

# In Iraq, mixed-religion soccer teams helped build social cohesion, healed wounds after war

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A new study, released today in *Science*, points to a way to repair social

ties and promote coexistence after war. The study found that in post-ISIS Iraq, mixing Christians and Muslims on soccer teams made Christian players more tolerant toward Muslims in their league, though the sentiments did not extend to Muslims in the broader community. The findings suggest that meaningful social contact can build community-level social cohesion with peers and acquaintances after war.

Researcher Salma Mousa, a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford's Immigration Policy Lab and Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, drew on the social science "contact hypothesis," which posits that under the right conditions, cooperative contact between groups can reduce prejudice.

In Iraq under ISIS, Christians were violently driven from their homes and subject to mass atrocities in 2014. As many began to return to their homes between 2016 and 2018, they found their cities ruined. Many Christians believed their Muslim neighbors were complicit in the prior ISIS raids, contributing to intense levels of distrust, support for local self-defense militias, and the potential for a backslide into conflict. Mousa partnered with a local community organization to set up a series of soccer leagues and rigorously evaluate whether intergroup contact could build [social cohesion](#) between Christian and Muslim players.

Dr. Mousa monitored attitudes and behaviors over the 10-week league, as well as six months after the league had ended. She found that Christians with Muslim teammates had more open and trusting attitudes toward their Muslim fellow players than those on all-Christian teams. Specifically, they were 26 percentage points more likely to vote for a Muslim player to receive a sportsmanship prize, and 49 percentage points more likely to train with Muslims six months after the league's end, but these sentiments did not extend to Muslim strangers.

"The players warmed up to each other over time, teams began to bond,

and new friendships emerged as a result of the leagues, which helped to create a new norm around the acceptability of inter-religious teams," Mousa explained. "It also became clear that these friendships were not necessarily equipped to overcome the weight of the ISIS occupation and displacement experience."

"With nearly 80 million people around the world displaced by violence and conflict, there is an increasing need for evidence on how to rebuild trust and community cohesion," said Sebastian Chaskel, the Peace & Recovery Program Director at Innovations for Poverty Action, the research and policy non-profit, which along with J-PAL, helped support the study. "This study points to a practical tool to heal the rifts between communities that too often remain in the wake of ethnic conflict," Chaskel said.

"A challenge with many prior social contact studies has been their inability to measure changes in behaviors and attitudes outside of a lab setting," said Aprille Knox, Policy Manager of J-PAL's Crime, Violence, and Conflict sector. "Mousa's study develops innovative measures for observing behavioral and attitudinal changes both on and off the soccer field, as well as over a longer-term time horizon than many previous studies have been able to observe, adding valuable insights to our understanding of if and how contact works in post-conflict settings."

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.

**More information:** Building social cohesion between Christians and Muslims through soccer in post-ISIS Iraq. *Science* (2020). [science.sciencemag.org/lookup/.../1126/science.abb3153](https://science.sciencemag.org/lookup/.../1126/science.abb3153)

Can playing together help us live together? *Science* (2020).  
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Provided by Innovations for Poverty Action

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