



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, March 23

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News Excerpts

March 23, 2020

Ynet News

Israel's Coronavirus Tally up to 1,238, Another Spike in Serious Cases

Another 125 people have tested positive for coronavirus in Israel, bringing the country's total to 1238, with another rise of patients being admitted in serious condition, the Health Ministry reported Monday morning. Of the latest number, 24 in serious condition - a spike of six additional cases since Sunday evening - 34 are in moderate condition and 1,142 have light symptoms. At least 37 people have recovered from the illness. The new data shows an increase of 293 new COVID-19 cases in the past 24 hours. The number, however, is in line with health officials' prediction of a drastic jump in the number of cases as the rate of testing for the virus increases almost on a daily basis. See also ["Number of coronavirus patients in Israel passes 1,000 as 126 more diagnosed" \(TOI\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israel Considers Cutting Off Parts of E. Jerusalem to Stem Corona Spread

The Israeli government is considering closing the Shoafat border checkpoint in East Jerusalem as part of its effort to stem the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Such a move would cut off tens of thousands of East Jerusalem Palestinians who are permanent residents of Israel but live on the other side of the security barrier and would be severed from the rest of city. In response, the residents of the Shoafat refugee camp, which is one of the relatively small number of Palestinian neighborhoods on the other side of the barrier and near the checkpoint, have begun taking steps on their own to deal with the virus without Israeli government assistance. The PM's Office said that no decision had been made on the matter. See also ["Clashes in East Jerusalem as police limit Old City access amid pandemic" \(TOI\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound Suspended due to Coronavirus

The administration of the Wakf Islamic religious trust announced on Sunday that it has decided to suspend prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem as of Monday morning to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The unprecedented decision came in accordance with recommendations by religious and health parties, the Jordanian-controlled Wakf said after holding an emergency meeting in Jerusalem. The decision means that worshipers would not be permitted to enter the compound starting Monday. This is the first time the Wakf called on Muslims not to come to the compound. The Wakf said its employees and guards would continue to report to work despite the decision to suspend the prayers. See also, ["Waqf closes Al-Aqsa to the public, as coronavirus proliferates" \(TOI\)](#)

AP

PA Orders all West Bank Palestinians into 14-Day Home Confinement

The Palestinian government on Sunday ordered Palestinians in the West Bank confined to their homes for two weeks as a precaution against the spread of coronavirus. The order, announced by Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh on television, goes into force at 10 pm local time. Medical personnel, pharmacists, grocers and bakers would be exempt, Shtayyeh said. In the West Bank, 55 cases of coronavirus have been diagnosed, with 17 recovering. Most of the cases were in the city of Bethlehem. There have been no deaths from the virus reported in the Palestinian areas. Sunday's announcement came just hours after the Pal' Health Ministry confirmed two cases of the virus in Gaza.

Times of Israel

MKs will Enter 6 at a Time for First Votes of New Knesset amid Corona

Israeli lawmakers will be restricted to entering the Knesset in groups of six at a time for a series of votes as the new parliament opens for business Monday, facing the unprecedented twin challenges of the coronavirus and safeguarding democratic oversight during the crisis. Knesset director general Albert Saharovich announced the planned measures late Sunday to allow the Knesset to open and vote on forming committees, while taking necessary social distancing precautions. At any given time no more than 10 people will be allowed inside the plenum. Speakers will sign up in advance and will be called to enter when it is their turn to speak. Waiting areas will be designated for those slated to speak. Those outside the plenum will be able to view the goings-on inside on screens. See also ["AG, Knesset adviser agree: Neither virus nor politics justifies shutting Knesset" \(TOI\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

High Court: How Can Knesset Speaker Reject Will of 61 MK Majority?

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, ["Supreme Court rules not to replace Edelstein as Knesset speaker" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

Blue & White Demands Edelstein Solution to Allow Quarantined MKs Vote

Amid fierce disagreements over the opening of the Knesset due to coronavirus fears, the Blue and White party is demanding that despite social distancing regulations, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein find a way to allow parliament members in quarantine to exercise their right to vote. "According to the law, and this is also what Blue and White will follow, every MK is eligible to vote. Solutions need be found to make it happen," a party spokesperson told The Times of Israel Sunday. The spokesperson said that the party would not agree to cancel out the votes of coalition members in quarantine by having an equivalent number of its own MKs skip the relevant plenary session, a practice sometimes adopted in other circumstances.

Ha'aretz

TV Host Fired by Public Broadcaster After Online Protest Against Govt'

Hours after she hosted and delivered an impassioned speech at a virtual demonstration against the shuttering of the Knesset and Israel's courts, Lucy Aharish was fired from her position as co-host of a new TV cultural talk show on the Kan public broadcaster. In a written statement released to the press, The Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation said that there was "no connection between Aharish's participation in events [taking place] outside the corporation" and her being laid off – explaining the decision as instead connected to scheduling changes made in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The Walla! news website, however, quoted a "source close to Aharish" as saying that, "this morning, Lucy received a phone call informing her that the broadcaster looked unfavorably on her participation in the demonstration... and that she would not be able to continue co-hosting 'Culture Agent.'"

Netanyahu has No Interest in the Democratic Need

By Avigdor Liberman, chairman of the Yisrael Beiteinu party

- Like every Israeli citizen, I too am filled with admiration and appreciation for our medical teams, which are among the best in the world and which have been working around the clock to save human life from this lethal virus. Can the same be said about the decision-makers? My answer is: absolutely not.
- The circus that we have witnessed every evening and which has been manufactured by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Health Minister Litzman is insulting, ridiculous and mainly has served to exacerbate the uncertainty felt by each and every citizen of Israel. We are in an absurd situation in which a transitional government has served for a year, without a functioning security cabinet and with a paralyzed Knesset that is incapable of supervising the government's work.
- From Netanyahu's perspective, that is the ideal situation. The vital need of every democratic country for checks and balances is of no interest to him. His hysteria and fear of the possibility that the Knesset speaker might be replaced, the threats and verbal bullying that we have heard come from his mouth as he conditions any progress towards forming a unity government on not replacing the speaker, only proves just how vital it is to making that replacement.
- The State of Israel has placed the health of every one of us in the hands of a sectarian minister who is neither a doctor nor an administrator. Prime Minister Netanyahu lives in the shadow of an indictment, political interests, widespread fear-mongering, stealing precious screen time and political polls—while laying the groundwork for a fourth election.
- And I ask: where is a detailed plan to support small businesses? Where are the Bank of Israel's executives in the context of the financial system and extending credit? How and under what conditions are we going to begin to restore the economy, or at least part of it, to regular activity even under the threat of the coronavirus? The projections currently talk about roughly one million unemployed Israelis, 0% growth and a deficit that already stands at around NIS 50 billion. In other words: we are facing the real risk of a deep and unprecedented recession that will send the Israeli economy back to the 1970s. Tourism, hotels, air travel, small businesses—including 13,000 restaurants—as well as many other sectors are not going to revert to where they were. Add to that the severe losses to the public's savings (pension funds and provident funds, which have plummeted in value). Unless we come up with an orderly plan for rehabilitating the economy and for coping better with the coronavirus, on the day we declare victory over the virus we will also pronounce a large number of businesses in Israel dead.
- As such, the question that needs to be asked is: what is the cost of the safety net that the government needs to give the public and the Israeli economy? Austria, a country that is of a similar size to Israel, has established a 38 billion euro aid fund—which is roughly NIS 150 billion. Where is the 150 billion to be taken from? Should it be taken by means of a loan from the public, as was done in the past, or by increasing the deficit? And how will that impact our debt-GDP ratio and Israel's economic status in international markets? Those are difficult questions that require a broad national consensus and resolute decision-makers.
- The measures that need to be taken immediately include the following:

A government announcement that all people who earn monthly wages of up to NIS 6,000 will be fully reimbursed for the months in which they are unable to work.

Canceling municipal tax, VAT and income tax payments (canceling, not postponing) either for the industries that have been particularly crippled or for businesses that have stopped operating on government orders. It is unreasonable that restaurants, gyms, hair salons and beauty salons that aren't generating revenues thanks to their compliance with government orders should have to continue to pay taxes to the state.

- **Those are some of the measures that appear in the economic plan that I am currently working on, and which I hope to publish shortly. But these measures are going to be impossible to implement without the decision-makers setting a personal example, such as cutting the wages paid to top government officials and reducing the number of ministries and ministers. It is essential that people set their egos aside and that a unity government be formed immediately to fight the coronavirus and to save the economy. In the past we successfully overcame challenges despite political differences of opinion. There is no reason why we shouldn't do that once again, in cooperation and with a sense of national responsibility.**

Summary: The circus that we have witnessed every evening and which has been manufactured by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Health Minister Litzman is insulting, ridiculous and mainly has served to exacerbate the uncertainty felt by each and every citizen of Israel. We are in an absurd situation in which a transitional government has served for a year, without a functioning security cabinet and with a paralyzed Knesset that is incapable of supervising the government's work. From Netanyahu's perspective, that is the ideal situation. The vital need of every democratic country for checks and balances is of no interest to him. His hysteria and fear of the possibility that the Knesset speaker might be replaced, the threats and verbal bullying that we have heard come from his mouth as he conditions any progress towards forming a unity government on not replacing the speaker, only proves just how vital it is to making that replacement.

Netanyahu Has Hijacked Israel's Coronavirus Response, Sidelining Top Health Experts

By Or Kashti and Ido Efrati, commentators at Ha'aretz

- **Management of the biggest public health crisis in the country's history is being taken out of health officials' hands by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, health officials familiar with the situation said. What began a few weeks ago as questions by health care professionals has become criticism that bubbles under the surface and is threatening to burst into the open, exposing a flawed decision-making process that is having an unprecedented impact on Israelis' daily lives.**
- **The public may believe that the coronavirus crisis is being managed through professional deliberations at which a variety of opinions are voiced, but that isn't the case, the sources said. In reality, both senior Health Ministry officials and the ministry's task force on epidemics have been excluded from the discussions. The coronavirus crisis is being run by Netanyahu and a few officials who support his views. Health Minister Yaakov Litzman is out of the picture, the sources said.**
- **One key member of Netanyahu's team is Prof. Ran Balicer, who heads the research institute of the Clalit health maintenance organization and is its director of health policy planning. He is also an adviser to the Health Ministry on infectious disease, epidemiology, health policy and emergency preparedness. In his media appearances, he supports harsh measures to slow the spread of the virus. The team also includes Prof. Yitshak Kreiss, director of the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Hashomer, and sometimes Prof. Shmuel Shapira, director of the Israel Institute for Biological Research. The Health Ministry is represented by its director general, Moshe Bar Siman Tov, and its director of public health services, Prof. Sigal Sadetsky. But no one on this decision-making team has training or experience in handling infectious diseases and epidemics.**
- **"The orders come from above and the professionals are expected to fall in line," one source in the health care system said. "The proper situation would be for decisions of this kind to be discussed in depth by the professionals and the epidemic task force, including every line of thought, its implications and objections to it, and then presented to the decision-makers. But none of this is happening." He said Bar Siman Tov, who as the ministry's director general should be leading this process, is instead collaborating with Netanyahu and stifling anyone opposed to Netanyahu's approach.**
- **Since Bar Siman Tov has no medical training, the ministry's top medical authority is its deputy director general, Prof. Itamar Grotto. Its other key official is Dr. Boaz Lev, a former director general at the ministry who now heads its epidemic task force. But anyone talking to these two men in recent days has had trouble getting clear answers. The reason, according to Health Ministry sources, is that they don't know the answers because the decisions are being made without them.**
- **Already two weeks ago, health care officials were claiming that the decision-making process was flawed and the epidemic task force was rarely being consulted. But since then, the situation has worsened, the officials say. This weekend, Channel 12 television's health correspondent, Yoav Even, reported that Grotto and Lev weren't taking part in the prime minister's meetings on**

the subject because of their bad relationship with Bar Siman Tov, who rejected this claim. “Itamar is a very significant figure in managing this event,” Bar Siman Tov wrote on Twitter, referring to Grotto. “He allows me to disconnect from day-to-day affairs and be calm when I have to be at meetings at the Prime Minister’s Office. So too is Dr. Boaz Lev.”

- As if to underscore this claim, the Health Ministry then announced that the daily press briefing that day would be given by Grotto. Unusually, Grotto was then also invited to a meeting with the national security adviser, though not to the prime minister’s meetings.
- Health Ministry officials said Grotto is being excluded because he has reservations about Netanyahu’s policy of imposing harsh restrictions on Israelis’ daily lives in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus. Grotto reportedly believes that other options should be considered. But an incident Thursday also helped make Grotto persona non grata for Netanyahu. After the media reported that the Mossad had secured 100,000 badly needed coronavirus test kits for Israel, Grotto told the Ynet news site that what the Mossad obtained “isn’t exactly what we were lacking.” What Israel needs, he said, are swabs, and that isn’t what the Mossad brought.
- Anyone with basic knowledge of the coronavirus test knows Grotto was right, but far from receiving backing from his superiors, he received complaints from on high, ministry sources said. And that evening, Grotto wrote on his Facebook page that the kits the Mossad secured “were of high quality and are needed for the continuation of our laboratory work in the coming weeks,” and that the ministry would continue cooperating with the agency to secure vital equipment for addressing the crisis.
- Unusually, this Facebook post was then published on the ministry’s Telegram page for coronavirus updates, which is supposed to be reserved for official announcements. That was a clear sign to both Grotto and other senior ministry officials about his place in the hierarchy. Moreover, Bar Siman Tov has handled most of the ministry’s dealings with the media personally, despite his lack of medical knowledge.
- The incident that first sparked professionals’ discomfort with Bar Siman Tov’s handling of the crisis occurred at the very beginning, when he sent Grotto to monitor five Israeli patients who contracted the virus aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship. This, too, made clear that Grotto wasn’t at the forefront of the decision-making. “It’s unbelievable,” a senior medical official said. “The director general sends his senior medical authority, who is supposed to guide him in this crisis, to monitor five patients with runny noses in Japan and then return to two weeks of quarantine, instead of staying at his side and helping him manage the crisis.”
- The role of providing a medical seal of approval for the ministry’s decisions has therefore fallen on Sadetsky. Before becoming its director of public health services in February 2019, she spent almost two decades at the cancer and radiation epidemiology unit at the ministry’s Gertner Institute. She also teaches and does academic research, and is widely admired by both colleagues and students. Still, some professionals said her experience and training are insufficient for the current crisis, especially when she is the only medical professional involved in the decision-making. They also said it is not clear she has the stature to oppose decisions made by the Prime Minister’s Office or propose alternatives.
- Many ministry officials and other health care professionals said they are extremely uncomfortable watching Netanyahu’s nightly media appearances about the crisis while knowing that his decisions have such a limited professional basis. “We have a prime minister who

teaches us how to use tissues, a health minister who talks about ushering in the Messiah and a [ministry] director general who frightens everyone to spin the situation and create an image for himself of presiding over the crisis,” one senior health care official said. As another put it, “I don’t see much advantage to the press conferences aside from the opportunity for someone to appear on prime time. The instructions could be explained much more professionally and clearly.”

Summary: Management of the biggest public health crisis in the country’s history is being taken out of health officials’ hands by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, health officials familiar with the situation said. What began a few weeks ago as questions by health care professionals has become criticism that bubbles under the surface and is threatening to burst into the open, exposing a flawed decision-making process that is having an unprecedented impact on Israelis’ daily lives. The public may believe that the coronavirus crisis is being managed through professional deliberations at which a variety of opinions are voiced, but that isn’t the case, the sources said. In reality, both senior Health Ministry officials and the ministry’s task force on epidemics have been excluded from the discussions. The coronavirus crisis is being run by Netanyahu and a few officials who support his views. Health Minister Yaakov Litzman is out of the picture, the sources said.