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Israel to shut down schools, universities in effort to combat coronavirus

03.12.20 – Th -

Israel to shut down schools, universities in effort to combat coronavirus

In a Thursday press conference, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urges the public to keep in line with current precautions, calls for 'emergency unity government' to combat virus that has so far infected 109 Israelis

Ynet| Updated: 03.12.20 , 21:47

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Thursday that Israel will close schools and universities as part of measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

He said the decision doesn't include kindergartens, special education and boarding schools, adding that a decision would be made for those institutions shortly.

"We are in the midst of a global event unlike anything in the history of the state's existence," he said during a press conference at his office in Jerusalem.

He also called for the formation of an emergency government following a year-long political deadlock.

"We will deal with the current crisis together and continue later," he said.

Netanyahu called on families to avoid having grandparents babysit children, saying that instead, "the big children will take care of the smaller children."

"All of humanity is in the same boat," he said.

The prime minister reiterated his commitment to fighting the virus and said he's cooperating extensively with world leaders on the matter.

At the beginning of his statement, Netanyahu warned that "the number of dead [from the coronavirus] could reach large numbers."

He said the mortality rate from the virus is two percent to four percent.

There have so far been no deaths from the virus in Israel, where there are 109 confirmed cases, among them a six month-year-old child.

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03.12.20 – Th -

Education Ministry mulls suspending studies until after April 8 Passover holiday

03.12.20 – Th -

Education Ministry mulls suspending studies until after Passover holiday

Health and education officials weigh far-reaching measure as coronavirus pervades school system; fifteen percent of students absent from class as country's sick count hits 109

Adir Yanko| Updated: 03.12.20 , 18:51

The National Security Council and the education and health ministries held talks on Thursday on whether to order the closure of the school system across the country to stymie the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Despite Education Minister Rafi Peretz saying earlier in the day that the country's schools would remain open despite increasingly tight restrictions from health officials, reports said that schools would be ordered closed until at least after the Passover vacation next month.

An official announcement will be made on Thursday evening.

Also on Thursday, four more Israelis have tested positive for the pathogen, bringing the country's total sick count to 109. The Health Ministry said it will release further details on the cases.

On Wednesday, the Health Ministry banned gatherings of more than 100 people in enclosed spaces, prompting the head of Israel Teachers' Union, Yaffa Ben-David, to demand the immediate closure of all schools.

Several school students in Israel have already been diagnosed with COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

"I call on the prime minister to display national responsibility for the public's health, including Israeli students, Israeli educators and their family members to stop the spread of the virus and prevent the next victims," Ben-David wrote in a message sent to teaching staff.

"I ask of you [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] to order to close all educational institutions across the country – kindergartens and school."

Education Ministry Director-General Shmuel Abuav sent a letter to ministry board members on Wednesday evening, in which he announced that schools will open as usual around the country despite the coronavirus outbreak.

"According to the prime minister and Health Ministry's orders, the education system will return tomorrow to a learning routine to prevent any significant damage to the fabric of civilian life," wrote Abuav.

"But at the same time, the following guidelines should be considered – educational institutions will open their gates, classes will take place as usual, recess and other outdoor activities in the schoolyard will take place as usual. However, it is prohibited to hold large-scale events in educational institutions, such as sports competitions with spectators, plays, conferences or shows."

Many worried parents are refusing to send their children to school and thousands have already signed an online petition created Wednesday evening to suspend the education system.

"Suspending school will reduce the number of infected and the risk that elderly people will get sick," read the blurb accompanying the petition.

Meanwhile, frustration is growing among educators, and some say they feel like the state has left them to their own devices.

"There is no justification to keep schools open," a teacher from central Israel tells Ynet.

"There is regular interaction both between and with the students in the teachers' lounge and the small classrooms. Additionally, the bathrooms are very crowded.

"I, for example, am going to meet and teach at least 200 students tomorrow. There are large gatherings of students during recess, definitely more than a hundred, and we're in Israel, the students here hug, shake hands and touch each other all the time." The teacher also suggested canceling the so-called "bridge" of school time between the Jewish holiday of Purim that took place this week and Passover, which starts on April 8. The ministry has said this stretch of lessons would not be canceled.

"It's madness that the Health Ministry has abandoned us," she said. "Nothing would have happened if they merged the Purim and Passover vacations. More people will pay with their lives if the schools stay open."

Despite the Education Ministry's announcement that schools will take place as usual on Thursday, about 15% of students across the country skipped school, although parent organizations nationwide have yet to officially adopt such a course of action.
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03.12.20 – Th -

WHO official says COVID-19 epidemic vaccine is at least 12 to 15 months away

03.12.20 – Th -

WHO official says coronavirus epidemic to 'get worse before it gets better'

World Health Organization Spokesperson Christian Lindmeier tells Ynet that world governments must work together to combat the COVID-19 spread, seeing as a vaccine against the virus is not due for the next 15 months

Ynet| Published: 03.12.20 , 14:35

A senior World Health Organization official said Thursday the coronavirus pandemic "will get worse before it gets better."

Earlier 100 more people have tested positive for COVID-19 bringing the total number of cases in Israel to 100, the Health Ministry confirmed.

World Health Organization Spokesperson Christian Lindmeier said in an exclusive interview with Ynet the vaccine for the new virus is at least "12 to 15" months away.

"A vaccine first needs to be developed, then it needs tests, then it needs production so it will all take some time even if it would be found very soon," he said. "We are thinking about 12 to 15 months, so definitely not something during this year."

He urged governments around the world to continue implementing strict directives in an effort to minimize the number of new cases, seeing as the end of the current outbreak does not appear to be in sight.

"The situation worldwide with the rise of cases and the spread in some countries - some uncontrolled - characterizes a pandemic, so unfortunately we have to assume it will get worse before it gets better."

Lindmeier praised the Chinese authorities, who recently said they've managed to contain the outbreak with new cases falling to single digits, for mobilizing efficiently to fight the virus spread.

Although he singled out Iran, Italy, South Korea as the states that struggle to contain the outbreak, he pointed out he doesn't believe it's "dangerous" to travel to those countries. "I wouldn't call it [Italy] dangerous, depends a lot on your **personal behavior**," he said. "If you **keep your distance**, be **careful what you touch** and **who you touch** and practice **good hand hygiene** ... you and everybody can protect themselves that way." He added that contrary to popular belief the new **virus is not "just like the flu"**, although **sometimes it behaves "flu-like."** "It has its own characteristics which we still don't fully understand and that's why it is important to have some drastic measures [to combat the outbreak]." He concluded by suggesting all countries must fight together to defeat the new virus.

"This is all of us together."

03.11.20 – We -

New restrictions to fight global plague limit gatherings to 2,000 people

03.11.20 – We -

New restrictions in place to fight 'global plague' of coronavirus

As number of Israeli infections reaches 82, Netanyahu says no more public gatherings of more than 100 people, with security-related exceptions; WHO declares virus to be 'world epidemic'

Ynet, Agencies | Updated: 03.11.20 , 20:38

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced on **Wednesday** that Israel is **limiting crowd gatherings to a maximum of 100 people** to combat the rapidly growing rate of the "global plague" of coronavirus in the country.

Netanyahu made the announcements during a press conference held along with Health Minister Yaakov Litzman, National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat and Health Ministry Director-General Moshe Bar-Siman-Tov.

Netanyahu said Israel is a good shape to deal with the coronavirus crisis, when compared to many other countries, having closed its "outer envelope" by requiring self-quarantine for all arrivals from abroad.

He asked Israelis to "**change your day-to-day routine**. "We like to hug, shake hands, kiss — don't do it," he said.

"Don't shake hands. **Wash your hands. Maintain good personal hygiene**," he said.

"Cough into a tissue... you don't need masks."

"We're in a pandemic — a global plague."

Netanyahu also said that younger people are not in danger from the virus, but older people are, and thus its spread must be prevented.

“If you get sick and you’re in your 20s or 30s,” he said, “you’ll get better. But if we can’t prevent the spread, we’ll infect the older people — and they’re in much greater danger... I’m talking about their lives... We have to look after dad and grandpa and grandma.

“With God’s help and everybody’s cooperation, we’ll beat this,” he said.

On Tuesday, Israel limited the gatherings to a maximum of 2,000 people, a substantial decrease from the previously allowed number of 5,000 people.

The new instructions means that studies in universities might be postponed.

Bar-Siman-Tov said authorities are currently not closing schools, though they are looking into asking institutes of higher education to hold their lessons online, with students studying from home.

Both Litzman and Bar-Siman-Tov stressed that the public should not go to the hospital unless they absolutely need to.

“If people have a fever or cough, they must stay home until their symptoms are gone even if they don’t have coronavirus,” Bar-Siman-Tov said. “If you are experiencing any coronavirus symptoms, go into home quarantine.”

The announcement was made after the Health Ministry gave Netanyahu the same recommendations, including canceling shows and closing movie theaters.

On Wednesday, the number of Israelis diagnosed with coronavirus rose again to 82 confirmed cases, according to the Health Ministry.

The ministry says some 31,000 people are currently under home quarantine to contain the spread of the disease in the country.

Also Wednesday, the World Health Organization officially designated the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the organization “has been assessing this outbreak around the clock and we’re deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity and the alarming levels of inaction.

“We have therefore made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized by ‘pandemic,’” he said.

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03.11.20 – We -

Relief planed for 4530 employees as Tourism is zero & 80% Airlines on unpaid leave

03.11.20 – We -

Netanyahu unveils NIS 10 billion coronavirus relief plan

PM says NIS 1 billion to bolster healthcare system, other funds will used to stabilize financial system, allow it to function during COVID-19 crisis: ‘This is a challenge we believe we can manage,’ he says

Ynet| Published: 03.11.20 , 16:23

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Wednesday that the government will allocate NIS 10 billion (\$2.8 billion) to help combat the economic consequences caused by the growing coronavirus threat in Israel.

"The coronavirus has an impact on the economy of the entire world, us included," said Netanyahu.

"The state of the Israeli economy is better than most world economies. The financial system is strong, and unemployment is low. These are big advantages in entering this crisis, our goal is to keep the economy going with an initial help package of NIS 10 billion."

Netanyahu said that while the first priority is to equip hospitals and reinforce the healthcare system, "there will be a separate help package provided to airlines beyond the NIS 10 billion."

He called the airline industry "Israel's lifeline."

Israel gives lifeline to businesses caught in coronavirus crunch

No mass gatherings, no hospital visits, police to enforce quarantine

The aid package includes NIS 1 billion to bolster the healthcare system, and additional NIS 1 billion for "dedicated needs" (such as special needs care).

Another NIS 8 billion will be devoted to business loans through a "National small and medium business loan fund," although the terms for the loans have yet to be revealed.

"What we are seeing is a global event," said Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, who took the podium in Jerusalem after Netanyahu.

"The high financial growth is a tremendous boon for us. We in the ministry hold regular meetings with the Bank of Israel, and are keeping a close eye on events," he said.

"We along with the entire economy are going through a difficult time, but still we are in complete control and intend to reinforce the healthcare system as much as we can."

Governor of the Bank of Israel Amir Yaron said: "The Bank of Israel will do everything in its power to protect the economy from the ravages of coronavirus. Our end goal is to support the continued activity of Israel's economy while creating a safety net to ensure it will overcome this difficult time."

He added: "The prime minister, finance minister and I are all working in full cooperation in order to promote and ensure both the growth and support of the economy."

Yaron said that at this stage, airlines will not be offered handouts only loans.

"All airlines are in constant communication with us; we will provide them with aid to ensure they withstand this crisis. We are not talking about grants and compensation, we are talking about providing them with a stable cash flow in order to help them through the crisis."

Earlier Wednesday, El Al Airlines announced it will place some 4,000 of its employees around 80% of its entire workforce - on unpaid leave from next week.

Israel's flag carrier has seen a massive decrease in revenue amid the coronavirus outbreak.

In a filing to the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange, El Al said the extension of self-quarantine requirements to all individuals arriving in Israel was expected to have a "fundamentally adverse effect" on the company's operations.

The Issta Lines tourism company has announced the closure of all 42 of its branches in Israel by April 15, following the company's "drop-in operations to zero," along with unpaid leave for most of the company's 530 employees.

Yossi Fatal, the chairman of the "Israel Incoming Tour Operators Association," which represents those working in the tourism industry, said in response that he believes "giving financial priority to the airline industry is a mistake."

"Without us to bring tourists into Israel, the plan to support the aviation industry is fundamentally incomplete," said Fatal. "We should be among the first to receive aid, without us there will be no tourists in hotels nor on the planes."

Fatal said that the inbound tourism industry was the sixth largest in the country, and constitutes 4% of Israel's GDP.

"We are talking about vital infrastructure that supplies jobs for thousands of people, mostly in the periphery," said Fatal.

"We demand that the prime minister allocates a special budget to support the inbound tourism industry, or he is risking a loss of 3.5 million tourists this year due to the coronavirus."

03.12.20 – Th -

WHO declared a pandemic, US restricts travel from Europe, tours will be shut down

03.12.20 – Th -

In battle against virus, Trump restricts travel from Europe

In a televised address the U.S. president blames the 'foreign virus' outbreak on Europe's inability to contain it and announces month long restriction on travel to and from the 'Schengen Area,' which includes France, Italy, German, Greece, Austria, Belgium and others

Associated Press| Published: 03.12.20 , 08:50

Taking dramatic action, President Donald Trump sharply restricted passenger travel from 26 European nations to the U.S. and moved to ease the economic cost of a viral pandemic that is roiling global financial markets and disrupting the daily lives of Americans.

Trump, in a rare Oval Office address to the nation Wednesday night, said the monthlong restriction on travel would begin late Friday, at midnight. After days of playing down the coronavirus threat, he blamed Europe for not acting quickly enough to address the "foreign virus" and claimed that U.S. clusters were "seeded" by European travelers.

"We made a lifesaving move with early action on China," Trump said. "Now we must take the same action with Europe."

Trump said the restrictions won't apply to the United Kingdom, and there would be exemptions for "Americans who have undergone appropriate screenings." He said the U.S. would monitor the situation to determine if travel could be reopened earlier. The State Department followed Trump's remarks by issuing an extraordinary global health advisory cautioning U.S. citizens to "reconsider travel abroad" due to the virus and associated quarantines and restrictions.

Trump spoke after days of confusion in Washington and in the face of mounting calls on the president to demonstrate greater leadership. At times, though, his remarks contributed to the uncertainty.

While Trump said all European travel would be cut off, Homeland Security officials later clarified that the new travel restrictions would apply only to most foreign nationals who have been in the "Schengen Area" at any point for 14 days prior to their scheduled arrival to the United States. The area includes France, Italy, Germany, Greece, Austria, Belgium and others, and the White House said the zone has the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases outside of mainland China.

The restrictions don't apply to legal permanent residents, immediate family of U.S. citizens or others "identified in the proclamation" signed by Trump.

And Trump misspoke when he said the prohibitions would "not only apply to the tremendous amount of trade and cargo, but various other things." The official proclamation released after Trump spoke made clear it applies to people, not goods and cargo.

The Oval Office address represented an abrupt shift in tone from a president who has repeatedly sought to play down the severity of the virus outbreak. Many Americans shared a similar mindset in recent weeks, but the grueling events of Wednesday changed the mood: Communities canceled public events nationwide, universities moved to cancel in-person classes, and families grappled with the impact of disruptions to public schools. The number of confirmed cases of the infection topped 1,000 in the U.S. and the **World Health Organization declared the global crisis is now a pandemic.**

Even as Trump spoke from behind the Resolute Desk, the pandemic's ferocious rewriting of American daily life continued. The National Basketball Association suspended its season, and Oscar-winning actor Tom Hanks announced that he and his wife, Rita Wilson, had tested positive for COVID-19. The first confirmed case on Capitol Hill was reported in a legislative staffer.

After Trump spoke, the White House cancelled a planned trip by the president to Nevada and Colorado this week, "out of an abundance of caution." Trump's re-election campaign also postponed a planned March 19 event in Milwaukee that was set to feature the president.

After a week of mixed messages and false starts, and as government officials warned in increasingly urgent terms that the outbreak in the U.S. will only get worse, Washington suddenly seemed poised to act.

Congress unveiled a multibillion-dollar aid package Wednesday that was expected to be voted on by the House as soon as Thursday.

"I can say we will see more cases, and things will get worse than they are right now," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, said

in testimony before the House Oversight and Reform Committee. He said the virus is "10 times more lethal than the seasonal flu."

S&P 500 futures went from a loss of about 0.4% before Trump spoke to a decline of 1.5% afterwards. The decline in the futures market followed a steep 4.9% drop in regular trading Wednesday. Wall Street investors are increasingly concerned that the Trump administration and other governments won't be able to do enough to prevent the virus outbreak from causing significant damage to the global economy.

After Trump's address, Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced a series of moves, including restrictions for 60 days on travel by servicemembers, Defense Department civilians and their families to, from and through the four counties currently designated by the Centers for Disease Control as the highest risk COVID-19 counties - China, Iran, South Korea and Italy.

In his remarks, Trump focused more on the threat of travel continuing to bring in illness when, in fact, in parts of the country there already is "community spread" - meaning people who don't have a known travel exposure are becoming infected.

In an omission that Democratic leaders called "alarming," Trump left unaddressed the testing backlog that is hampering efforts to learn just how many Americans already are infected. And while he warned the elderly to avoid risky crowds, advised nursing homes to suspend visitors and told sick people to stay home from work, he didn't address one of the biggest concerns - whether hospitals are equipped to handle the sick or will be overwhelmed.

Georgetown University public health expert Lawrence Gostin tweeted in reaction to Trump's speech, "Most of Europe is as safe as US," and COVID-19 "is already here; germs don't respect borders."

Trump said he was also directing agencies to provide unspecified financial relief for "for workers who are ill, quarantined or caring for others due to coronavirus," and asked Congress to take action to extend it. White House aides declined to provide details on Trump's announcement.

Trump said the U.S. will defer tax payments for some individual and business filers for three months to lessen the impacts of the virus outbreak. He said the Small Business Administration will also make low-interest loans available to businesses to help them weather the storm.

"This is not a financial crisis," he said. "This just a temporary moment of time that we will overcome together as a nation and as a world."

Trump also reiterated his call on Congress to pass a cut to the federal payroll tax in order to stimulate the economy, though that idea has been dismissed by many lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. He remained silent on his previous calls to provide assistance to industries hard-hit by the pandemic like airlines and cruise ships.

On Capitol Hill, House Democrats late Wednesday introduced an economic assistance plan that would provide free coronavirus testing nationwide and emergency funding to reimburse lost paychecks for those self-quarantining, missing work or losing jobs amid the outbreak.

The draft legislation contains a new, temporary federal sick leave benefit for coronavirus victims and caregivers -- two-thirds of an employee's monthly income for up to three

months - as well as a permanent mandate for employers to provide up to seven days of sick leave for their workers and 14 days leave in case of public health emergencies.

Facing a likely surge in unemployment claims, the package would also give states money for the newly jobless. It would provide additional funding for food and nutrition benefits for pregnant women, mothers and young children.

It also would up money for "meals on wheels" and food for low-income elderly people, as well as additional Medicaid funding for states facing a fiscal crunch.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, whom Trump tapped to negotiate with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, urged Congress "to pass legislation quickly." But while the ambitious package should breeze through the House on Thursday, Senate Republicans are likely to seek changes.

The administration had floated several other strategies, including the rare idea of declaring a national disaster that could potentially unlock funding streams, according to a person unauthorized to discuss the planning and granted anonymity. But Trump ultimately opted against taking that step Wednesday.

Trump, 73, is considered at higher risk because of his age and has repeatedly flouted the advice of public health experts, who have advised the public to stop hand-shaking and practice social distancing. But that didn't stop him from calling on fellow citizens to help combat the virus' spread. "For all Americans, it is essential that everyone take extra precautions and practice good hygiene. Each of us has a role to play in defeating this virus," he said.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

The vast majority of people recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover.

Congress' attending physician told staff there could be 70 million to 100 million coronavirus cases in the U.S. That's on par with other estimates. A Harvard official has estimated that 20% to 60% of adults will get the virus, noting it's "a pretty wide range."

In Washington, tourists still arrived at the U.S. Capitol, but an official unauthorized to discuss the situation and speaking on condition of anonymity confirmed that tours would soon be shut down.

03.11.20 – We -

WHO declares coronavirus crisis a pandemic, urges world to fight

03.11.20 – We -

WHO declares coronavirus crisis a pandemic, urges world to fight

WHO chief says countries were warned and alarm bells sounded but not all countries took the necessary measures causing concern and alarm at the levels of spread and severity of the coronavirus

Associated Press | Published: 03.11.20, 22:22

Expressing alarm both about mounting infections and inadequate government responses, the World Health Organization declared Wednesday that the global coronavirus crisis is now a pandemic but added that it's not too late for countries to act.

By reversing course and using the charged word "pandemic" that it had previously shied away from, the U.N. health agency sought to shock lethargic countries into pulling out all the stops.

"We have called every day for countries to take urgent and aggressive action. We have rung the alarm bell loud and clear," said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO chief. "All countries can still change the course of this pandemic. If countries detect, test, treat, isolate, trace and mobilize their people in the response," he said. "We are deeply concerned by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of inaction."

The WHO said Iran and Italy are the new front lines of the battle against the virus that started in China.

"They're suffering but I guarantee you other countries will be in that situation soon," said Dr. Mike Ryan, the WHO's emergencies chief.

He added that the agency thought long and hard about labeling the crisis a pandemic -- meaning a new virus causing sustained outbreaks in multiple regions of the world.

The risk of employing the term, Ryan said, is "if people use it as an excuse to give up."

But the benefit is "potentially of galvanizing the world to fight."

Underscoring the mounting challenge: The case count outside China has multiplied 13-fold over the last two weeks to over 118,000, with the disease now responsible for nearly 4,291 deaths, WHO said.

With officials saying that Europe has become the new epicenter, Italy's cases soared again, to 12,462 infections and 827 deaths -- numbers second only to China.

"If you want to be blunt, Europe is the new China," said Robert Redfield, the head of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Italy weighed imposing even tighter restrictions on daily life and announced billions in financial relief Wednesday to cushion economic shocks from the coronavirus, its latest efforts to adjust to the fast-evolving crisis that silenced the usually bustling heart of the Catholic faith, St. Peter's Square.

In Iran, by far the hardest-hit country in the Middle East, the senior vice president, and two other Cabinet ministers were reported to have been diagnosed with COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus. Iran reported another jump in deaths, by 62 to 354 -- behind only China and Italy.

In Italy, Premier Giuseppe Conte said he would consider requests from Lombardy, Italy's hardest-hit region, to toughen the already extraordinary anti-virus lockdown that was

extended nationwide Tuesday. Lombardy wants to shut down nonessential businesses and reduce public transportation.

These measures would be on top of travel and social restrictions that imposed an eerie hush on cities and towns across the country. Police enforced rules that customers stay 1 meter (3 feet) apart and ensured that businesses closed by 6 p.m.

Milan shopkeeper Claudia Sabbatini said she favored the stricter measures. Rather than risk customers possibly infecting each other in her children's clothing store, she closed it. "I cannot have people standing at a distance. Children must try on the clothes. We have to know if they will fit," she said.

Still, the effectiveness of such measures as travel restrictions and quarantines will likely drop substantially and be called into question as COVID-19 spreads globally, making it impossible for countries to keep the virus out. Health officials will also need to be more flexible in their coordinated response efforts, as the epicenters are likely to shift quickly and dramatically -- as the recent eruptions in Iran and Italy have demonstrated. Conte emphasized fighting the outbreak must not come at the expense of civil liberties, suggesting that Italy is unlikely to adopt the draconian quarantine measures that helped China push down new infections from thousands per day to a trickle now and allowed its manufacturers to restart production lines.

China's new worry is that the coronavirus could re-enter from abroad. Beijing's city government announced that all overseas visitors will be quarantined for 14 days. Of 24 new cases that China reported Wednesday, five arrived from Italy and one from the United States. China has had over 81,000 virus infections and over 3,000 deaths.

For most, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. But for a few, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illnesses, including pneumonia. More than 121,000 people have been infected worldwide and over 4,300 have died.

But most people recover. People with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover, the WHO says. In the Mideast, most of the nearly 10,000 cases are in Iran or involve people who traveled to the country. Iran's semiofficial Fars news agency said they include Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri. Iran's ministers for cultural heritage, handicrafts and tourism, and for industry, mines, and business were also infected, the agency said.

In Qatar, cases jumped from 24 to 262. Kuwait announced a two-week shutdown of the country.

For the global economy, virus repercussions were profound, with increasing concerns of wealth- and job-wrecking recessions. U.S. stocks in afternoon trading wiped out more than all the gains from a huge rally a day earlier as Wall Street continues to reel. Wall Street's plunge followed a steep decline by markets across Asia, where governments there and elsewhere have announced billions of dollars in stimulus funds, including packages revealed in Japan on Tuesday and Australia on Wednesday. Italy's government announced Wednesday it was dedicating 25 billion euros (nearly \$28 billion) to boost anti-virus efforts and soften economic blows, including delaying tax and mortgage payments by families and businesses.

Britain's government announced a 30 billion-pound (\$39 billion) economic stimulus package and the Bank of England slashed its key interest rate by half a percentage point to 0.25%.

Normal life was increasingly upended, with Pope Francis live-streaming prayers from the privacy of his Vatican library as police barred access to St. Peter's Square, emptying it of tens of thousands of people who attend the weekly papal address.

In the U.S., the caseload passed 1,000, and outbreaks on both sides of the country stirred alarm.

Former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders, vying to take on President Donald Trump in the presidential election, canceled rallies Tuesday and left open the possibility that future campaign events could be impacted. Trump's campaign insisted it would proceed as normal, although Vice President Mike Pence conceded future rallies would be evaluated "on a day to day basis."

In Europe, Spain's number of cases surged Wednesday past the 2,000 mark and Belgium, Bulgaria, Sweden, Albania, and Ireland all announced their first virus-related deaths. And at a Congressional hearing in Washington Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, sounded an alarm: "Bottom line, it's going to get worse."

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel said that if the virus is not halted by vaccines and cures, up to 70% of the country's 83 million people could ultimately become infected. Germany has about 1,300 confirmed infections and Merkel's comments fit a pattern of government officials using sobering warnings to convince people to protect themselves by washing their hands and not gathering in large numbers.

"It's terrifying," said Silvana Gomez, a student at Harvard University, where undergraduates were told to leave campus by Sunday. "I'm definitely very scared right now about what the next couple days, the next couple weeks look like"

03.13.20 – Fr -

Iran rockets killed 2-US & 1-Brit in Iraq Wed; US jets hit five Iran locations Thursday

03.13.20 – Fr -

Pentagon: U.S. strikes Iran-backed group that hit Iraq base

Officials say fighter jets hit five locations, mainly targeting Kataib Hezbollah weapons facilities; Esper: You don't get to shoot at our bases and kill and wound Americans and get away with it

Associated Press| Published: 03.13.20 , 11:30

The U.S. launched airstrikes Thursday in Iraq, targeting the Iranian-backed Shiite militia members believed responsible for the rocket attack that killed and wounded American and British troops at a base north of Baghdad, the Pentagon said.

U.S. officials said multiple strikes by U.S. fighter jets hit five locations and mainly targeted Kataib Hezbollah weapons facilities inside Iraq.

A Defense Department statement said the strikes targeted five weapons storage facilities "to significantly degrade their ability to conduct future attacks."

The strikes marked a rapid escalation in tensions with Tehran and its proxy groups in Iraq, just two months after Iran carried out a massive ballistic missile attack against American troops at a base in Iraq.

They came just hours after top U.S. defense leaders threatened retaliation for the Wednesday rocket attack, making clear that they knew who did it and that the attackers would be held accountable.

"The United States will not tolerate attacks against our people, our interests, or our allies," Defense Secretary Mark Esper said.

"As we have demonstrated in recent months, we will take any action necessary to protect our forces in Iraq and the region."

The Pentagon statement said the facilities hit in the precision strikes were used to store weapons used to target the U.S. and coalition forces. It called the counterattack "defensive, proportional and in direct response to the threat" posed by the Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups.

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said Friday that the response to the "cowardly attack on coalition forces in Iraq has been swift, decisive and proportionate."

U.S. officials said the locations of the strikes were largely around the Baghdad region. One U.S. official said there were two strikes at Jurf al-Sakher, one in Karbala, one at Al-Musayib, and one at Arab Nawar Ahmad.

The official said the U.S. expected casualties would be lower than 50, and said the main effort was to hit the weapons.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because some details about the operations had not yet been made public.

Iraqi religious authorities said Friday that one air strike hit a civilian airport under construction in Karbala and killed one worker.

An official with the paramilitary Popular Mobilization Units told The Associated Press that two Iraqi federal police personnel were killed in Jurf al-Sakher.

An Iraqi military statement said the aerial "aggression" occurred at 1:15 a.m. in the areas of Jurf al-Sakher, Al-Musayib, Najaf and Alexandria on the headquarters of the Popular Mobilization Units, emergency regiments and commandos of the 9th division of the Iraqi army.

Esper told reporters at the Pentagon earlier Thursday that President Donald Trump had given him the authority to take whatever action he deemed necessary.

"We're going to take this one step at a time, but we've got to hold the perpetrators accountable," Esper said.

"You don't get to shoot at our bases and kill and wound Americans and get away with it." At the White House, Trump had also hinted that a U.S. counterpunch could be coming, telling reporters, "We'll see what the response is."

And Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Pentagon reporters the U.S. knows "with a high degree of certainty" who launched the attack. On Capitol Hill earlier in the day, Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, the top U.S. commander for the Middle East, told senators the deaths of U.S. and coalition troops created a "red line" for the U.S., but said he didn't think Iran has "a good understanding of where our red line is."

Asked if any counterattack could include a strike inside Iran, Esper said: "We are focused on the group that we believe perpetrated this in Iraq."

Two U.S. troops and one British service member were killed and 14 other personnel were wounded when 18 rockets hit the base Wednesday.

The U.S. military said the 107 mm Katyusha rockets were fired from a truck launcher that was found by Iraqi security forces near the base after the attack.

U.S. officials have not publicly said what group they believe launched the rocket attack, but Kataib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shiite militia group, was the likely perpetrator. And the U.S. strikes, which came in the middle of the night in Iraq, targeted that group. Kataib Hezbollah was responsible for a late December rocket attack on a military base in Kirkuk that killed a U.S. contractor, prompting American military strikes in response. That in turn led to protests at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. They were followed Jan. 3 by a U.S. airstrike that killed Iran's most powerful military officer, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a leader of the Iran-backed militias in Iraq, of which Kataib Hezbollah is a member.

In response to the Soleimani killing, Iran launched a massive ballistic missile attack on Jan. 8, at al-Asad air base in Iraq, that resulted in traumatic brain injuries to more than 100 American troops.

McKenzie told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday morning that the killing of Soleimani and the increase in U.S. troops and assets in the region has made clear to Iran that the U.S. will defend its interests there. He said the U.S. has re-established a level of deterrence for state-on-state attacks by Iran.

However, he said: "What has not been changed is their continuing desire to operate through their proxies indirectly against us. That is a far more difficult area to deter." On Thursday, Esper and Milley said they spoke with their British counterparts about the attack, but declined to provide details.

Asked why none of the rockets was intercepted, Milley said there are no systems on the base capable of defending against that type of attack.

He also said the 14 injured personnel were a mix of U.S. and allied troops as well as contractors, and they will also be monitored for possible traumatic brain injury in the wake of the blasts.

03.12.20 – Th -

House restricts Trump's ability to wage war Wednesday; US attacked Iran Thursday

03.12.20 – Th -

Trump authorizes U.S. military to respond after Iran-backed militia kills troops

U.S. Secretary of Defense hinted that strikes against the militia itself were the priority in response to the killing of U.S. troops and would not take the possibility of striking inside Iran off the table

Reuters| Published: 03.12.20 , 19:34

U.S. President Donald Trump has authorized the U.S. military to respond to Wednesday's rocket attack by Iran-backed militia in Iraq that killed two American troops and a British service member, the Pentagon said on Thursday.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Army General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stopped short of blaming Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah or naming any specific militia.

But they were clear that they believe Iran backed the fighters who carried out the attack and warned that all options were on the table.

"I have spoken with the president. He's given me the authority to do what we need to do, consistent with his guidance," Esper told reporters at the Pentagon.

Asked if a U.S. response could include strikes inside Iran, Esper hinted that strikes against the militia itself were the priority.

"I'm not going to take any option off the table right now, but we are focused on the group -- groups -- that we believe perpetrated this in Iraq, as the immediate (focus)," he said. Trump told reporters at the White House it was not "fully determined it was Iran" and declined to say what the United States might do.

"We'll see what the response is," he said.

The United States has repeatedly and publicly warned that killing Americans overseas constituted a red line that would trigger a U.S. response.

"We gotta hold the perpetrators accountable. You don't get to shoot at our bases and kill and wound Americans and get away with it," Esper said.

Washington blamed Kataib Hezbollah for a strike in December that killed a U.S. contractor, leading to a cycle of tit-for-tat confrontations that culminated in January's U.S. killing of top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and a retaliatory Iranian missile attack that left more than 100 U.S. troops with brain injuries.

In the latest attack, some 14 U.S.-led coalition personnel were wounded, including American, British, Polish and others. Private industry contractors were among the wounded. Milley said five of the wounded were categorized as "urgent," suggesting serious injuries that could require rapid medical evacuation.

Earlier on Thursday, U.S. Marine General Kenneth McKenzie, head of the military's Central Command, noted that only Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah had been known to wage such an attack in the past.

"While we are still investigating the attack, I will note that the Iranian proxy group Kataib Hezbollah is the only group known to have previously conducted an indirect fire attack of this scale against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq," McKenzie told a U.S. Senate hearing.

The U.S.-led military coalition in Iraq says 18 107 mm Katyusha rockets struck Iraq's Taji military camp.

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said a total of 30 of the rockets were fired from a nearby truck and that only 18 of them landed at the Iraqi base.

Milley said the truck yielded evidence about those responsible.

"We have good indication based on the forensics of where (the attack) was fired from, who did the firing and so on and so forth," Milley said, adding that "we have pretty good confidence we know who did this."

In a sign of concern that tensions between the United States and Iran could be headed toward open conflict, the Democratic-led U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation on Wednesday to limit President Donald Trump's ability to wage war against Iran.

The Republican president has been engaged in a maximum-pressure campaign of renewed sanctions and near-constant rhetoric against Iran, after pulling the United States out of the international nuclear deal reached during the administration of his Democratic predecessor, Barack Obama.

Tensions between Washington and Tehran have mostly played out on Iraqi soil in recent months.

Iran-backed paramilitary groups have regularly been rocketing and shelling bases in Iraq that host U.S. forces and the area around the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

03.12.20 – Th -

Two U.S., one British personnel killed in Iraq rocket attack

03.12.20 – Th -

Two U.S., one British personnel killed in Iraq rocket attack

U.S. officials warn death toll may rise, say too soon to assign blame; Pompeo, UK counterpart Raab agree 'those responsible for the attacks must be held accountable' Reuters| Published: 03.12.20 , 11:54

One British and two American personnel were killed and about a dozen people were wounded when 18 small rockets hit Iraq's Taji military camp north of Baghdad on Wednesday, U.S. officials told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The officials, who cautioned the death toll may rise given the severity of some of the injuries, said it was too soon to assign blame. Any indication that Iran-backed militia were responsible could spark a new round of confrontation between the United States and Iran

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke with British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and they "underscored that those responsible for the attacks must be held accountable," the State Department said.

The last military escalation led to a U.S. strike in January that killed top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, which, in turn, led Iran to fire missiles at a base in Iraq hosting U.S. forces, leaving more than 100 troops with brain injuries.

Pompeo has argued the killing of Soleimani was necessary in part to deter Iran and Iran-backed groups from additional attacks.

The U.S.-led military coalition in Iraq said in a statement that 18 107 mm Katyusha rockets struck the base and suggested they may have been fired from a truck.

It confirmed three personnel were killed and about a dozen wounded but declined to disclose the nationalities of the casualties or offer any other identifying information.

"The attack is under investigation by the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces," the U.S.-led coalition said.

The State Department readout of the call with Raab said that there had been American, British and other casualties in the attack, but it did not provide details.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson issued a statement condemning the attack and added that Raab had spoken with Pompeo.

"We will continue to liaise with our international partners to fully understand the details of this abhorrent attack," Johnson said, without confirming British casualties.

War powers vote

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Tensions between Washington and Tehran have mostly played out on Iraqi soil in recent months.

Iran-backed paramilitary groups have regularly been rocketing and shelling bases in Iraq that host U.S. forces and the area around the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

The Kataib Hezbollah militia was blamed for an attack on a base last year that killed an American contractor, which led to retaliatory U.S. strikes against it in Iraq and Syria.

Syrian state media reported on Wednesday that unidentified jets hit targets southeast of a Syrian town along the border with Iraq.

But there was no indication so far that those strikes were by the United States. U.S. officials told Reuters the United States had not carried out any retaliatory strikes at this point.

03.12.20 – Th -

How would a Joe Biden presidency be for Israel?

03.12.20 – Th -

How would a Joe Biden presidency be for Israel?

US-Israel Affairs: Sanders picked up the endorsement of IfNotNow, a fringe-left, anti-Israel Jewish group.

By HERB KEINON **MARCH 12, 2020** 21:24 Email Twitter Facebook fb-messenger
DEMOCRATIC US presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks during a campaign stop in Detroit, Michigan, Monday. (photo credit: BRENDAN MCDERMID/REUTERS)
DEMOCRATIC US presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks during a campaign stop in Detroit, Michigan, Monday.
(photo credit: BRENDAN MCDERMID/REUTERS)

On Wednesday, a day after the “Super Tuesday II” primaries in the United States, where Joe Biden increased his lead over Bernie Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination, Biden picked up more than a dozen new congressional endorsements.

Sanders picked up the endorsement of IfNotNow, a fringe-left, anti-Israel Jewish group.

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IfNotNow is the group that throughout the campaign has planted provocative and leading questions at town hall meetings to pose to the Democratic candidates. For instance, in New Hampshire, just before the state’s primary last month, one of the group’s activists had this to ask Elizabeth Warren:

“I’m an American Jew, and I’m terrified by the unholy alliance that AIPAC is forming with Islamophobia and antisemites and white nationalists. And no Democrat should legitimize that kind of bigotry by attending their annual policy conference. I’m really grateful you skipped the AIPAC conference last year, so my question is if you’ll join me in committing to skip the AIPAC conference this March?”

Warren’s reply? “Yeh.”

Sanders, responding to the IfNotNow endorsement, called the group “an inspiring movement of young Jews working to promote peace in the Middle East.” Others would beg to differ, saying that it is actually the left-wing equivalent of the anti-Zionist, ultra-Orthodox Neturei Karta, and – in fact – both fringe groups can be seen protesting against Israel outside AIPAC conferences.

One could legitimately ask this of IfNotNow’s endorsement of Sanders: What difference does it make?

After winning Tuesday’s primary only in North Dakota, and losing in Michigan, Missouri, Mississippi and Idaho (Washington’s final tally is not yet in), Sanders is most likely not going to win the nomination. So, if Biden now looks like he will be the nominee, why does this fringe endorsement of Sanders matter?

It matters, from the point of view of US-Israel relations, because the positions on Israel articulated by IfNotNow are reflective of the thinking of many on the left wing of the

Democratic Party – a wing peopled by folks like congresswomen Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Linda Sarsour, and Phillip Agnew, the new “senior adviser” to Sanders, who views Israel as an illegitimate, racist, apartheid state, and only the “so-called” homeland of the Jews.

Even if Sanders loses the nomination, those voices are not going to disappear. And in trying to gauge what kind of president Biden might be toward Israel, it is necessary to consider what degree of influence those voices will have on his administration.

Biden, says Eran Lerman, a former deputy head of the National Security Council and today vice president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, “has personally been a friend of [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu. But the question is how much he will be beholden to the Sanders-ites, in order to first get elected, and then govern. That is the deeper question.”

In the October 2012 vice presidential debate with Mitt Romney’s running mate, Paul Ryan, Biden said, “Now, with regard to Bibi, he’s been my friend for 39 years.”

Two years later he went even further, saying during a speech at the Brookings Institution: “Send a message to Bibi: I love him. I love him. I signed a picture years ago to him. I said, ‘Bibi, I don’t agree with a damn thing you had to say, but I love you.’”

Apparently, however, that “love” has been doused. During a candidates debate last December, Biden slammed Netanyahu for moving to the “extreme Right,” and recommended constant pressure “on the Israelis to move to a two-state solution.” He stopped short, however, of accepting what Sanders suggested: withholding aid.

While Biden was careful throughout the campaign not to join the “Bibi-bashing” of Sanders and other progressive candidates, the question now as he moves toward the nomination is what impact that wing of the party will have on his policies if he wins the election in November.

Bob Silverman, a former senior State Department official who served for two-and-a-half years as political counselor at the US Embassy during US president Barack Obama’s first term, and now teaches at Jerusalem’s Shalem College, said that in order to win the election in November, Biden will be beholden to the Democratic Party’s progressive wing. And, he said, “they are going to insist on a get-tough policy on Israel,” something that might be seen as early as at the Democratic National Convention this summer, when the party’s platform is drawn up.

Though one might think that Sanders’s supporters will have no choice in November other than to vote for Biden, since they are certainly not going to cast a ballot for US President Donald Trump, Silverman says this misses the issue.

“In order to beat Trump the Democrats will need the energy, enthusiasm and passion of the progressives, so they will be beholden to some extent to the progressives. And the progressives don’t really care who wins the Israeli election, they just want to get tough on Israel.”

In some ways, in fact, a continued Netanyahu premiership would be favored by some progressives, because he is so unpopular among many Democrats – Sanders called his government a “reactionary racist” one – that it would be easier for a future Democratic administration to pressure and withhold aid from Israel if Netanyahu remains at the helm. If, as it now seems most likely, Biden does win the nomination, the progressives are going to insist on policy position commitments from Biden. And Biden will need to keep this wing happy, if only to ensure that it comes out to vote in November.

To this day, there are those in the mainstream of the party who blame Sanders for Hillary Clinton's 2016 loss to Trump, saying that Sanders supporters did not come out to vote en masse, something that cost her the elections in states like Michigan, where Trump won by only some 10,704 votes, and Wisconsin, where his margin of victory was 22,748 votes. Silverman cautioned that "if one's paramount interest is the US-Israel relationship, then a Biden presidency has a lot of question marks because he will be beholden to the progressive wing."

Silverman also cautioned Israelis against listening to American Jews when it comes to a possible Biden presidency, saying that for the most part US Jewry has "other issues than Israel" as its primary concerns.

"They may end up supporting Biden because they like his domestic policies, and while Israel is an issue for them, it is not the top one," he said.

Because of the progressives' influence on Biden, Silverman said that he imagines that under a Biden presidency the US-Israel relationship "will be more fraught than under Obama, and I don't know if people remember, but I certainly do – the relationship with Obama was quite fraught."

Another former diplomat who remembers that relationship well is Michael Oren, who served as ambassador to the US from 2009 to 2013 and wrote a book dealing with this period titled *Ally: My Journey Across the American-Israeli Divide*.

Oren, who spent a good amount of time with Biden, described him as a "good guy," and "one of the generation that has Israel in its heart. He remembers the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War, and has been here multiple times."

According to Oren, Biden – as Obama's vice president – often tried to soften the difficult relationship between Netanyahu and Obama. For instance, he said "Biden ensured us that Obama was serious about using the military option against Iran" if need be. Oren said that although he doesn't think this was ever really the case, Biden believed it.

Oren predicted that if Biden does become president, he would – as he has said – move toward reentering the Iranian nuclear deal.

"I honestly don't see how a Democratic president maintains the same types of policies that Trump had," Oren said. "My guess is that he would try to negotiate and try to get a better deal, and maybe include the ballistic missiles. My speculation is that he will come and say that he wants to reset this relationship, and relieve some sanctions if the Iranians come back to the table – and that is just where the Iranians want to be."

"For us," Oren said, "this is a matter of national security and national survival. This was an agreement that was a flagrant betrayal by America of its Middle Eastern allies, including Israel. It was a deeply flawed agreement that enabled Iran to conquer large swaths in the Middle East, kill tens of thousands of civilians, and that would ultimately have enabled it to have nuclear weapons."

BEYOND MOVING back to Obama-era policies on Iran, Oren said, a Biden administration would likely reverse some, but not all, of Trump's policies on the Israel-Palestinian issue.

For starters, as Biden himself made clear in a taped message to the AIPAC conference earlier this month, he thinks Trump's "Deal of the Century" is a bad deal, and called on Jerusalem to end all talk of annexation and settlement building.

Oren said that Biden is likely to renew the US aid to UNRWA that Trump halted, and no longer condition assistance to the Palestinian Authority on abandoning its “pay for slay” policy.

Though Oren does not think that Biden would move the embassy back to Tel Aviv from Jerusalem – as Sanders said he would consider – the former ambassador said he would likely play down the embassy’s significance, conduct most official business out of the embassy annex in Tel Aviv, and reopen the consulate in Jerusalem to deal with the Palestinians.

Oren also does not see Biden reversing the decision to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, though he does imagine that a president Biden would not provide diplomatic support for Israel if the move were to be challenged in the International Criminal Court.

Oren said that a Biden administration would also be less likely to back Israeli military action in Gaza than is the case now.

During the Trump administration, there have been no calls from Washington for Israeli restraint and a proportionate response in dealing with the attacks from Gaza, something that was a staple under the Obama administration. That type of language, he suggested, could return under a Democratic administration.

“Biden has a warm place in his heart for us,” Oren said. “But he is a Democrat, and that carries with it certain policy ramifications – some of them which are quite substantial for us.”