



COVID-19 VACCINATIONS IN THE MENA REGION

By Yasmin Abdul Razak

As the world observes the one-year anniversary of global COVID-19 lockdowns, many countries have already begun their vaccination campaigns. The consequences of vaccine hoarding are clear when considering the distribution and prospective supply of vaccines in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Most MENA countries have ordered less than two doses of vaccine per adult, which is not enough to fully vaccinate an individual against COVID-19. Syria and Lebanon, for example, have only ordered 0.8 doses per adult, while the United Kingdom and Canada have each ordered 8.5 and 11 doses per person, respectively.³ Chal-

lenges facing the MENA region in vaccine distribution are discrimination, exclusion, and lack of access for refugee populations.

One way that lower and middle-income countries can gain access to vaccines at a lower cost is through participation in the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) initiative. This program allows countries to donate, receive, or finance participants in gaining sustainable access to COVID-19 vaccines. Countries such as Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen are currently enrolled under the Advanced Market Commitment (AMC), with the vaccine costs partially covered through donations by higher-income countries.⁴ Other countries, including Iran, Lebanon,

ISRAEL

Israel has been lauded by media outlets as the first country to achieve herd immunity, where a sufficient percentage of the population is immunized against COVID-19, thereby preventing its ability to spread.⁹ As of mid-April 2021, Israel was reported to have administered 10.3 million doses, with 96% of adults having received their first dose and 89% of adults having received their second. Many factors contributed to Israel's speedy progress, including their small population size and landmass, relatively young population, centralized data-keeping, and strong pre-pandemic health infrastructure.⁸ Beginning in December 2020, Israel initiated its vaccination campaign, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu receiving the first dose in the country. Leading up to the election, Netanyahu's campaign placed an enormous focus on the success of the Israeli vaccination campaign. A video released in March contrasted Israel's crowded shops with empty ones throughout European cities.¹⁰ This has been part of an effort to bolster Netanyahu's image amidst a criminal trial and accusations of bribery.

Israel has received backlash due to its lack of involvement in Palestinian vaccine rollout plans, however. Areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA) rely on Israel for donations and supplies of the vaccine, which have not been fulfilled by the Israeli government.⁵ There have been arguments over who is responsible for vaccinating Palestinians, as different accords and conventions provide different answers.²

JORDAN

As a country with 2.9 million refugees, Jordan faces a large task in vaccinating its population.¹² According to a United Nations Refugee Agency report, Jordan is one of the first countries to include refugees and asylum seekers in its initial vaccination plan. Jordan is home to millions of Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian refugee populations, so its inclusion of migrants in its vaccination plan is a huge undertaking for the protection of refugee well-being.¹ In fact, the world's first vaccination center for refugees opened on February 15 in the Zaatari camp, which hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world.¹³

LEBANON

As one of the MENA countries with the least doses administered to date, Lebanon has had its fair share of struggles in vaccinating its population. To this day, *The Economist* reports that there have been 296,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine administered in Lebanon, with only 4.1% of adults having received their first dose and 2.5% of adults having received their second dose.³

The low rates of vaccination, huge financial strain, and high prevalence of refugee populations produce a unique set of challenges for Lebanon. The country received a generous

amount of \$34 million from the World Bank to finance the purchase of 28,000 COVID-19 vaccines, with which it could immunize more than two million people. In mid-February, however, the World Bank threatened to stop financing Lebanon's COVID-19 vaccines in response to accusations of favoritism regarding vaccine recipients.⁵ The agreement between Lebanon and the World Bank was to vaccinate people according to registration in order to ensure "fair and equitable" conditions. Despite this, local media reported that 16 deputies and four parliamentary staff were vaccinated without registration.⁵

As one of the world's top ten refugee host countries, the national vaccination plan itself has sparked much controversy among its people.¹² The Lebanese government pledged that everyone, regardless of nationality, will be included in its vaccine rollout plan. However, there have been no concrete details or actions taken regarding the vaccination of refugees, especially for undocumented refugees.¹ Uncertainty over who will actually receive the vaccine led to a trending hashtag on Twitter:

#اللقاح_للجميع

translating to #Vaccines_for_all.⁷ Many people also took to Twitter to voice their disagreements with the hashtag, calling out racism and asking the government to prioritize healthcare workers and the elderly in vaccine distribution.



Image by Jeremy Bishop