



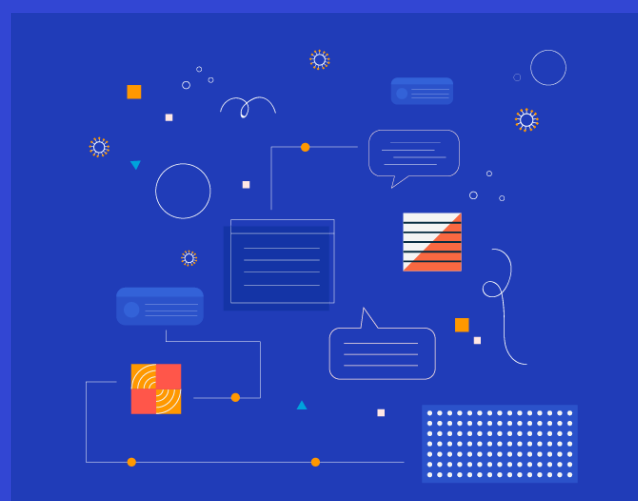
## ► Iraq Humanitarian Bulletin # 1

January 2022

### 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 between mid-December 2021 to January 31st, 2022. In total, 158 rumors have been collected. They have been categorized as 18 high-risk, 90 medium-risk, and 50 low-risk level. Data were collected from Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram pages, groups, and accounts that have significant user engagement.



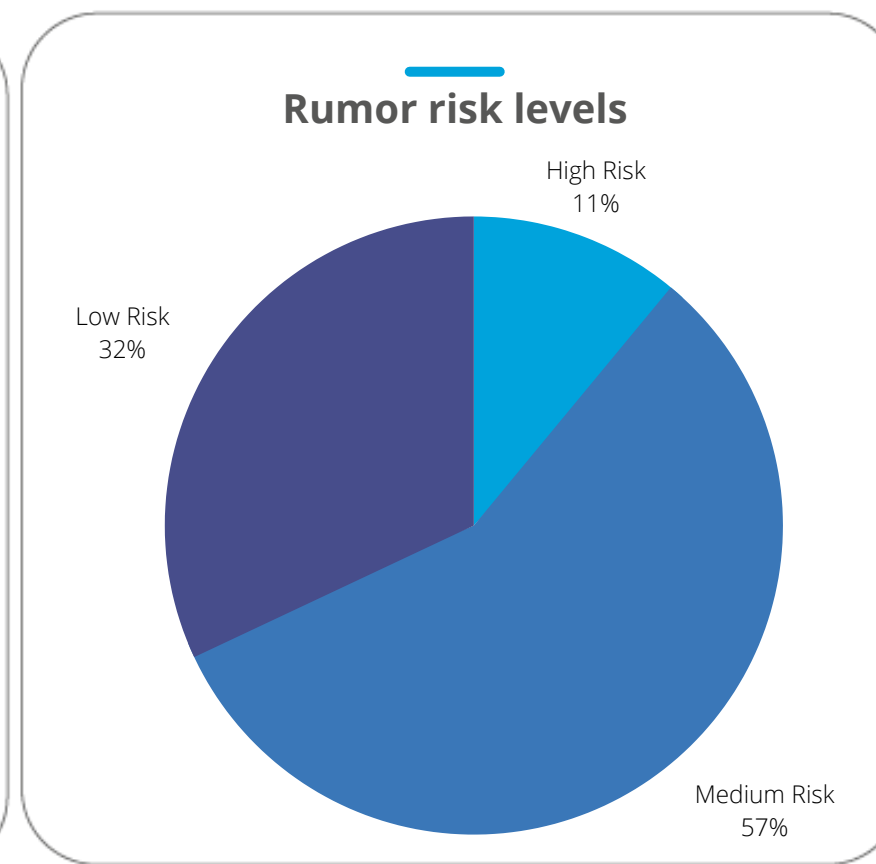
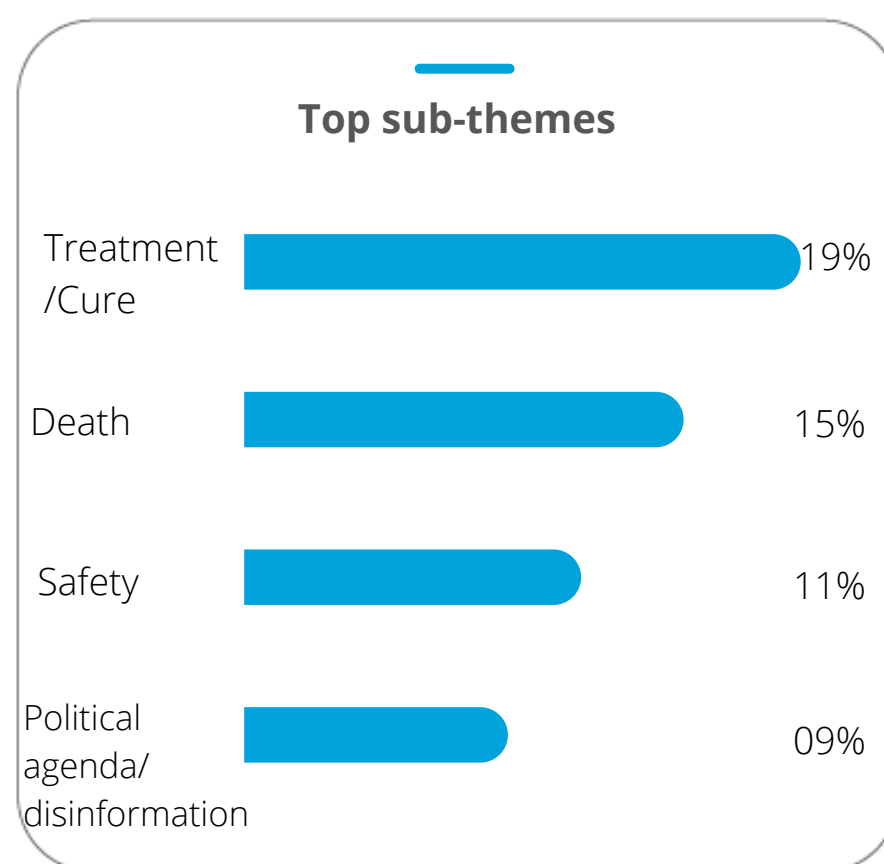
# What is Rooted in Trust?

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.



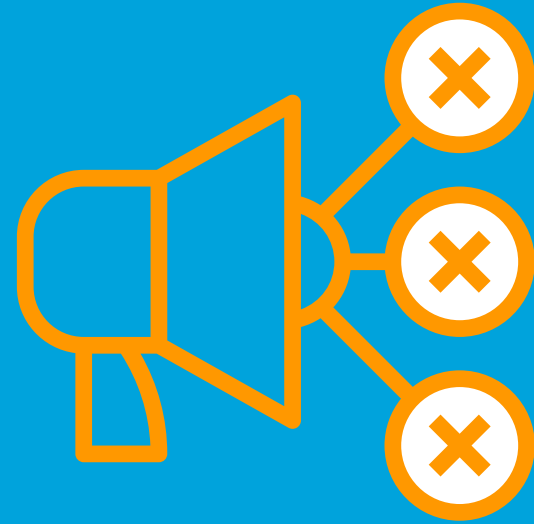
## 158 rumors were collected



- Project manager
- [ssofiwan@internews.org](mailto:ssofiwan@internews.org)
- [rootedintrust.azurewebsites.net](http://rootedintrust.azurewebsites.net)

## WHAT IS A RUMOR?

Rumors are unverified qualitative pieces of information documented from first-hand sources within the community, in the language of the community, and preserved in as much relevant detail as possible. Rumors can take the shape of a question, criticism, or general comments on a situation or topic.



## WHY IS RUMOR TRACKING IMPORTANT?

Identifying and analyzing rumors helps us better understand the communities that humanitarian actors work with and provides insights into peoples' questions, concerns, information gaps, and broader dynamics within the information ecosystem and specific vulnerable groups.

### Rumor

"The vaccines contain pork gelatin components and make you think only about sexual pleasure." *(said by a religious actor in a video posted on social media)*

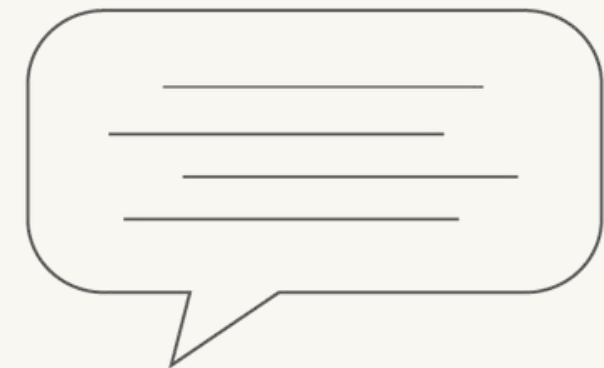
01



Spread in Kurdish through multiple social media platforms with an estimated reach of 2000 people

### What's behind the rumor?

Claims continue to circulate among Muslim communities that COVID-19 vaccines contain pork products. Because pork is prohibited by Islam, this rumor contributes to vaccine hesitancy amongst these groups. Some religious actors, such as certain Mullahs, claim that the global response to COVID-19 is a conspiracy against Islam. For example, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, some Muslim clerics told their followers that the virus is a deliberate plan to destroy Islam, aiming to reduce the number of Muslims or abandon their beliefs. As such, false information about COVID-19 and vaccines plays on these fears; this is often achieved by claiming that treatments including vaccines contain forbidden (Haram) ingredients.





## Fact check



In Iraq, Abdullah Waisy, the head of the Union of Kurdistan Islamic Scholars stated that “according to the Sharia, the Islamic Law, vaccines are halal and there are no religious objections towards taking vaccines.”[1]

Ali al-Qaradaghi, the Secretary General of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, confirmed that vaccines are halal in an interview with Rudaw Network, a leading media network in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

Pork-derived gelatin has been widely used as a stabilizer to ensure vaccines remain safe and effective during storage and transport. However, pharmaceutical companies have worked for years to develop pork-free vaccines to respond to the request of Muslim populations among other faith groups.

When vaccines were first rolled out, spokespeople for Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca confirmed that pork products were not part of their COVID-19 vaccines.[2] Several Islamic Medical Associations around the world have since then endorsed these vaccines and Dr Nabile Safdar, President of the Islamic Medical Association of North America, has also confirmed[3] that vaccines for COVID-19 are halal, (they have no pork objectionable ingredients.)

## Why does it matter?

- Although vaccination rates are increasing in Iraq, there is still an extremely high resistance from a large segment of the population. The rate of fully vaccinated people in Iraq is 15.9% by the end of January 2022. This means out of 41.18 million only 6.5 million Iraqis are fully vaccinated. Yet, there is no clear data about the levels of vaccination hesitance and resistance so far. Most IDPs in northern Iraq are Muslim so misinformation suggesting that pork ingredients are included in vaccines would contribute significantly to vaccine hesitancy among devout groups.
- A KAP study[4] conducted by CARE in mid-2021[5] [GK(2)] found out that women and religious leaders are least likely to have correct information about COVID-19, vaccines, and side effects. This is especially important when we consider the highly influential role those religious leaders hold in informing and communicating with believers.

**Theme:** COVID-19 Vaccine

**Sub-Theme:** Religion

**Risk Level:** Medium Risk

## Recommendations



- **Partners must engage with religious leaders** and understand their gaps in information and listen to their concerns related to vaccines. Religious leaders are trusted voices within the communities but if they are themselves hesitant about the vaccine or unable to access information, they will not be able to support the spread of accurate information.
- **Relay and amplify public statements from religious leaders, such as the Union of Kurdistan Islamic Scholars** that address the halal nature of vaccines and share it widely through outreach activities. Religious authorities have a disproportionately influential role in communities’ decisions related to vaccination.
- Humanitarian and health workers should be aware of **the trend rumors that link religious beliefs to anti-vaccine sentiments, in which these rumors could eventually create vaccine hesitancy among religious** and social groups. Therefore, preventative awareness measures among non-Muslim communities are keys to respond these kinds of rumors.

# HOW DO WE ASSESS THE RISK OF RUMORS?

The risk level is determined based on the potential to cause harm and what other negative impacts it could have on individuals, communities, or service providers. In particular:

**HIGH RISK:** These are rumors that are likely to be believed and cause significant and immediate danger or harm to an individual, group, or the wider community.

**MEDIUM RISK:** Content that is very likely to be believed and cause widespread action and panic. Medium risk rumors are also those that have the potential to have a larger impact on the community and have more traction.

**LOW RISK:** This is rumor content that if they are believed, they will NOT pose an immediate and severe danger to an individual or the community.



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## Rumor

“After taking Viagra medicine I was cured from Covid-19 virus.”



Spread in Kurdish and Arabic through multiple news websites and social media platforms with an estimated reach of 5000 people

## What's behind the rumor?

Unproven and ineffective 'alternative' treatments for COVID-19 have been common across the world since the early days of the pandemic, especially amongst communities with poor access to healthcare and information. This rumor gained international attention in mid-January 2022, after a British nurse claimed to have been given a large dose of Viagra as part of her treatment for COVID-19 at a local hospital.

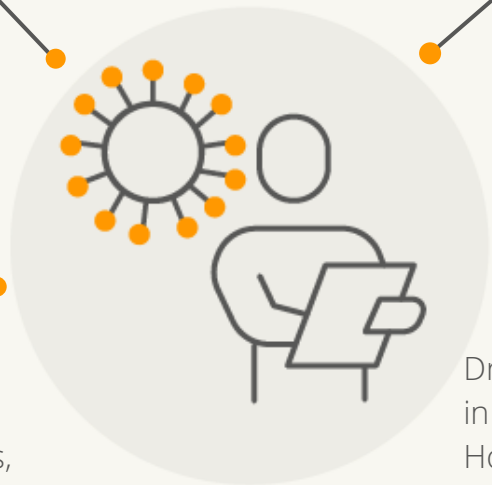
In Iraq, this rumor has gained traction since then, rapidly circulating on Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms including nationally popular media outlets with millions of followers and subscribers. On the social media profiles of these media, people positively responded to this purported cure and even recommended other alternative treatments such as birth control pills (Aleen).







## Fact check



Viatis, the company that produces Viagra, confirmed that the drug “is not indicated for COVID-19 or related symptoms” and that it is not approved for COVID-19 treatment.[5]

Birth control pills are not an effective treatment for COVID-19.

Sildenafil is the active ingredient of Viagra, a medicine mainly used to treat erectile dysfunction and, in some cases, pulmonary hypertension (a type of high blood pressure that affects arteries in the lungs).[6]

Dr. Hadi Abdullah, a clinical doctor working in the Intensive Care Unit at the Shahid Aso Hospital (a hospital for COVID-19 in Sulaymaniyah City) states “I have been working with those who are battling the coronavirus since the outbreak of COVID-19 until today, there is no guideline suggestion the use of Viagra as a treatment for coronavirus. Using Viagra may be fatal for some people”

## Why does it matter?

- People who incorrectly believe that alternative, ineffective treatments are readily available may be less likely to accept vaccines – which are in fact the only reliable preventative drug against COVID-19. This is especially important to consider regarding those groups which have not taken the vaccine or those who are already hesitant.
- According to a survey on vaccine hesitancy among marginalized people in Duhok and Ninawa, 68% of women mentioned they were not willing to receive a COVID-19 vaccine and 62% of people expressed they would not get the COVID-19 vaccine even if it was easily available to them. As such, misinformation about alternative treatments may further discourage vaccination or appropriate health-seeking behaviors in the case of infection.
- Women may be especially prone to act in the use of birth pills as there have also been increasing rumors about the potential effects of the vaccine on women’s fertility. A study conducted by CARE states that women have less access to, knowledge of, and willingness to accept the COVID-19 vaccine than men.
- Importantly, many medicines such as Viagra have potentially harmful side effects, especially for those patients with underlying health conditions such as heart conditions. This is especially worrisome for men, given that people can get Viagra from pharmacies without a prescription from a physician.

**Theme:** COVID-19 General  
**Sub-Theme:** Cure/Treatment  
**Risk Level:** High Risk

## Recommendations



- Humanitarian partners should ensure that **people receive accurate information about the medication and treatment of the COVID-19 virus** from the main sources such as the Ministry of Health and WHO.
- Community health workers must provide **regular information on the risk and danger of taking unapproved medicines.** Also, health centers inside the IDP camps should be aware of COVID-19 rumors and misinformation, so that they can respond accordingly

# Covid-19 snapshot (January 2022) - (Iraq)



116,842 cases  
January 1st to 31st



1,485,134



6,346,042  
2 doses total



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## Rumor

"These vaccines cause heart attack, brain stroke, destroying red blood cells, blood clot, and loss of the immune system. They are the test injection on the human body and slowly lead people to become robots and be controlled. The vaccines are against the Nuremberg Code that was signed by most countries after World War II, and Iraq is among those countries. Know your right not to let anyone make you a mouse in their laboratory."



Spread in Kurdish through a Facebook public account with an estimated reach of 1000 people

## What's behind the rumor?

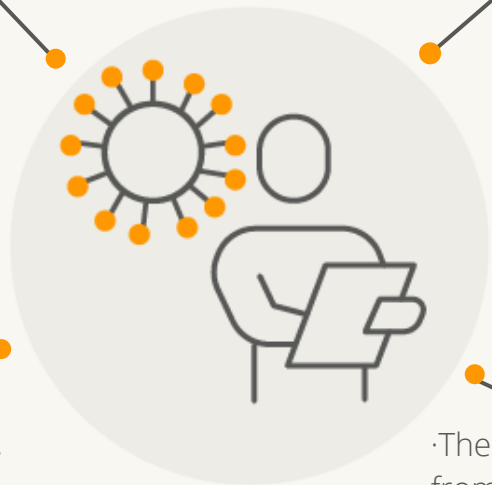
This rumor makes false claims about vaccine side-effects and suggests that Iraqi people are being exposed to experimental drugs. This narrative has been identified throughout the pandemic in other neighboring countries with the logic that the West is looking to eliminate Muslims or in other countries worldwide following mistrust fueled by historically unequal North-South relations. Particularly, this rumor refers to the Nuremberg Code, which is an ethical code defined after the Second World War to define the basic principles that must be observed to satisfy moral, ethical, and legal concepts for medical experimentation with human beings. The Nuremberg Code emphasizes the importance of voluntary consent of the human subjects in experimental trials.[7]

This rumor mentions the code and highlights the need for consent and exercising free power of choice, just after the Kurdistan Regional Government decided that any employee at any position does not receive a vaccine by February 1st, 2022, cannot abide by official work.[8] It thus expresses clearly a concern for the boundaries crossed by national authorities on their mandate and the fears of additional breaches in their rights. This is a common concern identified throughout populations worldwide, as they have seen their rights to move, access public spaces, or go to school heavily constrained by their unwillingness to take the vaccine.





## Fact check



People may experience some mild side effects after getting vaccinated, which are signs that the body is building protection. These may include fever, chills, or headaches, but not everyone will experience the same side effects.[10]

·COVID-19 vaccines are not able to genetically modify humans or alter human DNA. The Pfizer-BioNTech and the Moderna are mRNA vaccines, not DNA vaccines, and they can't combine with human DNA to change our genetic code.

·According to experts in medical ethics, the claim that the COVID-19 vaccines are experimental and contravene the Nuremberg Code is simply not true. COVID-19 vaccines have been shown to be safe and effective in large-scale clinical trials and have been approved nationally and internationally.[9]

·The risk of developing serious side effects from COVID-19 vaccines is extremely low. Some COVID-19 vaccines have been associated with an extremely rare syndrome known as vaccine-induced thrombotic thrombocytopenia that can lead to low platelet counts and blood clots to form in unusual areas. There is no evidence that vaccine causes heart attack, brain stroke, or red blood cells destruction.[11]

## Why does it matter?

This post received high engagement and reposted in multiple closed groups; in the comments, people stated that vaccines change genes, and they will have a negative impact on DNA. Despite having no scientific basis, these claims are circulating widely among different communities, with the likely result of increasing vaccine hesitancy or resistance. COVID-19 infection has a much higher risk of serious complications, such as blood clots and long-term symptoms, than any vaccine.

**Theme:** COVID-19 Vaccine

**Sub-Theme:** Safety, political agenda/Misinformation

**Risk Level:** Medium Risk

## Recommendations



- Partners should **engage communities in order to understand their fears related to vaccines** and the underlying factors fueling anxiety. It is essential to address those questions and rumors that express concerns of unclear practices with vulnerable communities.
- Humanitarian partners should support public health workers in **disseminating clear and straightforward messages on the actual side effects of a COVID-19 vaccination.** They can provide awareness sessions in the health centers inside and outside the IDP camps focusing on the difference between side effects and rare allergy reactions to the vaccines.

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## Sources



- [1] <https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/health/130420217>
- [2] Does COVID vaccine contain pork product or other animal product? | 11alive.com
- [3] Covid-19 Vaccines are Halal - IMANA Statement - YouTube
- [4] [http://carevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Iraq-Vaccination-Uptake-Study-CARE\\_FINAL.pdf](http://carevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Iraq-Vaccination-Uptake-Study-CARE_FINAL.pdf)
- [5] <https://apnews.com/article/fact-checking-171860386717>
- [6] <https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/sildenafil-viagra/>
- [7] <https://fullfact.org/health/nuremberg-code-covid/>
- [8] <https://gov.krd/moi-en/activities/news-and-press-releases/2022/january/krq-issues-new-covid-19-regulations/>
- [9] <https://www.who.int/news/item/11-06-2021-statement-for-healthcare-professionals-how-covid-19-vaccines-are-regulated-for-safety-and-effectiveness>
- [10] <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/side-effects-of-covid-19-vaccines>
- [11] <https://healthcare.utah.edu/healthfeed/postings/2021/07/blood-clotting-covid19.php>

Rooted in Trust is collecting, analyzing and responding to rumors in 10 countries with generous support from USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA). We focus on equipping journalists and humanitarian communicators with the tools they need, in the languages they prefer, to combat rumors and misinformation in the COVID-19 crisis. For more information on the project, visit: [rootedintrust.azurewebsites.net](https://rootedintrust.azurewebsites.net)



**Want to give us feedback,  
get involved, or share data?  
We love to chat!**

Contact: Sara Sofiwan - Project Manager  
[ssofiwan@internews.org](mailto:ssofiwan@internews.org)

