



# HUMANITARIAN BULLETIN #5

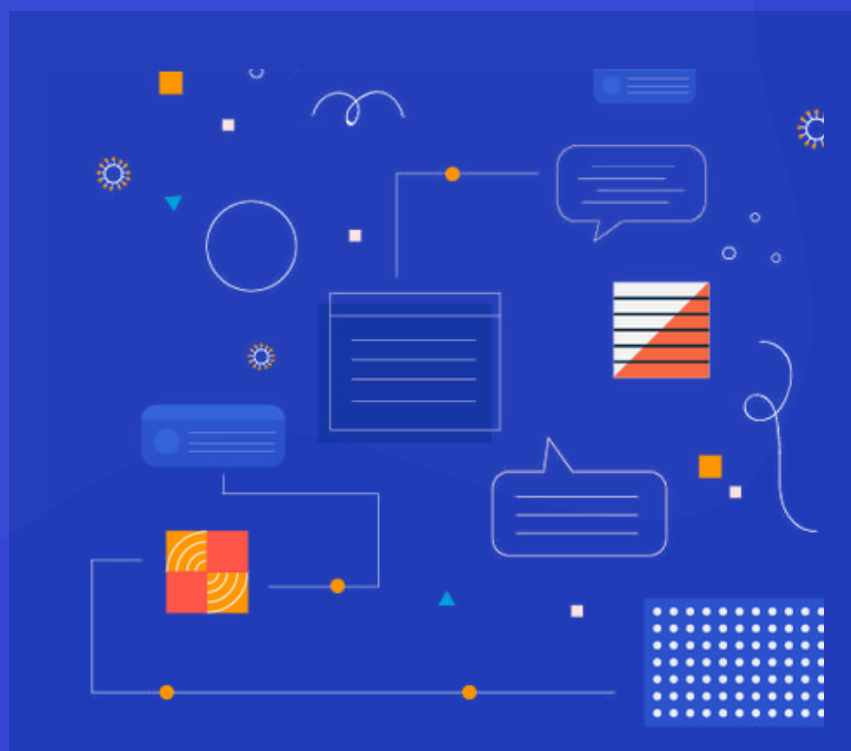
▶ Lebanon 1 to 30 April 2022

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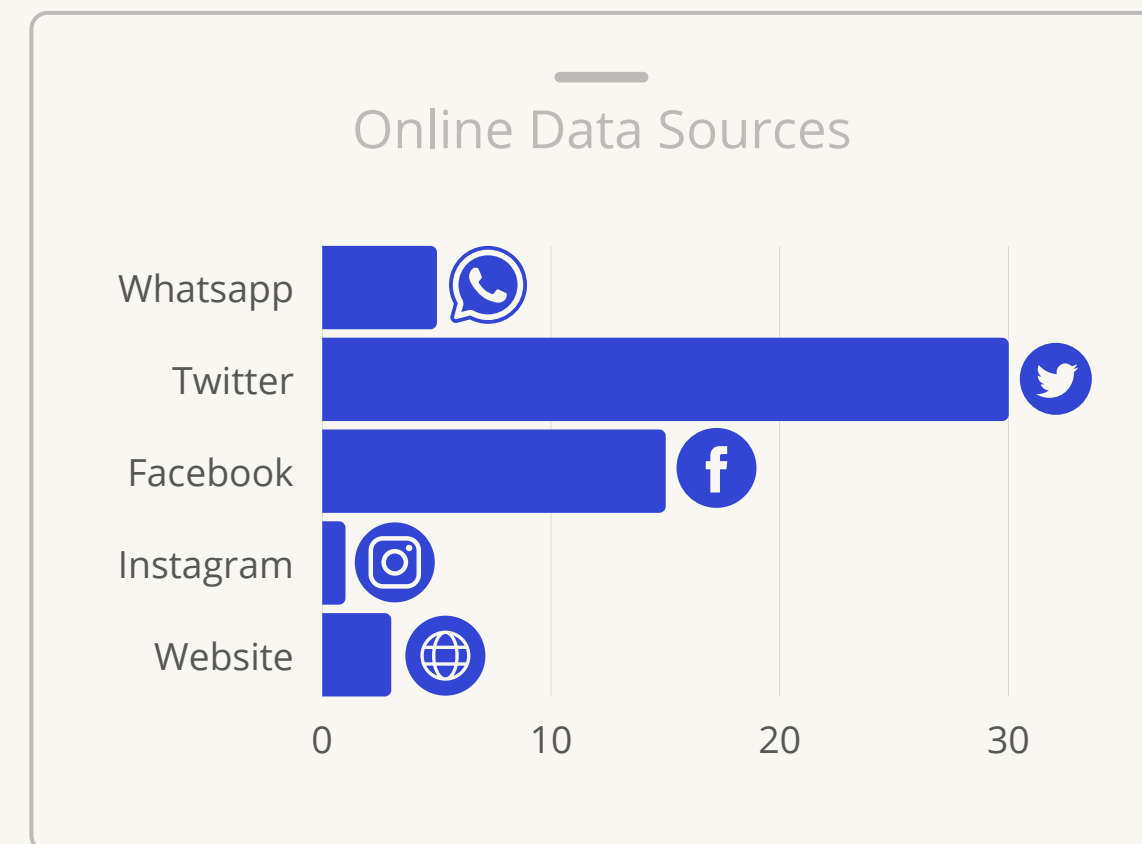
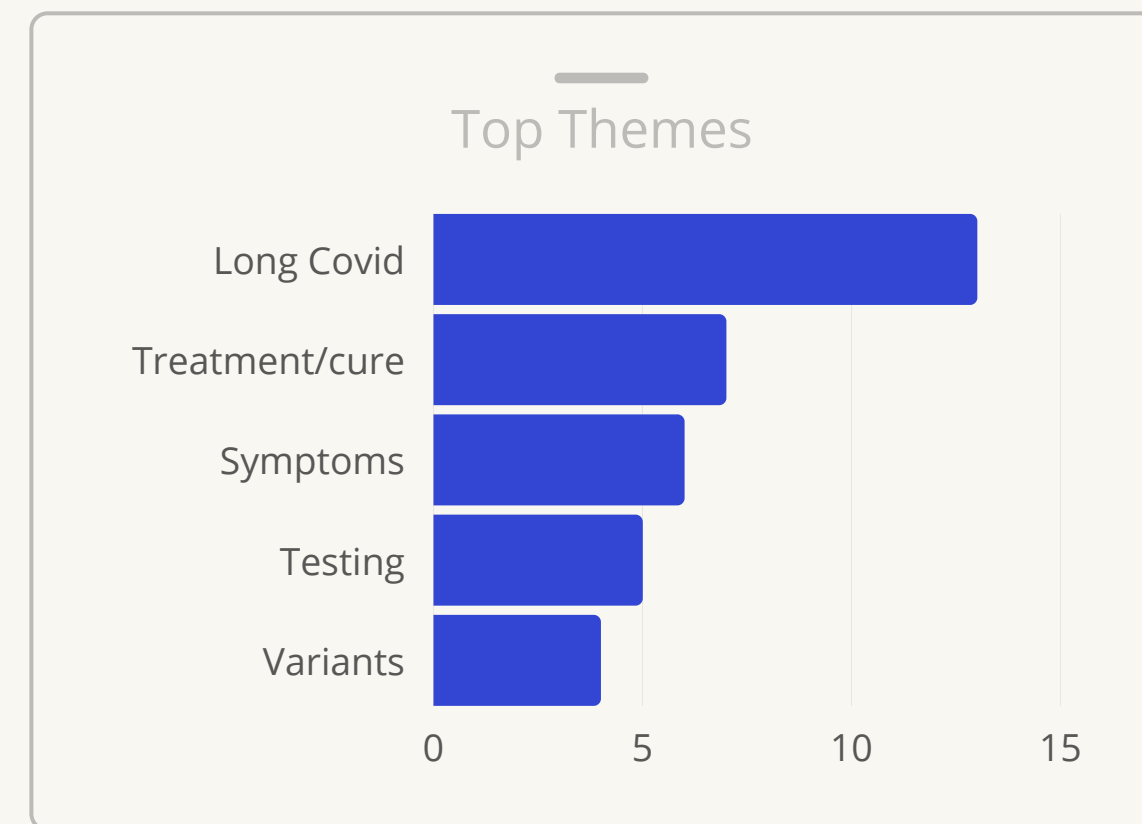


## Introduction to Rooted in Trust

Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA)-funded project run by Internews to support humanitarian and public health agencies combat and manage the spread of rumors and misinformation about COVID-19. The first chapter (RiT1) ran from October 2020 to February 2021 with more than 2,774 rumors collected in Lebanon. (1) The project was recently re-launched in September 2021 with its second chapter (RiT2.0) expected to run until end of 2022. In this bulletin, Internews profiles commonly occurring rumors across social media sites and offline through our partners' activities in Lebanon between 1 and 31 April 2022. During this period, 52 rumors were collected from Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram, in addition to private groups and accounts that have a relatively high user engagement. An additional 224 rumors were collected offline through aimed activities conducted by our partners, with the goal of reaching populations and groups that are less active online and who get their rumors through word of mouth. Two unique rumors were subsequently selected for this bulletin which fall under the recurring themes of "COVID-19 Vaccines" and "long COVID".


 **54 Online Rumors**

 **224 Offline Rumors**



# Covid-19 Snapshot LEBANON

115 New Cases 

10,383 Deaths 

5,602,398 Doses 



## COVID-19 SITUATION & SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT IN LEBANON

Lebanon has seen 3,825 new cases over the period spanning the 10th till the 29th of April, with one new death, (2) and with the virus spreading more prominently among young adults aged 20 to 29. (3) Lebanon is currently situated in Level 2 of community transmission. (4) High vigilance continues to be recommended with a focus on abiding by public health and social measures and increased vaccine coverage. (5)

The complex crisis in the country is having severe impacts on access to necessities for all populations, especially marginalized groups. As of 2021, over 80% of people in Lebanon, (6) including Syrian and Palestinian refugee households, are living under multidimensional poverty. Deprivation is rampant across areas including healthcare, electricity, water, sanitation, transportation, connectivity, and means of income.

The situation has led to a crisis in the quality and accessibility of healthcare. Access to medicines and basic medical services is deteriorating due to import shortages and lack of fuel for transportation and electric function in hospitals. There is a general decrease in vaccination due to transportation hardships and reduced access to services, risking the spread of vaccine-preventable disease in the country, as a threat of a measles outbreak is beginning in the region. (7)

Vaccine roll-out now includes people of all nationalities living in Lebanon, including Syrians, Palestinians, and migrant workers, even if their residency documents are not up to date. Children under the age of 11 years old are still excluded from COVID-19 vaccinations.

Sohatona App 



Efforts are being made to stop vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks in Lebanon. The Sohatana app is the first vaccination platform designed to help keep parents and caregivers well informed on their children's immunization and ensure their timely follow up on upcoming essential routine vaccines, provided for free in sponsored centers, as per the national immunization calendar. The app is available free of charge in Arabic language for all types of smartphones. It collects no personal information about the users. (8)

**Demonstration video of the app & how it works:**

**<https://youtu.be/wwfbJoX6HfE> (Available in Arabic with English subtitles)**

01.

## COVID-19 Vaccines

“As of late, as we saw in the media, it turned out that the American embassy had provided the Moderna vaccine, but it was expired and arrived in Lebanon on January 9, 2022.”

”



Shared by the prior Minister of Public Health (following: 1.8 million) on twitter with a high engagement of 7,852 views

## What's behind the rumor?

■ ■ □ Medium Risk

This rumor is likely politically driven considering the approaching elections, where some political candidates might be spreading misinformation to gain votes and attention. Hamad Hassan, the above-mentioned politician who is spreading the rumor, is the prior Health Minister. He could be trying to discredit Dr. Firas Al Abiad, who is affiliated with the opposing political group, and who is the current Minister of Public Health. As of 19 December 2021, Dr Firas Al Abiad was coordinating with the embassy of the USA to receive 2 shipments of vaccines: 336,000 of Johnson & Johnson to arrive first, and 277,340 doses of the Moderna vaccine to arrive later that week in December. (9)

Hamad Hassan could also be aiming to take advantage of existing anti-American sentiments for the approaching elections, which will lead to more support for his group. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, this same politician was trying to endorse and push for importing SPUTNIK, the Russian vaccine as opposed to vaccines manufactured by other countries for political reasons as well, indicating a pattern. This behavior has proved increasingly harmful, as it has prompted the creation of a fake parody Twitter account of the former Health Minister Hamad Hassan that spreads rumors under his name. (10)





## Fact check

The U.S. Government COVID-19 vaccine donations were made possible thanks to close coordination between the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health, namely Minister Firas Abiad, UNICEF, the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Lebanon, the US government has allocated over \$55 million dollars to COVID-related assistance to mitigate the spread of the virus in Lebanon, focusing in particular on vulnerable Lebanese. (11)

Moderna has approved the extension of the shelf life of the Spikevax vaccine (also known as Moderna vaccine) when it has been stored at freezing temperature (-25°C to -15°C), and frozen vials of Moderna vaccine manufactured before February 2022 can be stored for 9 months instead of only 7 months. (12) This decision has been approved by WHO (13) as well as other agencies such as the U.K.'s Health Security Agency. (14)

On March 1, 2022, the media office of the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health issued a statement about this incident, in which it states that the Ministry is strict in using the donated vaccines within the validity period that has been extended by two additional months, so that it has become nine months from the date of production, according to what was approved by the European Medicines Agency and the US Food and Drug Administration. The two agencies confirmed that the vaccine within this period remains safe, stable, and effective. (15)

In some instances when there is an incoming shipment of COVID-19 vaccines, the MoPH (Ministry of Public Health) can decide to delay the shipment to keep the vaccines preserved in their home country and prevent them from being subjected to poor storage conditions in Lebanon due to electricity shortages. This is done when there is still a large number of vaccines in circulation waiting to be administered, so that the locally available stock is consumed. (16)

The quality monitoring process around vaccinations is a rigorous, multifaceted process which involves multiple actors who have it in their best individual interest to hold each other accountable, and this would prevent a shipment of expired or unsafe vaccines.



## Why does it matter?

This medium risk rumor matters because it was spread by a trusted official politician (the ex-Minister of Public Health) with an online following of 1.8 million people of all nationalities living in Lebanon. It stems from fears around “American propaganda” and politically driven sentiments. It is considered medium risk because it drives a high level of distrust among populations and increases vaccine hesitancy, as well as fuels political tensions between supporters of the two opposing parties.

## Recommendations

- When sharing COVID-19 and other health-related content, it is important to endorse ideas and not people, and that is especially true when it comes to politicians. In this case, when sharing MoPH materials, it is important to make it clear to people that they get their information from the official MoPH platforms, not the personal platforms of any current or prior Health Minister.
- Work on increasing communication targeted towards the communities that are still highly influenced by the prior Health Minister and directing them to verified and trusted health resources.
- This can be done by giving these communities trainings on how to recognize fake news, and making handy brochures or visual material around this topic in accessible and local language that can be disseminated easily both online and offline in the gathering spaces of these communities. The following toolkit can be used:  
<https://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/fake-news-and-social-stability.html>
- Raise awareness on how locally, misinformation is often weaponized for political gain, especially during times of important historical events such as elections. (17)

02.

## LONG COVID

"Russian immunologist Dr. Nikolai Kryuchkov:  
"Thrombosis can develop in patients with  
Covid-19, even after several months of  
recovery. And this will not be just a clot, but it  
can be accompanied by a stroke, heart attack  
or pulmonary embolism."

”



Shared on the News 24/7 website, which averaged 1.2 million total visits for the website in the month of April

## What's behind the rumor?

■ ■ □ Medium Risk

As seen in the previous bulletin as well as through our data collection process, there is a rising trend in rumors that cite Russian professionals being spread. The rumor themes under this trend range from saying COVID-19 is a hoax, to spreading misinformation about symptoms, long COVID-19, and vaccines.

In an increasingly globalized world, the Syrian community in Lebanon is not isolated from misinformation being spread elsewhere in the world, especially with the Russia-Ukraine conflict affecting aspects of day-to-day life for people in Lebanon –especially refugees- such as a shortage in bread and other items previously imported heavily from Ukraine and Russia.

This could be prompting communities to follow news about Russia and Ukraine more closely to stay up to date to any promising developments that the situation might be resolved, or to know what to expect and what to do if things got worse. Consequently, communities are more exposed to rumors from these countries, especially when we take into consideration that conflict situations and instability makes ground for the increasing spread of different rumors, including COVID-19 rumors.





## Fact check

A study from Sweden published by The BMJ today finds an increased risk of deep vein thrombosis (a blood clot in the leg) up to three months after covid-19 infection, pulmonary embolism (a blood clot in the lung) up to six months, and a bleeding event up to two months. (18)

Risks were highest in patients with more severe covid-19 and during the first pandemic wave compared with the second and third waves, which the researchers say could be explained by improvements in treatment and vaccine coverage in older patients after the first wave. (19)

Mainly, patients who are seriously ill with COVID-19 are more likely to be affected. Risk factors include old age, obesity, and diabetes mellitus. More specific risk factors are likely to be already-damaged blood vessels. (20)



Scientific organizations generally recommend anticoagulants for COVID-19 patients being treated in hospital, particularly those in intensive care – and, of course, for patients who have experienced thrombosis before. (21)

Dr. Nikolai Kryuchkov, URA.ru immunologist and candidate of medical sciences, who the above rumor is referring to, clarified that there are three categories of people at risk of developing these complications– older people, people with chronic diseases and those who have suffered from a severe case of COVID-19, especially if they are unable to access medical care. (22)

## Recommendations

- Raise awareness on Thrombosis as a COVID-19 side effect through both online activities such as sharing informational content in accessible language, and offline activities such as awareness sessions to reach the biggest possible base of people.
- Support vaccination efforts among vulnerable communities by providing transportation for people to get to and from vaccination centers, enhancing mobile vaccination units across Lebanon, especially in rural areas and refugee camps. Vaccinated people have less risk of developing a severe COVID-19 infection, therefore less risk of thrombosis
- Given that the long-term impacts of COVID-19 are still being defined, providing information on what we know so far about the virus's medium to long-term impacts is a critical component of keeping people informed.
- Provide support and assistance to recovering patients who suffer from 'long COVID' symptoms, or side-effects that take a long time to manifest such as thrombosis, through systematizing constant follow-up loops in your health response and referring them to available services you know of.

## Why does it matter?

This medium risk rumor matters because Thrombosis is a potentially life-threatening yet not widely known side-effect of COVID-19, and it can be mitigated with simple measures. Thrombosis can manifest early on during COVID-19 infection where a person is more likely to be receiving medical attention, but it can also manifest a while after a person tests negative and can go unnoticed if they do not know about it.

This is dangerous for the Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon, as they are particularly vulnerable to chronic diseases. Many have no access to healthcare, are not able to afford it, and some might not even know they have a chronic illness in the first place. (23) Some populations, including those with low socioeconomic status and those of certain racial and ethnic groups, have a disproportionate burden of chronic disease, including COVID-19 infection, diagnosis, hospitalization, and mortality. (24)

Refugees live in high-density camps with scarce access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene services, which leaves these individuals highly vulnerable during an infectious disease outbreak. According to the non-profit organization Anera, (25) public health interventions have been scarce across refugee camps since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, COVID-19 deaths were elevated among Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, with a fatality rate that is four times and three times the national average, respectively. (26) Therefore, it is important that they take the vaccine because it is a safe and effective way of preventing serious disease or death due to COVID-19.

## Recommendations

- Organize community events in different communities by inviting trusted health professionals and community leaders to shed light and give examples on why some people experience more severe side effects than others.
- Monitor rumors that have the potential to give room to political tensions in communities you work with. Disinformation and misinformation have a huge impact and can be used to mobilize concrete sentiments and actions amongst communities, affecting COVID-19 communication efforts and vaccination initiatives.

# How Do We Define Risk at Internews?

Risk is measured by Rooted In Trust (RiT) data analysts, information managers, and social media monitors based on a range of factors including:

- Cultural relevance
- Timing
- Online engagement
- The "believability" of a rumor, and most importantly...
- The potential negative impact a rumor may have on the health, well-being, and safety of local communities or service provider

## ■ ■ ■ High Risk

A rumor that is very likely to be believed among the larger community with potentially severe impacts resulting in serious harm to an individual or group such as inciting violence or creating widespread fear or panic. High risk rumors may encourage avoidance of testing and treatment, or even harm towards health workers and other service providers.

## ■ ■ □ Medium Risk:

A rumor that has the potential to be believed among the larger community which poses moderate negative impacts to a community or an individual's health, well-being, or safety. Medium risk rumors may also have a moderate impact on health-seeking behaviors.

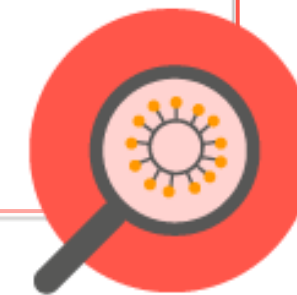
## ■ □ □ Low Risk

A rumor that is either unlikely to be believed among the community or which would cause very minimal negative repercussions if it is spread.



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