

# ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

## Episode: Social Cohesion After Conflict

*featuring*

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*interviewed by*

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Full Transcript

Reema Saleh: Hi, this is Reema, and you're listening to the University of Chicago Public Policy Podcasts.

You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies, and policy issues it affects. In this series, you'll hear from experts and practitioners who conduct research, implement programs, and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world.

Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P, in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

In this episode, Aishwarya and Wafa speak with Dr. Salma Mousa, a political scientist studying social cohesion after conflict, and what policies can build trust between groups. She talks about her latest study on building social cohesion between Christian and Muslim youth soccer players in post-ISIS Iraq.

Dr. Salma Mousa: As someone who grew up in the Middle East and who was also an immigrant in Canada for a while, the question of how someone's social identity conditions so much of what happens in their life, and how other people treat them, and how they see themselves, was always something that was very top of mind for me. I noticed different situations or environments where my nationality mattered or my religion mattered, and other environments where it didn't matter at all.

And this was all happening against the backdrop of the sporadic violence, especially when I lived in Saudi Arabia, which was targeted based on sect and based on nationality. And so, being in that kind of environment you start to think, okay, so my identity seems to matter sometimes a lot, and other times, it doesn't matter at all.

And so, how can we get identity to matter less? Because the Middle East is not necessarily a place where these social identities have always existed, number one. And number two, these identities have not been things that have structured conflict. It's not necessarily the case that we have to keep killing each other for these socially

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constructed things. And it wasn't the case for hundreds of years, if not thousands of years, for many ethnic and sectarian fault lines.

So, how can we get those things to stop being fault lines, given that there's nothing inherent in our culture that suggests that it has to be that way?

Wafa Eben Beri: Thank you so much. It's a very interesting point that you are bringing your personal perspective into that and your interests professionally. For our listeners who are not familiar with your work, can you tell us about your study that is titled *Building Social Cohesion Between Christians and Muslims Through Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq* and what the main findings were?

Dr. Salma Mousa: Sure. So, the study that you referred to was a field experiment in Northern Iraq where I was able to set up a series of soccer leagues, and I was able to randomly assign amateur Christian soccer teams to either receive fellow Christian players or receive some Muslim players, and then they train and compete for a two-month period.

And what I found was being assigned to a mixed team made Christians more accepting and tolerant toward Muslims in terms of their behaviors, but not really toward the Muslims, more broadly. So, what I mean by that is, I found this distinction between how you treat people you know from an outgroup compared to how you treat strangers.

And so, I found that this contact within soccer leagues was really effective at building these local social ties and improving tolerant behaviors toward your teammates and other guys you met in the league, but it did not extend to Muslims more broadly outside of that environment.

So, for example, being assigned to a mixed soccer team did not make you more likely to visit Mosul, which is a big Muslim-dominated city about 40 minutes away from the study sites. So, this suggests that this theory of intergroup contact can be promising in building this very localized community level social cohesion, but it's not necessarily achieving its goal of building generalized social cohesion and prejudice reduction.

Wafa Eben Beri: That's a very interesting point, because, based on my experience in Israel and working with Jewish groups, I found the same finding. The findings showed that the group contact didn't affect the perception of the participant toward the individual from the other group, and less affects the perception toward the collective group represented by the participant.

For example, someone would say, "When I meet this Arab guy, he's very nice, but not all the Arabs are like that, and he's an exception." Could you tell us, how can we expand social cohesion to a more broad level, to take this interaction that has happened between the participant and the individuals to a more collective level?

Dr. Salma Mousa: So, now I know I need to read your work because this sounds very relevant to what I'm looking at right now. And you highlight a really important issue, which is that these kinds of contact interventions, they aim not to just improve how you feel toward the one or two people who you meet, or who you're friends with, but to actually generalize those positive feelings toward the entire outgroup.

And if that generalization doesn't happen, if you don't update your beliefs about the entire group based on a handful of interactions, then the contact theory is really a failure. It's really trivial. It's nice to build some

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friendships here and there, but it's just not nearly scalable enough that this is something that we should necessarily be turning to, especially in conflict zones.

So, this question of how can you encourage the generalization of effects, I think this is an open question. Social psychologists point to a few factors that might help. One is typicality. So, you need to view the contact partners as typical, or representative in some way, in order for you to infer something about the entire group.

And actually, I do have some work on this looking at a Muslim soccer star in England, Mohamed Salah, who plays for Liverpool. And long story short, we do find that when you prime people to think about his Muslim identity and that he's a practicing Muslim, it makes Liverpool supporters, the fans of the club, more likely to say that Islam is compatible with British values.

So, this link, emphasizing this link between that one person and the whole group can help facilitate that process, but there's still really a lot that we don't know about it. I mean, people can still exceptionalize a handful of individuals who they like and choose not to see them as representative. So, the question is, is someone really objectively ever typical or representative, or is that actually a function of prejudice, whether you choose to see them as exceptional or not.

And there's this other tension between being representative, but also not confirming stereotypes. So, your group identity should be salient, but it shouldn't be salient in any negative way. You shouldn't be doing any stereotype-confirming behaviors because that won't work. So, there's some tensions, I think, here in the social psychological literature that need exploring.

Aishwarya Raje: So, I'd love to hear more about how you looked at soccer specifically as the framework for your work on social cohesion. I mean, I'm a huge fan of professional soccer, and I'm a terrible player, but I'm a huge fan, I mean, millions of people around the world are. I mean, what do you think it is about the sport, or perhaps team sports in general, that can potentially take a group of people beyond just recreation and competition, and actually build deeper connections on a more human level?

Dr. Salma Mousa: I think there's a few different routes through which sports can build social cohesion. I can think of a few just off the top of my head. One is that team sports naturally fulfill a lot of the conditions laid out by the contact hypothesis.

So, contact across group lines is supposed to reduce prejudice when the contact involves cooperating for a common goal, when it's endorsed by authorities who people respect, and when you are on equal footing, so there's not necessarily a hierarchy or an unequal power status. So all those conditions really lend themselves very nicely to team sports.

There's also, I think, an argument to be made about creating another identity as being fans of the same team or players on the same team. And so, it highlights this common third identity that's shared between people. And so, it highlights commonalities in that way, rather than differences. So, those are just two ways that I think sports – whether you're playing or whether you're watching – can actually... can build some social cohesion or erode some of the group boundaries.

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Wafa Eben Beri: During my work I saw a lot of different types of group contact that can yield sometimes different results related to social cohesion. What I mean by that, such as the difference between groups that meet through soccer or food, This is something that sometimes we find something in common. And the group that meet, for example, I have examples in Ireland or in Israel, in bilingual schools or through activism or volunteering together. Can you tell us more about what you think, and if there are different results related to this group contact with different purposes?

Dr. Salma Mousa: Yeah, absolutely. So, this is something that's important, right? What kinds of settings and environments produce contact under those ideal conditions? Team sports is one that lends itself naturally to this, but there are a few others as well.

To some extent, classrooms. You don't have so much the element of having a common goal, but there tends to be some cooperation, having equal footing, having an authority figure that endorses the interactions. So, classroom settings can be positive, and we do find that in the literature.

What's even stronger, most of the time, tends to be roommate assignments. So there, you don't necessarily have cooperation as much, but it's that kind of environment where you have these mini-cooperative interactions and generally a positive experience. And that is also something that we found that is actually effective at reducing prejudice.

Military conscription is another one, military training. So, again, it's the roommate mechanism, but really that fighting with each other and relying on each other seems to be really important. And so, if you want to extrapolate the commonalities across these different settings where we have seen positive effects, and looking at studies that have found negative effects of contact – and there are a few of those – I'd say one of the most important conditions is that you are not competing, that you are cooperating and not competing.

The degree of cooperation, it's a little unclear how much cooperation you need, but definitely the presence of active competition is almost always negative. So, I'd say that if we're starting to move toward an understanding of what are the necessary conditions, I would say that's as close to a necessary condition as we found.

Wafa Eben Beri: I have a follow-up question. You said about the negative results, when we put competition or we don't have a common goal between the interactions of the groups. Can you tell us in which way the results will be negative, how the results are being presented when it's negative? Is it that people become more prejudiced? Can you talk more about that?

Dr. Salma Mousa: So, we don't have a lot of very, I say, solid work about this, but I think there are some plausible explanations for why competitive contact is bad. I think the most common sense one to me is that it highlights otherness.

So, if you're put in a situation where you feel that you need to come compete with this group, either for jobs or for scarce resources or even in a sports game, you start to view that person and their group as being opposed to you, necessarily. You are against them. They are different. We have no preferences in common. Our goals are diametrically opposed to each other.

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And that, I think, just stresses the sense of otherness and difference, rather than what you want, which is the opposite, where you want to feel like you have some things in common. At least you should have a common goal, even if you have nothing else in common.

I think the other plausible explanation is that there are some interactions that come along with cooperating, like you have to discuss, you have to compromise, you have to make decisions together. And that process, that negotiation process, and just the micro-foundations of actually working together can reveal things about people's personality, can humanize them more. It opens up more of what we call "friendship potential," which is something that has been found to be very key to contact.

This kind of one-sided exposure where you just see someone in the subway or something – that can actually cause a backlash effect – but you need some space for friendship potential, some conversation in a not so emotionally charged environment. And so, I say those two things where that competition can emphasize otherness and, at the same time, it has very low friendship potential.

Aishwarya Raje: I'd be curious to hear your observations about how you've seen social cohesion play out based on gender. Of course, the study that you did focused on creating soccer teams for young men, but in a lot of context, I think we see women being the social backbone for their families and communities. So, I'm curious as to how you see those dynamics play out in a post-conflict context.

Dr. Salma Mousa: I don't have that much to say about this only because we have such little research that I'm aware of that looks specifically at social cohesion-building strategies that target women specifically. But what I can speak about is my own experience working in Northern Iraq.

I initially wanted to actually have an intervention targeted at women and bringing women from Muslim and Christian groups together, and it became clear very quickly that the social norms in Northern Iraq were not really conducive to this. This is because there's this unofficial system where women are not really permitted to be out in public, and especially in areas with unfamiliar people if they don't have their brother or their husband with them.

So, you would need the permission of the husbands, or the brothers, or the dads in order to be in these new spaces where they're going to be mixing across group lines with people that are unknown or strangers from the out-group. And so, because of the difficulty of actually arranging that contact, I then decided to focus more on men.

And so, this, I think, is an important question of how should we target these kinds of interventions, and I think there is a case to be made that you want to target potentially norm changers or norm leaders when it comes to prejudice. And we should be doing more work to understand how social cohesion operates among women. But, at the same time, there is one benefit of targeting whoever the norm leaders are in society, often, it's men, in that you might actually accelerate some of the change potentially.

Wafa Eben Beri: Can you tell us how group context affects the general political situation or the leadership in the country and vice-versa?

Dr. Salma Mousa: This is the million-dollar question. We have a lot of tools at the grassroots level for building social cohesion. So, things like intergroup contact, empathy-building interventions or education,

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perspective-taking exercises, and they seem to work, under some conditions, at the grassroots level. But the question is, how are these things affecting the structural barriers to social cohesion?

There are reasons why groups are in conflict, or one group is explicitly being oppressed. And these kinds of grassroots interventions, they're great at building this community level social cohesion – and that's a good thing – but are they really going to address the structural roots of conflict that cause this situation in the first place? And I'm much more skeptical about that.

So, can things like contact overcome barriers to integration like residential segregation, like ethnic entrepreneurs or political entrepreneurs who start stoking tensions between groups? These kinds of more environment-level barriers to cohesion, I think, are much harder to overcome without policy tools.

I think the ideal recipe would be a mixture of both. I think you need stuff happening at the grassroots level and policies at the structural level to really build lasting and sustainable peace. One of the reasons, actually, why this is important, is that if you just do the policy-level intervention, and you don't have grassroots support at least, or acceptance of the intervention, it might not actually have a positive effect.

I'm thinking, for example, some east Asian countries where they actually have very progressive immigration policies, but on the ground, there was not acceptance by the host population. And they're like, "Oh, why are you giving preferential treatments to immigrants?" So, actually, it can go the other way. So, ideally, you need, I think, a mix of those two things, but how you aggregate up from the grassroots level to the policy level, I think, is still unclear.

Aishwarya Raje: And that's a really great segway into my next question, because I know another element of your research interest is migration policy and refugee resettlement and integration.

And I'm curious, would you say that this model of building sports teams between perhaps host populations and refugee populations could facilitate greater refugee integration into the host countries? And how translatable do you think this model is to contexts that are not necessarily post-conflict, but in contexts that are generally just lacking a lot of social cohesion?

Dr. Salma Mousa: So, there are some reasons why the theory of change around social cohesion might be different in post-conflict societies and in recently post-violent societies.

I think the distrust towards strangers is higher. The averseness to risk is also higher. The lingering effects of personal trauma, psychological trauma, and community-level trauma is also very high. So, I think for all these reasons – and just baseline prejudice is probably high too. So, for all these reasons, you have a really hard case when you're going into recently post-conflict societies and trying to conduct these kinds of grassroots-level peace-building tools.

At the same time, I think there is a lot of overlap in what we do in peacetime and what can be done in post-conflict societies. So, for example, this idea of intergroup contact, positive contact actually reducing prejudice, it depends to the extent to which you see some of these cleavages in the West as being post-conflict or not, or actively antagonistic.

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For me, it's not obvious. For example, if we're looking at law enforcement and minority groups in the US, that's an actively antagonistic situation in a lot of cases. So, I think a lot of these distinctions between post-conflict and peacetime or West and Global South are not necessarily that relevant when you start looking on a case-by-case basis where you do have this active antagonism and hostility, and oftentimes violence as well.

What I would just say is that any time you have that situation where it's active conflict, you are setting things up to be harder, where you have to take a lot more precautions, not least of which from an ethical perspective, before getting into these kinds of grassroots interventions and getting people together, who are not necessarily ready to be brought together yet. So, there's just this extra layer of precautions that need to be taken.

Wafa Eben Beri: How can your research findings can shape the policies in a country in post-conflict, and especially in the context of peacebuilding?

Dr. Salma Mousa: So, I've done a few studies now looking specifically at this idea of contact. Generally, it looks like the effects are positive, but they're much more limited in post-conflict or active conflict settings.

So, what I would suggest to policy makers is any environment or space that you have control over where people are mixing or have the potential to mix across social lines, try to optimize those interactions so that they create the kind of ideal conditions for contact that we know to be generally positive. So, try to avoid competition, try to make the interactions recurring, not a one-time thing, try to get the endorsement of communal leaders who are respected. So, those spaces that you do have control over, optimize them for positive contact.

At the same time, I don't think you can rely only on grassroots tools alone for sustainable peace. So, we need to be addressing the structural roots of either oppression or intergroup conflict, depending on the setting. And so, we need to address things like residential segregation. That's causing people not to interact in the first place, for example. We need to address the kind of national rhetoric or the rhetoric of politicians that demonize certain groups.

So, you can't really just rely on the grassroots level. There has to be support at the policy level as well.

Wafa Eben Beri: Thank you so much.

Dr. Salma Mousa: That was really fun.

Reema Saleh: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict featuring Salma Mousa. This episode was produced and edited by Aishwarya Kumar and Reema Saleh.

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