

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. Positive and cooperative intergroup contact has the potential to reduce prejudice and improve relationships with outgroup members. Researchers evaluated the impact of mixed Christian-Muslim soccer teams on social cohesion and interactions between these groups in an ISIS-affected area of Iraq. Results indicate that Christians who played on mixed teams demonstrated a higher likelihood of engaging with Muslim teammates after the league ended. However, the intervention did not improve their overall tolerance toward the Muslim community.

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. In such contexts, rebuilding coexistence following war has been a key policy goal for achieving sustainable peace. 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 reduce anxiety about the other group, improve individuals' 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 in post-conflict communities?

Evaluation Context

In June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS) committed mass atrocities against minorities in the city of

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TIMELINE

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Mosul, displacing 100,000 Christians to Iraqi Kurdistan within a matter of days. After returning home, between 2016 and 2018, Christians found their cities ruined: among those surveyed for this evaluation, 36 percent had their homes destroyed. Many Christians believe their Muslim neighbors were complicit in the ISIS raids. This belief has contributed to intense distrust, a fear of returning home even to liberated areas, support for local self-defense militias, and the 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.

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 around 55 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, the cities' soccer teams are segregated by religion and many are founded by displaced Christians. Before the start of the evaluation, only two of the 51 teams in the study included non-Christian players.

Details of the Intervention

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

Research staff recruited 51 Christian teams from Erbil and Qaraqosh and informed their captains that a local Christian-led NGO was working with a U.S.-based university to set up a ten-week soccer league for displaced people and returnees in the area. There were two conditions for participating:

All players had to agree to complete a brief survey on their displacement experience and their views on Iraqi society before and after the league;

Each team would be allocated an additional three players who may or may not be Christian.

Teams in the treated group thus received three additional Muslim players, while those in the comparison group received three additional Christian players.² To incentivize teams to participate in the soccer league, researchers 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 two months of the intervention.

Researchers were interested in measuring players tolerance towards other teammates and peers encountered in the league (tolerance on the field), as well as generalized prejudice towards members of the outgroup, e.g. local residents, restaurant patrons, and passersby that one does not know personally (tolerance off the field). Researchers examined behavioral outcomes among Christian players, including willingness to attend a Ramadan dinner (and to bring their families), willingness to train with Muslims in the future, and willingness to register for a mixed league in the future. Finally, via household surveys, they measured whether exposure to the league had an effect on tolerance among local residents.

Results and Policy Lessons

Following their participation in the league, Christians with Muslim teammates demonstrated more tolerant behaviors towards Muslim peers up to six months after the intervention. However, the intervention did not improve their overall tolerance toward the Muslim community. These findings suggest that intergroup contact can build community-level social cohesion with peers and acquaintances after war, but these effects do not generalize to strangers from the outgroup.

Tolerance on the field improved: Christians with Muslim teammates were 13 percentage points more likely to say they would sign up for a mixed soccer team in the future, 26 percentage points more likely to vote for a Muslim player (not on their team) to receive a sportsmanship award, and 49 percentage points more likely to train with Muslims six months after the intervention ended. This shows how positive contact with non-Christian teammates increased Christians' acceptability of interacting with Muslims whom they encountered in the leagues, shifting norms around religion segregation in soccer teams.

Tolerance off the field did not change: When it came to tolerance toward Muslim strangers, players with Muslim teammates were no more likely to attend a mixed social event or to patronize a Muslim-owned restaurant three to four months following the intervention. Personal beliefs also proved difficult to change. Treated players became less comfortable with Muslims as neighbors, and views on other salient issues, like blaming Muslim civilians for Christian suffering, remained unchanged. However, measures of national unity, which included agreeing that ethnic and religious divisions are arbitrary and that Iraq would be a better society if citizens treated one another as Iraqis first, were almost twice as high for players on mixed teams than in Christian-only teams.

Pathways to change: Researchers believe that the league improved players' tolerance by normalizing contact with Muslims. Two-thirds of mixed teams had integrated Muslims as core team members six months after the intervention ended, indicating that contact led to sustained change. Successful team performance was also important to increasing tolerance, with the top-performing teams being more likely to patronize Muslim-owned businesses and to attend a mixed social event.

Effects on other community members: People who were exposed to the league – either by living within walking distance of a league field, having a family or friend competing, or by attending the final game upon the research staff's invitation – demonstrated more tolerant views. They were between 21 to 41 percent more likely to believe that league had a positive effect on the local community, and to endorse future intergroup activities outside of soccer.

Based on the results of this study, the Ninewa Provincial Council included inter-ethnic components as part of their development programming: After the evaluation, the Ninewa Provincial Council, the intervention's local government partner, was enthusiastic about the key takeaway: that inter-ethnic community programs can foster local-level social cohesion. As a result, the Governor of Ninewa Province decided to include inter-ethnic programming as part of their reconstruction and development plan for the city of Mosul, funded by the provincial government, along with the Iraqi federal government, and international sponsors, with the researcher's input. The provincial council also hired

staff to set up inter-ethnic soccer leagues in the Hamdaniyya IDP camps in 2018. Similar evaluations are currently being implemented with NGO partners in Lebanon and Colombia, looking at the role of intergroup contact between Lebanese and Syrian underprivileged youth, as well as between Venezuelan migrants and Colombian natives in Bogota.

Taken together, these results highlight the potential for civic organizations that cut across social cleavages to rebuild social trust after conflict, at least in relationships key to day-to-day coexistence and community-building.

Sources

1. World Bank. 2019. "Fragility, Conflict and Violence" <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview>.

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