

For Iraqis, the Choice Is Between Pandemic and Poverty

In the streets of Baghdad, Iraqis battle a corrupt political class, war, poverty, and now a pandemic that has ravaged an ailing health sector.

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Global Research, August 19, 2020

[openDemocracy](#) 18 August 2020

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#),
[Science and Medicine](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

On Baghdad's al-Rashid street, stalls, tea houses and restaurants serve unmasked customers in crammed markets in spite of COVID-19 rapidly spreading among the populace. This busy street in Baghdad is a testament to pre-existing governance failure that has been felt in many developing countries reeling from the impact of COVID-19 on their economies.

Nearby at al-Rusafi Square, exhausted porters pulling back-breaking cargo intersect in a cobweb of traffic threads under the scorching sun of Iraq's merciless summer. A horse on a leash looks on as drivers of taxis-turned-buses yell for the last passenger to fill an empty seat. Honking mingles with a stream of slurs spouted off by an angry driver who wants through, but cannot. A daily repertoire of mayhem plays on, and the din resonates across the square where car bombs incinerated many humans in recent years.

People most vulnerable to poverty are presented with no alternatives encouraging them to stay indoors. The absence of financial support is pushing them to resume their labor in risky environments. While easing movement restrictions enables daily workers to provide for their families, authorities have not provided any mobile health awareness teams in packed markets, nor arranged the distribution of increasingly-expensive face masks.

In Iraq, as is the case elsewhere in countries facing the multifaceted challenge posed by the pandemic, fragile groups of people are left to fend for themselves as the government kneecaps itself in the race to contain the spread of the COVID-19 infection.

"We would die of hunger"

For residents of the many impoverished areas of downtown and eastern Baghdad, staying indoors is an unattainable luxury. "We would die of hunger," says Mohammed Turki, a 44-year-old porter sitting on the edge of a nearby ally.

Turki has been working as a porter for the past sixteen years, at best earning somewhat around \$20 a day. But "that's if I could find work," he says. Otherwise, his daily wage ferrying merchandise in Baghdad's markets doesn't exceed \$8- barely enough to feed his four children.

Today, one pack of surgical masks costs around \$13 in Baghdad.

Around noon, shop owners at and nearby al-Rusafi Square who complain of plunging sales roll down the shutters. The economic consequences of COVID-19 cast a pall over many livelihoods.

Echoing World Bank [projections](#) that poverty will increase by the double in 2020, a [report](#) by the Iraqi Ministry of Planning, with support of UNICEF and other organizations, found that “an additional 4.5 million (11.7%) of Iraqis risk falling below the poverty line as a result of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. This sharp increase would bring the national poverty rate to 31.7% from 20% in 2018.”

In post-invasion Iraq, consecutive governments have either failed or lacked the will to diversify the country’s oil-dependent economy. They kept the national industry and agriculture in limbo and turned their eyes on flooding the Iraqi market with [imported goods](#) instead.

A recent [study](#) by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on the impact of COVID-19 and the drop in oil prices says, “high levels of conflict, coupled with the COVID-19 outbreak and the drop in oil revenues, can further increase extreme poverty.”



View of al-Rusafi Square in Baghdad, Iraq on 14 July 2020 | Picture by Nabil Salih. All rights reserved

Ali Tawfiq is one of those at risk of sliding deeper into poverty if a full lockdown to curtail the spread of COVID-19 is imposed again. He sees no alternative but to pull a handcart through crowded markets to care for himself, his blind father, and two disabled brothers: a vendor and a porter.

“I am the one who supports my family. Not showing up at the market means I

will not be able to eat or drink,” he says.

Legacy of war

Nineteen-year-old Tawfiq is from generations of downtrodden victims of the war the US and its allies waged against Iraq in 2003. He started working as a porter at the age of ten. Few years into the occupation, he lost his sister in a terrorist attack. “My sister died in a car bomb explosion in al-Mansour in 2007. She was only ten,” he says.

Every day, he makes his way to work from Alawi al-Hilla area on foot. His fourteen-year-old mute brother started working with him four years ago. Their eldest brother, a veteran wounded in the fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS) militants and subsequently discharged, spends his mornings selling bottled drinking water at the square.

A shredded Iraqi flag tucked into the hand of Ma’ruf al-Rusafi’s statue barely flutters in the scarce wind as Tawfiq speaks. Had the poet still been alive, perhaps he would reclaim his rostrum and say:

You, who ask after us in Baghdad
we are cattle in a barren land
The west rose to the skies, overlooking us
and we are still gazing from underneath

In downtown Baghdad, the misery engulfing today’s Iraq and erasing the splendor of its past is on full display. There, both history and humans are forsaken. Cracks course through the Abbasid-era minaret of al-Khulafa’ Mosque. Groundwater damages the foundations and the minaret gradually tilts eastward – on the verge of collapse. On the opposite side of al-Jumhuriyah street, moisture dominates the walls inside Saint Joseph [Cathedral](#). Two historic landmarks shut to visitors.

Piles of garbage sit at the foot of ancient mosques, churches and the traditional *Shanasheel* houses in crumbling alleyways where childhood is stripped off early from minor porters. Maps of despair invade faces of traumatized female and child beggars, and the elderly who pass the remaining of their lifetime sipping sizzling tea at the many teahouses of al-Rashid Street – aghast at the draconian deformation their city has endured.

As Tawfiq, his brother and Turki meandered the souqs of Baghdad pulling handcarts in flip-flops, post-invasion politicians and their entourage gnawed at state coffers like termites. The ‘agents’, as labelled by ordinary citizens, nurtured their obese bank accounts instead of investing in the ever deteriorating infrastructure. The country’s ailing health sector is just one example.

Misery in Iraq’s hospitals

One state-employed doctor who recently served at a COVID-19 designated hospital in Baghdad privately describes the situation in Iraq’s hospitals as “quite miserable”.

Iraq's health ministry has so far [announced](#) over 177,000 COVID-19 cases, while the disease snuffed out the lives of around 6,000 infected patients. But health workers privately say that they estimate higher numbers than those detected.

"I am not saying official stats are lying, but they don't reflect reality," he says, asking to remain anonymous.

In hospitals stuck in an enduring typhoon of conflicts and corruption, the number of infected people is "immense", hospitals are crammed, testing capacity is insufficient and ICU beds for patients in critical phase are so limited that "patients are being placed on waiting lists" to be treated when other patients die, he says.

His assertion is not surprising. While the lockdown imposed by authorities in response to the initial emergence of infections proved decisive in stifling a surge of COVID-19 cases for a few months-considering Iraq's neighbor Iran is a Middle East epicenter- it was neither adequately implemented nor fully respected.



Men sip sizzling-hot Iraqi tea, at an old cafe in the al-Maydan area of central Baghdad, Iraq on 22 June 2020 | Picture by Nabil Salih. All rights reserved

Busy markets and small shops in popular neighborhoods remained open, as opposed to those on main streets and in up-scale areas. As restaurants were ordered to close when authorities partially lifted the curfew, many of those in the major al-Shorja marketplace, or on and astride al-Rashid and al-Saadoun streets- two main thoroughfares in central Baghdad- remained open.

"In my opinion, there are at least 10,000 new cases every day," the doctor says. Another doctor, also asking to be anonymized, says he estimates the

actual number of COVID-19 patients to be at least a double of what is detected every day.

There are around 4,000 daily COVID-19 infections [announced](#) by the ministry of health.

“Into the Abyss”

Doctors in Baghdad criticize the government’s handling of the outbreak, how most of Baghdad’s main hospitals switched attention to treating and quarantining COVID-19 patients, while some received only certain non COVID-19 related emergencies.

By doing so, people suffering other ailments had less chances to be treated at state hospitals, and did not know where their loved ones would receive the needed care, the doctor says.

According to the World Bank, there only [1.4 hospital beds](#) for each 1000 people in Iraq.

Patients arrive to a certain hospital thinking the emergency room receives all cases, instead they are directed elsewhere to a specialized hospital and that- considering Baghdad’s notorious traffic jams-“adds to their burden”, he explains. Under pressure from relatives of patients in critical condition, “sometimes you are compelled to receive COVID-19 patients at an emergency room where non COVID-19 patients reside,” he says. Thus, already vulnerable patients were sometimes put at risk of contracting the virus.

“There could have been another plan, (for example) designating specific buildings to quarantining patients (of COVID-19) to keep public hospitals functioning normally,” he says.

On 4 August, the country’s health minister [announced](#) that Baghdad’s public hospitals will resume regular operations as four COVID-19 designated hospitals will handle infected people. A decision lauded by doctors. Yet the government took another step back by [lifting](#) a three day round-the-clock curfew usually starting Thursday and ending on Saturday.

But there have always been “hurdles” facing patients at public hospitals, which usually do not offer comprehensive medical services, the doctor explains.

“People say the health system has collapsed, but there wasn’t one in the first place (...) we have been standing at edge for a long time, COVID-19 gave us a push and now we’re falling into the abyss,” he says.

The young doctor is currently curing himself at home from COVID-19’s assault on his body.

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Featured image: Portrait of Ali Tawfiq, a 19-year-old porter who ferries merchandise in old marketplaces in Baghdad, Iraq on 14 July 2020 |Picture by Nabil Salih. All rights reserved

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