Highly Vaccinated Israel Has a Nagging Coronavirus Problem

Analysis by The Vaccine Reaction

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

> With 81 percent of Israel's adult population fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and the number of reported SARS-CoV-2 infections down to under 20 cases per day, the Israeli government lifted most COVID-19-related restrictions in the country on June 1, 2021

> Everything seemed to be going Israel's way up until around the third week in June when there were 227 new coronavirus cases, and that 70 percent of new coronavirus cases had been caused by the Delta variant of the virus

> An estimated 40-50 percent of the new coronavirus infections in Israel are in people who have already been vaccinated for COVID-19

With 81 percent of Israel's adult population (and nearly 59 percent of its overall population) fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and the number of reported SARS-CoV-2 infections down to under 20 cases per day, the Israeli government lifted most COVID-19-related restrictions in the country on June 1, 2021.

One of the main remaining restrictions was the requirement that people continue to wear masks in indoor public spaces, but even that restriction was dropped by mid-June.[1,2,3,4] However, by the end of June, suddenly there was an increase in reported COVID-19 cases in the highly vaccinated population.

The Israeli vaccination program has been heralded as being "enormously successful." During Israel Independence Day celebrations (sundown Apr. 14 through sundown Apr.

15), Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared:

> *"Israel is the first country in the world to beat Corona. It's all thanks to our successful national vaccination program."*[5]

In an Independence Day ceremony, there was even a tribute to Pfizer, Inc. for its role in providing the experimental messenger RNA (mRNA) BNT162b2 COVID biologic used in Israel. Pfizer's CEO, Albert Bourla, gave a short video address to the public. He said:

> *"Together, we have demonstrated that through mass vaccination we can defeat the COVID-19 pandemic and save lives."*[6]

"The situation here is quite amazing if you look at what happens around the world it's proof how vaccines can actually get us back to our normal lives," said Lior Haiat, spokesperson for Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "The bottom line is that vaccination is the solution for the COVID. If there's one message we can send abroad is that this is how we get over this crisis — the health crisis and also the economic crisis."[7]

Delta Variant Fuels Spike in Coronavirus Cases and Naming of New Response Team

Everything seemed to be going Israel's way up until around the third week in June when the Ministry of Health announced that it had registered 227 new coronavirus cases, compared to 13 cases of the virus the previous week, and that 70 percent of those cases had been caused by the Delta variant of the virus.[8,9]

Due to the sudden spike in reported SARS-CoV-2 cases, on June 25, Ministry of Health officials reinstated the indoor mask mandate in Israel and recommended that people wear masks even at outdoor events.[10]

On June 27, the director general of Israel's Ministry of Health, Chezy Levy, resigned from his post. Later that day, Israel's new Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, announced the appointment of Major General (retired) Roni Numa as special czar to manage the

coronavirus response at the country's primary port of entry, Ben Gurion International Airport.[11,12] In explaining the Numa appointment, Prime Minister Bennett said:

> *"For a year and a half now, there has been a huge national weak point, and that is Ben-Gurion Airport.*
>
> *Therefore, in coordination with the transportation minister, the health minister and the interior minister, we decided to appoint a special director to handle transitions and prevent the entry of this virus and future variants and viruses from around the world into Israel."*[13]

Bennett added ...

> *"Israel does not have a lot of border crossings — in fact, it is kind of an island state. There is no reason why we cannot defend ourselves even if there was no vaccine."*[14]

On June 28, Israel's National Coronavirus Project Coordinator Nachman Ash was appointed as the new director general of the Ministry of Health.[15] Suddenly, almost overnight, there is again a sense of urgency in Israel — a renewed COVID-19 crisis in a country that had recently declared itself the first to be the first in the world to "beat Corona" and had lauded its mandatory mass vaccination program as the reason for the victory.

Israel Tightens Measures to Combat Coronavirus Infections

Israel is gearing up for a new war against an enemy it believed it had vanquished. It has appointed two new generals to implement a battle strategy. One of the strategies is to more strictly manage travelers to and from Israel.

The Ministry of Health continues to advise Israelis not to leave the country unless absolutely necessary and instructed those who leaving the country to declare that they would not visit countries where there is a high risk of coronavirus infection. Anyone who

enters Israel who is not vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19 will be required to quarantine.

Also, anyone returning to Israel from countries under a travel ban (Argentina, Brazil, India, Mexico, Russia and South Africa) will required to quarantine even if they've been fully vaccinated.[16,17,18]

In addition to the stricter travel regulations, the Ministry of Health will re-emphasize the wearing of masks and getting vaccinated, particularly children. "Our approach is simple: maximum protection for Israeli citizens, with minimum harm to routine and the economy in Israel; masks instead of restrictions, vaccines instead of lockdowns," Prime Minister Bennett said.[19]

Israel has a supply of approximately 1.4 million doses of Pfizer/BioNTech's BNT162b2 biologic, which, apparently, will expire on July 31, 2021. The Ministry of Health will be making an effort to get as many people as possible fully vaccinated before then.[20]

Of course, the underlying assumption behind the Israeli government's renewed push to vaccinate is that BNT162b2 will be effective in curbing the rise of the SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant. But that assumption may be flawed, as evidenced by the fact that an estimated 40-50 percent of the new coronavirus infections in Israel are in people who have already been vaccinated for COVID-19.[21]

That poses a huge dilemma for the Israeli government or any government, for that matter, which has bet the store on these shots.

Sources and References

- [1] Choi J. Israel lifts most COVID-19 restrictions. The Hill June 1, 2021
- [2] Kershner I. With most adults vaccinated and case numbers low, Israel removes many restrictions. The New York Times June 1, 2021
- [3] The US Posts. Delta Variant Cases Spike, Israel Reintroduces Rule On Masks. June 25, 2021
- [4] TOI Staff. Officials to weigh reimposing some virus restrictions as Delta variant spreads. The Times of Israel July 3, 2021
- [5, 6] Israel Today Staff. Israel Celebrates Vaccine Victory Over Corona. Israel Today Apr. 20, 2021
- [7] Cohan A. Israel's coronavirus vaccine success can happen in Massachusetts too, Israeli officials say. Boston Herald May 1, 2021

- [8, 21] TVR Staff. Half of COVID Delta Variant Infections in Israel are in Vaccinated People. The Vaccine Reaction June 28, 2021
- [9] Guenot M. Israel says the Delta variant is infecting vaccinated people, representing as many as 50% of new cases. [...] Business Insider June 24, 2021
- [10] Haaretz. Israel Renews Indoor COVID Mask Mandate as Delta Variant Spreads. June 25, 2021
- [11] Efrati I. Israel's Health Ministry Director Resigns Amid COVID Delta Variant Outbreak. Haaretz June 27, 2021
- [12, 16] Eichner I. No new measures to fight coronavirus, ministers say. yNetNews.com June 28, 2021
- [13, 14, 17] Tercatin R. Coronavirus in Israel: Gov't appoints special airport commissioner. The Jerusalem Post June 27, 2021
- [15, 18, 19, 20] Tercatin R. Coronavirus 'czar' Nachman Ash named new Health Ministry director-general. The Jerusalem Post June 28, 2021