# Coronavirus hits Israel, threatens catastrophe for West Bank and Gaza

**Jean Shaoul**
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Israel's caretaker Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, never one to miss an opportunity to turn a crisis to his political advantage, is exploiting the coronavirus outbreak to shore up his political position.

His right-wing bloc of ultranationalists and orthodox religious parties won 58 seats in the 120 seat Knesset in the March 2 elections, the third in less than a year, leaving Israel's political system once again deadlocked. His trial--for bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases--starts on March 17 in the Jerusalem District Court.

According to health authorities, 127 Israelis have thus far tested positive for the novel coronavirus and thousands have been placed in isolation. 104 people infected with the virus have been hospitalised, while 19 are being treated at home.

Following the elections, Netanyahu has used the virus to create an aura of national emergency, with himself as the chief spokesperson for the nation, giving daily press conferences and sowing widespread fear. Seen by many as over-hyping the situation, he has announced a number of measures to control the spread of the virus, some of them ill-thought-out and without the allocation of necessary resources.

He has effectively placed the country in quarantine, banning flights from the European Union, although not from the US, ending the very limited land entry with Israel's neighbours as well as sea entry for international visitors, closed event venues and prohibited gatherings of more than 100 people. No foreigners are allowed into Israel, unless they can prove they are able to self-quarantine for 14 days after their arrival.

On Thursday evening, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that schools and universities would close. This has prompted a furious response from staff in kindergartens, daycare centres and schools for those with special needs, which are not included in the closures. Special education teachers have written to Netanyahu to include them in the nationwide school closures over coronavirus. As one teacher said, "Is the health of special education teachers any less worthy than the health of regular teachers? Don't tell me routine is important for the children, health is more important."

The teachers' union announced it would declare a labour dispute with the Education Ministry if it did not close kindergartens as well and told kindergarten teachers to call in sick, while several local authorities announced they would close kindergartens and special needs schools.

Netanyahu is also believed to be considering ordering all non-essential businesses and services to close, with staff working at home.

Announcing the closure of schools and universities on Thursday night, Netanyahu used the pandemic to press his opposition rival, Blue and White leader Bennie Gantz to form an "emergency unity government." He appealed to Gantz to join "without hesitations" for a limited time so that "together we will save tens of thousands of citizens."

He made it clear however that an emergency unity government would not include the third largest party, the four Arab parties in the Joint List. He told Gantz that "There is no place for supporters of terror, in routine times and during emergency."

In the meantime, Justice Minister Amir Ohana has expanded his powers to freeze court activity should the incidence of coronavirus cases increase, enabling him to declare a state of emergency in the justice system and thereby postpone Netanyahu's trial.

Four hospitals were designated as special centres for the virus. Within days, medical teams in two of these, staff in the emergency room at the Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv and Beilinson Hospital in Petah Tikva wrote to the hospital administrator saying that they did not feel properly protected from the coronavirus outbreak and were "beginning to fear for our health." They said they were "at the forefront" of the fight to contain the outbreak in Israel, and "hope to get support from the system we belong to."

Health workers at Ichilov Hospital called for a separate emergency room to isolate patients showing symptoms of the virus, the supply of maximum protection measures for workers in the emergency unit and for patients with a cough be tested for the coronavirus, as well as any staff member who fears for their health.

By Wednesday, 16 members of Ichilov's staff were in quarantine after being exposed to a coronavirus patient, as were some of Beilinson medical staff. In all, nearly 2,500 medical staff are now in quarantine across the country.

That medical staff should be forced to make such basic

requests despite the relatively low number of confirmed infections to date illustrates just how ill-prepared Israel's public healthcare system is to test masses of suspected coronavirus carriers, or to provide severe cases with adequate intensive care facilities. Successive governments have for years implemented austerity budgets for healthcare and other critical social services.

There is every indication that Netanyahu has largely sealed off the country and closed down services because Israel's health system would collapse under the weight of mass treatment and cure.

But there is a further consideration—that the coronavirus could spread to Gaza, sparking an extreme humanitarian and health crisis of biblical proportions. It is Israel's worst nightmare—because of its broader political and social implications.

Under the Hague Convention (1907) and the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949), Israel as the occupier of Gaza, whose borders it controls, and the West Bank is legally responsible for the safety and welfare of civilians living in the occupied territories, a responsibility which Israel denies. Should an epidemic occur, particularly in Gaza, Netanyahu is acutely aware that the world would hold Israel responsible.

Israel has closed its borders with the West Bank and Gaza for the Jewish holiday of Purim, ending on March 14, when it will decide whether to extend the closure in the light of the spread of the coronavirus. With around 120,000 Palestinians in the West Bank working in Israel, as well as others who travel to and from East Jerusalem, it is only a matter of time before the highly contagious disease hits the West Bank, which cannot be sealed off from Israel.

So far, some 35 cases have been diagnosed in the West Bank, although none of those infected are believed to be in danger. Most of the cases are in Bethlehem which Israel and President Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority (PA) have placed under lockdown for 30 days. The streets are deserted. Some 2,900 people are at home in quarantine in the city. Most are now without work or income. The PA has declared a state of emergency, ordering all schools, universities, mosques, and churches in Bethlehem to close. Jordan has closed the Allenby Bridge, the main crossing used by Palestinians and Jordanians to travel to and from Jordan.

The PA's healthcare system, such as it is, is limited and ill-equipped to deal with the emergency, having inherited a minimal service from Israel after the 1993 Oslo Accords. The coronavirus tests, whose kits have been brought in by the WHO, are carried out in Ramallah and then confirmed at an Israeli hospital. This is hardly surprising as the PA spends around 40 percent of its budget on the security services that police the Palestinian people on Israel's behalf.

There are also thousands of Palestinians in Israeli jails, where political prisoners are held in notoriously overcrowded and dirty conditions. One prisoner has reportedly come into contact with an Israeli doctor who had tested positive for the virus and is now being held in quarantine, with suspected cases in two other prisons.

There are widespread fears that the Israeli government and prison authorities, which the Palestinians have long accused of deliberate medical negligence, are not taking the appropriate measures, including the provision of sanitizers and soap, to prevent the virus spreading and treat those who become sick.

As yet, there have been no reported cases of the coronavirus in Gaza, thanks to the Israeli blockade that ensures that few people enter or leave what is little more than an open-air prison.

As a result of Israel's 12-year-long siege, which Egypt and the PA have aided and abetted, living conditions are truly atrocious. Half the population is unemployed. Poverty is endemic. A 2012 UN report predicted that Gaza would become uninhabitable by 2020, given the extreme overcrowding, the collapsed infrastructures, lack of electricity and water and the poor sanitary conditions and said that Gaza needed 1,000 more doctors.

In January, the Israeli rights group B'Tselem described the unprecedented health crisis in Gaza, as its barely functioning hospitals try to deal with the horrendous injuries and amputations inflicted on the Palestinians by Israel's armed forces during the weekly "Great March of Return" that started two years ago.

Under these circumstances, Gaza will be totally unable to cope when Covid-19—no respecter of sieges and borders—reaches the enclave. Some 7,000 Palestinians travel to Israel for work, a number to be increased under a recent agreement with Hamas, the bourgeois clerical group that controls Gaza, increasing the risk of infection.

The Palestinians in Gaza not only have no possibility of controlling the spread of the virus, they will suffer from its effects with no access to medical treatment and supplies. Thousands if not hundreds of thousands of Gaza's 1.8 million inhabitants could die as a result.