

Between National Habitus and State Actions: The Political Response to Covid-19

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Di Alon Helled, Università degli Studi di Firenze

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Introduction

Israeli society has been accustomed to the state of emergency since its independence in 1948. The so-called Emergency Command (paragraph.9) in the Order of Government State Decree (19 May 1948) has been renewed, ever since, in accordance with the later legislated Basic Law: The Government (1968). The decree provides the legal basis for government action in taking extraordinary measures, even when individual rights are reduced and without any juridical classification of the emergency to face. Naturally, such measures have often be taken by the Israeli state vis-à-vis the multiple forms of the ongoing geopolitical conflicts with the Palestinians, Hezbollah, Iran etc. Armed forces operations are usually justified by government decisions to act on the grounds of national security imperatives. Due to those long-term geopolitical circumstances, Israel has developed what can be referred to a “habitus of national resilience” intimately linked to the state as the utmost survival unit. The Israeli state has thus become the central stakeholder in policy-making processes in times of crisis, as government's rapid, yet sometimes controversial, emergent measures, seems natural and widely accepted, taken for granted by most Israelis. Such an enactment of government action is reflected by the ongoing emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Coronavirus has entered the public Israeli sphere and activated citizenry to fight a silent frontless war whose frontline still remains undefinable. The paper seeks to shed some light upon this *modus operandi*, its logics and structural reasons, while it contextualizes some of the key events and

happenings in Israel during the first wave of contagion. In order to do so, the paper commences with a short definition of habitus, survival unit and national resilience, based on existent literature, to better categorize the Israeli case. The analysis is then followed by a section dedicated to the process-tracing of key decision-making moments and actions pushed forward by Israeli decision makers. The paper ends with evaluation and hypothesis regarding Israel's strategy to face the ongoing sanitary threat and possible shift in Israeli politics.

The conceptualization of Israeli national Resilience

Israel's sociopolitical order is intimately connected with the centrality of the state as a nonpartisan stakeholder, according to the model of Israeli secular statism, better known as *Mamlakhtiyut*¹. The latter aimed at creating a national polity with no partisan ideological specificities (which does not mean any lesser institutional activism): a civic-consociational republic, which rendered the Israeli Jewish nation-state the only stakeholder of the *res publica*. As such, it delineated the rite and form of the sovereign Israeli nation-state in its daily presentability, solemnity and honourability. The approach centered on the behaviour of officeholders whose role was to represent the national system, as well as to socialize into it all citizens, -including the minority of 1948 Palestinians who became Israeli citizens after having lived under restrictive martial law, 1949-1966². Together with the legal and decisional ability to act in front of the everlasting state of emergency (the automatically renewed Emergency Order), Israel's nation-state-building is a perfect example of a consolidated national habitus.

The concept, deriving from the Aristotelian philosophical term *hexis* (ἕξις: “state”, “disposition”), denotes the creation and interiorization of behavioral norms, patterns and identity-defining elements by individuals who are socialized by a specific collectivity, as such the former become an intermediate structure bridging the psychological and social spheres (the concept is especially relevant in Bourdieu and Elias). Moreover, the habitus presents features of automaticity; “second nature” Hegelian qualities that interpersonal relations, entailing not only a sense of belonging and social cohesion but also the readiness to act together as an organic unit. The inherent primacy of the state, -anchored either to “power-ratios”

¹ Hebrew-English dictionaries usually translate the term as "statehood" or "sovereignty" with the adjectival form *mamlakhti* rendered as "officially of the state" [institutional or public, as in *mamlakhti* education]. The term was coined by Ben-Gurion himself from the Hebrew radix m-l-kh (the basic letters from which the verb "to reign" is composed. The term thus epitomized both the biblical and messianic idea of *Eretz Israel* and the modern model of national sovereignty. However, *Mamlakhtiyut* as a concept finds its origin in the Russian word *gosudarstvo* (literally "kingdom" or "empire"; adjective: *gosudarstvenni*), as Ben-Gurion was deeply familiar with both Russian culture and politics. See Kedar, N. (2002).

² The complex status of Israeli Arabs, their exclusion from power and national narrative in light of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict goes beyond the scope of this article. We thus suggest a recent book which affronts the former from an original perspective in social research, i.e. memory activism. See Gutman, Y. 2017. *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel-Palestine*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

in Eliasian thought or to “inter-objective fields” in Bourdieusian literature-, puts on standby major social conflicts (chiefly ethnic and political cleavages³), whilst prioritizing 'out-to-do', 'ought-to-be' modes of operation. The cohesion of Israeli society, at least in appearance and within a certain temporality of emergency, demonstrates that the habitus the nation-states has engendered over several generations still posits Israeli statehood on top of all other sociopolitical structures (intermediate bodies of social aggregation and governance, e.g. local authorities, religious congregations, political factions etc.).

By depicting the national structure and its inherent dispositions (habitus) as the ultimate collective identity and as the only possible socio-political aggregation, the Israeli nation-state instructs citizenry what are the stakes and boundaries of their social actions. Consequently, Israeli organs of state make a collectivizing “survival unit” *par excellence*; that is kind of a processual “social personality structure” (an Eliasian figuration⁴) that does not exist prior or outside the process which engendered it. For the sake of tackling emergencies, especially military threats, the Israeli state embodies and emphasizes self-reliance, self-regulation and resilience as social *modus operandi* (virtues not only of the nation-state *per se* but of the ideal-type citizen, namely the heroic Sabra (native Jewish-born Israeli), as crafted by the founding ideology of the state: Zionism (Almog, 2000). The synergy between state and citizenry is in function to constant secure Israeli society. We, therefore, suggest to examine to features of the Israeli national resilience in relation to the sanitary threat of Covid-19 pandemic. Inasmuch as the Israeli government, the executive hand of the state, enjoys autonomy and legitimacy when crisis is to be faced, the former nurtures that sense of fortitude. Adopted from physics and natural sciences, resilience is the capability of a strained body\living organism to recover its size and shape\metabolism after deformation caused especially by compressive stress\perturbation. In more general terms, it implies ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. Once applied to the national level, it can be defined as the processual adaptation of the nation-state, its structures and policies to both external and internal transformations. The case of current pandemics is certainly classifiable as a sudden systemic perturbation and\or misfortunate change. Nonetheless, the high standards collective national resilience, as required from chief stakeholders by citizenry, also entail accountability and demand for efficient measures, not to say positive outcomes.

³ Israeli cleavages affecting Israeli politics are discussed in Helled, A. *The Israeli Electoral State of Mind: Security, Discourse and Leadership as components of the 2015 elections*, Quaderni dell'Osservatorio Elettoriale, N. 79, Vol. 79, N. 1., June 2018, pp. 71-99. On the factions within Israeliness as a social construct, see Kimmerling, B. (2001): *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Culture and Military in Israel*, Los Angeles: Berkeley, University of California Press.

⁴ The terminology is extensively used by Elias (2001): *Society of Individuals*, London: New York, Continuum [especially in Part III: "Changes in The We-I Balance" (1987), pp.153 onward].

Tracing Policies, Politics and National Resilience in the Fight against COVID-19

This section reconstructs the major events in the expansion of the Coronavirus and the policies Israeli government has put in practice. By tracing and contextualizing key-facts, the analysis seeks to overcome the mere contingent journalistic narration of the ongoing highly mutable events, whilst it provides some consistent observations with regard to Israeli politics and state action.

Israel attests rather ambiguous numbers regarding its national health system. Israeli health expenditure usually ranged around 4.6% of its national GDP, inasmuch as governments preferred to pour resources into military spending rather than investing in healthcare and other social services; in accordance with the neoliberal and nationalistic stands expressed by center-right coalitions in the last decade or so. Truth be told, however, Israeli healthcare expenditure accounted 7.6 % of GDP in 2018, - a rise in comparison to past budgetary projections yet still significantly below the OECD average of 8.8% of GDP⁵. This general economic fact might give the impression the Israeli public health system has been receiving greater prioritization vis-à-vis the challenges of the aging population (11.55% over 65 in 2019), on the one hand, and the high rate of demographic growth (1.6% OECD ISRAEL, 2016). That said, Israeli military emergency branch, the Home Front Command (created in 1992), has often contributed to civil protection operations in both Israel and abroad in times of natural calamities. Nevertheless, severe criticism was expressed by outgoing State Comptroller, Yosef Shapira in his April 2019 Final Report on Israeli public readiness to face the 2018 Measles epidemic.

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel was first politically affronted on February 23, 2020 when first diagnosed case of contagion was reported in Israeli media (i.e. one of the 11 Israeli passengers of the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship). Israeli health authorities had already published via the official website of the Foreign Ministry the order that all Israelis returning from the Far East (initially China and Thailand, then Hong Kong, Singapore, Macau, Japan, South Korea) should be under a 14-day fiduciary home isolation (January, 23) with band on flights from China on 30 January. The order was progressively expanded to Italy (26 February), Spain, Austria, Switzerland, Germany and France (2 March, 2020) and then to all European countries and eventually to US flights as well (by March, 9th). The next week 5 infected Israeli citizens were reported as well as the outbreak of contagion among people who encountered a group of pilgrims from Greece (March 5)⁶ all sent to domestic fiduciary isolation. On

⁵ See the article published by the Jerusalem Post: <https://www.jpost.com/HEALTH-SCIENCE/Israeli-healthcare-expenditure-rises-remains-below-OECD-average-598982> (August 19th, 2019; last retrieved 13.04.2020).

⁶ The same group (7 people) also visited Bethlehem and Jericho in the Palestinian Territories before confirmed Covid-19 diagnosis. Consequently, a closure order was given by the Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett. The latter was executed by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), the COGAT (Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories) in coordination with the Palestinian Authority (while the Gaza Strip contagion originated from to residents who had visited Pakistan via Egypt). The state of emergency coincided with the Jewish holiday of Purim, during which all crossings from the West Bank

March 12th, 100 new cases of Covid-19 were diagnosed and reported. The government thus took measures and announced restrictions limiting public events and private gathering of more than 2,000 participants (10 March), while considering the contagion potential of that Purim week (9-10 March) during which children use to participate in school carnivals and private parties. Further extraordinary measures were soon taken, namely the suspension of the education system (March 12th) and the closure of religious services attended by the ultraorthodox population, i.e. ritual baths *Mikveh* (15 March). In addition, both public services and the private sector began applying emergency norms and modalities, since March 16th, 2020 (limit of 70% of workers). As restrictions were being implemented, 946,000 workers applied for unemployment benefits out of whom 88.7% were employees sent on unpaid leave and 9.6% fired by employers. As a result, the rate of unemployment in Israel soared from its normal 3.4% (December 2019) to 26.25% in mid-April 2020⁷, - despite the announced distribution of NIS 2.5 billion of aide to Israeli small-medium businesses by the Ministry of Finance (8 March 2020)-, as self-isolation, social distancing were gradually entering into force (19-25 March). In spite of these efforts, on March 23 the new State Comptroller, Matanyahu Englman, sent a copy of his review on the Israeli health system in light of the rapid contagion. The report highlighted structural shortcomings (Israel possesses only 4,000 ventilators, critical to aid those suffering from the worst respiratory conditions) and other deficiencies (public hospitals negative budget balance) which might hinder suitable medical response; consequently favouring the exponential increase in contagion rate.

Some concrete measures have been taken and implemented. A controversial mechanism of vigilance and health security was conceived by government technicians. Since Israel has a solid local High-Tech hub,- often referred to as a “start-up nation”-, which is linked to both civil and military projects, Israeli government authorized to deploy an app, monitored by the Ministry of Health, for citizens to detect places and movements of people who received positive Covid-19 diagnosis. The government has also granted Israel’s internal security agency (Shin Bet) the permission to track down the movements of

and Gaza into Israel were closed and checkpoints tightened restrictions. On March 18th the closure of the West Bank and Gaza was extended until further notice. On the emergency and challenges in Palestine, see Capelli, C. "Coronavirus Exposes Palestine's System Fragilities" (pp.35-38) in *The MENA Region vs Covid-19: One Challenge, Common Strategies?*" (ed.s. Dacrema E., Talbot, V.), ISPI Dossier, 7 April, 2020 (available online: https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/isp_i_dossier_menavscovid19.pdf).

⁷ In March 2020 the unemployment rate stood on 3.6%. The number of the unemployed is approx. 1,085,461 individuals. Ministry of Finance and Bank of Israel officials assessed that around 400,000 out of those sent on unpaid leave would find no employment after the Covid-19 crisis is over (assessment of total 750,000 unemployed). In addition, the cost of the sanitary crisis in terms of GDP growth was assessed about 45 billion INS (12 billion ca. \$US), i.e. -1.6% of the country's GDP. See Ynet News: <https://www.ynet.co.il/economy/article/Sk18YLaS8> (16.03.2020, in Hebrew) and Channel 12 News: corona.mako.co.il (in Hebrew, retrieved on 14.04.2020).

coronavirus patients through their mobiles and credit card data⁸. Rigid policy of social distancing and lockdown have been gradually accompanied by smart-working modalities as well as online homebound distance learning like in other countries, though with partial success, and not free of some opposition from teachers' trade unions lamenting potential salary drawbacks under the emergency regime. Air traffic has been ceased except flights destined to bring back home Israelis staying abroad (with the imperative to accommodate them in vacant hotels for 14-day isolation). Public transportation has also been significantly reduced. Israeli police and military units began to patrol public spaces (including beaches and parks), fining and arresting those violating government directives. Moreover, in order to face increasing food shortage, especially of eggs, the government signed an import agreement with Portugal and Ukraine to provide 4 million eggs before Passover. Moreover, on April 1st, 2020, the Israeli Prime Minister announced that a NIS 500 grant will be paid for children aged up to 18 (but not for more than 4 children per family). In addition, a grant for the elderly and the disabled was also discussed as well as down payments for the unemployed⁹.

Nonetheless, not all Israeli citizens have been obeying public health imperatives. Since day one, Israeli government decisions were challenged by Israeli ultra-Orthodox reluctance to follow directives. This sector in Israel's general population (9,138,400, 2019 Israel Central Bureau of Statistics) numbers around 12% of the entire citizenry. Yet, their observance of Jewish law, traditional customs, dating back to 18th Century Eastern Europe, have been clashing with the implementation of health security measures. This explains the rapid contagion (10%) in their distinct neighbourhoods and cities, namely Bnei-Brak and some parts of Jerusalem. Their refusal originates from the zero casualties and destruction Bnei-Brak had during the Gulf War (summer 1990- winter 1991), while neighbouring cities Tel-Aviv and Ramat-Gan were damaged. The local rabbinical *vulgata* was that the power of prayer saved the God-fearing population from any harm. This Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) perception remains. Even the Health Minister himself, Yaakov Litzman, who represents one of the Haredi parties in the Knesset (United Torah Judaism), also violated these public safety restrictions and contracted the Coronavirus (he recovered, April 20); which demanded from his senior staff, several ministers and even prime-minister Netanyahu to be sent to preventive home-isolation. Due to incontrovertible evidence, Haredi leaders are now instructing devotees to avoid gatherings and synagogue (a rather tough request on Passover). However, the adaptation of these communities to emergency has taken longer. 50% of hospitalized Israelis, infected

⁸ This authorization of the policy has been discussed by Israeli Supreme Court. On April 16th, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Judge Esther Hayut expressed worries regarding the lack of transparency and the potential grave violence of citizens' right to privacy. See the news <https://www.kan.org.il/Item/?itemId=69657> (in Hebrew, last retrieved 17.04.2020).

⁹ As pointed out by the Prime Minister himself, the payment of such grants requires legal ratification and unemployment benefits must be distributed following criteria of eligibility. The 500 NIS per child grant (total amount of 1.4 billion NIS) became operative on April 12th, 2020. See the related information as published by the National Insurance Institute of Israel: <https://www.btl.gov.il/English%20Homepage/about/news/Pages/default.aspx> (last retrieved 17.04.2020).

by Covid-19 are ultra-Orthodox. Major Haredi population centers are now under lockdown. The former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron (1993-2003) is the highest-rank public figure who deceased as a result of the Coronavirus (April 12, 2020) and whose funeral was kept close to the public. Nevertheless, there also worries regarding the pandemic amongst the Israeli Arab population in the Galilean villages of Deir al-Asad, al-Bi'na and Majd al-Krum (the potential infection of hundreds), as villagers have not been following directives¹⁰. The area of these villages was put under curfew and restrictive measures of isolation, as contagion spread increased in more than 500% in 72 hours¹¹.

Lockdowns were also applied to the general population on Passover (first holiday and second holiday, the seventh day, of the Passover Week) to avoid family gatherings. Israeli citizens were requested not to exit their homes and remain in the range of 100 meters from declared residence. The quarantine, of course, meant to avoid further contagion over the week of Passover during week many economic sectors are inactive. Government authorities thus decreed that all people leaving their homes after Passover must put on disposable facial masks (of the surgical kind), while only strategic economic sectors get back to work, always under the 70% manpower limit). Surprisingly, neither Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, nor Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu respected the restrictions as they both hosted family members for the traditional Seder dinner (April 8, 2020). The news brought about overt public criticism, as most Jewish families consider Passover to be one of the fundamentals of Jewish tradition. Both Rivlin and Netanyahu explained and justified their cases, emphasizing strict health safety measures on their families as well as expressing regret¹².

Mass Covid-19 testing, considered to be the most efficient measure against contagion (the South Korean model) had already been announced by Prime Minister Netanyahu on March 17th, eventually setting the bar at 30,000 tests per day (starting with 3,000 daily tests)¹³. However, no such goal has yet been achieved (only between 6,000-10,000 tests daily, that is total Covid-19 tests: 240,303 i.e. 27,763 per 1 million

¹⁰See Channel 12 News on https://www.mako.co.il/news-lifestyle/2020_q2/Article-354fa207f8c7171027.htm?sCh=31750a2610f26110&pId=173113802 (in Hebrew, 15.04.2020). It was later argued that the source of the contagion in Deir al-Asad originated in a Kashrut supervisor ("*Mashgiach*") working at the central Dabbah Meat Factory (one of Israel's largest meat suppliers) who allegedly infected 20 employees. See <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5715006,00.html> (Hebrew, 14.04.2020, last retrieved 17.04.2020).

¹¹ See the news on Channel 11: <https://www.kan.org.il/Item/?itemId=69738> (Hebrew, 17.04.2020).

¹² Two other cases of politicians who had not respected the directives were reported few days later: leader of *Yisrael Beiteinu* Avigdor Lieberman, Minister of Aliyah and Integration Yoav Galant (Likud) and Likud MK and former mayor of Jerusalem Nir Barkat. The news acerbated the debate over the lack of personal example of elected representatives. See https://www.mako.co.il/news-politics/2020_q2/Articlea0c16bb9c248171027.htm (in Hebrew 16.04.2000).

¹³ See Haaretz website: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/health/corona/.premium-1.8684953> (Hebrew, last retrieved 15.04.2020). Professor Grotto, the deputy general director of Israel's Ministry of Health, estimated that 24,000 daily Covid-19 tests will be reached by the end of April, 2020. His estimation was presented before the ad hoc committee of experts on 16th, April. See <https://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3808476,00.html> (Hebrew, last retrieved 17.04.2020).

citizens, as for April 21st), despite the availability of medical personnel, equipment and laboratories. Health maintenance organizations and government owned labs report that more Covid-19 tests can be done but that there has been a rather low request to conduct such tests, as Israelis have not been giving the expected number of samples¹⁴.

The rapid centralized implementation of measures received appreciative comments from Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz in a televised interview to Israeli public Channel 11, revealing that he had consulted with Prime Minister Netanyahu prior to closing down Austria's borders in mid-March (the first country in Europe to have done so)¹⁵. Nonetheless, the main concern remains that Israel's medical institutions will soon be overrun by Covid-19 patients who indirectly affect mortality rates of non-Coronavirus patients. Moreover, more health care employees are being sidelined from service due to possible exposure to the virus. This growing concern constrained Prime Minister to bypass Health Ministry authorities and transfer competences to the Ministry of Defense in view of the increasing criticism and mistrust aimed at Litzman's own ability to manage the delicate situation. Israeli government also nominated, on March 13th, the head of Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center, prof. Ronni Gamzu (former managing director of the Ministry of Health in the period 2010-2015) to review the state of emergency and form a forum of health care policy experts, especially in light of the high rate of contagion at nursing homes in various Israeli cities, especially in Beersheba and Jerusalem. On April 14th, Israeli government decided to implement total lockdown measures (as executed during Passover) to future national celebrations, i.e. from the eve of Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers of Israel and Victims of Terrorism (in Hebrew: *Yom Ha'Zikaron*) till the night hours of Independence Day, that is say 27-29 April¹⁶. Furthermore, in order to help the elderly, - a population that is risk of complications in case of contagion-, Minister for Social Equality, Gila Gamliel (Likud), finalized an agreement with 4 major food and pharmacy retail chains to guarantee "within-48-hours" home delivery of produce and pharmaceuticals to Israeli senior citizens¹⁷.

¹⁴See Mako-News12 website: https://www.mako.co.il/news-lifestyle/2020_q2/Article-a927b5860a77171027.htm?utm_source=AndroidNews12&utm_medium=Share (in Hebrew, 14.04.2020). The Covid-19 pandemic also engendered a decrease in the demand for unrelated health services (-60% in laboratory and ambulatory care nursing services, -30% in visits to ERs, -40% day hospitalization in comparison with the same period last year). Data were reported by the Israeli four health maintenance organizations to Israel's National Security Council (NSC). See the news on www.kan.org.il/Item/?itemId=69655 (state Channel 11 website, 16.04.2020, in Hebrew).

¹⁵ The interview was held from Berlin by the channel's Europe correspondent Antonia Yemini and aired on March 25, 2020: <https://www.kan.org.il/Item/?itemId=68766> (interview in German with Hebrew subtitles, last retrieved 14.04.2020).

¹⁶ Channel 12 News website: corona.mako.co.il (Hebrew, retrieved on 14.04.2020).

¹⁷ The agreement was reported on April, 16th and was about to become operative by Sunday 19. The minister aimed to extend the agreement to other retail chains. See *Yedioth Ahronoth* (Israeli newspaper) published on 16.04.2019.

The implementation of safety measures protecting Israeli citizenship is too recent to be assessed in terms of efficiency. General readiness cannot only be measured through the preparedness of the health system *per se*, nor can we infer whether government and expert policy-makers within public administration could cope with the pandemic differently. Most Western countries have been facing the Covid-19 emergency day by day, with some kind of structural shortcomings, shortages and criticalities. Hence, the whole eventful period reveals continuous challenges which require constant trial, error and revision. However, such attempts to protect society, adapt and reorganize the economy would certainly lead to the contraction in Israel's economic growth. According to the last projection by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Israel's GDP would shrink this year in -6.3% and the unemployment rate is estimated to reach 12%, hence the worst economic crisis in Israel's history¹⁸.

That said, the abovementioned Israeli national resilience, interiorized by citizens who are used to face militarized conflicts, has prevented collective hysteria (except some sporadic episodes), while keeping self-discipline and respect of the state of emergency, with the exception of some ultra-Orthodox factions. Yet, Israel's national resilience has also much to do with the political arena, considering the fact the country entered the state of emergency in tandem with another crisis taking place: the political one.

The political setting in which the Covid-19 pandemic began spreading in Israel was dramatic. The country held the third round of general elections in one-year span on March 2nd, 2020. Despite the "fatigue" of Israelis to go to the polls for the third time in twelve months (a unique political scenario in Israeli history), the table below shows a high voter turnout (higher than the last two previous elections). Not only does the latter indicate the active participation of Israelis, who view themselves as stakeholders of their own democratic rights, but it also stresses their desire to reach clear-cut political results enabling stability in government. Nevertheless, as in previous elections (April 9th and September 17th, 2019), popular vote and Knesset numbers were unable to form a stable coalition. For the third time the centre-right bloc (58 MK of which 36 Likud), led by Benjamin Netanyahu's interim government, did not gain the necessary majority (at least 61 deputies out of 120 MKs) to govern vis-à-vis the rival bloc, led by Blue & White leader, former IDF Chief of Staff, whose party won 33 seats out of the 55 seats attributed to the centre-left bloc in the Israeli Parliament (except 7 seats won by Avigdor Lieberman's secular nationalist party, *Yisrael Beiteinu*). President Rivlin handed Gantz the mandate to form a government on March, 18th.

Election	Valid Votes	Invalid Votes	Total votes	Registered voters	Turnout
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¹⁸ These estimates are more dramatic than those published by Bank of Israel Research Division which estimated -5.3% in GDP and 6% unemployment rate. See the data as published on an Israeli economics website: <https://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3808016,00.html> (in Hebrew, 14.04.2020)

April 2019	4,309,270	30,983	4,340,253	5,943,254	68.5%
Sept. 2019	4,436,806	28,362	4,465,168	6,394,030	69.8%
March 2020	4,586,954	25,053	4,612,007	6,453,255	71.5%

Table. 1 –Results of Last Israeli Elections (Source of Data: Central Elections Committee)

The new Knesset, the 23rd since 1948, was sworn on March 16th with elected MKs entering the hall three at a time. Surely political contentions have not be absent. The high-toned pro-Netanyahu vs. anti-Netanyahu electoral campaign was soon replaced by mutual accusations and party-disintegration. First of all, Netanyahu's opponents heavily accused him of using the current crisis to postpone his corruption trial (i.e. for the alleged undeclared gifts-receiving case 1000, the Yedioth Ahronoth daily media-favoritism case 2000, and Bezeq-Walla communications company bribery case 4000) and block any attempt to end his interim premiership. Inner political pressures combined with the evolving state of emergency put in motion the disintegration of electoral alliances. The 7 seats won by Israeli Labour-Gesher-Meretz alliance soon collapsed as Gesher's leader, and only elected MK, the centrist Orly Levi-Abekasis declared her support to form a national unity government guided by Netanyahu (March, 23) bringing about the disintegration of the original 6-MK left axis (Labour-Meretz) on April, 4th.

The two major parties Likud and Blue & White mutually delegitimized attempts to form government, as manifested in the debate over the nomination of the Speaker of the Knesset which ended in the nomination of the same Benny Gantz (March, 26)¹⁹, while his own political bloc was disintegrating because of inner criticism regarding the option to form a national-unity government whose premiership would be shared by Netanyahu and himself, on 18 months basis). The 33-seat centrist party was losing its competitiveness, as its main stakeholder, the *Yesh Atid* party, led by Yair Lapid, former minister of finance under Netanyahu (2013-2014) categorically refused any compromise with political adversaries. Consequently, Blue & White split on March 29th as 13 *Yesh Atid* MKs left and returned to be identified with the symbol of the original party (established in 2012); even the small political list *Telem* (5 MKs within Blue & White) led by former Chief of Staff and Minister Moshe Ya'alon,- who had split from Likud in 2016-, experienced inner contentiousness resulting in its political attachment to Yesh Atid, after two of its MKs, rightists Yoaz Hendel and Zvi Hauser, founded their own party *Derekh Eretz*. As Blue & White was left with only 15 MKs in its ranks. On the eve of Passover and in light of the deadline

¹⁹ Former Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein (Likud) tried to strain the already tense political atmosphere to its breaking point by using the Covid-19 emergency as a legitimate cause for shutting down the legislature as he refused to follow a Supreme Court order to reopen the Knesset. He eventually resigned from office on March 25. See Haaretz in English:<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-knesset-speaker-resigns-high-court-s-ruling-undercuts-foundations-of-democracy-1.8708565> (15.04.2020).

of the presidential mandate to form a viable coalition (which had expired on the April 13th but was extended to 48 hours, till April 15th), Benny Gantz claimed that the Coronavirus pandemic threatened Israel's future and called for Netanyahu to "put politics aside" after three election cycles. Both Blue & White and Likud teams intensified negotiations in order to avoid a fourth electoral round, while institutional and public calls for national unity to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic grew stronger. However, the parties did not reach agreement by April 15th at midnight. Consequently, on April 16th, President Rivlin sent government mandate back to the Knesset, starting 21-day countdown to election (unless majority is to be indicated), while both Netanyahu and Gantz kept dialogue open²⁰. That is not to say the two political adversaries lowered their tones, as disagreements regarding the nomination of judges, the politicization of judiciary and the application of the parliamentary immunity law (crucial to Netanyahu's future, given his corruption trial) as well as the modality of premiership by rotation seemed unbridgeable. The two parties finally reached an agreement. A joint national unity government was announced on April 20th, after 484 days of political crisis²¹, as the Covid-19 pandemic reached 13,883 diagnosed cases²².

In the meantime, the government approved a gradual "return to normalcy" economic program. After examining three different reports (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, National Security Council), Prime Minister Netanyahu announced the gradual normalization of commercial activities (press conference April 18th at 21:00, before government vote), indicating a step-by-step reconsideration of lockdown restrictions (valid until April 30th): 500 meters distance from domicile for sport activities (1-2 individuals) or for outside religious functions (max. 19 people); the pilot reopening of stores (housewares, bookshops, electronics), and factories (30% of manpower and no-over 67 years old employees), while keeping closed schools and kindergartens²³, shopping centres, markets and beauty parlours. Movement in the public space without facial mask is sanctioned (NIS 200-500 fine). Criteria and enforcement of sanitary norms are decided and implemented under the authority of the Ministry of Health²⁴.

²⁰The Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/israels-factions-fail-again-to-form-government-raising-possibility-of-fourth-election/2020/04/16/765f743a-7fbf-11ea-84c2-0792d8591911_story.html (16.04.2020).

²¹ Channel 11 news: <https://www.kan.org.il/Item/?itemId=69858> (in Hebrew, 20.04.2020).

²²As for April 21st: 9,349 active cases of whom 98% in mild conditions, 2% in serious or critical condition (142), closed cases: 4,534 with 96% recovered\discharged and 4% death rate (181 people), thus total cases per 1 million population: 1,604 and 21 deaths per 1 million people. See <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/israel> (21.04.2020).

²³ Except for special-needs education to be reopened on April 21st, in 2-3 pupil groups (with no compulsory attendance, thus on parental discretion).

²⁴On the debate within government, the application of the programme and the directives, see news websites (in Hebrew): <https://www.kan.org.il/Item/?itemId=69749> (18.04.2020); <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5716733,00.html> (19.04.2020).

Conclusions: Israel and the COVID-19 Pandemic

As all other populations worldwide, most Israelis are trying to look past the looming economic fallout which the Covid-19 pandemic has caused. The state of emergency is part of Israel's national habitus and the perception of the state as the ultimate form of survival unit, a collective aggregator whose primary disposition is national resilience vis-à-vis external threats. In Israel the eventful period of the pandemic that has opened in February 2020 was to cross the country's ongoing political crisis as the 35th government is still to be formed. Shortcomings in the national health care system (expenditures below OECD average) and cases in which emergency directives have not been respected, such as amongst the ultra-Orthodox population and Arab villages, do not seem to have hindered some rapid measures to be taken and implemented. As both the political and sanitary situations need efficient and effective decision-making and the execution of *ad hoc* policies, polemics have been put aside in order to act responsibly. Though the trajectory of the Covid-19 curve remains as unknown as the stability of future government, *ad interim* evaluations appear to indicate collective actions aimed at keeping contagion and mortality rates low, namely through lockdowns and quarantines, at incentivizing social-distancing while measures normalize home-based schooling activities and smart-working as much as possible. Of course, it is too early to seriously evaluate the general readiness of the Israeli public. Most Western countries have been facing the Covid-19 emergency day by day, under similar structural deficiencies. Trial, error and revision are all part of the contingent global and local context in which human society has found itself. That said, the abovementioned description of Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Covid-19 challenge attests that the country's habitus, based upon resilience, has prevented collective hysteria. Nevertheless, Israel's national resilience may go so far as the political arena holds and represents the democratic principles of Israeli *Mamlakhtiyut*. The Israeli nation-state, as Zionist thought shaped it, is the only stakeholder of the *res publica*. As such, its daily presentability, solemnity and honourability are neither ritual nor symbolic. On the contrary, the state is intimately interconnected with accountability and effectiveness of reaction to crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic in Israel is thus a case to be studied *in itinere*, alongside an attentive analysis of political occurrences.

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