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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, March 19

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News Excerpts

March 19, 2020

AP

With Draconian Clampdown, PM Accused of Exploiting Corona Crisis

With the Israeli government enacting a series of emergency measures to stem the spread of the new coronavirus, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is facing growing accusations that he is exploiting the crisis to entrench himself in power and undermining the country's democratic foundations. Amid a wave of sweeping restrictions that have put Israel in near shutdown mode, Netanyahu has managed to postpone his own pending criminal trial, authorize unprecedented electronic surveillance of Israeli citizens and block parliament from pressing ahead with legislation aimed at pushing him from office. See also ["Netanyahu's Bold Moves: Fighting a Virus or Risking Democracy?" \(New York Times\)](#)

Times of Israel

Number of Confirmed Virus Cases hits 529 as Testing Ramps Up

The number of Israelis diagnosed with coronavirus rose to 529 Thursday morning, a spike of 96 new cases from a day earlier, the Health Ministry said. The last two days alone have seen almost 200 new confirmed cases, with the sharp rise at least partially attributable to increased testing throughout the country. Six of those ill were in serious condition, 13 were in moderate condition and the rest were doing well. The six serious cases are reportedly all elderly patients with previous medical conditions. So far, the Health Ministry has confirmed that 12 people have fully recovered from the virus. The ministry's latest daily numbers were issued several hours later than usual, with officials saying the update was delayed by an increase in tests and testing facilities that led to more data to parse through. See also ["529 Israelis have been diagnosed with coronavirus - Health Ministry" \(JPost\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

High Court to Hear Petitions Against Shin Bet's Coronavirus Surveillance

The High Court of Justice will hear three petitions on Thursday early afternoon to freeze the Shin Bet's (Israel Security Agency) surveillance of citizens infected with the coronavirus until Knesset oversight is put in place. The surveillance went into effect on Tuesday based on a government decision, but without a Knesset sign-off, when the Knesset Intelligence Subcommittee headed by top Blue and White official Gabi Ashkenazi demanded further clarifications. Initially, Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit had said the Shin Bet surveillance would not start without a Knesset sign-off, but he later reversed himself, saying that political delays in the Knesset's functioning made waiting impossible and could put lives in danger. See also, ["Knesset Plenum on Lockdown, Gantz Goes to High Court" \(Hamodia\)](#)

i24 News

Rivlin to Edelstein: Adjourning Knesset 'Undermines Israeli Democracy'

Israel's President Reuven Rivlin issued a stark warning to the speaker of the Knesset (Parliament) Yuli Edelstein that adjourning the body is "undermining Israeli democracy." In addition to Rivlin's warning, the Blue and White faction - whose leader Benny Gantz has a mandate to form a government and nominally commands the support of a majority of the parliament - has now asked for an emergency meeting with President Rivlin to protest Likud's suspension of proceedings. Blue and White has led calls for the election of a new Knesset speaker to replace Edelstein, who now prevents of the formation of the organizing committee hampering the establishment of Knesset oversight committees.

Mossad Procures Test Kits for COVID-19, but Without Vital Swabs

The Mossad spy agency procured 100,000 coronavirus testing kits and are expected to obtain millions more, even as the Health Ministry said the kits they received were missing the swabs needed to conduct the tests. Israel's legendary spy agency is not normally tasked with procurement but stepped in to assist the health authorities. Mossad would not say where the kits were purchased but claims the same contacts are still being used. "Unfortunately, what Mossad has delivered is not what we are in need of," Health Ministry Deputy Director-General Prof. Itamar Grotto told Ynet. Mossad said it is coordinating needs with the ministry and will purchase supplies as instructed. On Wednesday, the founder of the online shopping giant Alibaba Jack Ma told Israel's ambassador to China that he will provide the country with tens of thousands of testing kits and other medical supplies. See also ["Mossad brought 100,000 'unuseable' coronavirus test kits to Israel" \(JPost\)](#)

Simple Flying

EI Al To Operate 16 Hour Boeing 787 Rescue Flights To Peru

Israel's EI Al is flying to Lima tonight to rescue around 1,000 stranded Israelis. It will be a marathon effort involving four Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners and 16 hour plus flight times, making them the longest flights ever flown by EI Al. AeroNews is reporting the story. The report says there will be four departures from Tel Aviv tonight. The aircraft will touch down in Lima tomorrow before heading back to Israel mid-afternoon. But all is not going smoothly. The Jerusalem Post is saying that some 600 of the young Israelis are being stopped from leaving Cusco. The newspaper reports that the city and its airport is closed and no-one is allowed to leave. Israel's Foreign Minister, Israel Katz, has urged its citizens to leave Latin America, having said; "As a result of the steps Latin American countries are taking to combat the corona epidemic, the transportation options, particularly outbound flights, are shrinking." See also, ["Israel evacuates backpackers stranded in Peru" \(JNS\)](#)

Reuters

Israel Deploys Cyber-Monitoring Against Virus, Tells People to Stay Home

The Israeli government began deploying cellphone-monitoring technology against the coronavirus on Tuesday, and issued directives urging people not to leave home. Netanyahu's cabinet approved emergency regulations that will enable the Shin Bet internal security service to tap into cellular data to retrace the movements of people infected by the virus. The data, customarily used for anti-terrorism, will be used by the Health Ministry to locate and alert those who have been in their vicinity, the government said. Such cyber monitoring would normally require parliamentary ratification and judicial oversight. Netanyahu, who announced the measure on Monday, circumvented the process by invoking the emergency orders. See also, ["Jerusalem prepares for mass closure, says mayor" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Police Tried Stopping Caravan Protesting 'Assault on Democracy'

The police blocked protesters traveling in hundreds of cars swathed in black flags against Israel's strict measures to contain the coronavirus outbreak from reaching the Knesset on Thursday. The police later allowed several of the protesters to continue on to Jerusalem. officers stopped the caravan on a main highway outside Jerusalem, and fined some of them for what they said was an illegal protest. "There are orders from the Jerusalem district commander that you cannot enter the city," one of the officers blocking the road said. Asked why the protest is illegal the officer replying "because it is."

Democracy Isn't a Game Either

By Nahum Barnea political commentator at Yedioth Ahronoth

- **With all the Israeli system of government's weaknesses, there was one thing that was upheld without dispute: honoring the results of the ballot box. Rabin vacated his seat for Begin; Shamir vacated his seat for Rabin; Peres vacated his seat for Netanyahu; Netanyahu vacated his seat for Barak; Barak vacated his seat for Sharon; Olmert vacated his seat for Netanyahu. None of them liked it when they had to move their possessions out of Balfour Street, but each of them understood that there was no other way—until now. What's at stake in this juncture in time is not only the law, justice and the rules of the game, but the citizens' very faith in the system of government, in the country. To quote Netanyahu on a different topic this week: this isn't a game.**
- **The March 2020 election was the first in which the ruling party did not reconcile itself with the outcome. It's been 17 days since the election, and the Likud has refused to recognize the results. It happened right after the polls closed, when associates of the prime minister started a campaign on social media against the Central Elections Committee and the judge who chaired it, arguing that the election had been marred by voter fraud. That was a deliberate lie, fake news courtesy of Balfour Street, as one of them later admitted. In the second stage, they proposed to MKs from the center-left bloc that they defect to the right-wing bloc. When that didn't work either, they turned to the coronavirus for help.**
- **The result is truly unprecedented: Israel does not have a duly elected government, the elected Knesset has been neutralized, and the courts are subject to the good graces of an appointed justice minister. This huge void is being filled by one man: there is no debate, no oversight, no balance, no control. We resemble Russia: from now on, don't say Binyamin Netanyahu, rather say Binyamin Putinyahu.**
- **Let there be no room for doubt: in terms of substance, the coronavirus crisis has nothing to do with the trampling of democratic procedure. The trampling began before the crisis. The crisis is just an excuse. As with the coronavirus, the number of carriers exceeds the number of sick people. We're having trouble realizing that the disease is nesting within us.**
- **This situation is dangerous when times are calm and even more dangerous in an emergency, when the public's confidence in the government's decisions is of crucial importance. Every night I've watched the announcements that the prime minister has given from the lectern (they call these events press conferences, even though they are far from being conferences and the press is nowhere to be found—only monologues from the hero), and I hope with all my heart that the viewers believe him. I find that difficult: Netanyahu has cried wolf so many times that I have trouble believing him even when the wolf is real.**
- **I find it hard to believe him when he highlights his and Israel's magnificent achievements in dealing with the crisis, because the facts, unfortunately, state the opposite. The public is not to blame for the testing kit fiasco, for opening the gates of Ben Gurion Airport to the virus, and for abandoning the medical teams. Israel had good statistics in the outset compared to other countries, and it squandered them. I would respect him more if he were to say: we made mistakes, and now we're fixing them.**

- In addition to compromising his own credibility, he's also been compromising the credibility of the Health Ministry's senior officials. It seems as if someone told them, "The Israelis think they're on a coronavirus vacation. Scare them: they'll only stay at home if you scare them to death." And then Health Ministry Director General Moshe Bar Siman Tov, a normally level-headed person, goes and announces "several thousand deaths." If that's the forecast, then we're in much worse shape than Italy. Meanwhile, not one person in Israel has died [of the coronavirus]. It's not time to start digging graves in public parks yet.
- Maybe this sounds petty, but we're allowed to expect that someone who preaches to others observe a few basic rules of caution. Senior Health Ministry officials have been talking into microphones that have gotten wet with the spittle of earlier speakers, touching contaminated surfaces with their hands, and then they astonishingly talk about social distancing while physical proximity is having a field day in the see-through TV studio behind them. The ministers arrange their chairs like it's a children's game, but right after the event they huddle together (at least Litzman isn't there anymore. He sets his personal example in the yeshivas of Bnei Brak).
- The coronavirus will eventually disappear, but democracy never restarts at zero: the disruptions happening now, under cover of the coronavirus, will not be easily repaired. That is why we must deal with the coronavirus as if a terror attack on democracy were not taking place before our eyes, and we must fight for democracy as if there were no coronavirus [alluding to David Ben-Gurion's World War II-era call to support the British as if they had not restricted Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine and to oppose the restrictions as if there were no war].

Summary: The result is truly unprecedented: Israel does not have a duly elected government, the elected Knesset has been neutralized, and the courts are subject to the good graces of an appointed justice minister. This huge void is being filled by one man: there is no debate, no oversight, no balance, no control. We resemble Russia: from now on, don't say Binyamin Netanyahu, rather say Binyamin Putinyahu. Let there be no room for doubt: in terms of substance, the coronavirus crisis has nothing to do with the trampling of democratic procedure. The trampling began before the crisis. The crisis is just an excuse. As with the coronavirus, the number of carriers exceeds the number of sick people. We're having trouble realizing that the disease is nesting within us.

For the First Time Ever, Israeli Democracy Has Been Shut Down

By Anshel Pfeffer, commentator at Ha'aretz

- **At half-past three in the afternoon on Wednesday, March 18, 2020, Israel came the closest it's ever been to a total failure of parliamentary democracy. A majority of the Knesset members who had been elected just 16 days earlier and sworn in only on Monday, demanded an immediate vote on appointing a new Knesset speaker and empaneling committees to oversee the government's actions in this moment of acute global crisis. But Yuli Edelstein, the speaker of the former Knesset, who still has control of parliamentary procedure until a new speaker is elected, adjourned the Knesset until next Monday.**
- **By next Monday, Israel may well be under total shutdown due to the coronavirus. In charge will be a government that was inaugurated way back in May 2015 on the basis of an election that took place five years ago this week, and a prime minister who has failed in three consecutive elections over the last 12 months to win a majority and the Knesset's confidence. Netanyahu has been a caretaker prime minister leading an interim government for 15 months now. And this is now a minority government shutting down the country and ordering draconian invasions of privacy while its representatives prevent any form of parliamentary oversight, and while Benny Gantz has already been endorsed by a majority of MKs to form a new government.**
- **Israel has never in its history been even close to a coup. In the early months of the state's existence, senior members of the Irgun underground urged their leader Menachem Begin to take power by force. Begin, whether because he knew he would be crushed by the Haganah's far superior military units or because he truly believed in democracy, rejected these ideas and resigned himself to 29 years of irrelevancy in opposition under a domineering Mapai (Labor) government.**
- **In 1967, as the generals of the IDF pressured Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to stop hesitating and give the order to attack the troops that Egypt was amassing on the southern border, Maj. Gen. Ariel Sharon muttered to his colleagues in the General Staff that they should lock the cabinet ministers in and announce to the nation that the military had taken control. But none of the other generals took him seriously.**
- **Ten years later, in 1977, when Begin, after eight consecutive defeats, finally won an election, there were those in Likud who feared that Labor had gotten too used to being in office to ever relinquish power. But the government changed hands in orderly fashion. For all the limits to its democracy, Israel's elections and parliamentary process have worked since the first election in 1949. Labor has held power for half the time, Likud and the short-lived Kadima party for the rest. Governments have come and gone. Prime ministers have been held to account and in Ehud Olmert's case, even gone to prison. The system has worked.**
- **Since the April 2019 election, the first one in Israeli political history not to yield a new government, the system has been stuck. Today, it is perilously close to breaking down. For the first time, a majority of newly-elected Knesset members have been blocked by an outgoing minority government from exerting in parliament the will of the voters.**
- **Likud claims that this is just a temporary, coronavirus-induced hiccup. The Knesset will soon be reconvened and anyway, Gantz may have received the mandate but he doesn't currently**

seem to have a coalition, so Netanyahu's is the only government, and it's busy dealing with the pandemic. Besides, they argue, the opposition only wants to take control of the Knesset to pass "personal laws" targeting an indicted prime minister.

- Edelstein protests that he is only carrying out the will of the public, which he has divined as being in favor of "unity," and therefore he is taking refuge in a contested interpretation of the bylaws to delay a vote that would "interfere" with the negotiations he claims to be mediating between Likud and Kahol Lavan.
- Whether or not these protestations are sincere, or, as looks much more likely, they are a campaign of obstruction by Netanyahu's proxies to keep him in power, they of course have no merit. The minority coalition has no business suspending parliament, no matter what the majority plans on doing with its votes. Sixty-one Knesset members isn't an incidental majority and it doesn't need to support a coalition to carry out its parliamentary business. Israelis in their elections don't vote for a government, a coalition or a prime minister. They vote for Knesset parties and those parties' members are the sole sovereigns of democratic power in Israel.
- For now, Edelstein, at Netanyahu's behest, has suspended Israeli democracy for the first time in its history. Potentially, Israel is now facing its biggest constitutional crisis ever. This may prove to be a brief hiatus that will either be ended by the Supreme Court on Thursday or on Monday, if the Knesset is indeed reconvened then. But for now – and the clock is ticking – Israeli democracy has been shut down.

Summary: By next Monday, Israel may well be under total shutdown due to the coronavirus. In charge will be a government that was inaugurated way back in May 2015 on the basis of an election that took place five years ago this week, and a prime minister who has failed in three consecutive elections over the last 12 months to win a majority and the Knesset's confidence. Netanyahu has been a caretaker prime minister leading an interim government for 15 months now. And this is now a minority government shutting down the country and ordering draconian invasions of privacy while its representatives prevent any form of parliamentary oversight, and while Benny Gantz has already been endorsed by a majority of MKs to form a new government. Israel has never in its history been even close to a coup. In the early months of the state's existence, senior members of the Irgun underground urged their leader Menachem Begin to take power by force. Begin, whether because he knew he would be crushed by the Haganah's far superior military units or because he truly believed in democracy, rejected these ideas and resigned himself to 29 years of irrelevancy in opposition under a domineering Mapai (Labor) government.