

The Audacity of the Erbil Hills Golf Course Amidst Iraq's Water Crisis

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Brief Analysis

In the heart of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), construction of the ambitious Erbil Hills Golf Course is underway.

The **development project** (<https://erbilhills.com/en/golf/>) plans to offer luxury living and a world-class 18-hole championship course for residents. However, the grand vision of the golf course project—meant to symbolize opulence and international status—stands in stark contrast to the city's persistent water shortage crisis, which has particularly impacted Erbil's poor neighborhoods and driven some to protest for basic water access.

Indeed, the environmental and ethical implications of building such a water-intensive project in a city plagued by climate change and drought has raised numerous concerns. Local residents are asking questions about the project's sustainability, responsible resource management, and the need to prioritize local communities over extravagant ventures. The irony of the golf course magnifies the urgency with which Erbil needs to address the waste of water resources and rethink its development priorities.

The Environmental Impact of the Erbil Hills Golf Course

Placing a golf course in the middle of an arid region such as Kurdistan will take a **significant toll** (<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/08/golf/climate-change-sustainability-spt-intl-cmd/index.html>) on the local environment, particularly on the KRI's water supply. More specifically, the maintenance of the course's lush greens demands excessive irrigation, and the **fourteen artificial lakes** (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=7703777083030146&external_log_id=0dd54887-f851-42e2-a51c-d29ea896e2f2&q=%20) and other water features on the course have already put immense strain on dwindling local water resources. World-class, 18-hole golf courses such as Erbil Hills can consume an astonishing amount of water, ranging from hundreds of thousands to millions of liters per day. Moreover, the use of heavy machinery during the land preparation for the course undoubtedly led to greenhouse gas **emissions** (<https://www.greenmatters.com/p/golf-courses-environmental-impact>) that can adversely affect nearby

waterways, not to mention the pesticides that will be used to maintain the course's greenery.

In recent times, golf courses around the world have become **targets**

(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2023/07/04/golf-courses-squeezed-between-drought-and-climate-activists_6042420_19.html) of climate activists and environmentalists advocating for more stringent water use regulations. For example, golf courses in many French regions experiencing drought and water shortages have become a sticking point for environmental activists. These groups have even **taken action**

(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2023/07/04/golf-courses-squeezed-between-drought-and-climate-activists_6042420_19.html) in some cases, filling holes with cement and planting vegetable gardens on greens to protest against the excessive water consumption of golf courses. The Soulèvements de la Terre movement in France labels golf courses as "luxury hoarders," similar to yachts and jacuzzis.

If environmentalists are raising concerns about water-intense golf courses in countries far ahead of Kurdistan and Iraq in their preparedness for climate change and water scarcity, then officials in the KRI should be even more worried about the impact that this golf course could have on their struggling environment. Ironically, the architect of the Erbil Hill golf course, Cynthia Dye, **claimed (<https://www.imgprestige.com/dye-interview-erbilhills>)** in an interview that "it is very important to the Iraqis to see water and green. At Erbil Hills, there is a lot of both." What Dye does not recognize, however, is that this water and green comes at the cost of the rest of Erbil, particularly the city's underprivileged and poor.

In the scorching heat of Erbil's unforgiving summer, the residents of impoverished neighborhoods already endure the relentless agony of water scarcity. With temperatures soaring above 40 degrees celsius, the situation has quite literally become a struggle for survival. Forced to purchase water from tanker trucks at exorbitant prices, these vulnerable residents are left with no choice but to spend a significant portion of their meager incomes on this essential resource. Each day, they line up anxiously, hoping to secure enough water to keep themselves and their families hydrated, to bathe, and to do basic cleaning. The burden of water scarcity weighs heavily on their shoulders. Now, they also bear witness to the sheer quantity of water consumed by the golf course just a stone's throw away.

Erbil's Deepening Water Crisis

The water crisis in Erbil is not a recent issue, as the city has historically struggled with water shortages due to its topography and the absence of major rivers and dams in close proximity. The situation, however, has reached a **dangerous level (https://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=11570)** in recent years due to the unequal distribution of limited water resources and the rapid population surge.

Erbil relies on **two main sources (<https://raseef22.net/english/article/1094336-thirsty-for-solutions-erbils-escalating-g-water-crisis-amidst-rapid-urbanization>)** for **clean water supply (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1502517470168747&ref=sharing>)**. Ifraz is the first source, situated 30 kilometers away and providing 35% of the water supply by drawing from the Great Zab River. Most of the remaining supply is obtained from 1240 water wells across the city, but access to this second source is becoming increasingly challenging. In fact, the Kurdistan Regional Government has issued several **warnings (https://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=11570)** about the significant drop of roughly 500 meters in Erbil's underground water levels over the past two decades, leading to a striking decline in water accessibility. In just a few decades, the depth required to dig a well for sufficient water supply has escalated dramatically from 100 meters in the 1960s to 200 meters in 2003, and now to an astounding 700 meters in 2022. This steep decline in water availability underscores the severity of the water crisis facing the city and emphasizes the urgency of sustainable water management and conservation measures.

Yet few are willing to connect Erbil's worsening water crisis with the luxurious Erbil Hills course. Ali Hama Salih, an

outspoken former member of the Kurdistan Parliament, is one of the few who has provided a scathing **critique** (<https://www.facebook.com/profile/100050509268547/search/?q=>) of the Erbil Hills project. His statements have shed light on the project's audacious exploitation of water resources, including the 100 water wells dug exclusively for the course and the 330 exclusive residences being built to encircle the course—each valued at a staggering \$6 million. Hama Salih emphasizes that the total area of the project spans 13-million square meters, worth an astounding \$5 billion. Shockingly, the investor for the Erbil Hills golf course was awarded this grand venture "for free" under the investment law. "While half of the Erbil population suffers from the lack of water," Hama Salih has asked, "how can you provide water to maintain the greenery of two million-meter green grass?"

Erbil Hills epitomizes the alarming trend of widening class disparities in Erbil and the KRI as a whole, an issue that has been escalating for years. The growing wealth divide has reached such an extreme level that the hard-earned wages of a worker in one part of the city cannot even cover the basic necessities in another. This outrageous inequality is also mirrored in the stark contrast of government-provided services. While the privileged residents of Erbil's **Pavilion residential city** (<https://www.pavilionerbil.com/>) luxuriate amidst artificial rivers, the less fortunate in Kasnazan and Taajil are forced to endure the appalling reality of sewage-filled alleys.

The glaring disparity between the haves and have-nots is painfully evident in the KRI, and the Erbil Hills golf course only adds to this dynamic. More than aggravating the current water crisis, the project glaringly exposes the inherent injustices and misplaced priorities of those in power. ❖

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