Four Million Love Letters to Mosul

Author: IWPR
Unprecedented initiative sends messages of support from Iraqi citizens to the beleaguered residents of the country’s second-largest city.

IWPR has helped airdrop four million letters of solidarity from ordinary Iraqis to the residents of Islamic State (IS)-held Mosul as part of a groundbreaking initiative supporting local voices and freedom of expression.

Mosul has been held by IS for more than two years. Since early spring 2016, the residents of Iraq’s second largest city have also been living in an information blackout, risking a death sentence if found watching TV, listening to the radio or using the internet.

The IWPR airdrop – which took place with Iraqi air force support - aimed to provide the people of Mosul with tangible proof that there were millions of Iraqis outside the city sympathizing with them.

Nearly 60 young volunteers from Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Babil, and Anbar worked from November 23 to December 15 to collect messages of support from ordinary people.

They set up kiosks in central parts of each city, inviting citizens to write letters to the people of Mosul, with the aim of allowing ordinary Iraqis to reach out directly to those held hostage by Islamic State.

“When I told my friends I’m going on a military plane to throw letters for my people in Mosul, they told me, ‘we never heard of such thing during a war; usually airplanes drop bombs and your airplane is dropping love letters’,” said Sakar Maan, one of the activists leading the initiative.

The 25-year-old, born into a long-established Mosul family, has been displaced from his hometown since the IS invasion.

“Our campaign was successful even before the letters were dropped,” he explained. “When we were collecting these letters in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf and other cities we managed to change people’s suspicious attitudes and thinking towards the residents of Mosul and challenge their negative stereotypes.”

The letters were dropped from a plane above the city of Mosul on the evening of December 22, 2016 in collaboration with the Iraqi Air Force and the national National Cell of Psychological Operations.

Iraqi bloggers and social media activists celebrated the airdrop online and shared the campaign hashtag #LettersToMosul.

People who had managed to maintain some contact with captive relatives inside Mosul reported that their family members had received the messages and that IS members had spent all night collecting the letters from the streets.

The airdrop was part of a long-running IWPR programme empowering youth groups in Iraq to help them play an important role in reconciliation, social cohesion, and building a stable future.

The digital #Letters To Mosul campaign was launched by IWPR’s social media team on October 17, 2016, when the move to liberate Mosul was announced.

Media and activists around the country adopted the campaign’s hashtag, creating content in line with its messages of empathy and solidarity.

The consignment represented a significant breakthrough of the IS information embargo on the residents of Mosul and has helped reassure residents that they have not been forgotten and that the rest of Iraq is waiting to welcome them back in solidarity when IS is defeated.

“Today we have witnessed how civil society in Iraq is making great efforts to promote peace, and true reconciliation at the grass root levels,” said IWPR Iraq programme director Nabil Khoury. “The support of the government and the army of Iraq for the #LettersToMosul campaign is a sign of faith in civil society and that Iraq as a whole is working together.”

He added, “Successful states are those that embrace all their communities and work with them on the same goals, so that they can tackle challenges together as well as celebrating successes.”

Location: Iraq
Topic: Promoting Free