BRIEFCASE

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IMPROVING TOLERANCE THROUGH SOCCER IN POST-ISIS IRAQ

Promoting positive and cooperative contact helped Iraqi Christians displaced by ISIS build tolerance toward Muslim peers after conflict, but these effects did not generalize to the broader Muslim community.

Featuring an evaluation by Salma Mousa

PHOTO: SALMA MOUSA | J-PAL

Countries recovering from conflict are often marked by devastated social ties and low levels of trust across groups, putting them at risk of relapsing into violence and instability. In such contexts, rebuilding and strengthening coexistence between groups has been a key policy goal for achieving sustainable peace. Social cohesion has been associated with good governance and economic development, yet there remains limited understanding of how best to build it.[1]

The "contact hypothesis" asserts that contact between groups can reduce prejudice and bias when it is cooperative, places participants on equal footing, is endorsed by communal authorities, and is characterized by a common goal.[2] In line with this theory, previous research suggests that grassroots organizations, like sports teams or trade unions—where cooperation is mutually beneficial—can help build social trust between conflicting groups.[3]

Despite the potential of intergroup contact, there is little rigorous evidence about whether it can build lasting real-world behavior change in areas affected by conflict and ethnic violence. Evidence on the extent to which this tolerance can extend outside the intervention, or spillover to others in the community, is likewise sparse. To test whether positive and cooperative contact can improve relations across groups in post-conflict communities, Salma Mousa (Yale) randomly assigned displaced Christians either to play with Muslims, or fellow Christians, through a two-month soccer league in an ISIS-affected area of Iraq.

KEY RESULTS:

Christians who played in mixed-religion soccer teams demonstrated increased tolerance toward Muslim peers. Christians with Muslim teammates were 318 percent more likely to train with Muslims six months after the league and 57 percent more likely to vote for a Muslim player to receive a sportsmanship prize.

However, the program did not reduce Christians' overall prejudice toward the broader Muslim community. Players with Muslim teammates were no more likely to attend a mixed social event or to patronize a Muslim-owned restaurant up to four months following the league.

Personal beliefs also proved difficult to change. The intervention had no impact on Christian players' level of comfort with Muslims as neighbors or their views on other salient issues, like blaming Muslim civilians for Christian suffering.

Christians with Muslim teammates reported a higher sense of national unity. Christian players on mixed teams agreed more that ethnic and religious divisions are arbitrary than players on Christian-only teams.

Top-performing teams demonstrated higher levels of tolerance toward Muslims outside the league. Players in teams that reached the finals were more likely to attend a mixed social event, for example.

EVALUATION

FIGURE 1. POSITIVE AND COOPERATIVE CONTACT BETWEEN CONFLICTING GROUPS CAN REDUCE PREJUDICE AND BIAS

Historically, Iraqi Kurdistan has been marked by tensions between Christians and Muslims, fueled by their ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences—exacerbated by both Christian and Muslim groups being victims of multiple massacres and cultural cleansing campaigns at the hands of the Iraqi state and terrorist groups. Most recently, in June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS) committed mass atrocities against minorities in the city of Mosul—Iraq's fifth largest city—internally displacing roughly 100,000 Christians within a matter of days. Many Christians believed their Muslim neighbors were complicit in the ISIS raids, resulting in intense distrust, a fear of returning home even to liberated areas, support for local self-defense militias, and the potential for a backslide into conflict. Muslim minority groups who were themselves persecuted by ISIS are also resented by Christians, who typically view them as cultural and security threats despite a shared history of victimhood.

Despite the differences between Christians and Muslims in northern Iraq, amateur soccer is popular among both groups. The cities of Qaraqosh and Erbil, where this evaluation took place, are home to a network of amateur male soccer teams, segregated by religion, and many are founded by displaced Christians. Leveraging the social potential of team sports, the researcher partnered with Christian community organizations and the Nineveh Governorate Council to conduct a randomized evaluation measuring the impact of mixed-religion soccer teams on social cohesion and interactions between Christians and Muslims.

Research staff recruited 42 Christian teams to participate in a two-month soccer league for displaced people and returnees in the area. Teams in the intervention group thus received three to four additional Muslim players, while those in the comparison group received three to four additional Christian players.[4] To incentivize teams to participate in the soccer league, the research team hired professional referees, provided uniforms, reserved fields, and awarded trophies to the top three teams. Such incentives were successful in ensuring committed participation throughout the intervention period. A total of 459 Christian and 70 Muslim players participated in the league.

The study aimed to measure players' tolerance toward other teammates and peers encountered in the league (tolerance on the field) as well as generalized prejudice toward members of the outgroup, for example, local residents, restaurant patrons, and passersby who one does not know personally (tolerance off the field).

[1] Gilligan, Michael J., Benjamin J. Pasquale, and Cyrus Samii. 2014. "Civil War and Social Cohesion: Lab-in-the-Field Evidence from Nepal." *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 3: 604–619; Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. 2002. "Social Capital and Community Governance." *The Economic Journal* 112, no. 483: F419–F436; Knack, Stephen and Philip Keefer. 1997. "Does Social Capital Have an Economic Payoff? A Cross-Country Investigation." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112, no. 4: 1251–1288; Samuels, Kirsti. 2005. "Post-Conflict Peace-Building and Constitution-Making." *Chicago Journal of International Law* 6, no. 2: 663, https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cjil/vol6/iss2/10.

[2] Allport, Gordon, Kenneth Clark, and Thomas F. Pettigrew. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

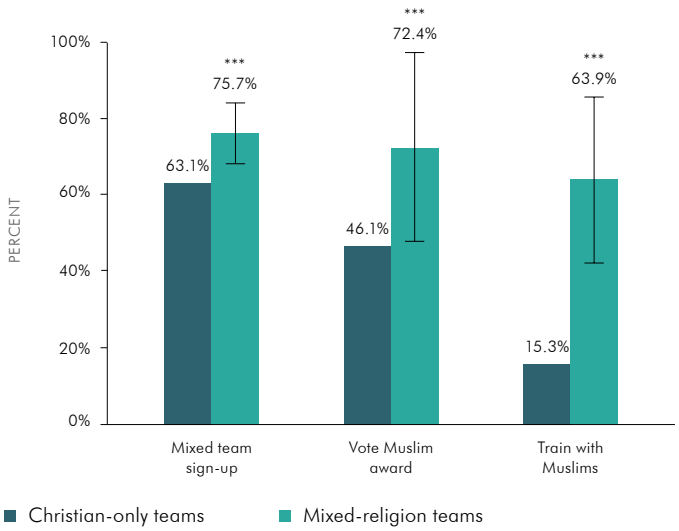
[3] Paluck, Elizabeth L. 2012. "Interventions Aimed at the Reduction of Prejudice and Conflict," in *The Oxford Handbook of Intergroup Conflict*, ed. Linda R. Tropp, pp. 13–28. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[4] To address the fact that Christian players assigned to all-Christian teams would still be exposed to Muslims by competing in the same league, the researcher created a second league composed of all-Christian teams. Assignment to the all-Christian league was nonrandom, however, and the results are not included in the main analysis.

RESULTS

Playing in mixed-religion soccer teams improved Christians' tolerance toward Muslim peers. Christians with Muslim teammates were 13 percentage points more likely to report that they "would not mind" being assigned to a mixed team next season (a 20 percent increase from a comparison group average of 63 percent). They were also 26 percentage points more likely to vote for a Muslim player (not on their team) to receive a sportsmanship prize (a 57 percent increase from 46 percent in the comparison group) and 49 percentage points more likely to train with Muslims six months after the soccer league ended (a 318 percent increase from the comparison group average of 15 percent). The league may have improved players' tolerance by normalizing contact with Muslims: 15 percent of mixed-religion teams had integrated Muslim players as core team members six months following the end of the league, indicating that contact led to sustained change.

FIGURE 2. PLAYING IN MIXED SOCCER TEAMS IMPROVED CHRISTIANS' TOLERANCE TOWARD MUSLIM PEERS



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for a test of a difference in means from the Monitoring group. Statistically significant difference relative to the monitoring group is noted at the 1% (***), 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

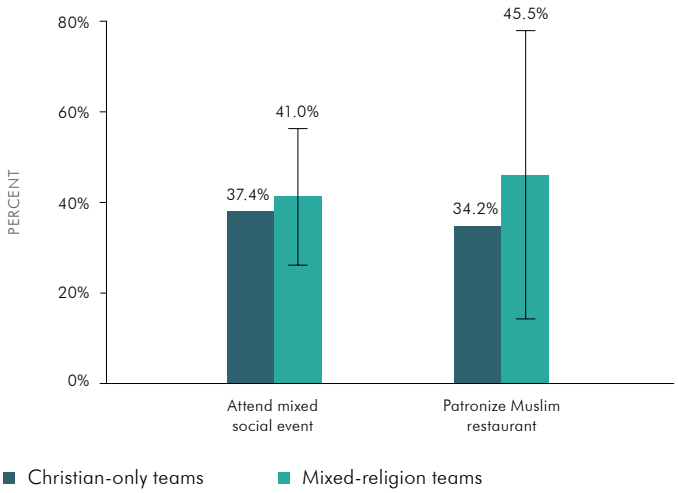
However, the intervention did not improve Christians' behaviors toward the broader Muslim community. When it came to tolerance toward Muslim strangers, players with Muslim teammates were no more likely to patronize a Muslim-owned restaurant located in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood or to attend a mixed social event three to four months following the intervention. Those who attended the event were also no more likely to bring a female guest, which typically includes a family member like sisters or wives (a measure of their comfort with Muslim strangers).

Personal beliefs also proved difficult to change. The intervention had no impact on Christian players' level of comfort with Muslims as neighbors or their probability of blaming Muslim civilians for Christian suffering, further suggesting little change with regard to attitudes toward Muslim strangers.

Christians with Muslim teammates reported a higher sense of national unity. Measures of coexistence and less salient beliefs, which included agreeing that ethnic and religious divisions are arbitrary and Iraq would be a better society if citizens treated one another as Iraqis first, were higher for players on mixed teams than in Christian-only teams. Compared to the other self-reported measures, these questions mostly capture rather abstract attitudes, confirming that the intervention was not able to change Christians' tolerance toward Muslims.

Success in the league led to more generalized tolerance. Successful team performance, measured as reaching the league's finals, was also important for increasing tolerance. Players in mixed, top-performing teams were more likely to patronize Muslim-owned businesses and to attend a mixed social event. This suggests that a positive or successful experience may be needed to overturn the negative experiences instilled by conflict and to maximize the impacts of contact.

FIGURE 3. CHRISTIANS' IMPROVED TOLERANCE DID NOT TRANSLATE TO MUSLIM STRANGERS



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for a test of a difference in means from the Monitoring group. Statistically significant difference relative to the monitoring group is noted at the 1% (***), 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

[5] Scacco, Alexandra and Shana Warren. 2018. "Can Social Contact Reduce Prejudice and Discrimination? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Nigeria." *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 3: 654–677. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000151.

Paluck, Elizabeth L. 2009. "Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict Using the Media: A Field Experiment in Rwanda." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 3: 574–587. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0011989

POLICY LESSONS

Interventions seeking to build social cohesion after conflict should consider aiming to change everyday behaviors rather than personal beliefs. Although Christians' tolerant views toward Muslims teammates did not generalize to the broader Muslim community, improving relationships that are important on a day-to-day basis might still help prevent groups from sliding back into conflict. Especially in fragile settings, civic organizations that cut across social cleavages have the potential to build localized social cohesion, which can help create resilience against future negative shocks.

Some behaviors may be easier to shift relative to self-reported attitudes. As shown by the evaluation results, behaviors appear easier to move than beliefs, at least in the short term (though attitudes are notably more difficult to measure, given risks of self-reporting bias). This finding is in line with results from related evaluations in Nigeria and Rwanda.[5] It is possible that shifting attitudes, particularly in conflict settings, may require longer-term interventions with components explicitly designed to address biases, distrust, and other grievances that may exist between groups.

ONGOING RESEARCH

Researchers Salma Mousa and Alexandra Scacco are conducting a similar evaluation in Lebanon, where refugees make up 25 percent of the population. They will bring together native Lebanese youth, Syrian refugees, and and those descended of Palestinian refugees through soccer leagues, and will randomly assign participants to a homogenous (Lebanese-only) or heterogeneous (Lebanese-Palestinian or Lebanese-Syrian) teams. They will track both players and their parents to capture possible spillovers and will also exploit variation in an accompanying educational curriculum to explore added returns to combining contact with empathy education. This study thus tests the differential potential of contact and educational programs to build social cohesion between old and new neighbors, in a context of pervasive prejudice and distrust.

OPEN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What types of real-world behaviors can most accurately capture social cohesion?
- What are the long-term effects of intergroup interventions? In particular, to what extent can tolerance among peers shield communities from future shocks to tolerance?
- Do interventions that create the opportunity for contact between conflicting groups also impact others in the community and/or family members?

Featured Evaluation: Mousa, Salma. 2020. "Building Social Cohesion between Christians and Muslims through Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq." *Science* 369, no. 6505: 866–870. doi: 10.1126/science.abb3153.

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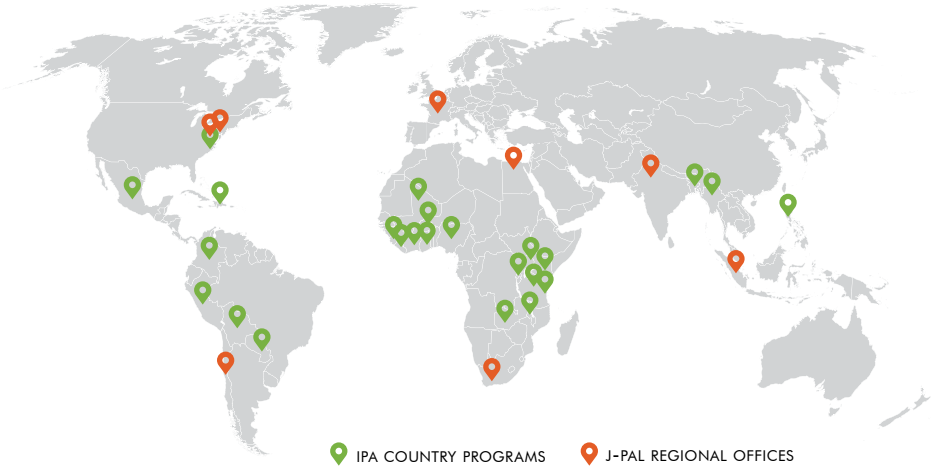
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