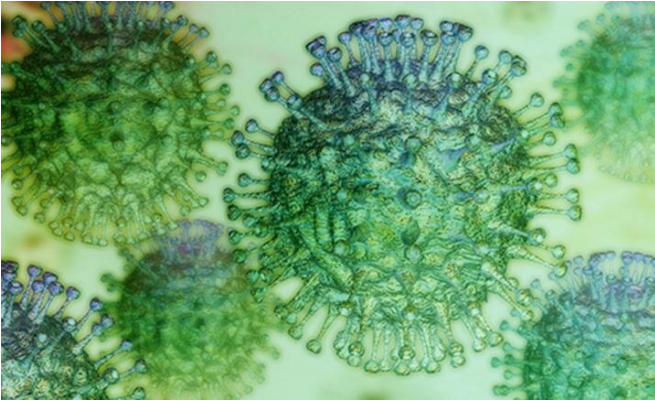


Israel extends nationwide coronavirus lockdown

1 February 2021



Coronavirus. Credit: European Centers for Disease Control

Israel's nationwide lockdown was extended Monday to contain the coronavirus which has continued to spread rapidly as the country presses ahead with an aggressive vaccination campaign.

The current lockdown, declared on December 27, is the third in the Jewish state since pandemic began last year.

The cabinet prolonged the closure until Friday morning, but scheduled a fresh meeting for Wednesday to assess whether a further extension was required, a statement from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the health ministry said.

With Israel, a country of about 9 million people, still regularly registering more than 5,000 new cases per day, Netanyahu had pushed for the lockdown's extension.

His [political opponents](#) said they would only agree if fines were increased for rule violators.

Netanyahu's critics have particularly highlighted persistent violations among Israel's ultra-Orthodox

Jews, the premier's key political allies who have repeatedly disregarded public safety measures throughout the pandemic.

Hours before the cabinet approved the extension, thousands of ultra-Orthodox, many not wearing masks, flouted bans on large public gatherings by packing the streets of a Jerusalem neighbourhood for the funeral of a top rabbi while police looked on.

Defence Minister Benny Gantz, Netanyahu's rival in Israel's caretaker government, said "this is what unequal enforcement looks like", pledging an end to the "indulgence" of an ultra-Orthodox community that has defied the rules.

Israel is heading to the polls again in March, the country's fourth vote in less than two years.

Most political experts agree Netanyahu has no path to extend his record 11 years in power without backing from the main ultra-Orthodox parties.

- Flight ban—Israel's lockdown also includes an unprecedented airport and border closure, which Netanyahu has described as a necessary weapon in the "arms race" against coronavirus variants.

The cabinet has extended the ban on [commercial flights](#) imposed last month until February 7.

Road crossings to Egypt and Jordan will also remain closed.

Israel is attempting to repatriate nationals stuck abroad by the commercial flight shut down, but said Monday that those brought back to the country over the next week must quarantine in government-chosen hotels.

Israel has registered nearly 620,000 [coronavirus](#) cases, including more than 4,500 deaths.

It has also given at least one of the required of two Pfizer-made jabs to more than three million people, a pace widely described as the world's fastest per capita.

Israel hopes to vaccinate its entire over-16 population by the end of March.

The Jewish state has also come under mounting international pressure to facilitate vaccinations for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip, an Israel-blockaded territory controlled by Hamas Islamists.

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