



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, March 12

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News Excerpts

March 12, 2020

Times of Israel

As Virus Cases Mount, Israel Bans Gatherings of More than 100 People

Israel is limiting public events in enclosed areas to 100 people as part of increasingly strict measures to curb the spread of the new coronavirus in the country, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Wednesday evening. The ban includes synagogue prayer and weddings, the Health Ministry director-general Moshe Bar Siman-Tov elaborated. Schools are staying open for now, but officials may require institutes of higher education to teach remotely. "We're asking, if there is no need for conferences, if there is no need for events, don't hold them and don't go to them," Netanyahu said during a press conference at his office. He said exceptions would be made for security, health and public needs, while urging Israelis to make "behavioral changes" and change their "day-to-day routines." See also ["Netanyahu Announces Emergency Steps as Israel Cases Rise to 97" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israeli Research Center to Announce It Developed Coronavirus Vaccine

Scientists at Israel's Institute for Biological Research are expected to announce in the coming days that they have completed development of a vaccine for the new coronavirus COVID-19. According to medical sources, the scientists have recently had a significant breakthrough in understanding the biological mechanism and qualities of the virus, including better diagnostic capability, production of antibodies for those who already have the virus and development of a vaccine. The development process requires a series of tests and experiments that may last many months before the vaccination is deemed effective or safe to use. See also ["As pressure for coronavirus vaccine mounts, scientists debate risks of accelerated testing" \(Reuters\)](#)

Ynet News

Health Ministry Urges Israelis Not to Enter PA Territories

The Health Ministry on Wednesday called on Israeli citizens and foreign tourists not to enter Palestinian Authority-controlled territories to prevent the spread of the coronavirus and out of concern for the public's health. The decision was taken after the discovery of coronavirus cases in Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Tulkarm, the ministry said. It also called for avoiding public gatherings, including religious congregations, in PA-controlled territories. Meanwhile, the PA government on Wednesday morning said no new cases of coronavirus had been detected over the past few hours. The health condition of the 30 patients infected with the virus remained stable, it said, adding that 20 of them were males and 10 were females. See also ["Thousands of Israelis in the US called home as coronavirus restrictions tighten" \(Forward\)](#)

Ynet News

Israel Unveils NIS 10 Billion Coronavirus Relief Plan

Netanyahu said Wednesday that the government will allocate NIS 10 billion to help combat the economic consequences caused by the growing coronavirus threat in Israel. "The coronavirus has an impact on the economy of the entire world, us included," said Netanyahu. "The state of the Israeli economy is better than most world economies. The financial system is strong, and unemployment is low. These are big advantages in entering this crisis, our goal is to keep the economy going with an initial help package." See also, ["Netanyahu Unveils \\$2.9 Billion Package to Battle Coronavirus Fallout" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Defense Ministry extends Gaza, Bethlehem closures due to virus outbreak

The Defense Ministry announced on Wednesday that it would be extending closures imposed over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank city of Bethlehem as it seeks to contain the coronavirus outbreak. Israel shuttered its crossings into Gaza on Sunday as it traditionally does for the Purim holiday. The four-day scheduled closure was a day longer than normal for the festival, which began on Monday evening in most of the country. A military spokesperson said this was not due to concerns about the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus or any other issue, but was decided out of practical considerations. The Wednesday Defense Ministry statement said the Gaza closure would be extended until sundown on Saturday, while no final date was given for the Bethlehem shutdown. See also ["Bennett decides: The closure on Gaza will continue" \(Arutz 7\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Gantz's Reps Meet Arab Alliance to Discuss Forming Government

Representatives from Benny Gantz's Kahol Lavan party met Wednesday with representatives of the Joint List alliance of Arab-majority parties in an attempt to form a minority government, which the List would not join, but support from the outside. Joint List lawmaker Ahmad Tibi said after the meeting that the sides discussed "upcoming parliamentary issues" as well as the issue of backing Gantz for prime minister." According to Tibi, the sides are slated to meet again. Joint List chairman Ayman Odeh declared on Tuesday that the list will act "as one party." All factions of the Joint List attended Wednesday's meeting, including Balad leader Mtanes Shehadeh. Balad Members told Haaretz on Tuesday that should Gantz agree to their demands, they would recommend to President Reuven Rivlin that the Kahol Lavan leader receive the mandate to form a government. See also, ["Gantz Must Try a Government With Israel's Arabs" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Erekat: West Bank E1 Road Start of Annexation and Apartheid

PLO Secretary-General Saeb Erekat warned that Israeli plans for a new West Bank road between the E1 area and Jerusalem were the start of Israel's "annexation and apartheid plan." He tweeted Tuesday about the road project, which Defense Minister Naftali Bennett advanced earlier this week, to help enable the construction project of 3,500 apartment units in an unbuilt area of the Ma'aleh Adumim settlement known as E1. Bennett himself spoke of the project as the "sovereignty road." It would link the Palestinian village of az-Za'ayem outside of Jerusalem with the neighboring towns of Anata, Hizme and A-Ram. The E1 bypass road would ensure easy Palestinian vehicular mobility, without entering the E1 area. See also, ["In change, US describes East Jerusalem Palestinians as 'Arab residents'" \(JPost\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Rivlin in Post-Election Rebuke: There are No 'Semi-Citizens' in Israel

Receiving the final results of the March 2 elections for the 23rd Knesset, President Reuven Rivlin on Wednesday leveled criticism at the heads of the parties that will take their seats in the next parliament over their apparent disdain for the Arab electorate. "In the Jewish-democratic equation, every vote counts," Rivlin said. "In the State of Israel, there are no half-citizens. There are deep disagreements, but no semi-citizens." The president then called on leaders to compromise on an outline for a stable government and offered once again a government outline he proposed in November for a unity government. See also, ["Rivlin calls on Likud, Blue and White to compromise on unity" \(JPost\)](#)

Israel's Gantz Ready to Do Whatever it Takes to Topple Netanyahu

By Ben Caspit political Commentator at AI Monitor

- **Lt. Gen. (res.) Benny Gantz has probably never faced as painful and cruel a dilemma in his entire four decades in uniform and as Israel's top soldier as he is now confronting as leader of the Blue and White party. The March 2 election results maneuvered Israeli politics into the most complicated situation possible: On the one hand, a clear victory for the Likud on the party level (36 Knesset seats for the Likud compared with 33 for Blue and White). On the other, a no less clear victory for Blue and White on the coalition map (62 Knesset seats for the center-left bloc compared with 58 for the right-wing, ultra-Orthodox bloc). An impressive electoral victory for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in personal terms, but failure of his truly important mission — sufficient votes for a narrow government comprised of his political base of right-wing, ultra-Orthodox parties. Netanyahu desperately needs his own government for him to continue serving as prime minister throughout his trial.**
- **Gantz has already made his historic strategic decision. He made that decision shortly after the publication of the March 2 election results, which showed that Blue and White could form a minority government if at least 12 of the 15 newly elected lawmakers of the Arab Joint List were to vote in its favor. Gantz decided to forge ahead with this move, no matter the cost. Yisrael Beitenu leader, the hawkish Avigdor Liberman, offered his silent support.**
- **After the last election round in September 2019, Liberman hesitated to support such a government. With his visceral hostility toward the elected representatives of the country's 21% Arab minority, he finally decided against it. But the results of the March 2 election convinced Liberman that there was no other way. In order to free Israel from Netanyahu's chokehold, Liberman would have to swallow the bitter pill and cross what was until then a red line. He realized that the only way to crack Netanyahu's bloc of right-wing, ultra-Orthodox parties, which now comprises 58 Knesset members (out of 120), and to quash the specter of a fourth election, he would have to back a Gantz-led government, which would need the vote of at least 12 Arab lawmakers to be formed.**
- **Originally, the intention was to make do without the votes of three Knesset members of the nationalist Arab Balad party, which is one of the four constituent parties of the Joint List. Most Jewish Israelis cannot stomach the idea of a government backed by Balad, which disavows the principle of a Jewish state, espousing instead a multinational state, and is perceived as more radical than the other Arab parties. When doing the math, if the 12 Joint List Knesset members and Liberman's seven vote in favor of a center-left coalition led by Blue and White (without joining it), Gantz would have the support of 59 Knesset members to form a government, compared to the opposing bloc of 58. This scenario has Liberman joining the coalition at a later stage, once other parties start trickling out of the Netanyahu-led opposition to partake in the perks of government. Meanwhile, the government would be sworn in, Netanyahu would depart the official residence on Balfour Street and Gantz would move into the prime minister's office. Toppling a government requires the backing of 61 Knesset members so that a Gantz government might survive if Blue and White, a hodgepodge of disparate elements, displays a modicum of political skills.**

- Gantz knows that if fourth elections are held later this year, Netanyahu stands a good chance of garnering the coveted 61-seat Knesset majority. He now has to choose between two pledges he made to voters — to shun a government led by Netanyahu, who is under indictment for bribery, and his promise not to form a government that would be backed by the Arab parties. Gantz opted to violate his second promise. “We intend to form a government as quickly as possible, to swear it in as quickly as possible sometime in March and to send Netanyahu home,” a Blue and White leader told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity.
- However, declarations of intent are one thing, skillful execution is another. Recent days have landed a series of political disasters on Gantz that severely undermine his prospects of swearing in a minority government with the support of Arab Knesset members, a move with no precedent in Israeli history. In the face of aggressive pressure being brought to bear on Blue and White’s lawmakers by the political right, Gantz finds himself at a grave disadvantage.
- The first to crumble under pressure was Blue and White’s right-wing flank, Knesset members Zvi Hauser and Yoaz Hendel, who worked closely with Netanyahu in senior positions until he showed them the door in 2012 for exposing alleged sexual harassment by Natan Eshel, a loyalist of the Netanyahu couple. In 2018, the two joined the small Telem party led by former Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon, which subsequently merged with Blue and White. While Ya’alon reluctantly agreed to Arab backing for a narrow coalition, for the sake of ousting Netanyahu, Hauser and Hendel have reportedly refused to go along. Gantz reprimanded them, but he does not appear to have overcome their refusal to support a government backed by Arab legislators.
- The second blow came March 10, when Knesset member Orly Levy-Abekasis, who ran in this month’s election with Labor party leader Amir Peretz on a joint ticket with the left-wing Meretz party, announced that she would not back such a government either, reversing her previous stand. In interviews she gave in recent weeks, Levy-Abekasis said she would have no trouble serving in a government coalition backed by Arab votes. Levy-Abekasis, whose father David Levy was foreign minister in Netanyahu’s first government, appears to be making her way back to the Likud. That would boost Netanyahu’s bloc to 59 Knesset members, further eroding Gantz’s prospects of forming a minority government.
- Gantz has not given up. He enjoys the sweeping support of two members of the Blue and White leadership quartet — Ya’alon and centrist politician Yair Lapid (albeit stormy reservations on the part of Gabi Ashkenazi, the fourth quartet member) and is now examining prospects of all 15 Arab Joint List lawmakers voting in favor of a minority government. That should suffice if Knesset members Hauser and Hendel agree to abstain in the vote or absent themselves from the plenary, rather than voting nay. If Netanyahu had a 61-seat majority he would have sworn in a government without bothering to examine the identity of its supporters. Gantz is trying to do the same thing, but his prospects of success are slim.
- The latest developments have eroded the clear political advantage Gantz enjoyed over Netanyahu in recent days, and he now faces a dead end. Prospects of his success have plunged dramatically. Netanyahu knows he has probably scuttled a minority government. Gantz is left with the choice between agreeing to a fourth round of elections and joining a Netanyahu-led government in a power-sharing agreement of a rotating premiership. Senior Likud figures are now claiming that a blueprint proposed by President Reuven Rivlin last year, which would give Netanyahu first turn as prime minister for eight months, after which he would switch with Gantz, is no longer relevant. Netanyahu is now going for broke, demanding two full years on the job before handing over to

Gantz. That would place him in a position of power as he faces the three Jerusalem judges named to try him (with a trial set to open March 17), enabling him to conduct negotiations with the attorney general on a possible plea bargain as an incumbent prime minister. That goal now appears closer than ever. The rollercoaster of Israeli politics is charging forward at record speed. That, along with the coronavirus outbreak (almost 100 Israelis have been diagnosed with the disease), the looming economic crisis and ongoing political chaos, make for a state at a total impasse.

Summary: Gantz has not given up. He enjoys the sweeping support of two members of the Blue and White leadership quartet — Ya'alon and centrist politician Yair Lapid (albeit stormy reservations on the part of Gabi Ashkenazi, the fourth quartet member) and is now examining prospects of all 15 Arab Joint List lawmakers voting in favor of a minority government. That should suffice if Knesset members Hauser and Hendel agree to abstain in the vote or absent themselves from the plenary, rather than voting nay. If Netanyahu had a 61-seat majority he would have sworn in a government without bothering to examine the identity of its supporters. Gantz is trying to do the same thing, but his prospects of success are slim. The latest developments have eroded the clear political advantage Gantz enjoyed over Netanyahu in recent days, and he now faces a dead end. Prospects of his success have plunged dramatically. Netanyahu knows he has probably scuttled a minority government. Gantz is left with the choice between agreeing to a fourth round of elections and joining a Netanyahu-led government in a power-sharing agreement of a rotating premiership.

Strike Hard and Fast

By Nadav Eyal, commentator at Channel 13 News

- **The world is at an historic juncture. Yesterday a pandemic was declared, and we are in uncharted waters. The world has never before coped with such a pandemic, at a time when international connections are so strong, with businesses so interdependent, with different cultures so affected by one another.**
- **And Israel is at a dramatic juncture. It is a very crowded country, among the most crowded in the West. The number of people who became infected with the coronavirus tripled in less than a week. The coronavirus is a real threat. A lot of fake news has been circulating in the last few weeks, and it is important to put an end to it. Yesterday the Italian medical community set guidelines for who can be put on respirators and who cannot, even if they are not dead, including young people, and who will be barred entry from hospitals. And why is that? Because the hospitals are swamped with moderate and serious cases because of the pandemic. In some hospitals in northern Italy, which is wealthy and orderly, they didn't treat people who arrived after suffering a stroke for lack of manpower.**
- **They did not perform resuscitations. Italy went from 45 dead in early March to more than 800 yesterday. This is not—and was not—the flu, and in contrast to what the prime minister said last night, it is not only affecting the elderly. Israel said: we are not Italy. There has been no community spread of the virus, and the problem is with the people returning from overseas. Everyone was so focused on Ben Gurion Airport that they forgot to protect the home front. The hospitals. They did not permit coronavirus tests on patients. But anyone returning from overseas with a fever was tested.**
- **Israel is now at a critical juncture. Perhaps there will be divine intervention in the form of weather that will hurt the virus. But if that doesn't happen, the choice that Israel makes will decide the life or death of many. It will affect the economy for a long time. This is the choice. Israel can say: the virus is here, a double-digit percentage of the population will be infected, the hospitals will be swamped, but it can't be curbed. We have to do what we can, hospitalize who we can, postpone events, and hope for the best. This is how pandemics were handled in the past. It will take quite a lot of time, and it will be very painful.**
- **Or it can choose to follow the Asian model. Strike hard, and fast. Take extraordinary steps, shut down a great many spheres, try and locate every single patient, quarantine everyone who has been infected. This method is much more painful at first, but shows enormous achievements within a very short time. Not a single leading epidemiologist thought that the Chinese would emerge from the crisis so quickly, and they have begun to emerge. And even if the Chinese are not telling the full truth, there is the example of Taiwan (with 32 million people and 54 infected, and one death). Or Singapore, or South Korea, which have begun to stem the virus. Such measures mean that the government has to step up and take concrete action. It means stopping the ridiculous press conferences with the self-congratulatory compliments, and instead enlisting the muscles of the health system to carry out tests on an industrial scale, even drive-thrus, quarantining every patient, shutting down schools, ordering people to work from home, and more.**

- This is not an invention, or a proposal. This is the Asian war doctrine, and it worked. To that end, Israel needs a government, not a boy scout lesson on how to use a handkerchief. Not Litzman's accolades. Israel needs a government that drafts hundreds of doctors who are at home. A government that stops classes at medical schools and sends the students to run medical testing positions. And mainly—a government that never entertains the proposal that every light case of the coronavirus be “home-hospitalized,” in other words—only come to the hospital if they're in serious condition. The logic of the healthcare system is clear: they don't want patients with 37-degree Celsius fever sitting and playing backgammon and occupying a bed when they are in light condition. The logic of the HMOs is also clear—they want to be paid for “home hospitalization.” But continuing to throw the ball backwards to the citizen, without the state taking charge, could end very badly. Firstly, the illness lasts a long time, and often it gets worse.
- Secondly, people will not stay home, and at some stage they will show up at the hospitals, and then what have we gained? But most importantly: the report of the World Health Organization on China revealed how people are being infected. It is mainly by close contact, whether at home or at work. If someone with a light case of coronavirus stays home, they will infect their family. They, of course, will infect others, because Israel has not even closed school (in contrast to Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Italy and more and more). Asia's answer is that home hospitalization is possible only if there is no one else at home. But what they really want is to take every patient and quarantine them. If someone has a light case of the coronavirus, they can go and sleep in the stadium with the other coronavirus patients. In Israel's case, in guest houses and hotels. The main thing is that they not stay home and infect others. Mass home hospitalization is another way for the government to shirk its responsibility, and also raises a white flag.
- Somehow, we can hope that fewer people in Israel have been infected. That enough tests were conducted. That the weather will make it difficult for the virus to spread. That is the hope. The fact is because the government did not take aggressive action—the kind that did not recoil from taking tough steps that tackled the challenge head-on—the results so far have been very bad.

Summary: This is not an invention, or a proposal. This is the Asian war doctrine, and it worked. To that end, Israel needs a government, not a boy scout lesson on how to use a handkerchief. Not Litzman's accolades. Israel needs a government that drafts hundreds of doctors who are at home. A government that stops classes at medical schools and sends the students to run medical testing positions. And mainly—a government that never entertains the proposal that every light case of the coronavirus be “home-hospitalized,” in other words—only come to the hospital if they're in serious condition. The logic of the healthcare system is clear: they don't want patients with 37-degree Celsius fever sitting and playing backgammon and occupying a bed when they are in light condition. The logic of the HMOs is also clear—they want to be paid for “home hospitalization.” But continuing to throw the ball backwards to the citizen, without the state taking charge, could end very badly. Firstly, the illness lasts a long time, and often it gets worse.