

Israel parliament withholds green light for spy agency fight against virus (Update)

March 16 2020

Israel's parliament on Monday stopped short of granting approval for the Shin Bet internal security agency to collect information about citizens to help halt the spread of coronavirus.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had said Saturday he wanted "technologies used in the war against terror" to curb the virus, without providing details.

Cabinet discussed the measures at its weekly meeting on Sunday, and in a statement released afterwards, said Netanyahu was "not satisfied" with the proposal's wording and demanded revisions to include safeguards against possible abuse of citizens' rights.

Netanyahu ordered that the data collected could only be used in "the struggle against the coronavirus," his office said.

The Shin Bet would not be enforcing quarantines and the authorisation would only last 30 days, it added.

Lawmakers in an oversight committee of the outgoing parliament rushed to discuss the issue Monday, just before a new parliament was sworn in.

But it failed to reach a decision and called for a new committee in the incoming legislature to weigh in, a parliamentary spokesman said.

Following the parliamentary failure to win approval, Netanyahu

announced that the cabinet was about to approve electronic measures to combat the crisis—but he did not mention the Shin Bet.

"The government tonight will approve emergency regulations that will enable the use of digital technologies in the war on coronavirus," he said in a televised address.

'No cyber-attacks'

The specifics of the Shin Bet's anti-virus effort would be secret, like its other work.

But a security official told AFP its mandate would be limited to "preventing confirmed virus carriers from harming the population".

Information collected would be given to the health ministry and deleted by the Shin Bet every month, the official said.

"There won't be active penetration into phones and there won't be cyber-attacks," the official said, stressing the Shin Bet would be subject to "all the supervision and regulation mechanisms in place".

Netanyahu's attempt to use the Shin Bet against COVID-19 was problematic in several ways, said Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler of the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI).

The health ministry could, with a court order, easily obtain location data on confirmed coronavirus carriers from network providers, she said.

Bringing in the intelligence agency could heighten the sense of emergency and perhaps boost Netanyahu's effort to lead a national emergency government, she added.

His rival, Benny Gantz, was tapped Monday to form the next government, but Netanyahu is seeking to stay on after his Likud won the most seats of any single party in March 2 polls, but fell short of majority in parliament.

Using the security agency in a health crisis set "a dangerous precedent," said Shwartz Altshuler, who heads the IDI's Democracy in the Information Age programme.

"The Shin Bet deals with national security issues," she said, noting the difficulty to ensure oversight over the organisation.

"What if tomorrow they're called in for an economic emergency?"

By drawing in a clandestine security agency to deal with a civilian health crisis, she said, "Israel is not aligning itself with the democracies."

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