well.

The COVID-19 crisis has sharply illustrated the need for more information on global health issues, such as new pandemics and contending with them. However, the range of civil issues that can affect national security is far greater. Some of these issues are related to new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, big data in the Internet of Things era, quantum computing and more. The competition for control of these new technologies has become an important component of the fight between the superpowers for national power. Other issues include environmental and climate issues, such as urbanization, desertification or food security, which hold weighty implications for the economic and social reality of the country in the medium- and long-term.

The data on these issues is relevant for building national strength and making crucial decisions on issues such as national investment in science and technology; prioritizing certain industries over others; securing resources for existence, such as food and energy; or investing in preparedness for extreme scenarios like natural disasters.

Super-trends

Information on the Middle East

For over a decade, upheaval in the region has led to considerable changes, including geo-strategic changes, with no end in sight. This upheaval has led to a sharp rise in concern by pro-Western Sunni regimes for their own stability, both because of Iran and Global Jihad, but also for domestic reasons. **These circumstances have created a precedent-setting change in Israel's regional status, making it an asset for some of the region's countries, and making cooperation more attractive.**

Iran and Global Jihad pose a common threat to these countries and to Israel, which in turn creates the potential for shared interests that will be transformed into joint cooperation, especially since Israel is perceived to have assets in three main areas. They are civilian technology, which can help address domestic challenges in many countries in the region (for example, Israel's advanced desalinization and agriculture capabilities); Israel's intelligence, military and counterterrorism capabilities, which can assist with external threats; and Israel's special relationship with the United States, which other countries believe will help them open doors in Washington.

These potential areas of cooperation create many opportunities for Israel, such as defense and civilian exportation, alongside advancing diplomatic achievements, such as eroding opposition to normalization of Arab states with Israel, weakening the strength of the challenges Israel faces in international arenas, and more.

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It is sufficient to simply look at the public reporting[6] from recent years about political and business contacts between parties in Israel and Arab countries to understand the potential that exists. It can be assumed that further work is being conducted under the media radar.

The coronavirus crisis, which hurt other countries in the Middle East, may contribute to deepening this trend. This illumination of risks may contribute to further eroding any reservations concerning relations with Israel, with the goal of benefiting from cooperation with Israel. Moreover, it may generate an awareness of the necessity for jointly tackling regional challenges, such as the pandemic, which are indifferent to the rifts between various powers in the region.

In other words, **in recent years, Israel went from being a spectator on the sidelines of the region to becoming an active player on the field, and this trend is expected to continue**. To use military language, for the political echelon of Israel, the Middle East has transformed from an area of interest to an area of responsibility and influence.

In Israel's national security concept, intelligence is given greater weight as a means to increase its strength, giving Israel the power to capitalize on opportunities and reduce risks when using force. In the Middle East's new reality, and given the opportunities this reality presents to exert diplomatic power, the intelligence community needs to provide the political echelon with more meaningful and abundant information to help it to meet its goals in these fields. Such information can help identify large-scale business opportunities for Israel; assist when negotiating with countries in the region and help solve diplomatic disputes that may arise as a result; recognize regional moves that could potentially affect Israel, either directly or indirectly, and prepare for them in advance; and more. Existing and potential data in this field is not currently being fully utilized for diplomatic and economic action at the national level.

Discussion

The following discussion of these three worlds of content is intended to illustrate the main argument of this article: **National security in our current era significantly exceeds the political-security aspect and should be interpreted in a variety of other areas that are civil in nature**. These areas also require as broad, systematic and reliable a base of information and knowledge regarding the external environment as possible, as well as of the parties operating therein, as essential input for the decision-making process at the national level. Therefore, **the COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity to reexamine the role of intelligence at the national level, including the question of its connection to and responsibility for civil worlds of content.**

[6] For example, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Oman; Minister of Culture Miri Regev's visit to Abu Dhabi in 2018; Foreign Minister Israel Katz's visit to Abu Dhabi in 2019; and a permit granted in 2020 to Israeli citizens to fly to Saudi Arabia for business purposes. Alon, A. and Eichner, A., January 26, 2020 [in Hebrew]. "For the First Time: Israel Will Allow Citizens to Fly to Saudi Arabia", Calcalist. https://bit.ly/2X54SaB.

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Itai Baron, former head of the Israel Defense Forces' Intelligence Directorate, articulated the accepted definitions of the national intelligence concept in an up-to-date and concise manner: “National intelligence is intended for the political echelon operating at the level of major strategy (prime minister, minister of defense and the security cabinet). This is the intelligence required to formulate the national security concept and shape Israeli policy in various arenas. It includes an analysis of Israel's strategic environment and of the logic that governs the high-level strategic actions of its various enemies. The analysis should point out areas of potential development, while emphasizing the threats and opportunities in the political and security spheres."[7]

This definition illustrates the gap between the national intelligence framework as it is understood and realized today and the political echelon’s need for current information and knowledge on what is happening outside the State of Israel in order to improve the country’s national situation assessment and multi-year national planning. **I would like to point out two possible alternatives for bridging this gap in terms of the intelligence community’s purview—a narrow alternative and an expansive one.**

According to the expansive alternative, the intelligence community should be given complete responsibility for all aspects of information and knowledge concerning the happenings outside of Israel. This would include areas outside of policy and security, such as science and technology, the economy, energy, health, ecological change and other environmental issues, and more.

Arguments in favor of this alternative may be based on an adherence to the definition of the intelligence community as a national assessor and the fact that information and knowledge on issues related to external factors outside of Israel, which are required in the context of national security, are involved. In addition, the intelligence community has a stark advantage over other institutions in the country in terms of its capability to methodically collect, process, research and access data in terms of advanced technologies and methodologies, as well as being connected to contexts applicable to national security. There are also institutional considerations that support this alternative, tied to the intelligence community's positive image, the attention it receives from the political echelon and its ability to influence decision making. In addition, the national character of the Israeli intelligence community ensures continuity that is less sensitive to the frequent political changes typical of a democratic system.

It is clear that this alternative will require a revolution in the intelligence community, so that it can adapt itself to the many complex areas of responsibility. This dramatic expansion of the intelligence community’s boundaries will require a change in its internal composition. It will also require the establishment of new areas of research and collection. Research and analysis bodies that operate in various government ministries and other executive bodies will need to be added, and the process of integrating everything into a unified national assessment will have to be redefined.

[7] Baron, I., 2015 [in Hebrew] "Intelligence Analysis: Understanding Reality in an Era of Dramatic Changes", Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center. Page 48. https://bit.ly/2XavO9b.

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Under the narrow alternative, the intelligence community must adhere to its current framework—in effect, its responsibility for information and knowledge in the areas of policy and security. Its work will be integrated as just one component of the information collection and research components at the national level. The overall responsibility for these various components and their integration into a unified national assessment will be the purview of a national body or mechanism that would need to be established to this end.

This alternative can also be reinforced by the fact that civil worlds of content required at the national level are not the main focus of intelligence organizations and are not its main areas of expertise. It is not at all clear that intelligence organizations have the ability to make the necessary adjustments in order to specialize in and deal extensively with these issues, which include an extensive range of complex issues that require a high degree of research specialization, such as the economy, medicine, epidemiology, ecology, and others. This does not even take into consideration the subspecialties in each respective field. In addition, the "command distance" between intelligence organizations and the consumers needing information calls into question intelligence organizations' ability to fully understand the spheres of activity in these fields and their informational needs. The command distance also makes it structurally difficult for intelligence organizations to influence and intervene in the planning and decision-making processes of civilian government ministries. In addition to these challenges, the limited resources and attention spans of the heads of the intelligence community challenge the ability of intelligence organizations to meet their existing goals and forces them to focus even more on tackling the military challenges faced by Israel. As a result, the core goals of the intelligence community in its current construct will not remain intact if there is a dramatic expansion in its fields of responsibility, or alternatively, its new goals will not receive the required attention.

It is worth emphasizing that the narrow alternative does not nullify the intelligence community's need to closely examine its involvement in civil areas of national importance and its interactions with other national information and knowledge bodies. Firstly, the intelligence community needs to explore how it can be more helpful as the provider of unique information in these areas. This information obviously includes classified information produced by the intelligence community. It is worth examining whether or not the intelligence community makes good use of the classified information it has gathered on these issues and whether its procedures for passing it to national-civil bodies are optimal, or if there are barriers that can be removed, or at the very least reduced. These include barriers that are the result of a lack of attention to the issue at hand, a culture of compartmentalization, gaps in identifying needs, or others.

In my opinion, a more important way the intelligence community can assist is by utilizing open information in service to civil and national issues. In recent decades, the information explosion has completely eroded the monopoly that intelligence organizations once had on open information that dealt with the "other side" and external environments. The extensive scope of information, as well as its availability and accessibility in the palm of anyone's hand, including the ability to automatically translate almost any text in any language, seemingly made redundant the need for an organization to act as an intermediary for information

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(whether in obtaining, translating or processing it). However, the flow of open information has reached such dimensions that it is already close to impossible to keep up with the flow , separate the wheat from the chaff and process the ocean of information into a clear and relevant picture without professional mediation. The intelligence community has the opportunity to "reclaim" open information, to design and develop advanced concepts and new technologies for handling this information and to use it to create a deep and comprehensive knowledge of research subjects.[8]

Finally, the COVID-19 crisis has uncovered another channel in which the intelligence community can make a significant contribution to the development of all aspects of information and knowledge at the national level. The involvement of the Military Intelligence Directorate in this area (as part of the National Data and Information Center for the War on COVID-19) exposed, according to media reports, the intelligence personnel involved to the gaps between the capabilities to which they were accustomed in their intelligence work and the capabilities they saw in the field.[9] In Israel, the intelligence community is at the forefront of information technology in relation to the public sector. Perhaps one of the important outcomes of the COVID-19 crisis is the opportunity created for the intelligence community to fully utilize its technologically, perceptually and organizationally advanced capabilities in service to the effort needed for Israel's digital transformation. This assistance can range from involvement in the Digital Israel project to providing specialized assistance to the various research units in government bodies to develop their capabilities in the fields of data science and data analytics.

Of course, in addition to the intelligence community's contribution to various governmental agencies, it will in turn be able to leverage the closer interfaces with the other national information- and knowledge-producing bodies to deepen its understanding of the impact of civil areas on the security responsibilities under its purview and develop its long-term analysis capabilities.

Conclusion

In an article published in the wake of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic by former senior members of the American intelligence community, Glenn Gerstell and Michael Morel[10] pointed out the need for change in the American intelligence community:

"First, our intelligence community must adopt a broader definition of national security that reflects the United States' true vulnerabilities […] the consequences of non-military and political threats—such as economic, health or climate disruptions—are significant and must be assigned a high priority. The public health crisis and devastating economic shutdown from

[8] There seems to be a deep understanding in the American intelligence community of the great importance that exists today regarding the advanced utilization of open information. However, there is still a considerable gap between the need and the opportunity that exist in this area and the existing technological ability of the intelligence community to utilize open information. Gazis, O., September 4, 2019. Intelligence Matters [Audio podcast]. https://cbsn.ws/3fYD1S4.

[9] Zeitun, Yoav, April 1, 2020, [in Hebrew]: "The Intelligence Directorate's Shadow War Against COVID: Gathering, Researching and Decoding Information", https://bit.ly/2TgC7Xm, ynet.co.il.

[10] Gerstel served as a senior adviser in the NSA, and Morel served as deputy head of the CIA.

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COVID-19 are proof that our national well-being relies on more than what have traditionally been considered national security issues.

[…] This leads to the second needed change: Our spy agencies must rely more on gleaning insights from ever-increasing amounts of publicly available information. […] As the scope of national security is broadened, we must recognize that information about the economy, health, supply chains and other public activities is far more likely to come from open sources than clandestine ones. Technology has made enormous amounts of meaningful information instantly available. Open-source information cannot wholly displace clandestine information-gathering but can deeply enrich it."[11]

Characteristics of the current era include a sharp increase in the diversity and complexity of the worlds of content that leaders and senior officials at the national level are required to address. Different civil issues are growing in importance, thereby eroding the exclusivity of the security-military issue at the top of the list of national security priorities. In recent years, this insight has become clearer, but it seems that the global crisis following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has made it possible, and perhaps even essential, to place the issue on the agenda of decision makers.

In civil matters, just as in any other subject, controlling information and knowledge can provide the political echelon with a force multiplier to reduce mistakes in decision making and contain risks at the national level. It can also provide a "business advantage" that can help pinpoint opportunities and increase national power. However, the intelligence community has not yet provided a satisfactory solution to the growing need for information and knowledge pertaining to civil matters that stand at the center of national interest, even as it faces a long list of weighty tasks and growing challenges in other operational and operative worlds of content.

In light of the above, an in-depth and comprehensive clarification of the intelligence concept at the national level (missions, objectives, architecture of processes and organizational structures) is clearly needed at this time, one that takes into account the growing need to address civil issues that go beyond classic intelligence activities. The aim is to make it possible for Israel to fully utilize its intelligence and technological capabilities, and that of its high-quality intelligence bodies, in the service of the overall national good.

[11] Morell, M., & Gerstell, G. S. (2020, April 7). "Four ways U.S. intelligence efforts should change in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic" Retrieved April 30, 2020, from https://wapo.st/2Lz6Gn4.

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