

# Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Coronavirus Response—Lessons Learned

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Biner Aziz served as a visiting fellow at the Wilson Center in 2007 and as a cultural senior official in the Kurdistan Regional Government in 2008. Today, he owns a private construction material supply business and has lived in Erbil since 2010. He holds an MPA from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, which he received in 2009, and has published several essays on Iraq and Kurdistan.



## Brief Analysis

Since March 13, my family and I have been locked at home in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), ordering all supplies and groceries via deliveries provided by the local supermarkets. As my neighbor Mr. Namiq, a public servant, put it: “Public daily routine has gotten complicated. [We have] a lock-down at home, with frequent sanitizing and hand-washing. We venture outside only for necessities. It is really annoying, and don’t know until when it will last. But our health is the most important thing.”

While a majority of the public are debating the extent of the quarantine period needed to respond to coronavirus and how long these measures will continue, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been proactive in its implementation of self-isolation. The public may be frustrated with being stuck at home, but there is a strong sense of understanding that these measures are needed to confront the spread of the virus. As Marco Rossi, an Italian expat living in Erbil, stated “I decided to stay in Erbil because I saw the well-educated cosmopolitan and knowledgeable western world has lost its mind, as the panic made the health risk contagious. Staying in Erbil is better, calm and safer.”

Sharing an [extensive border with Iran \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/ahwazi-children-in-iran-starving-abused-and-forced-to-work\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/ahwazi-children-in-iran-starving-abused-and-forced-to-work) that stretches hundreds of miles, the KRI faced a particular challenge in preventing spread for over a month. This region’s population of 5 million was at risk early on in the pandemic, [as the KRI generally has extensive travel across its borders with Iran \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/in-search-of-solidarity-the-coronavirus-and-chinas-views-of-the-uae-and-ira\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/in-search-of-solidarity-the-coronavirus-and-chinas-views-of-the-uae-and-ira).

As different governments throughout the Middle East have chosen [widely different strategies to adapt to the threat of coronavirus \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/egypt-coronavirus-denial-conspiracy-COVID-pandemic\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/egypt-coronavirus-denial-conspiracy-COVID-pandemic), the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has pursued a balanced approach between adopting authoritarian-style responses, carrot-and-stick encouragement of needed measures, and good health awareness that are limiting the need to apply tactics of control and coercion.

These efforts are so far proving remarkably successful, especially when compared to neighboring countries and regions. The KRG has not gained experience in managing SARS virus outbreaks or in the manner of Taiwan,

Singapore, or Hong Kong back in 2003. Nevertheless, while the KRG has not faced a pandemic before, it has been able to draw on its experience of dealing with other crises throughout the last twenty-nine years, ranging from wars and mass displacement to sanctions. These past experiences have allowed the government to take this current threat seriously, and have—even more importantly—primed the public to be highly responsive to the containment of the crisis.

Due to these factors, the KRG early on made the decision to ‘over-react’ to the threat, setting up an operations center to combat the coronavirus before having any confirmed cases. This was particularly important as the enforced curfew came just before the start of Newroz Celebrations (Kurdish New Year), and was essential to keeping people home and preventing them from socializing and gathering in the manner normal for this major holiday.

Now, there is a strong media and data analysis hub where all information from different cities is analyzed and published. The government very quickly began hosting press conferences on a daily basis, and even several times a day. The Ministry of Health also publicly released information on the first known cases—travelers from Iran—in a transparent way to much of the public.

The KRG has also demonstrated that quick quarantine and isolation of suspected cases is a key parameter in overcoming such a crisis. Officials have not been exempted; the highly influential Kurdish security director of a major border crossing was **removed from his position (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/2491dd90-5103-48fb-863a-b10233ee42f0>)** after his return from Germany on an official trip when he refused to self-quarantine. These measures proved necessary when he tested positive for coronavirus. This instance demonstrated early on that “nobody is above the law when it comes to the general public's lives.”

Due to these proactive measures, the KRG has also managed to dampen the global impulse to panic buy and hoard. Supermarkets in the KRI continue to be stocked and full of supplies as there is a sense of confidence in the government’s tackling of the issue.

Residents of the KRI may also be more inclined to participate in social distancing measures as they have also had a chance to see the outcome of a lack of control. Cases are growing at a larger rate in Iraq due to a relative lack of government control and public awareness. While Baghdad has attempted to establish curfews in certain areas of Iraq, there does not seem to be the same amount of public buy-in, further complicated by Iraq’s volatile political situation and ongoing protests. Kurds suspect that the virus is spreading at a quicker rate in other regions of Iraq, though testing in both Iraq and the KRI is not widespread relative to some countries.

Especially in a time of crisis, it is easy to criticize governmental reactions while minimizing positive achievements. However, the KRG’s handling of the crisis should be recognized. They have maintained a balance of keeping people vigilant without panicking and have ensured regular lines of communication on the issue, with direct televised communication from every level of government, including the Prime Minister himself. For many of us in self-isolation, we have a real sense that our government cares.

This success is all the more remarkable due to the limited financial, technological, and health capabilities of the KRG. The scope of these efforts in spite of the limitations of the KRG relative to major world powers has been widely praised by WHO.

Indeed, as regional publics look for a successful model of containment, I believe that there should be some caution in the trend of valorizing the Chinese response to the coronavirus outbreak, though they have been able to limit new cases of the disease inside their country. The apparent initial willingness of the government to ignore the virus and silence those doctors who attempted to sound the alarm has doubtlessly contributed to the spread of the pandemic to the rest of the world. No one—Chinese officials included—can deny that they engaged in a massive cover-up. This

response has made the Kurdish government's transparency all the more refreshing.

Against the odds, the KRG has succeeded at keeping the virus relatively under control, **despite their links to Iran** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/pivoting-to-the-krp-restructuring-the-u.s.-military-presence-in-iraq>). All this being said, it is still too early for any country or region to declare victory just yet. On the other hand, the Kurdish model provides a window for other governments to change course. While the KRG's model may not be directly translatable anywhere, countries who still have few reported cases and limited resources may see the KRI as a positive example for what is still possible. In contrast, Europe and the United States are demonstrating the dangers of waiting to enact major measures when the virus has already had a chance to spread.

The unprecedented situation of large swaths of the globe increasingly under lockdown is no doubt significantly altering the relationship between governments and their peoples; each public is now assessing the **efficacy of their government's response** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-response-of-israels-temporary-government-to-the-challenge-of-coronaviru>). For Kurds, the virus has demonstrated that good governance goes a long way towards tackling even the most potentially overwhelming threat. And for the rest of the world, the willingness of the public to abide by its government's efforts before catastrophe strikes, even when those efforts are significantly disruptive to daily life, demonstrates the value of this symbiotic relationship between governmental transparency and public trust. ❖

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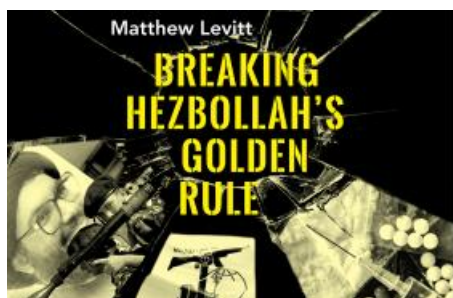
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