



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

March 18, 2020

Ynet News

Israel's Coronavirus Tally up to 337, with 5 in Serious Condition

Another twenty people have tested positive for coronavirus since the morning hours bringing the total number of infected in Israel to 324, with five patients remaining in a serious condition, health authorities reported on Tuesday. The Health Ministry said at least 234 patients are hospitalized, 20 are in the process of hospitalization, while 64 others are being treated at home. Thirteen others are still being evaluated to decide whether they will be treated at a hospital or at home. Eleven patients have recovered and have already been released from hospitals. The number represents a welcome increase as six Israelis were found to be free of the pathogen on Tuesday and are due to be discharged from Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv. See also ["Israel deploys cyber-monitoring against coronavirus, tells people not to leave home" \(Reuters\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Bennett Approves 2,500 IDF Reservists Enlisted to Fight Coronavirus

As the number of Israelis diagnosed with the coronavirus continued to climb, Defense Minister Naftali Bennett authorized the mobilization of another 2,500 IDF reservists to help deal with the continued spread of the deadly virus. The order came shortly after the Health Ministry called on Israelis to remain home unless absolutely necessary as the number of Israelis with the virus stands at over 300 individuals. The number of reservists authorized by Bennett are in addition to the 2,000 he authorized on Sunday for the Homefront Command which is working alongside Magen David Adom, the Health Ministry and other government bodies. See also ["Bennett lauds turning hotels into 'coronavirus recovery centers'" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

IDF Expects Crisis Could Last Up to a Year

The Israel Defense Forces are going on a war-footing to help Israel combat the coronavirus, believing that the crisis could last for several months and even up to one year, Channel 13 reported Tuesday. The military is drafting new orders that would give it the powers to act to help stem the crisis and was adapting its "Summer Cage" orders prepared for the event of a wide-scale earthquake, the TV said. This would allow the IDF to initially begin by assisting Israel's medical system, possibly setting up hospitals and taking in patients. It could also put its logistical capabilities, including vehicles, drivers and other facilities at the government's disposal.

Ha'aretz

Netanyahu: Israel to Massively Expand Coronavirus Tests

As the highly contagious novel coronavirus spreads around the world, Israel and the Palestinian Authority struggle to contain a local outbreak that has virtually halted air traffic in and out of Israel, led to school closures and tens of thousands of people entering quarantine. Bypassing the necessary approval from the Knesset, the government approved the tracking of cellphones by the Shin Bet security service in order to inform people who unwittingly came in contact with confirmed coronavirus patients in the two weeks prior to diagnosis. See also, ["Netanyahu urges more discipline from the public in the fight against the coronavirus" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Setup of 'Drive in' Coronavirus Testing Lab in Tel Aviv Begins

The Health Ministry on Tuesday started construction of a “drive-in” coronavirus testing center at Ganei Yehoshua (Yarkon) Park’s parking lot in Tel Aviv. Once the center is set up fully, anyone wishing to get tested can drive to the station and hand their DNA sample to the medical staff. They will receive the results via a text message within 36 hours. The main goal of the ministry is to conduct several thousands of tests for the coronavirus a day, at the facility. The center is expected to begin testing by Tuesday afternoon. The director of the hospital's special unit, Dr. Gadi Segal, said: "I hope that the more [previously infected] people return to normal life, the more people will realize that the disease can be beaten, and the more they obey Ministry of Health's guidelines, the more it will be eradicated." See also [“Israel's first drive through testing facility for coronavirus to open Wednesday” \(i24 News\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israel's Parliament Sworn In, but Paralyzed Due to Political Spat

Though the 23rd Knesset was sworn in Monday, in 40 batches of three lawmakers at a time, a combination of political wrangling and the coronavirus epidemic has left it paralyzed and so far unable to function. Members have yet to be appointed to Knesset committees, including crucial ones like the special committee on the handling of the coronavirus outbreak, the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and the Knesset Finance Committee. No legal arrangement has been found to allow the Knesset to hold a vote while complying with the Health Ministry directive prohibiting gatherings of more than 10 people. The arrangements committee, a key vehicle for Knesset activity between an election and the formation of a new government, has yet to be established due to disputes between the blocs. See also, [“Knesset at impasse as major factions bicker on committees” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Likud Denies it Tried to Shut Down the Knesset

PM Netanyahu's Likud Party vigorously denied reports on Tuesday that it had pushed to shut down the Knesset due to the coronavirus outbreak a day after its swearing-in. Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein convened a representative from each of the eight Knesset factions in two rounds on Tuesday. In the meetings, the party representatives fought over the makeup of committees in the Knesset that have yet to be formed. The first meeting with Likud, Blue and White, Joint List and Shas representatives ended in a clash. Likud wants equal representation, while Blue and White wants its 61-58 bloc advantage to apply in the committees. “We offered to build small committees, as the Health Ministry decided, with no more than 10 people, and they declined our offer because they want to have a majority,” Likud faction chairman Miki Zohar told The Jerusalem Post.

Times of Israel

Knesset Speaker to Okay Parliamentary Oversight of Virus Response

Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein on Tuesday said parliamentary panels would be formed to oversee the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, following withering criticism by the Blue and White party. Members of B&W came down hard on Netanyahu’s handling of the crisis on Tuesday, accusing him, and Edelstein, of obstructing parliamentary oversight. The centrist party on Tuesday sent an urgent letter to Edelstein, asking him to green light a plenary vote on Wednesday to form the parliament’s Arrangements Committee, which in turn, would staff the parliament’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Finance Committee, and create a special panel on the COVID-19 pandemic.

'Quiet, We're Sanitizing:' Security Agencies Tightening Grip on Israeli Lives

By Noa Landau political commentator at Ha'aretz

- At 1:30 A.M. Tuesday, in a lightning move carried out by phone, the cabinet of the transitional government approved the most draconian regulations in Israeli history for the mass-scale tracking of the movements of law-abiding citizens, by means that until now were reserved primarily for policing the population on the other side of the Green Line.
- The Netanyahu government, which officially lost its political mandate but is nevertheless amassing for itself broad authority in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, decided to throw off entirely the mechanisms of parliamentary oversight that still remained – i.e., the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee – and allow the gathering of coronavirus patients' personal data. It was done after the committee chairman, MK Gabi Ashkenazi of Kahol Lavan, dared forgo the prestigious role of rubber stamp and instead demanded that at the very least, a proper discussion of the issue be held prior to the regulations' approval.
- The cabinet also ignored the comments of the committee's legal advisers, who despite the time pressure managed to put together a well-reasoned opinion on the draft proposal – including numerous warnings about its contradictions and legal difficulties – only to see it disregarded. And so in the dead of night, approval was issued for the collection, in wholesale amounts, of the cellular geolocation data and additional “technological information” of citizens, without the parliamentary oversight that the Justice Ministry had explicitly promised the public.
- To put out the fire, the government's liberal protective suit, Deputy Attorney General Dina Zilber, was dispatched to explain to the media that the regulations will be returned to the Knesset committee for examination. Undoubtedly an effective step, after they were approved in any case.
- Throughout this “lightning round” approval process, with the exception of a few vague sentences by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu concerning “special digital measures,” no one gave the public a detailed picture of the plans and their implications. Only after the regulations themselves were entered into the official record – before their approval they were concealed by the authorities as classified – did the dimensions of the swindle become clear: Two separate types of regulations were approved, in effect separately, one for the Israel Police and one for the Shin Bet security service.
- The police were given unprecedented license to collect geolocation data, without a judge's warrant, for anyone merely suspected of having the coronavirus. The Shin Bet, which has no authority to intervene in a public health crisis, received the rare authority to gather any “technological information” about citizens, except for the actual content of phone conversations. In other words, not necessarily only location data. This could, for example, include the people on one's contact list, or with whom one corresponds and when, via every medium of communication. These two separate regulations can be extended repeatedly, as needed – or desired. One way or another, however, they will make their way to the Knesset in three months' time. If by that time there is a functioning legislature.

- As in the history books, most of the public – terrified, blackmailed emotionally and their lives disrupted – isn't even disturbed by this violation of fundamental democratic principles. The main thing is to defeat the "invisible enemy," as Netanyahu called the coronavirus. But history has also shown that giving nearly unlimited instruments to a nearly unlimited government under the cover of panic only leads to more and more such measures, which will also be done in the dark, with subterfuge. Many people believe that if they have nothing to hide, privacy isn't important. This is like saying that if one has nothing to say, they don't need the right to freedom of expression.
- Of course the pandemic is real and dangerous, and the public must be protected from it, in part through extraordinary measures. But there is a broad range of possibilities between going 1 kilometer per hour and 100, and for now there is no one to press the brakes and introduce some balance. The rest of the slide down this slippery slope is already in view: Under cover of the new, unofficial national anthem, "Quiet, We're Sanitizing" (instead of the now-nostalgic "Quiet, We're Shooting") there will be many more takeovers by the security agencies of our individual rights.
- For example, the police just created a special task force, one that includes police officers and Border Police combat troops, to enforce the Health Ministry directives. Among the scenarios for which the task force trained this week: dealing with violations of quarantine or lockdown. Are there any Israelis who aren't familiar with the usual deployment of Border Police, and what will happen if, after more than 50 years of enforcing the occupation, they are suddenly assigned to enforce a lockdown on the streets of Tel Aviv?
- The facilities in which people with mild cases of COVID-19 are to be placed will also be operated by the army, under Defense Minister Naftali Bennett, who for some reason decided independently to head medical projects that should have been reserved for the Health Ministry and not the Defense Ministry. We're talking about hotels, but under military guard. And that's only the beginning. Under the governmental contingency to declare a true emergency – a step that is not too far away – the army would be given the reins of the entire country. In natural-born militaristic Israel, the army is sometimes seen as more credible and more effective than other state authorities, certainly more than the political leadership. But the inherent danger in giving the army broad powers over civilians is enormous. For the first time, Israeli citizens could find themselves experiencing a bit of what the Palestinians have been undergoing for years. All, of course, for the sake of the nation's welfare. Just like in all the other situations that went wrong.

Summary: The police were given unprecedented license to collect geolocation data, without a judge's warrant, for anyone merely suspected of having the coronavirus. The Shin Bet, which has no authority to intervene in a public health crisis, received the rare authority to gather any "technological information" about citizens, except for the actual content of phone conversations. In other words, not necessarily only location data. This could, for example, include the people on one's contact list, or with whom one corresponds and when, via every medium of communication. These two separate regulations can be extended repeatedly, as needed – or desired. One way or another, however, they will make their way to the Knesset in three months' time. If by that time there is a functioning legislature.

Can Gantz form a Government as Israel Fights the Coronavirus? Should He?

By Raoul Wootliff, political commentator at Times of Israel

- Hours before the most surreal Knesset swearing-in ceremony in history Monday, with MKs inducted in 40 batches of three in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, President Reuven Rivlin, without any of the usual ceremonial trappings, officially tasked Blue and White chair Benny Gantz with forming a government. Accepting the mandate, Gantz vowed to cobble together a coalition as soon as possible. “I give you my word: I will do everything to establish within days, as few as I can, a national government, one that is as patriotic and broad as possible,” he said.
- With the virus changing both civil and political realities by the minute, even a few days is a long time. Since the March 2 election, an age ago, there had been fierce speculation about whether Gantz would be able to gain the backing of a majority of the lawmakers elected in order to form a government. On Sunday, the Blue and White leader answered part of that question by winning the recommendation of 61 MKs, including the entire Joint List of majority-Arab parties, when senior party members met with Rivlin.
- Netanyahu’s Likud won 36 Knesset seats in the March election to Blue and White’s 33, but the Likud leader’s right-wing bloc again failed to muster a parliamentary majority. Now that he has been given the opportunity by Rivlin, the question that remains is whether Gantz will be able to use that backing to form a government to replace Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s. And, crucially, whether — in the middle of a health crisis of epic proportions gripping both Israel and the world — he wants to.
- One potential option for Gantz would be to accept an offer by Netanyahu to join a national unity government, a move that would require him to forgo serving as prime minister for now and return the mandate to Rivlin. Late Sunday night, after Gantz had received the largest number of recommendations, Rivlin hosted both the Blue and White leader and Netanyahu for what he called an “urgent” three-way summit in an effort to encourage the two men to form an emergency unity government amid the coronavirus outbreak.
- Earlier in the day, Netanyahu went public with a pair of offers for a unity government with Gantz, urging the de facto opposition chairman to choose either to serve under him in a six-month emergency government or replace him after two years as part of a four-year rotational coalition. Gantz has said he supports an emergency unity government to tackle the coronavirus, but has claimed Netanyahu is not serious about the offers on the table. Following the meeting with Rivlin, the two released a joint statement saying that they “agreed that negotiating teams would meet soon.” And in the meantime, Gantz’s Blue and White has been actively working to oust Netanyahu.
- As the 23rd Knesset was being sworn in, Blue and White filed three pieces of legislation with that goal: the first would limit a prime minister to two terms in office — Netanyahu has served a total of four terms, plus two terms as transitional prime minister, meaning the law would disqualify him from continuing to serve; the second would bar people facing criminal charges from serving as ministers or prime ministers; the third would prohibit a lawmaker under

indictment from being tasked with forming a government. At the same time, Gantz has been making moves suggesting that he is indeed pursuing the option of forming a government that he would head.

- On Monday, Gantz phoned the leaders of most parties in the Knesset upon receiving the nod to form a government from Rivlin. However, despite his call for a “broad government,” he was given a cold shoulder from the three religious and right-wing parties, whose chairmen refused to meet him. Aryeh Deri and Yaakov Litzman, who chair the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties respectively, turned down Gantz’s request to sit down and work toward forming a government. According to a Blue and White statement, Deri told Gantz that he would let himself be represented by the “bloc,” a reference to the right-wing-religious bloc that consisted of 55 MKs after the September elections, when it stonewalled the centrist alliance by being only willing to negotiate as one and only willing to serve in a government under Netanyahu.
- That bloc of Likud, UTJ, Shas and Yamina is now three MKs larger, but still short of a 61-member majority — the number of recommendations that Gantz received from the Blue and White, Labor-Gesher-Meretz, Yisrael Beytenu and Joint List parties on Sunday, giving him the first opportunity to form a government.
- Also rejecting a meeting with Gantz was Yamina chairman Naftali Bennett, who conditioned such a sit-down on the Blue and White leader denouncing the support he had received from the Joint List, who Bennett claimed are “supporters of terror.” If those parties remain true to their word to stick by Netanyahu — particularly likely during the ongoing virus crisis — Gantz’s only realistic path to a coalition appears to be a center-left minority government backed from the outside by the Joint List.
- In Israel, minority governments are rare. The few cases of minority governments took place after one or more factions withdrew from a coalition mid-term, as happened with the 1992 Yitzhak Rabin government after the withdrawal of Shas, and the 1999 Ehud Barak government after the withdrawal of Meretz, the National Religious Party and Shas. No minority government has ever been formed immediately following elections. Nevertheless, the relevant Basic Law does not explicitly state that a new government must enjoy the support of an absolute majority of Knesset members. The establishment of a minority government right after parliamentary elections, while unprecedented in Israel, is thus theoretically an option.
- In principle, the candidate whom the president grants the right to form a government does not need a majority of 61 to do so. All that is really needed is a situation in which more MKs vote in favor of the government than against it. Gantz could therefore form a government made up of his Blue and White (33 seats), the hawkish Yisrael Beytenu (7 seats) and dovish Labor and Meretz (6 seats without Gesher leader Orly Levy-Abekasis, who has said she will vote against a minority government), with support from outside of the coalition from most or all of the Arab lawmakers of the Joint List (15 seats). If all Blue and White MKs backed it — and two have indicated they would not — such a government would have 59 votes in favor, to 58 opposing.
- Minority governments are quite common in democracies such as Canada, Denmark, Sweden and Spain, and minority governments are currently serving in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway, Spain and Sweden. It is clear, however, that such a government would be very shaky. The coalition would not have a Knesset majority and thus would have to constantly bargain for the support of other factions in order to pass laws and other decisions.

- Responding to Netanyahu’s initial offer of an emergency unity government, Gantz said last week that such a government would have to include elements from all political sides. “Blue and White, under my leadership, has thus far backed and will continue to back the common struggle against the coronavirus epidemic and its consequences,” Gantz wrote on Facebook. “In light of the situation, we will be willing to discuss the formation of a broad national unity government that would include representation of all parts of the house. We will make every effort to advance this step for the benefit of Israel’s citizens and the country.”
 - The mention of “representation of all parts of the house” was widely interpreted as a hint that Gantz would insist on the inclusion in an emergency government of the Joint List. Israel’s Arab lawmakers have long refused to join a government on ideological grounds, rooted in their support for the Palestinians. Jewish lawmakers have, reciprocally, seen the Arab parties as beyond the pale and generally refrained from including them in coalition calculi. Under its current leader, Ayman Odeh, however, segments of the Joint List have softened their opposition to such a partnership.
 - The relationship between the Jewish and Arab lawmakers, nonetheless, remains highly strained, marred by mutual distrust and disagreements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, West Bank settlement-building and Zionism. The tensions have been exacerbated by comments by some hard-line Joint List members that appear to support terrorism and violence against Israelis, as well as increasingly strident rhetoric about the Joint List, and the Arab Israeli community in general, from Jewish politicians, including Netanyahu.
 - Outside of the possibility of a unity government, forming a minority government with the backing of the Joint List is a controversial prospect, one that before the election Gantz vowed he would not pursue. And vocal opposition by rightist members of Blue and White, MKs Zvi Hauser and Yoaz Hendel, along with Labor-Gesher-Meretz’s Levy-Abekasis, appeared to reduce the likelihood of that scenario. It had still not been ruled out before the coronavirus crisis took center stage. A long week ago, Hauser and Hendel were reportedly given an ultimatum: Back the formation of a minority government relying on the outside support of Joint List, or resign from the Knesset.
- **Summary:** The mention of “representation of all parts of the house” was widely interpreted as a hint that Gantz would insist on the inclusion in an emergency government of the Joint List. Israel’s Arab lawmakers have long refused to join a government on ideological grounds, rooted in their support for the Palestinians. Jewish lawmakers have, reciprocally, seen the Arab parties as beyond the pale and generally refrained from including them in coalition calculi. Under its current leader, Ayman Odeh, however, segments of the Joint List have softened their opposition to such a partnership. The relationship between the Jewish and Arab lawmakers, nonetheless, remains highly strained, marred by mutual distrust and disagreements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, West Bank settlement-building and Zionism. The tensions have been exacerbated by comments by some hard-line Joint List members that appear to support terrorism and violence against Israelis, as well as increasingly strident rhetoric about the Joint List, and the Arab Israeli community in general, from Jewish politicians, including Netanyahu.