

Advocating against eviction in Rey Al Jazeera

NP's role in preventing a forced eviction

April 2022



Patrol in Rey al Jazeera, April 2022

Communities in Zummar Subdistrict, located in Tel Afar District, Northern Iraq, face ongoing challenges to durable peace and security, largely attributable to ethno-religious tensions between Sunni Arab and Kurd populations. Historic grievances between the two ethnicities have been exacerbated by the legacy of ISIS, perceived or real affiliation with the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan in the disputed territory, and the marginalization of populations along ethnic lines. Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) began working in Zummar in June 2021. NP's mandate is to protect civilians, increase community members' participation and inclusion in building peace within the district – particularly with regards to the implementation of the existing peace agreements - and foster social cohesion to reduce sectarian and inter-group violence.

Rey Al Jazeera, an informal settlement¹ located in Zummar, is formed mostly by

¹ Informal settlements are areas where groups of unauthorized housing units or shelters have been

displaced communities. Most of them are originally from a village that was flooded to create the Mosul Dam in 1985, amidst Saddam Hussein's violent Arabisation campaign, resulting in the displacement of thousands of people. At the time, the government gave them land across the river, in Barzan, where they rebuilt and resettled. Between ISIS occupation and following liberation of the territory by coalition forces, however, Barzan was completely destroyed in 2014. Some of the families who were able to flee set up improvised tents along a stretch of land between the lake of the dam and the village of Rey Al Jazeera, a few kilometres away from Barzan, on land owned by the Ministry of Water Resources. These same families were now under threat of forced eviction by local authorities.

Since NP's first weeks of activities in the area, NP has been working side-by-side with people living in Rey Al Jazeera Village. NP has been closely monitoring the situation, meeting with stakeholders and conducting patrols around Rey Al Jazeera. By organizing Community Security Forums (CSFs) and engaging with various actors, particularly women, NP also built a relationship with the community.

On December 27th, 2021, Mullah Jassim, one of the settlement's leaders, was formally notified by the Mayor that a legal eviction order notice was submitted by the Ministry of Land and Water. The notice stated that all 70 displaced families would have to leave their homes by February 2nd, 2022. Like

constructed on land that the occupants have no legal claim to.

thousands of Iraqis who remain displaced to this day, these families do not wish to continue living precariously in an informal settlement. Their homes were, however, destroyed during the war and they have no means to rebuild. These families expressed on many occasions that they wish to return to their area of origin but simply do not have the resources to do so, leaving them with nowhere else to go in the case of a forced eviction, would be particularly harmful during winter. Despite these circumstances, the residents were warned by local authorities that those who remained in the settlement after the deadline would have to pay rent retroactively for all of the time spent living on the site – money they did not have. Anyone who failed to comply would be trespassing and at risk of a forceful eviction. This would be the third time in one generation the displaced families in Rey Al Jazeera would be forced to relocate.

As the primacy of local actors is one of the pillars of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP), NP conducted an assessment on site and spoke with the displaced families soon after being informed of the eviction notice. The residents urged the authorities to postpone the eviction at least until May. Temperature during the winter in Zummar reaches 0°C/ 42°F degrees, with strong winds and snow. Also, during this period, a lot of people are left without livelihoods or have to invest most of their income to ensure that their families will be kept warm through the winter. Relocating during winter is an extremely challenging situation, so postponing the eviction would allow enough time for weather conditions to improve and for the residents to seek alternative solutions. NP conducted a CSF with the women and young women of Rey Al Jazeera, and Mullah Jassim, to share updates on the situation and ensure that their voices were being heard. The women asked NP to

advocate to the Mayor, who at the time was in favour of the eviction, to postpone the deadline.

NP immediately began to coordinate advocacy efforts to postpone the eviction. In coordination with partners ACTED and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), NP contacted the Mayor. NP described the residents' situation and explained that a housing project IOM was planning to implement in Barzan would likely enable many of the families in Rey Al Jazeera to safely and voluntarily return to their area of origin. Postponing the eviction would, therefore, give time for the project to begin, for the families to plan and prepare for the move in a safe and dignified manner, and for weather conditions to improve. These arguments persuaded the Mayor to push for a postponement, and he proposed submitting a joint appeal to the Ministry of Land and Water. While the appeal was being processed, residents would be allowed to remain on site.

After obtaining the Mayor's agreement, NP worked to ensure this process was inclusive and binding by arranging for the Mayor meet with representatives of the Rey Al Jazeera and provide them with written assurances. On January 26th, the community representatives and the Mayor signed documents confirming the official submission of appeal to the Ministry of Land and Water, who kick-started the evictions process. The representatives also received personal assurances from the Mayor that the families could remain in the settlement past February 2nd, 2022.

Although the displaced families are still waiting for a final decision on their appeal, the eviction did not take place on February 2nd and the Mayor confirmed he will not enforce an eviction without a decision from the court. On that day, instead of despair the

feeling among families in Rey Aljazeera was that of increased safety and security, and renewed hope. The impact NP has had on this community in Rey Al Jazeera can be felt in the words of Mullah Jassim:

“NP saved our lives” – Mullah Jassim, Rey Al Jazeera community leader, in reference to NP’s advocacy efforts. According to him, were it not for NP, the settlement’s wives and children might have died after being evicted in the middle of winter.

Further developments on the Rey Al Jazeera eviction process in March included a visit from NP to Mullah Jassim, Rey Al Jazeera’s community representative, to follow up on the formal legal appeal process submitted in February to postpone the eviction. According to Jassim, the Ministry of Land and Water has filled an official complaint against the appeal, who was later rejected by intervention of a Member of the Parliament - at Mullah Jassim’s request - resulting in an official notice issued on March 30th, postponing the eviction for 3 months. NP will continue to work alongside the families in Rey Al Jazeera to monitor future developments and advocate for durable solutions to allow for a safe and dignified return.



NP team during a patrol in Rey Al Jazeera, monitoring protection concerns following postponement of the eviction and consulting community members, April 2022