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# RSOG INSIGHT

MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER EDITION

## IN THIS ISSUE

*With the COVID-19 impacting countries at various stages, everyone is trying to understand what is required to protect themselves and their communities.*

*We spoke to some of our friends around the world on how it has affected them and their views of the situation.*

## ABOUT OUR GUEST

Vamik D. Volkan is a Turkish Cypriot Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia. He is also the Senior Erik Erikson Scholar at the Erikson Institute of Education and Research, the Austen Riggs Centre, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and an Emeritus Training and Supervising Analyst at the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute, Washington, D.C. He is the President of the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI). For three decades, he has led interdisciplinary teams to various trouble spots around the world and has brought high-level “enemy” representatives together for years-long unofficial dialogues. His work in the field has resulted in his developing new theories about large-group behaviour in times of peace and war.

**Disclaimer:** Views expressed in the article are of their own and do not reflect the opinion of Razak School of Government.

## VIEWS FROM UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*In this edition, we spoke to Emeritus Professor Vamik D. Volkan, the President of the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI). He previously delivered his talk at RSOG Seminar on “Large Group Psychology and Political Leaders” at Razak School of Government in 2015.*

**RSOG:** How has the pandemic affected your daily life?

**Emeritus Professor Vamik D. Volkan:** When the global outbreak of COVID-19 became an unexpected “enemy” for humankind my first reaction was “denial.” We use this psychological mechanism to reduce our anxiety when something feels particularly disturbing.

During the first week of March 2020, I was in Vilnius as a guest of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I participated in an international meeting which was part of Lithuania’s celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of its secession from the Soviet Union. My interdisciplinary team from the University of Virginia’s Center for the Study and Human Interaction (CSMHI) and I had first gone to Lithuania in April 1992. At that time, we met with representatives of the Lithuanian government and then facilitated a meeting with participants from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the Soviet Union. This was the beginning of our seven years of work in the Baltic states, mostly in Estonia. We tried to provide help and support for the Baltic states in their efforts to restore their independence in a peaceful fashion.

As March 2020 approached, I was aware of the danger of getting contaminated with the coronavirus, especially through travel. But memories of our work in Lithuania and the other Baltic states made me deny this danger. I wanted to take part in this government-sponsored meeting. I was also excited that the meeting organisers wanted this gathering to be “a marriage between diplomacy and psychoanalysis.”



While I was in Lithuania, social distancing did not seem to be in the minds of people at the meeting, open markets, and in the streets. On my way back to the United States on March 8, 2020, I had to change airplanes and had to wait at the Amsterdam International Airport for four hours. I lost my denial mechanism in this crowded environment.

After coming home to the United States, I began staying home only with my wife. I noticed that for the first fourteen days, I was checking to see if I might have any COVID-19 symptoms. I found a positive way to deal with my isolation. I began collecting observations on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on individuals and large groups.

**RSOG:** In your opinion what would be the main psychological impact on society from this global pandemic?  
**Emeritus Professor Vamik D. Volkan:** At the present time, I am supervising sixteen therapeutic cases of nine younger psychoanalysts in different countries. By examining what these sixteen analysands reported to their analysts after the virus pandemic I began to learn the initial impact of the virus pandemic on individuals behind observable denial, fear, anxiety, and devastating pain. These analysands returned, consciously and unconsciously, to their childhood losses and re-experienced anxieties and old defence mechanisms and fantasies linked to such losses.

Here I will focus on the initial societal/political responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some massive traumas are from earthquakes, tropical storms, floods, forest fires, volcanic eruptions, and other natural causes. When nature shows its fury and people suffer, those affected tend ultimately to accept the event as fate or as the will of God. Following man-made accidental disasters, survivors blame a small number of individuals for their carelessness. Both natural and accidental catastrophes usually do not bring ethnic, national, or religious border issues to our minds, unless the second-type disaster is like the 1986 Chernobyl accident that spewed tons of radioactive dust into the atmosphere. Sometimes, murdering a “transference figure” for the members of the large group – such as John F. Kennedy in the United States of America, Olof Palme in Sweden, Giorgi Chanturia in the Republic of Georgia, and Rafik Hariri in Lebanon – provokes traumatic societal responses. When the murderer and the murdered leader belong to the same large-group identity, there is no impact on border psychology. Other massive traumas are due to the deliberate actions of an enemy group, as in ethnic, national, religious and political-ideological conflicts, racism, terrorism, wars, and genocides. All deliberately induced social traumas by the Other inflame large-group identity issues and preoccupation with borders as soon as they occur.

In one of my books, I wrote about a fantasy of Martians coming to Earth and forcing human beings from different races and ethnic and religious backgrounds to come together against a common enemy. As a non-visible enemy, COVID-19 did not come from Mars. But like the imaginary Martians, it threatens all human beings: old people, young people, rich people, poor people, famous people, and refugees. This threat, however, right away initiated a need to protect physical borders between countries and some locations within the same country. Since every large group needs to protect itself, this was an expected and realistic development. This development became linked to leader-follower psychology, large-group identity, and political themes.

Interestingly, incredible communication technology has begun to create increasing psychological “holes” in the physical borders. For example, I began receiving email messages from individuals whom I had met in many countries and who, in normal times, were not in contact with me. Sharing the same “enemy,” I sensed, had brought us together again. I received an invitation from China to give a Zoom seminar to mental health workers on social trauma, loss, and mourning. I willingly did that on April 3, 2020. I was informed that 8,000 individuals listened to me. I repeated this seminar for the mental health workers in Turkey on April 23.





In 2018, I established the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI). IDI is a private, multidisciplinary group comprised of psychoanalysts, academics, diplomats, business people and other professionals from eight countries (England, Germany, Iran, Israel, Palestine, Russia, Turkey, and the United States) who meet biannually to bring a psychologically-informed perspective to the study and amelioration of social conflict. For me, the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI) meetings, have become a symbol illustrating the importance of psychologically informed dialogues in removing irrational views of one another and opening a reflective space of communication among people with different large-group identities.

On April 5, 2020, members of the IDI had their first telecommunication gathering. Our member from Palestine could not join us due to technical problems. The other 22 members from seven different counties shared their personal experiences, the nature of the anxieties related to business, the impact of the grieving process and its rituals, and the anger at the betrayal by incompetent persons in authority.

Listening to other members of the IDI, I also noted once more concerns about national, ethnic or religious identity and societal divisions, especially those supported by organised religions. We noted that deep denial over COVID-19's danger by some local religious leaders and religious organizations is taking place worldwide. The day after our first IDI telecommunication gathering, I heard from a colleague in the Republic of Georgia. She described the political reasons why the government was not daring to interfere with the Orthodox Church. Church members were continuing to have wine from one shared spoon and kiss the same cross.

By looking back at deadly plagues throughout history, such as the Black Death peaking in Europe and causing the deaths of 75–200 million people in Eurasia and North Africa in the fourteenth century, some scholars expect huge social, economic, and technological changes after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. We will have to wait to evaluate from a psychological point of view how this “enemy” will influence large-group psychology and international relationships

**RSOG:** Any messages you would like to share with our alumni and everyone involved whether directly and indirectly in curbing the COVID-19?

**Emeritus Professor Vamik D. Volkan:** Protect yourselves and stay healthy. When you take good care of yourselves you can help your loved ones and others. Find creative ways to deal with loneliness.

For leaders, give truthful information and do not cover up while dealing with realistically difficult issues such as economic ones.

I thank Razak School of Government for remembering me.

