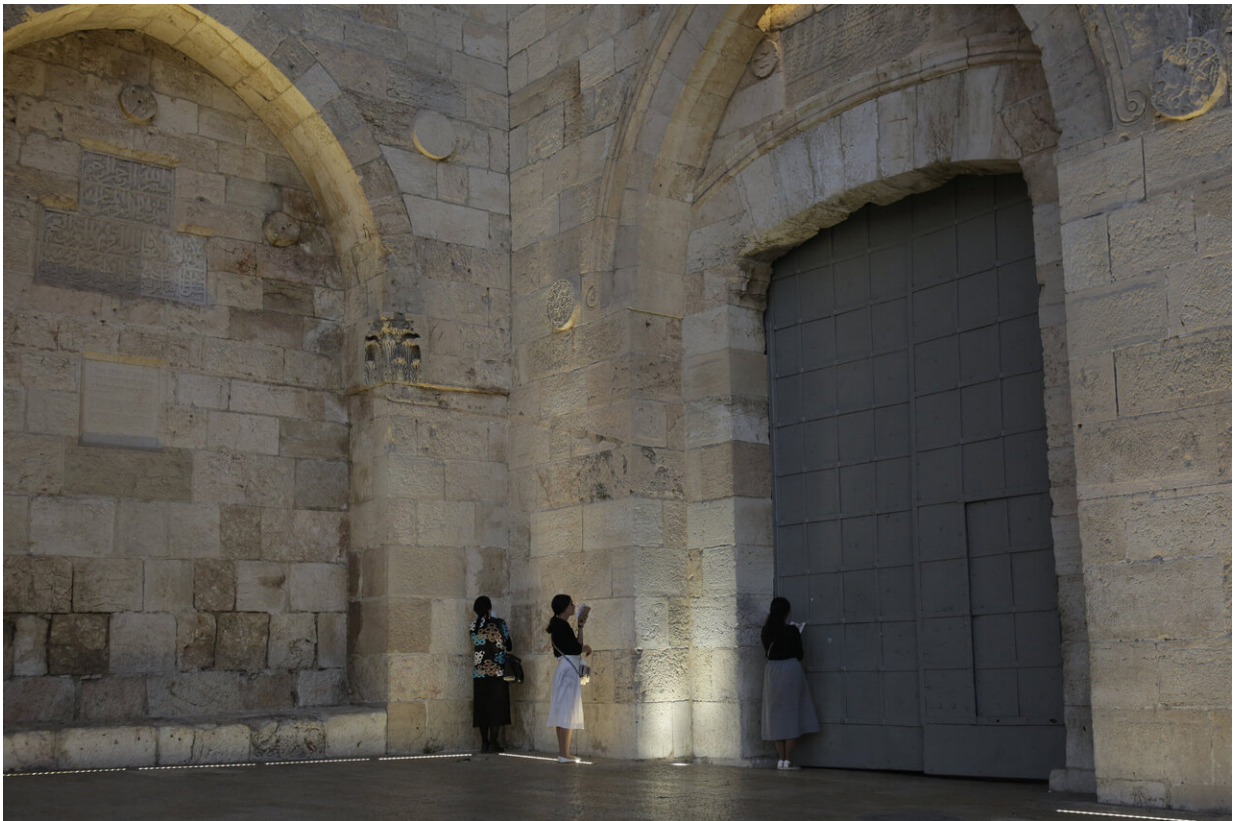


Coronavirus cases soar as Israel prepares tighter measures

September 23 2020, by Josef Federman



Jewish women pray at the Jaffa Gate to the Old City of Jerusalem, after they were turned away by police on their way to pray at the Western Wall, during a nationwide three-week lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus, Tuesday, Sept. 22, 2020,. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

Israel on Wednesday reported a new record level of daily cases of the

coronavirus, shortly before government officials were to meet to discuss tightening a new nationwide lockdown.

The Health Ministry reported 6,861 new cases on Wednesday as a raging outbreak showed no signs of slowing. Israel, a country of some 9 million people, now has one of the world's highest rates of coronavirus on a per capita basis, and health officials say hospitals are quickly approaching capacity.

The government last week imposed a nationwide lockdown that closed schools, shopping malls, hotels and restaurants. The coronavirus Cabinet was to meet later in the day to discuss further tightening the restrictions.

Ahead of the meeting, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that in light of the rapid spread of the virus, he would seek a "a broad general closure and significant tightening of restrictions immediately," including the closure of large parts of the economy, his office said.

Israel won international praise for its handling of the outbreak last spring, moving quickly to seal its borders and impose a lockdown that appeared to contain the virus. But the government reopened the economy too quickly, and a new outbreak has quickly spread throughout the summer. The economy, meanwhile, has not recovered from a serious downturn caused by the first lockdown, and the new lockdown has led to a new wave of layoffs.



A woman wearing a protective face mask plays with her daughter next to a statue of the first Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, during a nationwide three-week lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus at the beach in Tel Aviv, Israel, Tuesday, Sept 22, 2020. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)

A new poll released Wednesday by the Israel Democracy Institute, a respected think tank, found that only 27% of Israelis trust Netanyahu to lead the country's effort against COVID-19. That compares with 57.5% who trusted him in early April. The survey interviewed 754 adults and had a margin of error of 3.7 percentage points.

The Health Ministry has instructed hospitals to delay non-essential surgeries and to open additional coronavirus wards as the number of serious cases continues to rise.

Beyond further limiting economic activity, officials have been discussing shuttering synagogues and clamping down on protests—both of which risk sparking a public backlash.

The limits would come at a time when Israeli Jews are celebrating the High Holidays and when weekly demonstrations have been held against Netanyahu and his handling of the coronavirus crisis.



A man practices jumps on his skateboard during a nationwide three-week lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus, on Tel Aviv's promenade, Israel, Tuesday, Sept 22, 2020. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)



Israelis play paddleball under a closed hotel during a nationwide three-week lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus, on Tel Aviv's promenade, Israel, Tuesday, Sept 22, 2020. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)



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The ongoing protests have bitterly divided the country, with religious leaders saying their public is being unfairly targeted by restrictions on public prayer while Netanyahu's opponents continue to hold large public demonstration. Demonstrators say Netanyahu's supporters are using the outbreak as an excuse to muzzle their democratic right to protest.

Deputy Health Minister Yoav Kisch said restrictions would have to be tightened in the near future.

"Educational institutions will be closed, the economy will be limited to

essential work, synagogues will have no indoor prayers, with arrangements for outdoor prayer, and demonstrations will be allowed without protesters traveling between cities," he told Channel 12 TV. "Everyone will demonstrate where he wants, will pray where he wants and will stay at home. That is what is required now."

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