

RUMOR BULLETIN #6

FOR HUMANITARIANS | 13 FEBRUARY 2021



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In this bulletin, Internews profiles commonly occurring rumors across social media sites in Lebanon between January 5 and January 31, 2021. Featured rumors focus on false treatment methods and the COVID-19 vaccine. The vaccine rumors can be sub-categorized accordingly:

- The belief that the vaccine's purpose is to kill Muslims;
- Vaccines are being tested on people in the Middle East;
- Sensitivities around vaccine prioritization for certain communities in Lebanon.

Data was collected from Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram pages, groups, and accounts that have a relatively high user engagement. Similar rumors were expressed and identified during five listening groups conducted by Internews and Maharat in January 2021 with Lebanese citizens and refugee communities.

Internews

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.

In Lebanon, Internews works with Maharat Foundation to collect and analyze rumors and misinformation related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 disease.

For more information, or to submit rumors, please contact Internews' Project Coordinator Haley McCain, hmccoin@internews.org



HOW WE DO IT:

The analysis presented here is based on 376 rumors collected by Internews' Rooted in Trust team in Lebanon and the Maharat Foundation between January 5 and January 31, 2021. A social media mapping exercise underpins our qualitative approach to listening by pinpointing where discussions about COVID-19 are happening and highlighting key influencers of information. Feedback highlighted in this bulletin is selected based on a risk assessment matrix that accounts for: the frequency of times the issue was shared, the level of engagement around it, and its potential impact on individuals, the community, and pandemic response services.

COVID-19 SITUATION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), to date there have been 328,016 positive cases of COVID-19 in Lebanon as of February 11, 2021 with 72 percent of the cases impacting people between 20 and 59 years old.(1) Since January 2021, the country has recorded more than 20,000 positive cases per week. This has led to the implementation of a country-wide lockdown from January 14 that was extended to February 22 due to persistently high rates of positive cases. The lockdown, accompanied by one of the most dire economic situations the country has ever faced, sparked demonstrations in late January in Tripoli, a marginalized city with high rates of unemployment. The demonstrations left more than 220 injured and one person dead. (2)

The Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) launched an online platform for COVID-19 vaccine registration on January 28, and an average of 2,000 people are visiting the site every five minutes. The vaccine is expected to reach Lebanon between February 7 and 15 with more doses arriving in March.(3) Additionally, the MOPH confirmed that the COVAX Alliance will send doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine to Lebanon by the end of February. (4)

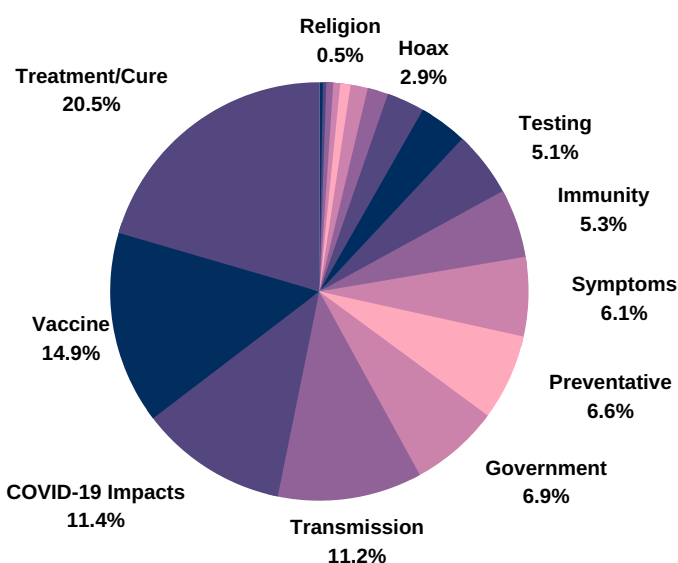


Figure 1: Distribution of 376 rumors by categorized themes

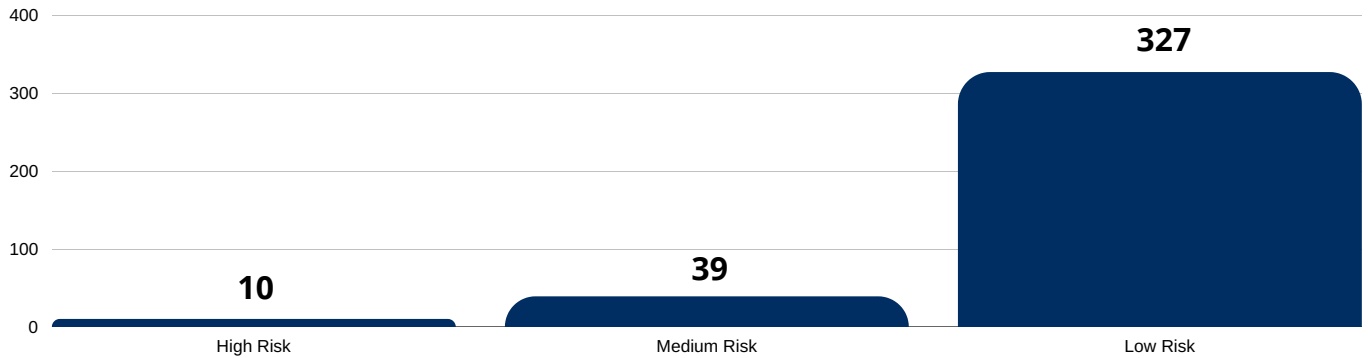


Figure 2: Distribution of 376 rumors by risk

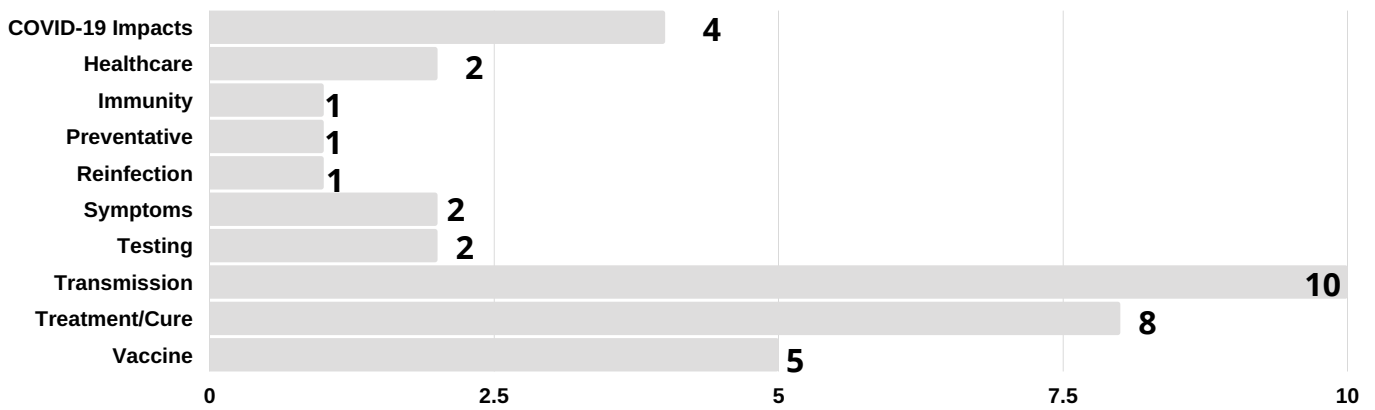


Figure 3: Thematic categorization of 38 rumors posted by Lebanese healthcare professionals during the period analyzed.

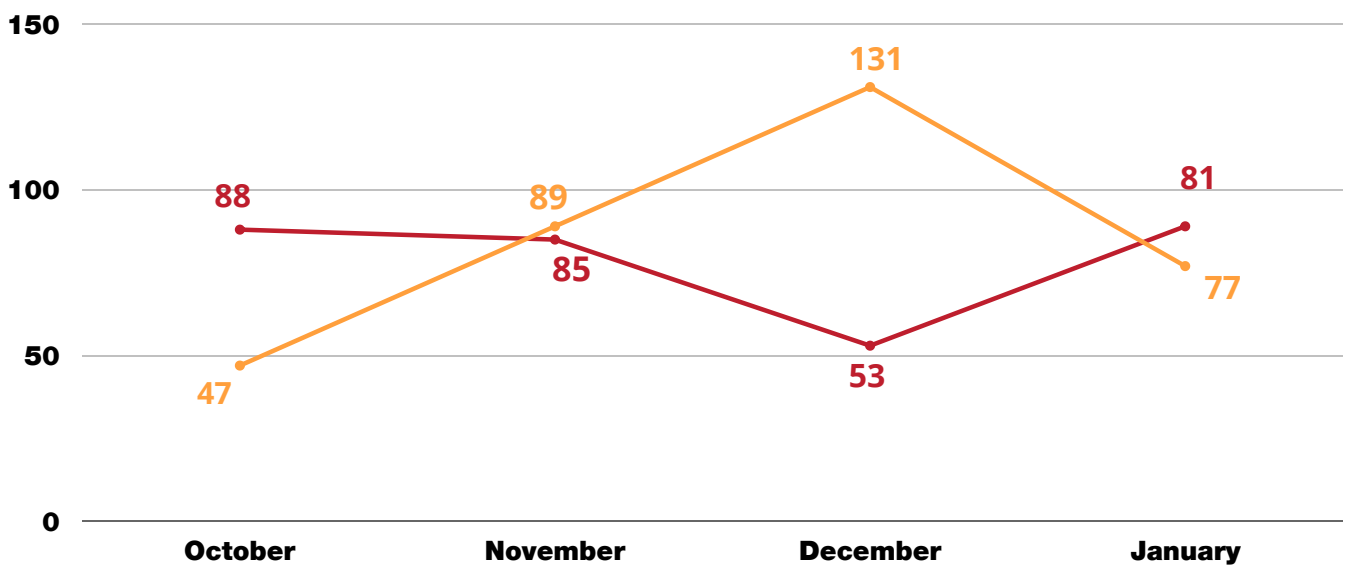


Figure 4: Distribution of 315 Treatment/Cure rumors and 344 vaccine rumors from October 2020-January 2021



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WHAT ARE PEOPLE SAYING?

TREATMENT RUMORS

“A group of German and Swedish scientists discovered that the Fluvastatin drug used to treat hypercholesterolemia can suppress COVID-19.”

Rumor risk level: High
Platform: WhatsApp

“The drug Ivermectin, used for lice, has been proven effective in treating COVID-19.”

Rumor risk level: High
Platform: WhatsApp

“All malaria treatments are effective against COVID-19, with evidence showing that the virus did not spread in Africa because these medications were present in peoples’ bodies. Medications (used to treat Malaria) include Chloroquine, Nivaquine, Quinine, and others.” Posted by a Lebanese man on his twitter account.

Rumor risk level: High
Platform: Twitter

“Good news, a medicine to treat COVID-19 was invented in Nahr al-Bared camp. Dr. Muhammad Adel Amiri, a specialist in chest diseases, revealed that a medicine called “R265” was produced by a herbal medicine expert. This medicine is useful for COVID-19 patients and patients with respiratory problems. It was tested on a large number of patients who recovered.

Rumor risk level: High
Platform: WhatsApp

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The Rooted in trust team has logged false COVID-19 treatment methods since the beginning of rumor tracking in October 2020, with 325 rumors collected in total. While some treatments pose minimal risks to the individual taking them—such as herbal remedies and vitamins—they have been referenced as a viable alternative to medical treatment for severe cases, which could cause harm.

Likewise, Internews identified several high-risk rumors linked to medications, such as those referenced above, which could pose harm to any person who decides to self-medicate without the proper guidance of a certified health professional.

Information that certain medications are not yet approved by the WHO is not known by many people in Lebanon. People are also being confused by conflicting opinions from different doctors suggesting unapproved medicines for treating COVID-19. The media, which is one of the most relied upon sources of information in Lebanon, are also shying away from covering these issues to avoid stockpiling of already limited medicines. Hospitals are operating at full capacity, and many people are unable to find hospital beds or afford hospitalization. This has caused some people to resort to self-medication in an attempt to find relief while staying home.

Many of these medications are becoming scarcer at a time when the country’s economic and public health crises are taking a disproportionate toll on chronically ill patients. Medications such as the antibiotic Azithromycin, Panadol, and vitamins which have been referenced as treatments for COVID-19 are increasingly scarce in Lebanese pharmacies.



HOW CAN HUMANITARIAN ACTORS HELP?

- According to listening groups conducted by Internews and Maharat in January 2021, many people reported that they would trust information shared by WHO or the MOPH. However, they also mentioned not coming across these sources as often as they encountered rumors about COVID-19. The WHO, MOPH, and other health actors involved in the COVID-19 response should proactively disseminate reliable communication materials through social media, TV, WhatsApp channels, and word of mouth, so that fact-checked information can reach the public prior to misinformation.
- Communication from humanitarians should focus on approved treatment methods but also highlight the dangers of self-medicating, especially risks of negative reactions with other prescribed drugs and herbal medications. Communication should encourage communal support rather than individualistic approaches by raising awareness on the risks of stockpiling medications. This can be done by highlighting the stories of patients suffering from severe or chronic illnesses who are unable to find their prescribed life-saving medications in any pharmacies because others stockpiled them in their homes.
- WHO Lebanon or the MOPH should release statements directly referencing and fact checking COVID-19 treatments mentioned on social media as soon as the rumor starts circulating to debunk rumors as swiftly as possible.

For more information about COVID-19 treatment rumors and recommendations, scan the QR code on the last page to read previous bulletins published by Rooted in Trust.



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WHAT ARE PEOPLE SAYING?

VACCINE RUMORS

"A leak from a CIA agent: After the virus failed in bringing the intended results, the world's richest countries agreed to create a vaccine to kill half of the global population."

Rumor risk level: Low
Platform: WhatsApp

"Video of a Tunisian man: Corona vaccine distributed in the West is a vaccine against influenza, and the vaccine that comes to Arab countries is nothing but a poison targeting the nation of Islam."

Rumor risk level: Medium
Platform: Facebook

"They have sent the vaccine to the Middle East so they could test it on us and continue their trials." Mentioned by the Lebanese doctor Dr. Gebran Karnaoui who called on the Minister of Health on a Lebanese TV broadcast to slow down vaccinations until more is known about the side effects. This doctor has continuously advocated for rejecting the vaccine and has proposed several conspiracy theories behind the vaccine's creation.

Rumor risk level: Low
Platform: Facebook

Racism in Lebanon comes even with the Corona vaccine. A number of Lebanese politicians, unfortunately a doctor too, proposed administering the vaccine only to the Lebanese first! After that, it is given to the "strangers," that is, to the Palestinians and Syrians."

Rumor risk level: Medium
Platform: WhatsApp

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The persistence of vaccine-related rumors poses a threat to the vaccine roll out planned for February. Rumors are circulating heavily among different religious and social communities, as well as among marginalized and minority communities. This will likely result in vaccine hesitancy and even blatant rejection by many.

There is increasing distrust in the effectiveness of the vaccine, and a rise in anti-vaccine sentiments not witnessed during previous vaccination campaigns in Lebanon. This sets a dangerous precedent since immunization is one of few viable solutions to limiting the spread of COVID-19, particularly among at-risk and vulnerable groups. According to a report published by Siren Associates, 47 percent of 327 interviewed people in Lebanon are unwilling to take the vaccine. (5)

If not organized and disseminated properly, the vaccination campaign could lead to heightened communal tensions, especially between refugee and host populations. Moreover, trust in medical professionals and scientific institutions leading the vaccination campaign will be undermined if certain health professionals continue to spread unchecked information.

HOW CAN HUMANITARIAN ACTORS HELP?

- As misinformation and rumors continue to circulate on popular television programs, humanitarian actors should engage with local media transparently and proactively to increase their understanding of the vaccine roll-out. As the media plays a direct role in influencing people's perspectives and reaches a large and diverse audience in Lebanon, it is crucial they are aware of all the facts that can enhance the quality and accuracy of the information they broadcast.
- Set up an automated messaging service (or chatbot) on WhatsApp, Facebook, or key informative websites such as the MoPH site, to automatically respond to the public's questions around the vaccine.
- Highlight WHO and MoPH-led vaccination campaigns successfully administered in Lebanon in the past to tackle other deadly diseases such as Polio and Measles.
- Engage in listening groups and focus group discussions to hear and respond to communities' main concerns around the vaccine, while redirecting them to trusted sources and factual information.
- Remain transparent about the progress of the vaccination roll-out, the priority groups, rates and timeline for vaccines to be administered, logistics, as well as the success and challenges faced along the way. This will ensure the population's trust is maintained throughout the process and will contribute to higher vaccine acceptance.



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BULLETINS ABOUT
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****HOW DO WE DEFINE RISK AT INTERNEWS?**

Risk is measured by Rooted In Trust data analysts, information managers, and social media monitors based on a range of factors including: a) cultural relevancy, b) timing, c) online engagement, d) the believability of a rumor, and most importantly, e) the potential negative impact a rumor may have on the health, well-being, and safety of local communities or service providers.

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 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 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 minimal negative repercussions.

SOURCES

- (1) WHO COVID-19 Dashboard Lebanon, <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/lb>
- (2) BBC News, 28 January 2021: Coronavirus: Man killed at protest against Lebanon's total lockdown, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55839957>
- (3) Arab News, 29 January 2021: Lebanon launches online platform for vaccine registration, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1800166/middle-east>
- (4) Hamad Hassan, January 30 2021, Twitter: https://twitter.com/Hamad_hassan20/status/1355567303908331527?s=08&fbclid=IwAR1XvYVrufogvgp690YVj3H3p3pPg-FVBtaS3BaO6yb5Mk43AuTPJPeFw6A
- (5) Siren Analytics, February 2021, COVID-19 VACCINATION IN LEBANON, https://impact.cib.gov.lb/assets/docs/IMPACT_covid_vaccination_brief_2021.pdf



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