



COVID-19 Vaccines in Palestine and Lebanon

Situation Report

February 24, 2021

Overview

The race to procure and distribute COVID-19 vaccines has produced a massive gap between countries with the ability to buy it en masse, and those that do not. Despite initial commitments to the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) initiative, many wealthy countries have put more focus into bilateral purchases. Developing countries, including Lebanon and Palestine, are just now distributing the first round of vaccines. Gaps in the procurement and distribution process, especially for refugee communities, is creating uncertainty around capacities and timing for coverage.

Vaccine Development

The most popular vaccines worldwide are currently the mRNA vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna. Both have been shown to have an efficacy rating of at least 90% in clinical trials, which is much higher than most flu vaccines. New data shows that the Pfizer vaccine, which originally needed to be transported and stored in ultra-low temperature freezers, can be stored at regular freezer temperature (-20°C) for up to two weeks and at refrigerator temperature (2°C to 8°C) for five days.¹ The Moderna vaccine can be kept at freezer temperature for 6 months and at chill temperature for 30 days. AstraZeneca, a more traditional viral vector vaccine, has also gained popularity due to its warmer storage temperature.

All of these vaccines require two doses, while the vaccine being developed by Johnson & Johnson, which is about to secure approval in American and other markets, is single dose.² Russia's Sputnik V and China's Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines have also had positive results in trials and are in broad circulation, especially in the developing world.³ These vaccines are becoming more popular as China and Russia have made a number of donations to developing countries, while the temperature at which they are stored is more convenient than the mRNA vaccines.

¹ [CDC: Pfizer Product Storage Guidelines](#)

² [CNN: Johnson and Johnson Vaccine](#)

³ [The Diplomat: China and Russia. Partners or Competitors?](#)

Vaccine Accessibility and Distribution in the West Bank and Gaza

While Israel has achieved a world-leading distribution of 74 doses per 100 people since December. While Arab citizens of Israel and Palestinians living in East Jerusalem are included in Israel's vaccine distribution network, a cooperative framework between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is slow to develop. The Palestinian Authority had to wait until early February to begin vaccinations.⁴ Gaza is reliant on coordination with the West Bank and Israel and donations from other countries.

A shipment of 2,000 vaccine doses donated by the UAE was cleared for entry into Gaza on February 17, after a brief delay by Israeli security officials.⁵ This is a small portion of the 10,000 Sputnik V doses that arrived in the West Bank earlier this month, meeting a fraction of Palestine's overall needs and highlighting the reliance of the people in Gaza on outside medical assistance. Israeli authorities are facilitating a small order of 5,000 Moderna doses, 2,000 of which have been delivered.⁶ This is another small contribution to the overwhelming needs of the 5 million people in Gaza and the West Bank.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) has other bilateral and multilateral agreements in place, but they are very slowly coming to fruition. The PA expects to receive the first round of vaccines from AstraZeneca and Pfizer through the COVAX initiative by the end of February.⁷ COVAX will cover 20% of Palestinian vaccine needs, though a general plan for the delivery and distribution of these vaccines is still forthcoming. The PA hopes to achieve at least 60% coverage of Palestinians, an effort that the World Bank reports would require \$55 million USD, necessitating donor support.⁸

Vaccine Availability in Lebanon

Lebanon's first wave of vaccination began on February 14, when a shipment of 28,500 Pfizer vaccines arrived in Beirut. The deal between the Government of Lebanon and Pfizer will deliver two million total doses.⁹ The World Bank, which issued the loan to pay for the shipment, issued a statement that there is to be "no *wasta*" (political connections) involved in the distribution process. The government has also confirmed that the first COVAX disbursement of another 2.7 million vaccines is scheduled to arrive before the end of February.¹⁰ There are also talks for another order of 1.5 million AstraZeneca vaccines. This brings the total number of vaccines on the table up to a little over six million, roughly half of what is needed to vaccinate the whole country.

⁴ [BBC: Why Are Palestinians Behind on Vaccination?](#)

⁵ [The Guardian: Israel Allows COVID Vaccinations into Gaza](#)

⁶ [Israel Sends 2,000 doses of COVID-19 Vaccine](#)

⁷ [BBC: Why Are Palestinians Behind on Vaccination?](#)

⁸ [Reuters: Funding Gap for Palestine COVID Vaccine](#)

⁹ [Arab News: Lebanon Launches Vaccine Rollout](#)

¹⁰ [Reuters: COVID Vaccine Arrives in Lebanon with World Bank Funding](#)

The distribution network for the vaccines is drawing questions due to uncertainties over treatment coverage. The National Deployment and Vaccination Plan (NDVP), released by the Ministry of Public Health, states that vaccine distribution centers will be key to distributing the vaccine to most of the public. Citizens must pre-register through a national online platform or register directly with the center to be selected for vaccination.¹¹ The media is reporting that only 11,000 Syrian and Palestinian refugees are registered with the national vaccine registration portal.¹² Without pre-registering, receiving vaccines from the government will be very difficult. The NDVP states that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and UN High Commission for Refugees will play a major role in the distribution of vaccines to Palestinian and Syrian refugees respectively, but they are not mandated, or disposed towards, the purchase of vaccines.

There is also a question of what role the private sector and civil society might play in the distribution process. The head of the National Vaccine Committee stated that it is likely that philanthropic organizations in Lebanon's civil society would be needed to help reach desired vaccine targets.¹³ The NDVP states that NGOs will need to play a role in helping people through the registration platform and advocate for vaccination, but do not mention NGO involvement in the distribution process.¹⁴

Anera Lebanon reports that 14,905 vaccines have been administered to date in the country.

COVID-19 Infection Rates

Active caseloads in Gaza and the West Bank are creeping back up after significant declines at the end of January, with nearly 11,000 overall infected persons.¹⁵ New infection rates, while significantly lower than in December, are on the rise, with more than 1,000 new cases reported each day in the past two days.

Several international COVID-19 monitors report that the caseload in Lebanon has also decreased. Cases spiked in mid-January, some days reaching over 6,000 new daily cases. That number has declined to under 2,000 as of February 21, but it is still in flux. Anera field office staff report that deaths are on the decline, with the previous weekly deaths falling by 30%.

¹¹ [Lebanon National Deployment and Vaccination Plan \(NDVP\) for COVID-19](#)

¹² [Al Jazeera: Lebanon Begins Vaccination](#)

¹³ Al Jazeera Video, [Lebanon Kicks off Vaccination](#)

¹⁴ Exact Language: "8.4. Role of NGOs and Municipalities: NGOs and municipalities to play a vital role in their communities to facilitate registration on platform and encourage vaccination especially in rural areas in the country."

¹⁵ [WorldOMeters: Palestine COVID-19 cases](#)

While the situation has improved in Lebanon, COVID has placed a great strain on healthcare systems. Intensive care unit space and ventilators are in extremely high demand, though a decreasing caseload is easing the pressure.¹⁶ Health facilities continue to struggle staying stocked with personal protective equipment (PPE) for their healthcare workers who are treating infected patients and those with chronic conditions. They report needing tens of thousands of liters of antiseptics and hundreds of thousands of medical wear items. They also include on their needs lists the bronchodilators and anti-viral drugs that they require to keep infected patients in stable condition.

Anera's Response

Anera is working to deliver much needed medicines and medical equipment to Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon through coordinated shipments with our partners, including International Health Partners (UK), Direct Relief, MedWish, Relief International, Americares and Health Partners International of Canada. These include an assortment of PPE items, including masks, face shields, gloves, protective coveralls, and isolation gowns. Our country offices also continue to work on public health messaging around COVID infection prevention and vaccines.

Anera is also contributing to the vaccine distribution process through a fundraising campaign to procure vaccines for 20,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon from the ages of 50 to 64.

¹⁶ [ReliefWeb: OPT COVID SitRep January 14-28](#)