

# IAS Educational Fund and ALCS meeting

## HIV science and communities: Progress and challenges in the Middle East and North Africa Meeting report

The Educational Fund of IAS – the International AIDS Society – in collaboration with the Association de Lutte Contre le Sida (ALCS), held a virtual meeting, “HIV science and community: Progress and challenges in the Middle East and North Africa”, on 29 and 30 September 2021.

The aim of the meeting was to help reduce the gap between scientific achievements in the response to HIV and their practical applications by discussing the development and implementation of new and relevant prevention, treatment and care services in the specific context of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA).

The meeting focused on two main topics: injectable agents and HIV self-testing.

The first day (29 September) consisted of three sessions:

- **The first session**, chaired by **Mehdi Karkouri** (ALCS, Morocco) and **Bruno Spire** (IAS), was dedicated to the implementation progress of a regional action plan established during the

[IAS Educational Fund meeting in Casablanca, Morocco, in March 2017.](#)

- **The second session**, chaired by **Mustapha Sodqi** (ALCS, Morocco), discussed the impact of injectable agents in the treatment and prevention stages.

- **The third session**, chaired by **Kamal Alami** (UNAIDS, Morocco), explored HIV self-testing and its role in improving testing and re-testing in key populations.

The second day (30 September) was dedicated to group work. The main objective was to explore solutions to remove current barriers to HIV self-testing implementation and accelerate the expansion of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in the region, particularly for key populations.

One group discussed the key levers and barriers to PrEP implementation in MENA countries. A second group focused on the challenges of introducing HIV self-testing in MENA countries.

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## Main points discussed during the meeting

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➤ **Implementation progress of the regional action plan (2017)**

Significant advancements were made towards the goals set out in the regional action plan established during the IAS Educational Fund meeting in Casablanca in 2017. Specifically:

Educational Fund IAS  
 ALCS association de lutte contre le sida  
 Membre de la Coalition Internationale Sida

### Axes/priorités identifiés

1. Mise en place de la prophylaxie pré-exposition
2. Mise en place et déploiement du dépistage communautaire
3. Mise en place de stratégies innovantes
4. Amélioration de l'environnement d'intervention

Mehdi KARKOURI

*Prof Mehdi Karkouri (ALCS, Morocco) presenting the regional action plan implementation progress (2017)*

- **PrEP implementation:** In 2017, ALCS led the "PrEPare\_Morocco" pilot study in collaboration with the Moroccan Health Ministry. It confirmed the acceptability and feasibility of a community healthcare PrEP programme for men who have sex with men and female sex workers in Morocco. The results of this pilot, as well as documents related to its implementation, were shared with contributors in the MENA region.
- **Community testing implementation and expansion:** One of the main recommendations of the 2017 action plan was to generalize community testing, which was partially accomplished in all countries of the region. Community advisor training was held in Mauritania, and a [guide to health screening in MENA](#), with a chapter dedicated to community health screening, was shared.
- **The implementation of innovative prevention strategies:** Most objectives were successfully achieved, in particular: reinforcement of prevention through the internet; adoption by all of MENA countries of the "test-treat-retain" strategy; implementation of sexual health clinics; realization of a pilot study on HIVST in Morocco; and launching of HIV, hepatitis C virus and syphilis screening campaigns.
- **The improvement of environmental intervention:** Various trainings for healthcare personnel and community contributors took place, including on PrEP and community screening. In addition, online work was strengthened through implementation and use of regional platforms, such as the [Plateforme Coalition plus MENA](#), [the MENA+ network](#) and [the MENAROSA network](#).

➤ **Adopting injectable agents in the treatment and prevention stages**

Long-acting antiretroviral (ARV) drugs are under development or being rolled out to overcome the challenges presented by daily oral administration of ARVs, notably adherence. Long-acting injectable ARVs are very promising for both treatment and prevention of HIV.

In the field of prevention, the use of injectable agents through intramuscular injection of a cabotegravir-based agent within a PrEP framework presented several advantages, including long-lasting action, better adherence and total confidentiality. However, its principal limitation is the risk of resistance after stopping PrEP. Indeed, the agent remains detectable in the blood for about one year at concentration levels that are too low to be effective, but high enough to allow the emergence of resistance.

In HIV treatment, the injectable form consists of a cabotegravir and rilpivirine combination. The FLAIR and ATLAS clinical trials have shown the effectiveness, safety, tolerance and user satisfaction of a monthly injection. The ATLAS 2M trial has shown the non-inferiority of an injection every two months compared with the monthly injection.

Given the complexity of the injection in terms of logistics and human resources, it is necessary to conduct feasibility studies to guide the implementation of injectable forms in national programmes.

➤ **Status of PrEP implementation in the MENA region**

PrEP is a biomedical strategy that involves the use of ARVs to reduce the risk of HIV acquisition. For the oral form of PrEP, two modes of administration have been shown to be effective in reducing the risk of HIV acquisition: the continuous mode, which consists of one daily dose; and the discontinuous mode, with one dose before and one dose after behaviour that increases vulnerability to HIV acquisition.

In the region, oral PrEP healthcare is officially available only in Morocco: ALCS sexual health clinics offer free PrEP to men who have sex with men and sex workers. Workshop participants noted unofficially available PrEP in Tunisia and Lebanon, where key levers and barriers to PrEP implementation and scaling up include the political context, lack of financial resources and the COVID-19 pandemic.



*Group work on barriers to HIV self-testing implementation and accelerating the expansion of PrEP in the region*

### ➤ HIV self-testing (HIVST)

Since 2016, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended the use of HIVST as an additional screening approach due to its high effectiveness observed in several studies.

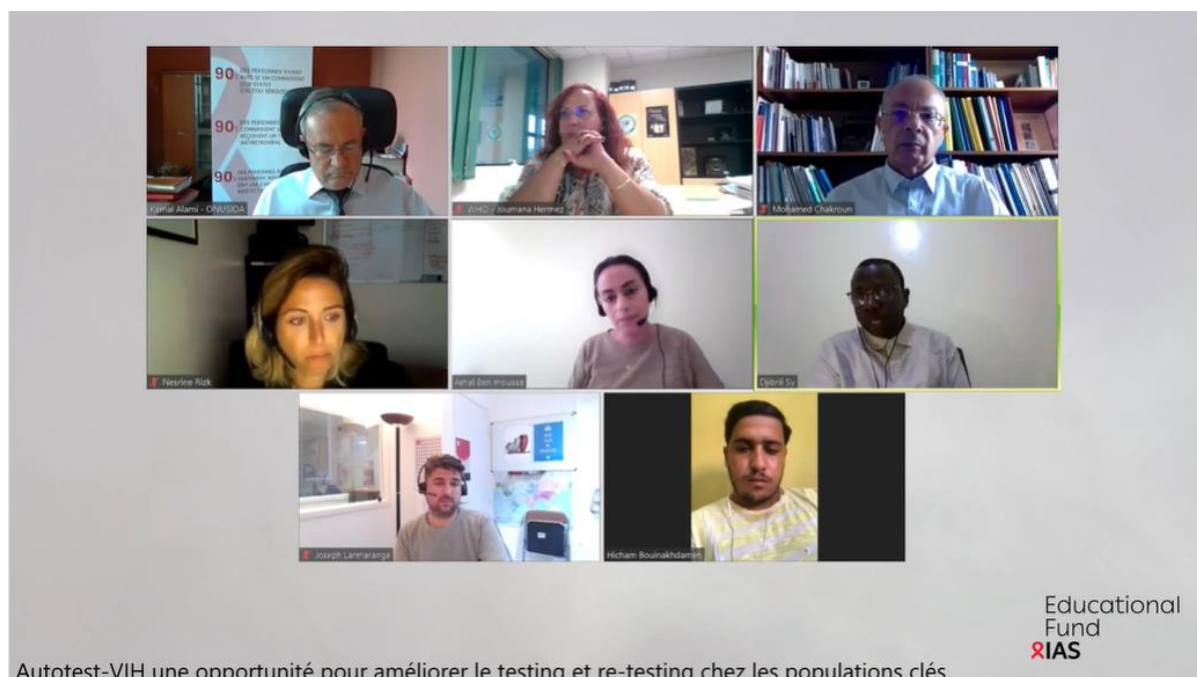
HIVST allows a considerable increase in screening in people frequently exposed to possible HIV acquisition and who usually have little or no access to screening due to barriers such as discrimination, stigmatization, distance and cost.

Two modes of HIVST distribution are used: primary distribution for personal use; and secondary distribution to the person's partners and contacts.

According to the results observed in the [ATLAS](#) project in Senegal, Mali and Ivory Coast, HIVST plays an important role in reaching affected groups, as well as key populations, which traditionally lack access to screening.

To successfully implement and scale up HIVST, it must be integrated into existing screening programmes, and key populations must be part of determining the most appropriate expansion strategies.

In MENA countries, HIVST is available for free at ALCS clinics. It can be bought over the counter in pharmacies in Morocco. Mauritania has launched a pilot study on HIVST carried out by SOS Pairs Educateurs in partnership with the Ministry of Health.



Autotest-VIH une opportunité pour améliorer le testing et re-testing chez les populations clés

*Moderators, contributors and panellists of the third session of the meeting, focused on self-testing*

## Actions to be carried out

### PrEP:

- ✓ Strengthen government and funding advocacy to accelerate implementation of oral PrEP healthcare in Tunisia and Lebanon.
- ✓ Carry out pilot studies of PrEP in Tunisia and Lebanon.
- ✓ In Morocco, diversify the existing PrEP offering by adding the injectable form after a feasibility assessment.
- ✓ Promote PrEP among key populations.
- ✓ Inform and train healthcare professionals and providers in the use of PrEP.
- ✓ Create broadcast awareness campaigns on social networks and audio-visual media.

### HIV self-testing:

- ✓ Ensure advocacy of HIVST with ministries of health, relevant associations and NGOs, public and private healthcare professionals and funders.
- ✓ Implement an awareness programme on the importance of self-testing, and broadcast these programmes using social networks, audio-visual media and hotlines.
- ✓ Carry out pilot studies on HIVST in MENA countries.
- ✓ Adopt primary (for personal use) and secondary (for the person's partners and contacts) distribution of HIVST.
- ✓ Implement a monitoring system for HIVST programmes to better evaluate the impact of its introduction. Monitoring should be based on several indicators, in particular, the number of kits distributed, the number of people with a reactive test, and the number of people living with HIV who have integrated into the healthcare system.

Participants of this meeting, HIV and AIDS professionals from the region and all people living with or affected by HIV in the MENA region should undertake the actionable items identified above as a priority to be achieved for the HIV and AIDS response

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**Testimonials**

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*"We all promote health. We should get the message out to different populations to inform them of new options, arouse interest in healthcare or prevention and promote interest in innovation in order to support advocacy."*

Clinician in a research centre

*"The meeting was a gold mine of information, and the exchanges during group discussion were very interesting."*

Researcher in a non-governmental organization (NGO)

*"Sharing experiences on the advances in the offer of PrEP services and self-testing has taught me a lot."*

NGO worker

*"I especially considered collaborating in the diversification of awareness tools (awareness meetings, hotlines, social media) for prevention and early diagnosis in key public and populations with whom I currently work."*

NGO worker

## Annex 1: Programme



### HIV, science and communities: Advancements and challenges in the Middle East and North Africa

The IAS Educational Fund Meeting

29 – 30 September 2021

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## Programme

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### Session 1: 29 September 2021 – Introduction

*Session objectives:* The purpose of this session is to review the road map established during the IAS Educational Fund meeting in March 2017 and to recognize the progress established during its implementation in order to identify possible obstacles and discuss, in subsequent sessions, manners in which to overcome them.

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WAT (GMT +1)

13:00 - 13:10

Welcome speech

*Mehdi Karkouri, President, Association de Lutte Contre le SIDA, Morocco*

*Bruno Spire, Member of the IAS Governing Council*

13:10 - 13:20

Introduction: Progress in implementation of the regional action plan established during the IAS Educational Fund meeting in Casablanca in March 2017.

*Mehdi Karkouri, President, Association de Lutte Contre le SIDA, Morocco*

13:20 - 13:30

Open discussion with the public

*Moderation*

*Bruno Spire, Member of the IAS Governing Council*



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## Session 2: 29 September 2021 – Injectable agents in the treatment and prevention stages.

**Session objectives:** *This session targets the recent advances in long-acting antiretroviral injectable agents and the manner in which they contribute to improving treatment compliance in people living with HIV, and PrEP compliance for key populations.*

*This session is chaired by:*

*Dr. Mustapha Sodqi, ALCS/LPCM, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy of Casablanca, Hassan II University - Casablanca\*\*, Morocco*

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### WAT (GMT +1)

13:45 - 14:05

Scientific advances in injectable agents for HIV prevention and treatment

*Dr Christian Laurent, Director of Research, The French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), France*

14:05 - 14:30

Panel discussion on injectable agents

Panellists

*Pr Tassi Noura, Clinician, Morocco*

*Elie Ballan, UNAIDS, Lebanon*

*Souhaila Bensaid, ATP+, Tunisia*

14:30 - 14:45

General discussion

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## Session 3: 29 September 2021 – HIV self-testing: An opportunity to improve testing and retesting in key populations

**Session objectives:** *HIV self-testing could be a great opportunity to improve HIV screening in the MENA region. This session will inform on global progress and identify the levers and obstacles to its implementation in the context of the region.*

*This session is chaired by:*

*Dr Kamal Alami, Director of UNAIDS Morocco*

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### WAT (GMT +1)

15:10 - 15:30

Update on HIV self-testing

*Dr Joseph Larmarange, Demographer, Centre Population & Développement, Paris University, France*

15:30 - 15:45

HIV self-testing in MENA countries

*Pr Chakroun-Mohamed, specialist in infectious diseases, Tunisia*

15:45 - 16:10

Panel discussion on HIV self-testing

Panellists

*Dr Nesrine Rizk, Clinician, Lebanon*

*Djibril Sy, Public healthcare sector, Mauritania*



Hicham Bouinkhadmen, Public healthcare sector, Morocco  
Joumama Hermez, Regional HIV, Hepatitis and STI Advisor  
 WHO/EMRO, Egypt

16:10 - 16:25

General discussion

Moderation:  
Amal Benmoussa, Head of Research, ALCS

16:25 - 16:30

End of the first day of meetings

**Group work: 30 September 2021 – Acceleration of PrEP implementation/scaling and HIV self-testing to reinforce prevention**

**Group work objectives:** *The availability of PrEP and HIV self-testing is unfortunately very limited in MENA countries. During the workshop, participants will meet to discuss how to introduce or scale-up these services.*

WAT (GMT +1)

Welcome speech

09:00 - 09:05

Mehdi Karkouri, President, Association de Lutte Contre le SIDA,  
 Morocco

09:05 - 09:10

Introduction to group work

Mehdi Karkouri, President, Association de Lutte Contre le SIDA,  
 Morocco

09:10 - 10:30

**Group 1: Key levers and barriers to PrEP implementation/scaling in MENA countries**

Moderation:  
Amal Benmoussa, Head of Research, ALCS  
Aida Mokrani, Tunisian Association Against Sexually Transmitted  
 Diseases (ATL), Tunisia

09:10 - 10:30

**Group 2: Levers and challenges of HIV self-testing introduction in MENA countries**

Moderation:  
Fatima Zahra Hajouji, ALCS Morocco  
Ayman Assi, Marsa, Lebanon

10:30 - 10:45

Health break

10:45 - 11:15

Return and discussion for work group 1

11:15 - 11:45

Return and discussion for work group 2

11:45 - 12:00

Conclusions and closing of meetings