

# The Delta Variant Surge in Morocco and its Dire Consequences

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## Despite vaccination campaigns, the spiking caseloads present severe threats to Moroccans' health and the country's economy.

On July 27, 2021, Morocco vaccinated a record number of citizens—over half a million—in one day. Yet that same day, Morocco also saw a record 6,971 citizens infected with Covid-19—the highest in a single day since the first case was detected in March 2020. Cases subsequently peaked in mid-August, but the current wave is proving the most severe in Morocco. With the vaccination campaign underway, and the Delta variant simultaneously spreading, Moroccans are realizing that the pandemic, like a snake with many heads, presents new facets despite the efforts made to eradicate it. Meanwhile, Morocco's efforts to reopen given the country's economic reliance on tourism are facing a series of major challenges.

### The delta variant reigns supreme in Morocco

Much of the current wave is driven by the delta variant of the coronavirus—the strain that has proven to be much more dangerous than the original version of the virus. According to the Ministry of Health, the new strain comprises at least 87% of infections in Morocco. Within Morocco, the highest rate of infection—39%—was reported in the Guelmim-Oued Noun region, while the Fez-Meknes region reported the lowest rate of infection at 4%.

Yet a glimmer of hope is that widespread vaccination can effectively combat this variant, as demonstrated by low hospitalization rates in highly-vaccinated countries, and increasing hospitalizations in countries with low rates of vaccination.

Morocco launched its nationwide vaccination campaign in January 2021, and as of publishing, about 49% of Moroccans have received their first dose, with 37% fully vaccinated.

While Morocco's vaccination campaign initially prioritized the elderly, the campaign is now focusing on young people. This is a crucial, positive step, according to anesthesiologist Motaouakkil, as the highly-contagious variant is more likely to affect those who have "greater mobility in society." Additionally, after the Moroccan government eased restrictive measures, young people took few precautions, which drove a resurgence in infection rates.

Morocco seems to be on the right track with over a third of the population fully vaccinated, but according to the Ministry of Health, herd immunity will require fully vaccinating another third of the population. Since Morocco is far from these levels, the government announced new restrictions on August 2 pertaining to travel, dining, gatherings and public facilities in attempt to curb the spread of the new variant.

Health experts have stated that the situation in Morocco is alarming and highly worrisome. According to the department of Khaled Ait Taleb, without strict adherence to the new guidelines, the already-dire situation is likely to get worse. Dr. Moulay Said Afif noted that if citizens continue to be lax about precautionary measures, the government will be forced to institute a total lockdown.

### Economic Concerns

In 2020, Morocco's annual GDP fell to 1.5%, and in the second quarter, when the country was under strict lockdown, there was a 25.1% decrease in exports and 26.7% decrease in imports. The tertiary sector, the main driver of Morocco's economic growth, declined by 11.5%, and the secondary sector—construction, electricity, textile s, and electrical and mechanical industries—likewise decreased significantly, impacting small and medium-sized enterprises as a result.

Yet in June, amid rising vaccinations and falling caseloads, [officials estimated \(https://www.africanews.com/2021/06/29/morocco-reopens-tourism-after-robust-vaccination-drive/\)](https://www.africanews.com/2021/06/29/morocco-reopens-tourism-after-robust-vaccination-drive/) that Morocco would receive 3.5 million tourists over the summer season, which would amount to 72% of tourism during the same period in 2019.

On June 15, 2021, the day Morocco's sea and air borders reopened, the country launched [Operation Marhaba 2021 \(https://dardif.com/marhaba-operation-morocco-2021/%23:-:text=Following%252520the%252520National%252520Tourism%252520Confederation's,June%25252015th%2525202021%252520under%252520the\)](https://dardif.com/marhaba-operation-morocco-2021/%23:-:text=Following%252520the%252520National%252520Tourism%252520Confederation's,June%25252015th%2525202021%252520under%252520the), a campaign for the return of Moroccans living abroad (MRE) for tourism, allowing MRE to arrive in the country with reduced fare options.

However, the sharp spike in cases caused concern. Mohamed El Fane, President of the Moroccan Federation of Franchise (FMF), stated that the government should punish individuals who flout restrictions rather than implementing widespread shutdowns during lucrative summer months, as the pandemic has already taken a harsh

economic toll.

Ultimately, the country's hopeful expectations were dashed by the rise in Delta cases. On August 2, the United States placed Morocco on its "high risk" travel list, on August 12, Belgium [reported \(https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/belgium-all-news/health/180985/positive-tests-among-returning-travellers-from-morocco-rise-rapidly/\)](https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/belgium-all-news/health/180985/positive-tests-among-returning-travellers-from-morocco-rise-rapidly/) that 7% of travellers returning from Morocco tested positive for COVID, on August 23, [France \(https://www.connexionfrance.com/French-news/Morocco-and-Algeria-added-to-French-coronavirus-red-list-for-travel\)](https://www.connexionfrance.com/French-news/Morocco-and-Algeria-added-to-French-coronavirus-red-list-for-travel) added Morocco to its "red travel list", and on August 30, [Canada suspended \(https://www.travelweek.ca/news/canada-suspends-all-passenger-flights-from-morocco/\)](https://www.travelweek.ca/news/canada-suspends-all-passenger-flights-from-morocco/) all flights from Morocco. As of early August, [only 142,000 tourists \(https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/08/343755/moroccos-tourism-sector-demands-support-amid-new-restrictions\)](https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/08/343755/moroccos-tourism-sector-demands-support-amid-new-restrictions) had visited the country, far short of the anticipated 3.5 million.

In the face of new restrictions, tourism professionals have requested that the Ministry of Tourism implement measures to account for the sector's tremendous losses, including delaying lease payments and extending the nightly curfew. [Recent statistics \(https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/08/343755/moroccos-tourism-sector-demands-support-amid-new-restrictions\)](https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/08/343755/moroccos-tourism-sector-demands-support-amid-new-restrictions) indicate that as a result of the pandemic, tourism sector incomes have fallen by 80% on average, and over 35% of employees working in the field have lost their jobs.

According to [a report \(https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/08/17/tripartite-policy-brief-on-the-economic-and-social-impact-of-covid-19-in-morocco\)](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/08/17/tripartite-policy-brief-on-the-economic-and-social-impact-of-covid-19-in-morocco) published by the High Commission for Planning (HCP), the pandemic has caused the national poverty rate to jump from 1.7% to 11.7%. These effects are strongest in urban areas, where the poverty rate is now 14 times what it was in 2019. Additionally, the rate of vulnerability for families' standards of living has increased from 7.3% to 16.7%, and the Gini index, indicating economic inequality, went from 38.5% to 44.4%, surpassing the threshold, 42%.

The health impacts have compounded these economic shocks, as informal workers are more vulnerable to impoverishment and disease, since they do not benefit from social safety nets and support systems if they lose their jobs. To avoid dire health and economic circumstances, it is imperative that Moroccans follow the newly implemented guidelines and continue to get vaccinated. By doing so, the country can avoid another economically-devastating shutdown, as well as yet another public health emergency. ❖

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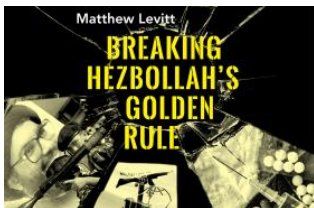
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