



GHD | EMPHNET Newsletter

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Feature Story

Strengthening Health
Systems Resilience in the
Eastern Mediterranean

Spotlight on Public Health Experts

Maj. Gen. Dr. Aamer Ikram

Public Health Issue in Focus

Public Health Research in
the Eastern Mediterranean

Updates

- Training Program for Polio Surveillance Officers in Yemen Shows Positive Outcomes
- Iraq Maintains Efforts to Improve AFP Surveillance Indicators in High-risk Provinces
- Evaluation Assesses Impact of harmonized Reproductive Health Registry Newly Established in Jordan
- Staged Development Tool Assesses NCD Public Health Functions in Jordan, to Be Used Regionally
- SOPs Published in Afghanistan and Libya to Strengthen Biorisk Management



Feature Story

Strengthening Health Systems Resilience in the Eastern Mediterranean

The GHD | EMPHNET Commitment

In the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, GHD|EMPHNET supported countries in their efforts to strengthen health system resilience in the face of the ongoing pandemic and in preparation for existing risks of health emergencies. While working with regional and global partners and with a strategic focus on SDG3 and Universal Health Coverage, our support fell into core areas of building/strengthening health systems resilience.

Workforce Development

With support from GHD|EMPHNET, different modalities of the Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP) were established to increase the number of health workers qualified in core epidemiological capacities. The intermediate, one-year program was introduced in Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia. The basic, three-month modality was launched in Morocco and Tunisia, and new cohorts were launched in Egypt and Iraq. Several of these trainees were also deployed in the field to support response, especially in countries affected by humanitarian crises, such as Afghanistan and Yemen.

A Learning Management System was launched where free, self-paced online courses are offered in risk communication, rapid response teams, and more in multiple languages.

The International Academy of Public Health, an accredited training body designed to support workforce development in the EMR was launched.

Surveillance and Information Systems

GHD|EMPHNET is promoting the use of different types of surveillance for communicable and non-communicable diseases: **laboratory-based** surveillance for brucellosis in Jordan, **hospital-based** surveillance for meningitis in Iraq, and **health information systems** for NCD surveillance at the regional level. GHD|EMPHNET is continuing its support to Iraq in the real-time surveillance of one of the largest mass gatherings worldwide, the *Arbaeen*. And according to a recent evaluation, the harmonized Reproductive Health Registry (hRHR), which GHD|EMPHNET helped establish in Mafraq, Jordan, to improve child and maternal health data, has shown positive results.

Laboratory Systems

GHD|EMPHNET is supporting Libya in standardizing SOPs of biomedical waste management and Afghanistan in implementing SOPs for handling, transportation, packaging, labeling and disposal of biological samples; and safe storage and disposal of chemical reagents. In a multi-country project, GHD|EMPHNET is working with partners to implement scalable, sustainable systems for sample inventory and security for high-risk laboratories in Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia.

In Iraq, with a focus on newly liberated provinces, GHD|EMPHNET is supporting training of Iraqi laboratories staff on treating, securing, and safely disposing biomedical waste which is an important component to mitigate risks of misusing the waste into Biological Weapons (BW).

Research

GHD|EMPHNET focused on supporting research to inform program implementation. In Jordan, it conducted three operational research studies with the aim of increasing the understanding of tuberculosis (TB) and HIV/AIDS burden in the country and to improve the efficiency of the current surveillance system. To improve sexual and reproductive health service use among adolescent girls and young women refugees in Jordan, GHD|EMPHNET supported the development of a psychosocial-SRH infused intervention package which has been translated and adapted to the context of refugees and will soon be disseminated in various mediums. GHD|EMPHNET continues to publish its research and support research dissemination for Field Epidemiology Training Programs and other public health entities.

Service Delivery

A core area is strengthening polio and routine immunization programs in the region, focusing on strengthening surveillance, logistics, advocacy and communication, and the delivery of immunization services. GHD|EMPHNET's efforts targeted Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, and Sudan.



Spotlight on Public Health Experts

Maj. Gen. Dr. Aamer Ikram Named Incoming Chairperson of TEPHINET Advisory Board

The Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET) congratulates Pakistan Field Epidemiology and Laboratory Training Program (FELTP) Director Maj. Gen. Dr. Aamer Ikram for being elected as the incoming Chair of the Advisory Board of TEPHINET.

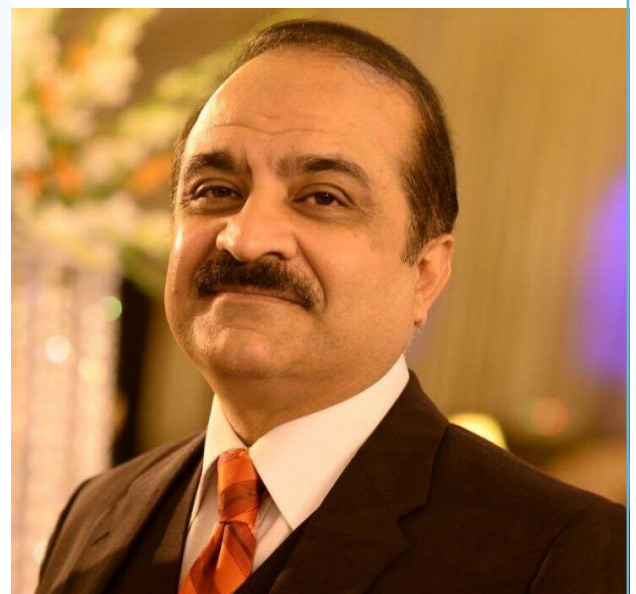
The Advisory Board of TEPHINET works to evaluate and support the duties and functions of the network with the support of the Secretariat. In coordination with the Secretariat, the Advisory Board also advises on technical aspects of the network's duties. It is informed of the annual budget, and actively carries out the network's purposes and objectives.

The Advisory Board is composed of at least one representative from each region as well as the director of TEPHINET and representative members from the following organizations namely: World Health Organization (WHO), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). The board's chairperson is elected by members of the network and serves for a three-year term.

Maj. Gen. Dr. Aamer Ikram brings a wealth of experience to his new designation, he holds a PhD in Molecular Biology, and he is a Registered Biosafety Professional from the American Biological Safety Association, a Biosafety Professional from the Institute of Safety in Technology and Research (UK), and an IFBA Certified Professional. Furthermore, he was awarded FRCP by the Royal College of Edinburgh; FRCPath by the Royal College of Pathologists in London; and a Fellowship in Public Health from Royal Colleges UK in 2018.

Dr. Aamer Ikram was also recently elected as a Fellow in the Pakistan Academy of Sciences. He also brings to this position, a vast experience in leadership, gained from serving as the President of the Pakistan Biological Safety Association (PBSA); Ex-President of the Medical Microbiology & Infectious Diseases Society (MMIDSP); Higher Education Commission Focal Point of Expertise for Medical Research, and Convener of Microbiology Pakistan Health Research Council, and he is currently the Executive Director of the National Institute of Health Pakistan, and the Director of the Pakistan FELTP.

The EMPHNET team and the region's FETP family extend heartfelt congratulations to Maj. Gen. Dr. Aamer Ikram for this notable designation and wish him further success and advancement in his future endeavors.





Public Health Issue in Focus

Public Health Research in the Eastern Mediterranean

GHD | EMPHNET's Contribution

GHD|EMPHNET supports the Eastern Mediterranean Region in increasing its share of public health research by conducting in-person and online training, providing technical support for researchers, sponsoring mini-grants, implementing operational research projects, and offering opportunities for research dissemination and collaboration.

Focusing on trainees and professionals affiliated with Field Epidemiology Training Programs, GHD|EMPHNET empowers the public health workforce in epidemiological and statistical methods, scientific writing, and the use of statistical software. In the last few years, over 200 trainees of Field Epidemiology Training Programs from the region participated in scientific writing workshops, organized with support from GHD|EMPHNET.

Also with support from GHD|EMPHNET, over 125 research papers were published by Field Epidemiology Training Programs in priority areas from different countries in the last few years. The most notable is a collection of 36 teaching case studies developed by these programs, which have been also compiled as an e-learning book, the first of its kind in the region.

From the EMPHNET Regional Conference, several proceedings have been published, and so have many of the abstracts presented at the conference over the years.

To promote collaboration in research, GHD|EMPHNET formed regional research groups whose papers have been published in reputable and high-ranking journals. And to share its extensive and growing experience in the field, GHD|EMPHNET publishes operational research, position papers, and viewpoint documents on priority public health areas.

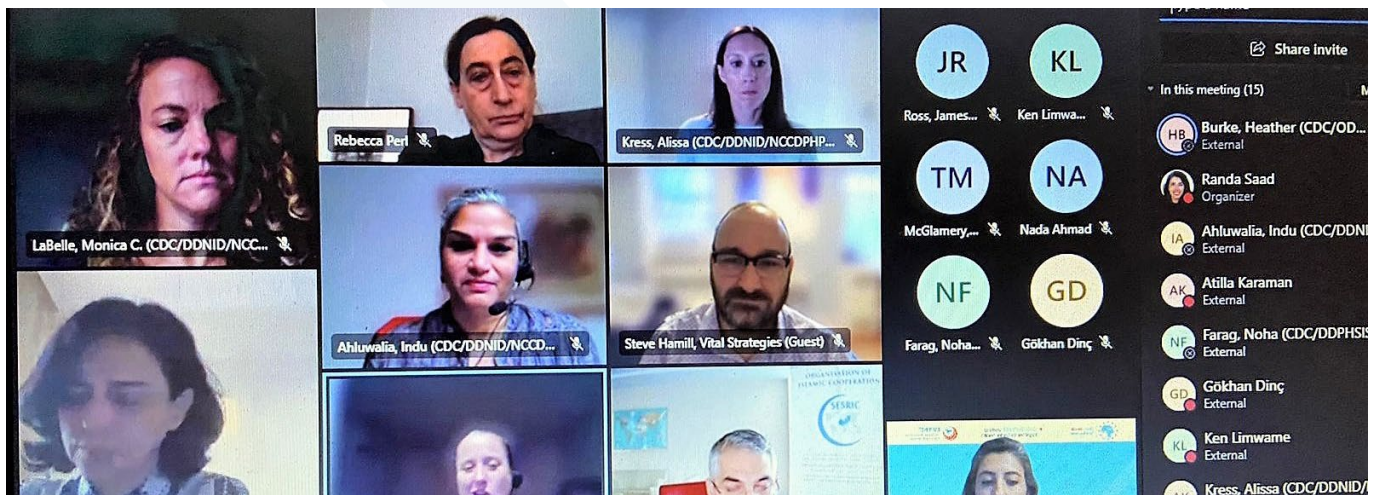
Since its establishment over ten years ago, GHD|EMPHNET implemented numerous operational research projects, focusing on the use of innovative technologies in support of public health programs implementation in maternal and child health, family planning, sexual and reproductive health, mass gatherings, animal health, non-communicable diseases, and infectious diseases like tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS.

Working in support of countries in the region and in collaboration with partners from multiple sectors, GHD|EMPHNET will continue to contribute to public health research in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.



Innovative Communication Used to Increase Demand for Immunization

To communicate awareness on the benefits of vaccines to the Afghani population, especially the majority who live in rural areas with minimal access to media, innovative and culturally acceptable interventions are being used to generate demand for immunization. The Ministry of Public Health, with support from GHD|EMPHNET, is engaging religious leaders and community elders in building trust in immunization services and creating demand for immunization services. Orientation sessions are being held for 200 religious leaders and community elders.



Data-Driven Risk Messaging Used Against Smoking During the Pandemic

Smoking and COVID 19: Data-Driven Risk Messaging is a project that will be implemented in four countries: **Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine**, to raise awareness of the harms of smoking, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic through developing country-tailored and culturally appropriate media messages to disseminate, educate, and promote smoking cessation to reduce morbidity and mortality from the virus. The project will be implemented by ministries of health in the aforementioned countries with support from GHD|EMPHNET and Vital Strategies.

Training Program for Polio Surveillance Officers in Yemen Shows Positive Outcomes

Since 2017, GHD|EMPHNET, in collaboration with international and regional partners, has supported the Ministry of Public Health and Population (MOPHP) in Yemen in building the workforce capacity of its Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI). Together, they established the Public Health Empowerment Program for Surveillance Officers (PHEP-SPO) to increase the technical capacity of polio and EPI staff to support national efforts in maintaining Yemen as a polio-free country and in strengthening Acute Flaccid Paralysis (AFP) surveillance. The PHEP-SPO targets governorate and district staff working in surveillance data collection, compilation, reporting, and response.

A recent independent evaluation of the program has been conducted to explore the effectiveness and impact of the program on its participants. The findings shared showed that the program achieved promising outcomes evident in the improvement as perceived by the trainees in relevant knowledge, skills, and performance post PHEP-SPO training and the satisfaction of the different stakeholders and trainees with PHEP approaches, design, and methods. The evaluation also offered recommendations to enhance the program in needed areas: (1) Increasing financial support (2) Conducting refresher training workshops for previous trainees (3) Improving coordination among the program's organizers and (3) institutionalizing the program within the MOPHP.



Supplement Published on COVID-19 Applied Research in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

GHD|EMPHNET is pleased to announce the publication of a research supplement in the Journal of Public Health titled "[COVID-19 Applied Research in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.](#)" The supplement contains original papers developed by the GHD|EMPHNET Regional COVID-19 Research Group. It covers different aspects of the COVID-19 response efforts carried out in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Yemen Invests in Supportive Supervision to Improve Immunization Coverage

In Yemen, the Ministry of Public Health and Population (MOPHP) is investing in supportive supervision (SS) for immunization workers to address relevant challenges resulting from the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the country. With support from GHD|EMPHNET, the MOPHP is implementing SS starting with the governorates around Aden.

After reviewing and updating the supervisory checklist, the MOPHP conducted a TOT training on SS for provincial and national supervisors. These supervisors later trained supervisors at the district level from Aden and its neighboring governorates: one workshop in Aden and another workshop in Mukala. The two workshops targeted the districts EPI supervisors from the twelve governorates.

The MOPHP will be extending this investment in SS in Sana'a in the coming months.



Afghanistan Produces SOPs to Implement Biosafety and Biosecurity Practices

GHD|EMPHNET worked with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) of Afghanistan in building capacities for handling, transportation, packaging, labeling and disposal of biological samples; and safe storage and disposal of chemical reagents for purposes of reducing biological threats. This collaboration focused on producing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on which relevant staffs are trained (1) to reduce access to dangerous infectious agents, laboratory agents and other materials and (2) to contribute to the development of more effective public health systems in biosafety and biosecurity measures implementation in field and laboratory practices.

While these SOPs contain general, yet fundamental instructions on handling and disposing of chemical waste generated at the MOPH and MAIL Laboratories, they provide more specific instruction on handling, packaging, labeling, and transporting infectious substances from the field to central and other national laboratories.

These SOPs are available in English, Dari, and Pashto.

Stakeholders Advocate for Law Implementation to Reduce Salt Intake in Iraq

As part of its work with governments to strengthen the prevention and control of NCDs with focus on advocating for national policy changes to create an enabling environment that promotes and reinforce healthy choices, GHD|EMPHNET collaborated with the Ministry of Health in Iraq and the WHO-EMRO on a project to support enforcing laws for reducing salt intake in the country.

Building on existing evidence, a desk review, key informant interviews, recommendations for law implementation were then presented at a consultative workshop where stakeholders met to agree on operationalizing these recommendations: **(1)** Developing encouraging policies in coordination with all stakeholders on low salt production and manufacturing of food products containing low salt **(2)** Focusing on social marketing for community awareness **(3)** Strengthening monitoring and evaluation for relevant national programs and interventions.

Following this workshop, an action plan was developed. The Ministry will work with GHD|EMPHNET and other stakeholders to advocate for its implementation.



Libya Launches Medical Waste Management Standard Operating Procedures

In Libya, the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC), in collaboration with GHD|EMPHNET and George Town University, developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for medical waste management (MWM) to support the implementation of basic concepts in MWM. These SOPs provide technical guidance to all personnel in biological laboratories that actively handle or manage biological agents and toxins. This document describes procedures for medical waste collection, segregation, offsite transportation, safe treatment, and disposal. The SOPs are available in English and Arabic.

In the coming months, these SOPs will be implemented in relevant health facilities across the country.

Evaluation Assesses Impact of harmonized Reproductive Health Registry Newly Established in Jordan

With support from GHD|EMPHNET and with funding from the International Development Research Center- Canada (IDRC), the Ministry of Health is implementing the harmonized Reproductive Health Registry (hRHR) in the Mafraq governorate of Jordan as an intervention to improve the availability and accessibility of MCH data to assure a responsive health care system for mothers and their children. The hRHR has been implemented and studied in seven health centers in the Mafraq health directorate.

An evaluation of the hRHR showed that **(1)** it has high level of acceptance among stakeholders, health providers, and women using MCH services **(2)** it improved documentation of data, decreased time and effort of data reporting and retrieval, and improved access to patient data.

In light of these findings, great potential to keep the existing momentum and not only expand the scope of the intervention (to include more indicators) but also scale it up to other governorates given the striking similarity between Mafraq and these governorates.



Iraq Maintains Efforts to Improve AFP Surveillance Indicators in High-risk Provinces Threat Reduction

the Ministry of Health in Iraq is focusing on addressing the risk of wild poliovirus importation and the emergence of the circulating vaccine-derived polioviruses (cVDPV) because of the decreased immunization coverage, mainly attributed to the COVID-19 emergency and engagement in its response. The focus is to improve AFP surveillance indicators to ensure rapid detection and response for WPV importation and the cVDPV.

A ToT training on AFP surveillance for AFP surveillance officers was conducted between October 24-26, 2021, in Baghdad, Iraq for from the national and provincial levels who will later train surveillance AFP and vaccine preventable diseases (VPDs) officers at provincial, district, and major hospitals in high-risk provinces: Anbar, Dahuk, Kirkuk, Missan, Muthanna, and Ninewa.

To further improve the quality of epidemiological investigations of high-risk AFP cases, the Ministry is implementing **(1)** a comprehensive epidemiological investigation for 50 AFP hot cases, clusters, and zero doses; and conducting **(2)** 50 limited scale coverage surveys to identify unvaccinated children around AFP cases. A response plan will be conducted according to the surveys' results.



Staged Development Tool Assesses NCD Public Health Functions in Jordan, to Be Used Regionally

Using the [Staged Development Tool \(SDT\)](#) Assessing, Planning, and Measuring Progress in the Development of National Public Health Institutes, a collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Jordanian Ministry of Health (MOH), the Royal Health Awareness Society (RHAS), and GHD|EMPHNET explored improving NCD surveillance systems and registries in the country, considered a priority area based on SWOT reports released by the NCD Advocacy and Communication Strategy and the National Strategy for Health Sector in Jordan 2016-2020.

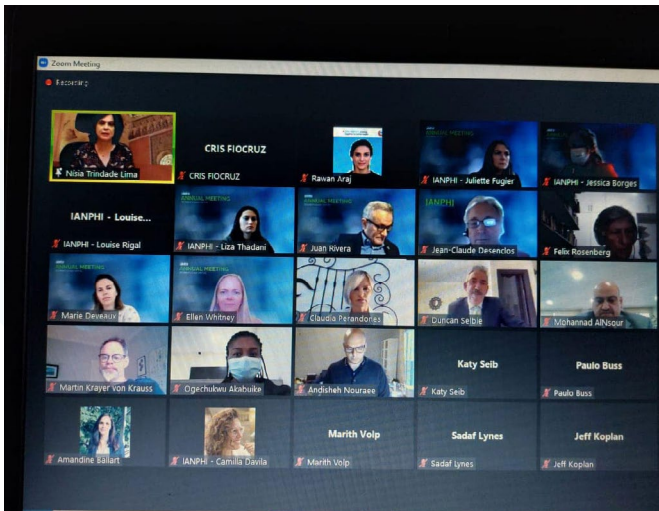
The SDT was customized to the context of Jordan to help participants clarify their current state, desired state, and major gaps that need to be addressed to move to their ideal state. The customized version, developed by the CDC, IANPHI, and GHD|EMPHNET, was named NCD- Capacity Assessment and Planning (N-CAP). Based on the N-CAP, officials from the MOH and organizations working in NCD response in Jordan participated in discussions that led to the development of an assessment and prioritization report, and a policy brief. Their content focused on the need to develop and update an NCD Strategy that identifies data collection needs and priorities and the development of an effective Health Information Systems (HIS), focusing on NCD data collection priorities. The discussions took place at workshop held in Amman, Jordan, between September 28 and 29, 2021.

Learning from this activity in Jordan, GHD|EMPHNET and the CDC are working together to tailor the N-CAP tool to assist the countries in the EMR to conduct assessments of NCD related public health functions. This is expected to lead to a plan of action that informs country-led efforts to address NCDs.



Updates

With the Partners



At the annual meeting of the International Association of National Public Health Institutes (IANPHI), GHD|EMPHNET has been elected as an IANPHI partner in recognition of its role in supporting countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region to better public health.



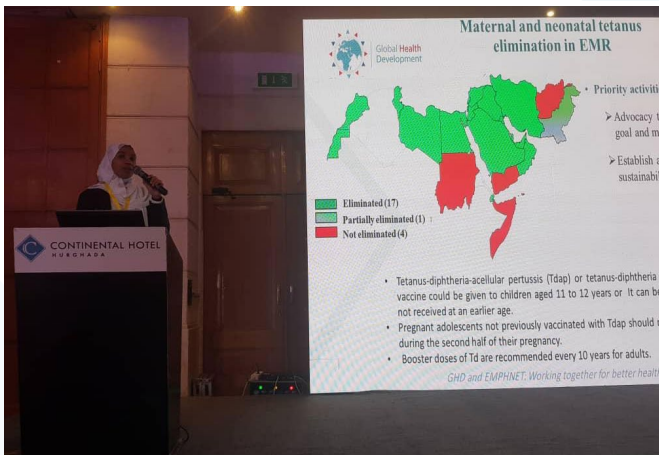
The Jordanian Royal Medical Services (RMS), with support from GHD|EMPHNET, is building the capacities of physicians, nurses, and health inspectors in epidemiology, outbreak investigation, biostatistics, research, scientific writing, and health promotion and protection. At the RMS's Preventive Medicine Day, GHD|EMPHNET was recognized for this collaboration with the RMS.



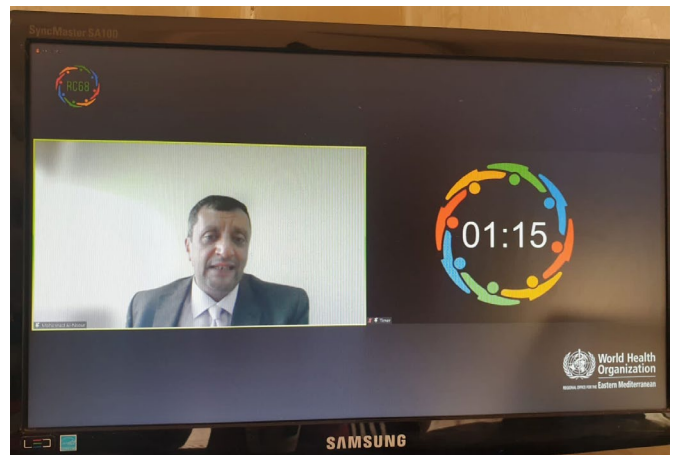
GHD|EMPHNET welcomed representatives from the Population and Family Health Office-USAID Jordan to explore joint areas of interest and further expand their existing collaborations.



GHD|EMPHNET participates in the 73rd Annual Brucellosis Research Conference of the International Brucellosis Society in Chicago, USA.



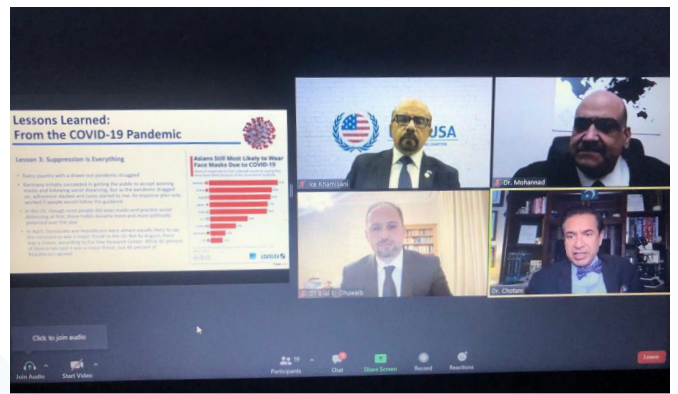
GHD|EMPHNET participates in the 4th MENA Region Conference on Adolescent Health with a presentation on adolescent vaccination needs.



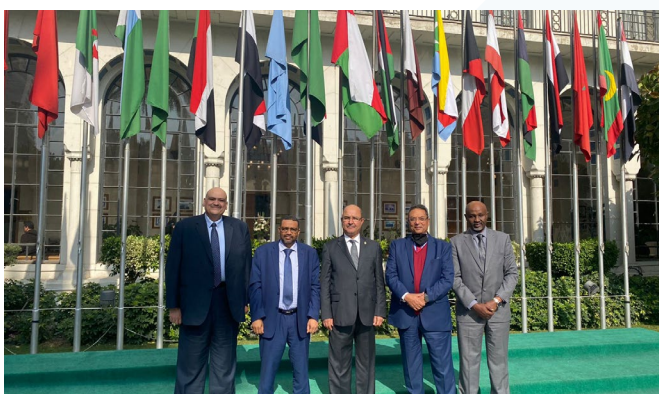
GHD|EMPHNET participates in 68th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean.



GHD|EMPHNET representatives met with HE Minister of Kurdistan Dr. Saman Barzanji to discuss mutual collaborations.



GHD|EMPHNET's Executive Director Dr. Mohannad Al Nsour participated as a Guest of honor in the webinar 'Pandemic! Variants! What's next?' held by the United Nations Association of the United States of America.



At the Arab League headquarters in Cairo, Egypt, a GHD|EMPHNET delegation led by Executive Director Dr. Mohannad Al Nsour met with the Director of the Health and Humanitarian Assistance Department HE Minister Plenipotentiary Dr. Saeed Al Hadi. The meeting focused on introducing the newly launched International Academy of Public Health (IAPH).



GHD|EMPHNET participates in a panel on health equity and global health security organized by the Global Health Council.