



# HUMANITARIAN BULLETIN #3

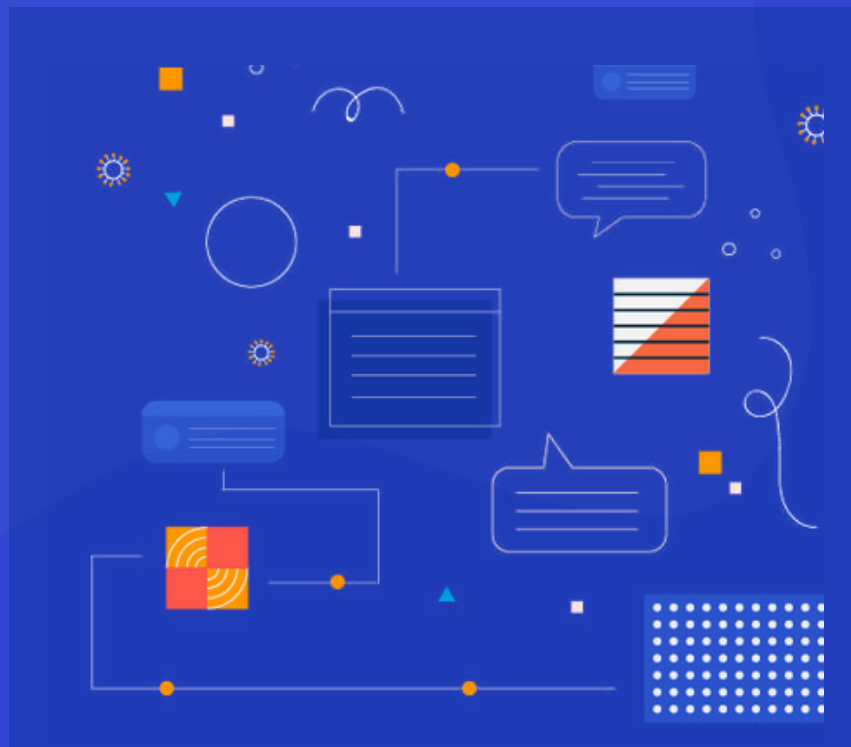
► Iraq March 2022

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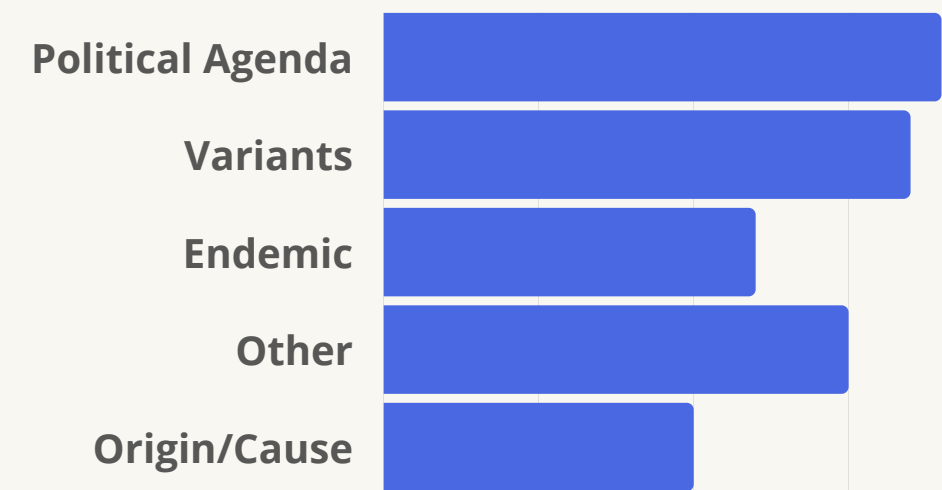
## Introduction to Rooted in Trust

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.

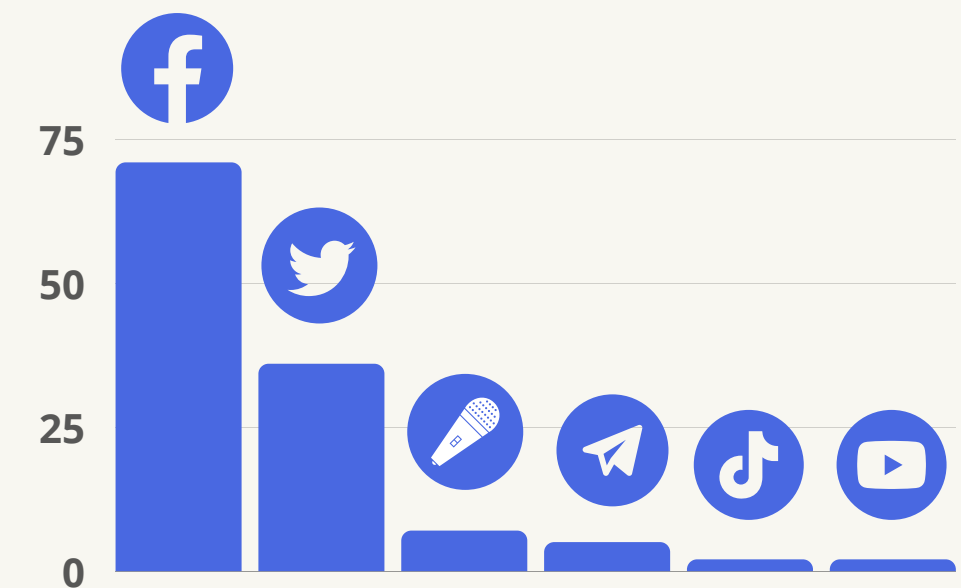
## About this Bulletin

This bulletin provides humanitarian and health 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 March 2022. In total, #123 rumors have been collected. They have been categorized as #2 high-risk, #64 medium-risk, and #57 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.

### Top Themes



### Data Sources



**123** Rumors Collected

01.

## Safety

“The ways to check if your vaccine is killer or not.”



Posted in Kurdish on a Facebook public account and a website. It has 1,694 readers on the website and a total of 108 engagements on Facebook (74 likes, 31 comments, and 3 shares).

## What's behind the rumor?

This rumor comes from an article that was published originally on a very popular website under the headline: “It's not a virus but it's a weapon”. The article contains short and punchy paragraphs, links to international data, an infographic, and seemingly genuine citations. All that makes the article appear to be reliable but it contains several false claims about COVID-19 and vaccines.

The first rumor within the article claims that the virus is man-made. The second rumor suggests that “the vaccine is the Trojan horse, made for controlling all humanity through nanotechnology.” Several claims are made about severe side-effects of the vaccines. These claims are taken from other conspiracy theory websites published outside of Iraq.



# 01.



## Fact check

**Dr. Saif Al-Badr** the Spokesperson for the Iraqi Ministry of Health & Environment responded to the rumor by stressing “There is no basis in truth to this news also no official website to indicate the vaccine type will kill you. In addition, Iraq up until this day has not witnessed any critical conditions or complications as a result of taking the vaccine. The post-vaccination symptoms were simple to mild such as pain in the place of the vaccine and some fatigue for a few days”.

**Dr. Hazha Hoshyar** the focal person for the Ministry of Health in the Iraqi Kurdistan region for vaccination issues mentioned “Undoubtedly false news, there is no website to indicate if the vaccine kills or not, on the contrary, the vaccine does not kill but protects, and we encourage everyone to take the vaccine to overcome the pandemic”.

**According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**, Messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines teach our cells how to make a protein that will trigger an immune response inside our bodies. Like all vaccines, mRNA vaccines benefit people who get vaccinated by giving them protection against diseases like COVID-19 without risking the potentially serious consequences of getting sick, and it cannot change your DNA in any way. [1]

## Why does it matter?

Any rumor that states that COVID-19 vaccines are dangerous can increase hesitancy among those who have not taken the vaccines yet, and anxiety in those who have. The rumor appears to target the majority of Kurdish readers, as it is inside a detailed written article and published on one of the popular Kurdish websites. The author posted the article on his Facebook public account; the post was reshared three times and received more than thirty comments in which most of them showed their agreement with the information stated in the article. There are several comments that clearly ask people not to take any vaccines, and this is an indicator of the negative impact of this misinformation on how it encourages people to avoid taking vaccines.

## Recommendations



- Humanitarian actors should provide healthcare workers, especially those who work in the IDP camps, with up-to-date information on COVID-19 vaccines. It is essential that health workers have accurate information to share with communities because they are trusted sources of information.
- Local partners should conduct discussions and listening groups with communities to address concerns and questions about side effects and the differences between the vaccines. Focus group discussions would provide useful insights into the rumors that people may have heard and enable organizations to develop resources countering misinformation.

02.

## Hoax

“Coronavirus is going towards the end in the region.”



Posted in Kurdish on two media outlets' social media pages and websites which have over half a million followers on Facebook.

## What's behind the rumor?

This post claims that “The infection and death of Coronavirus came to end” and quotes apparently official figures suggesting that there are very few new infections or deaths. The associated article states that “At the moment, most hospitals have reached to the minimum cases of COVID virus, and that so far there are no real public health concerns associated with this mutation”, claiming that this is the position of the KRG Ministry of Health. This was published in the first independent newspaper (Hawlati) and another active media outlet (Zaman) published the same title with the attached image of an official daily announcement of the Ministry of Health. The announcement showed only the number of registered cases in four different cities, which included a death and nineteen new infected cases.

The article advises people not to visit COVID-19 test centers or register their infections. It claims that the Omicron variant poses no danger to people because it is milder than previous variants.

# 01.



## Fact check



**Dr. Saif Al-Badr** the Spokesperson for the Iraqi Ministry of Health & Environment says, "The news is absolutely incorrect, Coronavirus has not ended yet, and Iraq is continuously recording new cases in the daily epidemiological and vaccination situation of the Corona pandemic in Iraq. Additionally, we also note that China is going through a wave of Coronavirus outbreak, so we must continue taking precautions."

**Dr. Hazha Hoshyar**, the focal person for the Ministry of Health in the Iraqi Kurdistan region for vaccination issues, responded to the rumor "The fourth wave in Kurdistan region ended, however the percentage of vaccinated people is very low, so Coronavirus fears continue, and there are still daily new cases recorded. Coronavirus continues to change so we do not know when a new variant will appear. Unless the percentage of vaccinated people reaches 90%, we cannot say that we controlled Coronavirus."

**Dr. Karzan Abdullah**, a specialist in Cardiology and Internists, stated that "as a specialist doctor I still diagnose cases with COVID-19 at the hospital, but the Omicron variant has milder side effects. Therefore, most people take medicine at home. But this doesn't mean that Coronavirus has ended, and we don't know what will happen in the future"

## Why does it matter?

This misinformation could lead people to wrongly believe that there is no longer any risk posed by COVID-19 and discourage them from taking preventative measures. Alarmingly, many media outlets such as websites, WebTVs, and the social media pages of radios and TVs published it, in which all of them state the same concept that the virus is coming to an end. Across KRI, people are decreasingly abiding by recommended public health and social measures; very few people wear masks in crowded areas such as shopping centers and even big conferences. Spreading such kinds of information may also fuel vaccine hesitancy at a time when vaccination is a major weapon for mitigating the spread and impact of COVID-19 in communities.

## Recommendations



- Supporting Kurdistan Ministry of Health, one of the leading reliable sources for information, in addressing information about COVID-19 by involving the media department team of the MoH in the Webinars and other sessions of sharing information, to be more specific and accurate to public and media speeches about COVID-19.
- Health actors should continue to invest in outreach and awareness campaigns about COVID-19, sharing up-to-date figures and advice. In-person activities in camps are important to reach communities with limited or no internet access. Online activities should stress the importance of continuing to be vigilant and the risks associated with not getting vaccinated.
- Information about the Omicron variant specifically should be provided to communities, emphasizing that it is still a major risk, especially to older and vulnerable people.

03.

## Hoax

“ COVID-19, the lie of the century  
My friends, I want to say something about all the lies that come from the west. What happened to the coronavirus in the war between Russia and Ukraine? Where is the vaccine regulation for Ukrainians when they enter other countries? Where is the news of deaths and infections all over the world? I have posted a photo that contains two injections the one with dark red blood is from a vaccinated person, and the normal light red one is from an unvaccinated person. Look only intelligent people refuse to take the vaccine. I hope Putin receives Nobel Prize for Medicine because he ended the coronavirus. Do not take the vaccine and protect your family from it. ”



Published in Kurdish on Facebook with over 156 likes, 13 comments, and 3 shares.

## What's behind the rumor?

The rumor shows that the media outlets functioned profoundly in creating panic, anxiety, and fear in people's hearts and regularly reporting the death numbers and newly infected people on a daily bases. The panic that was experienced by millions of people, was not because of the coronavirus spread and death only but it was because the media amplified Coronaviruses health effects and mortalities. Media blackout and diming suddenly covered the whole corona issues when the Russia-Ukrainian war broke out. The rumor indicates that the media leaves a focus on a topic, it does no matter how serious it is, when a new topic comes up.

Also, this rumor describes the Covid 19 as a conspiracy theory that the west has manufactured the new coronavirus with the support of mass media and its leading role in disseminating deceptions to control the whole world. It generates more suspicions about the mutations of the virus and states that the virus is not a natural evolution and praises Vladimir Putin for ending up the pandemic. By showing the image of the two different blood colors, one seems natural “without the vaccine” and the other with a petrifying dark color “with vaccine”, all create fear among the community through social media and urge people “to not be part of the game” by taking the vaccine.



# 01.



## Fact check

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, **there has been much false information and rumors from Iraqi people on social media suggesting that COVID-19 was a politically motivated hoax and has now ended because of the Ukraine conflict.** However, starting from the first day of the Russian invasion until the end of March 2022, the total number of new COVID-19 cases is 55,340,850 and the total number of deaths globally is 200,712. [1]

**Only in Iraq, 21,045 new cases were recorded from the first day of the Russian-Ukrainian war until the end of March 2022.** Also, 232 deaths have been recorded during the same period.<sup>2</sup> This data has been shared publicly on the Facebook pages of both the Iraqi Ministry of Health<sup>3</sup> and the Ministry of Health of the Kurdistan Regional Government. [4]

**Human blood is red because it contains a protein called hemoglobin.** Haemoglobin's color comes from a red-colored compound called heme that helps transport oxygen throughout the body. Without hemoglobin, blood would likely appear to be a lighter, yellower, clearer tone. People who are vaccinated against COVID-19 do not have lower levels of hemoglobin in their blood and COVID-19 vaccines do not change the color of blood. [5]

**There has been a decrease in media attention to COVID-19 and, understandably,** a lot of media focus is now on the conflict in Ukraine. This does not mean that COVID-19 is over; only that media priorities have changed.

## Why does it matter?

This rumor was circulating among people in Iraq when the media mainly prioritized the news of the war between Russia and Ukraine, and the coverage of the COVID-19 situation was ignored. Rumors that link the Coronavirus with political agendas, can quickly spread among people as there are always conspiracy theories on the virus and the political issues in the first place. This rumor easily gained traction in Iraqi communities, as many people argue COVID-19 is the result of Western countries' political agendas. However, data shows COVID-19 still exists all over Iraq. According to the WHO, 83% of the positive cases are the Omicron variant. The rumor targeted people who only use social media as their sources of information and they don't have knowledge of fact-checking. With people's responses to this rumor, the doubt, and hesitancy to take the vaccine become visible once again.

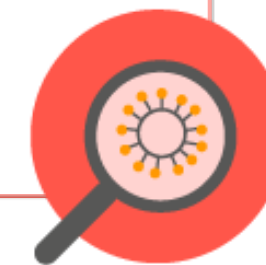
## Recommendations



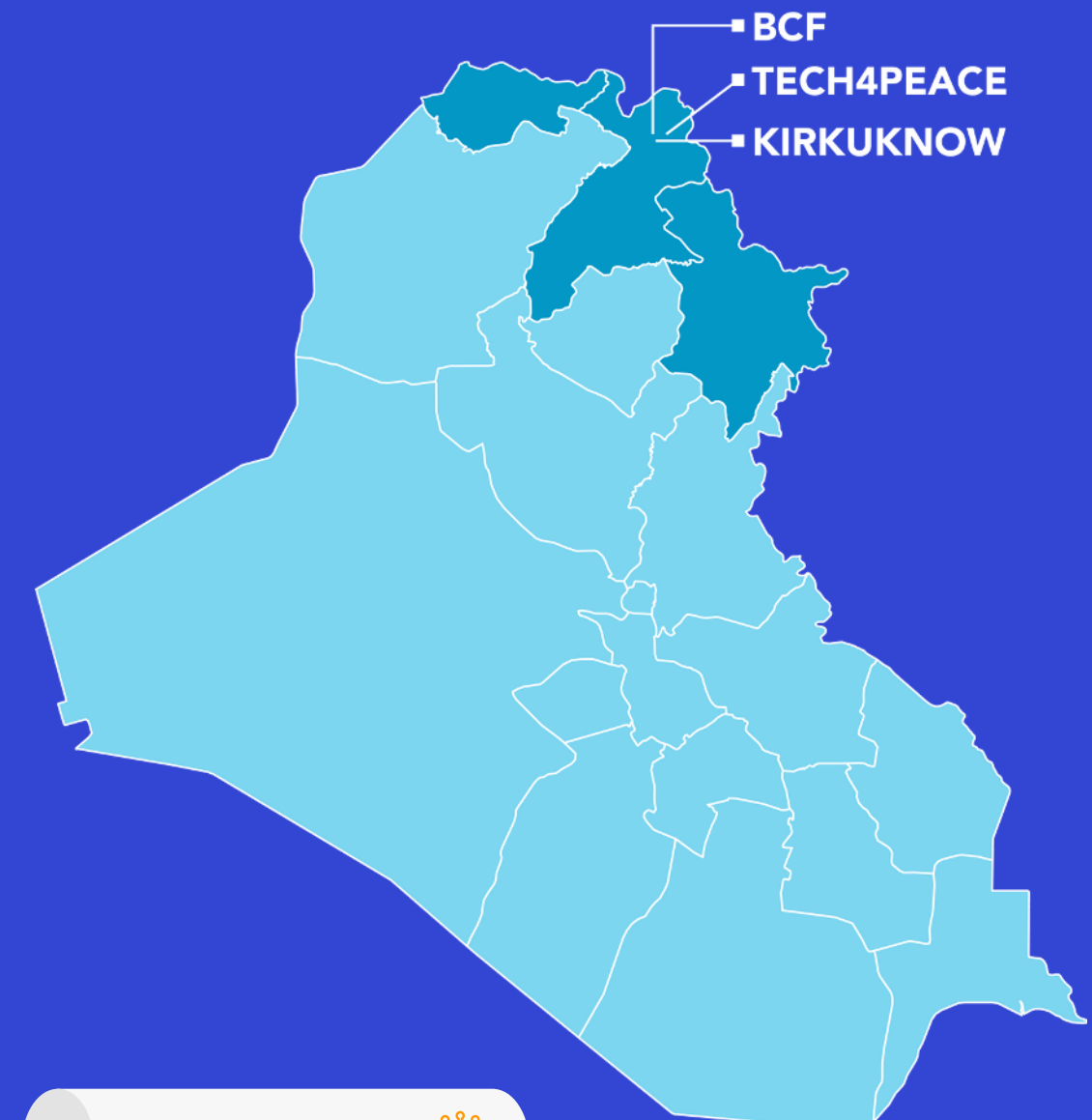
- For anyone who wants to know the up-to-date data on the COVID-19 virus, it is important to receive information and data from reliable sources such as WHO, the Iraqi Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Health-KRG.
- Since the source of this rumor is a Facebook post, remind communities to identify the source of information and compare the information presented across different sources to ensure that it is true and based on facts.
- Develop social media posts and conduct outreach activities to inform communities that COVID-19 continues in Iraq and that protective measures and vaccination are still important.
- Health and outreach workers should explain that the pandemic is still a danger. Referring to the WHO and government data, they should remind communities that there are still many people who get infected by the virus on a daily basis.
- Through community engagement activities, it is important that outreach workers state that there is no link between the COVID-19 virus and any political agenda. It is important to let people express their fear and concern about such kinds of events, however, humanitarian actors should provide facts and explanations related to these events.

## Sources

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/different-vaccines/mrna.html>
2. <https://covid19.who.int/>
3. <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/iq>
4. <https://www.facebook.com/MOH.GOV.IQ>
5. <https://www.facebook.com/KRG.MOH.Official>
6. <https://health-desk.org/articles/covid-19-vaccines-do-not-change-the-color-of-blood>



## Covid-19 Snapshot IRAQ



16,757 Cases



175 Deaths



17,778,382 Doses

