

## **Northern City Has Little Time For Fast**

**Author:** [Azeez Mahmood](#)

Cafes stay open all day as Sulaimaniyah residents show few outward signs of Ramadhan observance.

For Ramadan, the holy month when Muslims are traditionally required to fast during daylight hours, the Akar restaurant in Sulaimaniyah made just one concession, covering its entrance with a curtain, while continuing the business of serving food as usual.

Across the northern Iraqi province of Sulaimaniyah, the fasting period which ended two weeks ago saw fewer people than last year observing the normally stringent prohibition on eating, drinking and smoking during the day.

“Very few people are fasting. Most of them either don’t believe in it, or claim they physically can’t do it,” explained university student Talar Muhammed Hussein. “There’s been a big difference this year in terms of people’s behaviour.”

She put the shift down to the current situation in the rest of the country, “Islam has become unpopular here because of the terrible things being done in its name.”

For 21-year-old Azad Ahmed, the decline in religious observance is simply a sign of the times, “People are now looking more to science and technology. The more they engage with the rest of the world, the less connected they feel to religion.”

In this comparatively liberal town where unmarried couples can hold hands in the street and women work as traffic police, locals appear to find it hard to give up smoking and going out to restaurants over the fasting period.

Restaurants were as busy as ever over Ramadan, although many people admitted they still felt they had to come up with excuses for eating.

Young people admitted that they had little time for observance of the tradition. Teenager Sazan Safa Muhammed said fasting is simply not cool any more, “Some of my friends make fun of people for fasting. No one wants to be teased for doing it. And most boys say they are too addicted to smoking to stop.”

University student Karwan Omer agreed that peer pressure is a large factor in the decision whether to observe or not. “If you’re friends aren’t fasting then you don’t want to either. And it’s difficult for young people to fast – you have to give up all the things you like doing.”

This year, bars stayed open over Ramadan, as did shops selling alcohol to an enthusiastic clientele.

Many young women are no longer veiling themselves during Ramadan. Some say that as they spend the rest of the year unveiled, to cover their heads now would make them feel self-conscious.

Among those who did decide to veil themselves for the holy month, fashion concerns often seemed to take

precedence over modesty.

“A lot of girls no longer believe there’s any point in wearing a veil,” said Rezheen Omer, a student at Sulaimaniyah University. Citing the number of girls on the street who wear make up and tight jeans, their heads barely covered by a gauzy film of material, she added, “with some of the ones who do veil themselves, they might as well not bother”.

Her fellow student Avan Hama-Hussein agreed, “Very few woman veiled themselves this year, and most of those who did were making a fashion statement rather than anything else.”

While it’s not unusual for the younger generation to be at the vanguard of social change, just as many older people in Sulaimaniyah chose to turn away from abstinence this year. During Ramadan, they were to be found sitting in teashops, playing dominoes and backgammon, smoking cigarettes and drinking tea just like any other day of the year.

“Ramadan was different from last year,” commented pensioner Fatima Muhiyaddin. “It didn’t look like Ramadan at all. The restaurants were open and no one seemed ashamed that they weren’t fasting.”

According to interviewees, the marked lack of strict fasting seen in Sulaimaniyah was partly a reaction to the violence in the rest of the country. What is less clear is whether this was a trend that will continue next year, if the attacks subside.

Azeez Mahmood Abdullah is an IWPR trainee.

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/northern-city-has-little-time-fast>