

# Saudi Arabia, Israel tighten restrictions to counter virus

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Muslims circumambulate the Kaaba, the cubic building at the Grand Mosque, in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Saturday, March 7, 2020. Few worshippers were allowed to enter after dawn prayers to circumambulate the Kaaba over fears of coronavirus. (AP Photo/Amr Nabil)

Saudi Arabia closed off air and sea travel to 14 countries affected by the new virus Monday, while Israel ordered two weeks of home quarantine for anyone arriving from overseas. Mideast stock markets tumbled over fears about the widening outbreak's effect on the global economy.

The state oil giant Saudi Aramco led the financial losses, dropping by 10% on Riyadh's Tadawul stock exchange and forcing a halt to Aramco's trading.

In the Mideast, there have been over 7,600 confirmed cases, with the vast majority in hard-hit Iran. The country's health ministry said Monday the new virus killed another 43 people, pushing death toll to 237 amid 7,161 confirmed cases. Experts worry Iran may be under reporting its cases.

Worldwide, there are over 110,000 confirmed cases of the new virus, with more than 3,800 deaths attributed to it. The number of people who have recovered is about 62,000.

The drop in the markets came as global oil prices suffered their worst losses since the start of the 1991 Gulf War. Other Mideast markets fell as well as the new coronavirus has affected global energy prices and OPEC failed to make a production cut deal with Russia last week.

Coronavirus concerns led Saudi Arabia on Monday to cut off air and sea travel with Bahrain, Egypt, France, Germany, Iraq, Italy, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Spain, South Korea, Syria, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. The kingdom had earlier closed off its land borders as well.



A nurse wears protective gear in a ward dedicated for people infected with the new coronavirus, at a hospital in Tehran, Iran, Sunday, March 8, 2020. With the approaching Persian New Year, known as Nowruz, officials kept up pressure on people not to travel and to stay home. Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour, who gave Iran's new casualty figures Sunday, reiterated that people should not even attend funerals. (AP Photo/Mohammad Ghadamali)

"Out of concern to protect the health of citizens and residents and ensure their safety, the kingdom's government decided to temporarily suspend the travel," it said in a statement attributed to an unnamed Interior Ministry official.

Abu Dhabi's long-haul carrier Etihad, which operated 12 flights daily to Saudi Arabia, said three flights had been airborne at the time of the

Saudi announcement. When those planes landed in Dammam, Jiddah and Riyadh, only Saudi citizens could disembark, with others having to return to Abu Dhabi, the airline said.

The outbreak in Israel has been largely contained, but it has begun to gain pace in recent days, with a total of 50 cases diagnosed.

Israel had earlier ordered residents returning from several European and Asian countries into 14 days of home quarantine. On Monday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced the measure would now apply to anyone entering the country from overseas.

"This is a difficult decision, but it's necessary to protect public health. Public health comes before everything else," Netanyahu said, announcing the decision after hours of consultations with senior Cabinet ministers, security officials and public health officials. He said the order would remain in effect for two weeks.

Moshe Bar Siman-Tov, director general of the Israeli Health Ministry, told Channel 13 TV that foreign tourists arriving on flights would have to show proof they have a place to stay for two weeks of home quarantine, or they would be barred entry. He said tourists already in the country should exercise caution and immediately contact authorities if they feel ill.





A nurse wears protective gear in a ward dedicated for people infected with the new coronavirus, at a hospital in Tehran, Iran, Sunday, March 8, 2020. With the approaching Persian New Year, known as Nowruz, officials kept up pressure on people not to travel and to stay home. Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour, who gave Iran's new casualty figures Sunday, reiterated that people should not even attend funerals. (AP Photo/Mohammad Ghadamali)

The move comes just ahead of the Passover and Easter holiday seasons, when Israel is flooded with overseas visitors. It was sure to deal another blow to the already struggling tourism industry. Netanyahu said the government, which has already approved a relief fund for hard-hit businesses, was working on other measures to protect the economy.

An additional 26 cases have been detected in the neighboring West

Bank. The Palestinian Authority announced late Monday that it was closing the Allenby Bridge, the West Bank's main crossing into Jordan, to outgoing traffic. Palestinians in Jordan will be allowed to return home, and the order will not affect foreigners. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said the closure had been coordinated with Jordan.

Saudi Arabia already shut down access to the holiest sites in Islam over concerns about the virus and the COVID-19 illness it causes. The virus usually leaves people with only mild to moderate symptoms, but because it's new, experts can't say for sure how far it will ultimately spread and how much damage it will do, both in terms of health and the global economy.

Separately, Saudi Arabia said it donated \$10 million to the World Health Organization to help it combat the virus.

The tiny, energy-rich neighboring country of Qatar meanwhile has cut off travel to 15 nations including Bangladesh, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Lebanon, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Syria and Thailand. That's affected its long-haul carrier Qatar Airways, which has already been hurting from a yearslong boycott by four Arab nations including Saudi Arabia over a political dispute.

Qatar separately announced via its state-run news agency it would shut down schools and universities beginning Tuesday until further notice.



In this Saturday, March 7, 2020, a cleric, right, assists a medic treating a patient infected with the new coronavirus, at a hospital in Qom, 78 miles (125 kilometers) south of the capital Tehran, Iran. With the approaching Persian New Year, known as Nowruz, officials kept up pressure on people not to travel and to stay home. Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour, who gave Iran's new casualty figures Sunday, reiterated that people should not even attend funerals. (Mohammad Ali Marizad/Rasa News Agency via AP)

In Iran, the judiciary's Mizan news agency said authorities had temporarily released some 70,000 prisoners over concerns about the virus spreading in the country's prisons, up from the 54,000 previously announced. The island nation of Bahrain, which has seen 109 confirmed cases, ordered government officials not to travel abroad for two weeks.

The new virus has caused major economic disruptions, including in global aviation, which has helped slow demand for oil. An OPEC meeting with Russia last week failed to see countries agree to a production cut. In response, Saudi Arabia has warned it will increase its production and slash its own prices to claw back market share.

That sent oil prices into a free fall, losing some 25% of their value. Mideast stock markets followed suit.

The Tadawul fell over 7%, with investors particularly selling their stock in Saudi Aramco, formally known as the Saudi Arabian Oil Co. The stock closed at 27 riyals a share (\$7.19), giving the company a valuation of \$1.4 trillion. The company had reached \$2 trillion in early days of trading in December.

The oil company offered only a sliver of its value, 1.7%, on the exchange to help fund Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's redevelopment plans for the kingdom. The rest remains state owned.

Qatar's stock market fell over 9%. The Boursa Kuwait, the Dubai Financial Market and the Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange dropped by over 8%. Egypt's stock market benchmark index, the EGX 30, fell over 7%. Oman's Muscat Securities Market and the Bahrain Bourse each saw over a 5% loss. The Tehran Stock Exchange in Iran fell 2.7%.





Men wearing protective gear carry the body of Fatemeh Rahbar, a lawmaker-elect from a Tehran constituency, who died on Saturday after being infected with the new coronavirus, at Behesht-e-Zahra cemetery, just outside Tehran, Iran, Sunday, March 8, 2020. Rahbar previously served three terms as lawmaker. With the approaching Persian New Year, known as Nowruz, officials kept up pressure on people not to travel and to stay home. Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour, who gave Iran's new casualty figures Sunday, reiterated that people should not even attend funerals. (Mehdi Khanlari/Fars News Agency via AP)

Meanwhile, authorities in Egypt's southern tourist hub of Luxor announced the city would close to tourists Monday until medical experts could examine all hotel guests and cruise ship passengers in the area. Two cruise ships on the Nile River have been quarantined there in recent days.

Egypt's prime minister also announced a temporary ban on large public gatherings and all events involving people's movement between cities.

Egypt's health ministry on Monday adds four more cases of the novel coronavirus, including three Egyptians and a foreigner. That brings the totals cases in Egypt to 59 including one fatality for a German tourist.

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