

“After Bombing, Iraqi Player Hopes Soccer Holds the Power to Heal.” By SIMON AUSTIN, APRIL 8, 2016. *New York Times*.



Boys in front of a makeshift memorial in Iskandariya, Iraq, on March 26. The previous day, a suicide bomber blew himself up during a trophy presentation after a soccer tournament, killing 41 people. Credit Haidar Hamdani/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

LONDON — No one seemed interested in visiting Iskandariya, Iraq, after the bombing, even if this one stood out from so many others in recent months. In the attack on March 25, a bomber detonated a suicide vest during the trophy ceremony after a youth soccer tournament, killing 41 people, including 17 children. Some of the victims had just played in the event.

But Yaser Kasim could not stay away. A stocky midfielder for the third-division English club Swindon Town, Kasim, 24, had learned the game in similar circumstances, playing barefoot in ferocious 20-a-side games on dusty streets and open spaces in Baghdad as a boy. His family had fled to Jordan, and then to England, in the years after the Persian Gulf war, but he felt pulled home after reading about the bombing on the Internet. His club nervously gave him permission to fly to Baghdad on March 31.

What he encountered in Iskandariya, a town about 25 miles south of Baghdad, changed him, he said.

One grave contained only half the body of the young boy buried there, he said; officials had not been able to find the other half after the attack. Kasim laid a flag, some Iraqi jerseys and bouquets of flowers at the center of the field, and he later visited two injured children in their homes. One boy, about 10 years old and badly burned in the blast, was bandaged from the waist down.

“I said to him, ‘Do you love football?’ ” Kasim recalled. “And he said, ‘No, not anymore.’ ”

Suicide bombings are a tragic part of daily life in Iraq — there were nearly 200 last year, according to a University of Chicago database that tracks such attacks. And for that reason, grief, and expressing condolences, is part of the life of any player on Iraq’s national team. The team

exists and competes apart from Iraq itself; for security reasons, it has been unable to play a match in its home country since 2013. Most Iraqis have never seen the team play in person.

So when word spread that a member of the team had come to Iskandariya, a large crowd started to gather, raising safety concerns. The Islamic State had claimed responsibility for the earlier attack, and Kasim had arrived without security.



An image provided by Kasim, right, of his visit to Iskandariya shortly after the bombing. He visited with victims and their families. Credit Yaser Kasim

“Schoolchildren were running out, and there was a massive crowd, which was quite alarming at first,” Kasim said. “I walked into the stadium, and children were buried there with their pictures on their graves.”

The grief and despair were palpable.

“A friend drove me to the stadium, and as soon as I opened the door of the car, a man came running up close to me,” Kasim said. “He was very emotional. In Arabic, he said: ‘I’ve been crying all the time, but now you’re here, I am going to stop. I’ve lost my son, but I have another son in you.’ I didn’t know what to say.”

Others did not attend. Or, like the boy who had been burned, could not.

“That was the saddest thing I heard,” he said of the boy’s declaration that he had lost his love of the game. “Because I used to be one of them, playing football on the streets and in these stadiums, without a care in the world. That’s the worst anyone can do — to take the dreams of a child away.”

Kasim has made increasingly regular trips to Iraq since becoming involved with a charity, Yes2Iraq, that helps young orphans in the country. Swindon officials are concerned for his safety, but the club has not sought to block his visits.

“I’m always very concerned when Yaser goes to Iraq,” said Luke Williams, Swindon’s manager. “But if you want somebody in your squad who is passionate and a leader, then you have to back and trust them.

“Each time he comes back from Iraq, he’ll often come into my office and tell me about what he’s seen and experienced,” added Williams, who met Kasim in their previous stop at Brighton and Hove Albion. “It’s always a real eye-opener.”

Kasim fled Iraq as a 5-year-old because his father, Safa, feared for the safety of his wife and three children. Safa Kasim bribed a guard on the border with Jordan, and the family eventually settled in Hounslow, in west London, where Yaser’s talent was spotted by a scout from Tottenham Hotspur’s youth academy.

Yaser Kasim, who looks and sounds like a typical young Londoner, spent more than three years at the club before departing for Brighton — and the hope of first-team minutes — in 2010. He joined Swindon in 2013.

He has become a cult figure at the club, which reportedly rejected an offer of a million pounds (about \$1.4 million) for Kasim from Swansea City of the Premier League this year. But his profile may be even higher in Iraq. He has played 17 times for his country, which has advanced to the third round of Asian qualifying for the 2018 World Cup.

Despite what he saw in Iraq, Kasim said he still believed soccer could be a unifying factor there.

“Even when Real Madrid played Barcelona, the streets were deserted because of the interest,” he said. “And I was humbled when I visited Iskandariya, because it meant so much to the people there.

“As we were laying the flowers at the stadium, there were small children playing football on the pitch, and that was a magnificent image. It was the joy of playing football, and no one will take that away.”