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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, March 13

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News Excerpts

March 13, 2020

Times of Israel

Virus Cases Hit 126; Synagogues Curb Prayer; Schools and Theaters Shut

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Israel rose to 126 Friday morning — an addition of 17 new patients — as much of the country shut down and public life was severely curbed by the spread of the dangerous pathogen. The nation's schools and universities were also closed as of Friday morning until further notice, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on the public to “refrain as much as possible from gatherings in general.” Though preschools and kindergartens had been set to open, Haaretz reported that hundreds of teachers in those institutions had called in sick, in an apparent protest at the decision not to keep them shut as well. Theaters in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and around the country shut their doors for the foreseeable future amid a ban on gatherings of 100 people or more went into effect. See also [“Netanyahu announces all schools to be shuttered amid coronavirus pandemic” \(i24\)](#)

Ynet News

PM Calls for Emergency Government with Gantz to Tackle Coronavirus

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Thursday for Benny Gantz's centrist Blue & White party to join an emergency government to confront a growing crisis over the coronavirus, offering a potential way out of the deadlock that has paralyzed the political system for the past year. Gantz said in response that he was open to discussing the proposal. Netanyahu made the offer in a nationally televised address, saying the virus does “not differentiate” between Jews and non-Jews or between the political left and right. See also [“Netanyahu, Gantz start bickering over emergency government” \(JPost\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Gantz Calls for Unity With 'All Parts of House', including Arab Members

Kahol Lavan leader Benny Gantz and PM Netanyahu met Friday overnight to discuss the possible formation of a unity government to better confront the spread of the coronavirus in Israel, where the number of diagnosed cases rose to 126. In light of the situation, Gantz said, “we would be willing to discuss establishing a national emergency government that would include representation of all parts of the house.” According to a statement from Netanyahu's bureau on Friday morning, the premier stressed to Gantz during their nighttime meeting that “terror supporters” cannot be part of said government, neither in normal circumstances nor in emergency. The comment seems to be implicitly referring to members of the Arab-majority Joint List, the third largest party in the Knesset, which Netanyahu heavily vilified during Israel's numerous election campaigns over the last year.

Ynet News

2,479 Israeli Health Workers Currently in Quarantine

The Israeli Health Ministry confirmed that 2,479 healthcare workers have entered quarantine, as the number of confirmed coronavirus cases rose to 126 people on Friday morning. 1,174 hospital workers are in quarantine, as well as 171 MDA employees, 24 IDF healthcare workers, 93 psychiatrists, 128 geriatric care workers, 106 east Jerusalem healthcare workers, 20 administrative workers and 763 community staff. 949 doctors, 635 nurses, 127 assistants, 81 lab technicians, 64 logistic workers, 40 administrators, 83 pharmacists, 14 dietitians, 31 social workers, 108 physiotherapists, 171 paramedics, entered quarantine. See also, [“Coronavirus Quarantines Add to Tensions in Israel, West Bank” \(VOA\)](#)

El Al Halting Flights to Most Destinations as Virus Shuts Down Tourism

El Al said Thursday it was pausing flights to most areas of the world, but would maintain lines to the US, Canada, the UK, France and South Africa as the airline grapples with the coronavirus-induced wipeout of nearly all its business activities. The airline said it would gradually halt flights to Europe before Sunday, except for London and Paris. Flights to Boston and Mumbai will cease on Sunday; San Francisco, Moscow and Brussels on Monday; and Miami and Los Angeles on Wednesday. "We're following the situation and out of national responsibility we'll maintain regular air connections with New York, Newark, Toronto, London, Paris and Johannesburg for the purpose of transporting passengers and cargo," El Al CEO Gonen Usishkin said. El Al, Israel's largest airline, said Wednesday it would soon put some 80 percent of its workforce, or 4,000 employees, on indefinite unpaid leave. See also "[El Al to halt numerous flights, including some US airports](#)" (JPost)

Jerusalem Post

Majority of Israelis Believe Fourth Election is Imminent - Poll

Amid calls for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz to form an emergency unity government to combat the novel COVID-19 (coronavirus), a majority of Israelis believe that a fourth election is nevertheless unavoidable within the current "political plunder," a new poll published by Yisrael Hayom stated on Friday. When asked how the current political standoff will eventually be resolved, 40% of pollsters said that Israel will be going to a fourth election. Other than that, 19% said that they do not know how it will be solved, 19% believe a right-wing government will be established, and 9% believe that a minority government will be formed. The poll additionally asked which kind of government is preferred. A total of 31% of pollsters said that they prefer a broad unity government, while 26% said that they want a narrow right-wing government, 17% said they want a narrow unity government, 17% said they prefer a minority left-wing government led by Blue and White with the support of the Joint List.

Ha'aretz

U.S. State Dep. Report: Netanyahu, Likud Spread Hate of Arab Israelis

The U.S. State Department accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party of promoting hatred against Israel's Arab citizens in its annual human rights report, published on Wednesday. The report also criticized Likud for placing cameras at polling stations in Arab towns and neighborhoods during the general election in April 2019. The annual report contains a country-by-country breakdown of important events that impact the human rights situation around the world. This year's report made headlines because of a semantic change in how it refers to Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem – instead of calling them "Palestinian residents" as in previous reports, they are now "Arab residents" or "non-Israeli citizens," a move that was criticized by Palestinian leaders. However, a deeper read of the chapter devoted to Israel reveals that other parts within it will be less pleasing for the Israeli right wing. The report includes a subchapter on the rights of minority populations in Israel, as it does for many other countries. In the Israeli case, the government receives compliments for a growing trend of hiring Arab citizens to certain government positions, but there is also a direct reference to actions taken by Netanyahu's party during last year's election campaigns, which the report states had a negative impact on equality in Israel.

Systemic Collapse

By Ben Caspit political Commentator at Ma'ariv

- **At the end of another meeting with mutual praise between the prime minister and his ministers and aides, Netanyahu dropped a bombshell: I call for a national emergency government for a limited time, he said. He peppered the call with an apocalyptic description of the coronavirus crisis, with an expression that is reserved for historic national catastrophes. On the face of things, this is Netanyahu's dream come true. It is indeed an emergency government to deal with the coronavirus, but it is also a government to rescue Netanyahu. Benny Gantz will not receive the mandate to form a government, the Knesset speaker will not be replaced, Blue and White will not form and chair the Arrangements Committee, the bill to prevent a prime minister from serving under indictment will not become law, and Netanyahu will be able to breathe a sigh of relief as he becomes not only the father of the nation, but its physician too.**
- **A vicious dilemma awaits Blue and White's cockpit, and I'll get to that later. The coronavirus has closed the door on the dream and the promise of replacing Netanyahu in a calculated and surgical way. They aren't convinced that a national shutdown is really necessary, which is what Netanyahu is aiming for. They will have to make some tough decisions soon.**
- **Netanyahu knows that his fleeting glory as the new Nachman Shai [who famously calmed the public during the Gulf War as IDF spokesperson amid Scud rocket fire] is ultimately going to backfire on him. Interspersed between the lines of his speech yesterday was a good amount of apologetics. The pandemic will reach the entire world, the situation in Israel is relatively good, and so on. But this kind of spin has a short shelf life. In a few days, when the real state of the healthcare system becomes evident to everyone, the criticism will begin. When there aren't enough medical ventilators, the good folks will do the math and figure out how many medical ventilators could have been bought with the billion shekels that the prime minister's plane cost. This is an event similar to the great Carmel fire, only much more intense. Netanyahu is already preparing the excuses. The healthcare system was starved for resources and deteriorated on his watch. Trust him, he'll pin this, somehow, on Yael German.**
- **The necessary decision for Blue and White can be this: say yes to Netanyahu. A government for one year or until the coronavirus crisis is over, whichever comes first. The condition: only the Likud and Blue and White. Blue and White gets the justice, defense, communications and foreign affairs portfolios. Parity in the security cabinet. Key decisions related to diplomacy, security or the economy will be made by a majority of the security cabinet, or in a more limited forum composed on an equal footing. Most importantly, the wheels of justice system will continue to turn as usual, including the trials. That should be required in response to yesterday's report that Justice Minister Ohana has already authorized himself to put a halt to trials—because of the threat from the coronavirus, of course.**
- **Now let's skip to the political scene: everyone who has ever needed health care services is familiar with the much welcome and heightened presence of Arab citizens of Israel within the Israeli health care system. The number of Arab physicians has grown impressively in the past two decades. Arab surgeons are considered to be especially good. The number of male and female nurses who are Arab citizens of Israel is huge. They too are considered particularly**

dedicated, courteous, tolerant and efficient. If we descend in order for a second to the hospital orderlies and various support staffers, all the way to the cleaners, then it's clear that the Arab Israelis are really in control in the health care system. The Israeli health care system without Arab Israelis is unimaginable today. And we haven't said a word about pharmacists yet, have we?

- So now tell them that the party that represents them in the Knesset is forbidden from giving its support to forming a government. This party has been declared beyond the pale. It has been buried outside the fence. Israeli democracy does not recognize it. The prime minister of Israel, his sycophants and his allies, have made that party an illegitimate source of support (even from the outside!!). Now Netanyahu, who forged countless pacts with the Arab MKs over the years, including political bids and dramatic votes (no-confidence in 1995, dissolving the Knesset in 2019), and on and on, is has raised an outcry given the possibility that the Arab elected representatives might democratically vote a vote of confidence in a government (in which they will not be a part).
- Politically, Netanyahu is doing the right thing. Pinning the Joint List to Blue and White will do electoral damage to the Gantz brand. In Blue and White's internal polling, it turned out that the moment the Likud began its defamation campaign ("without Tibi, Gantz doesn't have a government"), Gantz began to lose ground and Bibi began to gain altitude. Fifty percent of the public bought those goods (which were entirely true, incidentally) and Blue and White immediately lost between three and four seats. The thing is that ethically, morally, democratically and nationally, Netanyahu's action was nothing short of despicable, to his everlasting disgrace.
- He knows how important it is to move the Arab MKs in the direction of the Arab public. He knows that that is hard. He knows that the Joint List's Palestinian nationalist agenda has been growing weaker and has been shunted aside in favor of the effort to integrate in Israel, to attain equality, to invest in education, personal safety, and the standard of living. He knows that perfectly well. Just recently, he dispatched Natan Eshel to write two articles about that. He personally spoke about that in countless times. Prosper, he told the Arab Israelis, come prosper and thrive and live with us. So now when they at last try to come, he banishes them, because it's politically inconvenient for him. After all, if he had to swear in a government with their votes, he wouldn't hesitate. This is another example of the man who will always prefer his own good over the country's welfare. What's good for him is good for the country.
- What did Netanyahu do until Thursday night? Nothing. He let Blue and White keep digging itself deeper into its quagmire. He enjoyed every second of that. He knew how lethal that was. He let Blue and White's leaders continue to tar and feather themselves and kicking their feet until they were completely covered. Now Blue and White is prepared to collaborate with Balad—which makes him very happy. He'll pick up the extra seats in the fourth election. That's his real objective.
- By Thursday evening he had milked that for what it was worth and decided, finally, to do what he should have done much sooner: call for a national emergency government. He didn't specify a time, he didn't stipulate seating arrangements, who would be ministers, how the composition would be determined, but he let it be understood that he obviously meant to lead the government himself. He put Blue and White's cockpit in a delicate situation: on the one hand, how could they say no to such an excited offer, particularly after Netanyahu described the situation in such

apocalyptic terms beforehand, as if we were on the verge of World War III? On the other hand, they would look very bad if now they came crawling into a government that Netanyahu would engineer around them, in order to serve as dull cardboard cutouts that would be swept offstage once the crisis was over. You wouldn't want to be in Blue and White's cockpit this morning.

- **Should they accept Netanyahu's offer? Should Gantz believe Netanyahu? Will he succeed? Can you believe someone when none of his other close associates have ever survived? Can a mechanism be formed that will allow Netanyahu and Gantz to work together without one of them trying to pickpocket the other? Is Netanyahu capable of learning from the vast accumulating experience in the cockpit, three retired IDF chiefs of staff and one defense minister, primarily in light of the fact that very soon the security establishment will be compelled to take responsibility for the coronavirus? I don't have the answer to those questions. One question is not and will not be in doubt: Netanyahu's overriding objective is to change the regime in Israel, to pass a French law [to delay prosecution until a politician leaves office], to delay the proceedings, to enact an override clause, and to continue to rule into perpetuity, or until Yair (not Lapid) is fit to succeed him.**

Summary: Politically, Netanyahu is doing the right thing. Pinning the Joint List to Blue and White will do electoral damage to the Gantz brand. In Blue and White's internal polling, it turned out that the moment the Likud began its defamation campaign ("without Tibi, Gantz doesn't have a government"), Gantz began to lose ground and Bibi began to gain altitude. Fifty percent of the public bought those goods (which were entirely true, incidentally) and Blue and White immediately lost between three and four seats. The thing is that ethically, morally, democratically and nationally, Netanyahu's action was nothing short of despicable, to his everlasting disgrace. He knows how important it is to move the Arab MKs in the direction of the Arab public. He knows that that is hard. He knows that the Joint List's Palestinian nationalist agenda has been growing weaker and has been shunted aside in favor of the effort to integrate in Israel, to attain equality, to invest in education, personal safety, and the standard of living.

Blood, Sweat and Gantz

By Nahum Barnea, commentator at Yedioth Ahronoth

- From the start of the coronavirus crisis, Netanyahu has adopted the worst-case scenario. That's how he always behaves; every mishap is an existential danger in his eyes, every threat is a Holocaust. Since meanwhile no one in the world knows with certainty where the epidemic will take us, the worst-case scenario sounds reasonable. Governments sometimes have to take harsh, brutal measures. If that is what will prevent a high Israeli death toll, very well. Who is in favor of eliminating the coronavirus [echoing Ariel Sharon's well-known cry, "who is in favor of eliminating terrorism?"]? All the Israelis together, as one.
- But then, towards the end of the speech, the magician suddenly drew a joker. The coronavirus will form a national emergency government for us, "as early as tonight." Gantz, Liberman, Peretz, Levy-Abekasis. This was so quick, so swift, I wasn't sure I had heard correctly. After all, no one is preventing Netanyahu from managing the coronavirus crisis as he sees fit, with his excellent ministers, Litzman and Rabbi Peretz, whom he has recently been praising frequently. A day previously, the message that came out of the Prime Minister's Bureau said the opposite: We don't want unity; we're going to a fourth round [of elections]. What changed? Certainly not the coronavirus.
- I am actually in favor of a joint government by the two large parties; it should have been formed long ago, after the first round. The election results made it imperative. But what does one thing have to do with another, what is the connection between the coronavirus and the legal and political imbroglio that has been ongoing for over a year? If I were Gantz, I would tell Netanyahu yes, I agree. I will be the prime minister and you will be high minister for coronavirus affairs. After all, this is a disaster the likes of which the world has not known. Only you, the experienced, well-connected and persuasive, will know how to fight it. Only you.
- In other words, Netanyahu has done it again. He raced forward with the speed of a jet fighter, performed a brilliant acrobatic maneuver, buzzed through the sky, and then crashed loudly into the credibility wall. Yes, there were a few other small things that impaired the blood-sweat-and-tears speech last night. The show he put on at the start, with the demonstrative instructions to separate two people in the room so that they did not infect one another, the scholarly lesson he gave in basic mathematics (the data from China and South Korea indicate otherwise), the used tissue he took out of his pocket, blew his nose in, returned to his pocket and took out again. The prime minister can afford to use a clean tissue. If he wants to serve an example to others, that is what he should do. This way, he will also guard his health, which is our health.
- The unity maneuver moved aside the problem that is our main concern: the coronavirus. We talk a great deal about the macro-medical and macro-economic aspects of the problem. It is slowly sinking into awareness that we are talking about much more than this—the effect on the individual, their work, their children's education, their leisure habits, their family and community life. The drastic change that hundreds of people in the Western world are currently undergoing is incomparable to anything else—not even to wars. A growing part of what politicians call "life itself" is being neutralized—and no one, including governments, has any idea whether it is a temporary crisis, a challenging vacation, a global holocaust or a minor footnote in the pages of

history. Citizens in democratic countries are complaining about having to operate under conditions of uncertainty. That is the lesser problem; the greater problem is that the governments giving them instructions are operating under conditions of uncertainty. They are shooting in the dark.

- Israel entered the coronavirus crisis in a relatively good situation. Sometimes it's best to be a villa in the jungle; a villa has a fence, and a fence has gates that can be locked. The lockup is not hermetic—the virus, by nature, does not stop at barriers, including the Ben Gurion Airport barrier, but it is easier to slow its penetration inside. A second advantage is that Israel has a universal healthcare system that knows how to take responsibility for all its citizens and residents. The healthcare system is one of the important assets that the state's founding fathers, members of the Labor movement, bequeathed to us. A third advantage is the experience that the Israelis have accumulated in coping with emergencies. This great advantage has one limitation: the Israelis have a short fuse. After a few weeks they get fed up. Perhaps that is the reason that Netanyahu needs Gantz in his government.

Summary: The unity maneuver moved aside the problem that is our main concern: the coronavirus. We talk a great deal about the macro-medical and macro-economic aspects of the problem. It is slowly sinking into awareness that we are talking about much more than this—the effect on the individual, their work, their children's education, their leisure habits, their family and community life. The drastic change that hundreds of people in the Western world are currently undergoing is incomparable to anything else—not even to wars. A growing part of what politicians call “life itself” is being neutralized—and no one, including governments, has any idea whether it is a temporary crisis, a challenging vacation, a global holocaust or a minor footnote in the pages of history. Citizens in democratic countries are complaining about having to operate under conditions of uncertainty. That is the lesser problem; the greater problem is that the governments giving them instructions are operating under conditions of uncertainty. They are shooting in the dark.