

MEI Weekly.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announcing new measures that will be taken to fight the coronavirus in Israel, including closing down various establishments and using “technologies used in the war against terror” to track the movements of those who have contracted the disease. He was speaking from his office in Jerusalem on Saturday (14 March). Photo: Gali Tibbon / AFP.

CALENDAR: UPCOMING INSTITUTE EVENTS

Suspension of Public Events

All MEI public events for March remain suspended until further notice, in view of the Ministry of Health’s advice to cancel or defer all large scale and non-essential events. New event dates will be announced once the situation stabilises.



Please check our website and social media channels for updates.

WHAT’S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

Netanyahu, Coronavirus and Democracy

In the name of combating the coronavirus, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shut down the country’s courts on Sunday (15 March) and on Tuesday (17 March), he ordered the use of Israel’s internal security service to monitor cell phone data for its quarantine policy, reported *The New York Times*. These bold moves come as his challenger Benny Gantz’s Blue and White Party successfully formed a minority government in coalition with the Joint List on Monday (16 March), raising doubts on Mr Netanyahu’s true motivations for his policies. Though many have praised the prime minister’s aggressive response to the pandemic, others are concerned about the impacts on Israel’s democracy, as Mr Netanyahu once again avoids standing trial for his corruption charges.



Expatriates from Egypt, Syria and Lebanon waiting to be tested for the coronavirus on Monday (16 March) at a Kuwaiti health ministry containment and screening zone in Kuwait City, Kuwait. This is just one example of a slew of other measures countries in the region have adopted in an attempt to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Photo: Yasser Al-Zayyat/AFP.

Covid-19 Continues Devastating Middle East

As the number of coronavirus cases continue to rise across the Middle East, governments have scrambled to implement curfews, suspend international travel and close religious sites. Already weakened by war, economic crises and turbulent political situations, many Middle Eastern countries are struggling to manage the epidemic with their strained healthcare systems, while others like Egypt and Iran have been roundly criticised for failing to undertake sufficient measures to control the spread of the virus. The situation is particularly severe in war-torn refugee camps where the millions crowded in close quarters are especially vulnerable to the extremely contagious disease.

Iraq’s New PM Tests Relations with Iran

Following Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahid’s resignation in December last year in the midst of widespread opposition, Iraq’s second prime minister, Mr Adnan al-Zurfi, was appointed on Tuesday (17 March). The move led by President Barham Salih was an attempt to break the country’s long-standing political deadlock, a much needed act given the current coronavirus outbreak and escalating tensions with the United States. Pro-Iranian factions in the country have criticised the designation of the former provincial governor who holds American citizenship, but Mr Zurfi has declared that he remains committed to combating the coronavirus, protecting protestors and forming a government.

LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

Saudi Arabia Calls Emergency G20 Meeting

As current president of the Group of 20 (G20), Saudi Arabia has called for an extraordinary virtual meeting some time next week for world leaders of major economies to discuss the coronavirus pandemic. The summit will “put forward a coordinated set of policies to protect people and safeguard the global economy” as world markets are still reeling from the rapidly spreading COVID-19 pandemic. Saudi Arabia itself has taken strong measures to counter the outbreak such as suspending the *Umrah* pilgrimage and closing schools, as well as restricting physical prayers everywhere but at the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina.

Knesset to Reconvene Next Week

The Knesset (the Israeli parliament) has been shuttered this week, but not due to the coronavirus outbreak in the country. Instead, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud Party has refused to step down and call for a vote on a new speaker, even though the party no longer represents a majority in the new parliament. Many are hoping that as the Knesset reconvenes next week, Israeli leaders will put aside political differences and work toward easing the COVID-19 outbreak in Israel.



#MUSTREAD: WHAT’S POPULAR ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

FACEBOOK: In an interview with *Haaretz*, former Foreign Minister George Yeo explains how Asia is increasingly important to Israel and as Israel looks to the East, Singapore can play a part as a close friend and ally. In his chapter in MEI’s book *Beating the Odds Together*, Mr Yeo wrote about how Israel came to Singapore’s aid when it needed help the most.
<http://bit.ly/2U0Ahe0>

In this latest *Insight*, Dr Dominique Trimbur explains France’s unique relationship with Jerusalem by studying French guardianship over Catholics in history as well as French “national domains” in the Holy City.
<https://nus.edu/2wnZo1t>



TWITTER: In an interview with CNBC on Monday (16 March), MEI Visiting Senior Research Fellow Tilak Doshi argues that in the oil price war, neither Saudi Arabia nor Russia seem likely to back down due to their vast reserves that are sufficient to sustain themselves until at least the end of the year.
<http://bit.ly/2xSGwIn>

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