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There is Not Only Violence in Iraq: The La Onf Week of Nonviolence Takes Hold Across the Country

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**September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows** is an organization founded by family members of those killed on September 11th who have united to turn their grief into action for peace. By developing and advocating nonviolent options and actions in the pursuit of justice, they hope to break the cycles of violence engendered by war and terrorism.

## Full Article:



Volunteers from LaOnf, a network of nonviolence advocates in Iraq, visited schools and exchanged soccer balls for war toys ([www.laonf.net](http://www.laonf.net))

*Please, spread the message: there is not only violence in Iraq, there is something more; people are building peace and seeking real change. Today La Onf exists within the polarized and dangerous political environment of Iraq where if you speak about resistance you are accused of supporting terrorists and advocating violence; but if you speak about nonviolence you are accused of supporting the occupation. La Onf seeks to create a third way with its message that nonviolence is a tool to resist occupation, terrorism and corruption.*

- Ismaeel Dawood, founding member of La Onf

La Onf is a network of Iraqi civilians & civil society organizations who are working together to create a free and peaceful Iraq using the philosophy & tactics of nonviolence. "La Onf" roughly translates as

"nonviolence" in Arabic.

La Onf was established in 2005 by a group of activists in Baghdad who asked themselves, "Can nonviolence be a tool for change, even in the midst of war and extreme violence?" La Onf's founders knew that for a nonviolent movement to take hold in Iraq, much work would need to be done to heal sectarian and ethnic violence among Iraqis. But escalating violence was being used to justify the continued presence of US forces, and this motivated Iraqis to learn new skills.

With support from the international organizations Un Ponte Per in Italy, Nova in Spain, & Patria in Romania, La Onf's organizers were trained in the philosophy and tactics of nonviolence. In this training, they studied the work of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, & Ghaffar Khan, and developed strategies for their work in Iraq.

### **A Network Grows**

La Onf held its first "Week of Nonviolence" in 2006 with several organizations in Baghdad. Activists distributed posters depicting a united Iraq, with "No Violence" written across it. They talked to people in neighborhood settings like shops, mosques, and schools. They also handed out the poster in police stations, on Iraqi army bases, and at US military bases. The actions were tremendously empowering, giving the activists confidence that they could apply nonviolence even in a war context.

Responses outside of Baghdad were positive, and the La Onf network grew. The second Week of Nonviolence in 2007 included 42 organizations from 7 different areas of Iraq. Actions included large and small gatherings, often with schoolchildren. There were artistic and cultural activities, singing, theater, and team sports. La Onf organized candlelight vigils and olive tree plantings to remember the victims of violence and create opportunities to begin to talk of healing. In many areas La Onf arranged for children to trade in their toy guns for soccer balls.

Some of these actions took place in areas of heavy violence, where it was not uncommon for car bombs to explode, and battles to erupt between militia groups or between resistance fighters and US occupation forces. In these places, the simple act of gathering in public to make a statement of nonviolence and unity took tremendous courage. Fortunately, there were no attacks against the activists who took part. Participants were inspired by their ability to momentarily transform a place of conflict into a place of unity and peace - a concrete step in their struggle to transform the entire country of Iraq into a more peaceful, stable nation.

### **Putting Nonviolence to Work**

In many regions, activists collected residents' signatures in support of a local initiative to ban the sale and importation of war toys in their governorate (or province). La Onf undertook this initiative after many young boys and their families were shot by occupation forces who mistook a realistic-looking toy machine gun for an actual gun. Where fear and the threat of violence are high, the act of signing one's name to a petition, even a relatively non-controversial one, was a challenging choice for many Iraqis. Nevertheless, the petition drive took off. In the governorate of Muthanna, the petition that was begun in 2007 has resulted in an ordinance being passed banning the selling & importation of all war toys & firecrackers. Now La Onf is working to have a national ban legislated.

The documentary *Masala, Activists in Iraq* shows the organizing and activities of the La Onf groups working in Kurdistan in the north of Iraq leading up to and during the 2007 Week of Nonviolence. Under Saddam Hussein, the Kurdish people suffered grave human rights abuses. The Anfal campaign against the Kurds that took place from 1987 to 1989 included the destruction of villages and chemical warfare, as well as mass deportations, rapes, and executions. As part of a policy of "Arabization" of oil-rich areas in the north, thousands of poor Arabs from the south of Iraq were relocated to Kurdistan. This history shaped the events of the 2007 Week of Nonviolence in Kurdistan. One of the scenes in *Masala* shows Arabs and Kurds debating which of them has the true right to live in the Kurdistan region. This dialogue was one of La Onf's efforts to address these issues nonviolently.

Following their 2007 activities, La Onf activists carried out an impressive organizing campaign to promote the ideals & work of La Onf in each of Iraq's 18 governorates. Experienced activists attended an advanced training held in Amman, Jordan, where they learned how to teach others about nonviolence. They then returned to their own governorates, and conducted workshops to which both civil society organizations and tribal leaders were invited. These workshops included an overview of the principles of nonviolence, an orientation about the La Onf network, and an open discussion of problems and issues in the governorate that a local La Onf group could address. At the end of the workshop, participating individuals and organizations were invited to become members of the La Onf network within their governorate. The newly formed La Onf governorate network then held a vote to elect a coordinator and a five- to seven-member board to lead their local network at the governorate level. Each elected governorate board of five to seven reps must contain at least thirty percent women and must have at least one member who comes from a minority ethnic group within that governorate. By the time elections had been held in each governorate, well over 100 Iraqi organizations had committed to the principles of nonviolence and joined the La Onf network.

### **A New Face of Change**

This year, the Week of Nonviolence was held over the course of three weeks, and for the first time Iraqis in every part of the country participated. Events promoting nonviolence were held to foster youth leadership, to strengthen women's political participation, and to support the arts. In the US, the group September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows has screened a video presentation about La Onf, and has used its website to spread the word about this important campaign.

All across Iraq communities are working to repair the damage of Iraq's many wars. The challenges they face are daunting. Iraqis have been devastated by unimaginable violence that has left hundreds of thousands dead, and one in five Iraqis forced from their homes. Communities are separated by walls and barriers, foreign occupation, bombings, and arrest sweeps. La Onf's efforts to revive and restore are helping to create an environment to build a better future that meets the needs of all Iraq.

This is the face of change we don't often hear about.

Your help in drawing attention to these campaigns will help illustrate that peace and security in Iraq will come from Iraqis united, not a better foreign occupation. It is an opportunity to learn more about what Iraqis are identifying as their priorities.

To see what change looks like, visit the picture gallery at [www.peacefultomorrow.org](http://www.peacefultomorrow.org) that documents just some of the amazing activities sponsored by La Onf this fall. Because many of the groups in Iraq

feel very isolated, the gallery was designed to have a dual role; to give the world a snapshot of the activities taking place in Iraq, and, to show Iraqis how many of us around the world are in support of their brave work.

*At [www.peacefultomorrows.org](http://www.peacefultomorrows.org) [4] you can learn more, and view a short video presentation about La Onf. You can also add your own photo to the gallery to show your support to Iraq's nonviolent activists.*

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