



Coronavirus in the Holy Land: Israel Has Been Ready for a Crisis Such as This

by [Neri Zilber](#)

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Fortress Israel raised its drawbridges early, though its resultant economic and political outlook is just as uncertain as the rest of the world's.

If there were one country best equipped to handle a crisis like the coronavirus, it would be Israel. Missile strikes, terror attacks and sudden outbreaks of war are familiar to Israelis—along with the disruptions to daily life. And the Israeli government began taking measures more than three weeks ago to halt the spread of the virus, well before many Western states. Psychology and history help explain part of the response, which has the entire country on the verge of total lockdown.

“Most people don’t believe something can happen until it already has. That’s not stupidity or weakness, that’s just human nature,” Israeli spy Jurgen Warmbrunn says in Max Brooks’s 2006 novel *World War Z*. “I happened to be born into a group of people who live in constant fear of extinction. It’s part of our identity, part of our mindset, and it has taught us through horrific trial and error to always be on our guard.”

Mr. Brooks’s fictional tale about a zombie apocalypse ravaging the Earth is complimentary of Israel’s efforts—the Jewish state is ever vigilant and, in a physical sense, always on guard. And so it is in the real world: Israel took pre-emptive steps against the coronavirus because it could.

A sliver of land with fewer than nine million citizens, bounded on one side by the Mediterranean Sea and on others by often hostile neighbours, Israel is sometimes referred to as a “terrestrial island.” There are only four international border crossings and one real international airport. Some 500 kilometres of reinforced metal fencing and concrete walls have been erected in recent years to guard borders in the north, east and south—not including the imposing

“Security Barrier” that snakes up and down the West Bank, separating Israel from much of the Palestinian population. A national health system, an overweening national government and formidable security services have allowed a high degree of centralized control in combatting the pandemic.

Already late last month came [mandatory quarantines for anyone returning from a number of Asian locales](#), which was later expanded to problematic hotspots in Europe. [Two weeks ago, all returnees from anywhere in the world were required to quarantine](#), effectively halting air travel into and out of the country. As in other countries, large public gatherings and sporting events were closed first, followed by schools and universities, until last weekend all bars and restaurants were also shuttered. Most of the country is working remotely from home and the military has ordered units to remain on base indefinitely. The Holy Land’s churches, mosques and synagogues have been deserted, in line with social-distancing guidelines.

The government has [ordered people not to leave their homes](#) for anything but essential supplies and medical care, and is threatening a fully enforced closure. Police in hazmat suits [track down quarantine violators](#) and the army has begun opening “[quarantine hotels](#).” The streets and cafes of go-go Tel Aviv, usually bustling with people, have emptied; a few people, some wearing masks, flit to and fro, careful not to linger too close to others. Even in wartime, with missile sirens wailing, Tel Aviv hipsters still ventured out, but no longer. The coronavirus is something different.

Most evenings, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appears on television to update the public about the next steps the government will be taking. The long-serving leader hasn’t minced his words, warning of millions dead globally and comparing the crisis to the most severe moments in Israel’s fragile history. Mr. Netanyahu has become the country’s schoolmarm, providing tutorials on how to use a tissue and beseeching renegade citizens still lapping up the springtime sunshine in parks and on beaches to stay home.

“There are many among you who still do not understand the magnitude of the danger. I see the crowds on the beaches, people having fun. They think this is a vacation. ... It is clear to me that there is an internalization problem. This is not child’s play; it is life and death,” he said the other night.

In the large shadow of the pandemic, the country’s political impasse continues like a low-grade fever. A third general election in a year, held at the start of March, didn’t deliver a clear result for either Mr. Netanyahu or his chief rival, former military chief Benny Gantz; a “corona emergency government” between the two is now a possibility.

The start of Mr. Netanyahu’s trial on various corruption charges, planned for this past week, was postponed after the courts were closed by government fiat. This and other emergency measures have drawn howls from the opposition, who warn darkly of Mr. Netanyahu abusing a legitimate crisis to retain his grip on power. In the only silver lining, Israel is working closely with the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to help their local authorities contain the virus.

Politics, for once, is not at the top of the agenda in the most politicized place on Earth. Like everywhere else, Israelis monitor the daily uptick in infected (705 as of Friday), ponder the economic damage of the near-total shutdown and wonder when the crisis will end. Like everyone else, Israelis are hunkering down.

“I assume that you are familiar with the English saying ‘My home is my castle,’” Mr. Netanyahu said on television the other night. “Your homes are your castles for protection.” Writ large, the drawbridges to Fortress Israel were raised early. Now, like the rest of humanity, it waits.

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