



Water, Peace
and Security

WORKING PAPER

The Impact of Covid-19 in Water-Stressed Iraq

How Covid-19 is exacerbating Iraq's
Health, Economic, Socio-political and Security Challenges
By Dorith Kool, Laura Birkman & Giorgio Berti

This brief provides an overview of current trends and developments related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Iraq and contributes to a broader set of considerations on the need for an integrated approach for addressing water, security and health challenges in the country.

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iraq, in parallel with the country's water issues, are exacerbating existing health, economic, socio-political, and security challenges. This brief outlines the ways in which COVID-19 interacts with and impacts these four pressing and interrelated challenges. The analysis focuses on the impacts on Iraq as a whole and the four provinces selected for further engagement by the WPS partnership: Basrah, Dhi-Qar, Wasit, and Missan.

Covid-19 in Iraq

As of March 16, 2021, there have been total of 763,085 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Iraq, with 13,788 people known to have died of the virus.¹ Limited testing capacities suggest that the actual number of infections is likely to be higher. Iraq's Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of the virus in the province of Najaf on February 22, 2020.² Following this confirmation, the Iraqi government closed borders, schools and airports and restricted movement in public areas to prevent further spreading. In mid-March 2020, stricter measures were implemented including curfews and banning of travel between provinces. Government measures were not fully implemented and adhered to by citizens.³ Still, these measures initially kept case numbers low, until movement restrictions loosened in April/May 2020 ahead of Ramadan, which led to an acute surge in number of

¹ Johns Hopkins University CSSE, "Coronavirus Covid-19 (2019-NCov)"; Worldometer, "Iraq Coronavirus"; World Health Organisation (WHO), "Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq."

² Mohammed Hadi Ali Al-Jumaili and Ahmed Solaiman Hamed, "Coronavirus Disease-19: Outbreaks in Iraq" (Department of Medical Laboratory Techniques, Al-maarif University College, Iraq, 2020), 4, <https://ersa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Coronavirus-Covid.pdf>.

³ Middle East Research Institute (MERI), "How a Fragile Iraq Is Facing the Covid-19 Challenge | MERI," Middle East Research Institute (MERI), October 27, 2020, <http://www.meri-k.org/how-a-fragile-iraq-is-facing-the-covid-19-challenge/>; OCHA Iraq, "Iraq: Covid-19: Situation Report No. 7" (OCHA, March 24, 2020), https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/24032020_covid19_sitrep_n07.pdf.

confirmed cases.⁴ Nonetheless, as of November 2020, the government fully lifted the curfew and restrictions on public gatherings, permitted travel between provinces, and reopened schools and universities. In response to the increase of confirmed cases at the start of 2021, on February 19th 2021, the government imposed new measures including overnight curfews from 8:00 pm until 5:00 am, and full lockdowns on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. The government also enforced the closure of schools, prohibition of large gatherings and mandatory wearing of protective masks in public spaces.⁵ Despite lockdown measures, the number of confirmed cases has continued to increase, peaking on March 11th 2021 at 5,170 cases.⁶ According to the Iraqi Minister of Health Hassan al-Tamimi, the spread of the new strain of the virus and citizens' defiance of government measures have contributed to the surge in the number of confirmed cases.⁷ As the number of confirmed cases continues to rise, Iraq has started to vaccinate the population to contain further spreading of the virus. On March 2nd 2021, Iraq received the first 50,000 doses Covid-19 vaccines from China.⁸ While vaccinations should improve the situation in Iraq, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have an impact on water-stressed Iraq after most of the population has received a vaccine.

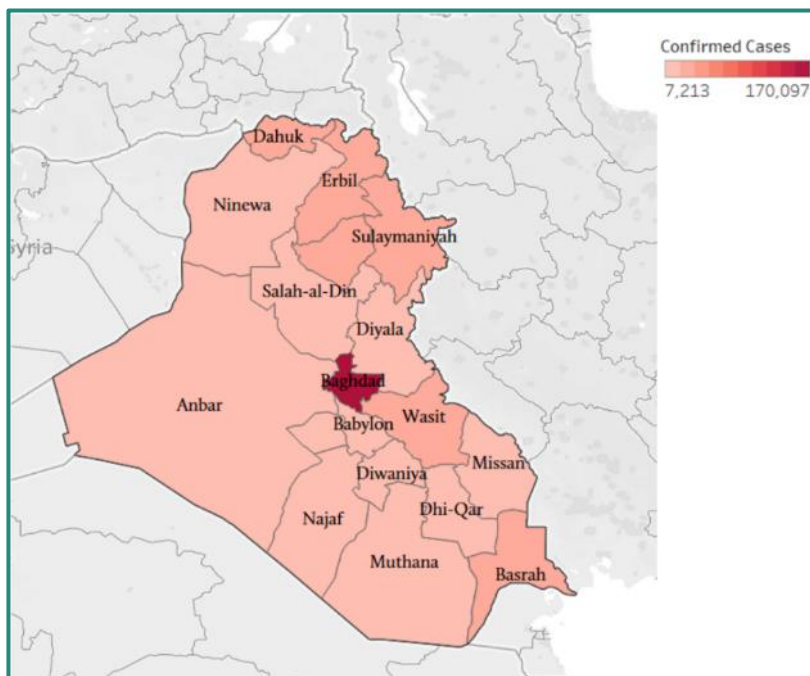


Figure 1: Number of confirmed cases per province as of 2 December 2020 (Source: Ministry of Health-Iraq)⁹

⁴ Bhatia, "Iraq Further Eases Covid-19 Restrictions"; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Covid-19 Addendum to the Humanitarian Response Plan 2020 Iraq," ⁵ International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Covid-19 Response Overview #1 (3 April - 20 July 2020)," ¹; MacDonald, "Coronavirus"; WorldAware, "Covid-19 Alert"; Reuters, "Iraq Eases Some Lockdown Restrictions Ahead of Ramadan."

⁵ "Old Habits Imperil Iraq as Doctors Warn of Second Coronavirus Wave," Arab News, February 19, 2021, <https://arab.news/5t457>; "Iraq Sees Record Covid-19 Cases as New Lockdown Begins," Asharq Al-Awsat, February 19, 2021, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2815796/iraq-sees-record-covid-19-cases-new-lockdown-begins>.

⁶ World Health Organisation (WHO), "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq."

⁷ IANS, "Iraq Reports 4,901 New Coronavirus Cases, Overall Tally Reach 763,085," *Business Standard India*, March 16, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/iraq-reports-4-901-new-coronavirus-cases-overall-tally-reach-763-085-121031600094_1.html.

⁸ Reuters, "Iraq Receives First Batch of COVID-19 Vaccines from China," Reuters, March 2, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-iraq-vaccine-int-idUSKBN2AU0YD>.

⁹ World Health Organisation (WHO), "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq."

The Health Challenge

Consecutive wars have damaged Iraq's healthcare infrastructures and services, while local authorities lack the necessary financial and technical resources to rebuild these facilities. In 2019, the government spent 2.5% of the national budget on the health sector, but this was insufficient to cover the full costs of repairing and maintaining health facilities and services.¹⁰ This has had a serious impact on the population's ability to access healthcare.¹¹ There is a critical shortage in medical supplies, equipment and staff to take care of the number of Covid-19 cases, including intensive care hospital beds, human resources, ventilators, and personal protective equipment.¹² Iraq has approximately 0.8 doctors per 1,000 people and 1.2-1.4 hospital beds per 1,000 people, and 85% of essential medicines are limited in supply or not available.¹³ Moreover, advanced testing capacity is limited to just five provinces that have WHO-approved centers. The remaining thirteen provinces often send swabs for testing to Baghdad.¹⁴

“There is a critical shortage in medical supplies, equipment and staff to take care of the number of Covid-19 cases.”

Iraq also suffers from shortages in clean water and effective water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services that are critical for limiting the spread of the Covid-19 virus.¹⁵ According to a report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA), daily water demand for handwashing increased by nine to twelve litres per person per household as a result of prevention measures.¹⁶ Damaged infrastructure, deficient wastewater treatment and management systems, (industrial) pollution, and decreased river flows of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers limit the amount of available clean water for drinking and sanitation.¹⁷ In November 2019, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) found that 36% of households outside of displacement camps and 46% of households inside camps are unable to access enough water

¹⁰ Ahmed Aboulenein and Reade Levinson, “The Medical Crisis That’s Aggravating Iraq’s Unrest,” *Reuters*, March 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-health/>; David Bacon, “Iraq’s Coronavirus Crisis Was Made Possible by Decades of War and Occupation,” *Foreign Policy In Focus*, April 14, 2020, <https://fpif.org/iraqs-coronavirus-crisis-was-made-possible-by-decades-of-war-and-occupation/>.

¹¹ Oxfam International, “Coronavirus Threatens Iraq with New Humanitarian Crisis,” Oxfam International, May 20, 2020, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/coronavirus-threatens-iraq-new-humanitarian-crisis>.

¹² Renad Mansour, Marc Skelton, and Abdulameer Mohsin Hussein, “COVID 19: Assessing Vulnerabilities and Impacts on Iraq,” Chatham House, April 7, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/covid-19-assessing-vulnerabilities-and-impacts-iraq>; Hussein Solomon, “The Impact of Covid-19 on the Middle East and North Africa” (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, April 16, 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/impact-covid-19-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

¹³ Enabling Peace in Iraq, “Mitigating the Impact of Covid-19 in Iraq,” 1; Aboulenein and Levinson, “The Medical Crisis That’s Aggravating Iraq’s Unrest”; Mansour, Skelton, and Hussein, “COVID 19”; Mahmoud, “Iraq Health Workers to Protest Attacks, Lack of Employment”; Shaol, “Iraqi Health Care Workers Threaten Nationwide Strike to Demand Resources to Fight Pandemic”; The World Factbook, “Field Listing :: Hospital Bed Density”; Aboulenein and Levinson, “The Medical Crisis That’s Aggravating Iraq’s Unrest”; Our World in Data, “Hospital Beds per 1,000 People.” For comparison. The countries with the highest number of hospital beds per 1,000 are: United States Virgin Islands with 18.68, Greenland with 14.35, Monaco with 13.80, North Korea with 13.20, Japan with 13.05. The countries with the lowest number of hospital beds per 1,000 are: Mali with 0.10, Madagascar with 0.20, Senegal with 0.30, Niger with 0.3, Nepal with 0.30.

¹⁴ Mansour, Skelton, and Hussein, “COVID 19.”

¹⁵ Susanne Schmeier, Charles Iceland, and Liz Saccoccia, “The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Impact Global Security,” Water Peace Security, April 1, 2020, <https://waterpeacesecurity.org/info/blog-04-01-2020-coronavirus-pandemic>.

¹⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, “The Impact of Covid-19 on the Water-Scarce Arab Region” (Beirut: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2020), 2–4, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00150_covid-19_water-scarcity-en.pdf.

¹⁷ Georgia Cooke, Glada Lahn, and Renad Mansour, “Same Old Politics Will Not Solve Iraq Water Crisis,” Chatham House, April 15, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/same-old-politics-will-not-solve-iraq-water-crisis>; Schmeier, Iceland, and Saccoccia, “The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Impact Global Security.”

for domestic use.¹⁸ This means that a large part of the population is unable to follow the Covid-19 mitigation measures. There are currently 4.1 million people in Iraq in need of humanitarian aid and are especially vulnerable to the direct (health) and indirect (economic) impact of Covid-19.¹⁹ This includes 1.4 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and 300,000 people residing in refugee camps.²⁰ These communities often reside in overcrowded areas where they are required to collect water from public water sources, heightening risk of Covid-19 transmission.²¹

The Economic Challenge

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a substantial drop in global oil demand that, in turn, has led to a decrease in oil prices. This has critical short and long-term economic implications on Iraq's already fragile economic situation as oil revenues constitute 90% of the Iraqi national budget.²² The economic fallout affects the government's capacity to rebuild essential water infrastructure, provide critical WASH services, improve the health care system, and pay the public sector salaries.²³

In May 2020, as a response to the dissipating oil revenues, Iraq's newly elected Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi cautioned that the government may be unable to pay half of the 3 million total state-employed workers.²⁴ Outside the public sector, citizens are also likely to lose their income as informal and formal businesses are forced to shut down.²⁵ An initial survey shows that Covid-19 has negatively impacted production and employment, with an average reduction of 67% and 27% respectively.²⁶ This has a huge impact on the country's economy and the population's ability to maintain their livelihoods. In 2019, 12.8% of Iraq's total workforce was unemployed and 25.2% of the youth population was unemployed.²⁷ Covid-19 has exacerbated these trends and led to an increase in unemployment rates to between 30 and 35%.²⁸ This in turn is likely to exacerbate current trends in Iraq's shrinking middle class and growing lower class (see [Figure 2](#)).

¹⁸ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Humanitarian Needs Overview Iraq" (New York, United States: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), November 2019), 20, https://www.sheltercluster.org/sites/default/files/docs/iraq_hno_2020.pdf.

¹⁹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Iraq," OCHA, January 27, 2020, <https://www.unocha.org/iraq>.

²⁰ Oxfam International, "Coronavirus Threatens Iraq with New Humanitarian Crisis"; International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Populations at Risk: Implications of Covid-19 for Hunger, Migration and Displacement: An Analysis of Food Security Trends in Major Migration Hotspots," 32; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Iraq."

²¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "The Impact of Covid-19 on the Water-Scarce Arab Region."

²² Enabling Peace in Iraq, "Mitigating the Impact of Covid-19 in Iraq," 5; Jalilvand, "Game of Chicken."

²³ Enabling Peace in Iraq, "Mitigating the Impact of Covid-19 in Iraq," 5.

²⁴ Cornish, "Iraq Warns over Threat to Public Sector Pay from Oil Price Collapse"; Food and Agriculture Organization, World Food Programme, and World Bank Group, "Iraq Covid-19 Weekly Food Security Monitor."

²⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization, World Food Programme, and World Bank Group, "Iraq Covid-19 Weekly Food Security Monitor"; International Organization for Migration, "IOM Iraq Leverages Mobility Data to Better Assess Covid-19 Impact."

²⁶ International Organisation for Migration (IOM), "Impact of Covid-19 on Small-and-Medium Sized Enterprises in Iraq," 4.

²⁷ Statista, "Iraq - Unemployment Rate 2020," Statista, October 20, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/327328/unemployment-rate-in-iraq/>; Statista, "Iraq - Youth Unemployment Rate 1999-2020," Statista, October 20, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812116/youth-unemployment-rate-in-iraq/>.

²⁸ Ahmad, "Covid-19 Induces Unemployment Rate up to %35 in Iraq."

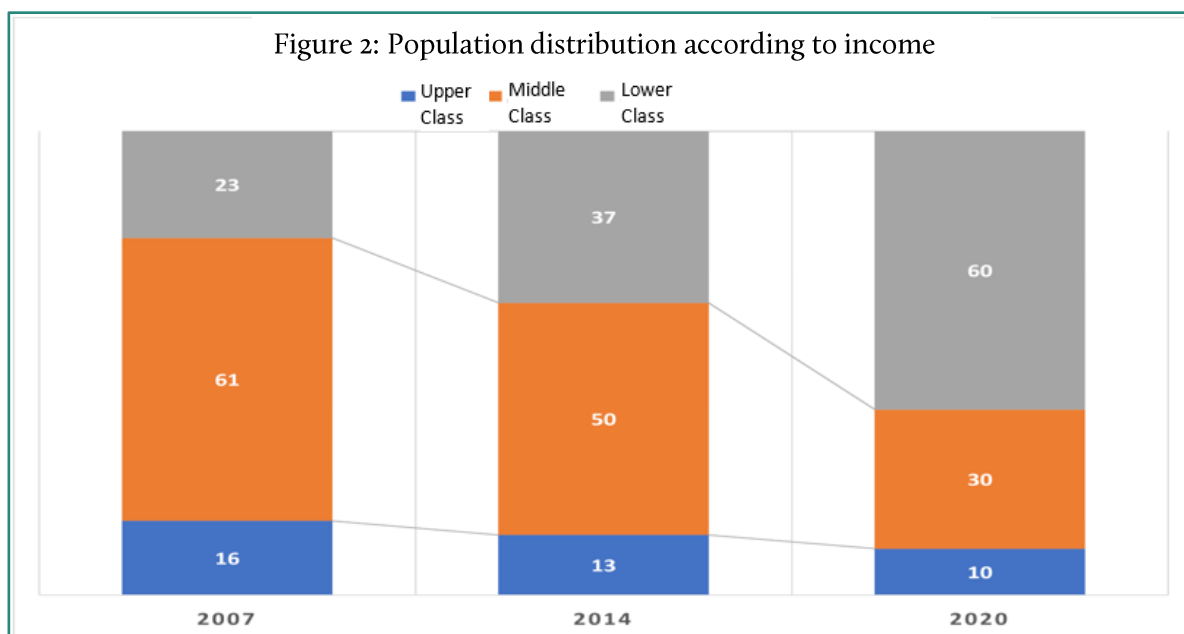


Figure 2: Iraq Population Distribution according to Income (Source: CSIS)²⁹

Water scarcity also poses a challenge to food security and the already fragile food system in Iraq. Increased stress on water resources due to the Covid-19 mitigation measures coincides with a growing need to allocate water supplies to the agricultural sector to increase domestic food production.³⁰ However, increased household water demand means that less water is available for industrial and agricultural purposes.³¹ Damage to agriculture-related water infrastructure and crop fields during recent conflict and targeted attacks by ISIS further challenge Iraq’s ability to produce necessary quantities of food.³² The impact of Covid-19 on the disruption of Iraq’s supply chains and increase in food costs is exacerbated by the decrease in the population’s purchasing power as many lose their jobs and slide into poverty.³³

“The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 will push an additional 11.7% of the Iraqi population (4.5 million people) below the poverty line.”

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, approximately 22% of the Iraqi population lived under the national poverty line of 110,881 dinars per month (approximately \$93.14) and between 2.5-3.9% percent lived in extreme poverty of under \$1.25 a day.³⁴ The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) finds that the

²⁹ Munqith Dagher, “Iraqi Stability and Its Free-Falling Middle Class,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, October 21, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iraqi-stability-and-its-free-falling-middle-class>.

³⁰ Food and Agriculture Organization, World Food Programme, and World Bank Group, “Iraq Covid-19 Weekly Food Security Monitor”; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, “The Impact of Covid-19 on the Water-Scarce Arab Region,” 4.

³¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, “The Impact of Covid-19 on the Water-Scarce Arab Region,” 2-4.

³² The World Bank, “Iraq: Reconstruction and Investment - Part 2: Damage and Needs Assessment of Affected Governorates” (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2018), 53-54; Hadi Fathallah, “Iraq’s Governance Crisis and Food Insecurity,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 4, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/81976>.

³³ Fathallah, “Iraq’s Governance Crisis and Food Insecurity”; World Food Program (WFP), “Iraq Market Monitor Report” (Rome, Italy: World Food Program (WFP), April 2020), 4, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Iraq%20Market%20Monitor%20Report%20Issue%2030%20-%20April%202020-Final.pdf>.

³⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung, “BTI 2020 Country Report,” 17; European Asylum Support Office (EASO), “Iraq Key Socio-Economic Indicators,” 43; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Impact of the Oil Crisis and Covid-19 On Iraq’s Fragility,” 10; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), “Iraq.”

socio-economic impact of Covid-19 will push an additional 11.7% of the Iraqi population (4.5 million people) below the poverty line.³⁵ Approximately 42% of the total population are especially vulnerable to poverty due to higher risk of being deprived of financial security, health, education, and appropriate living conditions.³⁶ UNICEF also expects a 30% increase in the number of people struggling to make a living.³⁷ This population group often works in the informal sector for minimal salary and are already on the brink of falling below the poverty line before the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁸ To reverse these trends and mitigate the economic impact of Covid-19, a high-level Iraqi delegation has met with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to request financial support and passed a law allowing for \$10bn in increased deficit from both internal and external sources.³⁹

The growing lower class and portion of the population living in poverty means that households are likely to depend on external assistance and NGO's for essential resources including food and clean drinking water.⁴⁰ The inability of NGO's to reach persons in need and provide such assistance due to Covid-19 related travel restrictions makes it difficult for the population to sustain their livelihoods, with direct implications for Iraq's socio-political order and stability.⁴¹ Previous protests show that economic hardship is one of the key factors underlying citizen disenchantment, broader grievances, and even anger, leading to widespread protests across the country. As the economic situation in Iraq deteriorates further, it is likely to continue to stir instability and protests into 2021.⁴²

³⁵ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Impact of the Oil Crisis and COVID-19 On Iraq's Fragility," 11; Dagher, "Iraqi Stability and Its Free-Falling Middle Class"; European Asylum Support Office (EASO), "Iraq Key Socio-Economic Indicators," 43; Middle East Monitor, "United Nations Expects Poverty in Iraq to Double to 40% in 2020," Middle East Monitor, May 14, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200514-united-nations-expects-poverty-in-iraq-to-double-to-40-in-2020/>.

³⁶ UNICEF, "Assessment of Covid-19 Impact on Poverty and Vulnerability in Iraq."

³⁷ UNICEF.

³⁸ Dagher, "Iraqi Stability and Its Free-Falling Middle Class."

³⁹ Mustafa Saadoun, "Iraq Increases Deficit to Pay Salaries," *Al Monitor Review*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/11/iraq-economy-deficit-finance-white-paper.html>; Dima Abumaria, "Mideast States Turn to IMF to Stave Off Economic Collapse," *The Media Line*, May 14, 2020, <https://themedialine.org/life-lines/mideast-states-turn-to-imf-to-stave-off-economic-collapse/>; Middle East Monitor, "Iraq Asks IMF for Debt Deferment Due to Coronavirus Crisis," Middle East Monitor, April 16, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200416-iraq-asks-imf-for-debt-deferment-due-to-coronavirus-crisis/>; Sajad Jiyad, "Struggling Iraq Faces Another Crisis in COVID-19" (Rome, Italy: Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), October 2020), 2, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2073.pdf>; Al-Ansary Khalid, "Iraq Seeks IMF Loan, Saudi Investments to Boost Oil-Battered Economy," *Bloomberg*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.bloombergquint.com/global-economics/iraq-seeks-imf-loan-saudi-investments-to-boost-battered-economy/>; "Iraq Looks to IMF for Financial Support," *Argus*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/2134794-iraq-looks-to-imf-for-financial-support>.

⁴⁰ Oxfam International, "Coronavirus Threatens Iraq with New Humanitarian Crisis."

⁴¹ Enabling Peace in Iraq, "Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 in Iraq," 5.

⁴² Elie Abouaoun and Sarhang Hamasaeed, "Iraq One Year After Its Seismic Protests Began," United States Institute of Peace, October 15, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/iraq-one-year-after-its-seismic-protests-began>; Intelyse, "How Is COVID-19 Affecting Political Stability in Iraq? Are We Seeing Violent Groups Taking Advantage of the Situation?," Intelyse, June 11, 2020, <https://intelyse.com/how-is-covid-19-affecting-iraq/>.

The Socio-Political Challenge

The difficulties of appointing a new prime minister on May 7th 2020 and forming a government has undermined the population's trust in the government.⁴³ Corruption and the absence of key public services and socio-economic opportunities have sparked several protest movements in the past years.⁴⁴ Demonstrations in 2019 quickly escalated due to the security forces' harsh response resulting in the death of over 600 demonstrators.⁴⁵ The same security forces that cracked down on public demonstrations are responsible for enforcing curfews to mitigate the spread of Covid-19.⁴⁶ In this context, many perceived the governments' ban on public gatherings as an attempt to undercut the momentum of the demonstrations.⁴⁷ Deteriorating state-society relations present a critical challenge to Iraq's response to Covid-19. The convergence between medical facilities and security forces in carrying out quarantine policies has heightened distrust of public medical services leading some to reject quarantine as they believe it resembles a form of arrest.⁴⁸ In addition, religious beliefs in some parts of the society render the population reluctant to take Covid-19 tests and seek treatment even if they have severe symptoms, as illness is stigmatized, and quarantine requires isolation from family members.⁴⁹

“Deteriorating state-society relations presents a critical challenge to Iraq’s response to Covid-19.”

The spread of Covid-19 impacts men and women in different ways and has distinct social, economic, and security impacts on women.⁵⁰ Although mortality rates are higher for men than for women (at 67% and 33% respectively), the spread of the virus has undermined the already precarious situation of women.⁵¹ Women face an increased burden of domestic work and care-taking responsibilities for children and sick persons, leading to a greater loss of economic livelihoods and autonomy that has increased the gender gap in the labour market.⁵² In addition, women face more barriers to accessing health and support services due to social and religious norms and relatively limited decision-making

⁴³ Peter Graff and Angus MacSwan, “Iraq Names Its Third Prime Minister in 10 Weeks,” *Reuters*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-politics-idUSKCN21R18Z>; Fay Daoud, “COVID-19’s Impact on Social Cohesion in Iraq Cannot Be Ignored in Recovery Efforts: New Report | UNDP in the Arab States,” UNDP, November 15, 2020, 2, https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2020/covid-19_s-impact-on-social-cohesion-in-iraq.html.

⁴⁴ Nancy Ezzeddine and Erwin van Veen, “A Paralysed Status Quo: Expect More Protests and Violence in Iraq” (The Hague: Clingendael, 2019), 1, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/paralysed-status-quo-expect-more-protests-and-violence-iraq>.

⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, “Deadly Violence Grips Iraq as Security Forces Clear Protest Sites,” Al Jazeera, November 9, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/deadly-violence-grips-iraq-security-forces-clear-protest-sites-191109174546606.html>.

⁴⁶ Mansour, Skelton, and Hussein, “COVID 19.”

⁴⁷ Solomon, “The Impact of Covid-19 on the Middle East and North Africa”; Intelys, “How Is COVID-19 Affecting Political Stability in Iraq?”; Michael Young, “Has the Coronavirus Crisis Permanently Silenced the Protests in Iraq?,” Carnegie Middle East Center, April 23, 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/81597>.

⁴⁸ Mansour, Skelton, and Hussein, “COVID 19.”

⁴⁹ Alissa J. Rubin, “Stigma Hampers Iraqi Efforts to Fight the Coronavirus,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/world/middleeast/iraq-coronavirus-stigma-quarantine.html>; Rubin, “Stigma Hampers Iraqi Efforts to Fight the Coronavirus”; Samya Kullab, “Iraqi Doctor’s Fight with Virus Lays Bare a Battered System,” *Egypt Independent*, May 15, 2020, <https://egyptindependent.com/iraqi-doctors-fight-with-virus-lays-bare-a-battered-system/>.

⁵⁰ Bratter, “Impact of Coronavirus on Women in Iraq”; Hadeel et al., “Gender Analysis of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Iraq”; Halawa, “The Gendered Impact of Covid-19 in the Middle East.”

⁵¹ World Health Organisation (WHO), “Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq”; Global Health 5050, “The Covid-19 Sex-Disaggregated Data Tracker”; Hadeel et al., “Gender Analysis of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Iraq,” 6; Dina et al., “Covid-19 Exacerbating Gender-Based Violence in Iraq.”

⁵² International Organisation for Migration (IOM), “Impact of Covid-19 on Small-and-Medium Sized Enterprises in Iraq,” 4.

power. Moreover, they are at heightened risk of domestic abuse and gender-based violence.⁵³ Increased levels of domestic abuse coincide with weakened protective social support networks, assistance, and aid, as well as a lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services. These factors put women at greater risk of suffering preventable mortality and illness.⁵⁴

The Security Challenge

Iraq’s security context is also deteriorating. In many parts of Iraq, the Islamic State (ISIS) has (re)gained momentum and influence due to the governments’ focus on mitigating Covid-19, the limited capacity of security forces to conduct counter-insurgency operations, as well as the partial suspension of the US-led military campaign against ISIS.⁵⁵ ISIS has strategically exploited security gaps and the health, economic, and socio-political turbulence in Iraq to relaunch attacks in rural and urban areas across the country.⁵⁶ There has been an increase in the total number of ISIS attacks in the first three months of 2020, compared to both the previous quarter and the same quarter the previous year (Figure 3).⁵⁷

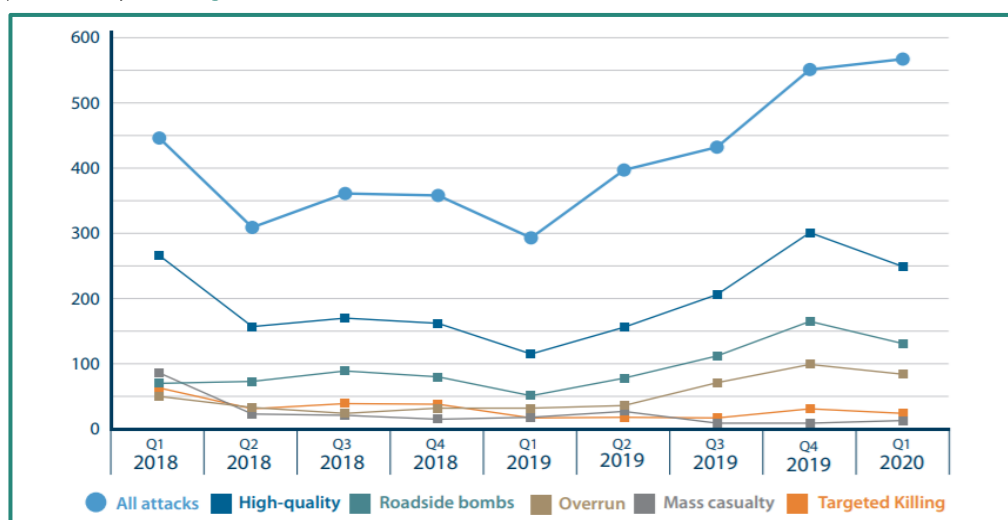


Figure 3 Number of attacks in Iraq per quarter (2018-2020), sorted by attack type (Source: Washington Institute)⁵⁸

⁵³ Hadeel et al., “Gender Analysis of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Iraq,” 4.

⁵⁴ Hadeel et al., 5; World Health Organization (WHO), “Responding to Uptick in GBV in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic.”

⁵⁵ Ryan Browne, “ISIS Seeks to Exploit Pandemic to Mount Resurgence in Iraq and Syria,” CNN, May 8, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/07/politics/isis-coronavirus-iraq-syria/index.html>; United Nations Security Council, “Letter Dated 16 July 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council” (United Nations Security Council, July 23, 2020), 1, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/717>; Elizabeth Dent, “US Policy and the Resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria” (Middle East Institute, October 2020), 1, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/US%20Policy%20and%20the%20Resurgence%20of%20ISIS%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Shivan Fazil and Dylan O’Driscoll, “The Resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq: Political and Military Responses | SIPRI,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), June 9, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2020/resurgence-islamic-state-iraq-political-and-military-responses>; Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, “How ISIS Is Using Coronavirus to Rebuild Its Terrorism in Iraq and Syria,” NBC News, May 28, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/isis-using-coronavirus-rebuild-its-terrorism-network-iraq-syria-ncna1215941>.

⁵⁷ Dent, “US Policy and the Resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria,” 4.

“ISIS has strategically exploited security gaps and the health, economic, and socio-political turbulence in Iraq to relaunch attacks.”

The number of attacks by ISIS initially decreased between the last quarter of 2018 and the first quarter of 2019 from 357 attacks to 292 attacks. Since then, the number of attacks has increased. In the second, third, and fourth quarter of 2019 the number of attacks increased from 396 to 431 to 550 attacks. This trend continued and in the first quarter of 2020 when the number of attacks reached 566 attacks. A comparison between 2019 and 2020 shows a 94% increase in attacks from 292 in the first quarter of 2019 to 566 in the first quarter of 2020.⁵⁸

Figure 4 demonstrates a notable difference between the number of attacks per province in Iraq. Most attacks took place in Diyala, followed by Baghdad, Salah al-Din, Anbar, Kirkuk, and Nineveh.⁵⁹

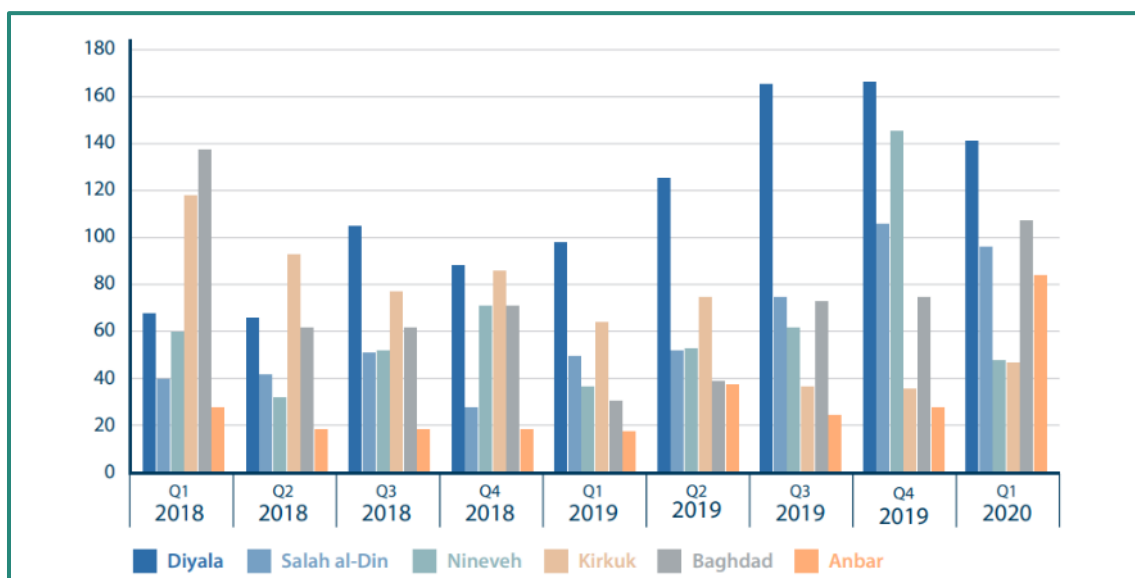


Figure 4 Iraq Provincial ISIS Attack Trends (Source: Washington Institute)⁶⁰

ISIS has also propagated instability by damaging Iraq’s water infrastructure and burning agricultural fields, putting additional pressure on Iraq’s shortage of clean drinking water and agricultural production.⁶¹ Affected agricultural communities become fertile grounds for recruitment by ISIS who

⁵⁸ Knights and Almeida, “Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019-2020,” 14; Chloe Cornish and Asmaa al-Omar, “Isis Operations Increase in Iraq as Coalition Withdraws,” Financial Times, June 9, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/abbdcd29-fe66-4be2-b35e-efcfa536ce1>; Dent, “US Policy and the Resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria”; Andrew Hanna, “ISIS Offensive Exploits Pandemic,” Wilson Center, June 8, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-offensive-exploits-pandemic>.

⁵⁹ Anthony Cordesman, “The Real World Capabilities of ISIS: The Threat Continues,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, September 9, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/real-world-capabilities-isis-threat-continues>; hawarnews, “Report: ISIS Launched 100+ Attacks in Iraq in August,” hawarnews, September 4, 2020, <http://hawarnews.com/en/haber/report-isis-launched-100-attacks-in-iraq-in-august-h18970.html>; Charles Lister, “ISIS’s Dramatic Escalation in Syria and Iraq,” Middle East Institute, May 4, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/isis-dramatic-escalation-syria-and-iraq>; Knights and Almeida, “Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019-2020,” 15.

⁶⁰ Knights and Almeida, “Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019-2020,” 13.

⁶¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, “The Impact of Covid-19 on the Water-Scarce Arab Region,” 5; The Arab Weekly, “ISIS Resumes Scorched Earth Tactics against Iraqi Farmers,” The Arab Weekly, May 13, 2020, <https://the arabweekly.com/isis-resumes-scorched-earth-tactics-against-iraqi-farmers>; The Arab Weekly, “ISIS Resumes Scorched Earth Tactics against Iraqi Farmers”; Al-Monitor, “Islamic State Believed behind Crop Fires in Iraq’s Disputed Territories,” Al-Monitor, May 13, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/farm-fires-resume-iraq-disputed-territories-islamic-state.html>.

offer young people food and livelihood security for their families.⁶² Moreover, Iraqi civilian security forces are still in critical need of reforms to assimilate various local militias into a unified force that protects all Iraqi citizens on an equal and impartial basis.⁶³

The destabilizing impacts of Covid-19, that may spread beyond Iraq's borders, has caught international attention. In January 2021, the Netherlands deployed 120 military personnel to help secure troops and equipment stationed at Erbil International Airport against attacks from ISIS. This Dutch-led Force Protection platoon is part of a broader international anti-ISIS coalition stationed in northern Iraq mandated to support regional military authorities in its efforts to independently fight terrorist organization ISIS in the long term.⁶⁴

A Vicious Cycle

Covid-19 acts as a burden multiplier to the already dire water situation in Iraq and compounds prevailing health, economic, and political challenges. Breaking this vicious cycle requires these formidable challenges to be tackled simultaneously. If the health challenge is not controlled, economic stability is likely to worsen. Prolonged economic insecurity, in turn, undermines the livelihoods of the Iraqi population and increases instability in society. Socio-political instability will widen the security gap in which armed groups like ISIS can proliferate. This dynamic has already started to emerge and highlights the need for better awareness and understanding of the importance of water access and quality, and more timely, integrated, and holistic responses to challenges posed thereon.

Impact of Covid-19 in four Iraqi Governorates

Iraq has been hard-hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, but numbers of cases vary between governorates. Overall, a comparison of confirmed cases per province indicates that Baghdad has had a substantially higher number of confirmed cases than any other region in Iraq, with Basrah and Najaf following in second and third place, respectively (See [Figure 5](#)). Anbar province has the lowest number of confirmed cases, followed by Ninewa and Salah Al-Din that also have a relatively low number of confirmed cases. The provincial snapshot presented in [Figure 5](#) is based on the registered numbers of cases on March 16th, 2021.⁶⁵

⁶² AsiaNews, "Iraqi Priest: Infections aside, COVID-19 Is Sinking the Economy, Helping the Islamic State," AsiaNews, May 29, 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Iraqi-priest%3A-Infections-aside%2C-COVID-19-is-sinking-the-economy%2C-helping-the-Islamic-State-50216.html>; Cooke, Lahn, and Mansour, "Same Old Politics Will Not Solve Iraq Water Crisis."

⁶³ Brookings, "Webinar"; "Joint NGO Statement: Humanitarian and Security Implications of the Covid-19 Crisis in Northern Iraq."

⁶⁴ Ministerie van Defensie, "Militairen naar Noord-Irak en Mali," nieuwsbericht, Defensie (Ministerie van Defensie, November 20, 2020), <https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/11/20/militairen-naar-irak-en-mali>; Ministerie van Defensie, "Militaire bijdrage Nederland in Irak - Missie in Irak," onderwerp, Defensie (Ministerie van Defensie, October 20, 2020), <https://www.defensie.nl/onderwerpen/missie-in-irak-en-oost-syrie/militaire-bijdrage>.

⁶⁵ World Health Organisation (WHO), "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq."

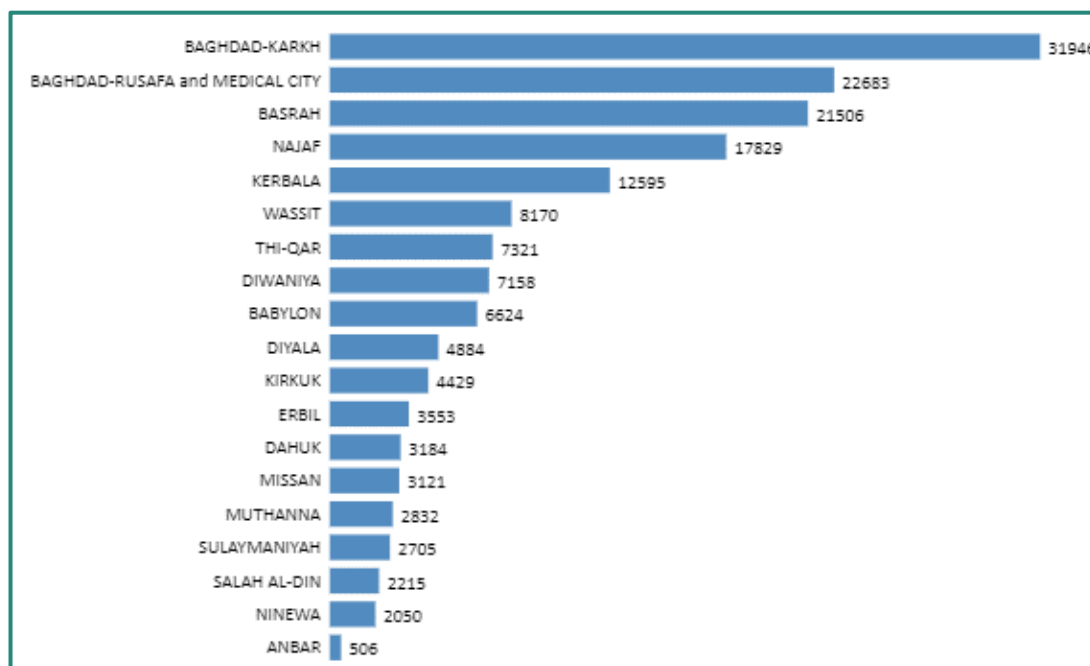


Figure 5 The cumulative number of confirmed cases by province as of March 16, 2021 (Source: World Health Organisation)

Since WPS is focusing its work in Iraq on (inter-)provincial water challenges in Basrah, Dhi-Qar, Wasit, and Missan, the impact of Covid-19 on these provinces are of particular interest and highlighted below.

Basrah Province

Basrah is the main oil-producing province of Iraq and has recently seen levels of poverty reaching up to 40%.⁶⁶ This poverty spike is linked to the collapse of oil prices due to Covid-19 and the related temporary halt of economic activities.⁶⁷ Basrah has been the second hardest-hit province after Baghdad with a total of 61,348 confirmed cases and 939 deaths on March 16, 2021. The number of confirmed cases peaked in March 2021, with a total of 927 cases on March 4th, 2021 (See Figure 6). After

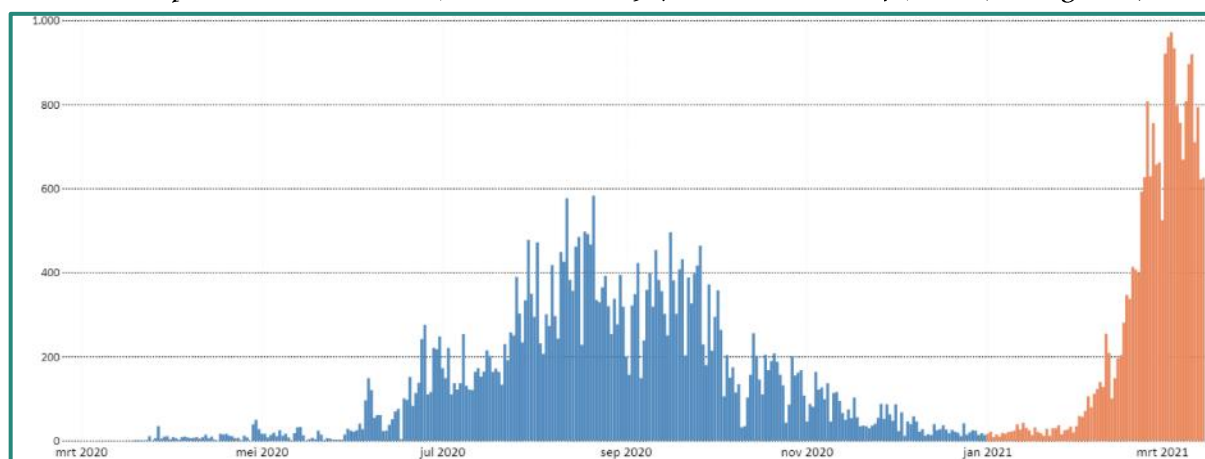


Figure 6 The number of confirmed cases in Basrah as of March 16th, 2021 (Source: World Health Organisation)⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Middle East Monitor, "Poverty in Iraq's Basra Rises to Record 40%," Middle East Monitor, November 19, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201119-poverty-in-iraqs-basra-rises-to-record-40/>; Rudaw, "Basra: Drowning in Poverty – on an Ocean of Oil," Rudaw, February 2, 2020, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/02022020>.

⁶⁷ Al Jazeera, "Iraq: Anti-Government Demonstrator Killed in Basra Protests," Al-Jazeera, November 6, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/6/iraq-activist-killed-as-security-forces-try-to-break-up-protest>.

a rapid decrease at the start of October, cases have remained relatively low throughout the months of November and January and saw a steady increase in March.⁶⁸

Dhi-Qar Province

Dhi-Qar has also been adversely hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. The global decline in oil prices has hit Iraq hard and the resultant economic downfall in the country has left the governorate unable to pay its public workers. Several protests have taken place in the capital Nasiriyah in the past few months against the government over poor public services and delayed salaries.⁶⁹ Dhi-Qar is the sixth hardest hit province in Iraq with 31,089 cases and 891 deaths on March 16, 2021. Three peaks in the number of confirmed cases can be observed in July and October 2020 and March 2021 (See Figure 7). At the highest point on October 1st, the number of confirmed cases reached 427.⁷⁰

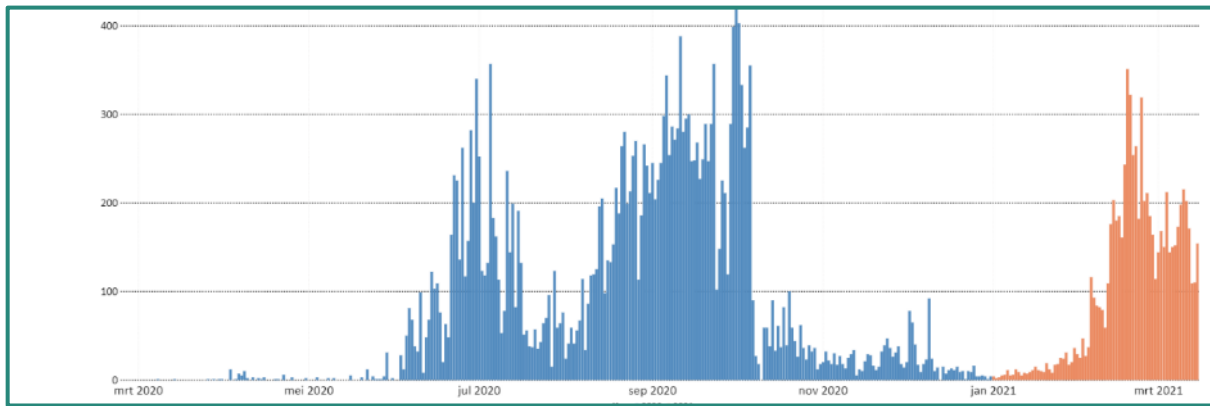


Figure 7 The number of confirmed cases in Dhi-Qar as of March 16th, 2021 (Source: World Health Organisation)⁷¹

Wasit Province

Wasit province has seen several protests during the Covid-19 pandemic over the past few months due to the economic impact on the population.⁷² Wasit is the fifth hardest hit province in Iraq, with a total of 40,497 confirmed cases and 486 deaths on March 16, 2021. The number of cases started to

⁶⁸ World Health Organisation (WHO), “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq.” World Health Organisation (WHO), “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq.”

⁶⁹ Middle East Monitor, “Iraq Protesters Shut down Dhi Qar Oil Company in Southern Iraq,” Middle East Monitor, September 22, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200922-iraq-protesters-shut-down-dhi-qar-oil-company-in-southern-iraq/>; TRT World, “Thousands Protest in Iraq’s Nasiriyah as Death Toll from Clashes Rises,” Thousands protest in Iraq’s Nasiriyah as death toll from clashes rises, December 1, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/thousands-protest-in-iraq-s-nasiriyah-as-death-toll-from-clashes-rises-41941/>; Al Jazeera, “Iraq”; Sofia Barbarani, “Nasiriya: City at the Heart of Iraq’s Uprisings and Rebellion,” Al Jazeera, January 1, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/1/nasiriyah-the-city-at-heart-of-iraqs-uprisings-and-rebellions>; Middle East Monitor, “Iraq Protesters Storm Dhi Qar Governorate Building over Poor Services,” Middle East Monitor, August 10, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200810-iraq-protesters-storm-dhi-qar-governorate-building-over-poor-services/>; Fadhel Al-Nashmi, “Iraqi Govt. Faces Political, Popular Pressure over Financial Crisis,” Asharq AL-awsat, November 9, 2020, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2614241/iraqi-govt-faces-political-popular-pressure-over-financial-crisis>.

⁷⁰ World Health Organisation (WHO), “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq.”

⁷¹ World Health Organisation (WHO), “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq.”

⁷² Al Sharqiya, “An Appeal to the Iraqi Government to Protect Peaceful Protesters in Wasit,” Al Sharqiya, November 29, 2020, <https://www.alsharqiya.com/en/news/an-appeal-to-the-iraqi-government-to-protect-the-peaceful-protesters-in-wasit>; Crisis24, “Iraq: Reports of Fatality as Protesters Clash with Security Forces in Kut (Wasit Province),” Crisis24, November 28, 2020, <https://crisis24.garda.com/insights/news-alerts/vwcc52zbwbenmjne/iraq-reports-of-fatality-as-protesters-clash-with-security-forces-in-kut-wasit-province-november-28-update-3>; The New Arab, “Protesters Return to Iraqi Streets despite Coronavirus Pandemic, Accusing PM of Stalling Reforms,” The New Arab (The New Arab, June 5, 2020), <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/6/5/protesters-return-to-iraqi-streets-despite-coronavirus-pandemic>; Arwa Ibrahim, “Demands Not Met: Anti-Government Protests Resume in Iraq,” Al Jazeera, October 25, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/25/demands-not-met-anti-government-protests-resume-in-iraq>.

increase in June 2020, reaching a peak on July 10th with a total of 496 confirmed cases. The number of cases remained between 55 and 307 in July and August and increased briefly in October to reach 446 cases (See [Figure 8](#)). The cases have remained relatively low between November 2020 and January 2021 and increased again in Februari and March 2021. ⁷³

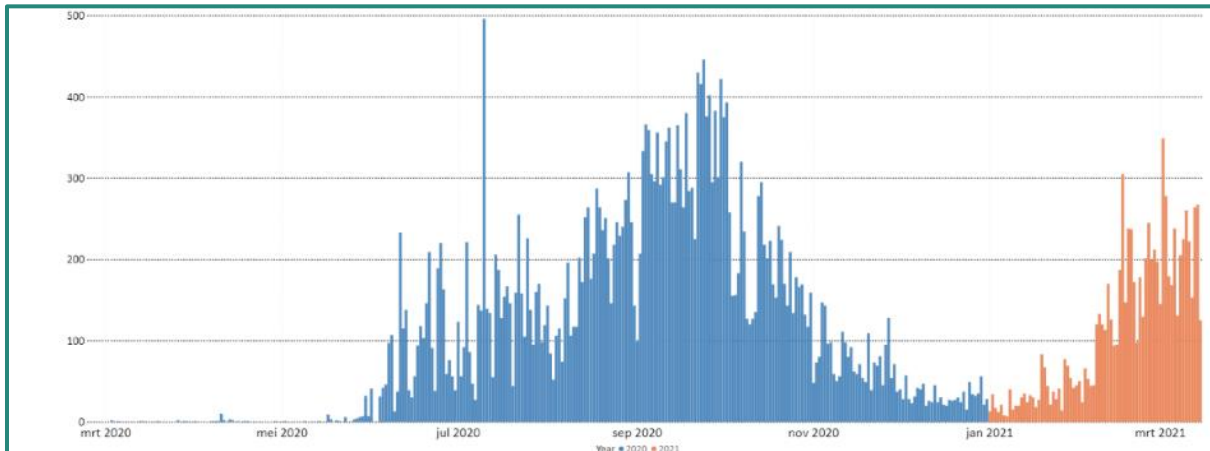


Figure 8 The number of confirmed cases in Wasit as of March 16th, 2021 (Source: World Health Organisation)⁷⁴

Missan Province

Missan province has seen an increase in narco-trafficking over the last years.⁷⁵ The decline in global demand for Iraqi oil has further raised concerns of a possible increase in narco-related crime. Missan recorded 21,362 Covid-19 cases and 471 deaths on March 16, 2021. The number of confirmed cases started to increase in June 2020 to reach a peak of 215 cases on June 26 (See [Figure 9](#)). After a brief decline in July, numbers peaked in September to reach a total of 242 cases on September 27. Since then cases have maintained low from November 2021 to the start of February 2021 when the number of confirmed cases increased rapidly.

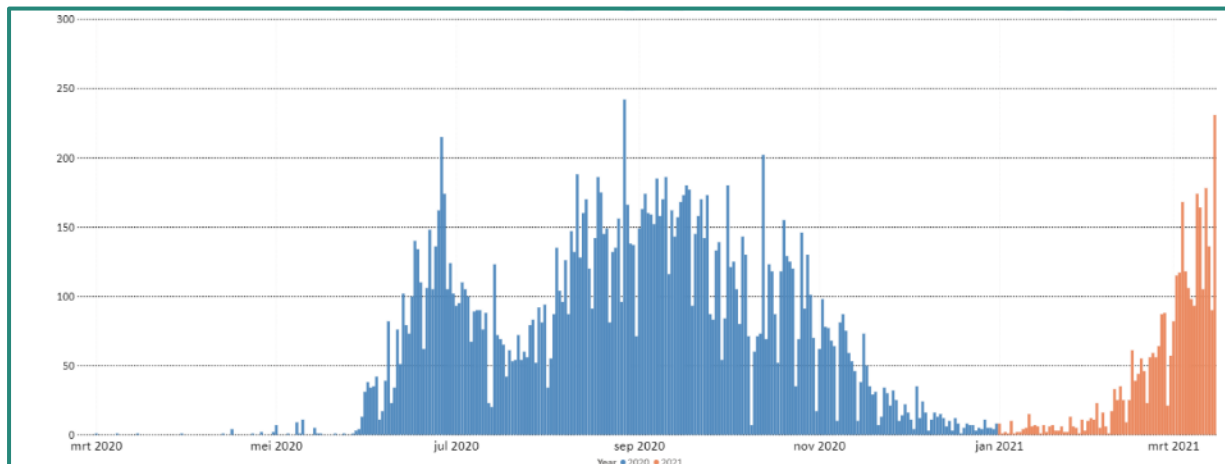


Figure 9 The number of confirmed cases in Missan as of March 16th, 2021 (Source: World Health Organisation)⁷⁶

⁷³ World Health Organisation (WHO), “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq.”

⁷⁴ World Health Organisation (WHO), “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq.”

⁷⁵ Adnan Abu Zeed, “Drug Smuggling, Abuse on the Rise in Iraq,” Al-Monitor, November 5, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/11/iraq-security-drug-crystal-iran.html>.

⁷⁶ World Health Organisation (WHO), “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq.”

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on the health, economic, socio-political, and security situation in Iraq and has exacerbated trends that already present a challenge to Iraq's fragile stability. These trends are likely to have long-term implications, even after the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic subsides. The recent emergence of a vaccine is likely to improve the health situation in 2021 and relieve some pressure on the overburdened and fragile health care system. However, due to shortages in medical equipment and services and the evolving socio-political and security situation, it is likely that the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to take lives into 2021. The declining productivity of critical sectors including the oil and agriculture industries will have a long-term impact, increasing unemployment and poverty levels. The dire economic situation and the inability to sustain livelihoods may lead people to dismiss mitigation measures in search of work opportunities. The population's distrust in the government's mitigation measures further exacerbate this trend and has already led to popular unrest and protests across the country. The withdrawal of foreign troops and (re)emergence of ISIS in Iraq further adds to the growing instability, in turn exacerbating people's sense of insecurity and frustration. If Covid-19 cases remain high, it is likely to temporarily halt the operation of international peacebuilding and training missions in the country, thus putting additional pressure on the government to control the security situation.

“The compounding health, economic, socio-political, and security challenges underline the need for an integrated and multi-disciplinary approach to addressing Covid-19, water and security in Iraq

The compounding health, economic, socio-political, and security challenges underline the need for an integrated and multi-disciplinary approach to address Covid-19, water and security in Iraq. This requires, first and foremost, developing a comprehensive understanding of the complex and non-linear (inter-) linkages between Iraq's various challenges. Without this understanding, solutions to one problem may undermine solutions to another problem and further exacerbate

its negative impacts. The first step in this direction is that various stakeholders active in government, the private sector, and civil society develop a shared understanding of each others' perspectives and challenges. A shared understanding provides the foundation for stakeholders with different backgrounds to engage in more constructive and solution-oriented dialogue and develop joint approaches for action to prevent and/or mitigate security risks and related vulnerabilities. This briefing paper supports this broader effort to better understand the linkages between Iraq's various challenges and engage in evidence-based dialogue.

The WPS Partnership

The WPS partnership recognizes the complex nexus between water and security and the critical importance of taking an integrated approach to facilitate the development of a shared understanding of the many pathways that link water and security. To this end, it develops innovative early warning tools that provide local stakeholders with evidence-based information (e.g. through information dashboards, analysis, scenario planning) to encourage more neutral and constructive dialogue. It also supports the negotiation of interests and trade-offs and exploration of alternative solutions. These innovative early warning tools utilize big data and remote sensing to support the identification of specific hotspot areas of risk and also support the more granular assessments of the impact of hydrological, social, economic, and political factors on local and regional communities. A better and more informed understanding of the complex water-security nexus moreover creates an enabling environment to raise awareness and encourage others to partake in a wider dialogue process. While this approach is time consuming, it is more likely to have impact and enable Iraq to build long-term solutions to the complex, water-related challenges in Iraq.

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