

Saudi Arabia and the Kurdish Region/Iraq Driving Opposite Directions

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In the Middle East, two contrasting festivals are interesting to review. [The first from Saudi Arabia](#). Since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (known as MBS) took control of everyday in Saudi Arabia in 2017, he has put in place the Kingdom's aggressive 2030 vision. The **Soundstorm Music Festival** is an eye-catching symbol of that change, which began in 2019 and it is repeated every year since. In just five years since Saudi Arabia lifted its ban on musical events, the kingdom's concert scene has arguably outshined even that of Dubai, long seen as the Gulf region's premier entertainment hub.



Soundstorm Music Festival in Saudi Arabia

While the Saudi kingdom, known as the birthplace of Islam, took the path of modernization, the Barzani organized [the second event](#) titled the “Taj Zirin” or “**Golden Crown**” festival in Arbil. The festival honored 3,000 girls who have simply made the decision to wear the hijab or the Islamic dress. The organization organizing the event is the “Kurdistan Students Development Organization,” which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU). The KIU is considered the branch of the Kurdish Muslim Brotherhood, with the approval of the authorities of the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Arbil.

While the leadership of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) works practically by allowing such suspicious, strange and unnecessary activities to return to the past, move backwards, or at best, stagnate in place, which in practice means costly and painful delay. The only explanation here for why the KDP ruling party, branded “secular and liberal,” allow such shameful activity to take place.

According to the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in the KRI, there are about 6,000 mosques throughout the said region. Thus, the number of mosques in the KRI is comparable to the number of all mosques in Kuwait, the Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain combined. About 700 of them were built by the Islamic League, which is headed by Ali Al-Qaradaghi, the man favored by Turkey and Qatar and a fierce defender of the Muslim Brotherhood who has Qatari citizenship.



Islamic Activities in Arbil

What is shocking here is that, in 2016, Mariwan Naqshbandi, who was holding an important position in the Ministry of Religious Endowments in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) at the time, stated that more than 5,000 of these mosques were built under the current “secular” Kurdish administration after the March 1991 uprising.

The question here is: If the Ministry of Religious Endowments in the KRI is the one financing the construction of these mosques, then this means that the budget of the ministry is very healthy and many times greater than the budget of the Ministries of Health and Education. Why is [Barzani not paying the teacher’s salaries](#) within the KRI? Why is the KRG not paying all the expenses of the [Assyrian-teaching schools](#) within the KRI but having no issues from constructing a lavish multi-million dollars patriarchal compound for the Assyrian Church of the East?



Patriarchal compound for the Assyrian Church of the East/Arbil

It is a disaster to promote and support religious over educational matters in the 21st Century. However, if we assume that the funding for the building of these mosques is coming from abroad and is for long-term, hidden political purposes, then the disaster is greater.

We could assert that Machiavelli’s words: “Religion is necessary for the government, not to serve virtue, but to enable the government to control the people” apply here.