Routes to recovery

Success stories from the reconstruction in Nineveh, Iraq

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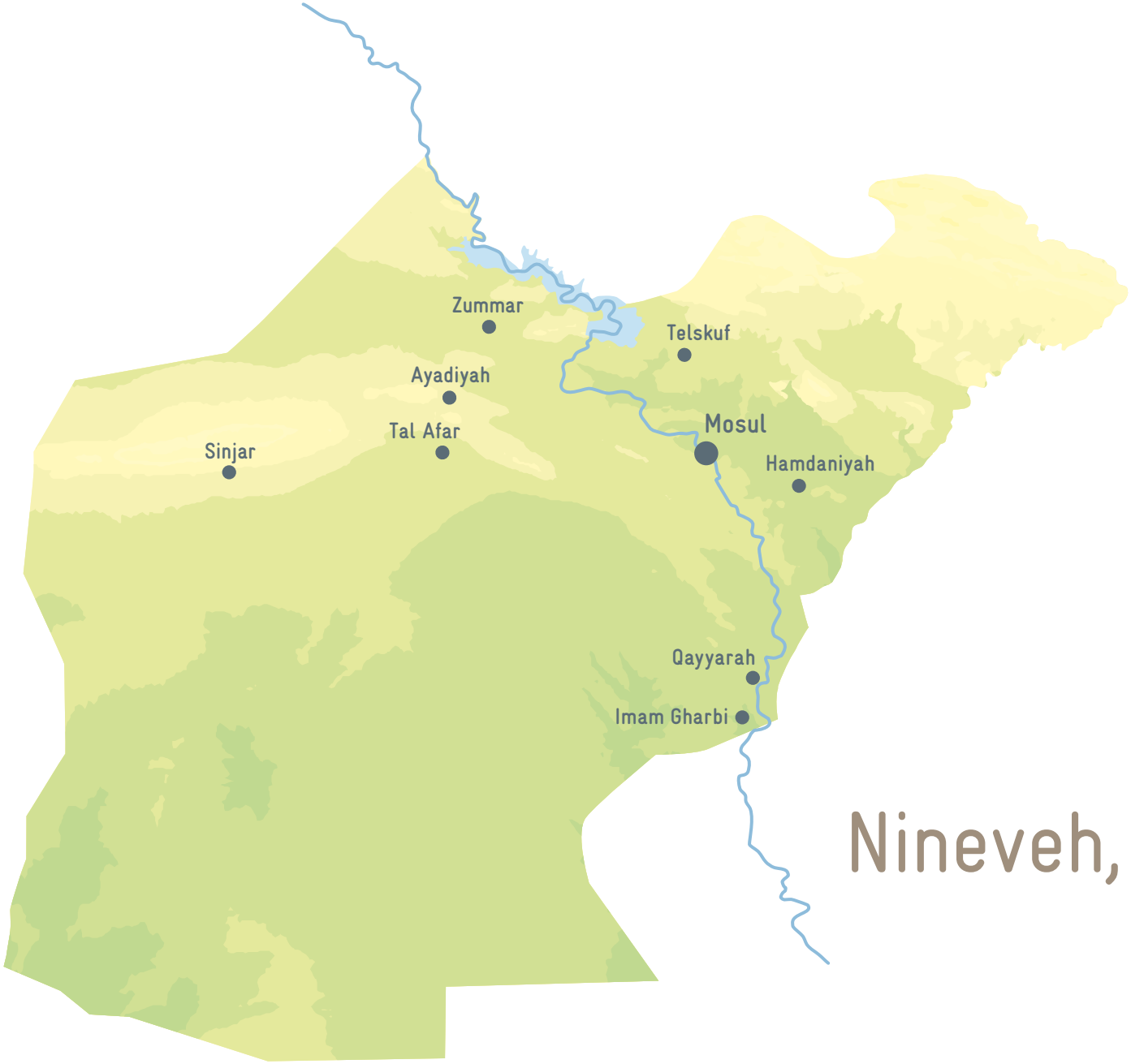


Nineveh, Iraq

Contents

Starting all over again: stories of people who never gave up

The occupation of Iraq's Nineveh governorate by the so-called Islamic State has left deep and lasting scars. Hundreds of thousands were forced to flee in the face of the terror. Even years after the area was liberated by the Iraqi army and its allies, many former residents have yet to return. Widespread mistrust lingers between different population groups. In many areas heavily damaged by the fighting, critical infrastructure – homes, schools, health clinics, as well as water and electricity networks – remains in ruins. The security situation remains unstable, and those who return often find that new residents settled in their communities during their absence, creating new layers of tension. These social strains are compounded by competition over increasingly scarce resources and growing environmental pressures. Iraq, among the countries most severely affected by climate change, is already grappling with its far-reaching impacts. Because those trying to return only receive limited support from the state, a real fresh start is almost impossible.

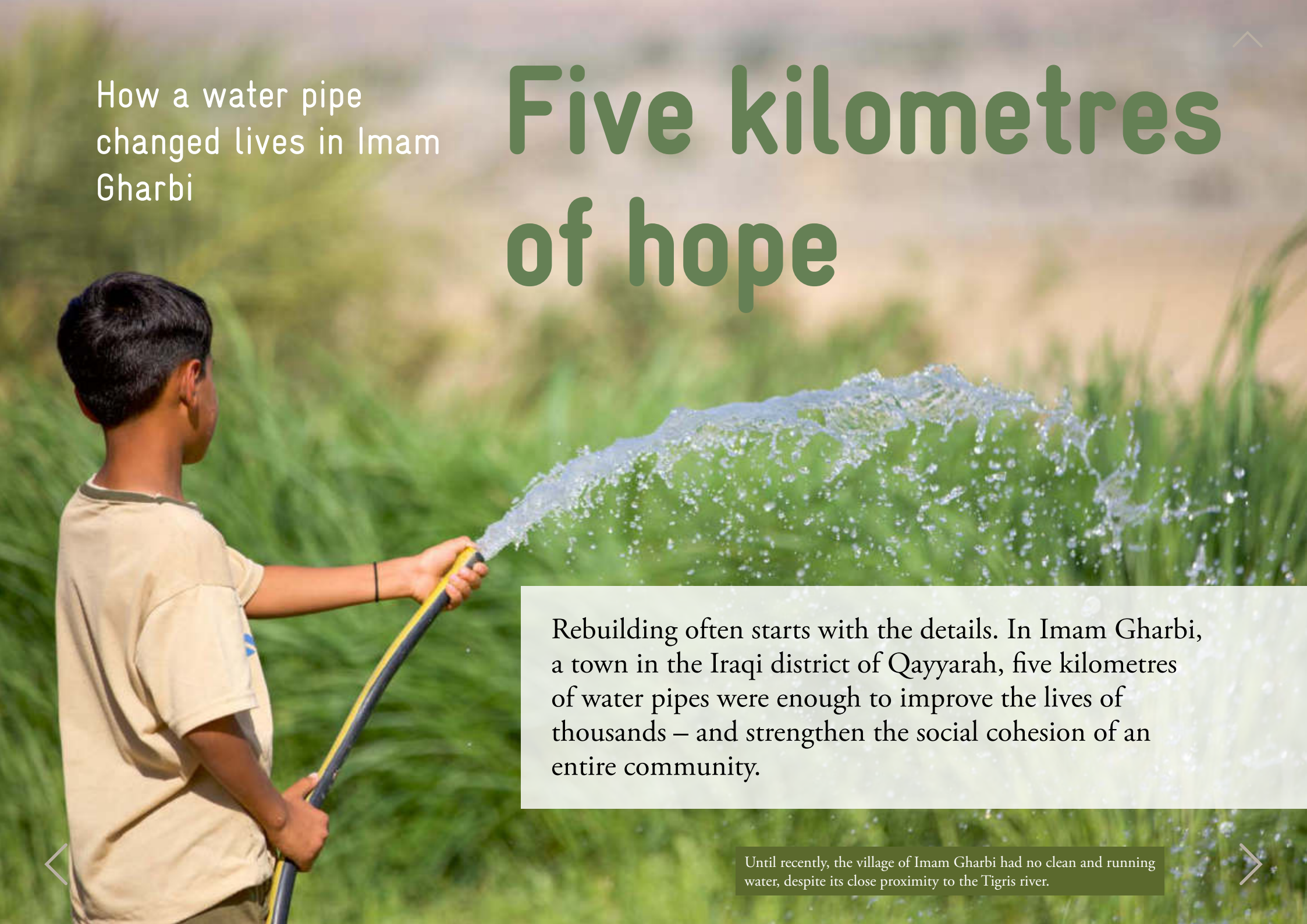
Since 2016, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) has been supporting the people of Nineveh on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The goal: to help returnees, internally displaced people, and local communities rebuild their lives after years of conflict and crisis. From 2020 to 2025, the GIZ programme "Strengthening resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Nineveh (SRN), Iraq" focused on strengthening social cohesion, creating economic opportunities, and restoring vital public infrastructure. The aim was not only to help communities recover from the trauma of the past, but also to increase their resilience in the face of future challenges. Working with the population and local authorities in five districts across

Nineveh, the programme reached hundreds of thousands of people through a wide range of initiatives: dialogue forums, workshops, training programmes, grants, construction projects, and the provision of production equipment. These efforts didn't just rebuild roads and water systems – they rebuilt lives. Social relations improved, many people gained employment and now earn their own income, and access to basic services such as clean water and education has been restored. Over the years, the programme has met countless inspiring individuals – people full of determination, energy, and hope. With the support of the programme, they have not only changed their own circumstances but have also become changemakers within their communities. This magazine shares some of their stories. They are stories of people who never gave up. Of communities that stood together – and found new ways to rebuild. Above all, they are stories of courage: the courage to start over, despite the looming shadows of disasters, war and trauma.

How a water pipe changed lives in Imam Gharbi

Five kilometres of hope

Rebuilding often starts with the details. In Imam Gharbi, a town in the Iraqi district of Qayyarah, five kilometres of water pipes were enough to improve the lives of thousands – and strengthen the social cohesion of an entire community.



Until recently, the village of Imam Gharbi had no clean and running water, despite its close proximity to the Tigris river.

If you want to understand how a few kilometres of pipe can improve the quality of life for thousands of people, you have to look at Imam Gharbi. The small town with a population of around 17,000 is located to the south of Mosul in the Qayyarah district of north-western Iraq. The climate there is subtropical and arid, with winters that tend to be short and extremely cold, together with brutally hot, long summers. Although the western bank of the Tigris lies only a few kilometres away, for a long time the town had no source of clean drinking water. During the occupation, a period that lasted for around two years, the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) destroyed large parts of Imam Gharbi's infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, community centres and roads, partly in order to sabotage the advance of the Iraqi army. It is estimated that up to 80 per cent of the inhabitants fled the villages and towns in the region. The Iraqi army finally succeeded in driving the terrorist organisation out of Imam Gharbi in the summer of 2017, leaving behind rubble and ruins, destroyed lives – and very little hope.

"Most people made a living through agriculture before the ISIS destroyed everything," says Ramadan Al-Subhan Al-Hamad Al-Razzez, speaking in early summer 2025, almost eight years later. He is the sheikh of Imam Gharbi, the chief official in charge of the town. "It was peaceful here and we did well for ourselves." Following the occupation, however, almost everyone lost their

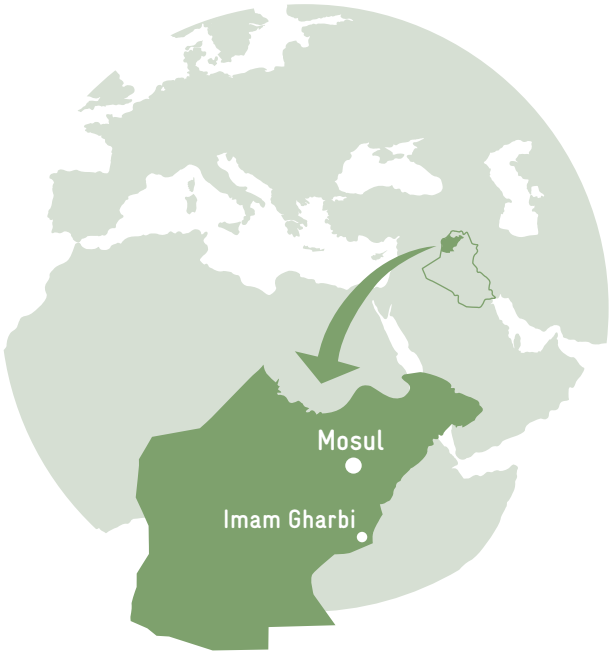
Today, not only is there enough drinking water. There is even enough water to irrigate the gardens.

livelihoods. People found it difficult to take control of their lives again after fleeing, being displaced and having to return. Today, there are hardly any jobs in the area, there is little trust in the regional or state authorities, and there is still a great deal of mistrust among the people. This undermines social cohesion and makes life even more difficult.

The struggle for survival

"It's incredibly hard," says Al-Razzez. "People are trying to rebuild their lives. But the infrastructure is destroyed; there are hardly any services running; and families are suffering, especially those in need. Despite all the challenges, we are trying to persevere and move forward."

The lack of water, however, has so far been the main obstacle thwarting the many efforts that have been made. Clean water, a universal human right, takes on a whole new meaning in climates where the temperature is around 45 degrees. People in Imam Gharbi only had access to contaminated, salty water unsuitable for either drinking or cooking, since chickpeas and beans do not soften when cooked in salted water. Some families who had just returned were forced to abandon their homes for the summer and find somewhere to live near fresh drinking water. Or they had to spend



Location
Imam Gharbi (Qayyarah)

Topics
Basic services, infrastructure, peaceful coexistence

"GIZ understood right away how urgently we needed water," says Sheikh Al-Razzez.

a fortune on bottled water. Yet a good and simple solution can be just around the corner. "Five kilometres of pipes were required to connect the water supply to a water source," says sheik Al-Razzez. However, the authorities only agreed to finance 100 or 200 metres. "What good would that have been to anyone?"

Water is essential

GIZ stepped in to help through its "Strengthening resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Nineveh (SRN), Iraq" programme. Since 2020, this programme has been supporting returnees, internally displaced people and host

Everyone is lending a hand, many of them volunteering, to help bring the much-needed water pipeline to life.

communities in north-western Iraq in better coping with the consequences of occupation under ISIS. In discussions with various aid organisations, representatives from Imam Gharbi had repeatedly pointed out the catastrophic water supply. Then GIZ contacted the community. "The people here can cope with just about anything," says Al-Razzez, emphatically. "We don't need paved roads or a reliable power supply to survive. But water? Water is essential! GIZ was the only organisation that understood this."

Once GIZ had established contact with the community, it carried out a needs assessment and drew up a plan in consultation with local leaders. "They really listened to us and tried to understand the complexities we faced," says Al-Razzez in summary. Consequently, five kilometres of pipes were laid, pumping stations were installed and a pipeline constructed to provide Imam Gharbi with water. The villagers actively got involved in the project, with many offering their labour voluntarily.

Water is life – and clearly, it brings a lot of joy, too.

A short pipeline makes a big difference

Five kilometres of pipes have changed everything. Of course, this is about water. But it's also about peace with the neighbours and therefore about social cohesion in a small town that is only slowly recovering from the ISIS terror and the aftermath of terrorist occupation. "Before this, we were constantly fighting over the little water there was available. Now we no longer argue. There is enough for everyone, which has made people more relaxed and cooperative," says Al-Razzez. The small town and its residents can now put their energy into other things, such as growing food, running their homes and rebuilding the town. "They even have time for their children again," says Al-Razzez, smiling.

It will take a lot longer before everything is back to normal in Imam Gharbi – if it ever does return to its previous existence after the ISIS occupation. But water – water is life. And Imam Gharbi can at least look ahead again.

Words of change

Trying something new – the key to change

Al-Harith Ziyad Khalaf grew up during difficult times in Mosul. After the reign of terror by the so-called Islamic State, he felt a deep desire to give back to his city and community. As a trained mediator, he has learned how to resolve conflicts through dialogue – and in doing so, build bridges.

Al-Harith is lucky to have survived years of instability and terror – memories that don't fade easily.

The situation was tense, complicated. The men in the family refused to give the daughters their due. “They’re married to strangers, and they’ll take our money,” they said. Al-Harith Ziyad Khalaf stayed calm. He listened, asked questions, spoke to everyone involved. He challenged the brothers: “Why won’t you give your sister her share?” He asked the sister why she didn’t insist on her rights. He brought in cousins and uncles, balanced interests, and ultimately resolved the conflict to everyone’s satisfaction. “That gave me confidence,” says Al-Harith. “I had always been shy, hesitant. But in that moment, I realised I could transform pain and sadness into something constructive.”

Al-Harith credits the GIZ initiative “Young Enumerators and Mediators (YEM)” for teaching him how to handle – and even solve – conflict situations professionally. There, he learned the skills of data collection, conflict analysis – and mediation. At first, he admits, he had no idea what the term “mediation” even meant. But that willingness to try something new, to see knowledge as a key to change, runs like a thread through his story.

Strict rules in uncertain times

Al-Harith was born in 1994 in Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city. Nearly two million people live along the banks of the river Tigris, where the ruins of ancient Nineveh – former capital of the Assyrian Empire – are scattered across the landscape. History is ever-present here. Mosul is surrounded by a wide, partly fertile plain that, come spring, turns lush and green, dotted with olive groves and grain fields. In the distance rise the hills and mountains of the Kurdish highlands. Mosul has always been a melting pot: Arabs, Kurds, Christians, and Yazidis live here, often side by side. The majority of residents are Sunni

No art, no friends, no joy: the years under ISIS rule were marked by mistrust.

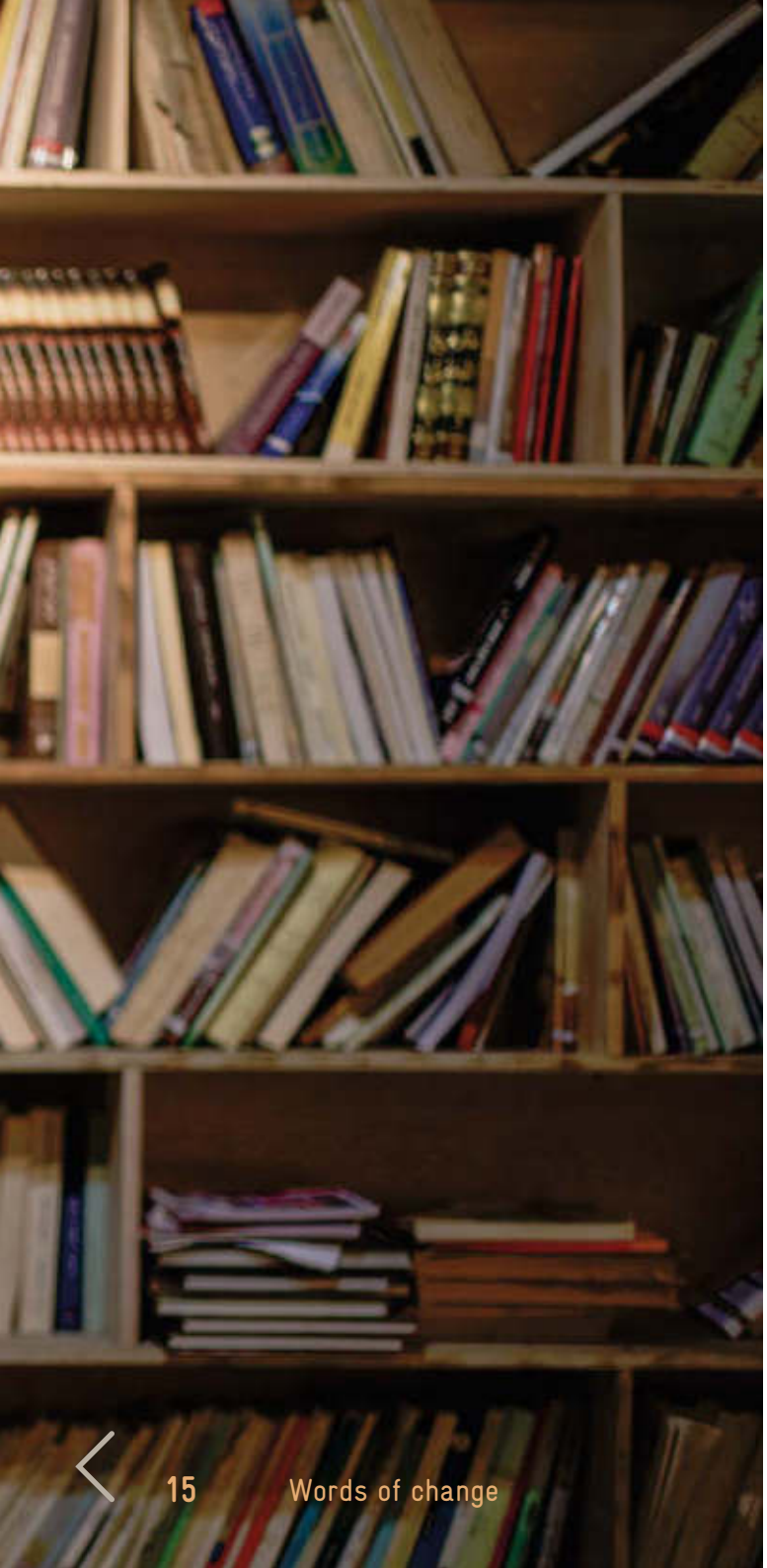
Muslims, but the city is marked by religious and cultural diversity.

Al-Harith and his eight siblings grew up with this diversity. Their childhood was simple but happy, until terror became part of daily life. After Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, Iraq descended into political instability. Explosions and assassinations became routine. As a teenager, Al-Harith narrowly escaped one such attack when an assassin threw grenades at a military vehicle near him. He ran, faster than he ever had before in his life. He heard the explosions behind him. "When I crossed the road, I felt like I had survived," he recalls. After that day, his father imposed strict rules: the children had to stay in the neighbourhood and be home

After ISIS declared its "caliphate," Al-Harith was forced to put his studies on hold.

by 2 p.m. at the latest. But he also explained the reasoning behind each rule, telling his children exactly how they had to behave – an open, communicative approach that would later shape Al-Harith's work as a mediator.

After this near-fatal encounter, Al-Harith's life became smaller, more confined. He spent most of his time at home, helping his parents with chores and errands, focusing on school, and reading – especially about history and post-war reconstruction in countries like Germany. He was interested in all sorts of things, absorbing knowledge like a sponge. To keep up to date with international developments, he watched the news, where he heard about places like Washington, Doha, and Moscow. He imagined what it might be like to live there.



Years without dreams

Despite everything, Al-Harith's life had been stable and calm – until the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) launched its large-scale assault on Mosul on 6 June 2014. Within days, ISIS fighters stormed the city. On 10 June, they officially declared it captured. In the days that followed, the group seized key government institutions – police stations, military barracks, banks, and administrative buildings. They looted the central bank and confiscated vast sums of money and weapons. The fall of Mosul was not only a military victory for ISIS, but also a symbolic one. Just weeks later, on 29 June 2014, the group proclaimed its "caliphate" in the Great Al-Nuri Mosque, imposing an extreme interpretation of Sharia law. Al-Harith and his parents initially tried to flee but returned soon after. They saw no alternative, and more than anything, they couldn't bear to leave their entire life behind.

The years that followed were years without art, without joy, without lightness. Al-Harith had to abandon his studies of Economics. "We had no more dreams," he says. His family kept to themselves, not even talking to friends or people in the neighbourhood. Mistrust prevailed: who knew whether the seemingly kind woman next door might secretly be an ISIS supporter?

Perhaps she gathered information, denounced people? Even making a phone call was dangerous and complicated. Al-Harith recalls how careful they had to be: “We hid the SIM card in one place and the phone in another, because ISIS could track the signal. When we wanted to call someone, one person would bring the SIM card, another the phone. They’d meet at a prearranged spot, insert the card, make a one-minute call, and then immediately part ways again.” Anyone caught by ISIS with a mobile phone and SIM card had to hand both in.

Open scars

After the liberation of Mosul in July 2017, Al-Harith and his family spent two months in a camp for displaced people. He couldn’t bear to sit idly in a tent, so he began helping distribute relief supplies. It was there that he met a German cameraman shooting a documentary. Al-Harith, digging deep into his knowledge of school English, struck up a conversation. His effort impressed those around him – he was praised, even admired. That moment made him proud. For the first time, he began to imagine a future working with international organisations. But first, he and his family returned to their home in Mosul.

Location
Mosul

Topics
Mediation and conflict resolution, youth empowerment, peaceful coexistence

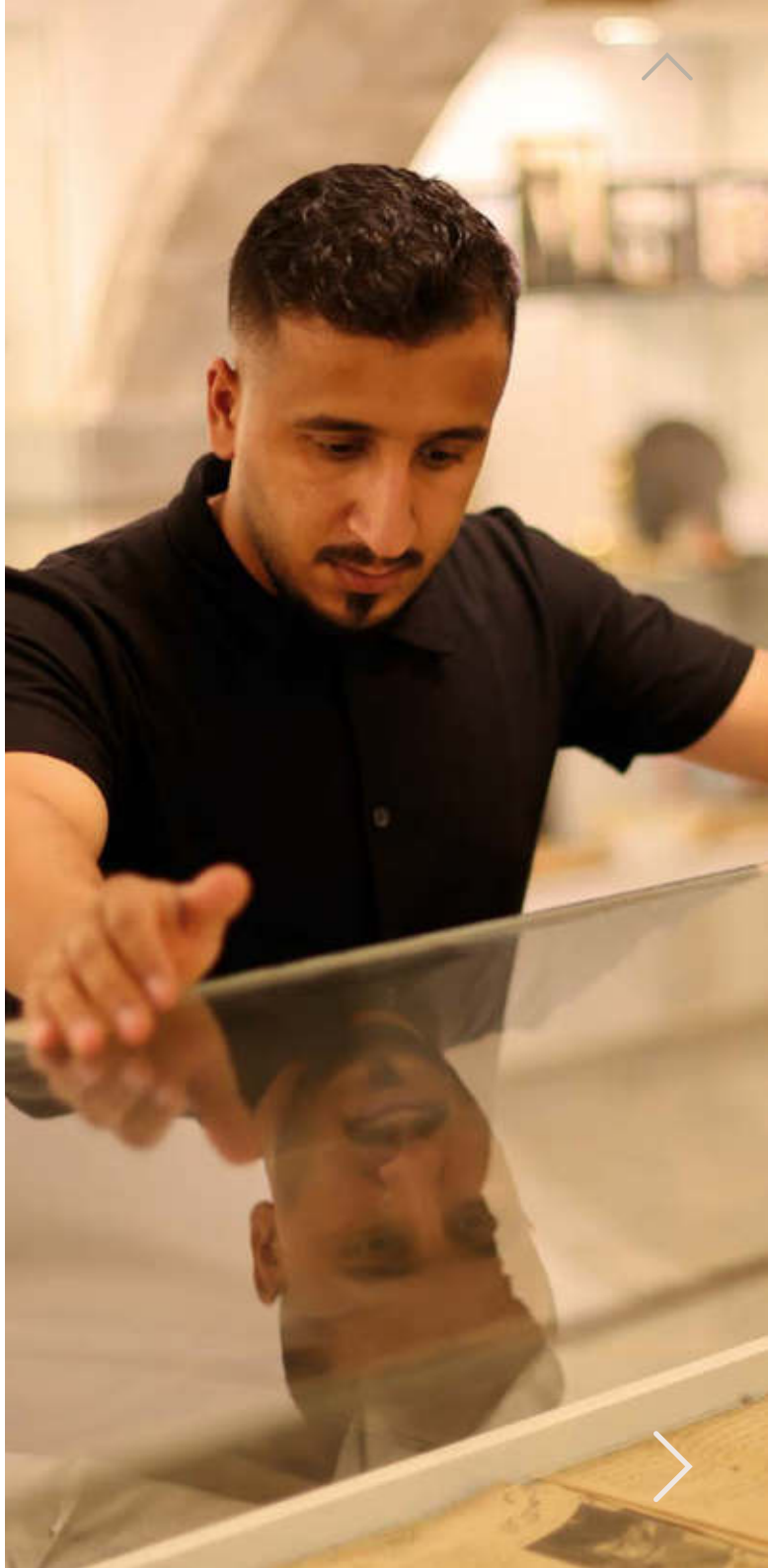
“Mosul means so much to me. I wanted to show my community that I have contributed something.”

Al-Harith Ziyad Khalaf

The old town in the west was a sea of rubble. Entire streets lay in ruins. Buildings stood like hollow shells, walls torn apart by grenades, walls blackened by fire, windows shattered. Minarets lay in the streets like toppled pillars. The area surrounding the Al-Nuri Mosque, where ISIS had proclaimed its “caliphate”, was particularly devastated – once a symbol of grandeur, it was now reduced to ruins.

The eastern side of the city, where Al-Harith lived, had suffered less. But even here, bullet holes scarred buildings, and schools, hospitals and government offices had been looted or destroyed. People stood in long queues for clean water. Electricity was unreliable. Mosul, in 2017, was not a liberated city in the traditional sense. It was a survivor that openly displayed its scars.

Al-Harith wanted to help Mosul, his hometown, to heal. He completed his bachelor’s degree in economics and began working in the humanitarian sector. He enrolled in training programmes offered by various organisations. He put his energy into the reconstruction of his city: clearing debris from parks, renovating schools, transporting damaged artefacts. “Mosul is the city where I was born and raised,” says Al-Harith. “It means so much to me and it needs my help.



Al-Harith works tirelessly for his city and his community. It means everything to him.

Through GIZ's "Young Enumerators and Mediators" initiative, Al-Harith learned how to resolve conflicts peacefully through dialogue.

I wanted to show my community that I am here, that I have contributed something."

The right place

As Al-Harith worked tirelessly for his community, his personal responsibilities grew as well: he got married and became a father. But despite his work and commitment, despite his family obligations, he never stopped learning. He continued applying to international organisations and was eventually accepted to the GIZ's "Young Enumerators and Mediators (YEM)" initiative. He was immediately drawn to the initiative's focus on data collection and conflict analysis, but it was the field of mediation

that truly inspired him. “I found my place here,” he says. “I wanted to help people.” As part of the initiative, Al-Harith travelled to Lebanon. It was the first time he had boarded a plane, his first time visiting a country he had only seen in the news. Despite their differences, he saw strong parallels between Iraq and Lebanon: both countries bear the scars of political and social instability. Both are shaped by tensions between diverse social and religious groups. Both countries are now undergoing processes of reconstruction and stabilisation. During the trip, Al-Harith and the other participants exchanged ideas with local peacebuilders – people who had experienced similar struggles in Iraq, and who are now working to promote peace in Lebanon. The trip strengthened Al-Harith’s resolve to continue on his path as a mediator.

After successfully resolving his first case, a family dispute, others began to trust Al-Harith and ask him for help. For him, mediation is more than just a tool for resolving conflict; it is a social responsibility. “A single word or gesture can trigger conflict. But when someone speaks with understanding, everything can change,” he says. Al-Harith believes that knowledge and skills should not only serve personal development but also benefit the wider community – a community still suffering from the consequences of terror, fear, and despair. He wants to build bridges. As a trainer in mediation, his goal is to pass on to young people the very tools that gave him strength: listening, empathy, and the power of the right words. Words that foster understanding – and also have the power to heal.

When resistance takes root

Samira's new beginning with GIZ

Samira has lost a lot: her childhood, her home, and her freedom. In Mosul, she is now giving other women what she herself was denied for so long – self-determination. With the help of GIZ, she is fighting back against violence against women and girls and digital blackmail.

Samira knew from an early age that she wanted to take charge of her own life – no small task in a patriarchal society.

"Women hold up half the sky," Mao Zedong, the supreme leader of the Chinese Communist Party, is alleged to have said. Hearing Samira's story, however, you'd probably vehemently disagree. The burden that she and other Iraqi women bear is so much more than half – especially measured in terms of violence and suffering.

In Iraq, women's lives are generally subjected to male control; this has been the case since long before the reign of terror by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). A complex system of patriarchal norms, weak legal structures, religious abuse, war trauma and repression determine women's day-to-day lives. Violence against women and girls, including domestic and sexual violence, is widespread.

While the Iraqi government has introduced a number of plans and laws to improve women's participation in society, there is increasing pressure countering such initiatives, particularly from conservative religious groups. Just recently, in January 2025, Iraq's parliament passed a new law on civil status that, among other things, facilitates child marriages – already a problem in the country – and further disadvantages women in inheritance matters.

With unwavering commitment, Samira advocates for those who still face the greatest challenges in Iraqi society: women.

Samira wanted to be strong. For herself, her five children – and the women in Iraqi society.

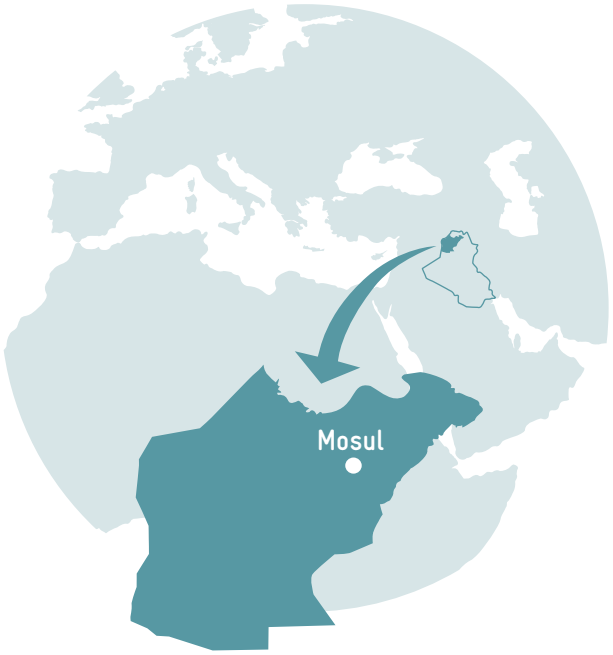
Iraqi women: between reform and repression

Samira has also experienced violence and suffering. After her father died in an accident, she and her siblings were separated from their mother and forced to leave Mosul. Samira grew up in her uncle's house, where she was abused by his wife for years. "I had a terrible childhood," she says, summing up her early years. "I was forced to do everything; I was always left completely on my own; nobody ever looked after me. I don't know if I ever really lived."

Samira was not even allowed to choose her husband, albeit this, too, is normal in Iraq's deeply patriarchal society. Her uncle married her off to a much older man before she was even of age. "Not my choice," says Samira, looking back, but adds "He was a good man". When he died of a brain tumour in 2009, life quickly deteriorated. By then, Samira had just turned 33, she was widowed and had four daughters and a son. "Our traditional society is merciless," she says, referring equally to her husband's family. She was forced to leave Mosul once again and seek shelter in her in-laws' village. For her children's sake, she was prepared to accept anything. "I realised that I had to be strong. For myself and for the women in our society."

A dual liberation

There are probably very few women living in a camp for internally displaced people who would describe themselves as "liberated". And yet Samira felt like a "queen" here. Until the invasion by ISIS, she had managed to feed herself and her children in spite of all the difficulties she faced. "I had succeeded in building a life for myself," she says. However, when ISIS seized control of the area, she had to flee to another part of the country. She wore a niqab and tried not to attract attention, not least because her family-in-law had joined ISIS. Her life as a queen began with her liberation from ISIS – and therefore



Location
Mosul

Topics
Women empowerment, peaceful coexistence

from her family. She moved to the Jad'ah camp, where she not only brought about change in her own life, but also in the lives of other women.

She established a women's network and defended victims of violence, either through her own means or together with various aid organisations. In 2021, she took part in workshops organised by GIZ for the first time. As part of the programme "Strengthening resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Nineveh (SRN), Iraq" issues like violence against women and girls, peacebuilding, and social cohesion are tackled.

Social cohesion takes courage

Samira's work focuses exactly on these issues, and the training courses are enabling her to open a new chapter in the social integration of women in Iraq. Their situation has not changed fundamentally after the war after all. They still suffer discrimination, exploitation and abuse by both the state and their families. Cyber extortion is on the rise, affecting in particular vulnerable groups, i.e. internally displaced people and especially women and girls, as is so often the case. Cybercriminals obtain personal or even intimate data and threaten to publish it. Cyber extortion often refers to seemingly

Even after the end of the ISIS occupation, many women and girls continued to face discrimination, exploitation and abuse.

trivial things, such as in the case of a man who threatened his wife with the publication of intimate pictures and forced her to top up his mobile phone credit at her expense. Still, those cases have consequences. If women refuse to comply with the demands, they live with the threat of repression, shame and reputational damage, which can dramatically worsen their already difficult situation.

A joint effort

The "Countering Blackmail and Creating Safe Social Media Spaces for Women in Mosul – Electronic Blackmailing" initiative is aimed at informing women about their rights and the ways they can take action,

Samira brings together people from all walks of life to design strategies against violence and extortion.

thus boosting their confidence and building a female bulwark against violence against women and girls. For instance, safe drop-in centres have been set up in close cooperation with the municipal police, and more victims are now gaining the courage to report extortion and have cybercriminals prosecuted. Courage is contagious. It helps entire communities to defend themselves and reorganise. For this purpose, GIZ has organised workshops to enable local leaders, community police officers, teachers and social media influencers to develop strategies to counter violence and extortion. They have also taken these strategies to rural, conservative areas with the aim of slowly dismantling discriminatory structures.

Samira and the other Iraqi women still have a long way to go. They need courage to overcome the social divide in Iraqi society and create areas of peace in this conflict-battered region. To this end, Samira and GIZ are working with women from a wide range of social backgrounds. This includes women whose families – often through their sons – had links to ISIS and those who have suffered under ISIS rule. Stigmatisation and divisions can only be overcome in a joint effort, slowly, taking things one step at a time. By supporting more and more women, the project is helping to heal a traumatised society.

Courage is contagious. Samira is a tireless advocate for those who are not yet able to stand up for themselves.

One round of negotiation after another, with increasing numbers of stakeholders. Until an agreement finally brings peace.

Two villages, decades of mistrust, and a conflict on the verge of escalation: What began as a seemingly unresolvable land dispute slowly evolved into a remarkable peace process. In the end, an agreement and a symbolic gesture demonstrate that reconciliation is more than just a compromise.

Peace returns to the land

How GIZ helped resolve a decades-long dispute

Cynics might argue that the parties involved simply ran out of steam – that after years of drawn-out, exhausting disputes and negotiations involving more and more stakeholders, people just got tired and thought: "Maybe it's time to just let it go." But that's not the story here. After all, this is a story about peace. About ending a conflict that dates back to the 1950s, one that nearly erupted into violence.

It's a story about a long-standing land dispute between the Kurdish community of the village of Hamad Agha and the Arab residents of neighbouring Kharab Al Ashq, located in the Zummar region. At the heart of the conflict lies a simple but deeply contested question: who owns the land, and who has the right to cultivate it? The dispute stems from a long chain of historical events, conflicting administrative decisions, and politically driven land allocations. Around 800 dunums of land in the Esela Valley are affected. In Iraq, one dunum equals around 2,500 square meters or roughly 200 hectares. Do the math, and you've got the area of about 280 football fields that different communities have been fighting over, most intensely since 2003.

The negotiations took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic – an additional challenge that was overcome.

Land reform, displacement, terror – and return

The roots of the conflict reach back to the 1950s, when land that had belonged to a local sheikh was seized by the state during a land reform process. It was redistributed among both Kurdish and Arab families, who jointly cultivated it for many years. But in 1974, the Kurdish population was forcibly displaced by the state, and the land was reassigned to Arab families.

Sheikh Muhsin Mahmoudi Shihab Ahmad, an Arab elder from Kharab Al Ashq who would later play a key role in the reconciliation process, recalls: "My community was even asked if we wanted to take over the land left behind by the Kurds, but we refused, out of respect for our former neighbours." The decision was also shaped by a long-standing friendship between his grandfather, Khadra Tannous, and Sheikh Al-Aziz from the Kurdish village of Hamad Agha.

But in this story, everything is far from simple. Eventually, Sheikh Muhsin's own clan was also resettled, thus losing access to those same 800 dunums of land. Around 30 years later, after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Kurdish families returned to the area. They not only reclaimed land that had previously belonged to them but also laid claim to

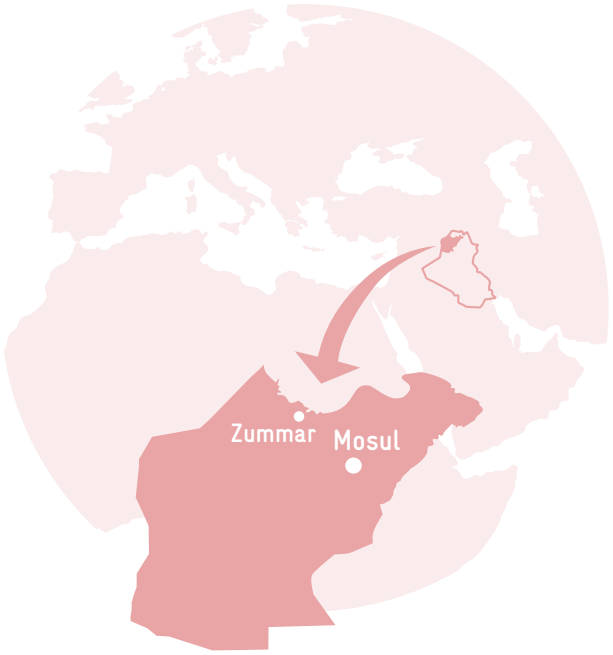
During many rounds of negotiation with numerous participants, Ali Abdul Karim helped negotiate the peace agreement.

the 800 dunums that had, in the meantime, become the property of Arab families from Kharab Al Ashq. It was a recipe for conflict. Tensions simmered as both sides insisted the land was rightfully theirs, each presenting conflicting documents. But in the absence of functioning legal institutions or clear rule of law, the dispute dragged on unresolved. Then came 2014. The so-called Islamic State (ISIS) swept through the area, forcing Muhsin and his family to flee. In their absence, "people from Bardiya", Kurdish families who had migrated into the area, took over the contested land.

After the return, escalation looms

Of course, nothing had been resolved when Sheikh Muhsin returned to Zummar in 2017. He hoped to bring the conflict to a formal close, preferably making use of state laws or municipal regulations. But instead, the conflict almost resulted in murder and bloodshed – when the Kurdish side began ploughing the disputed land, the Arab side refused to accept it. Armed men from both communities soon found themselves face-to-face, each claiming rightful ownership.

It was clear to Sheikh Muhsin that the situation couldn't continue like this. Local



Location
Zummar

Topics
Peaceful coexistence

The large turnout for the official signing of the agreement highlights its significance.

authorities, including the mayor of Zummar, the head of the agricultural authority, and the then-governor of Nineveh, also recognised the urgency. There would be no peace in this area as long as the conflict remained unresolved. And where there is no peace, nothing can flourish. The same understanding guided GIZ, which had been implementing its programme "Strengthening resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Nineveh (SRN)" in north-western Iraq since 2020. In order to resolve the dispute in a non-violent and community-based manner, the Zummar Dialogue Committee (ZDC) was founded, which included representatives from both sides of the conflict, local authority figures as well as trusted members of the respective communities. With support from GIZ, they embarked on a joint negotiation process that would stretch over the course of several years.

“We want a solution”

As with many peace processes, progress was slow – two steps forward, one step back. In July 2022, however, everything ground to a halt. A long-awaited land survey had finally been completed, awarding 700 of the 800 disputed dunums to the Arab population of Kharab Al Ashq. The Kurdish community from Hamad Agha, however, rejected the findings outright and renewed their claim to the entire area — an equally unacceptable solution for the contesting party. In response, the governor of Nineveh took a drastic measure: he closed off the entire Esela Valley, a total of 6,100 dunums of land,

Sayed Qasim Sayed Wahad participated in the negotiations of the Zummar Dialogue Committee on behalf of the Tal Afar community.

including large portions that had never been disputed.

"That had a severe impact on many families," recalls Sheikh Muhsin. "This land is among the most fertile in the entire region. Each dunum yields 500 to 750 kilos of grain, that's 3,000 to 4,000 tons per year."

Large portions of this land were cultivated by Kurdish farmers who suddenly lost access to their fields. Frustration grew – this time with their own representatives who had stalled the agreement. "The landowners came to us and made it very clear that they wanted a solution," says Sheikh Muhsin. This pressure helped break the deadlock.

After nearly six months of silence, negotiations resumed in spring 2023. The Zummar Dialogue Committee brought new mediators to the table. Talks restarted – persistently, and over many months. The discussions focused on how to interpret the land survey results, rules for land reclamation, and how to resolve disputes over specific plots.

Greater than the sum of its parts

From the beginning, it was clear to everyone involved that this conflict wasn't just about land. It was about relationships, about grievances, decades of discrimination and displacement, and so much more. With each new negotiation, the number of stakeholders grew, and so did the range of issues tied to the dispute, many of which extended

"The Kurdish landowners have made it very clear that they want a solution."

Sheikh Muhsin Mahmoudi Shihab Ahmad

Presenting the final agreement to the general public marks a powerful and symbolic milestone.

far beyond the question of land ownership. Perhaps it was precisely this complexity – the web of interests, and the need to constantly react flexibly to new challenges – that led to something greater than just a land-use agreement.

A breakthrough finally came on 28 July 2023, when representatives from the Arab and Kurdish communities signed an agreement in Erbil. Less than a month later, on 24 August, the agreement was signed again – this time in public. Reaching an agreement was an important achievement for the peace process. But perhaps even more significant for the future of this still-fragile region was something less tangible, yet more powerful: the building of trust. Trust between former adversaries.

The peace agreement signifies a major achievement. And it proves that persistence pays off.

Trust in local authorities. And trust in state institutions that had worked patiently and persistently to mediate the conflict.

Technically, the Arab side could be seen as the “winner” – after all, the land was officially awarded to them. And they could have rested on that outcome, satisfied with the fruits of their hard work. But instead, Sheikh Muhsin and his community chose to reach out to the Kurds, gifting 50 dunum of land they had just officially regained to the Kurdish residents of Hamad Agha. It was a powerful gesture, and a symbolic message that peace has – finally – returned to Zummar.

The first dresses Afkar Fathi Hassoun tailored were intended for her daughters.

For years, Afkar Fathi Hassoun lived a life marked by violence, poverty and hopelessness. Yet a sewing machine, training and the support of other women helped her to take control of her life – for herself and her daughters.

Stitch by stitch

Where hope is sewn into clothes

As if she were flying – that's how it felt to Afkar Fathi Hassoun when she got her first sewing machine in 2024. "I was so happy. It was as if my feet were no longer touching the ground," she recalls. A new feeling of lightness and hope filled Afkar's life.

Afkar grew up with several brothers and sisters in Qayyarah, a sub-district with an estimated population of 120,000 located approximately 60 kilometres south of Mosul, on the western bank of the Tigris River. Afkar started experiencing mental health issues and depression in childhood. She and her sisters felt neglected by their parents, since her brothers were allowed to go to school while the girls had to stay at home. "We had mixed schools back then. They took us girls out of school because they didn't want us to learn together with the boys. If I had received an education, my life might have turned out differently." When her mother died in 2003, 18-year-old Afkar had to take on responsibility for her younger siblings. Afkar married in her early 20s and moved to the countryside with her husband, where they had two daughters and two sons. Daily life in the village was hard. The young family often moved house, ran into debt and never had enough money, stability or security. Afkar continued to struggle with mental health issues and, later, also with physical issues. She also struggled with not being able to give her children what they needed. Every day was a challenge.

Two years of ISIS rule: fear and survival

When the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) seized control of Mosul and the surrounding territories in June 2014, Afkar and her family lived in a place called Hay al-Nahda. They heard gunshots and had no idea what was happening. Someone said that armed men had arrived. Afkar didn't know who these men were or what they wanted. But she did know that everyone in her neighbourhood had fled, which prompted her and her family to leave, too. They tried to head north but it was too late: ISIS had blocked the roads

For years, each day was a battle, but Afkar endured – for her children and her family.

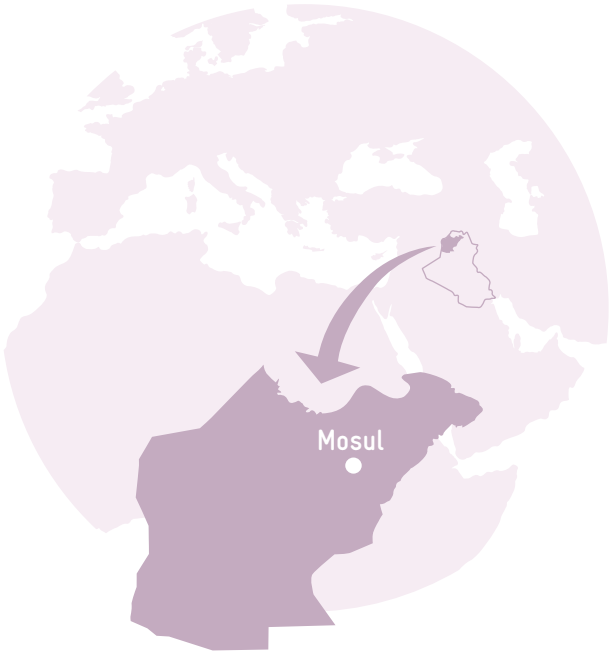
and nobody could get in or out. Afkar and her family had no choice but to return to their home. Chaos, violence and death swept across their village. Gunshots. Burning cars. Afkar was sure that Judgement Day – when all humans will be resurrected to be judged by Allah – had come: "Our life was a nightmare. Some days we had no food. No breakfast, no lunch and no dinner. There was no electricity, no running water. We collected rainwater in tubs, and I would boil and filter it so the children had something safe to drink." Afkar baked bread for her family with just a little water and flour on a clay oven – barely enough to be called a meal.

The family hardly dared leave their house out of fear of being punished or, in the worst

case, killed, for a supposed offence. There were rules everywhere: attending prayer in the mosque was obligatory at all times of the day and night; men had to grow their beards; women had to wear the khimar, a face veil, in public. Those who disobeyed faced brutal punishments, for example by "biters" – other women who bit them as a punishment. They dug their teeth into the skin of their victims as if they were wild animals. Some days, Afkar could barely keep her composure in front of her children. She locked herself in a room and cried in secret. Two years passed like this. During that time Afkar never knew whether she, her children or her husband would live to see the next day, whether they would survive. These were two years full of death and terror, full of despair. Two years in which Afkar nevertheless never lost her faith in Allah.

Surviving on the bare minimum

When their village was one of the first to be liberated by the slowly advancing Iraqi forces in the summer of 2016, Afkar and her family stayed inside their house. For a year, they had no income, food or car. People from the neighbourhood who had fled from ISIS returned and brought food like rice, chickpeas and beans. They helped where they could, even though they had little themselves. Since Afkar's husband was seriously ill and could no



Location
Mosul

Topics
Women empowerment, livelihoods

Afkar gave everything she had. She made it through the COVID-19 pandemic and planted trees. Sewing helps her to secure her livelihood.

longer work, Afkar became the sole breadwinner. She earned a little money by baking bread, but it was barely enough. On some days, she earned as little as 4,000 to 6,000 dinars (between 2.70 Euros and 4 Euros). Would they be able to survive? Afkar prayed. She hoped.

In 2020, during the height of the pandemic, her brother told her about an international organisation that offered jobs in forestry. Afkar and her family were afraid of catching the virus and falling ill – they were also deeply in debt, since they struggled to pay for rent, medication and daily expenses. Afkar was lucky and got a temporary job: she planted seedlings and trees for two months and received a good, steady income. While Afkar was happy about the money, her life

The training programme brought structure to Afkar's life. She now has something she can rely on.

was still difficult. She was still suffering psychologically; the family was in debt and her husband and two of her children were ill.

An offer that would change everything

Weeks, months and years passed, until one day Afkar was offered the chance to participate in a GIZ-supported project aimed at strengthening sustainable livelihoods. This was the opportunity Afkar had hoped and prayed for. After an initial interview, participants could choose from various training

programmes, including hairdressing, cleaning and cooking. Afkar opted for sewing because her sister had taught her how to sew and she already had some experience.

As Afkar walked to the restaurant where the first day of training would take place, she felt a sense of something opening up inside her. She felt able to let go of the pain. Still, Afkar found the situation and the other participants overwhelming. She was nervous and hesitant. The second time, she spoke to one of the other participants. The third time, she opened up a little more. And, little by little, she and the other participants began to talk and share ideas.

Afkar received financial support for her living expenses, allowing her to buy a fridge and a freezer – two things that made her everyday life easier. Now Afkar could cook meals in advance without having to worry that the food would spoil in the heat and her children would fall ill.

> "I hope that every woman who finds herself in a similar situation will have the opportunity to take part in a training programme and see their lives improve."
>
> Afkar Fathi Hassoun

Warmth, friendship and hope

It took Afkar six months to learn everything she needed to know to earn a living as a seamstress. In addition to sewing, she also learned about business strategies and how to deal with customers. Afkar used the money she received to set up her own business to buy sewing equipment like fabrics and thread. The training, however, also gave her something else: it brought her into contact with other women. They laughed and ate together, drank tea together. For the first time in her life, Afkar had real friends. In her previous life, she had stayed at home – she had never gone out or met friends before, partly because she had had no money and couldn't afford certain things. Afkar had constant problems with her husband, not because

he was a bad person, but because there was nothing that bound them together, nothing she could rely on. Afkar realised how good it felt to interact with other people and noted that this had a positive effect on her mental health.

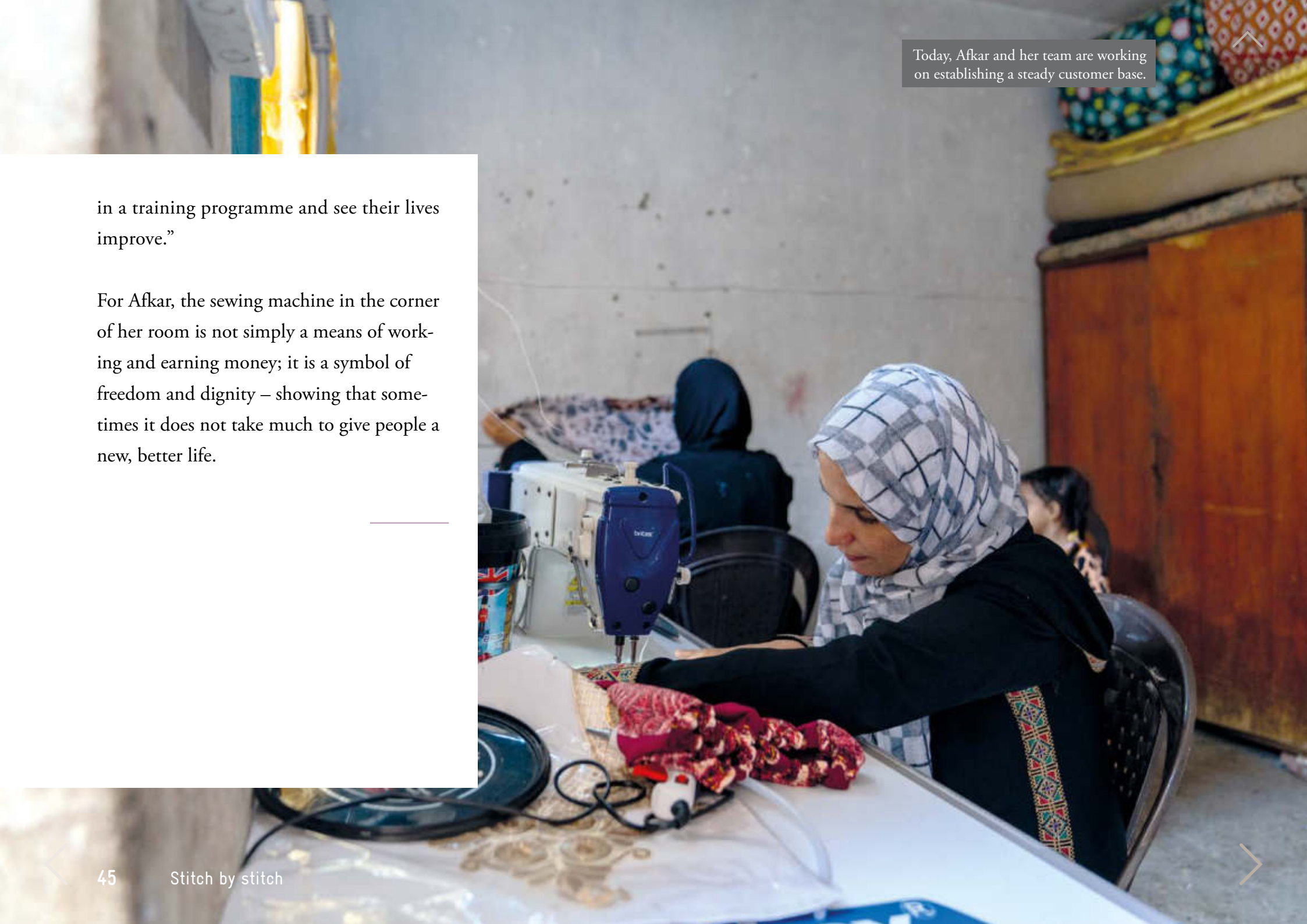
The training became a turning point in Afkar's life – it gave her hope and motivated her: "We were told that sewing could be a source of income and that it would improve our lives. I really kept that in mind. I said to myself, I have to buy a sewing machine and start sewing for people everywhere." In mid-2024, the day had come: Afkar bought a sewing machine. Now she felt as if she were flying – she had just made an investment in her future. The first garments Afkar sewed on the machine were for her daughters. "They were so happy. They hardly had anything before," Afkar said. Today, she sews everything from clothes to cushion covers. Afkar knows that her small sewing business is still in its early stages. It takes time to build up a customer base.

More than just a sewing machine

It has been a year since Afkar bought her sewing machine. Her life has changed a lot for the better. "I can sew, earn my own money and pay for my expenses." Afkar dreams of having a house for herself and her children, a home that is only hers without her having to pay rent. And she wants to continue learning, to improve her sewing skills, and to open a sewing shop where she can employ other seamstresses. She is already working with an experienced seamstress who cuts the fabric, which Afkar uses to make clothes with her machine. They divide the income 50/50. However, Afkar's biggest concern is for her daughters' future. She is keen for the two girls to have a good education and become doctors or teachers. Afkar doesn't want her daughters to have to struggle like she did. She wishes other women had the same opportunity that she has been given: "I hope that every woman who finds herself in a similar situation will have the opportunity to take part

in a training programme and see their lives improve."

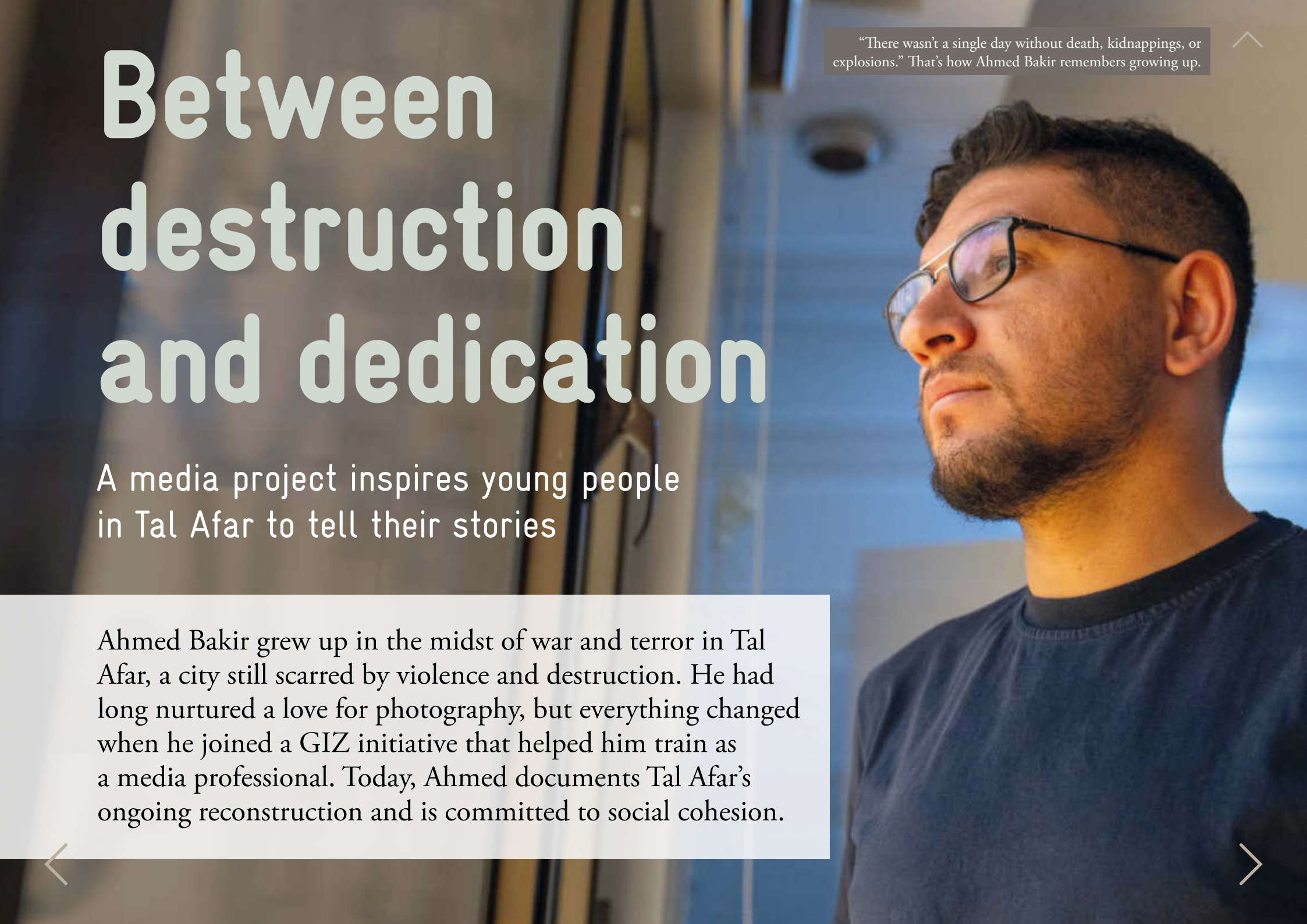
For Afkar, the sewing machine in the corner of her room is not simply a means of working and earning money; it is a symbol of freedom and dignity – showing that sometimes it does not take much to give people a new, better life.



Today, Afkar and her team are working on establishing a steady customer base.

Between destruction and dedication

A media project inspires young people in Tal Afar to tell their stories



"There wasn't a single day without death, kidnappings, or explosions." That's how Ahmed Bakir remembers growing up.

Ahmed Bakir grew up in the midst of war and terror in Tal Afar, a city still scarred by violence and destruction. He had long nurtured a love for photography, but everything changed when he joined a GIZ initiative that helped him train as a media professional. Today, Ahmed documents Tal Afar's ongoing reconstruction and is committed to social cohesion.

The reconstruction of the citadel of Tal Afar will take a little longer. Funding remains scarce, but many in the city recognize the deep significance of the structure, which was blown up by the troops of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014. "The citadel dates back to the Assyrian era. It was a symbol of our city and our cultural identity. To this day, we all feel the pain whenever we walk past the ruins," says Ahmed Bakir, a young photographer and filmmaker who was born in Tal Afar at the end of the 1990s. For many residents, restoring the citadel represents a chance to heal – a way to close a painful chapter. Its reconstruction would stand as a beacon of hope in a neighbourhood that has not had much cause for optimism in recent decades.

For Ahmed, the building represents more than just a few crumbling stones. It symbolizes loss and identity while also embodying hope for the future. Thus, it is not surprising that the citadel is featured in the 2022 documentary "Noor's Journey," a film created as part of the GIZ initiative "Media for Peace". Ahmed was involved in both the initiative and the making of the film. This marked his first foray into documentary filmmaking, and he now works as a media professional, having put in considerable effort to get to where he is today.

Growing up under Saddam

Ahmed was still a child when US troops invaded Iraq in 2003. His hometown, Tal Afar, is within a stone's throw of Mosul. Back then, it was home to 220,000 people from various ethnic and religious communities. The fragile power structures, rooted mainly in tribal and family networks, collapsed under the strain of war. Religious and ethnic tensions erupted into violent conflicts. Peace remained a distant reality for a long time. "Not a single day went by without news of a kidnapping, murder, or bombing," Ahmed says, recalling the years leading up to 2014.

Location
Tal Afar

Topics
Mediation and conflict resolution, youth empowerment, peaceful coexistence

2014 – the year that ISIS took full control of the city, although extremists had already been operating there for years. Al-Saray, Ahmed's neighbourhood, was an al-Qaeda stronghold where "holy warriors" specifically targeted children – recruiting them for their so-called holy war. "Living in that kind of society, it was incredibly hard to stay safe," says Ahmed, referring to the danger posed by al-Qaeda and, later, ISIS. "My mother protected me and constantly encouraged me to focus on school."

Finishing school – an act of resistance

Ahmed's mother did an incredible job of raising him, and despite having to work to support his family, Ahmed remained deeply committed to his education. "I was one of the top students and always dreamed of going to a good university," he recalls. But everything changed the day ISIS arrived. The family was forced to flee. They struggled to survive in Mosul, and Ahmed fought for his future. "If you truly believe in something, and stay true to your principles, you can achieve anything," he says. Ahmed dreams of

graduating. For him, finishing school is more than just a goal – it is an act of resistance and self-empowerment. When he finally started studying English at the university in Mosul in 2018, he was within a hair's breadth of fulfilling his dream.

It was by chance that Ahmed discovered photography, but it was his determination that caught the attention of GIZ. Armed with just a simple mobile phone, he began capturing everyday moments that reflected the return of life to his hometown after its liberation from ISIS. His deep commitment to Tal Afar was clear – Ahmed regularly shared his photos on social media, took part in clean-up efforts, and helped renovate schools. Eventually, he was invited to join a workshop run by GIZ's "Peace Pathways" initiative, which supports young people from conflict-ridden areas in using media to tell their stories and promote peace and social cohesion. "I got involved at every stage, documenting, helping and collaborating," Ahmed says.

When GIZ launched the "Media for Peace" initiative as part of the "Strengthening resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Nineveh (SRN), Iraq" programme, Ahmed applied immediately. It was a turning point in his life. "Before, I was just an amateur photographer. 'Media for Peace' turned me into a documentary filmmaker," he explains.

What began as a hobby is now a profession: since joining the GIZ initiative, Ahmed has been working as a photographer in his hometown.

Through his lens, Ahmed now captures the everyday lives of young Iraqis – in all their complexity.

Today, Ahmed Bakir is a respected, committed media professional who applies his craft in Tal Afar to make marginalised voices heard. “I owe this to GIZ,” he says. His work is shaped by social responsibility, professional ambition and deep personal conviction. His life’s mission? “I believe in the common good,” he says. “For me, it’s about doing something for the community. You don’t necessarily have to earn money from your talent – and even if you earn nothing or almost nothing doing it, you don’t give up. It’s about principles and social responsibility.”

Memories, stories, and transformation

How a GIZ project changed a life

Mohammed Raad Khalaf grew up during one of the most dangerous times in Iraq, surrounded by bombs, fear, and everyday violence. Today he is a journalist, data analyst and mediator. His story is one of trauma, transformation, and the power that lies in shared experiences.

As a child, Mohammed had no plans for the future. How could he, growing up under constant threat?

The GIZ initiative “Young Enumerators and Mediators (YEM)” marked a turning point in Mohammed’s life.

As a child, Mohammed Raad Khalaf had no dreams. Becoming a pilot or a doctor never crossed his mind, and he made no plans for the future. “I think the challenges we faced had a big impact on us,” he says today. Now aged 27, Mohammed vividly recalls what it was like growing up in Mosul, surrounded by bombings and violence. He was one of nine siblings with five sisters and three brothers, raised by a single mother. In 2004, when Mohammed was just six years old, his father disappeared on his way to work. Whether he was abducted, imprisoned, murdered, or if he is still alive – Mohammed’s family still doesn’t know.

Childhood in a state of emergency

As traumatic as this experience was, it was not unusual in Iraq at the time. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in spring 2003, the country entered a long period of instability. Many people died, and many families were left grieving. From 2004 onward, the Islamist group al-Qaeda ramped up its campaign of suicide bombings and attacks, targeting markets, mosques, and government institutions. At the same time, religious tensions between different population groups intensified. For the people of Iraq, life became a constant state of emergency – marked by chaos, death, and displacement. The infrastructure was severely damaged: hospitals and schools, as well as the basic electricity and water supply, were barely operational. Iraqi society was left deeply traumatised and fractured along sectarian lines.

The schools that Mohammed attended back then bore names like Peace, Freedom, and Future – names fraught with symbolism that stood in stark contrast to the reality of his daily life and school years, which were shaped by fear and the constant threat of violence. One traumatic memory remains especially vivid: as a teenager, Mohammed witnessed a fight between two classmates that ended in one of them being killed. “That

Reading a book, without fear or the urge to flee – what once seemed unimaginable now brings Mohammed a deep sense of peace.

moment still haunts me," he says. "The trauma still persists."

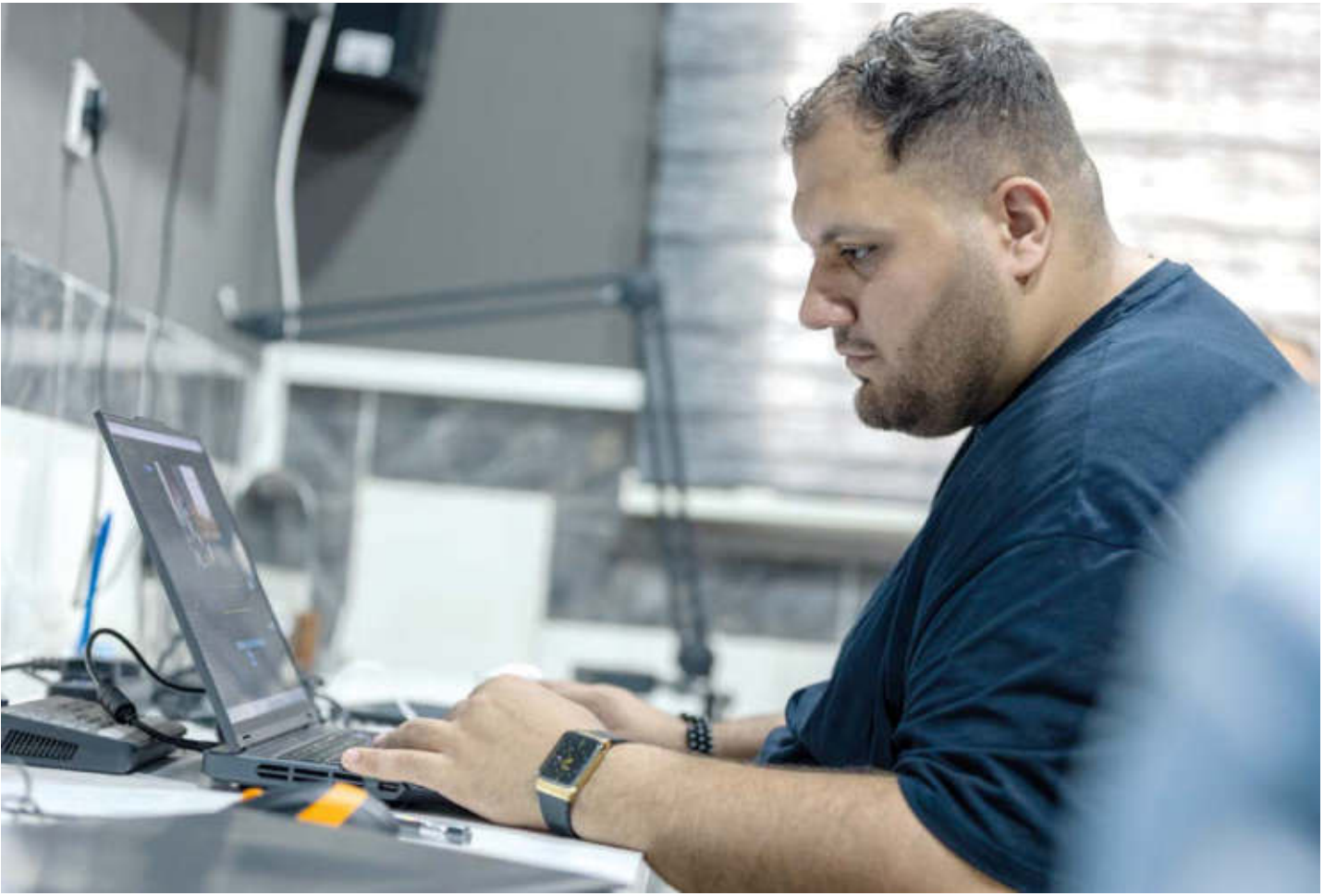
Youth under ISIS rule: The Lost Years

And more traumas would follow. Mohammed still clearly remembers the day when the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) seized power in 2014: "It was 6 June, the day I received my first mobile phone. The atmosphere was terrifying. Everything had this yellowish hue, like a filter had been placed over the city," he recalls. No one truly understood what was happening or who these armed men were who seemed to appear out of nowhere. Rumours swirled, and disturbing videos of ISIS fighters patrolling the streets spread virally on the internet. Mohammed's family agonised over whether to flee or stay. In the end, they chose to stay.

For three years, Mohammed, his siblings, mother, uncles, aunts, and cousins endured life under ISIS rule. Mohammed could no longer go to school, and his mother, who had worked as a teacher, lost her income – as did all government employees at the time. Every day, Mohammed monitored his behaviour carefully, because ISIS was unpredictable: "They had no rules, no boundaries. They could treat you however they wanted."

Looking back, Mohammed feels that his entire youth was stolen from him. There was no joy, no ease, no perspective. For months, the family survived on little more than spaghetti with date syrup and potatoes. There was no fresh fruit or vegetables. When Mohammed saw a tomato for the first time in months – years, even – he couldn't believe how red it was.

After the liberation from ISIS, Mohammed completed school and began studying media in Mosul.



Media as a bridge to the community

The first few months after Mosul's liberation in 2017 were financially tough. It was not until government employees – like Mohammed's mother – started receiving their salaries again that things slowly began to improve. Mohammed finished school and hoped to be admitted to media studies in Baghdad. He narrowly missed the required exam score and was offered a place to study in Mosul instead. "Fate would not let me go," he says with a hint of irony. Step by step, he began to rebuild his life. For the first

Location
Mosul

Topics
Mediation and conflict resolution, media, youth empowerment, peaceful coexistence

time, perhaps, he allowed himself to dream – to picture what his future might hold. Mohammed's interest in media stemmed from a desire to "tell the world what they had lived through". He began working at a local radio station and took part in a media training.

The year 2021 marked a turning point. Mohammed joined the GIZ-funded "Tamasuk" project, which set up district working groups in Mosul and the surrounding area. He conducted interviews, did research, documented stories – and discovered just how vital dialogue is between different social groups. He reports: "I interacted with many people and built up close relationships. I learned details I'd never known before – about their culture, the diversity of these regions, their environment, agriculture, climate, customs, and traditions." When GIZ asked him to produce a media report on the impact of the working groups, Mohammed produced a documentary about social connections, marriages between returnees and security forces, and new ways of living together.

"During my mediation training, I learned to listen instead of jumping to conclusions. That changed me fundamentally," says Mohammed, reflecting on his journey.

Telling stories to shape the future

In 2022, Mohammed produced another documentary – this time tackling the taboo topic of digital blackmail targeting women. The University of Mosul recognised his work with an award, marking his first public success. In spring 2023, he became part of the "Media for Peace" initiative. "For the first time, I learnt how to back up stories with data, how to really go into depth", he says. Mohammed reviewed over 100 hours of video footage, identified critical gaps in media coverage, and developed data-driven investigative reports on this basis, one of which examined the influence of social relationships in times of conflict. This changed Mohammed's perspective: "I no longer see conflicts as just a problem, but as something that can be shaped and transformed." Alongside his work for "Media for Peace", Mohammed took part in a mediator training project organised by GIZ. What began as a professional development opportunity soon evolved into a personal story of transformation. "I learned to really listen," he reflects, "and not to judge immediately. That changed my whole being."

Today, Mohammed works on data journalism projects, publishes articles, teaches and networks. An article about people with disabilities opened the door to advanced training opportunities in Germany. What drives

"Media for Peace" gave Mohammed self-confidence, a sense of purpose and dignity. And: hope and prospects for the future.

him forward? The power of storytelling. The ability to build bridges through experiences. And the sense of responsibility for empowering young people in his community. "When I look back now," Mohammed reflects, "the GIZ projects gave me more than just professional training. They restored my self-confidence, a sense of direction – and dignity." Now, Mohammed has something he once thought impossible: a future filled with possibilities. Today, he dreams of reaching people through stories, of helping them understand not only what was, but what is.

When the so-called Islamic State invaded her Yazidi homeland, Sanaa Saleh Qasim was forced to flee with her family. Years later, she returned – to a destroyed home in a deserted town. Today, she runs a small restaurant there and is gradually building a new life.

The taste of hope

The survival of a Yazidi woman in northern Iraq

During the ISIS years, Sanaa suffered most from a sense of loneliness. Today, she's again surrounded by people in her restaurant.

From a young age, Sanaa worked the land with her parents, learning how to earn her own livelihood.

"I am proud to be independent – both for myself and for my family," says Sanaa. Her restaurant represents more than just a livelihood. It stands for self-reliance, financial stability, renewed confidence – and above all, hope.

Now 30, Sanaa grew up in the small town of Khanasor in northern Sinjar, a region in northwest Iraq near the Syrian border, which has been inhabited by the Yazidi community for centuries. She never went to school, apart from a two-month literacy course. Already at the age of twelve, she worked alongside her parents in the fields. She started at four in the morning and worked until seven in the evening, with only a short lunch break. Sanaa harvested cucumbers, tomatoes and watermelons, and the money she earned was barely enough to get her, her parents, and her seven younger siblings through the winter. "My childhood was not like that of other children," Sanaa recalls. "I spent all my time working and helping to support my family." Life was tough, but being with her loved ones mattered most to Sanaa.

Fleeing on foot

Sanaa was 19 years old when the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) invaded Sinjar in August 2014. In a matter of days, the terrorist group killed, abducted, and displaced thousands in a deliberate attempt to annihilate the Yazidi community. Sanaa and her family fled on foot into the mountains, with no food or water, where they hid for seven days. When they heard rumours of an open route to Syria, they set out for the border. Once there, they managed to board a truck that took them to the Kurdistan Region, an autonomous area in northern Iraq.

For years, Sanaa and her family lived in an overcrowded refugee camp – ten people

Sanaa started out as a temporary worker. With support from a business start-up project, she was able to open her own restaurant.

sharing a single tent, with limited access to sanitation and only seasonal work available. It was not until 2021, seven years after their displacement, that they returned to Khanasor. What they found was heartbreaking: their home had been completely looted. "What saddened me most was the loneliness," Sanaa says. "Only few people had returned." Together with her parents and siblings, she began rebuilding, first repairing the house, then cultivating the fields. But when her brothers had to focus on school and education, they could no longer help with the agricultural work, and the family had to stop. Instead, Sanaa helped out in a local restaurant.

Sanaa's restaurant, located next to a primary school, is often so busy that her brothers have to help her out.

Back to Life

When she heard about a GIZ-funded project to promote business start-ups for returnees, Sanaa applied, hoping to start something in the field of gastronomy. She was accepted and completed several training sessions on entrepreneurship, organisation and cooking. Sanaa also learned how to source ingredients and how to prepare popular local dishes. During her time as a temporary help in a restaurant, Sanaa had already been playing with the idea of opening her own restaurant. Thanks to start-up funding from GIZ and the support of her father, she was able to realise this dream in 2023.

Today, Sanaa cooks every day for the guests in her small restaurant, which is located right next to a primary school. It gets especially busy during school hours, and on some days, she calls on her brothers to help. Her work makes her happy and gives her a sense of security, dignity and community. People do not just come to the restaurant to eat, but for the atmosphere. It is a place to talk, connect, and feel less alone. Numerous challenges remain like poor infrastructure, frequent water shortages, and power cuts, but Sanaa is already thinking ahead. She hopes to expand, start offering soft drinks and juices, and eventually hire staff. “I’m very grateful for what GIZ has done for us,” she says. Despite war, displacement, and loss, Sanaa

Location
Sinjar

Topics
Women empowerment, livelihoods, return of internally displaced people

Sanaa's training included accounting and business planning – skills that are now paying off.

has found her way back to life. She is not only shaping her own future – but also the future of her community. One meal at a time.

Building the future

The story of a young woman who takes responsibility

Ghalia Ismail was a refugee for nine years. Today, she is back in her devastated home village in north-western Iraq and is actively helping to rebuild it. What drives her is more than hope: it is a deep sense of responsibility. Responsibility towards her family, towards her community – and towards a future that is also built by women.

"Cash for Work": the GIZ initiative that gave Ghalia new prospects and a sense of purpose.

Ghalia was just a child when ISIS forced her to flee her village. She returned years later as an adult.

For Ghalia Ismail, home is a small village in north-western Iraq just south of the Sinjar Mountains, a narrow mountain ridge that rises from the dusty plains like a stone island and stretches across more than 100 kilometres of steep cliffs and exposed rock. In spring, the slopes show signs of life – junipers, acacias and hardy scrubland – but the landscape remains largely harsh and barren. It is the landscape that shaped Ghalia's childhood before she and her family were forced to flee in 2014. Now, at twenty years old, Ghalia is back in Qahtaniya, the village also known as Til Ezer. Returning was not easy – but support from GIZ helped ease the way.

Reconstruction brought modern technologies to Ghalia's village, including a sustainable energy system.

Escape through the mountains

Ghalia was ten years old when the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) attacked the Sinjar region in 2014. Until then, Ghalia's life had been hard but peaceful. Her father ran a shoe shop, and the family lived in a house made of mud bricks. "We didn't have much, but we lived in peace," Ghalia remembers. Sunday 3 August 2014 began like any other day. Ghalia was helping her aunt with the housework when her uncle rushed in with alarming news from nearby Sinuni, where he had been selling crops: everyone there was fleeing to the mountains. In the distance, Ghalia could see lots of cars and hear children crying. She contacted her family and learned from them that a terrorist organisation called Islamic State was approaching and had surrounded the area. Her aunt's family had no car, so they set off for the mountains on foot, taking nothing with them. "We thought we would be gone for just an hour or two, until things calmed down," Ghalia says. "But it turned out very differently." She and her aunt's family walked for nearly ten hours before reaching her uncle's house, where over forty families had taken refuge. There was water but very little food. Ghalia stayed there for two days before continuing on, determined to reunite with her parents.

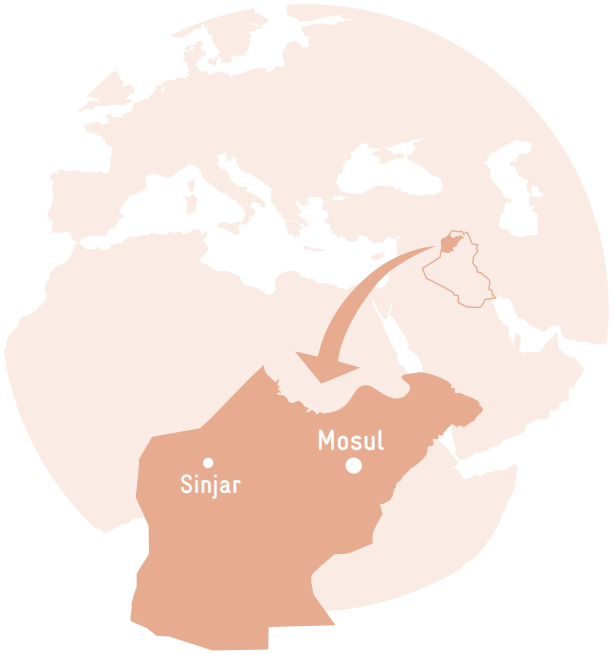
Within the GIZ project, Ghalia quickly took on a leadership role – determined to support others as well.

Fear was never far away in the mountains. Ghalia reports: “One day we heard that ISIS was approaching and could reach us at any moment. The women and girls were completely terrified; they did not want to be captured. One of my uncles said: ‘If they reach us, we will kill you all before they can take you – and then we will kill ourselves. No one will fall into their hands.’ Fortunately, ISIS did not reach us.” Eventually, Ghalia and her family fled to Kurdistan via Syria. They first stayed in overcrowded shelters before settling in Esyan camp, where conditions were harsh. Ghalia missed a year of school and continued her studies as best she could: lessons were held in large tents without desks or chairs, and the children sat on the floor. The teachers lived in the camp as well; most of them had only just finished school and had no experience in teaching. During the summer, Ghalia and her sister worked in the fields harvesting potatoes – a physically demanding job for which they were paid the equivalent of just three Euros a day.

A house without doors or windows

After three years in the camp, Ghalia and her family returned to the Sinjar mountains. “We came back because life in the camp was unbearable,” explains Ghalia. There was no work, no future. In Sinjar, things slowly started to improve. Her father found work in construction and Ghalia was able to return to school. She remembers that time warmly: “I loved that place. It wasn’t truly our home, but it felt like it was”.

In 2023, Ghalia’s family took the next step: they left the mountains and returned to Qahtaniya for the first time since fleeing in 2014. But the village they came back to was almost unrecognisable: homes destroyed or looted, infrastructure in ruins, unpaved roads and only a handful of people remaining. Ghalia’s feelings were mixed. “I left a child and came back an adult,” she reflects. Their family home was still standing – but barely. It had no doors, no windows, and was technically uninhabitable. Still, with nowhere else to go, they moved back in. After all those years, they had returned. But now what? Jobs were scarce, and there were hardly any opportunities to rebuild what had been destroyed.



Location
Sinjar

Topics
Women empowerment, livelihoods, return of internally displaced people

With the money she earned herself, Ghalia was able to buy new doors and windows for her parents' home.

No reconstruction without women

Ghalia was fortunate: along with other villagers – many of them returnees – she was selected to take part in a GIZ-supported project aimed at constructing a local water supply system. Before long, Ghalia took on a leadership role within her group. "Some of the women were older and the physical labour was especially difficult for them. So, I told them to rest while I worked in their place", she explains. The project offered more than just hands-on training in areas like surveying and construction technology.

It also served as a gateway into professional life. Ghalia earned the equivalent of around 1,000 Euros, enough to buy doors and windows for her parents' house, among other things. But for her, the most meaningful part was contributing directly to the reconstruction of her hometown and helping families who lacked access to clean water. She was also impressed by the project's sustainable design: the water pump is powered by solar panels, a practical solution for an area with an unreliable power supply. The project also had a dual impact: it improved the water supply in the region and at the same time strengthened women's economic participation. The project was widely accepted by the local community, a powerful signal that women can play an active role in rebuilding and development, when given the opportunity.

Ghalia got her chance – and she seized it. Now she dreams of studying English and pursuing a career that also serves her community, just like the GIZ-supported water supply project. "I want my work to benefit others more than it helps me," she says. She has come back – not as a child in need of protection, but as a young woman ready to take responsibility. Both for herself and those around her.

Thanks to reconstruction, life has returned to Ghalia's village.

How a football pitch in Telskuf fosters social stability

A hectare of participation

With the occupation by the so-called Islamic State, Santa not only lost her home: her dream of becoming a professional footballer was shattered too. Years later, she plays on the pitch rebuilt by GIZ in her hometown – together with others, for cohesion and a better future.

A green oasis in the dusty terrain: the newly rebuilt football pitch in Telskuf can be seen from afar.

Where minefields once threatened lives, football tournaments now bring the community together.

The girls run across the pitch, warming up. They do jump exercises, short sprints and joint mobility drills before jogging back across the pitch. Coach Amer Yaqoob Jaboo sets up mini hurdles for agility, speed and coordination training – crucial skills for the sport they all love: football. At first glance, training at Telskuf Sports Club looks like a typical session anywhere in the world. But in northern Iraq, a region still healing from conflict, recreational and organised sports, especially for girls, are far from the norm.

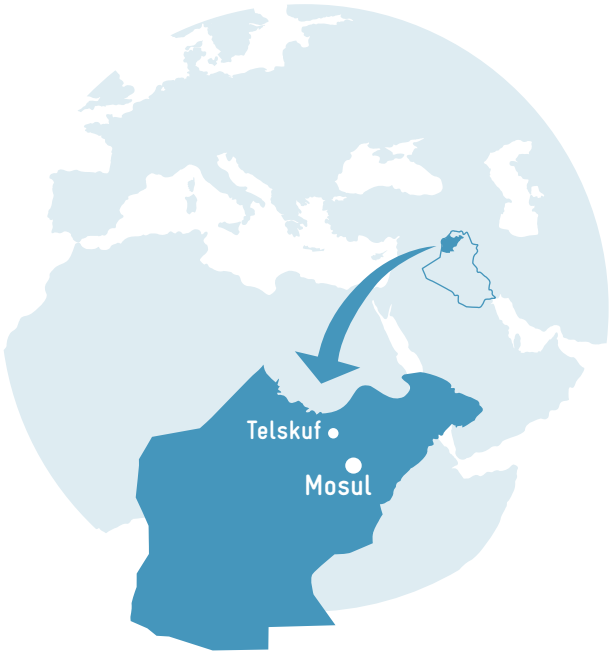
Eighteen-year-old Santa plays midfield for the club, proudly wearing the orange number 7 jersey. Like so many footballers, Santa has been kicking a ball around since she could walk. Coach Amer is her father, the man who introduced her to the pitch at a very young age. Santa always dreamed of making it big – maybe joining a team in Europe or "in the Gulf" – but that dream took time to take root. "I wasn't all that excited at first," she admits, "but eventually, I caught the football bug". She trains, she plays, she embraces the competitive nature of football and the opportunities it opens

up for her, even as a girl living in a region where that is not always encouraged. Then, in 2014, everything changed. Her dream was shattered by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS).

Destroyed communities, lost dreams

Telskuf is located near the border with the autonomous region of Kurdistan in the north of Iraq. The small town of around 11,000 inhabitants has been overrun by ISIS several times, forcing thousands to flee. "We all lost something back then," Santa recalls. She was still a child when she fled. "I lost my friends and some family. We were all torn apart."

Though ISIS only occupied Telskuf briefly – pushed back by Kurdish Peshmerga forces in 2014 and again in 2016 – the impact was lasting. The town, less physically destroyed than others in Nineveh, still struggles with slow recovery and return, even years after liberation. "When we came back, we had to start from scratch, including rebuilding the football club," says Santa. By 2017, their old football pitch had become a mine-field covered by rubble. "We didn't receive any help, not even for the pitch," she says. "Only GIZ stepped in. Without them, the



Location
Telskuf

Topics
Basic services, infrastructure, youth empowerment, peaceful coexistence

field would probably still have signs warning ‘Danger to life.’”

In this case, GIZ’s programme “Strengthening resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Nineveh (SRN), Iraq” works closely with local authorities and the population in Nineveh to strengthen social cohesion, build local peace structures, improve livelihoods, and rebuild public infrastructure in north-western Iraq, including sports facilities.

It was her father Amer who first introduced Santa to football – and he still coaches her today.

Peace plays out on the pitch

The football pitch and club in Telskuf are about much more than just sport. They provide psychosocial support, promoting stability and fostering a sense of community. As Coach Amer puts it, “It’s about peaceful coexistence. We’re not just a sports club, we are a social club, a cultural club. We bring all those values together”. To him, sport is not only a passion, but also a path to purpose and a better future. “This pitch isn’t just for people from Telskuf,” he adds. “It’s also for the surrounding villages.” In his view, GIZ hasn’t just restored a few hectares of land – “they

The football pitch was destroyed and mined by ISIS. Reconstruction dragged on – until GIZ stepped in.

have helped breathe new life into an entire region".

What was once a minefield is now alive with large tournaments bringing together teams from different communities across the region. "These are signs of peace, coexistence and unity," says Santa. "We're building bridges for a better future."

The football pitch in Telskuf has become a symbol of hope – a return to normal life, a space for inclusion, and a testament to peace. It connects generations, brings together girls and boys, and unites neighbouring villages. It is not just about the game; it is about rebuilding what was lost after years of war and destruction. For Santa, it might

Santa dreams of becoming a professional football player, ideally in Europe or “the Gulf”.

also be the start of something bigger. At just 18, she has already made it onto the Iraqi national team. And who knows, maybe one day a major club from Europe or “the Gulf” will come knocking at the brand-new metal gate that now surrounds the pitch, the club and a whole hectare of hope.

A shepherd starts afresh

Hope takes root

Taha Sulaiman Hassan was a shepherd in north-western Iraq. Then came war – and Taha lost almost everything. But, deep in the soil, the roots of his old pomegranate tree survived. Today, Taha represents a new beginning and the belief that even in dry soil, something can grow again.

Even as a child, Taha felt deeply connected to nature. Being able to live off the land means everything to him.

Taha started out as a simple shepherd.
Today, he implements modern technology.

"I was twelve years old when I planted my first pomegranate tree," says Taha Sulaiman Hassan proudly. Drought, war and displacement destroyed much of his life. Yet, like the tree, he endured. The forty-for-year-old comes from Al-Salihiya, a small village nestled in the dusty expanse of northwestern Iraq, where the plains gradually give way to barren hills. The village is part of the Al-Ayadiyah sub-district and lies north-west of Tal Afar – a city that was once a vibrant crossroads between Mosul and Syria. Today, there is little trace of this past significance in Al-Salihiya. The people here survive on what they can coax from the dry earth.

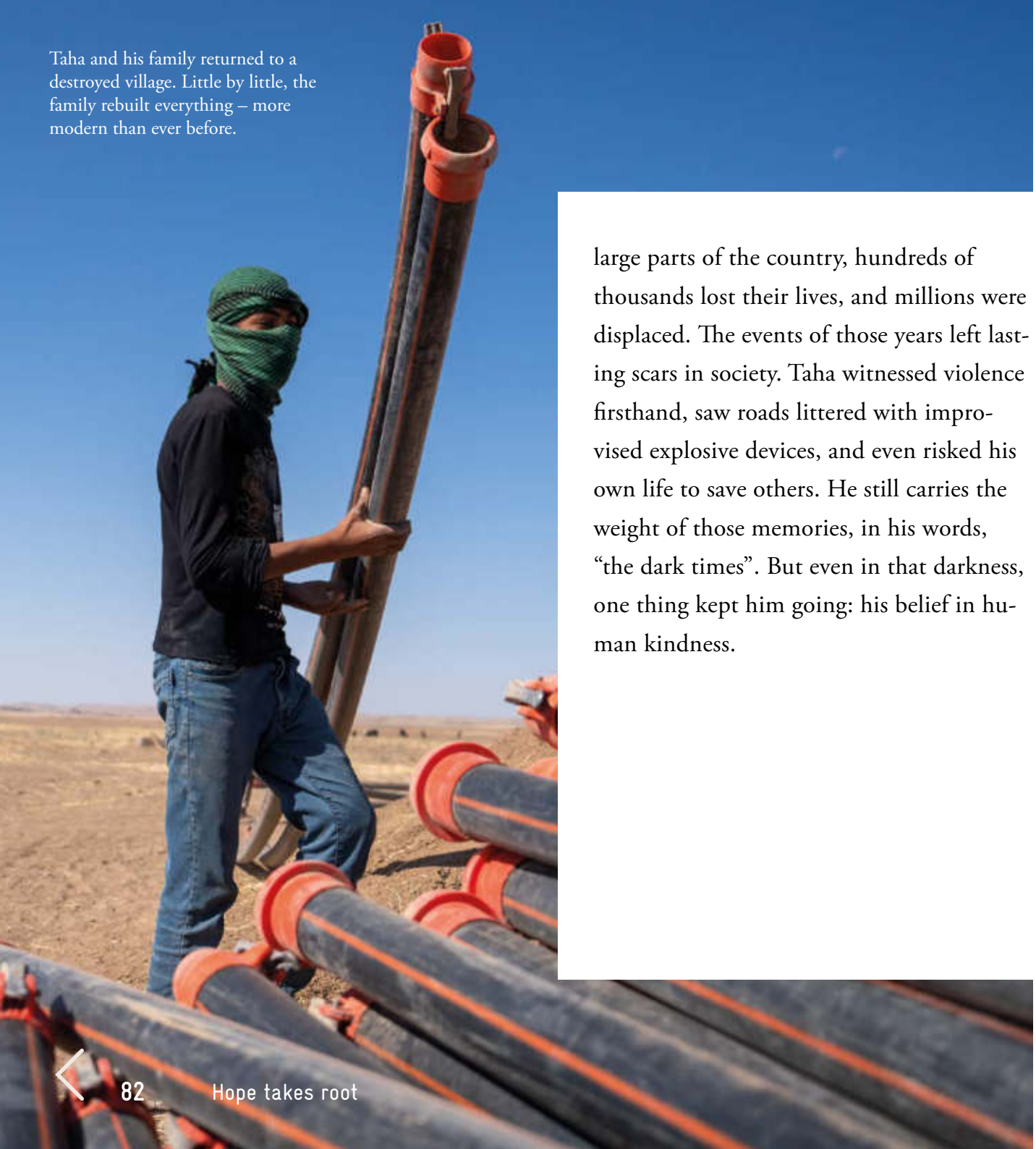
Like many of his generation, Taha grew up with farming and livestock farming. Even as a child he loved nature and felt connected to it – it was, and still is, something special and precious to him. When his father died, Taha had to leave school early to help support his family. He became a provider. As a simple shepherd, he had a modest life rooted in tradition, shaped by the rhythms of nature and the hope for rain. With no irrigation system, everything depended on the weather. "We only knew what our ancestors had taught us," Taha says. No rain meant a poor harvest and little food for the sheep; no rain meant losses and worries.

The dark times

The quiet rhythm of village life, held together by generations of tradition, was shattered between 2006 and 2008 by events that no one in the village could have foreseen. At the time, Iraq was gripped by a wave of brutal violence and deep instability. Daily, there were attacks, kidnappings, and targeted killings – especially in urban centres like Baghdad and Mosul. Militant groups exploited the power vacuum left in the wake of Saddam Hussein's fall to expand their influence. The government was barely able to overcome the deep social divisions.

At the same time, the humanitarian crisis deepened: Essential services collapsed across

Where farmers once hoped and prayed for rain, they now manage their own irrigation systems.



Taha and his family returned to a destroyed village. Little by little, the family rebuilt everything – more modern than ever before.

large parts of the country, hundreds of thousands lost their lives, and millions were displaced. The events of those years left lasting scars in society. Taha witnessed violence firsthand, saw roads littered with improvised explosive devices, and even risked his own life to save others. He still carries the weight of those memories, in his words, "the dark times". But even in that darkness, one thing kept him going: his belief in human kindness.

Return to nowhere

Then, in 2014, the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) arrived. Al-Salihiya's location away from the main roads made it more difficult to access – making the village both more isolated and more vulnerable. Taha had no choice but to flee with his family, his wife and children, to the Ayadiyah mountains, taking only what was necessary, including their animals. They lived in tents for three years and now and then managed to sell some of their livestock in Mosul. Farming was impossible in the harsh terrain of the mountains. "We survived on the rain and our animals," Taha says. Everything else was

Climate-adapted farming and irrigation techniques now help to wrest good harvests from the barren landscape.

gone – his house, his harvest, his sense of security.

In July 2017, Taha's home region was one of the last in the Nineveh governorate to be liberated from ISIS. Taha and his family left the mountains and returned to find their village in ruins. Nothing was left standing. There was no electricity, barely any water. Still, Taha felt happy: "Just to be here again, after all the suffering." Together with other returnees, he began to rebuild from scratch, setting up tents, procuring water. Gradually, international organisations arrived, bringing with them aid projects and job opportunities.

Knowledge as a new livelihood

Taha was given the opportunity to join an agricultural project supported by GIZ, where he took part in training on modern farming techniques, water and energy conservation, and sustainable livestock farming. He learned new, professional agriculture methods like how to make compost and set up irrigation systems. “I’ve learned to value the water we have and to make the most of it,” he says. Today, Taha cultivates tomatoes, okra, aubergines and watermelons on three dunums of land (about 7500 sqm). He uses solar energy for electricity, rainwater and a 40-metre-deep well. Water scarcity remains his greatest challenge, but now he knows how to better manage it.

And: he is sharing his knowledge of irrigation, solar technology, sustainable agriculture, plant diseases, organic fertilisers and the dangers of pesticides with the village community. “Farming brings people together,” Taha says. “By buying, selling and learning, I have made friends with very different people.” Taha wants to give from what he has. When two families in the village were struggling, he gave each of them a piece of land, without hesitation. Humanity and kindness are values he hopes to pass on to his children.

Location
Ayadiyah

Topics
Sustainable agriculture

The trauma of three years as a refugee remains.
But Taha is focused on building a future.

Hope is deeply rooted

The wounds of the past, of displacement, remain. But Taha has chosen to look ahead. For the sake of his ten children, his community, and his love of nature. The old pomegranate tree he planted so many years ago still stands in the dusty soil of Al-Salihiya – its roots deep, its presence quiet but powerful. It is a living symbol of resilience and a new beginning.

Building a future with yoghurt, butter and cheese

Laying foundations for tomorrow

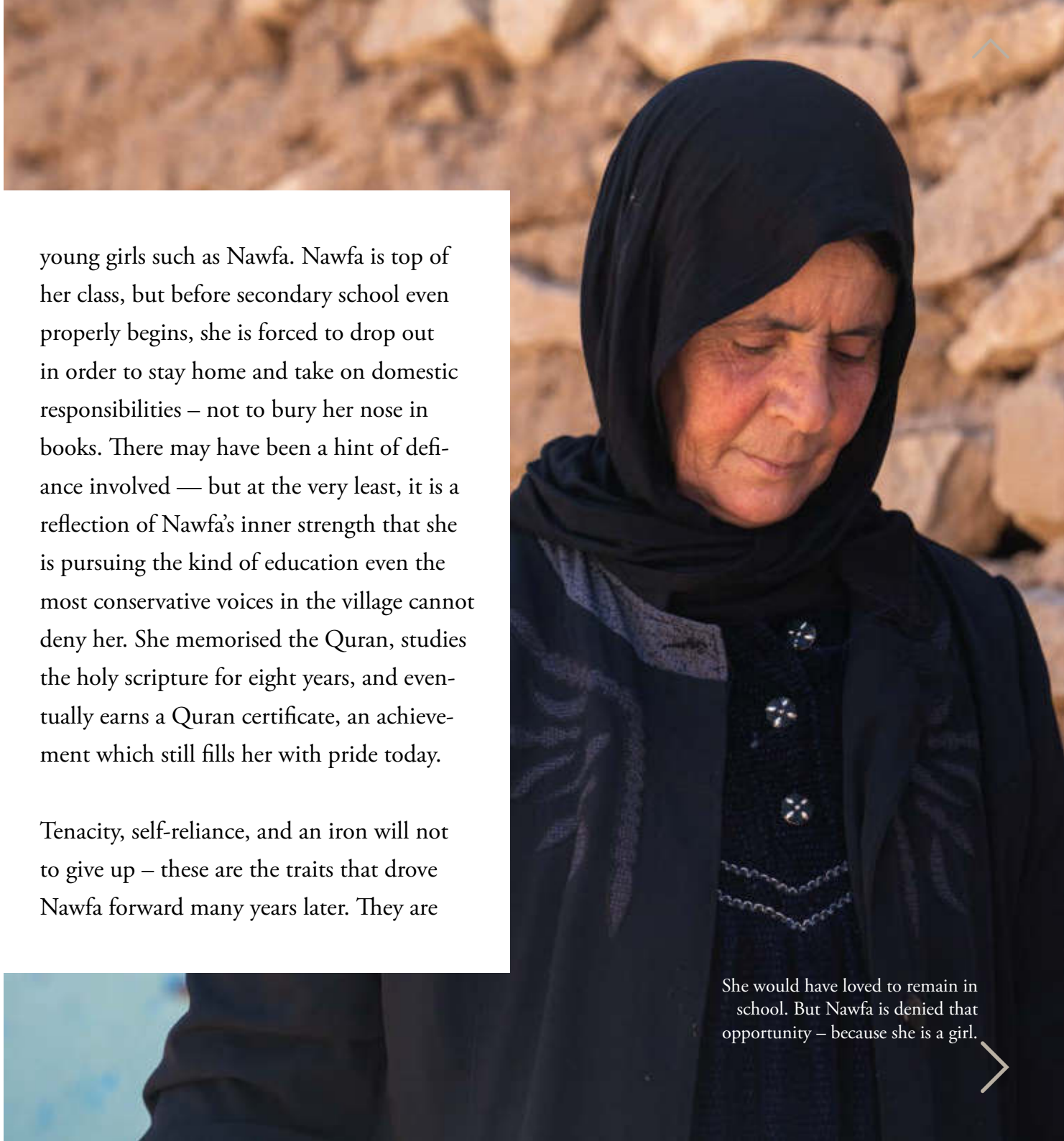
As a girl, Nawfa had to shoulder responsibility from an early age. Denied an education, she built a livelihood for herself with determination – and with home-made dairy products – despite war, displacement, and terror. Thanks to a project aimed at strengthening small-scale agricultural businesses, she can now help other women find their footing too.

Nawfa learned early on how to support herself and her family through homemade dairy products.

Zummar, in northern Iraq, is a harsh and arid place. Further north, the green mountains of Sinjar rise in the distance, but here, the wind sweeps across rugged meadows, land where Nawfa's family's sheep once grazed. She was born in 1967 in a small village not far from Zummar, where she lives again today. After her came six younger brothers – Abdullah, Khaled, Ahmed, Saleh, Omar, and Ismail. With each birth, Nawfa hoped for a sister, but in vain. Just like her wish for a proper education, which – for a girl – remained out of reach.

Al-Qaeda's presence in the region was great before the armed conflict between U.S.-led forces and Saddam Hussein's regime. This legacy is reflected in the unfair treatment of young girls such as Nawfa. Nawfa is top of her class, but before secondary school even properly begins, she is forced to drop out in order to stay home and take on domestic responsibilities – not to bury her nose in books. There may have been a hint of defiance involved — but at the very least, it is a reflection of Nawfa's inner strength that she is pursuing the kind of education even the most conservative voices in the village cannot deny her. She memorised the Quran, studies the holy scripture for eight years, and eventually earns a Quran certificate, an achievement which still fills her with pride today.

Tenacity, self-reliance, and an iron will not to give up – these are the traits that drove Nawfa forward many years later. They are



She would have loved to remain in school. But Nawfa is denied that opportunity – because she is a girl.

Nawfa has to work. She is expected to be productive, useful.

what opened the door for her to join a GIZ-funded project aimed at strengthening small farms, which is part of the programme "Strengthening resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Nineveh (SRN), Iraq". The project was not meant for someone like her. It was designed for bigger milk producers, not a determined one-woman enterprise with no formal training or qualifications. But if there is one thing Nawfa has learnt, it is not to let anyone or anything hold you down: neither the expectations of her six brothers, a society that undervalues women, nor even the shadow of war.

Nawfa's path to independence

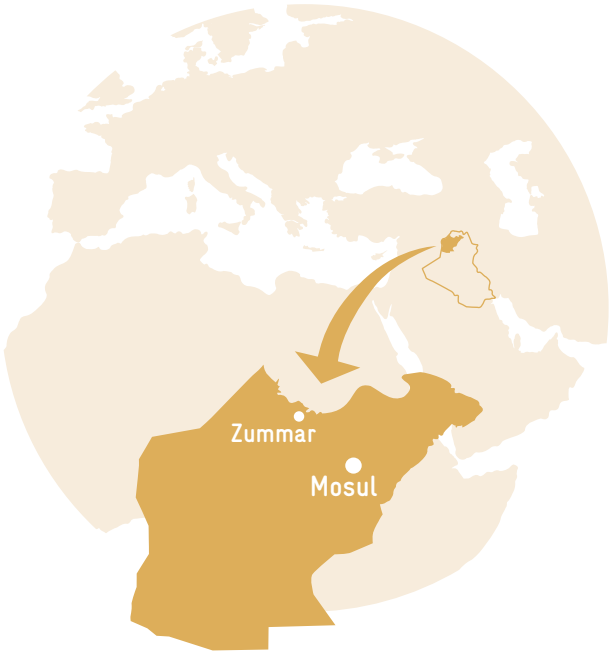
But first, back to the sheep. In northern Iraq, sheep are more than just livestock – they are a lifeline. They shape the rural economy and daily life for people in northern Iraq such as Nawfa. From an early age, she had to work. No matter how much support she received from her family, especially her father, she had to be productive and useful. "We had our own sheep," she recalls, "we milked them, and I made yoghurt, butter and ghee and then sold them." Because she studied the Quran during the day, Nawfa worked at night. While her brothers slept, she stayed up making cheese

and kneading dough, which she turned into sweets filled with homemade date syrup. She sold them within the village and finally made a reputation for herself that reached as far as the capital. "People came from Baghdad with trucks to collect my goods – that's how much they appreciated the taste and quality," she says.

But then came the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), bringing terror to a region already marked by conservatism and hardship. Half the population of Zummar and its surroundings fled. Nawfa and her family were among them, forced to move repeatedly – first from one house to another, then from one village to the next. They eventually settled near Mosul, where they endured three difficult years.

"We could barely breathe," Nawfa remembers. When ISIS committed a massacre in Al-Hawd, the family fled once more – from village to village. "We never stayed long; we moved on every three months."

But wherever Nawfa went, she worked. When there was no gas or electricity, she built clay stoves, uses wood, when there is no gas or electricity. Though she no longer had her own sheep, she bought milk wherever she could, from neighbours with sheep, goats, or cows. Nawfa makes ghee, yoghurt, and butter, just like she always has. Her work doesn't just sustain her own family; it helps feed the people around her, too. Every few months, she starts over. Their final stop was a camp for internally displaced people. "It



Location
Zummar

Topics
Women empowerment, livelihoods

wasn't a dignified life, but a tent in a camp is better than ISIS," she summarises dryly.

After years on the run, only one goal: home

Life in the camp wears heavily on Nawfa. Though ISIS has been defeated, she remains stuck there. The years of displacement have taken their toll. For a brief moment, she feels her strength slip away. But one thing keeps her going: the dream of home. Physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted, she sets off once again: to her village.

Nawfa returned from the war exhausted and weary. But despite the destruction, she's slowly rebuilding her life.

When she returns, she finds devastation. What ISIS hadn't destroyed had been reduced to rubble during the raging battles to liberate the region. But it is still home. Slowly, people begin to return. Today, around eight out of ten of the former residents made their way back to Zummar and the surrounding villages, living in tents or rebuilding their houses brick by brick. And Nawfa? She picks up where she left off – making yoghurt, butter, cheese, and sweets. She keeps her family afloat, but only just. The need for support is obvious. Aid organisations come and go, but actual help? Nawfa receives none. Until one day, there is an information event about a new project for supporting small agricultural enterprises. The goal is to offer training, equipment, marketing guidance, and access to local markets. Nawfa is not invited. The GIZ-supported project is designed for bigger producers – those processing 50 litres of milk a day. Nawfa barely manages ten.

She goes to the information event anyway, where she steps forward, wearing worn clothes and carrying a mug of fresh milk. "I've been doing this since the 1980s," she says, "I know every production step, every mistake, every flavour." The project team is impressed. One of the trainers says: "This woman is a treasure." She gets accepted into the project, into the training sessions, into a new future.

Nawfa wants to create something that stays

Being welcomed into the GIZ-supported project marks a turning point in Nawfa's life. She receives further training, certifications, and modern equipment. She learns new recipes and techniques, how to present her products professionally, and how to tap into wider markets. Once again, her products reach customers in Mosul and Baghdad. But Nawfa doesn't stop there. Instead, she passes on the knowledge she gains, training her nieces and other women in the village, teaching them how to chill cheese, store yoghurt properly,

Today, Nawfa is able to dream again. Her greatest wish: to go on an Umrah pilgrimage to Mecca.

and extend the shelf life of butter. She gives what she has – including her strength, which is a foundation you can build on. "Thank God," Nawfa says, "I have everything I need. Now, I just want to work for others."

Life hasn't been very kind to Nawfa. And yet, when she dreams, she dreams of Mecca. Just once, she says, she would love to make the Umrah, a pilgrimage. That would be enough. Everything else in her life continues to revolve around milk – and the people around her. She wants to expand her business, hire more employees. "Not for me. For the children," she says. "For those who have nothing. I want to build something that lasts."

Nawfa didn't let herself be defeated. Not by her six brothers, nor by the war.

After the end of the ISIS occupation, many schools in Nineveh faced the task of starting over. After years of violence and stagnation, teachers Mohammed Nabil Abdul-Muhsin and Amer Abdul-Mu'in Abdul-Aali are once more showing, how education can bring confidence and new perspectives into the classroom.

Back to the classroom

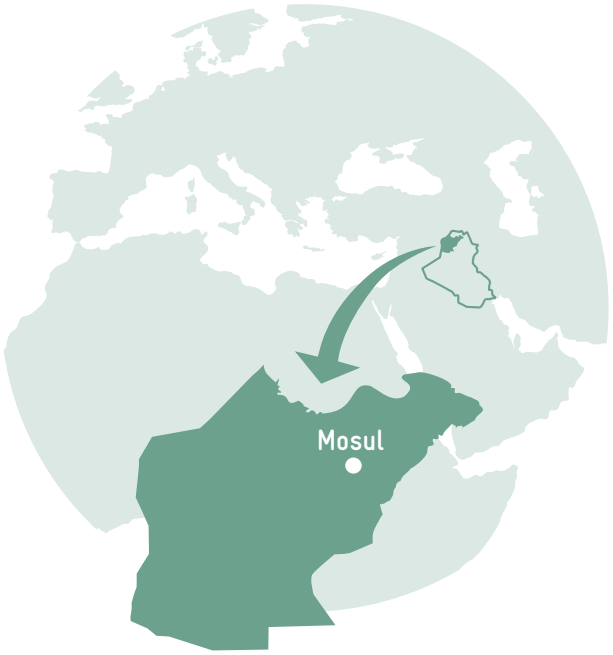
Education as a humanitarian task

For many years, education had a poor reputation in Iraq, and teachers were underpaid. Under ISIS rule, salaries were cut off completely.

Mohammed Nabil Abdul-Muhsin still vividly remembers the time after the liberation from the so-called Islamic State: At long last, he was back in a classroom in Mosul. But he quickly realised how much his students had been affected by the ISIS terror. How much trauma they were carrying around with them. “Some students hadn’t held a pencil or opened a notebook in years,” says the 37-year-old teacher.

Between profession and calling

During the years of ISIS rule from 2014 to 2017, he was forced to earn money as a driver and to sell petrol. With government salaries frozen, including those of teachers, he couldn’t work in his profession. ISIS once arrested Mohammed and imprisoned him for a fortnight because a neighbour had claimed that he was a spy for a Kurdish political party. Such false accusations were not uncommon and were often used to settle personal scores or to eliminate competitors – for example to gain political, economic or social advantages or to seize property. After his release, he moved to another part



Location
Mosul

Topics
Peaceful coexistence, basic services

New teachers are also trained in trauma care and participatory learning techniques.

of Mosul with his family – his parents, sisters, wife, and child –, where he stayed at home most of the time to avoid the risk of a further arrest. When Mosul was finally liberated in 2017, it felt like waking from a long nightmare. “It was as if someone was shaking me and saying: wake up, your life is back,” Mohammed recalls. Life – and with it, Mohammed’s profession.

Mohammed’s father was also a teacher. Following in his footsteps therefore felt less like a choice and more like a calling. But during his education in 2006, a few years after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, education held little value and teachers were widely underpaid. Freelance jobs paid more and offered quicker rewards, so Mohammed considered dropping out. In the end it was his father who changed his mind. He offered to buy him a car – on one condition: that Mohammed continue his studies. That promise was enough to convince him. Today, it’s thanks in part to his father that Mohammed is now a teacher in Mosul.

But Mohammed doesn’t just want to teach. He wants to learn, to grow and to improve. He regularly looks for opportunities to continue his education – and that’s how he earned a spot in a GIZ-organised training for literacy and primary school teachers.

Teaching is more than a profession.
It's a mission and both a humanitarian
and vital social responsibility.

Breaking through barriers of fear

It was in a training room in east Mosul, in 2023, that Mohammed first met Amer Abdul-Mu'in Abdul-Aali. The thirty-six-year-old had returned to Mosul shortly before ISIS seized control. Before that, he had worked in Sinjar, in the literacy department of Nineveh governorate. Like Mohammed, he mostly stayed home during the ISIS years. To make ends meet, he worked in a tyre shop, but ISIS fighters passed by several times a day, taking people at random and flogging them. "You could survive," Amer

says, “but only just.” He missed his job as a teacher. Doing anything else felt wrong. In 2015, Amer tried to flee the country, but his mother refused to leave. So he stayed. For Amer, family meant more than the uncertain promise of safety.

When liberation finally came, it felt like a celebration. Amer, a teacher of history and social studies, returned to his classroom – and so did his wife, who teaches IT. For Amer, teaching is a humanitarian responsibility, a service to the whole of society – and he takes this task very seriously. After the liberation, many of his students returned terrified to school. They had experienced terrible things. But Amer met them with warmth and compassion. “That broke through the wall of fear they had constructed during those dark years,” he says.

Moving away from traditional teaching

In the GIZ training, Amer, Mohammed and other teachers learned more than just modern teaching techniques – they also received training in trauma management and participatory learning methods. For Amer, this shift in teaching style meant stepping away from traditional, lecture-based lessons and embracing more interactive and visual approaches. “Some teachers used to rely on just one method: giving spoken lectures,” he says. “Now, they use presentations, images, maps, and other tools.”

Mohammed has also seen a transformation in his classroom. “I can now pass knowledge on to my students much more effectively,” he explains. “Our methods used to be very rigid and strict. Today, it’s all about connecting with the students. As a teacher, it costs me nothing to encourage them by saying ‘well done’ or ‘you can do better’. Telling a student that they’re lazy or stupid, isn’t helpful at all.” Since the training, Mohammed has noticed that his students are more engaged and self-assured.

The training programme transformed both teachers. Today, they return to their classrooms with renewed confidence.

His lessons feel more dynamic. While the curriculum is largely fixed, he has learned how to adapt it – simplifying or omitting parts when necessary – to better suit his students' needs.

Hope and new prospects

The GIZ training marked a turning point for both Mohammed and Amer. In addition to new teaching tools, it gave them the confidence to redefine their role as teachers. In doing so, they not only strengthened their own professional identity, but also brought hope and fresh perspectives into their classrooms. The impact goes beyond individuals; it strengthens entire school communities. Classrooms are once again becoming places of confidence and new beginnings.

For justice, dialogue, and the courage to take responsibility

Daring to reconcile

Rita Ammanoel Matti Al Babaka grew up in a Christian village in northern Iraq. The occupation by the so-called Islamic State shattered her dreams, but not her will to make the best of her life.

Rita learned how to listen and how to face hardship with courage. Today, she has become the person she always dreamed of being.

Journalist, mediator, activist: despite the circumstances, Rita is now an independent woman.

For a long time, Rita Ammanoel Matti Al Babaka only had one big wish: A job, an opportunity to work and earn money. In her diary she wrote “Dear God, please give me your mercy”. At the time, Rita was in her early twenties and living in Erbil, where she and her family had fled from the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). The capital of the autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq was considered comparatively safe during the ISIS reign of terror, a stable place that attracted many people who had been displaced internally. Rita and her family were barely making ends meet. Moreover, Rita battled for years with not being permitted to finish her schooling, because of their displacement in 2014.

Rita was born in 1996 in Karamles (also spelled Karamlesh or Karemlash), a Christian village on the Nineveh Plain in northern Iraq, around 30 kilometres south-east of Mosul. The village is set in a wide, open landscape of fields, olive groves and scattered hills. It is home mostly to Christian members of the Assyrian community, most of whom are members of the Syrian Catholic or Syrian Orthodox Church. For much of her early life, Rita had little contact with people of other faiths.

When ISIS took control of more and more areas in northern Iraq, Rita and her family – like so many others – fled to Erbil in 2014. Housing was scarce and rents were high, forcing her family to move repeatedly

in search of something affordable. “Life was completely different from before. It was very, very difficult”, Rita recalls. While her family wasn’t poor, they were living on the edge financially.

It wasn’t until after the liberation from ISIS in 2017 that Rita was finally able to finish school. But with little preparation, her grades were not good enough for a good place at Mosul University. Instead, she studied architectural drawing and graduated in 2019. And then – nothing. “I wanted a job, not just for my mental health, but because I was stuck at home,” she says. “I couldn’t move out because of our financial situation. I had dreams and goals, but I couldn’t pursue them because we couldn’t afford it.”

Still, Rita held onto hope: “But if you truly want something, God will open a door for you. If you take one step, he’ll help you with the next”.

A dangerous job

And that’s exactly what happened. Through a personal contact, Rita connected with a non-governmental organisation, and the work had a positive impact on her. She began to feel freer, gradually coming out of her shell. Without further ado, in 2021 she applied for training as a deminer, a landmine clearance specialist, and was accepted. The training took place in Sulaymaniyah, a major city in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

“I prayed for a job,” says Rita. “For my mental health.”

south-east of Erbil. When she applied, Rita had little understanding of what the job would entail or what would be expected of her. Suddenly, she found herself surrounded by landmines – the only Christian of the 150 trainees.

The work was hard. Every day, Rita and her team searched for mines using specialised equipment. Every day, the thought of quitting crossed their minds. But they persevered. Rita shared her accommodation with Muslim women. It was her first real interaction with people of a different faith. She knew nothing about her colleagues' faith. "Living with them helped me learn," she recalls. "I asked questions. But I was hesitant at first because I was still traumatised by ISIS. Sometimes the language they used reminded me of ISIS, and it scared me."

After completing her one-month training, Rita officially began working as a landmine clearer, first in Al-Hamdaniyah, then later in Tel Keppe. It was an extremely dangerous job, but what kept her going was the deep belief that she was doing something meaningful. "The job changed me as a person," she says. "I wasn't just working – I was helping people. It felt like I was truly making a difference, like I was a hero." With each mine that Rita and her team discovered, they potentially saved lives. But after three years, the physical and emotional toll became too much, and she had to step away. Still, she was proud. Of herself, of what she

Location
Hamdaniyah

Topics
Mediation and conflict resolution, media, youth empowerment, peaceful coexistence

Like a hero – that's how Rita felt in her first job as a landmine clearer.

had accomplished, and proud of how far she had come. With the money she earned, she bought a car, another symbol of freedom and independence.

Wanting to help – despite everything

In 2024, Rita was accepted into the Young Enumerators and Mediators (YEM) initiative, which is part of the GIZ programme "Strengthening resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Nineveh (SRN), Iraq". After completing the programme,

As part of GIZ's YEM initiative, Rita has trained to become a mediator.

she was given the chance to apply what she had learned in related initiatives within the programme network, such as the DWG+ initiative. DWG stands for "District Working Groups," which GIZ established in five districts across Nineveh. Members of public administration, security forces, religious leaders, and representatives of various communities are working together to find peaceful solutions to problems caused by the lingering effects of terror and war in their communities. Finally, DWG+ connected former participants of the GIZ initiatives "YEM" and "Media for Peace" with these working groups.

In Hamdaniyah, one of the districts, Rita joined a team of local leaders, including community leaders, a district commissioner, the mayor, and members of the Syriac Church. Their mission was both sensitive and complex: to support the reintegration of families believed to have ties to ISIS – families who had been displaced and excluded from their communities after the liberation.

"To be honest, I was terrified of this task," Rita admits. "I had been directly affected by ISIS. I spent four years as a refugee. I lost my home and witnessed Christians being murdered. The atrocities ISIS committed were unimaginable." The idea of helping families whose relatives may have joined ISIS return

to villages where those who suffered of ISIS still lived was incredibly difficult. But Rita accepted the challenge – because it mattered. Because she wanted to change something.

After years of demining, Rita now took on work that was completely different but no less challenging and difficult. Together with her team, she helped organise meetings and coordination sessions. They spoke with the families of ISIS fighters, and also with those who had suffered because of ISIS. "We sat with them, listened to their stories and had intense conversations," Rita recalls. "We explained the steps needed for reintegration, and how they could begin to be a permanent part of the community again." For Rita, this was part of her own healing process.

ISIS had caused her, her family and her community severe suffering. And now, she found herself sitting across from those whose fathers, brothers or sons had become ISIS perpetrators.

The initiative lasted for six months. In that time, more than 20 families were able to return to their villages and communities – a significant achievement, and one that left a lasting impact on Rita. "I learned that I don't have to respond to evil with evil," she says. "The families of ISIS members looked at me, a Christian, and I could see their shame. They knew what ISIS had done to us. And yet I was there, offering help."

To look ahead with hope

Looking ahead, Rita hopes to do even more for her community. Together with fellow graduates of the YEM initiative, she plans to establish a mediation team with a special focus on supporting women. Her vision includes getting involved in existing community groups and cooperating with community representatives and local councils. Together, Rita hopes, it will be possible to address social issues and resolve local conflicts within the community. Rita has also embraced another passion: she now works as a journalist. Rita feels she has become the person she always dreamed of being – an independent

The focus is on the future. For Rita, everything she has achieved so far is just the beginning.

young woman and an activist, mediator and journalist. All these different aspects come together to form a whole – a complete person. “If something is meant for you, it will happen,” says Rita. Her prayers may have been answered, but ultimately it was Rita herself who took charge of her life and turned her dreams into reality. She looks back on her journey with pride – and at the same time looks forward with hope. Because she understands that what she has achieved for herself, and her community is just the beginning.

IMPRINT

Editorial and interview team

The 14 stories in this magazine were based on interviews conducted by four young women and men from Nineveh. All had previously undergone targeted training in journalistic methods, interviewing techniques, and photography and video techniques as part of the SNR programme. With great empathy, sensitivity, and expertise, the interviewers documented life stories that otherwise often go unheard.

Tahseen Ali Ahmed Al-Khudur
Journalist and teacher from Sinjar

Al-Harith Ziad Khalaf
Activist from Mosul

Rita Ammanoel Matti
Activist from Hamdaniyah

Joria Eido
Mediator from Sinjar

Based on these original interviews, the final stories were written by the team of flmh Labor für Politik und Kommunikation, Berlin.

Photo and video team

The photos and videos for this magazine were created by participants of the "Media for Peace" initiative. They give a face to the people and context to the stories.

Abdullah Rasheed Al Bakri
Cameraman from Mosul

Yasir Ahmed Salim
Cameraman from Mosul

Sainab Khalil Ibrahim and Negar Ahmadpoor from the SRN team managed and coordinated the process and the many tasks involved in producing this magazine.

Videos

For this magazine, four videos were produced, for which Yasir Ahmed Salim travelled through Nineveh with a team from GIZ and flmh. The videos are subtitled in both German and English.

I dreamt of football

In Telskuf, ISIS deliberately destroyed all churches – and the football pitch. This video tells the story of Santa, a young woman who learned to play football here and then was forced to leave. Today, she is back on that pitch, again.

From displacement to independence

Nasreen is one of the Yazidi women who had to flee into the Sinjar mountains in August 2014, escaping genocide. After many years in a camp, she is now rebuilding her life in Sinjar – step by step, with quiet determination.

Returning to the community

Zaghira had two sons. Both joined the so-called Islamic State. When Zaghira returned to her village after being displaced and staying in a refugee camp, she was met with fear and mistrust. Here she tells the story of her return.

New beginnings in Nineveh

For five years, GIZ supported people in Nineveh who have returned to their communities following the end of ISIS occupation. This video accompanies three of these individuals on their journey into the future.

SRN worked closely with the following local and international partners to implement the activities described in this magazine.

AMBERO Consulting

Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI)

Danish Refugee Council

Hungarian Interchurch Aid

IBF International Consulting

Innovation and Insight

INTERSOS Humanitarian Aid Organisation

Media in Cooperation and Transition

Nonviolent Peaceforce

Peace Paradigms Organisation

Radio Al Ghad

Welthungerhilfe e.V

World Bank

Mercy Corps

Some of the stories shared here stem from joint activities with these partners.

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