The Impact of Inter-Religious Soccer Leagues on Social Cohesion in Post-ISIS Iraq

As conflict forcibly displaces millions of people, social ties and trust across groups can disintegrate and be difficult to rebuild after violence subsides. Researchers are partnering with the Nineveh Provincial Council and MaakThahTheh to evaluate the impact of mixed Christian-Muslim soccer teams on social cohesion and interactions between Christians and Muslims in an ISIS-affected area of Iraq.

Policy Issue
In 2015, there were an estimated 65 million refugees and internally displaced peoples in the world.1 As conflict forcibly displaces millions, social ties and trust across groups can disintegrate and be difficult to rebuild after violence subsides. Previous research suggests that crosscutting civic organizations, like sports teams or trade unions—where cooperation is mutually beneficial—can build social trust between conflicting groups. Another research agenda suggests that cooperative social contact from teams or projects like this can then reduce anxiety about the other group, improve individual’s tolerance of members in a conflicting group, and reduce prejudice. In turn, this may increase inter-group contact in other activities, where mutual benefits may be less prominent. However, there is little rigorous evidence on how to build social cohesion across groups in lasting ways, particularly in areas affected by conflict. Evidence on the extent to which this tolerance can extend outside the intervention, or spillover to others in the community, is likewise sparse. Can an intervention that fosters cross-group cooperation improve intergroup relations and impact social norms in post-conflict communities?

Evaluation Context
In June 2014, ISIS committed mass atrocities against minorities from the Nineveh plains, displacing at least 10,000 Christians to Iraqi Kurdistan within a matter of days. There is little information on the experiences of Iraqis displaced by ISIS, such as their exposure to violence and forced migration journeys. however, many Christians believe their Muslim neighbors were complicit in the raids. This belief has contributed to intense distrust, a fear of returning home even to liberated areas, support for local self-defense militias, and potential for future conflict. This distrust extends to Muslims who were themselves targeted by ISIS, who are seen as encroaching on one of Iraq’s last Christian strongholds.
This evaluation takes place in the cities of Qaraqosh and Erbil, Iraq in the Nineveh plains, home to many IDPs (and now returnees) of all faith backgrounds. These cities are home to around 100 amateur male soccer teams and several communal soccer fields, which serve 200,000 individuals in neighboring communities. Like much of life in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, the city's soccer teams are segregated by religion and many are founded by displaced Christians.

**Details of the Intervention**

Researchers are partnering with Nineveh Governorate Council (Strategic Planning Committee) and a local Christian NGO (MaakThahTheh) to evaluate the impact of mixed Christian-Muslim soccer teams on social cohesion and interactions between Christians and Muslims.

Researchers will randomly choose 37 soccer teams founded by displaced Christians to participate in one of three inter-religious soccer leagues. Each local team has nine players, however, thirteen are needed for this league. Researchers will randomly assign half of the teams to get an additional three players from other local teams who are Muslim. The other half of teams will serve as a comparison group and receive three players who are Christian.

To incentivize teams to participate in the soccer league, they will have professional referees, new uniforms, and live commentators, and the top three teams will win trophies. Such incentives are important, as the potential of having to play with those of another religion may dissuade individuals from participating.

The study will include a total of 481 players. To participate, all players must agree to complete a survey on their displacement experience and their view on Iraqi society before and after the league.

Researchers will also survey members of soccer players' households and 160 community members not directly associated with the soccer league to determine the impacts of the soccer league on the community. To accomplish this, researchers will:

- **Observe social interactions between Christians and Muslims.** The research team will measure sales at Muslim-owned restaurants up to three months after the leagues end; observe Christian attendance at a social event four months after the leagues end; record which players are training with Muslim players six months after the leagues end, record players' votes for a sportsmanship prize, and measure registrations for mixed teams and leagues for the following season.
  - They will measure the impact on women, specifically, by inviting female relatives of players to an end-of-league event and observing attendance. Invitees will be aware that both Muslim and Christian women are invited.
- **Survey individuals about social norms surrounding Muslim-Christian interactions.** Researchers will randomly select 160 local residents to invite to the final soccer match of the league. They will then be asked questions about their comfort level with various interactions with those of the opposite religion, such as having a Muslim/Christian neighbor, co-worker, or teacher, four months after the league ends. The research team will then donate US$1 on the participant’s behalf to their choice of either an inter-faith humanitarian group, such as UNCHR, or a religious humanitarian group, like the humanitarian arm of the Catholic Church. Researchers will compare outcomes for individuals who attended the final match, had a relative play in the league, or who lived next to the field.
Results and Policy Lessons

Project ongoing; results forthcoming.

Sources