

CASE STUDY

“A Call for Peace and Peaceful Coexistence”: The Qayyarah Festival as a Steppingstone for Women and Girls’ Influence in Peace Processes

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“Violence is the basis of the disintegration of communities and the destruction of social connections. Therefore, on Peace Day, this is a call for peace and peaceful coexistence between all groups across the Nineveh governorate, and Iraq. Peace is the foundation of coexistence, and without peace, there is no coexistence. - **Haneen, Coordinator of the Qayyarah WPT, Opening Remarks to the Peace Festival**

On 21 September 2023, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) supported a local festival to mark International Peace Day in Qayyarah Public Park. Organized by three Youth Peace Teams (YPTs) - one female team and two male teams - the event brought together a large and diverse range of community leaders, security actors, artists, volunteer teams, local organizations, and families from all around Ninewa. This included different groups of Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, and Arabs. It was the first of its kind in the south of Mosul since the occupation of Da’esh in 2014 in a town that is traditionally limited in social gatherings that cross inter-tribal and inter-religious lines, particularly for women.

A Limited and Divided Public Space

In and around Qayyarah – and Ninewa at large - communities rarely interact with those outside of their intra-extended family or intra-tribal group. Public spaces are divided as such, limiting any incentives to engage with different tribal or religious groups, particularly between families who have had very different traumatic experiences in the past decades - martyrs’ families, returnee families as well as families from the communities of origin affected by the armed conflict. Such little engagement has provided fertile ground that fuels negative stereotypes and fears about those from other groups.

Within this context, women, especially those with perceived IS affiliation, have a hard time accessing public spaces outside of their homes. It comes against the backdrop of local power dynamics and normalized gender inequality that often subject women to sexual harassment and online blackmailing. As such, this not only prevents their meaningful interaction with diverse groups but limits their participation in society as agents of change in support of peaceful coexistence.



More than 1,700 persons attended the Peace Festival, including approximately 650 women and girls, as well as secondary displaced persons and returnees (21 September 2023)

Breaking Through Social Norms and Dividing Lines

The Peace Festival broke through this environment – offering a unique opportunity that brought diverse groups together and provided women with a safe space and platform to meaningfully participate. In that sense, it fostered an environment that encourages mutual understanding, respect, and appreciation for differences.

*“It was the first time that a group of women from my village attended such public event. It is in part due to the good reputation of NP and its employees in the South Mosul area. - **Sheikh of a neighboring village, South Mosul***

Thanks to NP's Community Protection Team (CPT) that provided protective presence to women and girls to ensure their safe and secure participation in the festivities, women felt safe to attend.

*“I used to be afraid of having my picture taken and to be electronically blackmailed if I would go outside my home. Now, I feel free of fears, and I can participate in public events without worrying. I know that if someone blackmails me, I will go directly to the Community Police of the National Security Forces. - **WPT member, Qayyarah***

Going further, NP ensured the meaningful participation of women, particularly shedding light on the WPT of Qayyarah. The WPT coordinator, Haneen, was the first woman in South Mosul to deliver opening remarks to a festival of such a significant size and caliber of attendees.

*“The festival was very successful. One of my best memories was delivering a speech on peace in front of all the attendees. This made me feel more powerful and gave me the inner feeling that women are strong and active. - **Haneen, Coordinator of the Qayyarah WPT, Qayyarah***

I learned the strength of will from the WPT from Qayyarah and I felt encouraged when I saw Haneen giving a speech in front of so many people. This helped me to overcome my fears. We have a project to organize a festival very soon in Zummar. - **WPT member, Zummar**

A Lasting Impact on Durable Peace and Reconciliation

The Peace Festival was an eye-opener to many. It debunked inter-ethnic, religious, tribal, and linguistic stereotypes that commonly feed hatred, fears, and mistrust between communities – an impact that will last beyond the festival itself.

The story of Najat, a female Yazidi attendee from Sinjar, exemplifies this. Her presence and engagement with

Sunni Arabs broke stereotypes that many Yazidis held about Sunni Arabs following Daesh's brutal occupation. It sent a strong message to women that regardless of their religion, ethnicity or tribe, they should feel safe and secure across Ninewa.



Yazidi and Kurdish women from Sinjar and Zummar join stage to pay tribute to Iraq's national anthem (21 September 2023)

I spoke to the people in Sinjar about the people in southern Mosul and how they were kind and generous to the guests and treated everyone with kindness. Some people were surprised by what I said given the bad history they still remember about IS, but many of them were happy with what I told them, and they got a positive impression. I expect that they will visit the Arab regions a lot in the future after I encouraged them to do so. - **Yazidi Female, Sinjar**

Such positive interactions during the festival serve as a catalyst for ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and relationship-building among diverse groups, particularly women, within and between the communities. By challenging stereotypes, it sets a precedent for inclusive and peaceful coexistence, where diversity is celebrated in a more resilient and integrated community.

This is what NP does: uniting groups, notably women, across all religious, socio-economic, ethnic, or tribal lines and giving them a platform in efforts to foster peace within and between their communities and supporting them as agents of change.