Schools across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have started to emerge from the lockdowns imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Eighteen countries have resumed the 2021-2022 school year, combining both in-person and remote learning.

These are Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Syria, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen.

The countries that have not yet opened their schools are: Lebanon (some public schools partially opened the morning shift but not yet the afternoon shift for Syrian refugees) and Libya (announced that schools will reopen on 11 November).

18 out of 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa region have schools completely or partially open due to COVID-19.

18 out of 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa region have prioritized the vaccination of teachers in their national vaccine rollouts.

100% of teachers are vaccinated in Oman and Iran.

1 UNICEF MENA countries include Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
Ministries of Education (MoEs) across the region have adopted safety measures including social distancing, mask-wearing, temperature checks, and vaccination of students and teachers.

Ministries of Education across the region issued official guidance to support the safe reopening of schools through physical distancing in classroom settings. In Morocco, one classroom can accommodate up to 20 children. In Iran, the Ministry issued a circular specifying that 2.25 square metres of space should be allocated for each student providing the basis for the in-person school reopening plan.

Mask-wearing is required for teachers in the delivery of in-person teaching and learning in seven countries: Algeria, Morocco, Iran, Jordan, the State of Palestine, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. In Morocco, masks remain compulsory for teachers and older children in schools and classrooms while children under 10 are not required to wear masks. Only Algeria is implementing systematic temperature checks in schools as an early warning system to track potential cases of the virus in schools.

Ninety per cent of countries in MENA have prioritized the vaccination of teachers in their national vaccine rollouts. In a few countries, including Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, vaccination is mandatory for all teachers.

School personnel vaccination rates range from 15 per cent to 100 per cent in some countries. Iran and Oman have the highest teacher vaccination rate (100 per cent) followed by Jordan (90 per cent), UAE (86 percent) and the State of Palestine (82 per cent). The lowest rate is 15 per cent in Djibouti.

**The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

In response to school reopening and the continuation of education, the MoE provided 331,000 teachers with training during the summer holidays. Public schools are working remotely online using the “Madrasati” platform for primary school-age children. Secondary school-age children (12 years old and above) who are vaccinated have started face-to-face education and children who are not yet vaccinated are attending schools through distance learning modalities.

**Kuwait**

All private schools reopened on 27 September and public schools on 3 October. Students in public schools will follow a hybrid model to reduce the number of students in each classroom and use a double shift system. UNICEF is supporting professional teacher development through contextualize, digitize, and adapt the UNICEF Teacher Preparedness Training Package with a focus on wellbeing and protection. UNICEF is partnering with the EU to advance teachers professional development, with a particular focus on pedagogy and technology training through digital platforms.
**Bahrain**

Schools reopened on 27 September. The MoE announced an operational strategy for in-person, hybrid, or online learning using a green, yellow, orange, and red alert system based on risk and corresponding to various degrees of safe school protocols.

**Jordan**

The MoE developed the “School Reopening Protocol” with UNICEF’s support. Physical distancing means that half of the schools are on “rotation”. Children attend two days one week and three days the next. The “DARSAK” online learning platform and televised lessons are provided for children studying from home. Schools will only be closed if 10 per cent of students in a class or an entire school population test positive for COVID-19. A mandatory 14-day quarantine period for students testing positive for COVID-19 is in place before they can return to school. As of 3 October, 90 per cent of teachers were vaccinated, including in refugee camps across Jordan.

In refugee camps, UNICEF is supporting the implementation of the School Reopening Protocol, including the creation of an attendance monitoring system to track COVID-19 close contacts and provide data on attendance and drop out.

**Tunisia**

The MoE has overseen a full return to school with safety protocols. It revised programmes and included new pedagogical approaches for school children to catch up on missed learning. The school feeding programme and other services including the number of dorms for vulnerable children were increased.

**Iran**

School reopening was virtual in the majority of schools except for schools in nomadic and rural areas with low populations while workshop classes for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) reopened in-person. Secondary schools have opened as of 6 November. The MoE shared a circular with instructions on safe school operations and decisions on physical school reopening which is decentralized at the district level.

**Lebanon**

Only some public and private schools have reopened. The MoE developed a “Lebanon Inclusive Back to Learning Initiative 2021-2022,” providing information to parents, school directors and teachers on the reopening of schools for in-person, hybrid and/or full remote learning depending on the situation. The aim is to reduce barriers including the cost of transportation to and from school, the availability of teachers, and improve the availability of funds for schools to cover expenses.

The morning shift in public schools has partially restarted, but the afternoon second shift mostly for Syrian refugee children has not yet started.

**Morocco**

The Ministry of Education delayed the start of school to 1 October to allow for the rollout of vaccination programmes for children of secondary school age (12- to 17-year-olds) and to maximize the number of schools to open for face-to-face teaching and learning. Schools will be closed if there are new wave(s) of COVID-19, while two TV stations will stream school lessons for all levels. Digital material has been completed and uploaded online for children and teachers. Printed material has been prepared for children who live in areas where access to the internet is a challenge. A total of 800,000 children were reached nation-wide across 2,000 schools.

**Key issues and challenges (country examples)**

**Lebanon**

Children have experienced disruption to their education for the last 18 months not only because of COVID-19 school closures but also due to the multiple crises including the Beirut blast and the economic crisis, both have increased poverty levels.

Research about the school year 2020-2021 by the Center for Educational Research and Development found several challenges including: gaps in teacher capacity, a big loss in instruction time, disparities, a widening digital divide and a lack of engagement including the inability to support children with special needs.

**The State of Palestine**

The most significant challenge is to support schools to be fully operational especially in the Gaza Strip where rehabilitation and reconstruction work is ongoing in schools affected by the escalation of violence in May. To date, 20 schools were rehabilitated with UNICEF’s support and 13,000 teachers were trained on psychosocial support to students.

**Yemen**

The ongoing humanitarian crisis was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, putting additional pressure on an already overstretched education system. Prior to the pandemic, nearly 2 million children were out of school, over 2,000 schools were damaged due to the war and there are ongoing concerns with the quality of education.
Iraq

Iraq’s education system has faced multiple challenges for decades including conflict, displacement and economic crisis. The economic repercussions of COVID-19 coupled with a severe drop in oil prices have put even more pressure on an already fragile education system and affected access to education and its quality. Schools in the Kurdistan Region reopened on 14 September and on 1 November in the rest of the country.

UNICEF is advocating for:

- Support all children in the region to resume in-person learning as soon as possible with remedial learning programmes to catch up on what they missed, while teachers get the support, they need for the new norm including on blended learning.
- Prioritize the vaccination of teachers in national vaccination campaigns. Vaccination, however, should not be a prerequisite for school reopening. Additional safety measures are therefore needed in schools.
- Equip teachers with the skills they need, including digital skills. A competent, skilled and motivated teacher is a fundamental element of an education system.
- Education systems to become more flexible and focused on helping children acquire relevant skills including those for personal empowerment and wellbeing, lifelong learning and adaptability, employability and transition into work, participation and active citizenship.
- Increase government budgets to reform education systems.
- Foster partnerships with the private sector, including telecommunications and internet companies, to expand bandwidth and network infrastructure and provide affordable options for families, teachers and schools to reduce the digital gap including in poor, rural and remote areas.