Original Article

The Recognition of Shared Suffering After Violence: ISIS Victimization and LGBT+ Support in Mosul Iraq

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Abstract

While scholars have found that conflict-related victimization and exposure to violence can increase concern for the well-being of others, those effects have been largely circumscribed to in-group boundaries. Less clear is whether such empathy 'born of suffering' extends to stigmatized groups. We consider the case of public tolerance for LGBT+ people in Mosul Iraq, a city that experienced widespread violence under Islamic State (ISIS) occupation from 2014–2017, including targeted killings of LGBT+ people alongside other marginalized groups. Using original data from a 2021 survey experiment, we find that respondents are more supportive of protections for LGBT+ people when primed about ISIS persecution of LGBT+ groups. We observe that support also rises with experiences of personal victimization by ISIS. Our results speak to how conflict can potentially reduce out-group barriers through recognition of shared experiences of suffering, with implications for public acceptance of LGBT+-inclusive rights and protections in the aftermath of violence.

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"Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars." — Khalil Gibran

"My entire life, and those of my entire generation, and every generation that came after that, has been defined by trauma." – Omar Mohammed, Mosul Eye

Introduction

How do victims of violence respond to the suffering of others, especially those whose lived experience might otherwise be very different from their own, but for whom suffering itself is a potentially important common bond? While violence has been shown to heighten feelings of in-group solidarity and cohesion, less is known about the consequences of violence for out-group bridging (Bauer et al., 2016). We consider the illustrative case of violence inflicted by the Islamic State (ISIS) against the civilian population of Mosul, Iraq between 2014 and 2017. We ask whether exposure to violence through victimization alters perceptions of other victimized groups. Specifically, we examine public attitudes toward Mosul's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+)[1] community, some of whose members were targeted and murdered by ISIS in gruesome public displays of violence (Stern, 2016). We ask whether Mosul residents who experienced victimization at the hands of ISIS might display greater support, including the willingness to bestow human rights protections, toward the LGBT+ community in Iraq as a consequence of recognizing their shared suffering.

Our research question addresses an important contention in the literature on violence. Some studies underscore the detrimental effects of violence on social attitudes, norms, and behaviors, resulting in widespread distrust and detachment from others. Other work emphasizes how conflict engenders parochialism, amplifying ties to one's in-group, but also boundaries and divisions with those who are 'othered' or loosely seen as out-groups. Finally, a third line of research finds that violence can induce post-traumatic growth, enhancing trust, cooperation, and empathy toward others, including potential out-groups. For example, Bauer et al. (2016) note that "after war violence, it is possible to imagine victims changing their priorities in life and placing re-newed value on relationships with family and community, and even changing other-regarding preferences. Such changes need not be parochial in nature; the existing literature in this area is silent on this point" (p. 269). We address this silence by examining support for the extension of basic human rights and

protections after violence to marginalized groups, focusing on support for LGBT+ people.

While LGBT+ people may define themselves along different aspects of in-group versus out-group identity (ex. Race/ethnicity, religion, class, and their intersectionalities), homo- and transphobia retain overwhelming power to 'other' people. These phobias shape queer identities as distinctive, regardless of other identity sources and considerations, which is why research on social identity construction often perceives LGBT+ groups as an out-group. This justifies the contribution of the LGBT+ case to the 'in- and out-group' framing that is pervasive in the conflict literature. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that LGBT+ people also cross those in- and out-group lines, given that an out-group based on sexual orientation or gender identity may be an in-group on several other dimensions of identity (Murib, 2017).

Signaling LGBT+ groups' place as part of society is also a key strategy for LGBT+ social movements. For example, the Palestinian Queer initiative *Minkom O Feekom* translates to 'among you and from within you' (alQaws, 2020).[2] That said, pervasive homo- and transphobia in most societies 'other' queer people to a degree that makes the case relevant to theories of in-and out-group relationships.[3] Our study tests one way to realize the social movement goal, of altering perceptions to see queer people's experiences as shared and holding an integral place *within* society. Among contending perspectives (post-traumatic stress, parochialism, and post-traumatic growth), only post-traumatic growth, predicts that violence could lead to transformative ex-pressions of empathy and support for such stigmatized out-groups.[4] To this third perspective, we turn our attention.

We focus on the compelling case of LGBT+ support in Mosul, Iraq. LGBT+ people represent a highly marginalized group in Iraq, which the Islamic State brutally suppressed during its three-year occupation of the city from 2014 to 2017, alongside other ethnic and religious minority groups, women and children, and even ostensible in-group members (ex. Sunni Muslims) deemed insufficiently militant or loyal. Overall, ISIS inflicted in-numerable suffering on its residents before falling to the Iraqi army in 2017 (Hipskind, 2018). Amid this collective trauma, public opinion in Mosul offers an important test of the enduring effects of violence on attitudes toward marginalized and at-risk groups. We consider the implications of such vic-timization for public support for LGBT+ rights and protections while bringing these understudied LGBT+ groups centrally into the conflict literature.

In support of post-traumatic growth, we find that people who are told of ISIS's persecution of LGBT+ people are more favorable toward government protections for the LGBT+ community going forward, including protection from violence and extension of basic human rights. Such support is especially prevalent among people who experienced increased levels of ISIS victimi-zation themselves. The mechanism we theorize to explain this finding is

rooted in empathy – due to the shared experience of suffering at the hands of a common perpetrator – which generates concern for the well-being of others and a desire for corrective action to protect and/or reduce harm. We find less convincing evidence that violence leads to detachment from others or intensified out-group aversion, at least as it relates to the treatment of LGBT+ minorities. We attribute our finding to empathy 'born of suffering', with implications for how societies can transcend social divisions in the aftermath of violence to find common ground. While empathy barriers persist, there is movement in a more tolerant, inclusive direction for LGBT+ protections and rights. To make this argument, we begin with an overview of the literature on violence and empathy toward others generally, before providing the historical context of violence targeting LGBT+ communities during conflict and then bringing the two sections together to articulate a testable theory of shared suffering.

Violence and Empathy for Others

To what extent can traumatic experiences of wartime violence build bridges of support across social divides? In a recent review of the literature, Bauer et al. (2016) identify three general theoretical explanations for how conflict could lead to an expansion of bonding with others. The first involves a logic of social insurance, where individuals who fear that personal security and property rights are threatened will band together, including forming potential coalitions out of self-interest (Grosjean, 2014). A second evolutionary approach argues that social cooperation and cohesion enhance evolutionary fitness and survival amid inter-group competition (Choi & Bowles, 2007; Richerson & Boyd, 2001). The evolutionary models, however, emphasize how conflict amplifies a parochial form of social cohesion, elevating in-group bonding but not out-group bridging (see also Bauer et al., 2016). This parochial form of outreach is often reflected in heightened ethnocentrism (Dyrstad, 2012) and religiosity (Henrich et al., 2019) after conflict. Finally, most psychological research on violence has underscored the negative impacts of war-related trauma on stress and depression, which can lead to detachment and alienation from others (Magruder & Yeager, 2009). Nevertheless, psychologists have also found evidence of 'post-traumatic growth' or 'altruism born of suffering', where conflict leads some people to reorient their preferences to become more empathetic, altruistic, other-regarding, and cooperative with others (Canevello et al., 2021; Hartman & Morse, 2020; Staub & Vollhardt, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Vollhardt, 2009; Vollhardt et al., 2016). Although most research on post-traumatic growth focuses on interpersonal relationships, there is growing interest in whether empathy can extend to the group level as well, including out-groups with shared experiences of loss, stigma, or suffering (Eklund et al., 2009; Sirin et al., 2017; Wayne & Zhukov, 2022).

Empirically, a meta-analysis by Bauer et al. (2016) points to mixed evidence of cooperative, empathetic, or 'pro-social' responses to violence alongside increased parochial forms of in-group bias against out-groups. Ultimately, theoretical mechanisms underpinning these heterogeneous results remain elusive.

To begin to explore mechanisms, research from social psychology has long found a relationship between empathetic concern and prosocial behavior toward others (Batson, 2014).[5] Research by Cikara et al. (2014) illustrates how empathy biases and empathy failures are elevated by factors such as social distance, inter-group competition, threat perception, and antipathy, and are reduced by entitativity (consciousness and recognition of others' existence) and perceptions of mutual goals or traits (see also Hogg, 2020); both latter factors that would be relevant to engaging LGBT+ groups within society. Recent work by Bruneau et al. (2017) find in three contexts – Americans toward Arabs, Hungarians toward refugees, and Greeks toward Germans – that out-group empathy reduces preferences for out-group harm and increases out-group helping. Another line of research reveals how inter-group contact can build empathy, assuage fear, and facilitate better awareness of out-groups, reducing prejudice and intolerance when certain conditions are met (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Paluck et al., 2019). However, less is known about the effects of shared experiences of victimization or suffering.

At present, most research on out-group bridging has occurred in the absence of violent conflict or pervasive victimization. Theoretical mechanisms to explain how conflict victimization could result in increased concern for the well-being of out-groups need further development. Recent empirical work shows that cooperative responses to out-groups are not restricted to peaceful contexts. For example, Scacco and Warren (2018) reveal how inter-group contact reduces discriminatory behavior between Christians and Muslims in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria in educational contexts. Mousa (2020) finds similar effects in the context of interfaith sports in post-ISIS Iraq. While such work is encouraging for potential post-traumatic growth extensions in dealing with out-groups, whether such preferences vary by the intensity of conflict exposure and victimization or by the recollection of those experiences remains to be explored. In addition, most research has focused on out-groups in terms of ethnic and sectarian cleavages, and it is unclear whether there are theoretical and empirical extensions for post-traumatic growth to other types of out-groups, such as groups stigmatized based on their sexual orientations or gender identities.[6] Research on LGBT+ people generally remains understudied relative to many other marginalized groups in political science research (Majic & Strolovitch, 2020; Novkov & Barclay, 2010; Reid & Curry, 2019), despite their presence across states and the routine deployment of gender and sexuality in the political construction of conflict (see next section as well as Hagen et al., 2024). We shed light on LGBT+ groups in this domain.

Our study contributes to critical and understudied dynamics in the literature on pro-social responses arising from violence. It fills an important gap in addressing whether post-traumatic growth applies to out-groups who are marginalized, stigmatized, and preyed upon due to their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. In addition, the literature on conflict-related sexual violence focuses primarily on the causes and consequences of acts of sexual violence by perpetrators against victims (Koos, 2018; Stachow, 2020) but has given less attention to how victims of violence are often targeted due to being LGBT+ and the potential consequences thereof. Consistent with post-traumatic growth, we propose that experiences of victimization could increase empathy, awareness, and support for LGBT+ communities in conflict environments.

Violence and LGBT+ Identity

Understanding the relationship between violence and LGBT+ peoples' lived experience—both in Iraq and in general—is important for setting the stage for our study. LGBT+ people have been targeted and persecuted throughout history and across states and societies, particularly during wartime (Hagen et al., 2024). The desire to protect the so-called 'morality of the nation', which involves attempts to uphold imagined and fixed understandings of 'nation' (Anderson, 2006), almost always sits uneasily with groups whose presence signals social change around gender and sexuality. This is because the fixity of identities rooted in tradition, religion, and nation are inherently challenged by the fluid concepts of gender and sexuality (Ayoub, 2014; Conrad, 2001). As a result, there is a long history of societal and state-sponsored discrimination of people who are now commonly referred to as LGBT+. Monro (2015) documents a concise history of the stigmatization and persecution—including death, torture, flogging, and castration—of sexual and gender variant behavior from the high Middle Ages (11th and 12th centuries C.E.) to the Italian Renaissance and the early modern period (starting in the 16th century) when legislation against homosexual expression (e.g. King Henry VIII's Buggery Act of 1533) spread across most of Europe and its colonies. These patterns also play out in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, which has suffered from colonialism and conflict, and where authoritarians commonly target queer communities to deflect from socio-economic issues like corruption and inequality, and families consolidate patriarchy and local understandings of shame and honor through hegemonic gender and sexuality-based norms (Abdulhadi, 2009; Amer, 2012; Atshan, 2020). Indeed, in global analyses of LGBT+ discrimination, the Middle East and Africa typically score the lowest on both legal and attitudinal indicators (Dicklitch-Nelson et al., 2023; ILGA World et al., 2020).[7] These dynamics explain why LGBT+ people, or people "perceived to be LGBT [+,] not only face ridicule, shame,

disenfranchisement, and possible criminal charges, but in most of the world […] can face violence and even death" (Dworkin & Yi, 2002, p. 270). In all periods, and with relatively few exceptions in the contemporary era, LGBT+ people have been positioned at the periphery of the 'straight state' (Canaday, 2011).

In this construction of nation, "selective acts of remembering and forgetting are recognized as an integral part of the nation-building process more broadly" and they become heightened during periods of conflict (Scicchitano, 2021, p. 1560). Indeed, the intersection of militarism and masculinity—"the variety of gendered ideas about how boys and men should think and behave"—reifies conceptions of what constitutes appropriate gender roles in times of war and insurgency (Enloe, 2007, p. 8). As Enloe (2007) and Scicchitanto (2021) argue, patriarchal systems will always privilege certain masculinities "over all forms of femininity" and thus justify the subjugation of specific groups because of their feminization (Enloe, 2007, p. 8). LGBT+ people—gay and bi men and transwomen who are perceived as feminine, but also lesbian and bi women and transmen who deviate from their society's prescribed gender roles—are degraded and targeted in this process (Scicchitano, 2021, p. 1557).

Historical records of such persecution during conflict are plentiful. Perhaps most infamously, this is evident in Nazi Germany's persecution of LGBT+ people and the eventual internment of thousands of gay men in concentration camps during the Second World War (Whisnant, 2016). But other examples abound. In the conflict leading up to Cyprus's partition in 1974, sexuality became "enmeshed with nationalist and religious discourses about the preservation of Greek Cypriot bloodlines and traditional families, so that LGBT people have faced high levels of stigmatisation" (Monro, 2015). The state crackdown on LGBT+ people also largely defined the more recent conflict in the Chechen wars: "Whether it be for their failure to dress 'appropriately' or their unconventional sexual orientation, women, and now queer men, have been the target of state-sponsored violence because they have been imagined as in some way 'un-Chechen'" (Scicchitano, 2021, p. 1558). Similar patterns emerge in the Colombian Civil War, where Ritholtz's (2022) work has shown that the stigma manufactured through the brutalization of LGBT+ groups is both ideologically and strategically productive for the paramilitary groups that seek to dominate territory. Hemorrhaging the spread of so-called "LGBT+ ideology" was also used as a justification for the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine by Russian President Putin and Orthodox Patriarch Kirill (Ayoub, 2018; Edenborg, 2022).

Existing theories and historical examples of violence toward LGBT+ people during times of conflict have much currency for countries in MENA, like the case of Iraq. As noted above, the MENA region scores among the lowest in the world on indicators of LGBT+ rights, in part because religious

leaders commonly deploy homo- and transphobic platforms (Chase, 2014; ILGA World et al., 2020). Although there was a prior history of state-sponsored discrimination of LGBT+ people in Iraq, ISIS intensified that violence—both in action and rhetoric—in the territories that it occupied, including Mosul (Hipskind, 2018, p. 62). In its most horrific form, at least 39 people were executed for sodomy and other "morality-based offenses," according to Outright Action International, a leading global LGBT+ rights NGO (Stern, 2016, p. 1195).[8] ISIS's crimes had far-reaching effects. For example, even the U.S.-based homophobia that fueled the injury of 102 people (and the death of 49) at the 2016 Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando, Florida was connected through the assailant's claim of ISIS allegiance (Hipskind, 2018, p. 63). A 2022 report from Human Rights Watch paints a harrowing picture of ongoing structural violence toward LGBT+ communities in Iraq—including "a pattern of attempting to hunt LGBT people down to perpetrate harm against them" (HRW 2022, p. 5). As discussed later, in April 2024, the Iraqi parliament even proposed a bill to introduce the death penalty for homosexual relationships (Azhari & Rasheed, 2024), which later was adopted with a prison sentence of up to 15 years.

Having established the pervasiveness of violence in LGBT+ experience, as well as the centrality of LGBT+ issues in conflict, understanding the effect of violence on attitudes toward such communities has sweeping consequences for political research. Indeed, the history of LGBT+ violence speaks to our interest—as discussed in the previous section—in the relationship between victimization and out-group preferences generally. For example, research has found that—due to their own experiences with discrimination—LGBT+ people are themselves more likely to express empathy for others who are ostracized on the basis of race, gender, ability, or immigration status (Moreau et al., 2019; Swank, 2019). Work in political psychology finds that LGBT+ people show "increased empathy and solidarity with other disenfranchised groups" compared to heterosexual people, for example in turning out to protest (Swank, 2019, p. 4) or "sympathiz [ing] with those who belong to other marginalized groups" when they vote (Egan, 2008, pp. 14–15).

Furthermore, there is reason to theorize that people *not* identifying as LGBT+ may feel more emotionally tied to them if they have a shared negative experience with a common aggressor (in our case study, ISIS). This expectation is justified by Turnbull-Dugarte and López Ortega's (2024, p. 1365) finding "that support for LGBT+ rights can be driven by a desire to create social *disidentification* with those perceived as opposed to LGBT+ rights." They draw on balance theory (Heider, 1958), to identify a 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' pattern, in that individuals can come to associate with out-group 'others' via a shared understanding of 'who we are not' (Turnbull-Dugarte & López Ortega, 2024). Harrison (2017) have also found that in-group endorsements of LGBT+ rights (e.g., delivered by admired celebrities)

lead to greater support for LGBT+ rights among members of that in-group. Such findings around experiences of violence and attitudinal change leave fertile ground for analysis and theory building as they relate to post-traumatic growth and roots of support for LGBT+ people in the most challenging contexts.

Theory and Hypothesis

Having surveyed the literature on violence and out-groups in general and LGBT+ groups specifically, we now inquire how conflict-related trauma and victimization could lead to increased empathy toward 'othered' groups with LGBT+ orientations. Our argument is grounded in psychological theory of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018) and related work on altruism born of suffering (Hartman et al., 2021; Hartman & Morse, 2020; Vollhardt, 2009). Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is distinct from resilience, or the ability to 'bounce back' to pre-trauma attitudes and behaviors. Instead, PTG underscores a transformation of one's values because of a traumatic experience, as evidenced by a greater appreciation of life, the importance of relationships with others, personal strength, and/or spiritual change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In terms of traumatic experiences, we focus on conflict-related violence at the hands of combatant perpetrators. We argue that conflict trauma can occur in various forms through direct experiences of personal suffering (personal injury, imprisonment, displacement) or indirect experiences (injury of close friends and family members). Importantly, PTG transformations are not merely a short-term effect of trauma but appear stable and enduring over time (Wayne & Zhukov, 2022). What remains unknown is why some people have PTG reactions to trauma while others do not.

Our research speaks most clearly to the 'other-regarding' aspect of PTG theory, where individuals become more attuned to the welfare and well-being of others around them. Conflict and post-conflict studies have found cooperative pro-social responses to others that include elevated trust, prosocial behavior in experiments, social and community involvement, and political participation (see meta-analysis by Bauer et al., 2016). One possibility is that such cooperative preferences are contingent on in-group/out-group boundaries, consistent with evolutionary theories about war and parochialism (Choi & Bowles, 2007). However, this perspective provides little insight into outgroup outreach. A PTG approach, in contrast, could explain how conflict could lead to value transformations that increase empathy toward out-groups.

How might PTG theory explain increased support specifically for marginalized LGBT+ communities? Drawing on the concept of empathy, Bruneau et al. (2017) illustrate a mechanism where people who are asked to recall their own traumatic experiences, express more empathy for others, which in turn reduces preferences for out-group harm and increases out-group helping or

support. Though scholars have defined empathy in many ways, we consider empathy as an expression of concern or regard for the welfare and well-being of others in distress (see Cuff et al., 2016 for more detailed discussion).[9] For example, Kalla (2022) use reactive empathy to tap into the idea of "concern with their [some group's] suffering" (33). We focus on empathetic concern beyond the individual level, where people express out-group empathy through expressions of concern for the group, in this case, LGBT+ people.[10] Vollhardt et al. (2016) describe empathy arising from the recognition of shared suffering as a form of *inclusive* as opposed to *exclusive victim consciousness*. Other research also suggests that out-group empathy could also be conditional to feelings of out-group threat, competition, and recognition or awareness of commonalities and experiences (Eklund et al., 2009; Cikara et al., 2014; though see Sirin et al., 2017).

What motivates empathetic responses to out-groups? Hartman et al. (2021) propose three plausible mechanisms underlying empathetic responses to the suffering of others: a self-centered response motivated primarily to reduce one's own emotional distress, an other-centered response generally focused on ameliorating another group's suffering, and a perspective-taking response that involves both self-reflection and other-regarding motivations. While there is more risk than benefit in advocating for LGBT+ rights in Mosul, and a lack of general public visibility surrounding LGBT+ suffering, we do find utility in the latter mechanism of perspective-taking.

In line with the perspective-taking mechanism, we argue that empathy, while potentially in short supply for marginalized groups, could nevertheless be amplified by increased recognition of their victimization at the hands of common perpetrators or abusers. Hence, people who are made aware of shared suffering experiences with a particular out-group should become more concerned with their well-being, as expressed through increased feelings of closeness to others, and seek to provide help and/or reduce harm to the group in distress. As such, awareness of shared suffering should reduce boundaries with out-groups via cross-cutting experiences of victimization.

In the context of LGBT+ groups in conflict settings, we anticipate that asking people to recall (1) their own conflict-related victimization and to recognize (2) the victimization of LGBT+ group members should increase empathy for LGBT+ people through the recognition of shared suffering.[11] Following Bruneau et al. (2017), awareness of shared suffering could increase empathy by reducing preferences to *harm* as well as increasing willingness to *help* LGBT+ groups. At a minimum, we argue that recognition of shared suffering should increase concern about protecting LGBT+ people from harm, though it could potentially also increase willingness to help LGBT+ people achieve greater rights or recognition. We test the following hypothesis that comprises dimensions of shared suffering:

H1 (Shared Suffering) Recognition of LGBT+ trauma alongside personal vic-
timization increases public support for the protection of LGBT+ groups from
further harm.

Finally, we posit potential scope conditions on the relationship we hy-
pothesize between victimization and post-traumatic growth to include (1)
entitativity or recognition of the out-group's identity and existence (2)
awareness of out-group suffering and/or an understanding of commonalities
through shared experiences of suffering, and (3) low salience of the out-group
as a political threat or resource competitor, and (4) recognition of a common
perpetrator of violence.[12] Under these conditions, we anticipate that conflict-
related victimization could lead to post-traumatic growth in support of
marginalized groups such as LGBT+ communities. We also recognize that
LGBT+ groups are only one of many different types of stigmatized groups
which may include other types based on ethnic and religious sectarian, re-
gional, or ideological identity cleavages. While we plan to evaluate PTG
hypotheses against other types of group identity in future comparative work,
we see LGBT+ identity as a particularly challenging case for PTG-related
empathy-building effects given the especially high degree of stigma and
invisibility LGBT+ people commonly face in conservative societies.[13] We
now provide greater attention to LGBT+ identity and marginalization in
relation to theory and practice in conflict environments and the case of ISIS in
Iraq specifically.

Rationale for Case Selection

The broader theoretical and empirical motivations for studying cases like
Mosul, Iraq—and this particular 'othered' group—are multiple. For one,
political science still knows too little about how to move opinion toward
LGBT+ acceptance in socially conservative societies and has devoted scant
attention to systematically studying such questions (Ayoub, 2022; Ayoub
et al., 2021; Novkov & Barclay, 2010). Further, numerous scholars have
documented how LGBT+ people are strategically targeted for violence during
conflict, but the field lacks an understanding of what happens in relation to
these groups after conflict (Hagen et al., 2024). Most often, this research views
LGBT+ people solely as victims rather than recognizing the potential for
resilience or change. These are pressing issues given that, while we have seen
growing acceptance in many advanced, post-industrialized democracies,
politically-motivated LGBT+ discrimination remains pervasive in most of the
world (Velasco, 2023). Indeed, there is no issue among world values that has
seen such divergence among countries as the acceptability of homosexuality
(Jackson & Medvedev, 2024). Iraq is a socially conservative society within
this global context. Human Rights Watch has chronicled numerous abuses

against LGBT+ people, exposing the government's inaction and hostility to LGBT+ rights and protections (HRW 2022). It is also not alone, however, as majorities in most states hold substantially negative views toward LGBT+ people, of which Middle Eastern and African societies score the lowest (Smith et al., 2014). In states like these, LGBT+ people also have limited visibility due to understandable fears of violence. Yet, despite these discouraging conditions and the tendency of scholarship to view them as formidable, we theorize that ordinary Mosul citizens are more willing to support the expansion of LGBT+ rights protections than many would expect.

Considered within the context of Iraq, Mosul offers a useful but challenging case for examining the destructive effects of wartime violence on empathy toward marginalized LGBT+ people for several reasons. First, the city was the epicenter of a major conflict between the Iraqi government and Islamic State insurgents, who captured the city in 2014 and held control until it was liberated by the Iraqi military in 2017. During that period, Mosul residents, including LGBT+ people were targeted by ISIS for persecution. As we will argue below, the experiences of ordinary people in Mosul under ISIS rule compounded the challenges LGBT+ people already faced as a marginalized and stigmatized community within Iraq, where they lack official government recognition, rights, protection, or support. These experiences resonate with other conflict environments where LGBT+ people are targeted for persecution. As one political commentator put it, "the terror felt by gays in areas controlled by the Islamic State is an extreme form of their victimization in far too many other places. It's a summons to action…" (Bruni, 2015). For reasons outlined below, evidence of emerging empathy for LGBT+ people in the aftermath of ISIS brutality and civil conflict would be a remarkable finding with potential implications for a variety of other conflicts taking place in traditionally homophobic contexts.

Second, Iraqi society is representative of those with moderate to staunchly conservative views on LGBT+ identity, as reported in well-known public opinion surveys of the MENA region (Rohde, 2016; Stegeman, 2020). Figure 1 below provides an overview of LGBT+ attitudes from a standard survey item in wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS) which was fielded in Iraq, including in Mosul, in 2018 following ISIS occupation. It shows that a majority of Iraqis as a whole and citizens of Mosul specifically believe that homosexuality is "never justifiable" ("10" on a scale of 1–10) – 56.8% and 67%, respectively, placing Mosul in the middle of a broad spectrum of neighboring countries in the region (see the Appendix for a more expansive comparison on global discrimination against LGBT+ people). People from Mosul appear more conservative on LGBT+ issues than the general Iraqi population. However, cross-national surveys such as WVS and the Arab-barometer provide only limited attention to LGBT+ issues and fail to address the potential complexity of views on LGBT+ identity in the region. These
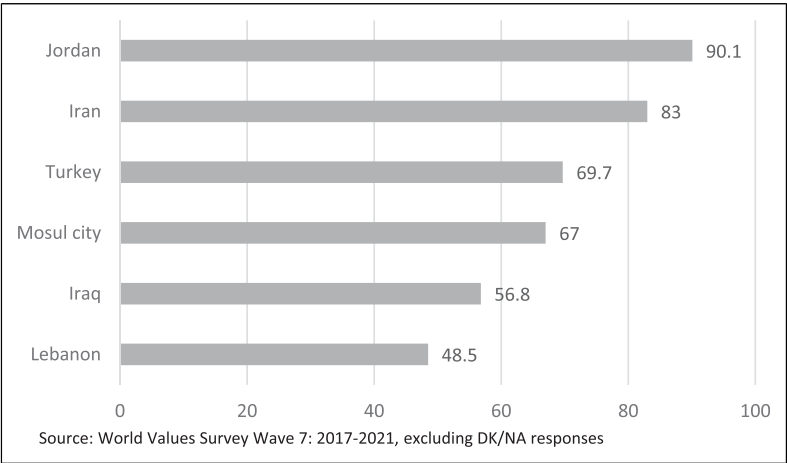
Figure 1. LGBT+ Opposition in a Regional Context/% indicating that homosexuality is never justifiable.

surveys also do not inquire about sub-nationally specific contexts such as ISIS occupation or the victimization resulting therein.

A further exploration of LGBT+ attitudes in Mosul, Iraq is useful because we know surprisingly little about public opinion on LGBT+ identity in presumably conservative societies. This is due to a lack of attention on the topic in the aforementioned broad-brush omnibus regional surveys, which tend to paint a picture of the region as uniformly intolerant (Smith et al., 2014). This image of MENA obscures the complexity of LGBT+ perceptions observed in many rich ethnographic and qualitative inquiries from around the region (Atshan, 2020; Chase, 2014; Long, 2009; Rahman, 2014).

Third, we know even less about the impact of conflict exposure and conflict-related victimization on tolerance and support for historically marginalized groups in Iraq, including LGBT+ communities. While several studies are now examining multiple dimensions of public opinion in the aftermath of ISIS occupation (Kao & Revkin, 2021; Revkin & Wood, 2021), none have considered the implications of ISIS occupation for attitudes toward LGBT+ people specifically.

Fourth, Mosul provides a compelling case for further examination due to ISIS's selective targeting of vulnerable ethnic, religious, and LGBT+ minorities for violence. Numerous human rights groups have documented ISIS's brutality against women and children (Ahram, 2015; Kaya, 2020), ethnic and religious communities such as the Yazidis (Cheterian, 2021; El-Masri, 2018), but also against those suspected of homosexuality or other non-conforming sexual orientations and gender identities (Davis, 2017; Tschantret, 2018).

While the murders chronicled above are "the most extreme form of violence, […] LGBTI Iraqis and Syrians have been persecuted by intolerance permeating all aspects of life, including education, employment and healthcare" (Stern, 2016, p. 1194). Punishments—which even ISIS members themselves suspected of homosexuality were subject to—involved public spectacles of violence such as executions by stoning and throwing victims from rooftop buildings (Hipskind, 2018).

Fifth, ISIS not only targeted vulnerable minorities but also inflicted widespread suffering on the general population during its occupation, including severe punishments for failing to abide by ISIS's strict guidance on Islamic law. Human rights organizations detail ISIS's use of beatings, detentions, torture, and grotesque forms of public executions to maintain obedience, instilling terror in the general population for over three years (Human Rights Watch, 2017, 2019). ISIS also routinely violated property rights by confiscating and occupying individual homes and businesses throughout Mosul.

Finally, the Iraqi Army's liberation of Mosul from ISIS rule in 2017 has brought Mosul back under the jurisdiction of Iraqi law. Although homosexuality was not illegal until recently, LGBT+ persons were also not offered any specific legal protections and are banned from the military and barred from marriage or civil unions (ILGA World et al., 2020).[14] LGBT+ people continue to face stigma and discrimination within Iraqi society and are periodically targeted for violence, even if that stigma also can obscure or invisiblize such targeted violence to populations living in their midst (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

In summary, broad theoretical considerations alongside the context of social conservatism, conflict exposure, and lack of protections for LGBT+ people make Mosul a compelling, if difficult, case for further investigation of public opinion regarding LGBT+ support and opposition. It provides a unique opportunity to examine whether conflict further entrenches intolerance of marginalized groups, or whether the shared experiences of suffering can build bridges of understanding and empathy among survivors of violence. The results of this study have implications for minorities at risk in many contexts around the world and speak to the capacity of post-conflict societies to transcend legacies of violence.

Research Design

We measure support for LGBT+ protections, our dependent variable, using responses to the following survey items: "Iraqi authorities should do more to protect 'gay/homosexual'[15] people from violence." and "Gay/homosexual people are entitled to human rights protections under Iraqi law."[16] Response items range from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Our dependent

variables do not explicitly link violence against LGBT+ people to persecution by ISIS. Instead, we inquire about greater support for more prospective government measures to protect LGBT+ people from future violence and ensure their basic human rights. Our choice of dependent variables illustrates how support for LGBT+ groups can be understood both in terms of protection from harm as well as proactive assistance toward improving rights, which is consistent with the foundational goals of LGBT+ movements worldwide (ILGA World et al., 2020).[17]

Next, to probe for effects of recognition of shared suffering from ISIS victimization on support for LGBT+ protections (H1), we randomize subjects to a treatment group who are asked about their victimization experiences under ISIS rule, followed by priming their awareness of LGBT+ suffering under ISIS. The control group receives no personal or LGBT+-related victimization priming. Here, personal victimization experiences function as a pre-treatment moderator of priming on LGBT+ victimization, our key treatment variable. We address shared suffering through the independent and interactive effects of the treatment and moderator (LGBT+ and Personal Victimization) on support for LGBT+ protections. To assess empathy, we include an intervening variable measuring feelings of closeness to gay people, ranging from 0 = not close at all to 10 = very close. Heightened feelings of closeness to others are considered an expression of empathy but could be conditional on the awareness of their plight or suffering, which we prime with our LGBT+ victimization treatment (Pawlicka et al., 2019).

We measure feelings of closeness sequentially in the survey following priming on victimization and our outcome variable in the treatment group and before our outcome variable in the control group. We anticipate respondents in the LGBT+ victimization treatment will display greater feelings of closeness to gay people after becoming aware of their suffering at the hands of ISIS. These items are summarized sequentially for the Treatment Group in Table 1 below:

To estimate the effect of priming on LGBT+ victimization and personal experiences of victimization on LGBT+ support, we utilize the following ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model:

$$Y_i(LGBT\ protection/support)$$
$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1(LGBT\ Victimization)_i$$
$$+ \beta_2(Personal\ Victimization)_i$$
$$+ \beta_3(LGBT\ Victimization \times Personal\ Victimization)_i + \beta_n X_i + e_i$$

where the dependent variable measures individual (i)'s support for LGBT+ protections from violence and support for basic human rights. To assess the treatment effect of LGBT+ victimization, we employ a binary variable

Table 1. Moderator, Treatment, Empathy, and Outcome Measures.

Personal Victimization (Moderator): Did any of the following happen to you while ISIS was in control of Mosul from 2014 through 2017?
  • Were you punished in any way for violating ISIS rules?
  • Were immediate family members punished for violating ISIS law?
  • Were you injured by ISIS fighters, police, or supporters?
  • Were any of your immediate family members injured?
  • Were any of your immediate family members killed?
  • Were you detained or imprisoned by ISIS?
  • Did you flee your home due to threats from ISIS?
  • Was your home or property occupied or looted by ISIS?
  • Were women or other family members abused or assaulted by ISIS?

LGBT+ Victimization (Treatment): During ISIS rule in Mosul, homosexuality was punishable by death. People who were suspected of being gay/homosexual were publicly executed by being thrown off rooftops and/or stoned to death
  • Have you ever heard about ISIS executing gay people before?
  • Did you ever see someone executed by ISIS for being gay?

Empathy measure: "How close do you feel to gay people?" with response options ranging from zero = not close at all to 10 = very close

Outcome Variables: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following
  • "Gay/homosexual people are entitled to human rights protections under Iraqi law."
  • "Iraqi authorities should do more to protect gay/homosexual people from violence." with response options randing from 1 = strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, to 4 = strongly agree

(*LGBT+ Victimization*), coded 1 for those who received the LGBT+ victimization treatment before the outcome variable and zero for the control group. To parse out the effects of LGBT+ suffering and personal victimization, we create a binary ISIS victimization variable (*Victimization*) coded 1 if respondents reported any form of ISIS victimization listed above. We then interact that victimization variable with our LGBT+ victimization treatment. A positive effect in the interaction term indicates that victimization experiences increased support for LGBT+ protection when coupled with priming on LGBT+ suffering. The interaction term also allows us to isolate the effects of our randomized LGBT+ victimization treatment with and without added experiences of personal victimization to avoid compound treatment effects between LGBT+ victimization and personal victimization. The variables $\beta_n X_i$ represent extended demographic controls. Finally, to probe for mechanisms, we also assess whether our LGBT+ victimization treatment produces an increase in empathetic feelings for LGBT+ people, which we measure by increased closeness to gay people. However, we treat any discussion of causal

mechanisms as exploratory since our empathy items are not experimentally manipulated through blockage, encouragement, or parallel-type designs (see Bullock & Green, 2021). We are conservative about causal claims involving mechanisms at this stage but we open the door for future testing.

Sampling and Data Collection

Sampling took place in two waves in 2021 between August 5-September 4 with an initial 300 respondents and again between October 1–8 with a boost sample of 600 additional respondents, for a total of 900 participants in the study.[18] The main reason for conducting two waves was out of caution because we were unsure how sensitive the issue of LGBT+ rights would be for respondents in Mosul, including selection bias in who participates in an LGBT+-related survey and how they might respond. On the contrary, we were surprised by public willingness to discuss LGBT+ issues in Mosul. Response rates were better than previous surveys we administered (approximately 30% of initial contacts).[19] As one enumerator remarked to us "When we ask people if they will answer questions on a survey about gays [sic], they say 'Sure no problem, just don't ask me about politics!'" We found this to be a remarkable observation. First, it suggests clearly that Mosul residents are wary of politically sensitive questions, but also that many did not see LGBT+ identity as especially politicized at the time. The local LGBT+ community that existed was driven underground by ISIS and lacks visibility in Mosul, where local politicians were not actively broaching the issue of LGBT+ rights.[20] When we asked respondents in the LGBT+ victimization treatment about whether they were previously aware of or saw ISIS executing LGBT+ people, only 3 out of 900 indicated yes, which surprised us given the attention ISIS received in Western media for horrific acts of violence against suspected LGBT+ people.[21] However, this lack of awareness also underscores how any association of shared suffering can be directly linked to our experimental treatment and occurs in the aftermath of violence.[22] We also believe that low visibility and a lack of political sensitivity could have made respondents willing to engage the subject of LGBT+ identity in our survey. The topic of LGBT+ identity was also broached in other surveys in Mosul, including the 2018 World Values Survey (WVS), though the WVS did not pose questions about ISIS victimization to evaluate our hypotheses. Finally, all respondents were made aware in the consent process that the study would involve LGBT+ related questions. We note that while such awareness could be a source of bias (Bailey, 2021), since those in the control condition were aware of the study's LGBT+ focus, the bias should work against rather than in favor of the experimental treatment effects we find.

Table 2 below provides a basic overview of demographic information on our sample. The sample is divided into two groups: a treatment group which

Table 2. Summary of Sample Demographics by Control/Treatment Group.

	Control group			Treatment group		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Women	450	0.22	0.42	450	0.22	0.42
Age	450	27.58	7.73	448	27.26	6.17
Education	450	3.37	0.75	450	3.93	0.31
Income	450	3.19	0.85	450	3.04	0.42
Employment						
Employer, manager	450	0.02	0.13	450	0.04	0.20
Professional worker	450	0.12	0.33	450	0.19	0.39
Office worker	450	0.08	0.28	450	0.06	0.23
Manual worker	450	0.26	0.44	450	0.21	0.41
Farmer: Owns farm	450	0.03	0.17	450	0.02	0.12
Farm worker	450	0.08	0.27	450	0.01	0.10
Armed forces	450	0.03	0.18	450	0.02	0.13
Unemployed	450	0.03	0.17	450	0.02	0.15
Student	450	0.35	0.48	450	0.44	0.50
Religion						
Shia	450	0.09	0.29	450	0.00	0.07
Sunni	450	0.91	0.29	450	1.00	0.07
Ethnicity						
Arab	450	0.87	0.34	450	0.84	0.37
Kurd	450	0.13	0.34	450	0.10	0.29
Turkmen	450	0.00	0.07	450	0.04	0.20

received priming on ISIS victimization before LGBT+-related questions and a control group which received the reverse sequence. Women make up 22% of both groups.[23] The average participant age was 27, with a range from 18 to 60. The treatment and control groups are also comparable across a wide range of income, education, and employment backgrounds, as well as ethnic and religious variation. Balance tests, reported in the online appendix, show imbalances across some observed pre-treatment variables (victimization experiences, education, income, Shia respondents) which could reflect potential administrative error in the survey randomization process.[24] Following Gerber and Green (2012), we include extended controls to account for these imbalances with estimating treatment effects as well as additional robustness checks in the online appendix using covariate matching (Abadie & Imbens, 2016) and sensitivity analysis to deal with potential selection bias (Masten et al., 2024; Oster, 2019).

Finally, we prioritized the safety and well-being of our enumerators and participants in the study, given the high risk faced by LGBT+ people in the

region and the sensitivity of the topic, as well as the legacy of recent trauma. No adverse events were reported in the conduct of the study. The online appendix provides further details on sampling procedures, including COVID-19-related protocols and neighborhood sampling locations. Both here and in the online appendix, we also consider how our research addresses APSA guidelines (2022) for the ethical conduct of research including concerns about power, harm and trauma, confidentiality and consent, which were of great importance to us and essential to receiving IRB approval.

First, we sought to minimize power imbalances by using local civilian enumerators, ensuring voluntary participation without incentives[25], avoiding affiliations with authorities, and fostering transparency, confidentiality, and autonomy for respondents throughout the research process. Respondents were informed in the consent process that the study would involve questions about LGBT+ issues as well as ISIS-related violence. Moreover, they were informed of their right to decline participation at any stage, reinforcing their agency in the research process. While no study is without risk, we hoped to minimize potential harm and trauma by conducting interviews in locations that maximized security, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Our enumerators were also trained to provide information about local outreach services to respondents affected by ISIS-related victimization. Finally, we conducted the study within the guidelines of Iraqi law and in a manner consistent with other researchers working in Mosul. In summary, given the context in which our study took place, we took great care to follow the APSA (2022) guidelines.

Results

We begin by examining the effect of our LGBT+ victimization treatment on our dependent variables. The LGBT+ victimization prime was randomized such that half (450) of the sample received the priming treatment and half
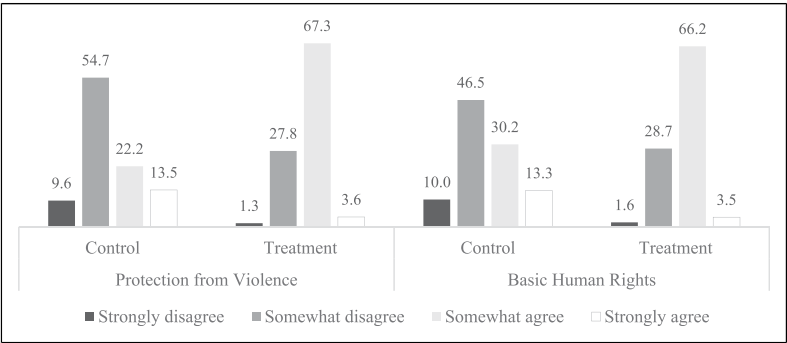

Figure 2. Support for LGBT+ protections and basic human rights (%).

(450) represented a control group. Figure 2 indicates the shift in the distribution of support for our dependent variables between the treatment and control groups. We find that priming on LGBT+ victimization in the treatment group led to increases in support for government protections from violence and basic human rights. First, we consider support for government protection of LGBT+ people from violence. Overall opposition to such protections dropped remarkably in the treatment group from 64.3% (strongly and somewhat disagree) to 29.1%, a reduction of more than half. Similarly, overall support for government protections from violence rose from 35.7% to 70.9%. We find similar results when comparing support for basic human rights for LGBT+ people. Overall opposition dropped in the treatment group from 56.7% to 30.3%, while support rose from 43.5% to 69.8%. Finally, we observe a drop in opposition in both the 'strongly disagree' and 'somewhat disagree' categories, while our treatment boosted moderate support for LGBT+ protections (the percent who somewhat agree), but not intensity of support (the percent who strongly agree), which declined by 10% in both dependent variables. Hence, our treatment, while effective at dramatically boosting moderate support for LGBT+ rights and protections was more successful at reducing moderate and strong opposition.[26] See also Appendix Figure 1 for additional data visualization with average treatment effects as recommended by Coppock (2021).

Next, we consider how variation in personal victimization experiences by ISIS could impact support for LGBT+ protections. Our victimization prime includes a range of items related to personal as well as familial victimization, displacement, and property loss. Figure 3 below shows the percentage of respondents who indicated experiencing varying forms of
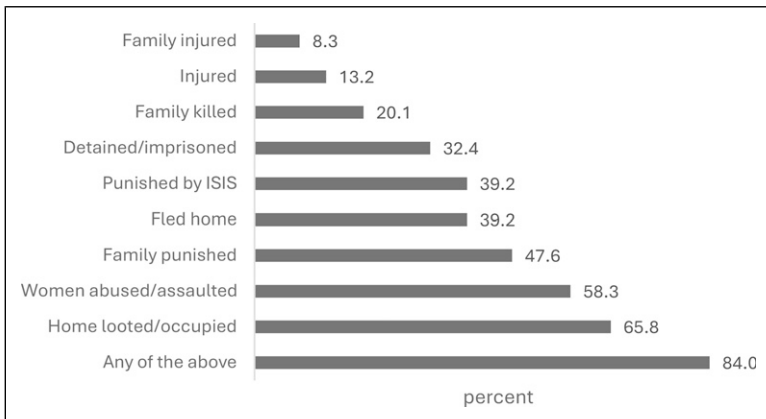

Figure 3. ISIS victimization (2014–2017).

abuse during ISIS occupation of Mosul. Many respondents reported property loss (65.8%) through looting and/or confiscation by ISIS forces as well as being forced to flee their homes (39.2%). A surprisingly high number of respondents relayed being punished (39.2%) or detained/imprisoned by ISIS (32.4%). Almost half (47.6%) disclosed that a family member was punished by ISIS during the occupation and that women in particular experienced abuse or were assaulted in some way by ISIS (58.3%). Overall, 84% of those surveyed indicated that they experienced at least one type of victimization under ISIS rule, consistent with human rights reports of widespread suffering under ISIS occupation. The mean number of items selected was 3.24 with a standard deviation of 1.94, indicating variance in overall victimization experiences.

We approach victimization holistically in this analysis. We anticipate that while those who received the personal victimization prime before questions about LGBT+ support could be recalling different aspects of victimization, most are experiencing recollections of suffering at the hands of ISIS in some form. Empirically, we find also that responses to victimization were strongly intercorrelated, such that experiencing one form of victimization likely implies other forms as well. We utilize a simple dichotomous variable coded zero for no reported victimization (16%) and 1 for any form of victimization by ISIS (84%).[27]

To assess the average treatment effect of our LGBT+ victimization prime on support for LGBT+ protection, we turn to OLS regression.[28] In Table 3, Model 1.1 indicates a significant treatment effect of priming on LGBT+ victimization (*Treatment*) on support for LGBT+ protections resulting in a moderate increase in support from the control condition (Cohen's d = 0.47), while personal victimization at the hands of ISIS also has an independent positive effect on support for LGBT+ protection. We see similar results in Model 1.2 for *Treatment* effects on support for basic human rights (Cohen's d = 0.35). Next, Models 1.3 and 1.4 include an interaction term between LGBT+ victimization and personal victimization experiences. Consistent with H1, we find evidence of a shared suffering effect, where support for protection from violence and basic human rights is elevated among victims of violence who were exposed to the LGBT+ victimization treatment (the *Txt × Victim* interaction term, Cohen's d = 0.71, 0.58 respectively). In contrast, priming on LGBT+ suffering did not increase support for LGBT+ protections among non-victims of ISIS violence, nor among victims who were not made aware of LGBT+ suffering (the direct effect coefficients in Models 1.3 and 1.4). Hence, the effect of making people aware of LGBT+ victimization on support for LGBT+ protection is moderated by personal victimization experiences, consistent with our theory of shared suffering. Finally, Models 1.5 and 1.6 indicate that treatment effects are robust to extended controls, which were

Table 3. Victimization and Support for LGBT+ Protections (OLS Regression).

Variables	(1.1) Support protection from violence	(1.2) Support basic human rights	(1.3) Support protection from violence	(1.4) Support basic human rights	(1.5) Support protection from violence	(1.6) Support basic human rights
Treatment	0.39***	0.29***	−0.34	−0.54*	−0.36	−0.62**
	(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.23)	(0.28)	(0.24)	(0.29)
Victimization	0.36***	0.28**	−0.25	−0.41	−0.29	−0.53*
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.21)	(0.25)	(0.21)	(0.27)
Txt x victim			0.83***	0.95***	0.84***	0.99***
			(0.25)	(0.30)	(0.26)	(0.31)
Women					0.00	−0.01
					(0.03)	(0.02)
Age					−0.00	−0.00
					(0.00)	(0.00)
Education					0.10	0.09
					(0.07)	(0.06)
Income					−0.04	−0.05
					(0.03)	(0.03)
Unemployed					−0.09	−0.04
					(0.10)	(0.12)
Religion = Shia					0.77***	0.57***
					(0.03)	(0.04)
Ethnicity = Arab					−0.13	−0.05
					(0.09)	(0.11)
Ethnicity = Kurd					−0.21	−0.61***
					(0.12)	(0.17)
Survey wave	−0.17*	−0.06	−0.11	0.02	−0.13	−0.01
	(0.10)	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.06)
Constant	2.36***	2.31***	2.81***	2.82***	2.78***	2.96***
	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.25)	(0.27)	(0.35)	(0.45)
N	900	900	900	900	898	898
Adj. r2	0.0840	0.0441	0.117	0.0868	0.169	0.184

Standard errors clustered by sampling location in parentheses.
***$p < .01$, **$p < .05$, *$p < .1$.

not significant, with the exception that Shia are more supportive of LGBT+ protections than Sunnis (Models 1.5 and 1.6) and Kurds were less supportive than Arabs or other ethnicities (Model 1.6). We show in the appendix that Shia respondents were also more likely to be victimized by ISIS than Sunnis, while Kurds were less likely than Arabs or other

ethnicities, so this effect is consistent with recognition of shared suffering as well. A dummy variable for the initial versus follow-up survey wave was not significant. In the online appendix, we demonstrate how treatment effects are also robust to the exclusion of Shia and Kurdish respondents from the sample and to propensity score matching to adjust for imbalances during randomization (Abadie & Imbens, 2016). Additional sensitivity analysis indicates our results are unlikely to be easily confounded by selection on observables or unobservables (Masten et al., 2024; Oster, 2019).

Lastly, we explore whether the effects of our LGBT+ victimization treatment on support for LGBT+ protections could be explained by a rise in empathy toward LGBT+ people. We asked respondents in an intervening variable between our treatment and outcome items: "How close do you feel to gay people?" with response options ranging from zero = not close at all to 10 = very close. We argue that the concept of closeness reflects a hallmark of empathy – increased feelings of connection to others in response to recognition of their suffering (Cuff et al., 2016; Pawlicka et al., 2019).[29]

In general, most people in our sample do not feel especially close to gay people, consistent with what we would expect in a socially conservative context.[30] The modal response was zero = not close at all, chosen by 62.4% of the respondents in the control group. However, the distribution was wide-ranging among the remaining 37.6%, who expressed at least some sense of closeness. Figure 4 indicates that feelings of closeness to LGBT+ people are elevated in the treatment group receiving LGBT+ victimization priming (see also Appendix Figure 1). There, fewer people report no closeness at all to gay people (55.8%), and more express at least some degree of closeness (44.2%). Taken another way, the empathy gap between
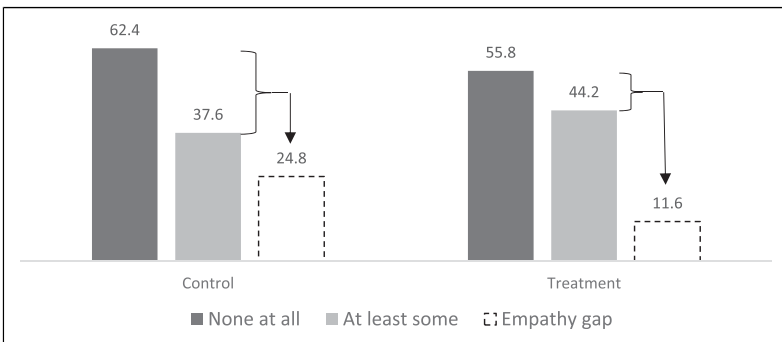

Figure 4. Feelings of closeness toward LGBT+ people (%).

"none at all" and "at least some" is more than halved among those who are made aware of LGBT+ suffering (11.6%) relative to control (24.8%). This suggests a pathway where priming on LGBT+ victimization increased support for LGBT+ protections through an empathy-generating mechanism. However, this mechanism should be treated as exploratory, requiring further research for causal identification.[31] But if confirmed, then recognition of shared suffering could provide an important lifeline of support for LGBT+ people, even in socially conservative contexts, by increasing feelings of empathy toward them.

In summary, our analysis illustrates how raising awareness of LGBT+ victimization under ISIS leads to an increase in support for LGBT+ protections, especially among those who experienced victimization by ISIS themselves. ISIS victims express greater concern for the basic well-being of LGBT+ people after being made aware of their shared suffering. Our results point to empathy born of suffering as a potential mechanism for explaining how violence could result in positive shifts in attitudes, even toward distant or 'othered' groups.

Discussion and Conclusion

While most conflict research emphasizes the long-term negative consequences of political violence, a growing body of scholarship on post-traumatic growth in political psychology suggests that conflict exposure and victimization can also lead to increased social cohesion and cooperation. Our study lends additional support for how conflict-related violence can induce empathy for others. In the aftermath of the Islamic State's brutal occupation of Mosul, we find that priming on ISIS victimization increases public support for government actions to protect a vulnerable and highly stigmatized LGBT+ group. We reveal how the recollection of victimization at the hands of ISIS increases empathy toward others who suffered under ISIS rule, specifically LGBT+ people. Despite considerable efforts by ISIS to dehumanize and destroy Mosul's LGBT+ presence, many ordinary Mosul residents appear willing to recognize, support, and protect this long-marginalized community.

At the same time, while ordinary Moslawis display a remarkable level of support for improving rights for LGBT+ persons, local activists and human rights organizations inform us that the Iraqi government is doing very little to protect LGBT+ people from stigma, abuse, and targeted violence (Human Rights Watch, 2022). As one Iraqi activist lamented, "What law is there in Iraq that could protect us?" (ILGA World et al., 2020). Indeed, Human Rights Watch (2022) makes the case for how Iraq could expand legal protections, drawing on Iraq's treaty obligations in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), but also emphasizes how

such treaty obligations are sorely neglected for LGBT people: "Each of the [Iraqi] LGBT people whom Human Rights Watch interviewed reported experiencing harassment in the streets, ranging from verbal insults to being attacked at gunpoint. Their lack of access to protective mechanisms, including legislation protecting against discrimination and reliable complaint systems, limits LGBT people's mobility to a debilitating extent and deters them from seeking redress for abuses committed against them" (6).

Regrettably, this research has become even more urgent, given a 2024 bill by lawmakers to introduce lengthy prison sentences for same-sex relationships, which human rights groups are actively calling on the government to repeal (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Our work underscores how Iraqis may indeed be willing to support the expansion of LGBT+ rights protections and how local lawmakers could potentially employ the memory of shared suffering as a means to build public support for such actions. This approach could enhance the inclusivity of human rights under Iraqi law and speaks to efforts by scholars to understand how LGBT+ activists can further human rights in MENA countries (Anabtawi, 2022).[32] This research proposes that such an empathy-generating strategy could be effective.

At the same time, we should also conclude with a cautionary note on the extent to which the people of Mosul could be willing to protect a more open and visible LGBT+ community. Intolerance is still widespread in Mosul, as it is in Iraq, the MENA region, and beyond. We find that making people aware of LGBT+ suffering improves support for LGBT+ rights, but it may also trigger reticence, especially if people perceive LGBT+ victimhood as being elevated above that of other groups. Also, as noted in our earlier discussion of Figure 2, we find more evidence of reduced opposition and moderate acceptance, than we do of increased intensity of LGBT+ support. Some people may be wary of expressing strong affinities for LGBT+ people when reminded of ISIS brutality toward them.

We argue, however, that even moderate changes in empathy and support are an important first step toward a more inclusive society. Future research might test additional dynamics of shared suffering and empathy, including across types of conflict settings and ones with different degrees of intensity or duration.[33] The utility of highlighting victimhood or relatable suffering may also hold implications for LGBT+ rights promotion in non-conflict contexts. For instance, LGBT+ rights groups in Lebanon and Tunisia have successfully raised awareness about the violent treatment and torture of queer people arrested by state authorities, which their own surveys indicate helps people rethink their willingness to see LGBT+ people incarcerated, even among those who view homosexuality as immoral.[34] These arguments are put to an empirical test in this manuscript, and we hope will inspire much more work alongside advocacy groups.

Our results also have important implications beyond the local context. First, our findings of greater-than-expected support toward LGBT+ people among respondents in Mosul help to destabilize narratives that characterize homophobia in the MENA region as ubiquitous or "intractable" (Kriesberg et al., 1989). Instead, we find that public awareness and acknowledgment of LGBT+ identity is far more nuanced and complex than what is often gleaned from cross-national, comparative surveys of LGBT+ support in the region (such as the familiar items utilized by the World Values Survey). Our work provides further experimental and survey-based evidence for what many qualitative researchers have been long reporting, and signals to researchers that we must look more closely to avoid painting a picture of determined or unmovable homophobia in the region.[35]

To be sure, Iraq is among the most challenging contexts for LGBT+ rights—for the various economic, religious, political, and post-conflict factors we and other scholars have isolated—but this should not erase the support that we have uncovered among ordinary Iraqis for protecting such marginalized communities. This evidence offers potential pathways with which to envision a more inclusive future, however challenging reaching it will be. It also holds potential for other regions that have experienced a variety of conflicts featuring LGBT+ people in violence, from Chechnya (Scicchitano, 2021) to Colombia (Ritholtz, 2022).

Our work also speaks to growing efforts to address LGBT+ persecution more visibly within the framework of international human rights and conflict-related sexual violence. Indeed, very little research has been conducted on LGBT+ people in both scholarly domains (Ayoub, 2022; Hagen et al., 2024; Novkov & Barclay, 2010). The work of LGBT+ activists from Iraq and Syria has impacted politics at the UN following ISIS violence. In 2015, speeches before the UN by Subhi Nahas and "Adnan" (pseudonym), gay Syrian and Iraqi refugees respectively, shined a light on homophobic persecution under ISIS occupation and contributed to shifting the language around human rights. Looking forward, Nahas states "The whole ISIS thing happened in 2 days, and now it's lasted 2 years. The world can change in 2 seconds. I can't accept thinking that it won't change for the better". Similarly, Samantha Power, then US Ambassador to the UN, reacted by saying, "We're trying to get it into the DNA so that when you're talking about minorities or vulnerable groups, you would always have L.G.B.T. people included." (Bruni, 2015). While such global reactions come too little and too late for LGBT+ victims of ISIS violence, our research underscores how raising awareness of shared suffering can become a potential foundation for meaningful societal and political change in both domestic and international contexts of LGBT+ recognition, rights, and support.
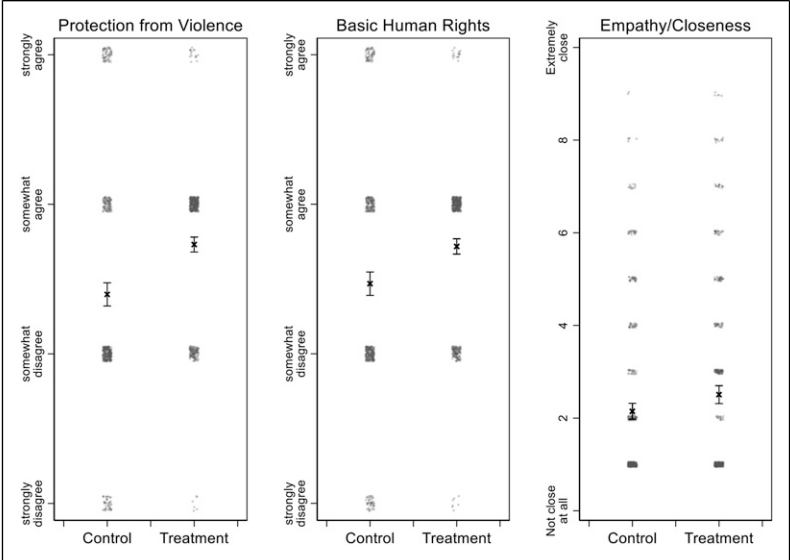
Appendix

Figure 1. Victimization Priming with Data Visualization.
Note: Treatment and Control Group predicted means are represented by a small "x" with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Points represent individual data points clustered at response options.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Data Availability Statement

Replication materials and code can be found at (Ayoub et al., 2024).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We acknowledge the complexity surrounding our use of the LGBT+ terminologies, even if these English terms (and 'queer') are also used in the Arab world, given that they represent identities that have largely formed in western societies and are not universally resonant (Amer, 2012). Since most NGO reports surrounding the discrimination of people marginalized by their sexuality and gender identity in Iraq use this language, we have adopted it as an umbrella, while calling attention to the fact that many such marginalized subjects do not identify with these specific terms or they may feel better represented by other identities altogether (e.g., queer, men who have sex with men, and a variety of indigenous terminologies).

2. "'Minkom O Feekom' is a colloquial way for us to say we are an integral part of society, a statement against social denial and colonial narratives isolating Palestinian queers from Palestinian society, and an invitation for our society to engage in a discussion around sexual and gender diversity in Palestine" (alQaws, 2020). We are grateful to a reviewer for pointing this out.

3. For example, in extreme cases, identifying as LGBT+ can even lead to parents viewing their own child as an out-group member (e.g., powerful enough to 'dishonor' a family, leading to a queer unhoused youth problem in many countries).

4. As explained in this paragraph, with our loose definition of 'out-group' we refer specifically to marginalized, at-risk identity groups that are highly stigmatized in their own societies.

5. See the online appendix for a more detailed discussion of empathy and related concepts.

6. Prosociality toward other out-group ethnic and sectarian identity markers has been explored in greater detail in Bauer et al. (2016). Scholars generally find that conflict induces parochialism in the form of in-group bonding and out-group aversion toward ethnic and sectarian out-groups, but less is known about prosocial behavior toward other types of 'othered' groups, including LGBT+ groups.

7. A meta-analysis of cross-national attitudinal data by the Williams Institute finds these two regions rank below other geographic clusters (Smith et al., 2014, p. 8), though there are country-exceptions like South Africa.

8. At the time, Outright Action International was known as International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission.

9. Scholars continue to debate the affective/emotional and cognitive dimensions of empathetic response (Dawes 2006). Some argue that empathy can arise from cognitive awareness or rational recognition that the suffering of others has occurred, which importantly may or may not include an emotional response, while still producing a drive to alleviate that suffering. Most conceptualizations of empathy reviewed by Cuff et al. (2016) emphasize a positive behavioral or attitudinal change toward others in recognition of their suffering.

10. Most research on out-group empathy focuses on ethnic/racial or immigration-related out-groups (Sirin et al., 2017). However, far less is known about empathy toward LGBT+ out-groups, especially in relation to wartime violence.

11. We acknowledge that personal traumatic experiences could also work to build empathy for others who do not have shared victimization experiences, but we focus here on recognition of shared suffering.

12. We will evaluate these proposed scope conditions in future research, but we argue that these conditions should be favorable to PTG outcomes, including in Iraq. While the degree of suffering required to produce an empathetic response might vary, we know of research positing that victimization (even when it is imagined or when suffering has not materialized) can also lead to unexpected bonds among groups (e.g., Turnbull-Dugarte & López Ortega, 2024).

13. We leave comparative and intersectional assessments of PTG empathy building across different in-group and out-group identities for future research.

14. As we discuss later, a bill to criminalize homosexuality was introduced in 2024.

15. Our survey referred to 'gay/homosexual' terminology, given respondents' greater familiarity with these terms. Our field tests asked respondents what 'gay/homosexual' means to them, which shows a wide range of understanding associated with queerness and inclusive of both men and women. We translate 'gay/homosexual' using the Arabic word 'mithli' or 'misli' (drawing form the word 'same' or 'homo') which is the increasingly preferred term by Arab LGBT+ organizations. It can also stand in for the more inclusive term 'MMMM' or 'Misliya, Misli, Mozdawij, and Moghayir' which translate respectively to LGBT (Amer, 2012, p. 385).

16. In our pre-analysis plan (PAP) we include a range of variables capturing LGBT+ tolerance. See the online appendix for the PAP and further discussion of how our

dependent variable fits into our PAP's conceptualization. We also report results from alternative dependent variables and discuss their significance in light of LGBT+ tolerance. For an overview of LGBT+ rights as human rights see Langlois (2020), and pretaining to the MENA region see Chase (2014).

17. At present, the Iraqi government offers no recognition, rights, support, or protection to the LGBT+ community. In 2024, it proposed introducing the death penalty for same-sex acts (Azhari & Rasheed, 2024) before eventually settling on a maximum 15-year prison sentence. Issues of government protection are thus specifically central to the LGBT+ movement organizations in Iraq. See Human Rights Watch (2022) for detailed recommendations.

18. Our pre-analysis plan (available in the online appendix), only accounted for the initial wave of respondents. We subsequently added a boost sample, but we did not modify our pre-registered expectations in response to any post hoc data analysis from the first wave.

19. Benstead (2018) disputes the notion of "Arab exceptionalism" – the belief that MENA surveys are more prone to response rate problems, missing data, and other biases with data showing comparable response rates to other regions. Our survey has better response rates and less missing data problems than are typically encountered.

20. Until April 2024, the current Iraqi government less actively deployed political homophobia – where state authorities make salient LGBT+ people as a threat for political gain, such as in Russia. Instead, it straddled a case category where LGBT+ people lacked ample political visibility altogether. While respondents knew what 'gay/lesbian' people are (see Online Appendix), they received fewer cues from political elites about what to think about them. Still, that does not mean – given strong cis- and heteronormative societal norms in Iraq – that gender and sexual fluidity would be welcomed or relatable. Societal discrimination in Iraq is widespread. So, while LGBT+ people are somewhat less vilified by the state (compared to those more notorious for deploying political homophobia), we found it quite remarkable that ordinary people would want to protect LGBT+ communities.

21. The lack of awareness also prevented us from using these survey items in our analysis as a potential moderator variable for entitativity. Our sample consisted of people who were hitherto unaware of ISIS persecution of LGBT+ people.

22. As suggested by Turnbull-Dugarte and López Ortega (2024), the idea of shared threat may be sufficient in bringing different groups together, potentially even in cases unlike ours, when the common threat has not (yet) exercised violence against various groups. As such, our hypotheses on shared suffering could potentially apply to a time or context when ISIS, or some other threat, was not yet in control but where people were fearful of targeted victimization.

23. Women were under-sampled because we had fewer female enumerators in our team. Response rates among women whom we surveyed were comparable to men.

24. See online appendix for further discussion.

25. To avoid economic pressure that might compel participation out of need rather than willingness.

26. One possibility we consider, but cannot confirm, is that when primed on the suffering of people who have been targeted for death because of their LGBT+ visibility, even allies might be cautious about expressing strong support. Signaling moderate as opposed to intense support could be a safer strategy when reminded of ISIS brutality.

27. See online appendix for factor analysis of ISIS victimization data. Results are robust to alternate specifications of victimization and victimization subcomponet analysis.

28. Results are robust to ordered probit estimation (see Online Appendix).

29. We will explore other measures of empathy in future research to unpack the affective/emotional versus cognitive dimensions of empathy (Daves 2006) with emphasis on experimental manipulation of mediator pathways (Bullock & Green, 2021).

30. See the online appendix for further discussion of our results in light of varying measures and conceptualizations of LGBT+ tolerance in our pre-analysis plan.

31. See online appendix for further discussion.

32. We can only speculate whether increased support for LGBT+ people after violence is a short-term or long-term transformation, but that many studies have emphasized long-term legacies of violence on social attitudes and behaviors suggesting that effects we observe should be more enduring than ephemeral. However, much may depend on whether the state and/or society builds on LGBT+ support in any constructive way.

33. Indeed, it is important to note that empathy does not necessarily require shared suffering in all instances, especially if the stigmatized group is already familiar and has certain understandings attached to it (which is not always the case for often-invisibilized LGBT+ people). For example, people in other countries who did not experience ISIS brutality could nonetheless empathize with LGBT+ people who suffered under ISIS. Though in a place where there is little empathy to go around, shared suffering offers a bridge.

34. We thank a reviewer for pointing this out.

35. An analogy can be found in the work of Kao and Revkin (2021) who argue against false dichotomies between victims and perpetrators of violence in Mosul. People in Mosul cannot be similarly dichotomized into homophobes and non-homophobes, instead espousing varying levels of tolerance and support for LGBT+ people.

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