

CASE STUDY

Bridging Divides: Youth Peace Team Promotes Social Cohesion in Sinjar

April 2024

Sinjar, Iraq, is home to a diverse community - a mix of Yazidi, Sunni and Shia Arabs, and Kurds among others. Yet, decades of conflict, exacerbated by the recent IS invasion, have deeply fractured these communities. This division has led to widespread distrust, perpetuated negative stereotypes, and instilled fear, ultimately normalising cycles of violence. This is compounded by the limited interactions between different ethnic and religious groups within the Sinjar community, hindering the potential for peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. In response, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) works to establish and sustain Community Peace Teams (CPTs) in Sinjar that consist of diverse community members who work on such issues in support of social cohesion between and within communities in Sinjar.

Indeed, one of NP's peace teams is a Youth Peace Team (YPT), consisting of 22 members, including four Yazidi men, 17 Yazidi women, and one Shia woman. Active for nearly one year, they work on women's inclusion, online blackmail and social cohesion within their community in Sinjar after receiving unarmed civilian training (UCP) training and support from NP.

On April 2, 2024, NP met with two members of this YPT in Sinjar to discuss the relationship and perceptions between the Yazidi and Shia communities. The two members were Zainab*, a Shia woman who is a volunteer teacher in a girl's school, and Naza*, a Yazidi woman who is a university student. They discussed their own perceptions of each other, and how perceptions of people with other ethnic-religious ties within their community in Sinjar have changed since joining the YPT. This case study is a reflection of one of their conversations, giving a unique insight into the process of trust-building.

“What was your perception of the people with other ethnic-religious ties within your community prior to joining the YPT?”

Zainab and Naza mentioned they had little to no interaction with other ethnic-religious ties within their community in Sinjar. As a result, echoing a similar sentiment as Naza, Zainab said:



"We had negative opinions about the Yazidis" - **Shia female YPT member, Sinjar**

Accordingly, in cases of conflict, this would merely entrench such misperceptions as Zainab mentioned she would avoid communicating with others to resolve the conflict.



"Before, I would never greet Shia individuals on the street or interact with their community. I didn't think that we would be able to interact with each other in [a more constructive] way." - **Yazidi female YPT member, Sinjar**

"How has your perception changed of people with other ethnic-religious ties within your community after joining the YPT?"

After joining the YPT, Zainab and Naza said that their perception of and interactions with the other ethnic-religious members of their community changed significantly. One reason that they cited for this was the UCP training:



"The training taught me how to use communication constructively through nonpartisanship and nonviolence when engaging with others." - **Yazidi female YPT members, Sinjar**

In addition, the diversity of the group prompted the members to interact with each other, which helped them to appreciate each other and dispel any negative perceptions they had.



"I used to think that Yazidis only worked for their own community. But when the Yazidi staff from NP helped me resolve a problem, I realised that they are not just working for their community, but also others and that they will support the Shia community. It built my trust with the Yazidis." - **Shia female YPT member, Sinjar**

On that basis, Zainab and Naza have shifted their interaction and behaviour towards those with different ethnic-religious ties not only within the YPT but also in their community.



"I've realised now it's important to engage with other religious communities to prevent negative thoughts spreading about the other and understand their side. This will change our views of the other and support peace in Sinjar" - **Yazidi female YPT member, Sinjar**

"I now try to understand the other person's needs and feelings, which helps me resolve conflict" - **Shia female YPT member, Sinjar**

Accordingly, both Zainab and Naza have expanded the diversity of their regular interactions within the community in a more constructive and empathic manner. Zainab mentioned that she now engages with the Yazidi community every day at work – something that she used to find unthinkable and too challenging. Likewise, Naza noted similar feelings, saying that she now engages with Shia and greets them on the street.

"I didn't expect that I would ever have a Shia friend, but now I have many Shia friends"- **Yazidi female YPT member, Sinjar**

This has consolidated a positive shift in their mindset towards those with different ethnic-religious ties. Naza noted that by engaging with the Shia community, she realised how diverse they are, and that they all have different ideas and thoughts.

"It feels like [Yazidis] are part of my community now." - **Shia female YPT member, Sinjar**

"How will you use your acquired knowledge and skills to support more positive interactions and perceptions between different ethnic-religious ties in your communities?"

Inspired by their experience, Zainab and Naza are determined to translate their newfound understanding and perceptions within their communities.

"I used to have negative views about the Shia community but when I engaged with them, my perception changed and I realised I should not judge a group without first interacting with them. This has inspired me to work with my community to also change their attitude towards Shias." - **Yazidi female YPT member, Sinjar**

They aim to challenge negative views and promote social cohesion through various initiatives and events that bring both sides together.

“After our activities on 16 Days against GBV, where we invited both Yazidi and Shia communities, the Shia female community members said to me that the Yazidis are nice and invited us to their homes. Even the Shia from Basra called me to say that they had heard about the event and how kind the Yazidis are. We are changing perceptions.” - **Shia female YPT member, Sinjar**

Evidently, the stories of Zainab and Naza serve as a compelling testament to the potential for transformative change through dialogue and community engagement. Their journey from holding negative perceptions to becoming champions of social cohesion underscores the profound impact that individual agency and collective action can have in bridging divides and fostering understanding within diverse communities. Indeed, the two have emerged as catalysts for positive change, exemplifying the power of empathetic engagement and communication in fostering social cohesion within diverse communities.

“My wish for Sinjar is to build peace and trust between the different communities. We still have a long way to go because it takes time, but I believe we can do it.” - **Yazidi female YPT member, Sinjar**

*** Names were altered to maintain privacy and confidentiality.**