

# The Response of Israel's Temporary Government to the Challenge of Coronavirus

by [Yoel Donchin \(/experts/yoel-donchin\)](#)

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Yoel Donchin is the chief medical officer at Israel's Ben Gurion international airport, a professor of medical education at Hebrew University, and a practicing physician at Hadassah hospital. He is also the former director of Israel's public emergency medical response team.



Brief Analysis

The first signs of the [coronavirus epidemic \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/in-search-of-solidarity-the-coronavirus-and-chinas-views-of-the-uae-and-ira\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/in-search-of-solidarity-the-coronavirus-and-chinas-views-of-the-uae-and-ira) came just two weeks before Israel's third election, when fourteen Israelis were quarantined for two weeks on the Diamond Princess cruise ship off the coast of Japan. For Israel's politicians, the virus gave them the excuse to bombard the electorate with news of their efforts to 'rescue' these Israelis from captivity, providing a convenient distraction from the problems plaguing Israel's Prime Minister.

However, the situation since has become considerably more serious, as evidenced by the two senior microbiologists sent to Japan who are now themselves under a two-week self-quarantine. Initially, public health authorities did all the necessary preparations to effectively accept the infected Israelis upon arrival. Suspected cases were directed to Tel Hashomer hospital, and within a very short period, the Ministry of Health had erected an isolation chamber and trained special teams to handle these quarantine cases. With these systems in place, Israel has so far been capable of handling those who have come into contact with the disease, with sixteen Israelis now testing positive.

Even so, the threat of epidemic is growing, with Israelis returning from abroad and tourists acting as the main sources for the potential spread of the virus. As such, passengers are advised at Ben Gurion airport to not use public transportation to go home and, once home, remain in full isolation for fourteen days. Currently, passengers are instructed on how to behave via flyers at the airport (see below). Yesterday, the government announced its most recent restrictive measures, demanding that Israelis self-quarantine after travel to several European countries, including [Germany, Spain, and France \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-dramatically-widens-coronavirus-rules-adds-eu-nations-to-quarantine-list/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-dramatically-widens-coronavirus-rules-adds-eu-nations-to-quarantine-list/)

. Also announced was the refusal of entry for any tourists who had recently traveled several neighboring Middle Eastern countries. Because of these measures, the latest estimates now put the number of citizens in isolation at around 5,000.



Israel's Defense Ministry has also announced its close coordination with the Palestinian Authority(PA) to stem the recently cluster there, where seven cases have already been identified in the Bethlehem area. Israeli and Palestinian medic professionals have undergone joint training on the threat, and Israel has so far sent 250 test kits to the PA, with each kit allowing for hundreds of tests.

These proactive efforts may make it possible to reduce the spread of the disease across the country—currently the Public Health Ministry's top priority. Maintaining a small number of patients, as with other countries, is crucial in preventing strains on the country's health system and preventing a "mass casualty" scenario.

Given the current efforts and Israel's relatively small number of entry points into the country, and assuming the disease course follows the current trajectory with only mild or asymptomatic disease in about 80 percent of cases, it is likely that Israel will succeed in hindering the spread of this virus while allowing most of its citizens to conduct their lives as normal. This also assumes, of course, that the public follows instructions as provided by the health ministry.

The benefits of restrictive measures have simultaneously been playing out on an international scale. Whereas countries with a large measure of control over their populations—including China, Vietnam, and Singapore—have been able to enact strict measures to control the spread, countries where less restrictive measures have been taken are projected to see a continued spread of the virus into a major health crisis.

Israel has so far taken measures more along the lines of these aforementioned countries, with increasingly strict control of both travel and large groups. In order to maintain this level of protection, each day brings new regulations: at present, large gatherings are forbidden, all international school trips have been cancelled, and many have abandoned their flights to other countries. This has also taken its toll on Israel's economy; Israel's national airline El Al (<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/El-Al-to-fire-1000-workers-due-to-coronavirus-impact-619750>) is laying off a thousand workers and factory production is suffering from a lack of materials.

Given Israel's current political challenges, these measures are somewhat remarkable in their ability to manage the spread of the virus thus far. Israel's temporary government has put at the helm of the country's containment efforts, a controversial Minister of Health from the Haredi United Torah Judaism party and a Director General of the Health Ministry who lacks an MD and previously worked in economic affairs. So far, the current government is pitching its efforts to contain the virus as a great success. And while these efforts have been substantial, it is too early to say if Israel's efforts will be able to permanently contain the virus. ❖

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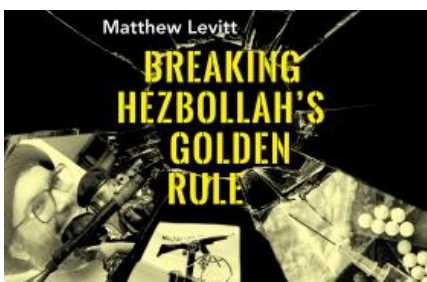
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