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Atomic Energy Agency oversight warns US, Iran will increase enrichment to 60%

02.24.21

Iran hampering nuclear oversight and threatening stability, FM warns

Ashkenazi remarks follow Iran's announcement it will limit international access to its nuclear sites; 'Iran is moving in the wrong direction' warns U.S. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price

TPS| Published: 02.24.21 , 20:32

Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi warned on Wednesday that Iran is trying to hamper the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) ability to oversee the development of its nuclear program, all while trying to undermine the stability in the Middle East.

Ashkenazi's remarks follow Tehran's announcement on Monday that intends to limit international access to its nuclear sites, as well as suspend certain safeguards put in place by the nuclear watchdog to verify the peaceful use of all nuclear material.

"Iran's policy is a declaration of intent as to its desire to continue to secretly develop nuclear capabilities," said Ashkenazi. "Israel sees this step as a threat, and it must not go by without a response. Israel will never allow Iran to control the capability to acquire a nuclear weapon."

Ashkenazi added that the suspension of IAEA oversight should "serve as a wake up call to those who refrained until now from responding decisively and practically to Iran's ongoing violations of its international obligations."

Lior Haiat, the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry further warned that "Iran continues to stockpile enriched uranium, deceive and obfuscate its ambitions for a nuclear weapon."

"Iran's harming of the special oversight mechanisms of its nuclear facilities and suspension of the additional implementation protocol are extreme steps that cross all red lines set out by the international community, and completely deplete the nuclear deal of its substance," Haiat underscored.

Since 2019, Iran has continuously breached the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal in response to former U.S. President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the deal the previous year and Washington reimposing sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

These breaches include the enrichment of uranium of up to 20%, with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei saying that Iran will increase enrichment up to 60% "based on the country's needs," - despite the deal stating that Tehran can enrich uranium up to no more than 3.67%, as uranium metal can be used to make the core of an atom bomb.

The IAEA also recently found uranium residue in four previously undisclosed nuclear sites in Iran.

A report issued Tuesday by the IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi stated that the UN's watchdog is "deeply concerned" that Iran secretly kept "undeclared nuclear material" at an "undeclared location" and warned that Tehran continued to exceed "many limits" set by the 2015 nuclear deal.

The report determined that Iran executed undeclared activity with nuclear materials in at least four different sites, and did not report where the nuclear materials are currently located.

Grossi added in his report that Iran "needs to give answers" on the nuclear traces found these sites and said the process with Tehran "has not yielded positive results for now."

Speaking to reporters on Tuesday, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said that the U.S. is concerned that "Iran is moving in the wrong direction. It is moving further away from its nuclear constraints."

"Our objective in all of this remains to seek an outcome in which Iran and the United States resume compliance with their commitments under the JCPOA. These steps by Iran, the steps that we have spoken to, that the Iranians have spoken to publicly, are clearly moving in the wrong direction," he said.

02.24.21

Israel arrivals isolate at home with ankle bracelets or compulsory hotel isolation

02.24.21

Israel reinstates isolation hotels, launches electronic tagging for travelers

Knesset panel approves isolation in hotels for arrivals from abroad until March 2; those who wish to isolate at home instead will be asked to put down NIS-1,500 deposit for a tracking kit

Itamar Eichner, Nina Fuchs, Adir Yanko | Published: 02.24.21, 19:08

Israel on Wednesday reinstated compulsory isolation in state-run hotels for people who arrive in Israel from abroad while the Health Ministry launched a pilot program in which travelers will quarantine at home and be affixed an electronic tag as part of the measures to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Knesset's Constitution, Law and Justice Committee approved extending the order until March 2 after panel chairman MK Yaakov Asher (United Torah Judaism) initially objected to it, imploring the government to present him with alternatives.

The order expired the night between Monday and Tuesday, and since then many Israelis who landed at Ben Gurion Airport have returned directly home. In contrast, about 80 passengers who will arrive in Israel on a Lufthansa flight Wednesday night will be forcibly taken to hotels.

Alternatively, travelers will also have the option to participate in the new pilot program and self-isolate at home.

As part of the pilot, the state will initially issue 100 tracking kits to travelers to ensure they do not leave their place of quarantine during the isolation period. The program is planned to be expanded to 1,000 kits within days.

Travelers who wish to isolate themselves at home instead of a hotel will have to put down a NIS-1,500 deposit.

Israel Police representatives refused to take responsibility for supplying the system, but officers will be deployed to enforce breaches of quarantine.

Tracking and identification company SuperCom will operate the program, supplying ankle bracelets, electronic tags and smartphones to some 1,000 Israelis returning from abroad.

Deputy Health Minister Yoav Kisch said the new measures are a part of Israel's efforts to prevent the spread of new COVID-19 variants throughout the country and will be brought to a Knesset vote next week.

"We are very concerned about new variants coming in that may jeopardize the vaccination campaign," Kisch said. "To this end, we require isolation in hotels for arrivals from abroad. Those who test negative [for coronavirus] at the airport can choose to isolate at home with electronic tagging. Those who don't want to, can stay in a hotel. We are not forcing anyone. We have legal permission to start the pilot and it will go up for vote next week."

Meanwhile, the Health Ministry is examining additional technological solutions, such as reintroducing the controversial cellphone tracking scheme operated by the Shin Bet domestic security service last year.

02.24.21

Knesset law gives Education & Welfare the contact data on non-vaccinated Israelis

02.24.21

MKs pass law allowing transfer of data on non-vaccinated Israelis
Legislation permits municipalities to acquire names, ID numbers, addresses and telephone numbers of local residents who have not yet been inoculated against coronavirus or missed second dose in order to encourage them to receive it
Moran Azulay | Published: 02.24.21 , 15:13

The Knesset on Wednesday passed the second and third readings of a bill allowing the Health Ministry to supply certain official bodies with the personal information of people who have thus far refused vaccines for COVID-19.

According to the law, the information can be passed to local authorities, the Education Ministry director-general and Welfare Ministry officials in order to contact those who have not been vaccinated to urge them to receive their shots.

The third reading of the bill was approved by 30 votes in favor to 13 against.
The new law also states that "the information will be passed on to the authorities subject to an active request and the presentation of a plan to encourage immunization among the population included in the database."

"An official who is authorized by the Health Ministry director-general will receive the names, ID numbers, addresses and telephone numbers of citizens who are eligible to be vaccinated but have not done so," the law states.

The Health Ministry will also pass on the information of anyone who received the first vaccine dose but did not arrive at the appointed time for the second.

A Knesset statement issued after the bill was passed stressed that "in order to reduce the invasion of privacy and prevent misuse of the information, the law stipulates that the information transmitted will be used solely to encourage immunization and any other use of the data is banned."

The information will only be available to a restricted list of officials, who will also not be allowed to contact anyone with whom they are already familiar.

Those receiving the information will also have to sign a confidentiality agreement and the data will be deleted no later than 60 days after its receipt.

02.24.21

US to tackle UN Human Rights biased focus on Israel every HRC session

02.24.21

Blinken: U.S. to seek election to UN rights body, tackle anti-Israel bias
Secretary of State says he urges Human Rights Council to look at how it conducts its business including disproportionate focus on Israel as he 'humbly' asks member states for support in bid to return to seat in Geneva-based assembly
Ynet, Reuters| Published: 02.24.21 , 13:27

The United States will seek election to the UN Human Rights Council later this year and remain an active observer speaking out about violations worldwide until then, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday.

Blinken, addressing the council by recorded video, said that the Biden administration would work to eliminate what he called the Geneva forum's "disproportionate focus" on its ally Israel.

Under former President Donald Trump, the United States quit the council in June 2018 but the Biden government returned as an observer earlier this month.

"I'm pleased to announce the United States will seek election to the Human Rights Council for the 2022-24 term. We humbly ask for the support of all UN member states in our bid to return to a seat in this body," Blinken said.

Annual elections for three-year membership on the 47-member council are due to be held at the UN General Assembly in October. Britain, China and Russia are among current members.

"As the United States re-engages, we urge the Human Rights Council to look at how it conducts its business. That includes its disproportionate focus on Israel," Blinken said.

Israel is the only country in the world whose rights record comes up for discussion at every HRC session, under "Item 7" on the agenda. Item 7 on "Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories" has been part of the council's regular business almost as long as it has existed, which both Democratic and Republican administrations have opposed.

The Israeli government has repeatedly lambasted alleged bias against Israel by the 47-member Human Rights Council.

The United States has opted to stay out of the Human Rights Council before: The George W. Bush administration decided against seeking membership when the council was created in 2006.

The U.S. joined the body in 2009 under then-president Barack Obama.

02.23.21

Purim night curfew across Israel Thursday to Sunday, then reopen education

02.23.21

Cabinet approves nighttime curfew across Israel on Purim

Restrictions to begin Thursday evening, will be in effect from 8:30pm to 5am until Sunday; public transportation to be minimized in order to prevent travel to illicit parties over period of normally festive holiday

Ynet | Published: 02.23.21 , 20:57

The coronavirus cabinet Tuesday approved a nighttime curfew for the duration of the Jewish holiday of Purim in an effort to minimize festivities and prevent the further spread of the pathogen.

The curfew will be in place from Thursday until Sunday, and will last from 8:30pm to 5am.

The cabinet also voted to minimize public transportation that period in order to discourage revelers from attending illicit parties during the period of the normally festive holiday.

Ministers agreed to meet on Wednesday in order to make a decision on a further reopening of the education system.

After weeks of continuous decline, Israel's COVID-19 reproduction number has been climbing again in recent days and has reached 0.86, the Coronavirus National Information and Knowledge Center reported Tuesday morning, raising concerns of a resurging spread of the disease.

A reproduction number, or R number, indicates how many other people a person carrying the virus will infect.

According to data, 4,677 new cases of coronavirus were detected out of some 69,000 tests conducted on Monday, meaning 7% of tests yielded a positive result - topping the 6.5% weekly average.

Of the new coronavirus patients, 77% were under the age of 39, and only 6.2% were over 60.

The taskforce warned that the extent of infections and the fact that a significant proportion of the population has not yet been vaccinated against COVID-19 is causing a slow reduction in the number of serious cases.

Officials urged Israelis to adhere to health regulations as the country emerged from a six-week lockdown two weeks ago, opening schools for children younger than 10 and allowing a growing list of industries to reopen, and as the more infectious U.K. coronavirus variant became the dominant strain in Israel.

There were 797 COVID-19 patients hospitalized in serious condition as of Tuesday morning, including 248 people who were connected to ventilators.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, 5,604 people have died in Israel from coronavirus-related complications.

The Health Ministry announced on Tuesday morning that over 70% of Israelis over the age of 16 have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Out of some 4.5 million inoculated citizens, nearly half of Israel's population, more than 3 million have also received the second booster shot.

Some 157,000 people were inoculated with either the first or the second dose on Monday alone.

02.23.21

Israel will dispute Iran by advisers, since former US Democrats had feuds

02.23.21

Israel aims to resolve Iran disputes with Biden at adviser level

Netanyahu, Gantz and Ashkenazi agree to show a united front on Israeli misgivings and proposed improvements to nuclear deal, which will be relayed by National Security Council to White House counterparts
Reuters| Published: 02.23.21 , 19:56

Israel hopes to prevent personal tension between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Joe Biden over their differences on the Iranian nuclear question by delegating talks on the topic to their senior staff, an Israeli official said.

Netanyahu's foreign-policy fortunes have waned since Biden succeeded Republican President Donald Trump, who withdrew the United States from world powers' 2015 Iranian nuclear deal, deeming it too advantageous for Tehran - a view Israel shared.

Biden, a Democrat, wants to rejoin the deal. That has set the stage for possible new strains in the U.S.-Israel alliance.

On Monday, Netanyahu conferred with Defence Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi to present a united Israeli front on Iran - even as the conservative premier runs against the two centrists in a March election.

An official briefed on Monday's meeting said it was agreed that Israeli misgivings about, and proposed improvements to, the deal would be relayed by Netanyahu's National Security Council to the counterpart National Security Council in the White House.

"The intent is to work everything out at that level, and to keep that communication channel open," the official told Reuters on Tuesday on condition of anonymity.

"Obviously this has benefits where there is a risk of a 'cold shoulder' at chief-executive level."

Citing unnamed sources involved in the meeting, Army Radio reported the Netanyahu and the other ministers had decided to keep disputes with Biden "under the radar" for now.

Netanyahu's office declined to comment.

When the 2015 deal was being put together, Netanyahu's opposition - including in a speech he delivered to the U.S. Congress - led to feuds with the then-Democratic administration of Barack Obama, whom Biden served as vice president.

Netanyahu's office said on Friday that Israel was "in close contact" with Washington on the issue and asserted that a return to the 2015 deal would "pave Iran's path to a nuclear arsenal".

Israel previously hinted it might shun Iran talks with Washington in the event of a new deal that it still opposes, lest such engagement give the impression of consent.

Iran, which denies seeking the bomb, began breaching the deal in 2019, following the U.S. withdrawal. It has recently stepped up violations and was cool to an administration announcement on Thursday that Washington was **ready to talk** about a mutual **return to compliance**.

Israel is reputed to have the region's only nuclear arsenal, something it neither confirms nor denies under an "ambiguity" policy designed to ward off foes while avoiding arms races.

02.24.21

EU may adopt global vaccine certificates as in Greece & Israel travel deal

02.24.21

EU mulls vaccination passports to resurrect tourism after COVID-19

With the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines now gathering pace, some governments are pushing for quick **adoption** of an **EU-wide certificate for those already inoculated** so that people can travel again

Reuters| Published: **02.24.21** , 23:47

European Union leaders will agree on Thursday to work on certificates of vaccination for EU citizens who have had an anti-COVID shot, with southern EU countries that depend heavily on tourism desperate to rescue this summer's holiday season.

Lockdowns to slow the **pandemic caused the deepest ever economic recession in the 27-nation bloc last year**, hitting the south of the EU, where **economies** are often much more dependent on visitors, disproportionately hard.

With the rollout of vaccines against COVID-19 now gathering pace, some governments, like those of **Greece and Spain**, are **pushing for a quick adoption of an EU-wide certificate for those already inoculated** so that people can travel again.

However, other countries, such as France and Germany, appear more reluctant, as officials there say it could create de facto vaccination obligation and would be discriminatory to those who cannot or will not take a jab.

France, where anti-vaccine sentiment is particularly strong and where the **government** has **pledged not to make them compulsory**, considers the **idea of vaccine passports as "premature"**, a French official said on Wednesday.

Work is needed on the details, including **whether it should be in digital form**, be **accepted globally** and at what stage of the two-step inoculation process it should be issued.

"We call for work to continue on a common approach to vaccination certificates," a draft statement of the leaders video-conference seen by Reuters said, without setting a time-frame for a result.

Officials said the EU was working with the International Air Transport Association, which is keen to revive air travel, and with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Health Organization.

But travel with certificates also raised legal questions, officials said, because those last in line for vaccinations could argue their freedom of movement was unjustly restricted by the often months-long queues.

EU officials also point out there is no guidance yet from the WHO and EU agencies whether people who have received two shots of the COVID-19 vaccine can still carry the coronavirus and infect others, even if no longer vulnerable themselves.

It was also not clear if people could be infectious having already fought off the coronavirus themselves, for how long they remained immune and if they too should get certificates.

"There are still many things we don't know," a senior official from one of the EU countries said. "We need more time to come to a common line."

But time is short for countries in the south, where the hospitality sector needs to know what it should prepare for in the coming months. Despite the official stance that all EU governments want to solve the issue together, some might decide to move faster individually.

Earlier in February, Greece and Israel signed a deal to ease travel restrictions to Greece for Israelis with proof of COVID-19 vaccination.