



HUMANITARIAN BULLETIN #7

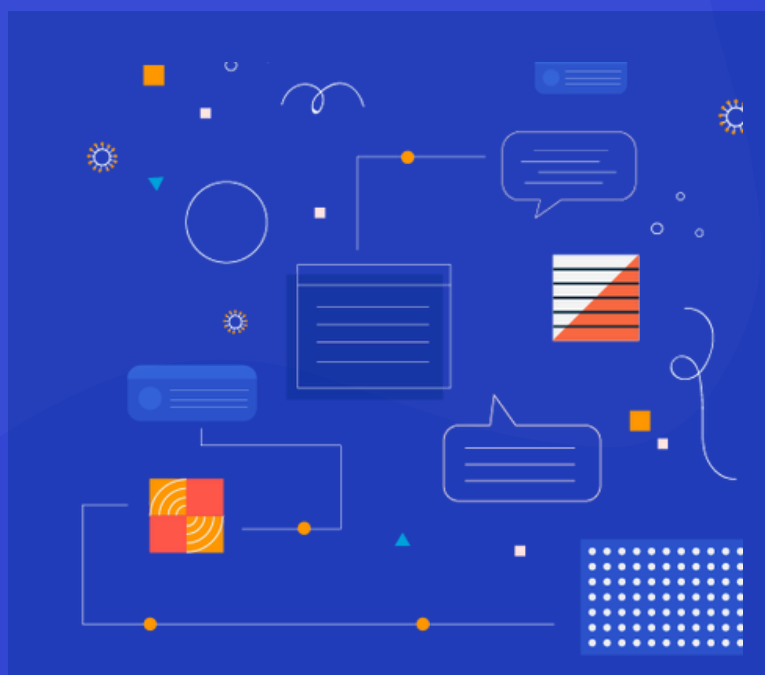
► Iraq July 2022

Project Manager

Sara Sofiwan
(ssofiwan@internews.org)

Project Coordinator

Goran Khudhur
(gkhudhur@internews.org)



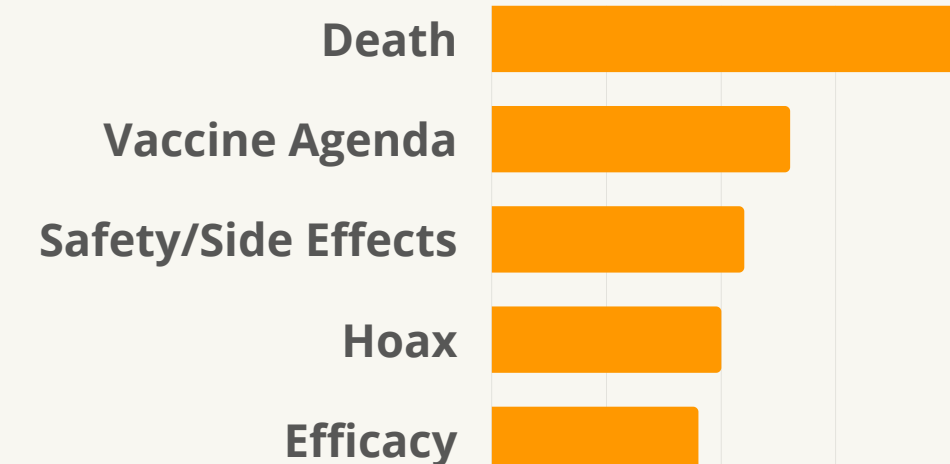
Introduction to Rooted in Trust

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.

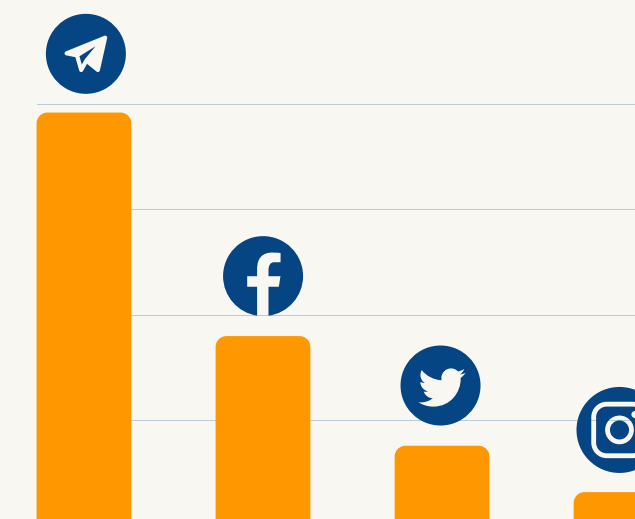
About this Bulletin

This bulletin provides humanitarian and health 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 July 2022. In total, 150 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



150 Rumors Collected

01.

Masks

“Masks cause lung cancer.”



This rumor was posted in Arabic and English on a public group on Telegram, and it has 1.2K views.

What's behind the rumor?

In Iraq, rumors about the use of masks have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic since its beginning. Recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are clear: masks control the spread of COVID-19. Preventive measures against COVID-19 such as physical distancing, hygiene measures, and the use of masks in crowded places have almost disappeared in 2022. During our engagement activities inside IDP camps and listening sessions that our partners run, many people express the opinion that we are in the post-COVID-19 period and thus the virus is no longer a concern, so there is no need for using masks.

This rumor appeared on a very active account on Telegram, repeating misinformation that was originally posted in 2020, claiming that masks cause lung cancer. This coincides with significant media coverage and social media discussion about rising cancer rates across the whole country.

Some rumors claim that COVID-19, as well as preventative measures, have led to an increase in cancer in the community. In fact, the rise may be linked to worsening environmental crises such as water pollution and dust storms, plus reduced health services in public hospitals; financial resources are running out in Iraq's largest cancer hospital¹, according to the director of Hiwa Cancer Hospital. As such, people's attention has turned back to other chronic illnesses such as cancer with the perceived decline in risk posed by COVID-19.

01.



Fact check



"There is no proven evidence or sufficient study correlating wearing masks with lung cancer" stated Dr. Dana Omer, Hematologist at Hiwa Hospital for Cancer Treatment.

WHO stresses the continued importance of wearing masks as a key step to control COVID-19 and save lives. A detailed guide about masks with common Q&A in the COVID-19 context is available on the WHO official website^[2].

The CDC emphasizes the efficiency of masks and their proper use. The CDC also provides a comprehensive section³ about the different types of masks and procedures on how to properly use them.

Why does it matter?

Despite the widespread perception that the COVID-19 pandemic is over, cases have increased sharply since the beginning of summer; 97,879 confirmed cases were recorded only in July, a 447% increase over June. Deaths increased from 20 in June to 74 in July. Unlike many countries, vaccination coverage in Iraq remains low, with only 19.2% of people fully vaccinated, and protective measures are no longer taken seriously by community members or the government.⁴

The religious occasion "Ashura" and the massive gathering that occurs from the end of July to the beginning of September in Iraq may be behind the massive increase of COVID-19 cases. This is especially dangerous for vulnerable groups such as people with chronic illness and older people, who are particularly likely to participate in Ashura during the whole month of August.

Recommendations



- Given the low vaccination rates, humanitarian actors and public health responders may use social media platforms to emphasize that the pandemic is not over and stress the importance of mask-wearing.
- Working closely with trusted sources in the community to emphasize the importance of following preventative measures set by the Ministry of Health and that wearing a mask has no link with lung cancer.
- During the Holy month of Ashura where people are practicing religious duty amidst massive public gatherings, humanitarian actors and government should work with local media to share COVID-19 data about confirmed cases and to emphasize the importance of adhering to protective measures.

02.

Death

”

It has been requested to pull back the vaccine, so far it has killed 40K people, any medicine that causes killing 50 people, has to be pulled back!! Vaccination will restart next month, avoid taking it.

”



This rumor was posted in Kurdish on a public Facebook account. The post has more than 600 engagements including 120 likes and 22 comments.

What's behind the rumor?

The person who posted this rumor is one of the most active sources of Kurdish-language misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines, with thousands of followers. This account has previously claimed that the vaccine causes disease, that it is intended to reduce the world population, and that is connected to HIV/AIDS.

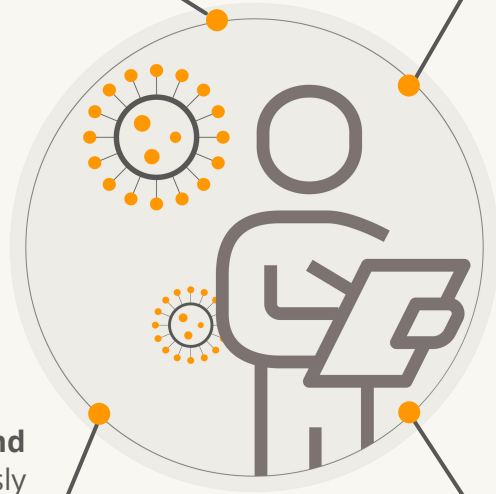
This rumor presents a three-minute video in English, claiming that 40,000 people have died because of the COVID-19 vaccine. There is no source for this claim.



Fact check

The COVID-19 vaccines have been proven in large-scale trials to be safe, effective, and life-saving

Both the Iraqi Ministry of Health and KRG's Ministry of Health has previously stated that there is no death case by the vaccines in Iraq.



A total of 12,308,330,588 vaccine doses have been administered and 4,845,535,590 persons are fully vaccinated worldwide as of August 1st, 2022. Despite the fact that the vaccines have certain side effects such as fever, tiredness, and muscle ache; hence, there is no official published data and report on the number of deaths caused by the COVID-19 vaccines.

There was only one death case in Iraq that had been associated with the COVID-19 vaccine. A 17-year-old boy died after two days of getting the first dose of the vaccine, however, it has been investigated that the death was not caused by the vaccine. The Director of Kirkuk Health Directorate said to the local media that the boy was infected by the COVID-19 virus, and the vaccination team did not test him before vaccinating him.^[5]

Why does it matter?

Iraq has a very low vaccination rate of only 19.2% as of July 2022.⁶ Out of more than 40 million people, only 7.7 million are fully vaccinated. Rumors that associate vaccines with death or severe side effects contribute to vaccine hesitancy and the comments below this rumor confirm this, with many agreeing that they will not put their lives in danger by taking the vaccine.

Furthermore, political and economic instability in Iraq has contributed to a slow-down in the national vaccination campaign, resulting in fewer protected individuals, a heightened risk of transmission, and a sense amongst the population that vaccination is no longer necessary.

Recommendations



- Emphasize the safety of vaccination and be transparent about actual adverse reaction data.
- Vaccination centers should ask and test people about the health conditions of those who visit them and make sure if they have short-term or long-term illnesses before taking the vaccine and advise them based on their health conditions.
- Humanitarian and health actors should continue to engage communities on the importance of vaccination, stressing that infection in unvaccinated people can be severe and lead to long-lasting health issues.
- To overcome the COVID-19 communication challenges, humanitarian actors can get an advantage from the “Vaccine Inequality: Why Vaccine Inequality is our Biggest COVID-19 Communication Challenge Yet” report that has been prepared by Internews in this regard.

Sources

1. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/07062022>
2. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-masks>
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/types-of-masks.html>
4. <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/iq>
5. <https://www.iqiraq.news/society/31466--.html>
6. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/vaccines/international>



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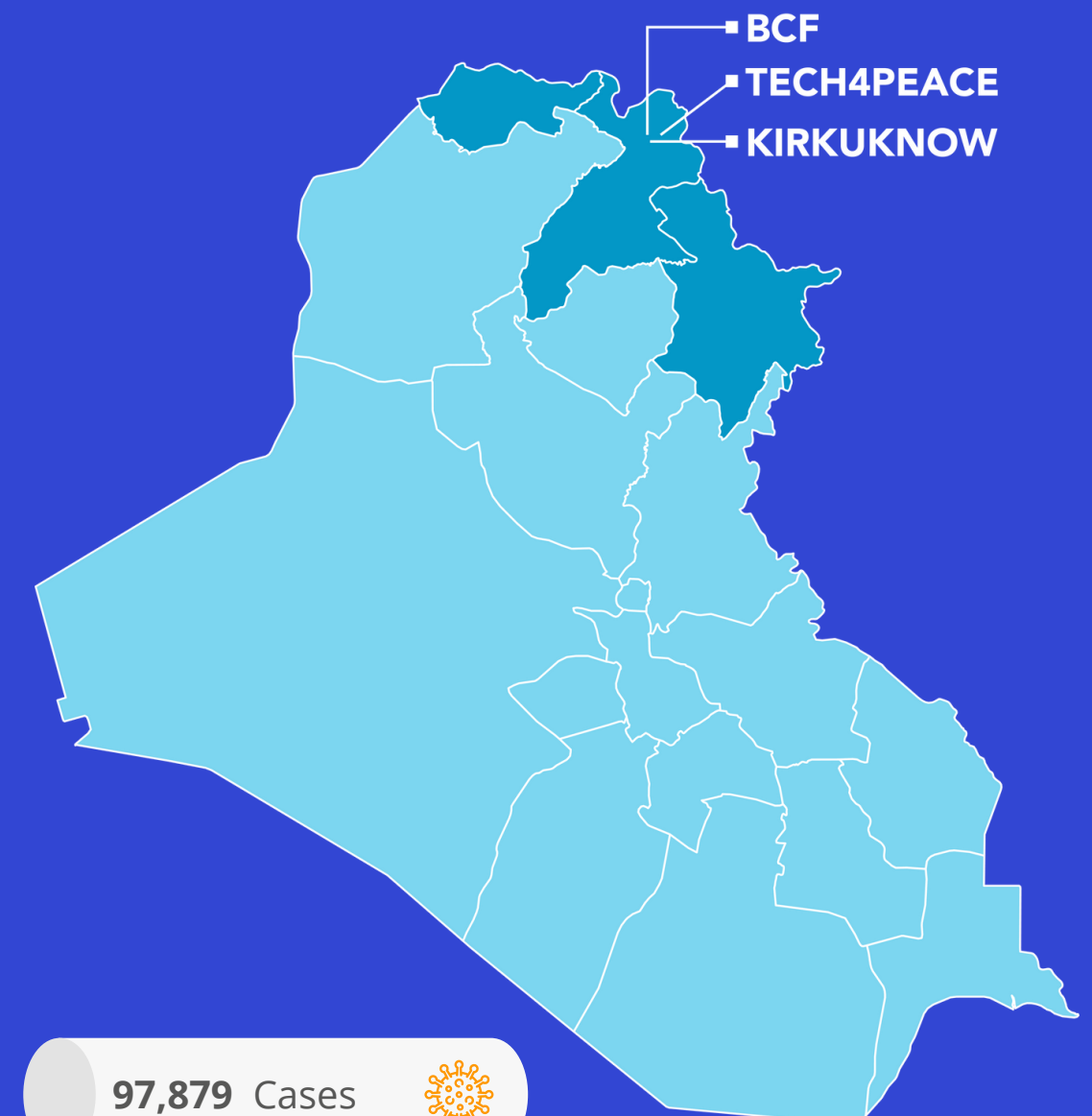
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BCF
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Covid-19 Snapshot IRAQ



97,879 Cases



74 Deaths



18,904,252 Doses

