

Covid-19 in Iraq:

Is the worst yet to come?

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(Pariq Faraj Mahmood - Anadolu Agency)

Iraq confirmed its first case of Covid-19 on February 24, 2020. Most of the reported cases of the virus during the initial period were linked to Iran. In response, the government imposed curfews which were routinely extended. This policy outlook examines the measures taken by the Iraqi authorities to prevent the spread of coronavirus and the challenges that the country faces in dealing with the pandemic, especially following a recent uptick in reported cases. The paper also looks at the political developments in Iraq since the protest movement began last October and how Covid-19 has impacted politics in the country.

Background

Iraq [confirmed](#) its first case of Covid-19 on February 24, 2020. The Iraqi health authorities said the victim was an Iranian national who was undertaking religious studies in the city of Najaf. A day later, four members of the same family tested positive for the virus in the province of Kirkuk after returning from Iran, the hardest-hit country in the Middle East. Before the end of that week, Iraq announced its first case in the capital Baghdad, where the victim was an Iraqi citizen who recently [returned](#) home from neighbouring Iran.

Most of the reported cases of the virus during the initial period were linked to Iran. On February 26, Iraq banned travelling to and from China, Iran, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Italy, Bahrain, and Kuwait. The Iraqi authorities, however, did allow its citizens to return home from these countries within a specified period. A travel ban on all other international destinations was subsequently imposed.

Although the authorities requested from Iraqis returning from virus-hit destinations – particularly from Iran – to self-isolate or submit to a 14-day mandatory quarantine, little follow-up or monitoring measures were carried out, leaving many non-compliant citizens to carry on with business as usual. Additionally, there were [reports](#) that some Iraqis sought to return from Iran using smuggling routes in a bid to avoid quarantine or being identified as a possible health risk.

Coupled with the travel restrictions, Iraq's Health Ministry also banned public gatherings and ordered the closure of schools, universities, cafes and other public places. On March 4, Iraq [reported](#) its first fatalities from Coronavirus. A day later, Iraqi religious authorities called for the cancellation of the weekly Friday prayers over fears of spreading the virus. Breaking with a more than 15-year-old tradition, representatives of Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, did not deliver his Friday sermon on March 6. Sistani has subsequently issued several statements calling on Iraqis to abide by a state-imposed curfew and follow the instructions of the health authorities, including social distancing. He also called on the state to provide the necessary protective equipment to medics and for people to gather aid for those who may be impacted by the crisis, especially the sick and needy.

On March 17, the authorities began imposing a curfew in Baghdad, which was subsequently expanded to the whole country, as part of its measures to counter the pandemic. The nationwide curfews were initially meant to be temporary. However, they continue to be extended as the threat of the spread of the virus has persisted.

Visits to holy shrines

According to observers, Iraqi authorities imposed the curfew primarily to prevent Shia worshippers from visit-

ing holy shrines, as they traditionally do in high numbers during that time of the year, in order to mitigate any potential 'super-spreader' events. Nevertheless, On March 21, tens of thousands of worshippers [defied](#) the government curfew and Sistani's religious edicts by visiting the shrine of Moussa al-Kadhimi to commemorate the revered imam.

Many of the visitors to the al-Kadhimi shrine were supporters of influential cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, a self-styled patriot who controls the largest bloc in Iraq's parliament. Some commentators considered Sadr as being [personally responsible](#) for the incident as his statement on visiting the shrines was ambiguous and interpreted as a green light to worshippers, rather than offering unequivocal support for the curfew.

"I ask God that He accepts your visit [to the shrine] and your obedience. I hope that everyone speeds up carrying out the visit, abide by the order, and abide by medical and health instructions in order to avoid spreading [the virus] to others," said a [statement](#) by Sadr on the eve of the al-Kadhimi shrine visit.

A week earlier, he [expressed](#) "astonishment" how in the West, people were turning to prayers in the face of the virus while in the East they have stopped praying in mosques or visiting shrines. He called on those who are afraid of going to houses of worship or shrines to pray to God, "even if it is from their rooftops".

The general message that was understood by his supporters was that they should visit the al-Kadhimi shrine, drawing criticism from people outside his support base over concerns that he was encouraging behaviour that could lead to mass transmission of the virus.

Videos shared by Iraqis on social media purportedly showed worshippers licking the metal bars of the shrines in Iran, which have been touched by many hands. Such acts intended to send the message that visitors to Shia holy sites do not fear the possibility of catching the virus thanks to divine protection. Other videos showed people telling their audience that visiting the shrines protects them from Coronavirus and other diseases. There is no evidence that these videos were linked to Sadr or his support base.

Sadr [denied](#) that he encouraged defying the curfew or disobeying the instructions of health officials, saying that he has been supportive of the efforts to counter the spread of the virus. As examples, he cited instructing his supporters to take part in disinfection campaigns at holy sites as well as the readiness of his militiamen to help security forces enforce the curfew or give moral support to medics. He even gave recommendations of pious things one could do during the period of self-isolation.

Some people concluded that government attempts to prevent them from visiting shrines were motivated by [sectarianism](#), prompting members of the security forces to remind visitors that they (i.e. the security forces) are Shia

too. Other conspiracy theories claimed that the Coronavirus was a hoax propagated by the US and China aimed at making profits for producers of certain products, or that US designs for the region are more [dangerous](#) than the virus. On the other hand, some went as far as to accuse the US of deliberately infecting other countries with the virus.

Political implications

Learning from Sadr's mistakes, and seeking to capitalise on the Coronavirus crisis, his Iran-backed rivals in the *Hashed al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilisation Forces) sought to present themselves as the party most concerned with the well-being of Iraqis. They ran campaigns to distribute aid, donate blood and even build a field [hospital](#) to treat those with Covid-19. Actions of a charitable nature were also carried out by politicians across the ethnic and sectarian spectrum. One example was the [promise](#) made by Parliament Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi, a Sunni Arab, to build a hospital in Baghdad to deal with the impact of the virus.

This is not to say that such steps, regardless of their motivation, are of no benefit to the public. Indeed, their inaction would not help in countering the impact of the virus. However, the political class appears to have already benefited from the spread of the virus. Despite using a carrot and stick method in dealing with mass protests demanding radical government reforms that kicked off in October, Iraqi politicians have failed to dissuade demonstrators from taking to the streets – until the spread of Coronavirus.

Protesters managed to force Adel Abdul-Mahdi to resign as prime minister at the end of November and rejected the first two figures that were offered as his replacement. Parliament has been divided on how to deal with the demands of the demonstrators and the protest movement managed to secure a victory when lawmakers voted to reform the country's electoral laws. The protesters' rejection of the designation of Mohammed Tawfik Allawi as prime minister was partly why some lawmakers did not want to appear as openly backing him, leading him to fail in his bid to form a government. The same issue arose when Adnan al-Zurfi's was named prime minister-designate after Allawi, as the protest movement previously rejected Zurfi's nomination. The demonstrators saw both Allawi and Zurfi as a continuation of the same regime, albeit the components of that regime are themselves bitterly divided.

Although the protest movement's anti-corruption calls have rattled the country's whole political class, Iranian-backed politicians and militiamen are particularly unhappy with the demonstrators' demands of ending Tehran's influence in Iraqi affairs. All politicians can claim to oppose corruption, but it is hard for openly pro-Iranian groups to say they are against Tehran.

For as long as they were in public squares, the voices of protesters were taken into account. This presence came at a heavy price in terms of deaths, kidnappings and injuries.

Since nationwide curfews were announced, however, the bulk of the protest movement was no longer seen in the streets. Previous government curfews could not stop demonstrators from gathering. Nevertheless, because of Covid-19, avoiding crowded places has been adhered by protesters out of concern of spreading the virus. Small groups of protesters have taken to the streets on a few occasions but they failed to persuade others to come out. It seems the majority view within the protest movement is to wait until the worst impact of the virus is over before re-kindling their presence on the streets and in squares across the country.

The protest movement had already suffered a major blow when its supposed ally and backer Sadr withdrew his support¹ before once again re-endorsing it. Sadr's flip-flopping was a wakeup call for the protest movement to know the limits of its strength.

The US assassination of Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Sulaimani and top Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January appears to have nudged Sadr to edge closer towards Iran. Sadr has aspired for a long time to get Baghdad's decision-making independent of Tehran.

There was, however, a development that gave protesters a reason to be cautiously optimistic. The Iraqi parliament's third bid to name a prime minister proved successful. On May 07, the country's legislative body approved the government of Mustafa al-Kazemi, the former Intelligence Director. Kazemi did not waste time in adopting the reform demands of the protest movement.² With an unreliable ally like Sadr and empty streets thanks to Covid-19, Iraq's demonstrators have little choice but to give Kazemi a chance – and time – to deliver on his promises.

¹ Sadr had frequently adopted the cause of Shia protesters in Iraq in the past. He often presents himself as the "opposition" to the Iraqi government even though he is part of the political establishment and was initially supported by Iran. There were times when his bloc in parliament served as kingmaker, backing one side over another to form a government. In the last election (May 2018), Sadr's bloc received the largest number of seats after campaigning to fight corruption and be independent of Tehran. But his bloc agreed with the second-largest bloc (his election campaign rivals, the Iran-backed, pro-militia Al-Binaa bloc, led by Hadi al-Amiri) on the naming of former Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi. When the October 2019 protests kicked off, Sadr quickly disowned Abdul-Mahdi and sided with the protesters, but it became difficult to claim he is with the opposition or critical of Iranian influence when his bloc is the largest in parliament, and it is in alliance with his pro-Iran rivals. Many in the protest movement became vocally critical of Sadr, saying that he is a deceiver, but Sadr's supporters remained in the protest movement till late January when he withdrew his support for the demonstrations. This change came about after (a) the assassination of Iran's Qassem Sulaimani and (b) the rejection of the protest movement of the naming of Mohammed Allawi as prime minister-designate (which was approved by Sadr). Sadr may have felt that the whole establishment, including him, are under threat (with support from the US). As his supporters left the streets, security forces attacked the protesters, with a heavier hand than usual. From the perspective of the protesters, the flip-flop of Sadr means his backing could be withdrawn any time and that they could be exposed to violent state attacks again.

² Kazemi ordered the release of many of the protesters in detention. The protesters who were "abducted" were released immediately, following his orders. He promised to look into those who were killed and punish their killers, as well as compensate the families of the victims. He plans to establish a channel of communication to negotiate directly with protest leaders on the wider reform demands, including fairer elections.

Renewed Coronavirus threat

Time does not appear to be on Kazemi's side as the threat of the virus is once more on the [ascendant](#). State officials claimed that a recent spike in cases was due to an increase in testing, however, critics blamed the government's easing of the lockdown. By June 09, a total of 13,841 cases were [reported](#) with 370 fatalities.

The number of those who have tested positive for the virus is said to be higher than official reports, according to a recent report by [Reuters](#) that cited unnamed Iraqi officials. Iraq responded to the news report by [suspending](#) the work of the news agency for three months.

"It is clear that Iraq lacks the state infrastructure and even the political will to report on the true toll of the Coronavirus outbreak in the country...Nothing quite highlights the inability and ineptitude of a government than a public health crisis," Tallha Abdulrazaq, a UK-based expert in Middle Eastern strategic and security affairs, told TRT World Research Centre.

"The protesters are predominantly from the Shia Arab base who voted many of today's politicians into power. However, they now turned on them after seeing their sectarian politics does not put food on the table, does not provide jobs, and does not provide security. All it does is allow for a total degeneration of the state and its institutions, which in turn harms the citizenry and leads to corruption on an unprecedented scale. If they were to accurately report on the impact of the Coronavirus, the Iraqi public would never forgive them, and it would likely spell the beginning of the end of the failed sectarian quota political system," he added.

On the face of it, the Iraqi authorities did appear to be taking strict measures. Residents in several Baghdad districts say there are checkpoints on the roads between neighbourhoods to enforce the curfew. Those deemed essential workers are provided with papers that allow them to pass.

There have been reports that those caught gathering in the neighbourhoods – even if it is in front of one's home – were subjected to verbal insults, cautions and some instances physically assaulted by security personnel. Those who have tested positive were taken to special quarters in hospitals by ambulances accompanied by a police car.

Central and local government officials frequently appear on television to urge people not to go out or socialise. At times, the advice has turned into warnings of punishment. The governor of Basra, Asaad al-Idani, [warned](#) that fines would be levied on those not abiding by the curfew in the southern province. The governor of Babel, Hassan Mandil, [said](#) Iraq is facing its most dangerous health threat and what is to come is going to be worse due to the poor health

facilities and insufficient support from the central government. He also criticised residents not adhering to social distancing requirements. "Do not even see your brother. Call him by phone," he told reporters. Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Hassan Al-Kaabi, [warned](#) that the Coronavirus would destroy the country if the curfew were not imposed by force.

Other than the government and politicians, the NGOs became also active. Civil society activists and religious figures (who are not affiliated with political parties), as well as local mosques and [Hussainiyas](#), were reported to have taken part in charitable or disinfection activities in a bid to counter the effects of the virus. They are also delivering food and medicine to households to encourage more people to stay indoors.

Iraqi President Barham Saleh said that while he "highly appreciate[s] the initiatives of political and social figures to help in this field," he [appealed](#) to those who are well off as well as relevant organisations to coordinate their efforts with those of the government. Even before the president's appeal, there were reports that many landlords have voluntarily stopped taking rent, without being asked to by their tenants.

However, the spirit of generosity that flared up in the months of March and April began to wind down before the end of May due to the worsening economic situation. In addition, many of the examples of strict action conducted by the authorities were undermined by reported violations carried out by members of the public, the ruling class or even of the security services entrusted with enforcing the lockdown.

Cultural challenges

One of the most significant barriers to implementing effective preventative health measures appears to be the country's cultural norms. One [video](#) shared on social media purportedly shows a man who is revered in his neighbourhood in Basra being welcomed by his neighbours and supporters after recovering from Coronavirus. Those celebrating his return home did not keep social distance amongst themselves as they gathered around him.

Adham Rashad Ismail, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) head of mission in Iraq, [told](#) The Associated Press that "cultural attitudes" posed a challenge for the government. He noted the burial process of those who died from Coronavirus in Iraq is at odds with WHO guidelines, which advocate minimal handling of the dead and that trained medical teams perform the burials.

The government-proposed burial plots caused an uproar among relatives of the dead who wanted to bury their loved ones in the cemeteries of their choice, the most notable of which – for the Shia community – is Wadi al-Salam cemetery in Najaf province. There were concerns that the

measure would prompt families to declare a false reason for death so that they could bury their loved ones in their cemeteries of choice. In the end, the government gave in and reversed its precautionary policies with regards to burial.

The other problem with burial is that people have not been complying with social distancing, even when they became aware of the importance of the new safety measures. In fact, authorities in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish-majority region [issued](#) arrests warrants for people who held a mourning ceremony on March 21 that led to the infection of several people with Covid-19.

Being Covid-19 positive appears to carry a stigma with it, which some people would rather avoid even if it were at the expense of their health and the well being of their loved ones. There were [reports](#) of people going into hiding once they test positive.

TRT World Research Centre interviewed one medic on condition of anonymity. He is working with Coronavirus cases in Al-Yarmouk Teaching Hospital in Baghdad. He said that the government is very strict in imposing mandatory quarantine in places designated by the health authorities for people who have tested positive, but there have been notable exceptions. He stated that one high profile person managed to convince medics not to treat him in a hospital, as that would let it be known that he is infected. He did subject himself to self-isolation and to being monitored but at a place of his own choosing and not the government-designated facilities. Making exceptions in implementing safety measures undermine the government's message on the seriousness of the situation.

The medic in Al-Yarmouk hospital noted that police enforcement of curfews is not always watertight. "On one hand, Iraq's experience in dealing with security issues has made it capable of setting up checkpoints and concrete barriers in no time. Once an area is affected by Coronavirus, it can be easily isolated, preventing its residents from leaving. On the other hand, because it is not a counter-terrorism issue, the police are sometimes relaxed in their implementation of the curfew. They allow the movement of people whom they think are harmless from a security perspective, not fully appreciating the danger health-wise," he said.

Even when people are well meaning, there are risks to being exposed to the virus thanks to laudable social norms like "generosity" or "welcoming guests". When groups of local government workers or volunteers go to areas to disinfect their streets and houses, sometimes the locals insist on offering the workers lunch and won't take no for an answer; it is considered "shameful" if you don't honour your "guest" and shameful for the guest to refuse the generosity of his host. On a few occasions, these workers - who usually wear fully protective clothes - were filmed taking off their masks and gloves and sit down to eat with colleagues and hosts.

Another example of a good deed that potentially has counterproductive results is when houses of worship that become points of distributing food for the needy become crowded with queues of people who are standing too close to each other. In many cases, though, the organisers realised the dangers and promised to deliver the food items to homes instead of having people come out to collect them.

Struggling economy fanning the flames of the pandemic

The latest - and arguably most serious - challenge to combating the spread of Covid-19 seems to be resulting from economic problems. The government has yet to pay the salaries of state employees for May, citing economic problems. This could result in an increase of Covid-19 cases, as some of those who had been receiving salaries were financially helping day labourers, and thus helped them stay at home.

"Those of us with salaries used to financially help relatives and neighbours who could no longer earn a living due to the curfew. Now, it has been more than a month since we were last paid, and we can barely support ourselves. The charitable initiatives in neighbourhoods in March and April have dried up in May. Poor people who rely on daily work to earn a living are openly flouting the lockdown," a medic working in Al-Hakim General Hospital in Baghdad, told TRT World Research Centre, on condition of anonymity. "Our boss told us that we might have to accept a pay cut of 50%. We had hoped that state employees in the health sector would be treated differently, that if we did not get any support, then at least we would be exempt from pay cuts. That seems unlikely now," she added.

According to both medics, the number of health workers hit with Covid-19 has increased. "Before, we used to see or hear about cases of people whom we don't personally know. Now, it is reaching our own colleagues in the health sector, and some of them have died," said the medic in Al-Hakim hospital. "Today, there aren't enough beds for the mandatory quarantine in hospitals or designated buildings monitored by health officials. Infected people are asked to self-isolate in their own homes, without proper monitoring" she added.

Is the state to blame?

According to observers, the Iraqi health system had been suffering from accumulative problems dating back to the 1980-88 war with Iran, the 1991 Gulf war and UN sanctions, the 2003 US-led invasion, and most recently, the 2014 Daesh takeover of swathes of territory before its costly liberation. "This has impacted the way the Iraqi authorities respond to health crises, including the Coronavirus,"

Azhar Al-Rubaie, an Iraqi journalist based in the southern city of Basra, told TRT World Research Centre. However, he added, this does not excuse the government's blunders in dealing with the pandemic.

"The Iraqi government chose to ignore public calls to shut the borders with Iran after it became clear that the first Coronavirus case in the country came via Iran. It (the Iraqi government) continued to allow travel between both countries until the virus spread to many areas in Iraq," said Al-Rubaie.

"The government did not put a quick plan in place to deal with Coronavirus. The rampant corruption in Iraq has also had an impact on the spread of the virus. For example, a number of infected people managed to avoid being put in quarantine, thanks to their relations with government officials, because having the virus was seen as a stigma. The authorities did not take serious steps to enforce the curfew. There were many people going about their daily business using fake documents," he added.

"By not offering workers financial aid so they can stay safely at home, the government has pushed many of its citizens out to the street, where they seek to earn a living despite the dangers to their health and the wellbeing of others -- and regardless of the state's rules and regulations," noted Al-Rubaie.

Conclusion

The initial spread of Covid-19 in Iraq may have been facilitated by the country's close ties to, and open borders with, Iran. Another reason leads back to the ambiguous messages from Muqtada al-Sadr, which appear to have encouraged religious gatherings at a time when social distancing should have been stickily observed.

The government did initially manage to slow down the spread of the virus. The authorities' efforts were undermined by several factors, including: cultural practices and economic hardships causing people to flout the lockdown regulations, the state's corruption, which had an apparent impact not only on the strictness in applying the curfews but also undermined the government's message to stay at home. The current shambolic state of the health system is, in part, due to systematic, decades-long, corruption.

To avoid future spikes in the number of Coronavirus-related deaths and the increase of Covid-19 cases, the government would need to convince an already fatigued public to maintain social distancing and abide by curfews and general lockdown regulations. To do this, it would need to first make sure that people have enough financial support for people to stay at home. In addition, the state's health and safety messages must not be undermined by its own members. Ultimately, state officials need to lead by example.