

## WHO Syria boss accused of corruption, fraud, abuse, AP finds



BY MARIA CHENG

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LONDON (AP) — Staffers at the World Health Organization's Syrian office have alleged that their boss mismanaged millions of dollars, plied government officials with gifts -- including computers, gold coins and cars -- and acted frivolously as COVID-19 swept the country.

More than 100 confidential documents, messages and other materials obtained by The Associated Press show WHO officials told investigators that the agency's Syria representative, Dr. Akjema Magtymova, engaged in abusive behavior, pressured WHO staff to sign contracts with high-ranking Syrian government politicians and consistently misspent WHO and donor funds.

Magtymova declined to respond to questions about the allegations, saying that she was "prohibited" from sharing information "due to (her) obligations as a WHO staff member." She described the accusations as "defamatory."

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Magtymova and gathering relevant information.

"In view of the security situation, confidentiality and respect for due process do not allow us to comment further on the detailed allegations," WHO said. It gave no timeline for when the investigation was expected to be completed.

WHO's Syria office had a budget of about \$115 million last year to address health issues in a country riven by war -- one in which nearly 90% of the population lives in poverty and more than half desperately need humanitarian aid. For several months, investigators have been probing allegations that Syrians were badly served and WHO staffers were ill-treated:

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— Financial documents show Magtymova once threw a party costing more than \$10,000 -- a gathering held mostly to honor her own achievements at WHO's expense, staffers say, at a time when the country was struggling to obtain coronavirus vaccines.

— In December 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, she tasked the more than 100 WHO personnel in the country with learning a flash mob dance, asking officials to film themselves performing the choreographed steps for a U.N. party, according to videos and messages seen by the AP.

— Six Syria-based WHO public health experts said Magtymova called staffers "cowards" and "retarded" on multiple occasions. Even more concerning, the officials told agency investigators that Magtymova "provided favors" to senior politicians in the Syrian regime and met surreptitiously with the Russian military, potential breaches of WHO's neutrality as a U.N. organization. The staffers asked not to be named for fear of retribution; three have left WHO.

In one complaint sent to WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in May, a Syria-based staffer wrote that Magtymova hired the incompetent relatives of government officials, including some accused of "countless human rights violations."

“Dr. Akjemal's aggressive and abusive actions are negatively impacting WHO's performance to support Syrian people,” the staffer wrote, adding: “Vulnerable Syrian people are losing a lot due to favoritism, frauds and scandals instigated and supported by Dr. Akjemal, which is breaking all trust (and) pushing donors away.”

Tedros did not respond to the staffer's complaint. In May, WHO's regional director in the Eastern Mediterranean appointed an acting representative in Syria to replace Magtymova after she was placed on leave. But she is still listed as the agency's Syria representative in its staff directory and continues to draw a director-level salary.

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Magtymova, a Turkmenistan national, previously served in a number of roles, including as the agency's representative to Oman and as emergency coordinator in Yemen. She assumed her position in Syria in May 2020, just as COVID swept around the world.

“What we (at WHO) do is noble,” she said in a statement upon her appointment. “We gain respect by competency, professionalism and the results we accomplish.”

Numerous WHO staffers in Syria have told the agency's investigators that Magtymova failed to grasp the severity of the pandemic in Syria and jeopardized the lives of millions.

“During COVID-19, the situation in Syria was deplorable,” one former WHO staffer said. “However, WHO was not providing adequate aid to Syrians.” Medical supplies were “usually focused on Damascus only, and not covering other areas in Syria,” where there was an acute shortage of medicines and equipment.

Syria's health care system has been devastated by more than a decade of war; for years, the country relied almost exclusively on international health assistance. WHO's presence in areas controlled by the government has often raised criticism that its aid is directed by Damascus, which is sanctioned by the US and the EU. Nearly 7 million people are displaced by the war inside Syria and most live in tented camps in areas beyond government control.

Staffers also questioned some of Magtymova's own behavior and directives to staff as coronavirus cases spiked worldwide -- and even as WHO's chief claimed that the entire organization was working “tirelessly” to stop COVID-19.

At least five WHO personnel complained to investigators that Magtymova violated WHO's own COVID-19 guidance. They said she did not encourage remote working, came to the office after catching COVID and held meetings unmasked. Four WHO staffers said she infected others.

In December 2020, deep in the first year of the pandemic, Magtymova instructed the Syria office to learn a flash mob dance popularized by a social media challenge for a year-end U.N. event. At the time, senior WHO officials in Geneva were advising countries to implement coronavirus measures including the suspension of any non-essential gatherings.

“Kindly note that we want you to listen to the song, train yourself for the steps and shoot you dancing over the music to be part of our [global flash mob dance video](#),” wrote WHO communications staffer Rafik Alhabbal in an email to all Syria staff. Magtymova separately sent a link to a YouTube website, which she described as “the best tutorial.”

Multiple videos show staffers, some wearing WHO vests or jackets, performing “[the Jerusalema challenge](#)” dance in offices and warehouses stocked with medical supplies. Magtymova praised the “very good looking and beautiful people” in videos made in Aleppo and the port city of Latakia.

The following October, when the country was enduring one of its worst waves of COVID, Magtymova hired a choreographer and film company to produce a video of staffers performing another dance to mark U.N. Day. Photos and video show there was no social distancing during the party Magtymova held for dozens of unmasked people, which included a “cake-eating ceremony.”

Magtymova posted one of the dance videos on WHO Syria’s social media accounts, but it elicited so much criticism that her superiors ordered her to remove it. The video was “disgraceful,” said Anas al-Abdah, a leading Syrian opposition politician: “The organization should have (instead) filmed the catastrophic condition of our people and demanded justice.”

Magtymova, however, was unrepentant.

“My message here is to ask you not to be discouraged,” she told staff. “We have an important job at hand to perform and a huge responsibility for people, we have done something really out of (the) box: we dared to shine.”

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Internal documents, emails and messages also raise serious concerns about how WHO’s taxpayer-provided funds were used under Magtymova, with staffers alleging she routinely misspent limited donor funds meant to help the more than 12 million Syrians in dire need of health aid.

Among the incidents being probed is a party Magtymova organized last May, when she received a leadership award from Tufts University, her alma mater. Held at the exclusive Four Seasons hotel in Damascus, the party included a guest list of about 50, at a time when fewer than 1% of the Syrian population had received a single dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

A hotel invoice shows the reception’s menu included Singaporean-style beef satay, fried goat cheese with truffle oil croquettes and sriracha chicken sliders, alongside a selection of seasonal mocktails. A production company was hired to film the event and make a promotional video, according to an internal WHO summary.

The evening’s agenda featured remarks by the Syrian minister of health, followed by a reception and nearly two hours of live music. WHO documents show while the event was called to celebrate WHO’s designation of 2021 as the Year of Health and Care Worker, the evening was devoted to Magtymova, not health workers. The cost, according to a spreadsheet: more than \$11,000.

Like many other U.N. expatriate staff in Syria, Magtymova lived at Damascus’ ornately decorated Four Seasons hotel. But unlike other staffers, she chose to stay in a spacious, multi-room suite with two

washrooms and a panoramic view of the city. U.N. documents suggest she stayed in the suite from October 2020 to this past May at a discounted cost of about \$450 per night, more than four times the price of rooms occupied by other U.N. staff. A hotel staffer said such suites normally cost about \$940 a night.

The hotel was sanctioned by the U.S. and U.K. because of its owner's role in financing the regime of Bashar Assad; the U.N. is estimated to have spent \$70 million there since 2014.

Other WHO officials were concerned with the agency's inability to track its support of health facilities in Syria. In correspondence from January, staffers wrote about a worrisome "spot check" made to a health project in northern Syria, noting discrepancies between what WHO paid for and what was found.

Among the issues identified: "the medicines quantities checked were not matching the invoices," the staff did not have medical training, there were missing items including wheelchairs, crutches and hearing devices, and most of the building rented to store such supplies was empty.

Dr. Ahmed Al-Mandari, WHO's regional director in the eastern Mediterranean and Magtymova's boss, also chastised her for the Syria office's failure to account for its spending.

In an email last October, he told her there were many unresolved audit and compliance issues. Al-Mandari said Magtymova had not completed several long overdue reports detailing how money was being spent in Syria that needed "urgent attention." Without those reports, donors had little evidence Syria and WHO were using their resources as intended.

Three WHO officials involved in procurement told investigators that Magtymova was involved in several questionable contracts, including a transportation deal that awarded several million dollars to a supplier with whom she had personal ties. Another staffer said to be close to Magtymova reportedly received \$20,000 in cash to buy medicines, despite the lack of any request from the Syrian government, which was normally required to trigger such a purchase.

At least five staffers also complained Magtymova used WHO funds to buy gifts for the Ministry of Health and others, including "very good servers and laptops," gold coins and expensive cars. The AP was not in a position to corroborate their allegations. Several WHO personnel said they were pressured to strike deals with senior members of the Syrian government for basic supplies like fuel at inflated prices, and were sidelined if they failed to do so.

The accusations regarding WHO's top representative in Syria come after multiple misconduct complaints at the U.N. health agency in recent years.

Last May, the AP reported that senior WHO management was informed of [sex abuse](#) during the 2018-2020 Ebola outbreak in Congo but did little to stop it; a panel later found [more than 80 workers](#) under WHO's direction sexually exploited women.

And in [January](#), the AP reported that staffers at WHO's Western Pacific office said the region's director, Dr. Takeshi Kasai, used racist language to berate staff and improperly shared sensitive coronavirus vaccine information with his home country, Japan. In August, [WHO removed Kasai](#) from his post indefinitely after an initial investigation substantiated some of the claims.

Javier Guzman, director of global health at the Center for Global Development in Washington, said the latest charges regarding WHO's Magtymova were "extremely disturbing" and unlikely to be an exception.

"This is clearly a systemic problem," Guzman said. "These kinds of allegations are not just occurring in one of WHO's offices but in multiple regions."

He said though Tedros is seen by some as the world's moral conscience during COVID-19 -- he repeatedly decried [vaccine inequity](#) and called for countries to act in solidarity -- the agency's credibility was severely damaged by reports of misconduct. Guzman called for WHO to publicly release any investigation report into Magtymova and the Syria office.

WHO said investigation reports are "normally not public documents," but that "aggregated, anonymized data" are shared with its Executive Board and made publicly accessible.

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Sarah El-Deeb in Beirut, Lebanon, contributed to this report.

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