



Sports have the power to connect and bring communities together, regardless of their differences. This is certainly true in Ba'aj (Ninewa Governorate), where many football tournaments used to be organized. Friendships started on the pitch as players came to share their passion for the sport. Football built strong bonds between the Sunni youths from Ba'aj and the Yazidi from Sinjar, despite their religious differences. This all changed in 2014, when IS militants gained control of the region and carried out a campaign of wanton destruction. Even to this day, many Sunnis are still being accused for their alleged IS affiliation, whilst fearing that the Yazidis would seek revenge for the brutality they faced under IS. Yazidis share similar concerns, as they dread the prospect of being attacked by the Sunnis. In this climate of fear and mistrust, contact between the two communities completely stopped.

In 2021, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), started implementing a new project in Ba'aj and Sinjar, focusing on mitigating violent conflict and strengthening the capacity of community protection teams. When NP proactively engaged with youth in Ba'aj on the relationship with those in Sinjar, the initiative was taken to organize a football match to build trust between youth from Ba'aj and from Sinjar. This is premised on the idea that youth in the football teams – fully trained on unarmed civilian protection – could not only prevent violence from happening on the football field, but also outside of it and, in doing so, they could promote the idea of peaceful coexistence between the two communities. To make this a reality, the youth team leaders specifically requested NP to provide capacity strengthening sessions for youths and support in the organization of football tournaments.

NP provided trainings on Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP), including prevention and response to GBV and leadership trainings to youth leaders and players. These trainings aim to prepare the sports teams to resolve conflicts through nonviolent means, emphasizing that although conflict is a normal part of human life, violence is not the only, nor the ideal solution. After the trainings, enthusiastic football team leaders formed a sports committee and met at the NP office. Supported by NP, the committee took

the initiative to organize a football tournament called **'Love and Peace'**. The committee established a proposal of rules for nonviolent football matches, which was subsequently signed by the teams before each match.

The Love and Peace tournament was held in Ba'aj in August 2022. Initially, security forces were skeptical about the prospect of having a peaceful tournament just through the power of nonviolent community action and under the lead of the Committee. As a result, they were present at the initial stage: armed with sticks and ready to use them to maintain order. As the tournament progressed however, it became clear that the football teams were fully capable of maintaining the peace themselves with nonviolent means. Seeing this, the security forces later decided to withdraw and let the youths conduct their own affairs.

For the youths who were involved, holding a peaceful tournament was a *bona fide* success –



Ba'aj and Ramboussy youth gathered after an exciting match (December, 2022).

something that they had learnt to do with support from NP. Indeed, according to one of the football team leaders –

“We learned to distance ourselves from prejudice, to handle issues in a nonviolent way. We have been able to take a step forward in our relations with the Yazidis through football.” (Youth leader of football team, Ba'aj, October 2022).

A mukhtar who witnessed the event also remarked the peacefulness of the tournament:

“It is the first time since IS occupation that we enjoyed a football tournament without having tribal disputes. Thank you (NP) for your support.”
(Mukhtar, Ba’aj, October 2022).

The youths now dream of something bigger: using these football matches to restore relationship between Yazidis and Sunni. The first steps were taken in Ramboussy, where the teams, with NP support, organised a match between Yazidis and Sunnis. The match took place peacefully, and it echoes the days – the time before IS – when the two communities would socialize and interact through events like this. It was a moving moment for those who participated in and observed the game. As a local teacher said:

“This game is a step in the right direction, these football games will lead to strengthening of relations between the two communities.”

Going forward, the Ba’aj and Sinjar football teams look forward to organizing more matches between the two communities – consolidating the trust that was built through the Ramboussy match and use it to foster peace and restore the relationship between Ba’aj and Sinjar. For its part, NP remained committed in supporting the teams in organising these tournaments and in establishing a protective presence during the matches. Additional trainings will be given to ensure that youth can not only keep the peace on football pitches, but also to become champions of peace within and between their respective communities– as it once was in the distant past.



NP discussing the protection challenges faced by Yazidis and Sunni Arabs and possible solutions with school directors (December 2022).

