

# “Leading by example”. The IDF’s role in the world’s most effective COVID-19 vaccination program

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## Main points

- Cooperation between Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Israel's Ministry of Health (MoH) made Israel a global leader in COVID vaccination campaign.
- IDF's resilience has been developed by the long history and experience of living under constant threats and responding to emergencies.
- The military technology plays a significant role in the Israeli vaccination campaign essentially in tracing, testing and quarantine people who had been in contact with those infected.

## Introduction

**While many embrace Israel for its very effective vaccination campaign, there is not enough said about the critical role of the Israel Defense Forces in this process.** The State of Israel is an unquestionable leader in terms of vaccinating its citizens. As of February 21, over 7,36 million Israelis have been vaccinated, and the number is rapidly growing.<sup>1</sup> That would not be possible without the long-lasting coordinated efforts between Israel's Ministry of Health and the Israel Defense Forces. **IDF's experience and cooperation in large-scale national emergencies had been tested in natural disasters, security or health-related situations.** The Home Front Command of the Israeli Defense Forces operates in various emergencies, mostly in the field of civilian protection.<sup>2</sup> In addition to dispatching personnel to reinforce hospitals, it plays several other essential roles in the current crisis. Close ties between the Israeli Ministry of Health and the IDF allowed storing the vaccines in ultra-cold storages in the state's central locations.<sup>3</sup> The military is also responsible for transporting and providing the vaccinations to most injection sites and smaller, local communities.

### *IDF's' Bodies and Units*

**The IDF established several administrative bodies to combat the virus's spread and ensure efficient vaccine distribution.** On July 23, 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed a "Corona Project Manager", whose main goal was to lead and manage

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<sup>1</sup> Our World in Data, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations*. Available at:

<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations> [Accessed 22 February 2021]

<sup>2</sup> IDF, *Home Front Command*. Available at: <<https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/home-front-command/>> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>3</sup> Rosen, B., Waitzberg, R., Israeli, A. 'Israel's rapid rollout of vaccinations for COVID-19', *Israel Journal of Health Policy Research* p. 8.

the national program to fight COVID-19 by integrating professional and executive bodies.<sup>4</sup> **The government obtained rights to use the IDF's data collection, investigation and execution capabilities by forming a mission-task force to curb the virus' spread.** In practice, the military support helped trace and quarantine people who had been in contact with infected people. According to the military spokesman, the IDF has conducted roughly 240,000 epidemiological investigations, while the Home Front Command facilities have accounted for about 50% of all COVID-19 testing.<sup>5</sup>

To break coronavirus transmission chains, the IDF established new units, such as "Alon" and "Ella", for epidemiological investigation purposes under the leadership of the Home Front Command.<sup>6</sup> **Approximately 600 troops on active duty and dozens of reservists serve across various municipalities as epidemiological investigators. They use a special digital system, developed by Unit 8200 and the Computer Service and Cyber Defense Directorate.** The system has two main functions: it updates civilians about their health condition and gives instructions on keeping themselves and others safe.<sup>7</sup> While the new units have been established as a government and military response to the worrying raises in COVID-19 cases around September 2020, it has been proven effective in helping local communities enforce the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the Prime Minister.

**IDF Intelligence Directorate bears responsibility for Coronavirus Information and Knowledge Centre.** Its primary role is to gather and process all available information about the virus and vaccines to help the government make better decisions. **Dr Asher Salmon, head of the Health Ministry's international relations department outlined that one of the most important roles of the Centre is to analyse the future of the pandemic in the short and long term.**<sup>8</sup> In terms of vaccines, it monitors and evaluates their performance. It also tracks the distribution, reports side effects, and provides educational support to convince the residents to vaccinate.

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<sup>4</sup> Waitzberg, R., Penn, N., Leibner, G. Brammli-Greenberg, S., 'Policy responses for Israel', *COVID-19 Health Response Monitor*

<sup>5</sup> Nikkei Asia, *Israel military minds aid COVID battle and rapid vaccine rollout*. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Israel-military-minds-aid-COVID-battle-and-rapid-vaccine-rollout> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>6</sup> i24 News, *IDF establishes new epidemiological unit in battle to curb spread of virus*. Available at: <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/coronavirus/1600698809-idf-establishes-new-epidemiological-unit-in-battle-to-curb-spread-of-virus> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>7</sup> IDF, *Fighting COVID-19: War on The Homefront*. Available at: <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/idfs-response-to-covid-19/fighting-covid-19-war-on-the-homefront/> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>8</sup> Nikkei Asia, *Israel military minds aid COVID battle and rapid vaccine rollout*.

A quick and organised effort of the Israel Defense Forces proves that despite many obstacles caused by the pandemic, it has managed to reorganise and develop one of the most effective vaccination campaigns on the planet. **Israel's long history and experience of living under a constant threat and emergencies developed a fast stream of communication and cooperation between various state entities.** The military's flexibility and a high number of staff and volunteers resulted in an impressive distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations within the country.

### **IDF's vaccination drive**

Hidai Zilberman, the IDF spokesperson, hopes most IDF personnel will be vaccinated within the next few months.<sup>9</sup> **In late December 2020, IDF started to vaccinate its staff following the military's prioritising system.** IDF medical personnel and soldiers with pre-existing health issues were the first to receive the shots.<sup>10</sup> Once these groups are vaccinated, the General Staff and other high-ranking officers, special forces and combat units are next. Finally, the rest of the army, which does not need to maintain full combat readiness, would follow.

**To "lead by example", IDF General Staff and some of the other senior officers were vaccinated to convince the soldiers, who are not forced to do so, to follow.** That move also intended to convince the public about the effectiveness and reliability of the vaccine.

**The IDF has established six main inoculation centres, with plans to set up 11 more going forward.** Vaccination centres are located in the Navy's logistic base in Haifa, the Israeli Air Force's Palmachim Base in Centre of Israel, and Military Intelligence's Gelilot Base north of Tel Aviv.<sup>11</sup> **Furthermore, vaccination teams will visit all other military bases, where more than 1,000 soldiers are serving, performing the injections on site.** The most recent data shows that around 85% of the IDF has already been vaccinated.<sup>12</sup> Vaccinating a significant

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<sup>9</sup> The Times of Israel, *IDF to launch vaccination operation in bid to inoculate 6,000 by week's end*. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-to-launch-vaccination-operation-in-bid-to-innoculate-6000-by-weeks-end/> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>10</sup> IDF, *All you need to know about the IDF's COVID-19 vaccination campaign*. Available at: <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/idfs-response-to-covid-19/idf-s-covid-19-vaccination-campaign/> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>11</sup> The Times of Israel, *IDF to launch vaccination operation in bid to inoculate 6,000 by week's end*.

<sup>12</sup> The Jerusalem Post, *Senior IDF officer to 'Post': We didn't waste any COVID-19 vaccine doses*. Available at: <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/senior-idf-officer-to-post-we-didnt-waste-any-covid-19-vaccine-doses-659177> [Accessed 22 February 2021]

number of soldiers plays an important role in both the physical and psychological spectrum. Not only does it give an example to Israeli civilians, but also strengthens the IDF's role in the region.

### **Vaccination of civilians**

Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu had announced the COVID-19 vaccination of citizens would start on December 27, 2020.<sup>13</sup> One week later PM revealed Israel had struck a deal with one of the biggest COVID-19 vaccines manufacturer – Pfizer.

**About 10 million doses, including the promise of shipments of 400,000 - 700,000 doses every week was exchanged for anonymised data about age, gender and medical history of those receiving the jab, as well as its side effects and efficiency.**<sup>14</sup> Some time before the start of the vaccination campaign, the IDF had already recommended the Alon Command Centre to vaccinate the citizens of Israel.<sup>15</sup> It had some 3,000 professionally trained soldiers and volunteers who had earlier served as epidemiological trackers as of late December. Israeli soldiers also assisted in supplying food to the elderly and families in lockdown and dedicated their own paramedics to ensure the safe conduct of the civilian vaccination campaign.<sup>16</sup>

With the help of that military personnel and all the factors discussed above, the State of Israel has statistically the highest number (85,01) of COVID-19 vaccination doses administered per 100 people in the world.<sup>17</sup> In the second place, the United Arab Emirates currently administers around 56, while the world's average is only 2,67. The campaign has been proven effective, while the cases of COVID-19 and hospitalisations dropped significantly among Israelis who were vaccinated within just a few weeks.<sup>18</sup> According to the new Israeli

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<sup>13</sup> The Jerusalem Post, *Israel to begin giving corona vaccines Dec. 27*. Available at:

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/first-pfizer-coronavirus-vaccine-shipment-arrives-in-israel-651569>  
[Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>14</sup> Politico, *The secrets to Israel's coronavirus vaccination success*. Available at:

<https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-coronavirus-vaccine-success-secret/> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>15</sup> The Jerusalem Post, *IDF recommends Home Front Command oversee COVID-19 vaccine distribution*.

Available at: <https://www.jpost.com/health-science/idf-could-play-active-role-in-administering-covid-19-vaccines-651290> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>16</sup> IDF, *IDF Soldiers Help Elderly During COVID-19 Crisis*. Available at: <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/idfs-response-to-covid-19/idf-soldiers-help-elderly-during-covid-19-crisis/> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

<sup>17</sup> Our World in Data, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations*. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations> [Accessed 22 February 2021]

<sup>18</sup> The New York Times, *Virus Hastens Exit from Israel's Ultra-Orthodox Community*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/08/world/middleeast/israel-orthodox-virus.html> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

study, the number of new COVID-19 cases dropped by 41 per cent compared to three weeks earlier.<sup>19</sup>

### Recommendations

- **While the Polish government praised Israel's vaccination success, Polish military should operate closely with the IDF to drive on its successful emergency experience.** Closer cooperation between the Israel Defense Forces and the Polish Army would only improve Poland's vaccination campaign. Moreover, the cooperation would also have a positive impact on strengthening Polish-Israeli ties, and thus future political and diplomatic cooperation after COVID-19-era.
- **Rather than struggling with the virus alone, the European Union should develop closer military and political cooperation with Israel to combat the pandemic.** Whether creating a new EU COVID-19 military task force or through the NATO alliance, European states could engage more troops into vaccination effort in terms of transportation, vaccination and other assistance to the patients. The efforts would tighten up and unite the European Union after Brexit and open a new chapter for EU-Israel relations. That may result in more joint military exercises between the United States, Israel and European states. Further, the cooperation on pandemic-related issues could help Europeans to learn how to cooperate more efficiently in various emergency situations, drawing on the Israel experience.

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<sup>19</sup> The New York Times, *Israel's Vaccination Results Point a Way Out of Virus Pandemic*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/world/middleeast/israel-virus-vaccination.html> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

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