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Trusted authorities can change minds and shift norms during conflict

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The integration of former members of violent extremist groups is a pressing policy challenge. Governments and policymakers often have to change minds among resistant populations and shift perceived community norms in order to pave the way for peaceful reintegration. How can they do so on a mass scale? Previous research shows that messages from trusted authorities can be effective in creating a attitude change and shifting perceptions of social norms. In this study, we test whether messages from religious leaders—trusted authorities in many communities worldwide—can change minds and shift norms around an issue related to conflict resolution: the reintegration of former members of violent extremist groups. Our study takes place in Madaguri, Nigeria, the birthplace of the violent extremist group Boko Haram. Participants were randomly assigned to listen to either a placebo radio message or to a treatment message from a religious leader emphasizing the importance of forgiveness, announcing the leader's forgiveness of repentant fighters, and calling on followers to forgive. Participants were then asked about their attitudes, intended behavior, and perceptions of social norms surrounding the reintegration of an ex-Boko Haram fighter. The religious leader message significantly increased support for reintegration and willingness to interact with the ex-fighter in social, political, and economic life (8 to 10 percentage points). It also shifted people's beliefs that others in their community were more supportive of reintegration (8 to 10 percentage points). Our findings suggest that trusted authorities such as religious leaders can be effective messengers for promoting peace.

violent extremism | leaders | conflict | norms | reintegration

Violent extremist groups such as al-Qaida, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State and its regional affiliates have proliferated across the world in recent decades, killing hundreds of thousands and displacing millions more (1,2). Considerable recent scholarship addresses the question of who joins violent extremist groups and what motivates people to join (e.g., refs. 3–11). Less attention has been paid to the systematic study of how former members of violent extremist groups reenter society (but see ref. 12), despite the fact that this has become an urgent and growing policy challenge. In the wake of conflict in Iraq, Nigeria, Syria, the United States, Europe, and beyond, former members of violent extremist groups are attempting to reintegrate into society through informal as well as formal, government-led processes (13–17).

While former combatants have generally been welcomed back home in civil war contexts after intensive reintegration campaigns (18, 19), the reintegration of former violent extremists has proved more challenging (12, 15, 20, 21). Violent extremist groups not only use violent tactics targeted at civilians, such as suicide bombings and armed attacks, but also indoctrinate members into extremist ideologies. As a result, policymakers and citizens are often afraid that defectors will believe in extremist ideology and may be motivated to recruit other violent back at home or recruit others into the group. Yet putting an end to conflict and preventing the continuation of cycles of violence requires finding ways for former members of extremist groups to regain social, political, and economic life at

home (22). Former violent extremists with nowhere to go may rejoin their extremist groups or form new ones. Moreover, the lack of a viable path out of a violent extremist group and back into civilian life may dissuade current fighters from defecting (23).

Creating the conditions for peaceful integration of former fighters requires change on a mass scale in attitudes of their return. Acceptance is a collective process requiring the consent of many, such as government officials, community leaders, family members, future neighbors, and local business owners (24). While the ultimate goal is to change behaviors to foster reintegration, governments and civil society must first address the attitudes of communities to accept ex-fighters back home (25). This process starts by changing community members' attitudes, intended behavior, and perceived community norms (i.e., perceptions of what others in one's community think, refs. 25, 26) around reintegration. If most citizens are personally supportive of reintegration, intend to accept returning fighters, and believe others in their community are also supportive of reintegration, this will signal to government officials that reintegration efforts can begin, help prevent conflict when former combatants return home, and encourage the demobilization and return of former fighters ready to lay down arms.

Significance

Violent extremist groups such as the Islamic State and Boko Haram have proliferated across the world in recent decades. While considerable scholarship addresses why people join violent extremist groups, much less attention has been paid to how former members reenter society. Yet successfully ending conflict requires robust communities to accept former members back home. In this research, we find that radio messages delivered by trusted authorities in Nigeria lead to large, positive changes in people's willingness to accept former Boko Haram fighters back home and make people think their neighbors are more in favor of reintegration. Our results show that messages from leaders can create change on a mass scale at low cost, helping to end conflict and division.

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Trusted Authorities Can Change Minds and Shift Norms during Conflict

The reintegration of former members of violent extremist groups is a pressing policy challenge. Governments and policymakers often have to change minds among reticent populations and shift perceived community norms in order to pave the way for peaceful reintegration. How can they do so on a mass scale? Previous research shows that messages from trusted authorities can be effective in creating attitude change and shifting perceptions of social norms. In this study, we test whether messages from religious leaders—trusted authorities in many communities worldwide—can change minds and shift norms around an issue related to conflict resolution: the reintegration of former members of violent extremist groups. Our study takes place in Maiduguri, Nigeria, the birthplace of the violent extremist group Boko Haram. Participants were randomly assigned to listen to either a placebo radio message or to a treatment message from a religious leader emphasizing the importance of forgiveness, announcing the leader’s forgiveness of repentant fighters, and calling on followers to forgive. Participants were then asked about their attitudes, intended behaviors, and perceptions of social norms surrounding the reintegration of an ex-Boko Haram fighter. The religious leader message significantly increased support for reintegration and willingness to interact with the ex-fighter in social, political, and economic life (8 to 10 percentage points). It also shifted people’s beliefs that others in their community were more supportive of reintegration (6 to 10 percentage points). Our findings suggest that trusted authorities such as religious leaders can be effective messengers for promoting peace.

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