

# Iraq Faces Coronavirus with Empty Coffers and a Crumbling Health System

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Abbas Abboud Salem is an Iraqi writer and journalist with a master's degree in political science. He has held several significant positions in the field of audiovisual and print media, and his work has appeared in over a dozen Arabic newspapers. He has written four published books.



## Brief Analysis

Since Iraq's first case of COVID-19 in late February, the Iraqi state has struggled to contend with stagnant economic growth, [political unrest \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Husham-al-Hashemi-Iraq-PMF-IS-Kataib-Hezbollah-Security-Extremism\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Husham-al-Hashemi-Iraq-PMF-IS-Kataib-Hezbollah-Security-Extremism), and divided popular opinion as cases continue to rise through the summer. Despite early attempts to slow the spread of the virus, the rocky relationship between Iraq's people and its government has caused issues for government actors and enhanced the pandemic's spread in the country.

So far, popular cooperation with the government has been limited. While many urban Iraqis take the virus seriously, [adhering to safety measures \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Iraq-Coronavirus-Religion-Sunni-Shia\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Iraq-Coronavirus-Religion-Sunni-Shia) from the Ministry of Health, they are a limited portion of the population. More common are those in the outskirts of cities and rural areas who often deny the existence of the pandemic outright. Belief in conspiracy theories, making light of preventive measures, or coming up with religious or metaphysical interpretations of the disease's provenance to justify dismissal of its potential threat are common in Iraq. Still, many Iraqis remain unconvinced either way.

These popular trends, coupled with general distrust of the government and economic woes, have limited the success of Iraqi efforts to handle the pandemic, helping to explain the rising caseload throughout the summer, with no signs of abating.

## Early Efforts Under Health Officials

Iraq reported its first case of COVID-19 on February 24, 2020 in the holy city of Najaf. Three days later, the capital, Baghdad, reported its first case. On [March 4 \(Q\)](#), the country saw its first COVID death in the Kurdistan region.

Iraq's Minister of Health Dr. Jaafar Sadiq Allawi had already taken preventative measures against the virus. As the most active government minister, Dr. Allawi succeeded in providing leadership and gaining the respect of some disaffected Iraqis. Formerly a well-respected medical professional in Britain, Dr. Allawi was able to use his experience and professional relationships to form a specialized team to combat COVID-19. Despite derision and rejection, he also pushed the government to adopt early measures to prevent the spread of the novel virus.

On January 28, 2020, the Iraqi Ministry of Health announced it would pursue measures to prevent the coronavirus from reaching the country and instituted precautionary measures at the country's points of entry. The ministry also advised local leaders to limit religious gatherings. Two weeks later, after the WHO officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, Dr. Allawi and his team tightened restrictions, prohibiting religious gatherings and closing restaurants.

Nonetheless, the ministry's efforts could not keep the virus out of Iraq. The state failed to monitor the return of Iraqis from abroad, and health officials were unable to manage the country's border crossings. Iraqi media outlets likewise failed to persuade citizens to comply with safety and prevention measures.

Consequently, the government attempted to enforce more stringent and serious measures. On March 26, 2020, the Iraqi Council of Ministers decided to form the Higher Committee for Health and National Safety led by the Prime Minister. It was envisioned to be the top body tasked with combating the spread of the emerging coronavirus in Iraq alongside the committee headed by the Minister of Health.

### **Governmental Failure and General Mistrust**

COVID-19 in appeared in Iraq during its most dire political crisis since April 2003, which included sit-ins, protests, large-scale demonstrations, clashes with riot police, and dozens of casualties. These developments, fueled by popular discontent and rising security tensions, brought most commercial activity in the heart of Baghdad to a standstill.

The collapse of oil prices and destabilization of the country's oil-dependent economy only worsened the political situation. The Iraqi government was now more vulnerable than ever thanks not only to economic degeneration and a decline in standard of living, but also the domination of rival parties and foreign interests in political decision-making. Protestors' demands ultimately led to the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi and his subsequent decision to take a "voluntary absence" from the duties of caretaker PM.

The rupture between Iraqi citizens and their political establishment also had an impact on government policies regarding the virus. Iraqis simply were not abiding by the instructions of the Ministry of Health, in part because a large segment of the population lacks full confidence in state institutions. Some Iraqis doubted the existence of the virus in the first place or accused the government of using excessive and strict measures simply to tighten its grip on the Iraqi people.

The Iraqi government's inability to address the economic effects of the pandemic only worsened its relationship with the Iraqi people. The coronavirus hit professionals and independent business owners hard while eliminating the incomes of large numbers of workers and laborers who depend on daily work for their survival. Many Iraqis have since come to face the dual pressures of COVID-19 and economic insecurity. These economic challenges caused many Iraqis to ignore health directives in the early months of the pandemic, despite high rates of infection and news of the virus's spread in other countries, particularly Iran.

### **As Cases Continue to Rise, Iraq Seeks Direction**

On May 6, parliament voted in the new government headed by Mustafa Al-Kadhimi by an overwhelming majority. Around the same time, the Iraqi government also replaced Dr. Allawi, the leader of government health efforts since the beginning of the pandemic, with a new and less experienced Minister of Health. Given Dr. Allawi's recognized efforts, this replacement sparked public controversy.

Beginning in June, the health situation in Iraq became more serious and the danger more clear as the pandemic began to stoke alarm among the general population, including those that were once skeptical about the virus's existence and seriousness. In a solemn milestone event, Iraq saw an increase of over a thousand cases in one day

after the Ministry of Health announced 1,006 new infections on June 5. It took three months for the coronavirus pandemic in Iraq to reach a thousand cases per day, but that figure then went from 1,000 to 2,000 daily cases in a single month. This number would continue to climb, with daily cases sometimes topping 3,000 in late July and early August.

While Iraqis watched numbers climb, they also saw the impact of the virus both at home and among some of the country's beloved public figures. Among those killed by the virus are media personalities, artists, members of parliament, and Iraq's most famous international football legend, Ahmed Radhi, leaving much of the country in a state of mourning.

At present, the still-new government of Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi and his specialized COVID-19 team are using various means to halt the alarming rise in the rate of infection. Yet the task is proving difficult, and the options on the table are limited. While many expected Al-Kadhimi to impose a total curfew, the government changed its tactics by adopting a new strategy: ban gatherings, but allow unrestricted movement while reinforcing the concept of social distancing and commitment to safety and prevention measures.

Thus far, Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi he has been unable to halt the atrophy of Iraq's health services and control the rise in deaths since he took office on June 6, 2020, when he declared that tackling the coronavirus would be one of his administration's foremost priorities. Inefficient government structures, neglect, corruption, inadequate healthcare systems, and political unrest have convinced most infected Iraqis to avoid government hospitals, choosing instead to remain quarantined at home as their only hope for survival. Many Iraqis now see state-run hospitals as incubators for the disease.

Despite the new prime minister's rhetoric, many Iraqis do not sense that their government has a clear strategy or plan for confronting COVID-19, other than hoping for herd immunity. They face an uncomfortable and vague future as the virus continues to spread.

As of now, Iraqis must either live with the coronavirus in their midst and follow a path toward herd immunity or cooperate on an individual basis to stop the terrifying rise in cases and deaths through serious compliance with prevention measures. The future will depend on government support, international aid, and the promise of vaccines or medicines to change the tide of the pandemic. In any event, it appears August will be the most decisive month in determining whether the Iraqi people can prevail over this biological enemy.



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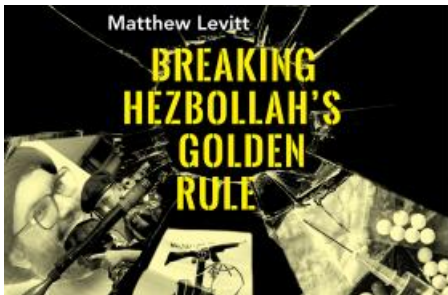
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