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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 31% 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 sponsorship 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.

Improving Tolerance through Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq

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