

Current major event

COVID-19 situation in the Region during 2021

For the second year of the pandemic, COVID-19 continued to impact all countries in the Region and worldwide. More than 12 million cases and 194 245 deaths were reported from the 22 countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region with a case-fatality ratio (CFR) of 1.8%.

Editorial note

In 2021, countries in the Region experienced an increase in reported cases and deaths related to COVID-19. The total of 12 219 208 confirmed cases represented more than double the number reported in 2020, which stood at 4 941 451. A higher number of deaths was also reported compared to the previous year (194 245 in 2021 compared to 121 488 in 2020). However, the CFR reported was lower in 2021 (1.8%) compared to 2020 (2.5%), which is partially attributed to widespread vaccination coverage, better case management and the higher availability of supportive treatment in terms of oxygen supply.

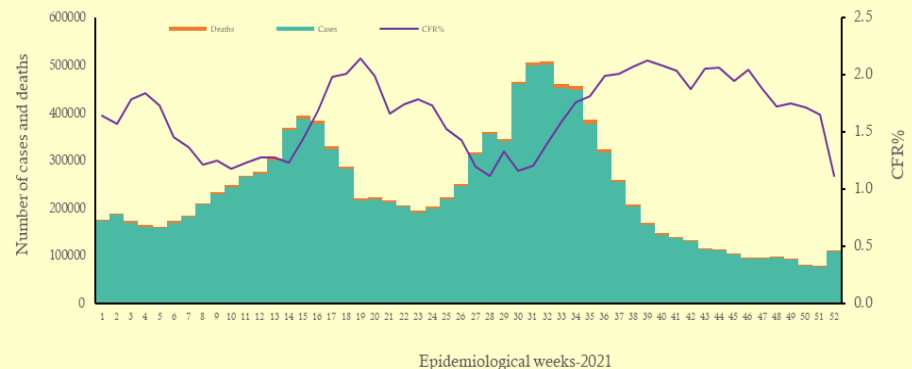
Two waves of the pandemic were observed in 2021 across the Region (see graph). The first wave started in epi-week 5 and gradually increased till it reached its peak in week 15 at 387 375 reported cases. The implementation of strict public health and social measures by the countries resulted in a steady decline afterwards. The second wave started around week 24 peaking in week 32 when the highest recorded number of cases reached 501 055. The Delta variant was the main reason behind the second wave.

In 2021, Islamic Republic of Iran continued to witness the highest burden of COVID-19 in the Region (4 957 929 cases; 40% of the Region's total), followed by Iraq (1 496 858; 12.2%) and Pakistan (809 893; 7.5%). Regarding disease mortality figures, Islamic Republic of Iran also reported the highest number of total associated deaths (76 201) followed by Tunisia (20 786) and Pakistan (18 630). The highest CFRs were reported by Yemen (17.12%) followed by Sudan (8.2%), while the lowest CFRs were reported by United Arab Emirates (0.27%), Qatar (0.35%) and Bahrain (0.55%).

In terms of testing, a total of 224 212 249 laboratory PCR tests were conducted in 2021 across the Region including 5 537 220 tests in week 52, which shows a 9.6% increase compared to the previous week when 5 053 882 tests were conducted. The highest number of PCR tests were reported from United Arab Emirates (224 million), followed by Islamic Republic of Iran (34.4 million) and Saudi Arabia (22.1 million). The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are performing the highest rates of testing per capita. The average positivity rate for the Region is 5.8% (see table).

In terms of laboratory capacities, 15 countries reported having domestic genome sequencing capabilities to detect SARS-CoV-2 variants of

Weekly distribution of confirmed COVID-19 cases, deaths and CFR, Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2021



SARS-CoV-2 VOCs in the EMR, 2020-2021

Variant of concern (VOC)	First date of reporting	Number of countries
Alpha (B.1.1.7)	14 Dec 2020	21
Beta (B.1.351)	24 Jan 2021	18
Gamma (B.1.1.28)	28 Jan 2021	6
Delta (B.1.617.2)	20 April 2021	18
Omicron (B.1.1.529)	1 Dec 2021	14

concern (VOC). The other 7 countries received WHO support to sequence abroad and are receiving support to strengthen local sequencing capacity using MiniOn technology.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 vaccination continues to progress across the Region. The total number of doses administered so far in the 22 countries is 537 963 306. Pakistan has administered the highest number of doses at 156 623 021, followed by Islamic Republic of Iran at 119 325 720 and Egypt at 56 694 353. On the other hand, the total number of administered doses in Djibouti is 133 933 and in Yemen is 659 712. Seven countries succeeded to vaccinate more than 40% of their target population, while five countries are still falling behind with less than 10% of target population fully vaccinated.

Since the start of the pandemic, a total of five variants of concern (VOC) were reported across the Region. Among these VOCs, four were reported during 2021 (see table). Cases due to the Delta variant were reported to be severe, while Omicron cases showed high transmissibility. In total, 14 countries in the Region are reporting Omicron variant to date.

WHO has continued to provide support to the countries to enhance national response to COVID-19 health challenges through the strengthening of capacities for surveillance, laboratory, clinical management, infection prevention and control (IPC), and risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) in order to improve detection and response capacities. WHO also assisted the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing kits, conducted online trainings, and accelerate research and development through the solidarity trials and unity studies to help test and develop therapeutics, diagnostics and vaccines.

Update on outbreaks in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

COVID-19 in 22 EMR countries

Current public health events of concern [cumulative N° of cases (deaths), CFR %]

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): 2019–2022

Afghanistan	[158 156 (7361), 4.7%]
Bahrain	[282 677 (1394), 0.5%]
Djibouti	[13 668 (189), 1.4%]
Egypt	[386 358 (21 768), 5.6%]
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	[6 195 403 (131 639), 2.1%]
Iraq	[2 093 891 (24 163), 1.2%]
Jordan	[1 064 277 (12 684), 1.2%]
Kuwait	[417 723 (2468), 0.6%]
Lebanon	[731 288 (9136), 1.2%]
Libya	[389 650 (5722), 1.5%]
Morocco	[965 420 (14 851), 1.5%]
occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)	[470 658 (4942), 1.1%]
Oman	[305 710 (4116), 1.3%]
Pakistan	[1 296 527 (28 941), 2.2%]
Qatar	[251 361 (618), 0.2%]
Saudi Arabia	[557 082 (8878), 1.6%]
Somalia	[23 532 (1333), 5.7%]
Sudan	[46 988 (3337), 7.1%]
Syrian Arab Republic	[50 310 (2901), 5.8%]
Tunisia	[728 260 (25 586), 3.5%]
United Arab Emirates	[764 493 (2165), 0.3%]
Yemen	[10 127 (1984), 19.6%]