

# Israel right-wing parties boycott parliament re-opening

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JERUSALEM: Israeli right-wing parties backing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu boycotted the re-opening of parliament Monday to protest what they called the "dictatorial" conduct of their centrist rivals.

The dramatic move came after a year of political turmoil that saw three inconclusive elections, and as Netanyahu has imposed strict legal and security measures to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party accused the centrist Blue and White, led by ex-military chief Benny Gantz, of breaching standard practice in parliament, the Knesset, following March 2 elections.

The row centered on whether Gantz would use his bloc's slight majority of lawmakers to shape the composition of a powerful parliamentary committee.

Noting the "severe health crisis" – with 1,442 confirmed coronavirus cases in Israel – Likud accused Blue and White of "hate-driven, dictatorial and destructive conduct."

The election early this month saw the anti-Netanyahu parties claim a narrow lead of 62 seats.

Right-wing and ultra-Orthodox factions that back the caretaker premier claimed 58.

Gantz was last week tasked with forming a government, something that had proved impossible following the last two votes given deep divisions within the anti-Netanyahu camp.

There was no guarantee Gantz would fare better this time.

Monday's spat centered on the key arrangements committee, which is responsible for forming other parliamentary committees.

When the new Knesset was sworn in last Monday, lawmakers failed to agree on the committee's composition, which is traditionally negotiated among different Knesset factions.

But Blue and White declared it would put the issue to a majority vote.

Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein, a Likud member and Netanyahu ally, scheduled the vote for Monday.

Hours before the chamber was due to re-open, Likud announced its boycott, saying it would not take part in the "disgraceful process."

Gantz's bloc voted despite the boycott, creating an arrangements committee that will see Knesset business move forward, including the formation of a new body to tackle the coronavirus.

Gantz accused Netanyahu of trying to "paralyze the Knesset," in a speech to a near empty chamber on Monday.

Netanyahu has repeatedly called for Gantz to join him in a unity government, with the premier's job rotating between them, and President Reuven Rivlin has backed such calls amid the pandemic.

Israel has imposed severe restrictions to contain coronavirus, including banning non-essential movements.

Netanyahu had also enlisted the Shin Bet internal security agency to track possible virus carriers through their mobile phones – without a court order. That move triggered outrage over alleged national security over-reach, with the supreme court ruling last week such surveillance could not go ahead without Knesset oversight.

The committee tasked with overseeing the Shin Bet, the foreign and defense committee, was scheduled to be formed in the coming days.

A dispute also escalated over the powerful job of Knesset speaker.

Likud has argued that its member and Netanyahu loyalist Yuli Edelstein should remain as speaker until a new government is formed.

Blue and White asked the supreme court to weigh in. On Monday, judges told Edelstein he had two days to schedule a vote for a new speaker.

Edelstein rejected what he described as the court's "ultimatum," saying it was not the role of judges to set the Knesset agenda.

Blue and White in a statement warned Edelstein that he would be "shamefully remembered" for defying the court.

Netanyahu is also facing criminal corruptions charges, allegations he denies, but which could soon leave him vulnerable: MPs who oppose him have backed legislation that would bar anyone under criminal indictment from serving as prime minister.



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Netanyahu challenger Gantz chosen to form new Israeli government  
Netanyahu accused of exploiting virus crisis

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## [Algeria imposes curfew in capital](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Mon, 2020-03-23 18:52

TUNIS: Algeria will impose a curfew to combat the coronavirus in the capital Algiers from 7pm-7am and a full lockdown in the town of Blida, center of the worst outbreak in the country, with both measures starting on Tuesday and lasting for 10 days.

The measures, to be enforced by the army, were announced in a statement by the presidency on Monday and residents of Blida will be able to receive food and other staples by delivery, it said.



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## [Gaza virus cases attended conference in Pakistan](#)

Author:

AFP

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GAZA: Gaza's first two confirmed coronavirus patients attended a conference with 250,000 Muslims in Pakistan last month that went ahead contrary to government advice, an official and family members said Monday.

Pakistani authorities had urged the cancelation of the five-day Tablighi Ijtema congregation, or Tablighi Jamaat in Arabic, hosted annually near Lahore.

But organizers from the conservative Sunni Muslim evangelical movement ignored government advice to postpone.

It was unclear where the two Palestinians – who returned to Gaza from Pakistan via Egypt earlier this month – contracted COVID-19.

But a statement from the Palestinian embassy in Islamabad said the two attended the event which took place “despite the warning of the Pakistani authorities against conferences.”

Omar Al-Tabatibi said his 79-year-old grandfather Mohammed and friend Amer Doghmosh had attended the Lahore event.

Previous statements from health officials had misidentified the men as being between 30 and 40.

“My grandfather learnt about the conference by chance from a friend while he was in Pakistan so he wanted to attend,” Tabatibi said.

After returning from Pakistan his grandfather stayed several days in Egypt before taking the long journey overland to Gaza, Tabatibi said.

“Maybe my grandfather caught corona in Egypt and not Pakistan, no one knows,” he added.

He said the family had already been subjected to abuse on social media and in person since the news broke.

“My little brother went to a games shop today and the owner told him to go home as his grandfather has corona.”

Gaza's health ministry said the two men were placed in quarantine immediately after crossing into Gaza and did not mix with the population.

It described them as being in stable condition.

Omar said his grandfather has pre-existing conditions of high blood pressure



and diabetes.

“I spoke to him last night on the phone and he told me he was ok and is recovering,” he said.

The United Nations has warned that a COVID-19 outbreak in Gaza could be disastrous, given the high poverty rates and weak health system in the coastal strip under Israeli blockade since 2007.



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Will the Gaza Strip be able to cope with a COVID-19 outbreak?

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## [Ghost town Beirut: Troops patrol streets in virus curfew crackdown](#)

Mon, 2020-03-23 03:24

BEIRUT: Troops patrolled deserted city streets and army helicopters circled

Beirut on Sunday as Lebanese people were warned to “prepare for the worst” from the coronavirus outbreak.

Soldiers set up roadblocks and military aircraft broadcast loudspeaker messages urging people to obey official instructions and stay at home as the number of virus cases rose by 18 to 248.

The crackdown was necessary because “some people are not complying with the necessary preventive measures to protect their relatives, families, friends, community, and even their neighbors,” Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmi said.

“We must save ourselves, our families and our country before it is too late. We must prepare for the worst while maintaining hope and faith that we will overcome this crisis by doing the right thing.”

Saudi Arabia reported 119 new virus cases on Sunday, raising the total to 511. Health Ministry spokesman Mohammed Abdelali said 72 of the new patients were Turkish, and were under quarantine in Makkah after being in direct contact with another Turkish national who was already infected.

More than 4,000 people were under quarantine, Abdelali said. “We are starting to see more cases linked to interactions ... we advise everyone to stay home.”

In the UAE, Emirates airline initially said it was halting all passenger operations by Wednesday, but said later that some flights would continue as long as borders remained open and there was passenger demand. Cargo flights will also operate.

“We find ourselves in a situation where we cannot viably operate passenger services until countries reopen their borders, and travel confidence returns,” chairman Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al-Maktoum said.

Three luxury hotels operated by the developer Emaar in the Downtown Dubai area, which is popular with tourists, have stopped taking bookings. The UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, announced an additional economic stimulus of 16 billion dirhams, bringing the total to 126 billion dirhams (\$34.3 billion).

Elsewhere in the Gulf, Oman on Sunday banned public gatherings, limited staffing at state entities, closed currency exchanges and banned the publication or distribution of newspapers and magazines.

Kuwait imposed a partial curfew and extended a work suspension for two weeks. Some supermarkets are allowing only 50 shoppers at a time.

Qatar, where 481 coronavirus cases have been reported, has introduced checkpoints to enforce a ban on public gatherings. There are fears for the health of tens of thousands of migrant workers under quarantine, effectively locked into a densely populated district southwest of Doha, known as the Industrial Area. No one is allowed to leave.

Amnesty International warned that cramped conditions there were putting the workers at risk, and called for “access to health care, including preventive

care and treatment for everyone affected, without discrimination.”

In Iran, the regional hotspot of the virus outbreak with more than 21,000 cases of infection and 1,685 deaths, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said his country would never accept medical aid from “American liars, manipulators, impudent and greedy ... charlatans.”

Iran, which is struggling to contain the outbreak, has so far received medical equipment or financial aid from Azerbaijan, Britain, China, France, Germany, Japan, Qatar, Russia, Turkey and the UAE.



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Lebanon told to 'prepare for the worst' as virus cases rise  
Army patrols Malaysian streets after coronavirus spike

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## [UAE suspending all passenger flights to curb spread of coronavirus](#)

Author:

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DUBAI: The United Arab Emirates announced on Monday it will temporarily suspend all passenger and transit flights amid the novel coronavirus outbreak.

The Emirati authorities “have decided to suspend all inbound and outbound passenger flights and the transit of airline passengers in the UAE for two weeks as part of the precautionary measures taken to curb the spread of the COVID-19,” reported the official state news agency, WAM.

It said the decision – which is subject to review in two weeks – will take effect in 48 hours, adding: “Cargo and emergency evacuation flights would be exempt.”

The UAE, whose international airports in Abu Dhabi and Dubai are major hubs, announced on Friday its first two deaths from the COVID-19 disease, having reported more than 150 cases so far.

Monday’s announcement came hours after Dubai carrier Emirates announced it would suspend all passenger flights by March 25.

But the aviation giant then reversed its decision, saying it “received requests from governments and customers to support the repatriation of travelers” and will continue to operate passenger flights to 13 destinations. Emirates had said it will continue to fly to the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Australia, South Africa, the United States and Canada.

“We continue to watch the situation closely, and as soon as things allow, we will reinstate our services,” said the airline’s chairman and CEO, Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al-Maktoum.

Gulf countries have imposed various restrictions to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus pandemic, particularly in the air transport sector.

The UAE has stopped granting visas on arrival and forbidden foreigners who are legal residents but are outside the country from returning.



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Emirates suspends flights to more cities over coronavirus fears, closing routes to 111 destinations  
Emirates asks pilots and cabin crew to take unpaid leave