

Coronavirus, the Fall of Populism, and Iraq

by [Munqith Dagher \(/experts/munqith-dagher\)](/experts/munqith-dagher)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Munqith Dagher \(/experts/munqith-dagher\)](/experts/munqith-dagher)

Dr. Munqith Dagher is MENA director and a board member of Gallup International. Dr. Dagher is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

In her [December 2019 piece for Quartz \(https://qz.com/1774201/the-global-state-of-right-wing-populism-in-2019/\)](https://qz.com/1774201/the-global-state-of-right-wing-populism-in-2019/), the geopolitics expert Annalisa Merelli identified 20 countries now governed by populist movements and 14 other countries—Iraq included—where populist parties played a pivotal role in policy making. The quick spread of populist movements over the past few years has been a reactionary response to the consequences of globalization. Though there is no alternative to globalization, the widespread appeal of populism potentially heralds comprehensive corrective changes similar to what English economist John Maynard Keynes proposed as an economic system for capitalism after the Great Depression of the 1930s. Keynes proposed for the state to play a role in rebalancing the capitalist economy through direct supervision of production and distribution and adjusting the market balance **between supply and demand**

[\(https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/ar/content/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%86%D8%A9\)](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/ar/content/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%86%D8%A9).

The paradox now lies in that the same populism that benefited from the shortcomings of globalization will now suffer greatly from populist leaders and regimes' inability to deal with the ramifications of the coronavirus crisis. Francis Fukuyama recently noted the significant similarity in mindset and decision-making between totalitarian regimes like China and Iran and democratic governments with populist leaders like the United States in dealing with coronavirus. Much like totalitarian leaders, populist leaders are characterized by a concern with how they are portrayed rather than the facts on the ground.

Iraq has also faced this deep challenge. Though its leadership structure is tenuous, populist figures have held major sway over Iraqi politics during the past few years. Social studies suggest that the societies which have championed populist leaders the most are the ones with a high sense of fear of what is foreign (xenophobia), and the lowest levels of trust in others. The latest statistics suggest that these are major trends in Iraqi society—80 percent of Iraqis suffer from xenophobia, while the percentage of those who trust others is only ten percent.

After Iraqis realized that the sectarian political rhetoric in Iraq was one of the reasons for the catastrophe of the “ISIS tide,” **and after it was finally defeated in 2017 (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/striking-deals-with-isis-a-fruitful-iranian-tactic)**, a new type of populist rhetoric began to emerge. This populist rhetoric focused on provoking new negative emotions such as regionalism or dividing Iraqis into axes of resistance against or support for the United States, among many other divisions.

Along with an emphasis on societal divisions, populist leaders also tend to emphasize the need for an individual savior rather than reliance on government or institutions. Institutions are presented as corrupt and therefore inhibiting, whereas the populist leader is unadulterated and pure. Herein lies the similarity between **populist and authoritarian leaders, dictators, and totalitarian regimes (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/bigoted-populism-may-spell-the-end-of-lebanon-as-a-modern-state)**. In each case, every opponent ranges from corrupt to evil—and must be removed or eliminated.

However, now that so many populist leaders are in power, their failure to meet the demands of coronavirus has shown cracks in their rhetoric. Among them, the decline of inflammatory populist rhetoric that aims to awaken the primal instincts of the masses, such as fear and panic, against others which has long been used by populist leaders to build their grassroots base. In light of the [spread of the coronavirus \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/despite-political-turmoil-and-coronavirus-iraqs-protest-movement-continues\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/despite-political-turmoil-and-coronavirus-iraqs-protest-movement-continues) pandemic, mobilizing people on the basis of fear of others is illogical, especially given that during this crisis people have experienced mass casualties, and this is surely tougher than any other form of fear.

As social interaction moves online, social media has played a pivotal role in strengthening feelings of solidarity between societies. Social media users have followed tragedies across the globe, facilitated by viewers' free time during this period of isolation. Online rhetoric has increasingly included compassion and feelings of solidarity, which in some cases has prevailed over feelings of fear. Instead of the fear on which populism thrives, people have begun to feel compassion and sympathy, and Iraqi social media sites, like many sites around the world, have been filled with an outpouring of solidarity towards others.

The spread of the coronavirus pandemic has also led to an increased public interest in scientific research and facts. This interest in the nuanced and complicated issues of public health goes against the populist emphasis on 'cure-all' politics. Populist leaders are more akin to snake-oil salesmen or magicians. In Iraq, scientific facts have exposed a number of Iraqi populists who have relied on conspiracy theories or obscure religious principles to explain the coronavirus pandemic—some have even been forced to retract previous claims due to public skepticism.

The necessity of state institutions has also become increasingly clear to the Iraqi public. While populists view state institutions as hostile to the people, the reality is that during times of crisis there is a dire need for institutional and cooperative work rather than individualism. Crises also underscore the need to seek the help of experts, because their expertise—rather than populist rhetoric—is what is required for addressing the challenge. Whereas politicians have presided over all of Iraq's past crises, this time the Minister of Health and the experts, health personnel, and hospitals are the ones who have led the fight. Many Iraqis now see these individuals as their saviors, and their instructions and recommendations are widely heeded.

In order to navigate major crises, history has demonstrated time and time again that logic, science, and knowledge, not myths and illusions, are needed to overcome it. Iraq has seen its own share of major crises. Most recently, the country faced a dual crisis, namely the threat of ISIS and the drop in oil prices in 2014 during the government of Mr. al-Maliki, who himself employed populist rhetoric that divided Iraq and led to sectarian conflict becoming more deeply rooted. This populist rhetoric paved the way for ISIS occupation of more than a third of Iraq's territory and the loss of thousands of Iraqi lives and the displacement of millions. This also contributed to al-Maliki's ouster despite his relative "victory" in the [2014 elections \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/who-will-win-the-iraqi-elections\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/who-will-win-the-iraqi-elections).

In contrast, balanced national discourse, non-populist decisions, cooperation with society and the international community, during al-Abadi's government played an important role in mobilizing Iraqis on the basis of a national identity and in reducing hate speech, thus leading to the defeat of ISIS.

Past crises have uncovered those delusional populist leaders whose policies relied on fear mongering and pitting Iraqis against each other, and ultimately toppled them. Similarly, this current crisis will undoubtedly topple what remains of Iraqi populists, especially those who rose to power during the [2018 election \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/opinion-survey-insights-on-the-2018-iraqi-election\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/opinion-survey-insights-on-the-2018-iraqi-election)—which saw large-scale election fraud as pointed out by many reports—and were at the forefront of the political scene, and thus restore the prestige of the state and its institutions. ❖

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