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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- Israel's Coronavirus Sick Count Leaps by 234 to 1,656
- 'A Million Israelis Infected with Coronavirus Within a Month'
- Right-wing Bloc to Boycott 'Stolen, Undemocratic' Knesset
- Eretz Hakodesh: Surprise of World Zionist Congress Election
- Six Temporary Knesset Committees Set Up
- High Court Rules Edelstein Must Allow Vote for New Speaker
- Bank of Israel Buys NIS 50B in Bonds to Bolster Economy
- Hamas Urges PA to Lift Sanctions to Fight COVID-19 in Gaza

Commentary:

- **Ma'ariv: "Anarchy"**
 - By Ben Caspit
- **Ynet News: "Netanyahu's Coronavirus Circus"**
 - By Avigdor Liberman

News Excerpts

March 24, 2020

Ynet News

Israel's Coronavirus Sick Count Leaps by 234 to 1,656

The Health Ministry confirmed on Tuesday morning that the country now has 1,656 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, an additional 234 cases since Monday night. Thirty-one confirmed patients are hospitalized in serious condition, 47 in moderate condition and 1,528 in light condition, among them 652 patients displaying only light or no symptoms who are hospitalized at home and 161 more patients hospitalized in hotels requisitioned by the state to treat coronavirus patients. So far, 135,549 Israelis have self-isolated at home for a period of 14 days after returning from overseas or being exposed to the virus and 71,029 citizens are in isolation at the moment, 773 of them entered isolation on Tuesday. This new report makes Israel the world's 20th country worst-hit by the coronavirus.

Jerusalem Post

'A Million Israelis Infected with Coronavirus Within a Month'

One million Israelis could be infected with the novel coronavirus and 10,000 could die, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned his ministers Monday during a seven-hour meeting with top officials about ongoing efforts to stop the spread of the virus. "We could reach a million infected within a month," the prime minister said according to a report on N12. "There could also be 10,000 dead Israelis." A government official who was present at the hearing told N12 there is a sense among decision makers that some ministers and the public have still not internalized the rapid spread and infection rate of the coronavirus. As of Tuesday morning, 1,656 Israelis have been diagnosed with coronavirus, according to the Health Ministry. Of those, 31 are in serious condition, an increase of three people from the day before. The Health Ministry reported that the majority still have mild cases of the novel virus – 1,528 – and another 47 people are in moderate condition.

Times of Israel

Right-wing Bloc to Boycott 'Stolen, Undemocratic' Knesset

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party fumed Tuesday morning after the High Court ruled that the Knesset must be convened to choose a new speaker and after the Blue and White-led bloc used its 61-strong majority to form parliamentary oversight committees. After gaining control over the Arrangements Committee, which determines which parliamentary committees will be formed and who will sit on them during a transitional government, the center-left bloc late Monday pushed ahead with the formation of six special parliamentary committees, including one to oversee Israel's handling of the coronavirus crisis. Likud's bloc boycotted all the votes. The party said the right-wing bloc "will not cooperate with this and won't take part in these undemocratic discussions and votes, which quash and ignore 58 MKs chosen by the people," and vowed to fight the "thuggish and undemocratic behavior."

Eretz Hakodesh: Surprise of World Zionist Congress Election

A rigidly Orthodox party, running for the first time, is the big winner of the World Zionist Congress election held in the United States, according to preliminary results announced on Monday. Eretz Hakodesh ("The Holy Land") – which champions "traditional religious values and Jewish rights in the entire Land of Israel" (code for Israeli annexation of the West Bank) – emerged as the third largest party, garnering more than 15 percent of the total vote. Eretz Hakodesh made attacks against Reform Judaism the focus of its campaign. In the last election, parties representing progressive American Jews won two-thirds of the total votes. In this latest round, mainly thanks to Eretz Hakodesh's strong showing, parties representing progressive American Jews won less than half the total vote. Leaders of the Reform movement expressed satisfaction with the results.

Six Temporary Knesset Committees Set Up

After gaining control over a key Knesset committee, the Blue and White-led center and left bloc late Monday pushed ahead with the formation of six special parliamentary committees, including one to oversee Israel's handling of the coronavirus crisis. The Arrangements Committee, which determines which parliamentary committees will be formed and who will sit on them was earlier approved 61 in favor and zero against, with right-wing and religious lawmakers allied with Prime Minister Netanyahu boycotting the vote. Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein, a member of Netanyahu's Likud party, was the only lawmaker to abstain. Netanyahu's bloc also boycotted the later votes on the formation of the special committees, saying that such a move was not legitimate during a time of a transitional government.

High Court Rules Edelstein Must Allow Vote for New Speaker

The High Court ruled in a unanimous decision Monday that Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein must convene the Knesset no later than Wednesday, to elect his replacement. The ruling comes after Edelstein informed the court that he intends to follow Knesset rules and will permit a vote to replace him no later than the establishment of a coalition government. Chief Justice Esther Hayut wrote in the ruling that "the continued refusal to allow for a full vote in the Knesset for the election of a permanent Knesset speaker undercuts the foundations of the democratic process." Edelstein, a member of Netanyahu's Likud party, suspended the parliament's activities last week, citing procedural issues and restrictions on large gatherings due to the virus. A panel of five judges, chaired by Chief Justice Esther Hayut, ordered Edelstein to announce by late Monday whether he planned to bring the selection of a new speaker up for a vote, or else they would be forced to rule against him.

Bank of Israel Buys NIS 50B in Bonds to Bolster Economy

The Bank of Israel said Monday that it would buy NIS 50 billion (\$13.4 billion) in government bonds on the open market to ease credit conditions and bolster the economy as the coronavirus crisis bludgeons the national economy and global markets. The move is the latest in a series of measures by the bank to stabilize the economy as it deteriorates amid skyrocketing unemployment, government restrictions, shuttered businesses, plunging equities and consumer fears. The bank initially offered a relatively optimistic view of the crisis, predicting a loss of less than 1 percent to Israel's GDP, but the government outlook, including that of the Finance Ministry, has become increasingly dire. The massive bond purchases will allow the bank to influence bond yields, lower the cost of longer-term credit for companies and households, moderate bond volatility and stabilize markets, the bank said.

Hamas Urges PA to Lift Sanctions to Fight COVID-19 in Gaza

Hamas has called on Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to lift the sanctions he imposed on the Gaza Strip to enable the Palestinians living there to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The appeal came in the aftermath of the discovery of the first two cases of coronavirus in the Gaza Strip on Sunday. The Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health said two Palestinians who returned to the Gaza Strip from Pakistan tested positive for the virus and were placed in quarantine. Several Palestinians who came in contact with the two patients who returned from Pakistan have been placed in quarantine. They include Tawfik Abu Na'im, commander of Hamas's Internal Security Force.

Anarchy

By Ben Caspit

- **Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein published his decision at 9:00 yesterday evening: I have no intention of complying with the ultimatum that was issued by the High Court of Justice, he wrote. That is a major event. A decision by the High Court of Justice is construed as being an ultimatum. In another moment Edelstein might say that he feels like a refusenik all over again, as if the justices have taken him prisoner. But let's not forget: the High Court of Justice hasn't even made a ruling; it only demanded that Edelstein explain his decision not to allow for a vote to be held to elect a new Knesset speaker despite the fact that 61 MKs have demanded in writing to hold that vote.**
- **This is a formative moment. Remember this day. The prophecy that Amir Ohana made immediately after he was brought out of nowhere to serve as "justice minister" has come to pass sooner than expected. No, there's no need to respect court rulings. Period. The end. This marks the end for all of us and the beginning of anarchy.**
- **One may criticize High Court of Justice. One may say that it is mistaken. One may and may and may. And people do just that. I too have done that. But up until recently it was clear that court rulings must be respected. History will judge us, the journalists, severely. The most important [i.e. popular—Hahadashot] news broadcast in Israel didn't bother reporting yesterday (at least not until 8:30 in the evening) about the calls that were made by senior cabinet ministers, including the justice minister, not to uphold a High Court of Justice ruling. One senior cabinet minister said that the president of the Supreme Court was razing the Knesset with a bulldozer. Publicly elected officials are calling for a rebellion, are crushing the Supreme Court and are making the possibility of an angry mob armed with pitchforks storming the Supreme Court horrifyingly realistic.**
- **And the prime minister? He is silent in the best-case scenario, and he dispatches his emissaries to continue their unbridled attack on the court in the less-best-case scenario. And what is all this about? The High Court of Justice hasn't even ruled yet. It instructed the Knesset speaker to explain why he has ignored the demand by a majority of MKs (61) to elect a new speaker. That was enough to drive the Rottweilers into a maddened frenzy, to the cheering of the masses. And the media, democracy's last watchdog, turned the other cheek. Meanwhile, the magnitude of the chaos in all that pertains to the management of the coronavirus crisis has begun to become evident. Conversations that I have held with several good people who are in the darkness that is raging around the prime minister have painted a troubling picture.**
- **There is no orderly team and there is no team leader. Everyone is fighting for the attention of just one man with dark circles under his eyes, and he finds himself torn between the Health Ministry and the Finance Ministry, making decisions only to reverse them five times an hour, for eight straight hours, nearly every day including yesterday. The National Emergency Management Authority, which was supposed to coordinate the teamwork, was emasculated and all but disbanded. The National Public Information**

Office is paralyzed and abandoned. In a properly-run country the prime minister would have formed a team, appointed a project manager, delegated responsibilities, made a concerted effort and instated order. The public hasn't received the information it needs from a certified physician, in the government's name, every day at the same time of day in a professional manner.

- Had the public understood from the first moment the nature of this disease and just how important its behavior is, we might have been in a very different place right now. But when the public needs to wait for 9:00 in the evening for the prime minister to end the daily brawl between “Barsi” and “Babad,” only to hear him explain how to sneeze, this is the result. Everyone is talking for the public record. They know that once this is all over, someone is going to have to take the blame. They are preparing for the commission of inquiry. The man who invented this method was Binyamin Netanyahu. Every time he says something for the public record with an eye to the future commission of inquiry, there are people in the room who exchange a smile with one another.
- Yesterday, for example, a different opinion was required for the record to the demands that have been made by the Health Ministry. Finance Ministry Director General Shai Babad said that there were epidemiologists who thought differently from Prof. Siegal Sadetzki and Health Ministry Director General Moshe Bar Siman Tov. Netanyahu agreed to hear them. Babad went to call three professors (Zeev Rotstein, Shuki Shemer and Gabi Barabash). When he stepped outside, he was stopped, apparently by one of the prime minister's aides. He went back inside, raised a ruckus, stepped out only to find his path blocked once again. Netanyahu, who understood what had happened, said the following statement loudly and at dictation speed: “For hours I have wanted to hear the other opinion, the opposite view.” When he was confident that his remarks had been recorded, he let Babad go again except this time, with artillery support from National Security Council Director Meir Ben-Shabbat, he broke through the barricades and brought the three professors to the meeting.
- A fighting opposition was formed yesterday within the Finance Ministry. As far as I could ascertain, in the course of the night a letter was drafted and signed by all the top Finance Ministry officials calling on the prime minister to stop the current method in which all the decisions get made in nighttime conversations that he holds with Health Ministry officials. Top Finance Ministry officials are convinced that the measures that currently are being taken will have nothing short of catastrophic repercussions on the Israeli economy. Yesterday they fought another desperate battle against Netanyahu, who arrived at the meetings drunk on the conversations he had held the night before with Bar Siman Tov. They ultimately succeeded in somewhat scaling back the severity of the decrees, but that was too little too late. The situation is desperate. Finance Ministry officials are trying to persuade the major credit rating companies that the Israeli economy can continue to function at a level of at least 30% output, so that they might continue to be able to receive decent credit in the world, but no one is going to believe them given the measures that are now being taken here.

- **And we haven't even begun to talk about the coronavirus test kits fiasco. At some point we are going to have to find out who was the genius in the Health Ministry who decided that there wasn't any need for testing. Even now that we are several weeks into this crisis, they still haven't understood what everyone in the world long ago understood. It's simply maddening. People, such as Professor Rotstein, have been doing everything in their power to explain, to demonstrate and to prove that Israel can, with a small effort, begin to perform tens of thousands of tests every day. But no one wants to listen. Yesterday on Channel Thirteen News I saw Professor Ariel Munitz from the Tel Aviv University School of Medicine all but beg the Health Ministry to use his labs to dramatically increase the number of tests. But he was talking to the wall. "I don't understand," he said. "This is war. How can you go to war without intelligence?"**
- **If there were an orderly team with a clear hierarchy, which held orderly meetings using clearly established work methods, Israel might have been able to reach the correct conclusions at the necessary junctures in time. But there isn't. Every proposal either lives or dies at the hands of a single man who, talented though he may be (and no one disputes that he is talented), is predisposed to becoming gripped by panic and to being torn between the sum total of his fears: between fearing the swift spread of the pandemic, which will leave hundreds if not thousands dead, on the one hand; and between fear of economic annihilation, deep recession and the devastation of the Israeli economy, on the other. The prime minister shouldn't be sitting in meetings for eight hours every day—he at the Prime Minister's Residence on Balfour Street and they in the security cabinet's conference room—to hear every last remark by every last official. He should be using a professional team that has leadership and orderly work methods that produce a series of conclusions that are presented to him once a day for his decision after they present him with a half-hour executive summary.**
- **And I can't conclude this column without mentioning the man who staged a hostile takeover of the State Comptroller's Office, Matanyahu Engelman. That man yesterday shamelessly made the following statement: "This is criticism that anticipated the future. We have found that the epidemic is a veritable danger to the State of Israel." He deigned at long last to publish the state comptroller's report. A grave report that lay bare the state of Israel's health care system, found that Israel was unprepared for an epidemic and which provided several examples of just how badly the health care system, which is supposed to keep all of us alive and healthy, was neglected.**
- **So, what is the problem? The answer is simple: that report had been ready for publication since November 2019. The final draft was submitted to the subjects of the report at that point. The established norm in the State Comptroller's Office for years has been to publish reports of this kind between four and six weeks after the final drafts have been given to the subjects of the report. But Engelman, who was appointed with the goal of whitewashing and obfuscating, delayed publication. This report could have been published in January and perhaps, along with the eruption of the coronavirus crisis in China, might have set off a few alarms in Israel. Maybe a few Health Ministry civil servants might have gone to the trouble to order a few more shipping containers full of protective gear, at least for the medical teams. But no. The state comptroller buried the**

report and planned to publish it only in May! Then he has the chutzpa to say that it “anticipated the future.” It may have anticipated, but it was shelved.

- The state comptroller’s report also noted that “flaws were found in the preparations by the Health Ministry, the HMOs and the hospitalization teams.” The Health Ministry? Who was there? Who served for most of the past 11 years as health minister? No one is mentioned by name. State Comptroller’s Office officials tried to ensure that the names would appear at least in the footnotes. No. The state comptroller bodily prevented that from happening. He isn’t here to serve as a comptroller. He’s here to serve as an undertaker.

Netanyahu's Coronavirus Circus

By Avigdor Liberman

- Like any Israeli citizen these days, I am full of pride and admiration for our medical teams. They are some of the best in the world, working day and night to fight the deadly coronavirus. But could we say the same about our decision-makers? The answer is a resounding "no."
- This circus run by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Health Minister Yaakov Litzman is ridiculous and insulting and only serves to increase feelings of uncertainty among the people of Israel. We are caught in an absurd situation, with a caretaker government in situ for more than a year, a paralyzed Knesset, no functioning security cabinet and no oversight of the government actions. This is an ideal scenario for Netanyahu. He doesn't care about the checks and balances that serve as a core component of every democratic state.
- Netanyahu's fear and hysteria at the possible replacement of Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein, his threats and verbal bullying as he conditions unity government talks on keeping his lackey in place, only prove how critical it is now to remove Edelstein. More alarming, our healthcare is in the hands of a Haredi rabbi turned minister who is neither a doctor nor a professional and only cares about one sector of the population. The prime minister lives in the shadow of his indictments, political interests and scaremongering, usurping precious air time every evening and immersing himself in political polls, laying the groundwork for a fourth election.
- I ask you, Mr. Netanyahu: where is your relief plan for small businesses? Why is the board of the Bank of Israel silent on matters such as the state of the economy or credit lines for Israelis? Under what circumstances will we begin to restore our economy, restoring parts of it at least to normal functioning even with the threat of the coronavirus? Some predictions already warn of one million people unemployed, zero percent growth and a budget deficit nearing NIS 50 billion (around \$13 billion). In other words, there's a real danger of a deep recession that could set the economy back to the 1970s. Tourism, hotels, airlines, small businesses (including over 13,000 restaurants) and other industries will never be the same. Significant damage will be done to savings, pensions and funds.
- Without an organized plan to rehabilitate the economy and better handling of the coronavirus crisis, the day we announce victory over COVID-19 will also be the day we announce the death of countless businesses in Israel. The real issue is how much to put into the fiscal safety net that the government gives the public and the cost to the Israeli economy. Austria, a country about the size of Israel, has managed to allocate funds amounting to 38 billion euros, about NIS 150 billion.
- Do we even have NIS 150 billion? Should the state issue bonds to the public as it used to help the country recover from its wars? Should it increase the deficit? How will this affect Israel's economic rating in the international markets? These are all very complicated

questions that require determination and national consensus. I am devising a full economic plan that I will make public soon, but we must immediately take the following steps: 1. A declared commitment by the government that salaried workers making under NIS 6,000 a month will be fully compensated. 2. Cancellation of municipal taxes, VAT and income tax for industries particularly affected by the crisis or businesses that have stopped operating under government directives.

- It is absurd when restaurants, gyms, barbershops and beauty salons that cannot generate income due to the government's directives must still pay government taxes. These steps are not possible without ministers and MKs setting a personal example by taking pay cuts and limiting their staff. We must set our egos aside and establish a unity government immediately to fight the coronavirus and save the economy. Israel has come out of major crises before despite people's political differences. There is no reason we cannot do it again - together, hand in hand.