

Authors

Salma Mousa
Yale University

RESEARCH

INTERGROUP RELATIONS

Building social cohesion between Christians and Muslims through soccer in post-ISIS Iraq

Salma Mousa

Can intergroup contact build social cohesion after war? I randomly assigned Iraqi Christians displaced by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to an all-Christian soccer team or to a team mixed with Muslims. The intervention improved behaviors toward Muslim peers: Christians with Muslim teammates were more likely to vote for a Muslim (not on their team) to receive a sportsmanship award, register for a mixed team next season, and train with Muslims six months after the intervention. The intervention did not substantially affect behaviors in other social contexts, such as patronizing a restaurant in Muslim-dominated Mosul or attending a mixed social event, nor did it yield consistent effects on intergroup attitudes. Although contact can build tolerant behaviors toward peers within an intervention, building broader social cohesion outside of it remains challenging.

On 10 June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured the Iraqi city of Mosul, displacing or killing an estimated 1.5 million people in a genocide against Yazidis, Christians, Shia, and other minorities, displacing ~800,000 Christians to Iraqi Kurdistan overnight (1). Many Christians believe that their Muslim neighbors were complicit in these acts. These suspicions have discouraged Christians returning to displaced areas, fueled support for self-defense militias, and heightened the potential for reprisal killings and future conflict (2). At the same time, Muslims accustomed from neighboring Iraqs have been migrating into Christian enclaves, leading Iraqi Christians to fear the dilution of their culture and identity (3). Christian-Muslim relations in northern Iraq continue to be marked by mutual distrust and social segregation.

How can social cohesion between groups be rebuilt after war? Intergroup social cohesion, patterns of cooperation among individuals from different social groups who live and work in close proximity (4), is considered key for good governance (5) and economic development (6). However, countries recovering from war often face high rates of violence and instability despite heavy international investment in state-building and peacekeeping (7). Sustainable peace requires a combination of policy interventions, such as power-sharing arrangements, and grassroots initiatives that aim to improve interactions between individuals (8). Meaningful intergroup contact represents one such grassroots approach.

Here, I provide causal evidence on whether meaningful contact between groups can build social cohesion after war. Using a field experiment among Iraqis displaced by ISIS, I randomly assigned amateur Christian soccer players to an all-Christian team or to a team mixed with three Muslims for a 2-month

league. The league largely met the conditions considered key for achieving successful intergroup contact: Teammates had to cooperate to achieve their shared goal, players were subject to the equalizing effect of team sports, and local Christian leaders and organizations endorsed the league. This study thus serves as a proof of concept that near-optimal contact can build tolerant behaviors after violent conflict—at least toward those encountered in the intervention. The positive effects of contact among Christian study participants did not, however, generalize to Muslim strangers, highlighting a potentially important limitation of contact after war.

The “contact hypothesis” proposes that interpersonal contact across group lines can reduce prejudice if it is cooperative, places participants on equal footing, is endorsed by communal authorities, and is characterized by a common goal (9). Casual evidence shows that such contact reduces prejudice in several nonconflict settings by highlighting commonalities, forging friendships, lowering intergroup anxiety, and inducing empathy (10–12). On the other hand, stressful physical exposure has been found to cause more prejudice (13–16), and competitive contact has a similarly negative effect (17). These findings suggest that meaningful (positive and cooperative) contact might hold the potential to rebuild tolerance, at least in times of peace.

Should we expect contact to be similarly effective in conflict settings? Only a handful of contact studies involve groups in conflict (18,19), in part because contact is more likely to be negative in these settings, which disproportionately shapes prejudice (20). The evidence we do have indicates that studies of ethnic prejudice generate “substantially weaker effects” relative to interventions aimed at reducing prejudice toward other stigmatized groups such as the elderly or the disabled, suggesting that the changes common to war are particularly rigid. Identity, ethnic violence,

and military group identities, ethnic prejudices, and anxieties around being physically proximate to the outgroup, further tempering expectations around the impacts of contact after war (21–27).

Methodological constraints also limit our knowledge of intergroup contact. Contact is most effective if its effects can be generalized to an entire outgroup rather than just to individuals encountered in an intervention (28). However, most contact studies document the generalization of contact effects using self-reported attitudes measured immediately after the intervention (28). Policy-makers have subsequently questioned whether contact can change actual behaviors toward the outgroup in lasting ways (29). In response to this concern, I tested the generalization hypothesis using real-world behaviors.

Despite the differences between Christians and Muslims in northern Iraq, amateur soccer is popular among both groups. Scholars and policy-makers consider encouraging civil associations such as amateur sports clubs to be engines for social capital (30–32). Intergroup sports in particular exemplify the “positive, energetic, community-based, centered on non-political issues” (33) that facilitate the “meaningful interaction with members of different groups” recommended by policy-makers to improve community affect by ISIS (34).

Leveraging the social potential of team sports, the experiment compared four soccer leagues spread across two winters and study sites (table S2 and fig. S1). Research staff invited Christian teams in two northern Iraqi cities to participate. Forty-one of the 41 teams in the area were recruited on a first come, first served basis, resulting in a sample size that varied between 383 and 409 Christian players depending on the outcome (see the supplementary materials and methods). Captains were told that a local Christian community organization was working with a United States-based university to offer a soccer league for displaced people and to research their experiences. Participants were told that community-building was one of the league’s aims and, as such, each team would be allocated an additional three players who may or may not be Christian in an effort to include diverse groups.

Treated teams received additional Muslim players drawn from local Muslim teams, whereas control teams received fellow Christians. Christian and Muslim athletes were indistinguishable in baseline skill (table S6), and league guidelines ensured that they played roughly the same number of minutes per game (see the supplementary story text). A total of 38.6% of contact participants were retained until the end of the study, whereas the remainder dropped out before treatment assignments were made or because of injuries sustained during games. Because Muslims were only

Yale University, Yale Div. of International Studies
First published online 10/1/2015

Mousa, *Science* 348: 603–607 (2015) | 10 August 2015

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August 14, 2020