

Israel to set new nationwide lockdown as virus cases surge

September 13 2020, by Tia Goldenberg and Aron Heller



In this Tuesday, Sept 8, 2020 file photo, ultra-Orthodox Jews keep social distancing and wear face masks during a morning prayer next to their houses as synagogues are limited to twenty people following the government's measures to help stop the spread of the coronavirus, in Bnei Brak, Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has faced a national furor over his handling of the coronavirus, but that anger is boiling over among the ultra-Orthodox, or Haredim, who have used their political muscle to fend off what they see as discriminatory restrictions. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty, File)

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday announced a new countrywide lockdown will be imposed amid a stubborn surge in coronavirus cases, with schools and parts of the economy expected to shut down in a bid to bring down infection rates.

Beginning Friday, the start of the Jewish High Holiday season, schools, restaurants, malls and hotels will shut down, among other businesses, and Israelis will face restrictions on movement and on gatherings.

"Our goal is to stop the increase (in cases) and lower morbidity," Netanyahu said in a nationally broadcast statement. "I know that these steps come at a difficult price for all of us. This is not the holiday we are used to."

The tightening of measures marks the second time Israel is being plunged into a [lockdown](#), after a lengthy shutdown in the spring. That lockdown is credited with having brought down what were much lower infection numbers, but it wreaked havoc on the country's economy, sending unemployment skyrocketing.

The lockdown will remain in place for at least three weeks, at which point officials may relax measures if numbers are seen declining. Israelis typically hold large family gatherings and pack synagogues during the important fast of Yom Kippur later this month, settings that officials feared could trigger new outbreaks.



An Israeli protester holds a sign after chaining himself during a demonstration against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu outside the Prime Minister's residence in Jerusalem, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020. Hebrew reads: "Full closure" (AP Photo/Sebastian Scheiner)

A sticking point in [government](#) deliberations over the lockdown was what prayers would look like during the holidays. While the details on prayer during the lockdown were not nailed down in the government decision, what were expected to be strict limits on the faithful. That prompted Israeli Housing Minister Yaakov Litzman, who represents ultra-Orthodox Jews, to resign from the government earlier Sunday.

Israel has had more than 150,000 confirmed cases of the [coronavirus](#) and more than 1,100 deaths. Given its population of 9 million, the country

now has one of the world's worst outbreaks. It is now seeing more than 4,000 daily cases of the virus.

Israel earned praise for its initial handling of the coronavirus outbreak, moving quickly to seal the country's borders and appearing to bring infections under control. It has since been criticized for opening businesses and schools too quickly and allowing the virus to spread unchecked.



In this July 16, 2020 file photo, ultra-Orthodox Jewish men pray in divided sections which allow a maximum of twenty worshipers in line with government measures to help stop the spread of the coronavirus, at the Western Wall, the holiest site where Jews can pray, in Jerusalem's Old City. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has faced a national furor over his handling of the coronavirus, but that anger is boiling over among the ultra-Orthodox, or

Haredim, who have used their political muscle to fend off what they see as discriminatory restrictions. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty, File)

Much of that criticism has been aimed at Netanyahu, who has faced a [public outcry](#) over his handling of the crisis and has seen thousands of protesters descend on his Jerusalem residence every week. While lauded for his decisive response following the spring outbreak, Netanyahu appeared distracted by politics and personal matters, including his trial for corruption allegations, as infections rose over the summer.

Netanyahu has also been lambasted for seeming to cave to pressure from various interest groups, including most recently his ultra-Orthodox governing partners, who appeared to have convinced him to relax a pinpointed, city-based lockdown plan that would have mostly affected ultra-Orthodox and Arab communities.

At the press conference Sunday announcing the lockdown, Netanyahu defended his response, saying Israel's economy had emerged from the first lockdown in a better state than many other developed nations and that while cases were high, the country's coronavirus mortality numbers were lower than other countries with similar outbreaks.



In this Feb. 23, 2020 file photo, Israeli Health Minister Yaakov Litzman arrives for a situation assessment meeting regarding the Coronavirus, in Tel Aviv, Israel. Housing Minister Yaakov Litzman, who served as health minister during the initial outbreak of the virus, resigned Sunday, Sept 13, 2020, in protest over the government's plan to impose a nationwide lockdown this week ahead of the Jewish New Year due to rising coronavirus cases. (Jack Guez/Pool via AP, File)

The country's power-sharing government, made up of two rival parties who joined forces in a stated aim to combat the virus, has also been chided for the new [outbreak](#). The government has been accused of mismanagement, failing to properly address both the health and economic crises wrought by the virus and leading the country to its second lockdown.

Some government ministers meanwhile have pointed fingers at what they've called an undisciplined public, who they have accused of violating restrictions against public gatherings and mask wearing.

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