



HUMANITARIAN BULLETIN#6

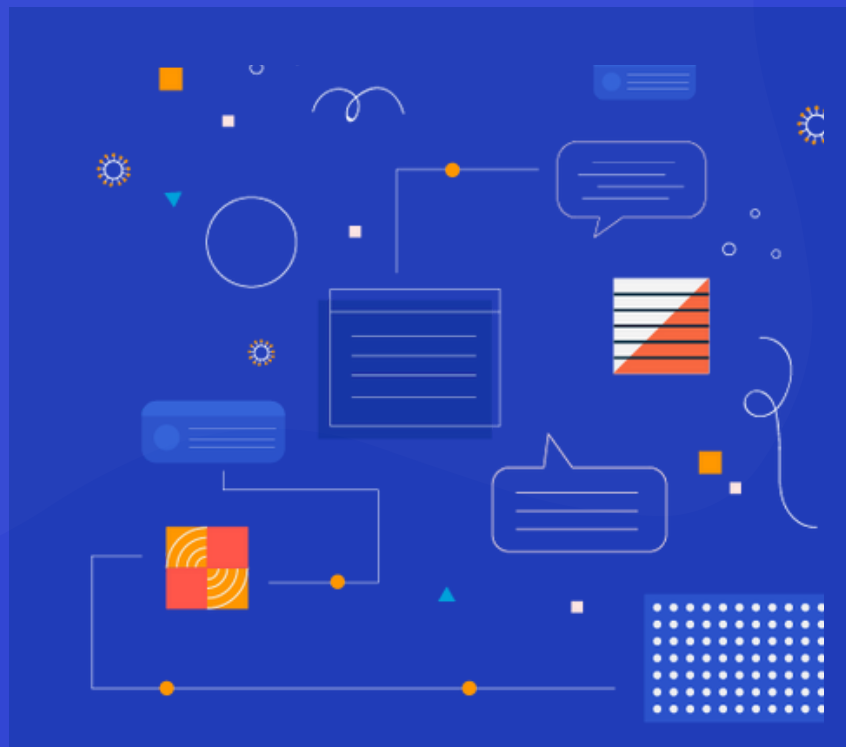
► Iraq June 2022

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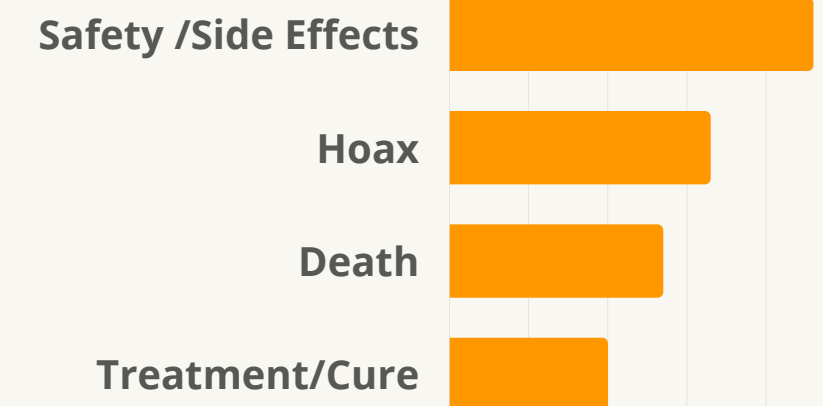
Introduction to Rooted in Trust

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.

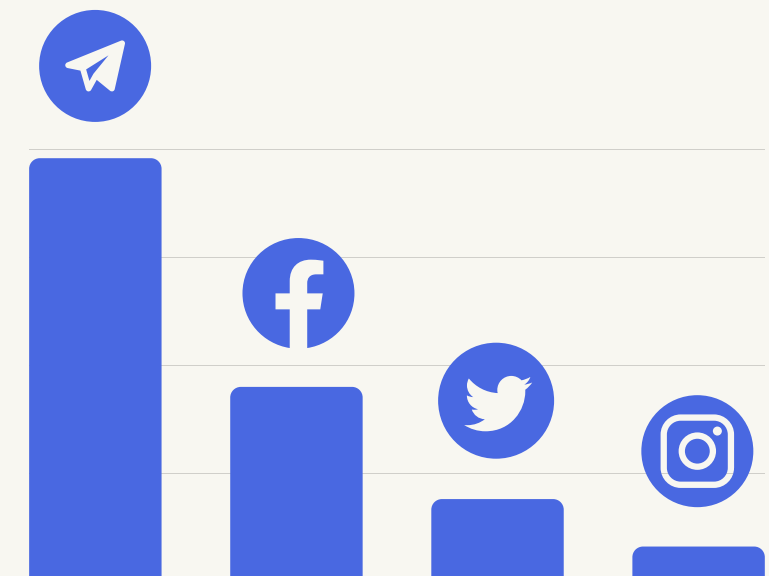
About this Bulletin

This bulletin provides humanitarian and health organizations with the latest rumor data identified among internally displaced populations in northern Iraq. This bulletin aims to respond to the COVID-19 “infodemic”, including rumors and misinformation which affect access to basic services and assistance of vulnerable communities in Iraq. It also aims 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 June 2022. In total, 292 rumors have been collected. Data were collected through in-person listing groups with IDPs, as well as various pages, groups, and accounts that have significant user engagement from Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms.

Top Themes



Source of Online Rumors



292 Rumors Collected

01.

Vaccine Agenda

”

Plandemic: Monkeypox

WEF, NAT & Munich Security 11/2021 finalized an overlapping plandemic (starts 5/2022) to improve corona plandemic (ends 12/2022) response by mind distraction:

1. Hide corona vaks effects & cover critical cases being busy with new plandemic supported by spreading new symptoms
2. Hide the failure to vaksinate 70% especially Africa & blame Africa via AVAT (new) as the virus source
3. Continue vaks with same tech till 65 million deaths
4. Supress oppositions, data, media sensorship & gain followers.

”



This rumor was posted in Arabic and English on a public account on Telegram, and it has 7441 views.

What's behind the rumor?

Conspiracy theories have not subsided since the outbreak of COVID-19 until today. This rumor claims that there is a hidden agenda and that Monkeypox was created only to shift attention from the supposed negative outcome of the COVID-19 vaccines.

The rumor also claims that the COVID-19 vaccines are lethal. There is still a high level of suspicion and vaccine hesitancy in Iraq, often driven by fears over safety and side effects.

There is deliberate misspelling for the term “pandemic” and “Vaccination”, the user writes “Plandemic” and “Vaks”, and there is a clear reason behind it which is to avoid censorship and detection from the platform's fact checking.

01.



Fact check

In March 2021, the Nuclear Threat Initiative's[1] (NTI) Global Biological Policy and Programs team (NTI | bio) and Munich Security Conference (MSC), held an annual tabletop exercise focusing on reducing high-consequence biological threats responding to COVID-19 pandemic threats by highlighting weaknesses in the international architecture for preventing, detecting, and responding to pandemic threats. The exercise was illustrated using a fictional scenario using the monkeypox virus.

So far, there are no recorded Monkeypox cases in Iraq, and the government has not issued any official statement about the disease. However, Thi-Qar and Basra Governorates have taken measurements regarding the importing of Monkeys, which can be seen [here](#).



The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[3] (CDC) stated that multiple studies and reviews of data from vaccine safety monitoring systems continue to show that vaccines are safe and reports of death after COVID-19 vaccinations are rare. However, nine death cases associated with J&J/Janssen COVID-19 vaccination were recorded.

Due to the recent detection of the monkeypox virus in several countries, the NTI released a statement[2] clarifying that the current outbreak of Monkeypox is purely a coincidence and is not associated with a fictional scenario in the exercise.

Vaccines contain only killed or weakened forms of germs like viruses or bacteria[4], this means that each vaccine produces against a certain virus or bacteria. Smallpox vaccines are effective against monkeypox, and COVID-19 vaccines are effective against the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Why does it matter?

This rumor was channeled on a very active Telegram account, it was originally created to combat the COVID-19 vaccination process. The current post has more than 7500 viewers and some other posts have more than 50000 viewers with big interaction.

This rumor starts with a headline that shifts the social media audience's attention directly into a big distrust of COVID-19 and its vaccines, referencing the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) Global Biological Policy and Programs team (NTI | bio) and Munich Security Conference as a source in order to back up and build the misleading theory.

In a community that lacks information literacy even if a conspiracy theory is implausible according to science or scientific evidence, it has a substantial impact on people's attitudes, emotions, and behavior though.

Monkeypox is a serious disease and should be considered separately its risks and dealt with more carefully, especially when the World Health Organization declared it as the outbreak an international emergency after a key medical panel failed to reach consensus on the risk from the virus.

The rumor generates fear and anxiety among those who have not received the vaccines yet through claiming that there is an organized plan, and the target of the plan is to reach the certain number of deaths in the world.

This type of post on social media has a huge impact on the intention of getting vaccinations among the Iraqi communities and this is one of the reasons why the vaccination process has been slowed down recently and the number of infected people increased in June 2022 according to the WHO data. By not receiving the vaccines, there will be potential consequences and risks increased and may cause more deaths.

Recommendations



- Concerns about vaccines should be taken seriously and factual answers should be provided to respond to these concerns. Explain how preventive vaccines work. Also updating humanitarian agencies and their staff about the high number of COVID-19 cases compared to April and May might impact the increasing vaccination rates and respond to people's questions.
- It is important to make it clear to people that they receive their information about new viruses and vaccine safety from the official platforms such as WHO Iraq dashboard and MoH. Also, humanitarian actors should partner with local and individual social media platforms that the community trusts and create dialogue via those spaces.

02.

Political Agenda

“ Now the numbers will increase in the north (Kurdistan Region of Iraq), every first thing comes from the north, first corona, first death, and the first new fever, everyday a virus and they are all agreements to take money from the central government, otherwise, Coronavirus has ended a long time ago and these new viruses are tricks to loot and steal money. ”



This rumor was posted in Arabic as a comment under one of the posts of the Ministry of Health-Iraq's official Facebook page. The post has around 10k engagements including 9.4 likes, 277 comments, and 51 shares.

What's behind the rumor?

Since the war against ISIS and particularly starting with the economic crisis in Iraq in 2014 until today, there are many political and economic conflicts between the Iraqi Federal Government and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in which the second one rules the north part of Iraq. The main problem is that KRG does not hand over a share of its oil and non-oil revenues to the Federal Government. On the other hand, the Federal Government does not provide KRG with its share of the annual budget. These conflicts have affected Iraqis in mostly all sectors.

People usually believe that any crisis facing them is a result of the tensions between the two governments. Consequently, when it comes to a health issue, people also associate it that one of the governments is behind it as an action against the other one. This rumor is an example of the Iraqi community's understanding that whenever the number of cases increases in the north, it is a trick from KRG to receive some budget from the Federal Government. Despite the tensions, there is coordination between the two governments on health issues, but the budget issues always make people not believe in the fact of spreading COVID-19, CCHF, and other viruses.



Fact check



According to the first situation report of COVID-19 by OCHA, the first recorded case of COVID-19 was recorded in Iraq on 24 February 2020, in the city of Najaf, in Najaf Governorate, in central and southern Iraq. The patient was a theology student coming from Iran.^[5] Later, the first death by COVID-19 was reported in Iraq, on March 4th in Sulaymaniyah Governorate, northern Iraq.

The rumor was a comment under a post of the official page of the Ministry of Health-Iraq. The post stated the data of the COVID-19 cases in Iraq for June 18, in which on that day there were 385 cases all over Iraq, out of this number only 70 cases were from the north. Around 200 cases were only reported in Baghdad Governorate in the central of Iraq.

Despite the tensions between the two governments on budget issues, so far there hasn't been any statement from the Iraqi Ministry of Health and the KRG Ministry of Health regarding having problems related to health matters. Yet, there are regular meetings between the two parties for better coordination in combating the outbreaks.

Why does it matter?

By linking the increased number of COVID-19 cases with the political agenda, and more particularly, the belief that this is a deliberate act from KRG to receive money from the Federal Government, people forget the reality of the virus spreading and the risk of paying no attention to the preventions from the outbreak. It is important to highlight this rumor because the Iraqi community is now facing several issues, and on top of them, several health problems including the increase of COVID-19 cases, CCHF, and the Cholera outbreak that recently encountered Iraq. This rumor deepens communities' understating of having political agenda behind any outbreak in the country. Iraqis undoubtedly believe in such kinds of rumors as they struggle with their gaining basic needs, lack of services, and corruption in the country, and they consider these kinds of false information as a fact. Moreover, this type of rumor contributes to the political polarization, stigmatization, and discrimination that affects IDP communities, as they are displaced due to the other political conflicts in the country back in 2013 and 2014.

Recommendations



- Organize dialogue opportunities for communities to share factual information about the latest COVID-19 cases reported, it's important that Humanitarian actors clarify the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic situation to their partners and staff. For example, only in June 2022, the number of COVID-19 cases in Iraq raised compared to April and May 2022. Only in June, 17,874 confirmed cases were recorded, while only 3,172 cases were reported in May 2022. Also, the number of deaths increased in June, as 20 deaths have been reported, while there were eight cases in May. There is still a low rate of vaccination in Iraq, in which by the end of June 2022, the rate is %18.9. It means that according to the WHO dashboard, out of more than 42 million of the Iraqi population, only 7,609,777 is fully vaccinated.
- Humanitarian actors and health workers can rely on RiT products such as bulletins and Situation Reports for debunking infodemic and sharing up-to-date information with their partners. (Here is the [link](#) to RiT Iraq products).

03.

Expiration

“More than one person has told me do not take the vaccine, because it is expired.”



This rumor is collected in an IDP camp in Erbil Governorate, stated by an IDP during a listening group session activity in June.

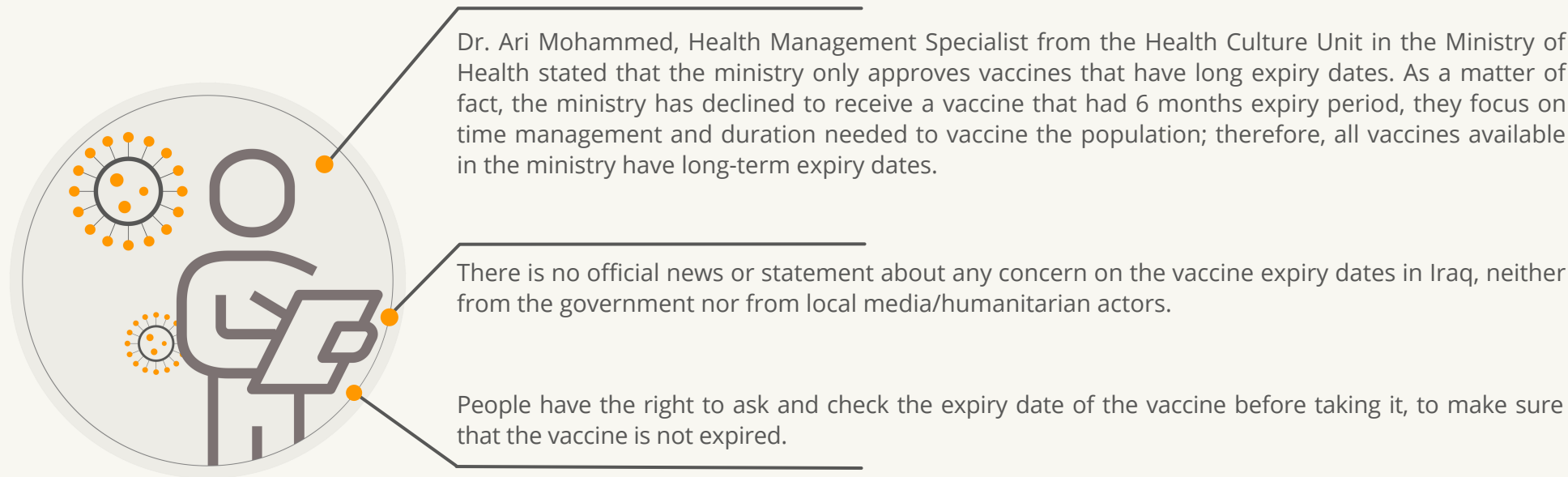
What's behind the rumor?

Thoughts against the COVID-19 virus and its vaccines are growing along with developments of the nature of the virus and the vaccines' upgrades. Starting from the COVID-19 pandemic in Iraq in February 2020, many people in Iraq did not believe the fact of the virus spreading. Then, when hundreds of Iraqis were infected by the virus, they started blaming the science that it cannot provide a solution and produce a vaccine. Later, when several vaccines were provided, once again they refused to believe in the solution and started spreading rumors and false information about the vaccines; including that the vaccines contain poison, and vaccines kill you in 6 months. After that, people also showed their hesitancy that the government does not store the vaccines based on the WHO regulations.

Now, the theories against vaccines expanded to a very large number of false information such as this rumor which claimed that the vaccines are expired. All these theories have one purpose which makes people feel hesitant and anxious about taking the vaccines. Not all rumors have bad intentions, sometimes people spread unverified or false information without knowing that the information is false. This is because people have concerns about the virus and its vaccines. Also, there are many legitimate concerns that the pandemic has concerned which have also given some of the rumors traction. This rumor spreads offline, and mainly inside the IDP camps, people who spread this rumor have their own reason for targeting this community, as they realize that this community has not enough knowledge about the reality of vaccines and does not have clear sources in checking the facts of this false information.



Fact check



Why does it matter?

This medium-risk rumor is important to highlight because it was spread among the IDP community, in which IDPs already face other crises including struggles with having basic needs and the lack of proper health services inside the IDP camps. After making inquiries about this rumor, it has been found out that an IDP received this false information from a medical person, without stating the name and any other detail of the person. This encourages the IDP community to feel more hesitant in receiving the vaccines because one of the trusted sources about health issues for the IDPs is the people with medical backgrounds. Because the main theme of this rumor is the COVID-19 vaccine, this affects the vaccination rate in the country and makes it even lower; the rate is 18.9% until the end of June 2022, in which around 7.6 million out of 42 million Iraqis are fully vaccinated.

Recommendations



- Provide training for camp-based health workers on COVID-19 misinformation. Consider conducting surveys on health workers to assess knowledge and understanding.
- Listen to people's fears about vaccines' expiry and address the specific claims that have been raised, to allay fears before people encounter them, including the safety of vaccines and the lack of evidence of any expiry vaccines that have been used on people.
- During outreach activities, health actors should specifically explain when expiry dates of vaccines are to community members, in order to dispel the fear around expired vaccines.
- Focus on the vulnerable groups: Share careful awareness messages about COVID-19, vaccine types, its storage and how MoH is getting rid of the expired vaccine due dates of vaccines less than six months through campaigns and active communication inside camps.

Sources

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2. <https://www.nti.org/news/nti-statement-and-frequently-asked-questions-regarding-the-nti-munich-security-conference-2021-tabletop-exercise-on-reducing-high-consequence-biological-threats/>
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/safety/adverse-events.html>
4. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/vaccines-and-immunization-what-is-vaccination>
5. <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-covid-19-situation-report-no1-27-february-2020>



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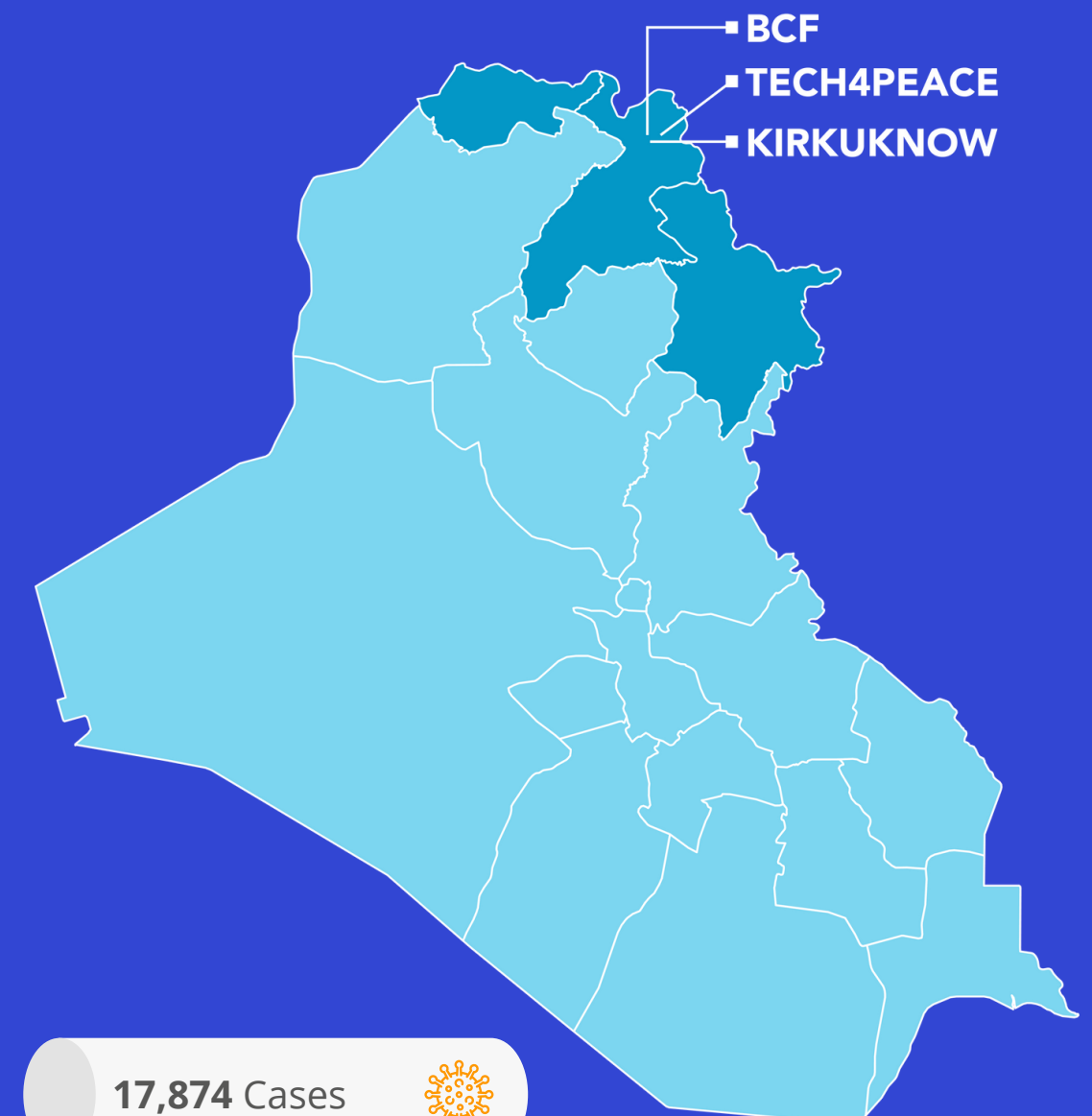
KIRKUKNOW
From People To People



BCF
BARZANI CHARITY FOUNDATION



Covid-19 Snapshot IRAQ



17,874 Cases



20 Deaths



18,636,865 Doses

