



HUMANITARIAN BULLETIN #2

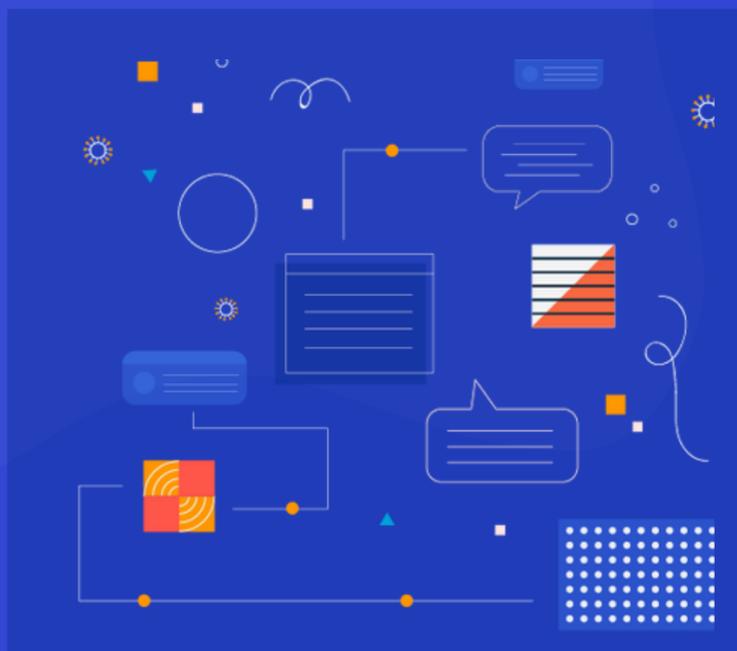
► Iraq February 2022

Project Manager

Sara Sofiwan
(ssofiwan@internews.org)

Project coordinator

Goran Khudhur
(gkhudhur@internews.org)



Introduction to Rooted in Trust

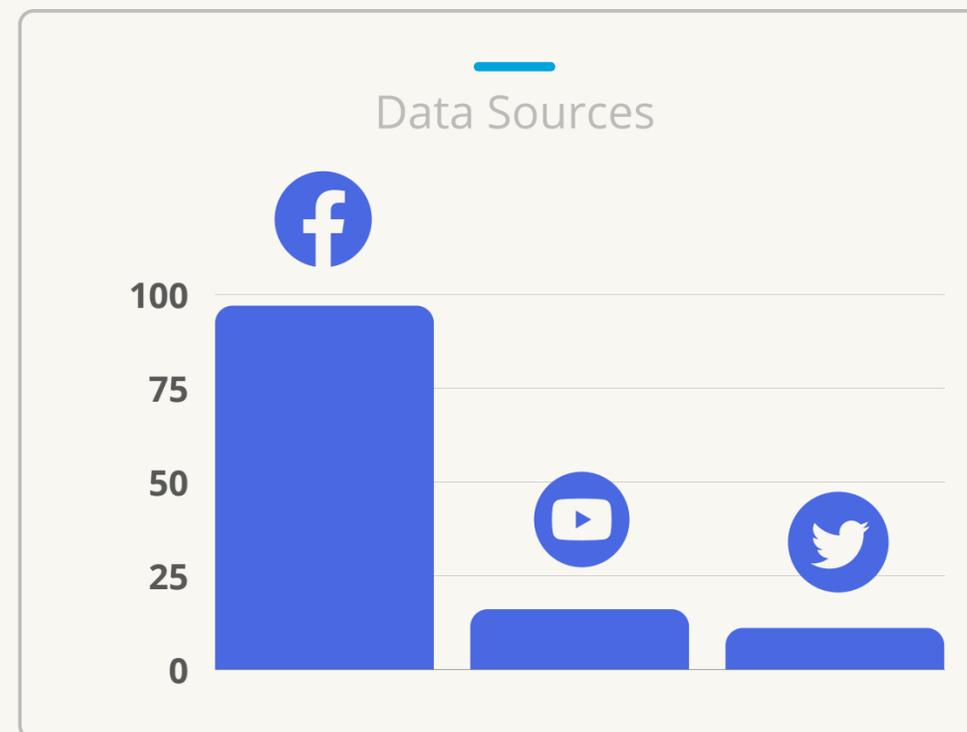
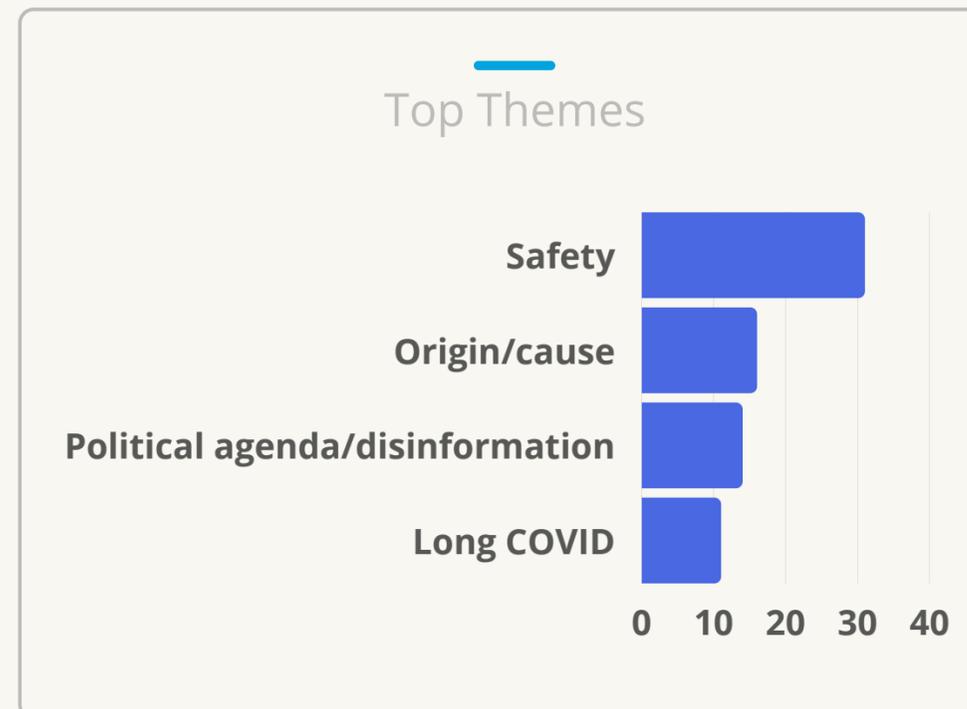
Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA)-funded project by Internews that aims at countering the unprecedented scale and speed of the spread of rumors and misinformation on COVID-19 health response and COVID-19 vaccines among vulnerable populations affected by humanitarian crisis.

In Iraq, Rooted in Trust works with media, community-based organizations, and health and humanitarian actors to build a healthier information ecosystem that is responsive to the needs of internally displaced populations in northern Iraq, with the goal of disrupting and mitigating the flow of misleading and inaccurate information.

About this Bulletin

This bulletin provides humanitarian and health partners with the latest rumor data identified among internally displaced populations in northern Iraq. The aim is to guide and inform risk communication and community engagement efforts within the COVID-19 response.

It profiles common rumors across social media in Iraq during February 2022. In total, 148 rumors have been collected. They have been categorized as 12 high-risk, 112 medium-risk, and 24 low-risk levels. Data were collected through various pages, groups, and accounts that have significant user engagement from Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and other social media platforms.



148 Rumors Collected

01.

Death

”

All vaccinated people will die in 6 to 24 months.



From a 7-minute video published by an Iraqi YouTuber in Kurdish language on February 22nd, 2022. It has 677 views, and the link has been shared on other social media platforms.

What's behind the rumor?

This rumor is published on YouTube under the title of “What are the risks and negative effects of using the corona vaccines?”. The video has high production values, which makes it appear legitimate, and contains several false claims presented as fact about the danger of COVID-19 vaccines. On-screen messages appear throughout the video claiming that vaccine manufacturers seek to reduce the global population, a common anti-vax conspiracy theory. False data are used to make these claims seem authentic; it claims that taking the first vaccine can result in a loss of 15% of immunity and taking the second vaccine will result in a loss of 35% of immunity. It further claims that anyone vaccinated people will contract thrombosis and become infertile, and that 80% of pregnant women will experience miscarriage during the third month of pregnancy.

Combining multiple false claims, using data and medical terminology can be an effective way of convincing people of conspiracy theories and is likely to increase vaccine hesitancy. Such conspiracy theories may be a contributing factor to the low rate of vaccination in Iraq, which is 16% as of February 2022. Beside false claims, there is growing evidence suggesting that people feel that it is not worth the effort to get vaccinated because of a perception that the Omicron variant is "milder" and does not pose a significant health risk. However, this is not supported by medical evidence: Omicron infections are indeed often less severe, but this is usually due to the fact that people have some immunity to COVID-19 from prior vaccination. Omicron infections in unvaccinated individuals still carry a significant health risk.

01.



Fact check

Dr. Kamal Olleri, the Health Cluster Coordinator for Kurdistan responded to this specific conspiracy theory by explaining that **“the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 vaccine is zero up to date.** The people claiming that you will die after being vaccinated by 6 months to 5 years has no proof or any reliable study. COVID-19 started at the end of 2019, and **it is impossible to have a study that says you will die after five years of being vaccinated”.**

The spokesperson of the Iraqi Ministry of Health (MoH), Saif Al-Badr, said, **“All the vaccines that Iraq contracted for, have proven their effectiveness, and no cases of complications or hospitalizations were recorded,** for the those who took the vaccine doses. Also, Iraq has not witnessed any death or entry to the recovery rooms for any vaccinator, and there are rare cases of those who received the vaccine and were subsequently infected with corona,” stressing that “the infections of vaccine recipients with the virus are very light compared to the non-recipients.”

Based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website, **Reports of death linked to COVID-19 vaccination are extremely rare.** The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires healthcare providers to report any death after COVID-19 vaccination to Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS), even if it's unclear whether the vaccine was the cause. Reports of adverse events to VAERS following vaccination, including deaths, do not necessarily mean that a vaccine caused a health problem.

Why does it matter?

The main rumor is supported by a sequence of false statements referencing groups of western anti-vax protesters in different countries, with the use of scientific terminologies to that may make the video appear credible. These rumors can easily create fear, hesitancy, and disappointment among those who have already taken the vaccine and as well as among those who have not taken it yet. These rumors appear to specifically target young people and pregnant women. Comments under the video demonstrate the effectiveness of this conspiracy theory, with one of them asking “Why didn't you publish the danger of the vaccine before? Many people already received the vaccines now”, and many others have shared the link on personal Facebook accounts and groups. This kind of misinformation appears to be effective at discouraging Iraqi people from choosing what is right for their health.

Recommendations



- Focus on the vulnerable: Share careful awareness messages about COVID-19, vaccine types, and side effects among community members to reduce vaccine hesitancy, especially among IDP camps and vulnerable groups.
- Yes, there are mild side effects –and we should talk about them too. Share accurate side effect data so people know what they should expect when getting vaccinated. Beware of referring to real-world studies and official data.
- Listen to people’s fears and discuss the options: Address the specific claims raised by this video to allay fears before people encounter it, including the safety of vaccines for pregnant women and the lack of evidence of serious adverse events following vaccination.
- Be aware of broader information ecosystems: as seen throughout our global rumor data, people are connected to and react to events in the West –whether to successful vaccination efforts that make evident unequal global vaccine distribution to anti vax protests that inspire vaccine resistance to vaccine donations that are regarded as suspicious. It is important to listen to communities and discuss tensions, frustrations or fears that may emerge from this.

02.

Safety and Side Effects

“ 50 million COVID-19 vaccines have been mixed with the spike protein of HIV, and now the government says it is not a danger. This is for two purposes either to make money or to make people get AIDS.



Posted on a Facebook personal account in Kurdish – 13 shares, and more than 100 likes.

What's behind the rumor?

Rumors around the safety of the vaccines have been spreading in Iraq since the vaccination process started in March 2021. There are several prominent public social media accounts, especially on Facebook, that publish rumors and misinformation about COVID-19 and the vaccines in the Kurdish language and Iraqi Arabic dialect, which social media platforms are currently unable to monitor and ban because of the letter characteristics of the languages/dialects. These accounts often publish short videos in other languages, adding mistranslation and misinformation in the onscreen captions. The account that posted several rumors linking the HIV spike protein to COVID-19 vaccines aimed to spread fear among people that taking vaccines will cause a high risk to their health in the future. This rumor comes after releasing a study in Netherlands that states “a new HIV variant with higher virulence and more damaging health impacts has been discovered in a study led by the University of Oxford”.

Claiming a link between HIV and COVID-19 vaccines is a particularly troubling rumour because, for many Muslim communities, HIV is perceived as shameful and taboo. The person posting this rumor is aware of how quickly this claim will result in hesitancy and mistrust, especially amongst low-literacy groups who are less able to fact-check the information related to the rumor.





Fact check



Vaccine Safety Net organization, a trustworthy source and certified by WHO, responded to the rumor as it was globally circulated in different countries, and stated that **COVID-19 vaccines don't contain bacteria or HIV**; the vaccines enhance the body's ability to respond to pathogens, not reduce it.

Dr. Kamal Olleri, the Health Cluster Coordinator for Kurdistan Iraq responded to rumor, explaining that **"it is not possible to put parts from a certain virus in the vaccine of another virus, In conclusion, there are no HIV spike proteins in COVID 19 vaccines"**.

Why does it matter?

HIV is severely stigmatized in Iraq and negative attitudes are already a major challenge. There is evidence that this rumor has already taken hold to some degree and is encouraging people to convince others not to take COVID-19 vaccines. One comment under this post stated: "I have already taken the second vaccine, that means my life has ruined", while another said "what should I do now? why did not tell us about it in advance". A third said: "since I heard about this news, I keep urging people to not take any vaccine". It is important to address the claims in this rumor to prevent its further spread. It's important to mention that the news about discovering a new HIV variant affected the spread of this rumor, while the discovery of the HIV variant has no connection with Vaccine, because the researchers estimate that the new HIV variant first arose during the late 1980s and 1990s in the Netherlands, and it has declined in past 10 years.

Recommendations



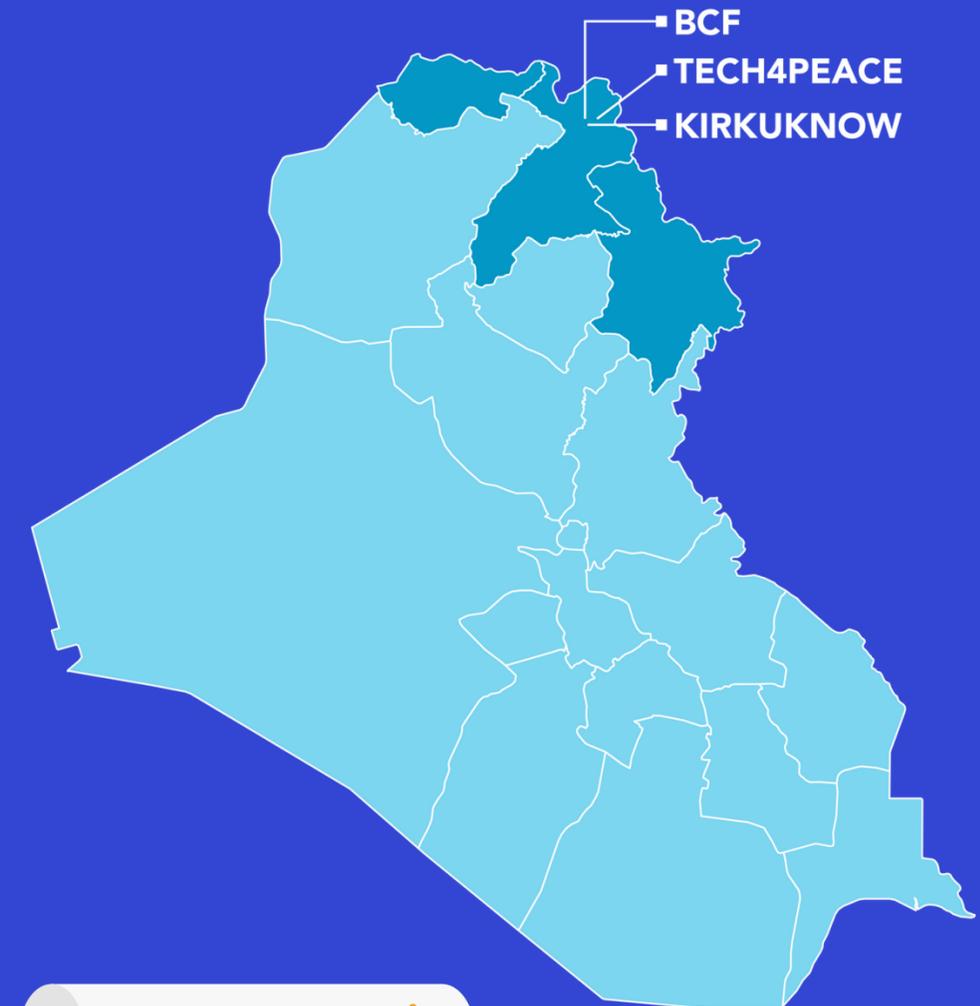
- Strengthen dialogues among community members and HCWs: It is essential for health workers in health centers in the IDP camps and health clinics within neighborhoods to have continuous dialogues with different community groups as a means to build and maintain trust. It is of outmost importance for people to share their fears and exchange thoughts on vaccines amidst this serious kind of misinformation. Enhance your communication on vaccine safety: Humanitarian actors should respond to common community concerns with visualized awareness messages inside camps such as posters, spots through community centers to ensure that the vaccine doesn't include any ingredients that's harmful for their health or against their religion or believes.
- Ensure vaccination teams are aware of these concerns: Share up-to-date information on HIV transmission mode, the new HIV variant and COVID-19 vaccine safety protocols with vaccination teams so they are ready to respond to any question if prompted by community members with these concerns.

Sources

1. Links to source and further coverage: <https://bit.ly/3MV1x7e> and <https://tasrebat.com/archives/237980>
2. Link to source: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/safety/adverse-events.html>
3. Another source: <https://www.muhealth.org/our-stories/scary-reports-deaths-following-covid-19-vaccination-arent-what-they-seem>
4. Link to source 19 Jan 2022 : <https://healthfeedback.org/claimreview/covid-19-vaccines-dont-contain-bacteria-hiv-vaccines-enhance-bodys-ability-respond-to-pathogens/>
5. The list of Covid-19 vaccines ingredients can be found here 20 May 2021: <https://www.uchealth.com/en/media-room/covid-19/a-comprehensive-list-of-all-covid-19-vaccine-ingredients>
6. Another source globally responding to the rumor in different countries 15 February 2022: <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2022/do-covid-vaccines-include-hiv-aids/>



Covid-19 Snapshot IRAQ



90,000 Cases



500 Deaths



16,476,263 Doses

