



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, March 20

Headlines:

- **Israel Confirms 700 Corona Cases; 10 in Serious Condition**
- **Teva Donates Potential Coronavirus Treatment to US**
- **Innovative Diagnostic Method for Coronavirus Developed**
- **Gantz Eyes Unity with Netanyahu, Risking Blue & White Split**
- **High Court: Virus Surveillance Must Have Knesset Oversight**
- **Israeli Workforce Suffers as Coronavirus Hits Businesses**
- **Bibi Tells Israelis: Now it's an Order - You Must Stay at Home**
- **Chief Justice Criticizes Edelstein for Closure of Knesset**

Commentary:

- **Ma'ariv: "Coronacracy"**
 - By Ben Caspit
- **Jerusalem Post: "What is Netanyahu Fighting For?"**
 - By Ehud Olmert

News Excerpts

March 20, 2020

Ha'aretz

Israel Confirms 700 Corona Cases; 10 in Serious Condition

705 Israelis have so far tested positive for the novel coronavirus, known as COVID-19, with the vast majority of cases mild and 15 recoveries. Ten patients are in serious condition. In the West Bank, 48 cases have been diagnosed so far, and 17 were cured, the majority of them in Bethlehem. Another 3,900 Palestinians have been placed in quarantine. Israel's government approved additional measures to limit movement of citizens and trade, shuttering cultural and recreational establishments as well as schools and universities and banning gatherings of over 10 people. All foreigners are not allowed to enter Israel, unless they can prove they are able to self-quarantine for 14 days upon their arrival.

Jerusalem Post

Teva Donates Potential Coronavirus Treatment to US

As the coronavirus is spreading across the world, and the number of people infected is increasing everyday, there is an urgent need to find treatments against COVID-19 that could reduce complications and improve recovery. Recently, the Israeli Health Ministry has approved multiple experiment treatments, and companies worldwide are attempting to determine what could be used to treat COVID-19. As such, Israeli pharmaceutical company, Teva, has announced that they will donate more than 6 million doses of hydroxychloroquine sulfate tablets through wholesalers to hospitals across the United States, from March 31. Over 10 million tablets are expected to be shipped within a month. The tablets are approved by the FDA for the treatment of malaria, lupus erythematosus and rheumatoid arthritis. The tablets are currently under investigation to determine their efficacy against the coronavirus and US government officials have asked for the immediate availability and use.

Jerusalem Post

Innovative Diagnostic Method for Coronavirus Developed

Israeli researchers are at the forefront of medical innovation to offer new solutions in the fight against the novel coronavirus outbreak. British company diagnostics.ai, whose research and development is entirely based in Herzliya, is already providing labs in the UK and US with their advanced diagnostic technique, employing artificial intelligence for faster and more accurate results, Brian Glenville, chairman of diagnostics.ai and former head of heart surgery at Hadassah-University Medical Center, told The Jerusalem Post. To perform the test, a biological specimen of the patients, for example, saliva or blood, is put into a machine called thermal cycler, which heats and cools the material 30 or 40 times until the DNA or RNA fragments in the specimen have split. The fragments then join to a molecule of fluorescent light.

Gantz Eyes Unity with Netanyahu, Risking Blue & White Split

Kahol Lavan leader Benny Gantz is inclined to form a unity government with Benjamin Netanyahu serving as prime minister first in a rotation, despite Gantz's suspicions of his rival and even at the price of breaking up Kahol Lavan, political sources said. Gantz is conditioning the move on the enacting of a law to ensure that the rotation takes place on a set date. Earlier this week, Gantz said his broad unity government would "heal Israeli society of the coronavirus, as well of the virus of hatred and division." But former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, one of Kahol Lavan's four leaders, refuses to join a unity government led by Netanyahu, even if an agreement on setting up such a cabinet is reached with Likud, the sources said. Ya'alon declined to comment. The sources said another of Kahol Lavan's top four, former military chief Gabi Ashkenazi, told Gantz he would not join a government supported by the Joint List of Arab parties.

High Court: Virus Surveillance Must Have Knesset Oversight

In a dramatic decision, the High Court of Justice said Thursday that it would shutter the government's new mass surveillance program if Israel's parliament fails to establish parliamentary oversight over it within five days. On Thursday, Israel's secretive Shin Bet security service was ordered to begin tracking the movements of Israelis in an effort to keep tabs on the spread of the new coronavirus through the population. The tracking, done through the location data of Israelis' cellphones, aims to alert and order into quarantine people who, in the previous two weeks, were within two meters for 10 minutes or more of someone who turns out to have the virus. The new measures use cyber tracking technology previously only permitted for use in surveilling terror suspects. Rights groups and political activists have panned the Likud-led government for instituting the policy, noting that the continuing political deadlock in the Knesset has prevented the establishment of parliamentary committees to oversee the unprecedented new surveillance powers.

Israeli Workforce Suffers as Coronavirus Hits Businesses

Almost 400,000 people have registered as unemployed in Israel since the start of March as coronavirus restrictions hit businesses hard. Almost 90 percent of those new claimants were put on unpaid leave and many fear they may never recover financially. On Wednesday alone, more than 60,000 people applied for assistance - a rate of 4,700 new applicants an hour. Economists estimate that by the end of the month up to 700,000 people will be out of work in Israel, requiring around NIS 5 billion (\$1.3 billion) in assistance every month. With economic uncertainty and no end to the crisis in sight, many of the newly unemployed have found they are not informed of their rights or what help they can expect to receive from the government.

Bibi Tells Israelis: Now it's an Order - You Must Stay at Home

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday announced authorities would begin taking legal action against Israelis who leave their homes in violation of strict Health Ministry directives aimed at containing the coronavirus. "Yesterday I asked you to listen to the Health Ministry directives and stay at home," Netanyahu said in a televised statement from his office. "The government will approve emergency ordinances tonight to limit movement." "This isn't a request, this isn't a recommendation, but a binding requirement that will be enforced," he added. Netanyahu said the new regulations of the instructions come into effect immediately after their approval and will last for a period of seven days, but the existing regulations were in effect until April 20. Netanyahu acknowledged the move was "unlike any since the founding of the State of Israel," but said the country has never before faced anything like the coronavirus.

Chief Justice Criticizes Edelstein for Closure of Knesset

Supreme Court President Esther Hayut fired a warning shot across the bow of Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein on Thursday, demanding to know, "Why can't the Knesset open today?" Technically, she was sitting on a panel of justices addressing the constitutionality of the new Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) surveillance of citizens infected with the coronavirus. But the hearing ended up intertwining inextricably with related petitions connected to the fight between the Likud's Edelstein and Blue and White about forming Knesset committees. Blue and White demanded the committees open already Wednesday, including the Intelligence Subcommittee to oversee the Shin Bet's new surveillance powers. Edelstein preferred to wait until next Monday in hopes of reaching a deal between Likud and Blue and White that could also prevent his ousting as speaker.

Coronacracy

By Ben Caspit

- **We have not yet reached the end of democracy yet, we're headed in that direction. Something simple is happening here: there is an attempt to hijack Israeli democracy and nationalize it for the needs of a single family. Now is the time to invoke the Hannibal protocol [a military order that determines how to respond when hostile forces abduct a soldier]. The accumulation of the events of the past two weeks, each one of them unbelievable on its own, leaves no room for doubt. On land, air and sea, by every means and measure: the aerial umbrella is being provided by the coronavirus, which constitutes an excuse to demolish the legislative and judicial branches, subordinate all of the rules and principles to the decisions of one man, and silence everyone who thinks otherwise. Incidentally, more than half of the public thinks otherwise, at least based on the last election results.**
- **As Ma'ariv Online reported yesterday, the surreal petition that the Likud lodged against the election results is also part of this bid. MK David Bitan, who represented the Likud on the Central Elections Committee and served as its vice chairman, declined to sign the petition and append a statement. They called up Shlomo Karhi for that. Bitan also disobeyed an order from Balfour Street to vote in the committee against confirming the election results. Alternatively, they gave him instructions to abstain. So he abstained, but he let it be known for the record that his true opinion was different. The point of this petition is obvious: to create feelings that the election was stolen. To undermine the legitimacy of another institution that forms the foundation of democracy. To put wind in the sail that is supposed to steer the pirate ship that will soon claim that Blue and White's very wish to exercise its advantage [in terms of blocs] in the Knesset (61-59) for the purposes of legislation or replacing the speaker, as is customary, is illegitimate.**
- **Netanyahu broke the record yesterday when he accused Blue & White of scheming to exploit the (paralyzed) Knesset for political objectives. For your information, Mr. Prime Minister: that's what the Knesset was made for. People engage in politics there. They form governments, topple governments, enact laws, employ political leverage and implement the will of the electorate. Anyone who tries to undo all that is sabotaging democracy. The person trying to undo it is you. Your envoy is one of your most devoted and pathetic servants, citizen number two, outgoing Knesset Speaker Edelstein. This week Edelstein charged into the hall of shame of Israeli politics. Compared to him, Orly Levy-Abekassis suddenly looks like Benny Begin. Even Miki Zohar suddenly looks like a beacon of wisdom and stateliness. Edelstein turned in the last of the shame he had left in stock when he terminated the Knesset's activity on Wednesday, without allowing the Arrangements Committee and the other committees to be formed, with an excuse that even the proponents of egregiously tracking quarantined people's phones wouldn't tolerate. That man must never be forgiven for this disgrace.**
- **The coronavirus has struck the entire world. On the one hand, most experts believe that we're going to have hundreds of thousands of deaths, maybe more, on a global scale. On**

the other hand, the numbers are totally bearable for the moment. On yet another hand, no democratic country with the coronavirus has shut down its parliament, the courts, and democracy. No government in any country on earth allowed itself to do the kind of harm that Israel has. Nowhere on earth has the speaker of parliament dissolved the legislature because he didn't have a majority, or prevented a majority of parliament from electing a new speaker, as is obligatory under the regulations. Nowhere on earth has the coronavirus served to rescue a leader who has failed to win reelection three times in a row while holding the public hostage. As the saying goes, only in Israel.

- The democratic institutions are unraveling around us. Remember the previous major events: the Second Lebanon War led to the formation of the Winograd Committee. The Carmel fire led to a real-time commission by the state comptroller. Ditto for Operation Protective Edge and the tunnel disgrace. Now we no longer have a state comptroller. His people are begging to start looking into the healthcare fiasco, but that man, who is exercising his power in order to destroy this institution, is preventing them.
- The justice minister shuttered the courts in the dead of night. The cabinet invoked emergency defensive regulations regarding digital tracking in the dead of night, while clearly evading parliamentary oversight. The Knesset speaker is trying to neutralize the Knesset, brazenly and cold-bloodedly sabotaging its work. Talia Einhorn, a member of the committee that appoints senior officials and a well-known right-winger, tweeted on Thursday that it's time to abolish the High Court of Justice. Israeli democracy's death certificate is being written before our very eyes in black letters on the wall, and now is precisely the time to go fight for it.

What is Netanyahu Fighting For?

By Ehud Olmert

- Benjamin Netanyahu, the interim prime minister, is not fighting to establish a national-unity government because he believes it's the right way to handle the coronavirus pandemic. Netanyahu, the head of the Likud Party, does not really want to establish a government based on a reasonable balance of power and responsible management of state affairs. The interim prime minister, who is using every legitimate, and mostly illegitimate, excuse to evade showing up at court, is only concerned with one single matter: how to retain his position as prime minister and to evade prosecution.
- There is no other way to explain the situation. The various individuals who are currently contending for political positions are certainly subject to constraints that affect their decision whether or not to publicly and openly comment in a firm manner on what many people feel. I am exempt from these constraints. Not only do I have the right, but also a duty, to say what has become the central subject of nightly conversations in many homes in the country. Netanyahu is not waging a war against the coronavirus. He's managing a war for his own survival, and nothing else.
- The novel coronavirus is a very serious threat. In some respects, it's a greater threat than anything the world has faced in the last few hundred years. In contrast to previous pandemics in the last few centuries and that resulted in tens of millions of deaths, humanity has developed capabilities and tools that have enabled us to find effective responses against the coronavirus. It's only a matter of time until these tools, medicines and treatments will be ready to protect most people who are exposed to this unmanageable danger. I was health minister during the First Gulf War. At the time, our biggest concern was protecting ourselves from chemical and biological warfare, which required an extremely comprehensive assessment of the country's health systems, hospitalization capabilities, and purchasing of medicines that would be necessary in case of a chemical or biological attack.
- At the time, the public sector in general, and especially the public health system, functioned in an excellent manner to address the threat. At the end of the day, it was a useful exercise that thankfully we didn't need to experience in reality. The current crisis is unlike anything we've ever experienced in the past. Under no circumstances should the risks involved here be understated. We must take any and every precautionary step recommended by the professional authorities in an effort to minimize the threat of infection to each one of us as much as possible.
- It's difficult not to be impressed by the TV and other media professionals who've spent hours in the studios. Most of them relay the relevant information in matter-of-fact and eloquent tones that are catchy, but also subdued. Health Ministry officials, and its director-general Moshe Bar Siman Tov, have created the impression that they know what they're doing, that they are sensitive to the fears that a large portion of the population naturally is feeling, and that they understand the need to take appropriate precautions to

protect Israel's medical practitioners in hospitals, clinics and any place where there is reason to believe that people who've been infected need help. Health ministry officials, as well as former and current hospital administrators, have shown impressive knowledge and seriousness in the way they describe the current situation, and in the way they divulge difficult facts that although they are hard to hear, must be stated.

- I am not in a position to judge, nor is the vast majority of the public, whether the restrictions that are being imposed on us are excessive or unavoidable. Did they hold organized discussions to weigh various alternatives? Did they consider ways to limit the economic damage and social ramifications, while also taking into account the inevitable risk factors of an extensive spreading of the virus? Did they consider the possibility that the complete collapse of Israel's economy, which might happen if all general activity is brought to a complete standstill, could result in more lasting damage and possibly more casualties and fatalities, than if we had chosen a more balanced reaction that would enable us to maintain a higher level of economic activity, employment and freedom of movement than is allowed at the present, and which might become even more restricted in the coming days.
- There is no simple answer to these questions. I assume that the National Economic Council, a governmental organization which I established when I was prime minister, and which discusses topics such as the crisis we're currently experiencing, is most certainly considering alternatives. The National Security Council, which also deals with such questions, is also involved in the decision-making process, together with various governmental offices, regarding decrees that will be made in the upcoming days and weeks. None of this has any connection to the prime minister's ludicrous solo performance on the news each evening during prime time. The only person who has turned the coronavirus into a theatrical performance is Benjamin Netanyahu. His recurring performances every evening do not offer any helpful information to the public. He doesn't say anything that's important for the public to know or how we should be comporting ourselves in order to reduce the potential harm and danger to fellow citizens.
- Watching Netanyahu perform is experiencing theatrical art at its best. Every performance – and I say this from first-hand knowledge and following years of experience with the actor and seeing how he prepares himself for his performances is planned down to the minutest detail. He carries out rehearsals in front of the mirror at home (his mirror on Balfour Street is big enough, I know) so he can practice all the nuances that turn his performances into an art form. Someone might, heaven forbid, think that during one of his recent televised press conference performances in front of a small group, when he told the people sitting in the audience to sit with extra space between each other, that this was a spontaneous comment. It wasn't. He'd prepared this moment ahead of time, just as he had with the tissue that he took out of his pocket to wipe his nose.
- Every little detail was meticulously prepared in advance. Like the actors in the world's most sophisticated theaters, not one action was unintentional. Nothing happened by chance or was spontaneous. Netanyahu has turned the coronavirus into one long swirl of macaroni, which he's climbing with vigor in order to keep from falling into the abyss.

Even Health Minister Ya'acov Litzman, who's been forced to play a supporting role in these daily recitals, has shown restraint in his recommendations. In actuality, what he's saying is: I'm here because I don't have a choice. But it's not my show – it's Netanyahu's. All the other participants are accidental extras, by virtue of their roles and the responsibilities they've been given. They are fulfilling their mission, as best they can under the circumstances, and yet the prime minister presents them as a group of butlers whose only purpose is to shine a light on him.

- It's perfectly clear now that Likud members are not really focused on finding a solution to the coronavirus threat. Instead, they are busy dealing with a much more severe threat – the plague that threatens our country's democratic principles. There's no more overwhelming proof of the Likud's priorities than their insistence on retaining Yuli Edelstein in the position of Knesset speaker. Edelstein is a worthy individual. His Likud membership does not disqualify him and does not diminish his talents, leadership capabilities and the respectful way he has fulfilled his role, even during the most difficult constraints and provocations from the imperial family – the father, the mother and the crazy son. Take, for example, the famous ceremony on Mount Herzl celebrating the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel almost three years ago.
- We are now experiencing a new political era in which 61 members of Knesset have expressed their desire to bring in a new Knesset speaker. In the past, and in all nine times that I was sworn in as a member of Knesset, the first session was run by a member of Knesset who was voted in during the most recent election, or was one of the most veteran MKs. There has always been a broad-based agreement between the parties regarding who should lead the new Knesset sessions until a new speaker can be chosen. In many instances, the speaker was chosen during the first session. Sometimes it took a few weeks, but there was always agreement, and always an understanding, that the previous Knesset becomes irrelevant once new members are sworn in.
- The Likud's insistence on maintaining control of the position of Knesset speaker is insufferable. My complaint has nothing to do with Edelstein – he is a gentleman from a previous generation, the likes of which are no longer common in our surroundings. After agreeing to allow the Knesset plenum to convene for a vote regarding immunity, Edelstein was almost crucified. Now he is under pressure to insist on something that is in direct, blatant contradiction to the sensible rules of democracy. But what choice does he have? Will he have the strength to do the right thing, even if it is harmful to his imperial highness, the imperial queen and their son, who control every move the right-wing bloc makes? It's perfectly clear that the only reason for holding onto the speaker position is to prevent Blue and White from beginning legislative proceedings that would prevent Netanyahu from continuing his term as prime minister.
- It's clear that controlling the Knesset's agenda is another measure designed to enable this group of criminals to supervise any moves that would prevent the unexpected collapse of control they've created to extend Netanyahu's rule. Apparently, nobody really cares if we remain a democracy. This issue reveals the Likud gang's true intentions. They have no interest in forming a unity government or reaching a national reconciliation.

They could care less about intra-party solidarity or mobilizing all of the efforts, talents, resourcefulness and capabilities of citizens. For Netanyahu, the supreme value that soars above all others – which is higher even than the state itself – is his own survival. This is exactly why Gantz needs to take on new traits. He needs to be firm, resolute and completely disregard the Likud members' self-righteous eye-rolling.

- **Anyone who engages in incitement and polarization, who insults and disqualifies a large part of society for years, and who considers his political opponents, three of whom are former IDF chiefs of staff, as collaborators with people who supposedly call for Israel's destruction, is the last person who should be allowed to talk about unity and national responsibility. The only way we can take responsibility for national unity, make way for change, and remain hopeful is for Netanyahu to step down and leave the government. We will survive the coronavirus without him.**