



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, March 25

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News Excerpts

March 25, 2020

Ynet News

Israel's Coronavirus Death Toll up to 5, Number of Cases Reaches 2,030

Another two people have died overnight from complications that resulted from coronavirus, bringing the country's total to five, health officials reported Wednesday. Israel's overall number of COVID-19 cases is now up to 2,030. One of the two latest fatalities is a 76-year-old man who suffered from serious underlying health conditions. He was hospitalized on Monday at the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Hashomer in an intensive care unit dedicated to COVID-19 patients. Tuesday saw two people pass away within hours, from complications associated with coronavirus. In the meantime, of the latest number of infected, 37 in serious condition, 54 are in moderate condition and 1,876 have light symptoms. At least 58 people have recovered from the illness, a significant increase over the recent days. See also ["Coronavirus Death Toll Rises to Five as Israel Approves Stricter Regulations" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

On the Brink Corona Crisis, Gaza Appeals to Israel and the World for Help

Gaza's Health Ministry issued an urgent appeal to the World Health Organization for critical medical equipment in the event of a coronavirus outbreak, with senior officials warning of catastrophic consequences if the virus manages to spread in the coastal enclave. "We are asking the UN and the international community to give us immediate support, including ventilators and intensive care equipment to deal with the epidemic," Health Ministry spokesman Dr. Ashraf al-Qudra told a press briefing on Tuesday. The ministry said there is an immediate need for some 150 ventilators to cater for Gaza's two million people. See also ["UN's Palestinian refugee agency suspends Gaza food aid" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

330 Israelis flee Milan on 'Rescue Flight' Amid Devastating Virus Outbreak

Some 330 Israelis landed at Ben Gurion International Airport on Monday after fleeing the devastating coronavirus outbreak in northern Italy. The evacuees, mostly students, boarded a plane from Israeli airline Israir in Milan, one of the world's hardest-hit regions. Airline staff referred to the emergency operation as a "rescue flight." The passengers were required to wear face masks for the entire flight, and were served by flight attendants dressed in full-body protective gear, Channel 13 reported. "It's really sad to me how the situation here in Milan has deteriorated," said Oshra Zimmerman, who moved to Milan two months ago to study interior design.

Ynet News

Limited Movement, No Synagogues: Israel Approves Tighter Steps

The government approved new emergency measures late Tuesday night to further restrict the movement of Israelis, which will go into effect Wednesday at 8 pm. After a six-hour-long teleconference meeting, the ministers approved the restriction on the public to venture no further than 100 meters from home at all times except for the supply of food, medicine, and other essential house maintenance needs. Synagogues are also closed. Public transportation will be limited further, vital workers will be required to submit to a temperature screening upon entering work locations. Supermarkets and pharmacies will continue to operate as well as banks, gas stations, and other vital services. See also ["Synagogues, Yeshivas and Hospitals: Most Coronavirus Prone Locations in Israel" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

PA Asks Palestinian Workers in Israel to Return Amid Corona Outbreak

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh asked all Palestinian workers in Israel to return to their homes in order to protect them and keep them safe in light of expected measures to decrease movement in Israel to fight the coronavirus outbreak on Tuesday, according to the Palestinian Wafa news agency. All workers returning from Israel will have to stay at home in quarantine for 14 days. Those who show symptoms should contact their nearest health center immediately. The announcement came as the Israeli government met to discuss new regulations to fight the coronavirus outbreak. People, according to the new rules, will only be allowed to leave their homes within 100 meters; leisure activities will only be allowed within walking distance and sporting events - even on one's own - are forbidden.

Times of Israel

Court Lets Shin Bet Continue Phone Tracking With Knesset Oversight

The High Court of Justice on Tuesday lifted an injunction that barred the Shin Bet security service from tracking Israelis to keep tabs on coronavirus outbreak, and that prevented the police from acting on that data to enforce quarantine orders. After rights groups petitioned against the mass surveillance program last week, Israel's top legal body warned that it would shutter the Shin Bet program if parliamentary oversight was not in place by Tuesday. The Knesset re-opened Monday, after being shut down on the orders of Speaker Yuli Edelstein since last Wednesday, and the Clandestine Services Subcommittee was established, allowing the court to lift the injunction placed against the security agency. See also ["Israel Begins Tracking And Texting Those Possibly Exposed To The Coronavirus" \(NPR\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Top Likud Ministers Change Tune, Back Vote on Knesset Speaker

Senior ministers from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's party called on Tuesday on Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein, also of Likud, to honor a High Court of Justice ruling calling on him to allow Israeli lawmakers to vote on his replacement. This follows harsh criticism by some other Likud members after justices issued their ruling on Monday. Some of them, including Justice Minister Amir Ohana, explicitly urged Edelstein to defy the court, deepening a constitutional crisis exacerbated in the fallout from Israel's undecisive March 2 election, the country's third in a year. skip - Netanyahu's corona smokescreen and Gaza's 'God-help-us' moment. See also, ["Do the right thing, Yuli Edelstein" \(JPost\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Emergency Gov't Idea Mulled as Compromise to Keep Blue & White Together

Blue and White leader Benny Gantz is considering joining what would be termed as an "emergency government" under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for six months, sources in the party said Tuesday, after Gantz held individual meetings with Blue and White MKs at the Knesset. Joining such a government could enable Gantz to keep Blue and White together despite the fierce opposition to joining a Netanyahu-led government from members of the party's leadership "cockpit," Yair Lapid and Moshe Ya'alon. The six months would be counted as part of Netanyahu's time in office if a more formal unity government is formed afterward with a rotation in the Prime Minister's Office. Gantz turned down an offer from Netanyahu to meet on Tuesday and close a deal on a national unity government. "This time is a test of leadership and national responsibility," Netanyahu wrote to Gantz in a Facebook post. See also, ["How to end the political deadlock? A minority government... headed by Netanyahu" \(TOI\)](#)

Edelstein's Choice

By Sima Kadmon political commentator at Yedioth Ahronoth

- Yuli Edelstein yesterday faced the choice between war and disgrace. He could have told Netanyahu and Knesset Director General Albert Sakharovich that he had no intention of trampling the Knesset's dignity underfoot, and that he was choosing to fight for its independence. That is what a stately speaker would have done, a speaker who understood the magnitude of the moment and the enormity of the role he had to play. That is what a courageous person with a spine and an inner moral compass would have done. He would not have capitulated to the prime minister and he would have refused to become a rag doll in his hands.
- But Edelstein chose disgrace. His response to the High Court of Justice, which instructed him to respond whether he intended to convene the Knesset plenum to allow for a vote to elect a new speaker, is unbelievable. He, Edelstein, believes that the court's intervention in his discretion as speaker is incorrect at the current juncture in time. Or, in other words, Edelstein said: I don't give a damn about the Supreme Court and its rulings.
- Edelstein chose disgrace and that is precisely what he received. And not because of the remarks that were made by the president of the Supreme Court but because his action yesterday will remain a blot on his biography even in another 20 and 30 years. A former prisoner of Zion, the emissary of a man who has been indicted on serious charges, was accused yesterday by the Supreme Court of "undermining the foundations of the democratic process and overtly damaging the status of the Knesset as an independent authority." When people want to coin a phrase for someone who, with a single disgraceful act, lost their dignity and good reputation, they will say that he pulled "an Edelstein." It seems to me that with his capitulation to the pressures that were brought to bear against him by the prime minister and his associates, Edelstein's hopes of being elected president one day were buried yesterday as well.
- Some people say that the person who urged him to take his current position was his director general, Albert Sakharovich, who just a week ago announced that contrary to the Health Ministry guidelines it was his recommendation that the MKs not gather in groups of more than ten people—and that it was because of him or, at the very least, with his help, that the vote on forming committees was postponed. Some people said last night that Sakharovich's motives are simple: he doesn't want to lose his job, which is certain to happen if Edelstein is replaced. There is also a political explanation: Edelstein was led to understand by Netanyahu and his envoys that Israel would be heading into a fourth election and that he would be best served by clinging to his seat, which would guarantee that he remain in office through September—by which point everyone would forget anyway.
- These are unbelievable times, times of a kind we have never seen before. Yesterday it seemed that the coronavirus crisis paled against the destructive subversion by the Likud, which with every passing day has been undercutting the foundations of democracy without any brakes. One only needed to hear the remarks that were made by Minister Yariv Levin, an Israeli cabinet minister who hopes to be appointed justice minister: "The High Court of Justice has officially seized control and has turned the Knesset speaker into a rubber stamp, while the Knesset and the plenum are being run by the Supreme Court justices." Subsequently, Levin called for nothing

short of a coup when he suggested that the Supreme Court president make her way to the Knesset building with the court guard and that she personally preside over the plenary session. By so doing, Levin joined another luminary, Justice Minister Amir Ohana, who personally urged the Knesset speaker to respond to the High Court of Justice with the following single word: No.

- With the exception of a few Likud members who swam against the current (but who nevertheless failed to salvage their party's honor), such as Gideon Saar, Gilad Erdan and Michal Shir, no one stood up to protest the attack on the court.
- But Israel has judges, and yesterday they stopped the ongoing erosion of the Knesset's status. That appears to put an end to any possibility of a Netanyahu-led unity government. It is hard to imagine that Gantz, after his speech in the Knesset, is still considering entering a government of that kind. Edelstein's actions proved to him something that still needed to be proved from his standpoint: Netanyahu's insistence on Edelstein's continued tenure showed all and sundry that Netanyahu had never wanted a unity government and that he is already focused on a fourth election after successfully weakening Gantz's strength and public standing.

Summary: These are unbelievable times, times of a kind we have never seen before. Yesterday it seemed that the coronavirus crisis paled against the destructive subversion by the Likud, which with every passing day has been undercutting the foundations of democracy without any brakes. One only needed to hear the remarks that were made by Minister Yariv Levin, an Israeli cabinet minister who hopes to be appointed justice minister: "The High Court of Justice has officially seized control and has turned the Knesset speaker into a rubber stamp, while the Knesset and the plenum are being run by the Supreme Court justices." Subsequently, Levin called for nothing short of a coup when he suggested that the Supreme Court president make her way to the Knesset building with the court guard and that she personally preside over the plenary session. By so doing, Levin joined another luminary, Justice Minister Amir Ohana, who personally urged the Knesset speaker to respond to the High Court of Justice with the following single word: No.

Will Gantz Jettison or Legitimize Netanyahu's Fear Mongering?

By Akiva Eldar, commentator at AI Monitor

- According to an old Jewish proverb, those who need the services of a thief must take him down from the noose. In the case before Israel, the thief is being accused of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, but has nonetheless convinced the citizenry that his services are essential. In this regard, Israel's interim prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has turned himself into a vital cure for a horrible epidemic. In addition, he is demanding that the political hangman, Blue and White leader Benny Gantz, and his associates restore him to the status of permanent prime minister. On March 22, Netanyahu appealed once again to his rival Gantz to join a unity government to tackle the coronavirus crisis. With the help of this tiny virus, the larger-than-life accused has successfully placed responsibility at the door of his accuser and created conflict in the accuser's camp.
- Blue and White, established in late 2018, rode the waves of voter disgust with Netanyahu to its current position at the head of a slim, 61-seat Knesset majority, and its leader has been tasked with forming the next government. Over 1.2 million Israelis who voted for Blue and White were fed up with Netanyahu's indecent assault on Israeli democracy and his abuse of the state's social fabric. In the run-up to the March 2 elections, Gantz tweeted, "Support Blue and White in the polling booth, or else you'll get an Erdogan entrenched in the PM's residence," referring to Turkish strongman President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He also announced categorically that his party would not join a government led by an indicted prime minister, the first article in Blue and White's contract with its voters. Had this been a legal document, a decision by Gantz and his friends to join a Netanyahu-led government would have been the basis for a damage award on the grounds of a contract violation.
- The problem is that the contract includes another commitment, the violation of which could be considered deceit if not outright vote theft. In March 2019 during Gantz's early days in politics, he announced that he would not conduct a dialogue with the political leadership of Israel's Arab community because it "speaks out against the State of Israel." Thus, the second article in Blue and White's contract with its voters promises that any government the party forms will only include Zionist, or patriotic, parties. In light of the March 2 election results, which gave Blue and White 33 Knesset seats and the Arab Joint List 15, Gantz had no choice but to chip away at this pledge and invite the Arab political leadership for talks.
- Yisrael Beitenu leader Avigdor Liberman, who has built a reputation for himself as the archenemy of the Arab lawmakers, swallowed the bitter pill of political cooperation with the Arabs in his quest to unseat Netanyahu. The head of the small Telem faction in Blue and White, Moshe Ya'alon, a former general considered a straight shooter, also decided that the first article in the contract with voters was so crucial that it justified violating the second. Ya'alon failed, however, to convince Zvi Hauser and Yoaz Hendel, his two fellow Telem colleagues, to follow in his footsteps. Hauser and Hendel, both of a distinctly right-wing persuasion, had had firsthand experience with Netanyahu's deceptiveness — the former as his cabinet secretary and the latter as his spokesperson — and thus had set out to topple him. Now they are refusing to cooperate with the Joint List even at the cost of perpetuating Netanyahu's grip on power. There are increasing signs in recent days that Gabi Ashkenazi, a member of the Blue and White leadership,

is leaning toward joining the two rejectionists and accepting Netanyahu's call to join a unity government under his leadership for the first 18 months of the term.

- As always, “unity” relates only to parties for which most of their voters are Jewish. (Luckily, members of the arch-racist Otzma Yehudit, disciples of Rabbi Meir Kahane, failed to get elected.) Netanyahu, the person who enabled Hamas to receive Qatari cash aid, has in the public's eyes turned the elected representatives of the state's Arab minority, among them two medical doctors, into “terror supporters.” This campaign of incitement by Netanyahu and his allies against the state's Arab citizens has infuriated many Israelis who devoted most of their lives to protecting the security of the state. Writing in Haaretz on March 23, Ephraim Halevy, former Mossad chief and former chair of the National Security Council, condemned the rejection of the Joint List as legitimate political partners: “Anyone who disqualifies the Arab MKs disqualifies their supporters, including the doctors who are currently saving the lives of Israelis — Jews, Arabs and Druze alike. This is a disgrace and, worse, a self-inflicted wound.”
- Had Netanyahu's performance in the critical fight against the coronavirus epidemic been flawless, and if he were indeed irreplaceable, as he claims, Gantz, a former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff, would have been justified in thinking about subordinating himself under the great leader's command, at least temporarily. Senior health system sources have claimed, however, that contrary to the story Netanyahu presents in public, he excludes top Health Ministry professionals and leading epidemiologists from the decision-making process on the epidemic. The results are apparent in the contradictory instructions issued to the public and the lack of coordination among authorities.
- A March 23 report by the State Comptroller's Office, the government watchdog, points to flaws in the preparedness of the Health Ministry, HMOs and hospitals in dealing with resurgent and new epidemics. The comptroller found that the national preparedness plan fails to set out the number of isolation rooms required and that the Health Ministry lacks a plan to rectify the shortage in hospital beds, medical teams and equipment in the event of a flu pandemic. The review also found that the inventory of medicine would suffice for only 16% of the population rather than the required 25%.
- The transitional prime minister's handling of the current crisis is reminiscent of another of his performances in the health care arena. Netanyahu bears responsibility for the prolonged abandonment of Israel's elderly, the group most vulnerable in the current epidemic. In a 2017 report, the comptroller pointed to the many serious flaws in the quality of home care — “to the point of neglect” — provided to 165,000 elderly Israelis. In May 2019, the same comptroller warned that the Health Ministry had not prepared for the significant growth expected in the number of elderly, including the need for dedicated wards and units and additional dedicated beds and nursing support and rehabilitation.
- Those in Blue and White's leadership who advocate joining a unity government argue that despite Netanyahu's actions and failures, he still commands significant power. They warn of the irreversible political damage to the fragile alliance that could be caused by the fear being generated by the coronavirus and of the Arabs. A Channel 12 poll released March 12, however, indicates that the coronavirus and incitement against the Joint List have not undermined the position held by the center-left political bloc, which has maintained public support for its 61 Knesset seats.

- **The Supreme Court has ordered a vote to replace the current Knesset speaker, Likud's Yuli Edelstein, by March 25. With a new speaker and with new committees, Blue and White could advance legislation blocking Netanyahu from being tasked with forming the next government and in the process bringing him closer to the defendant's box. Gantz and his friends must now decide which is wiser: legitimizing a citizen under indictment who is eroding the state's democracy or approving that same citizen's delegitimization of 15 democratically elected, law-abiding Arab citizens.**

Summary: Had Netanyahu's performance in the critical fight against the coronavirus epidemic been flawless, and if he were indeed irreplaceable, as he claims, Gantz, a former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff, would have been justified in thinking about subordinating himself under the great leader's command, at least temporarily. Senior health system sources have claimed, however, that contrary to the story Netanyahu presents in public, he excludes top Health Ministry professionals and leading epidemiologists from the decision-making process on the epidemic. The results are apparent in the contradictory instructions issued to the public and the lack of coordination among authorities.