



Soccer: Moulding the Middle East and North Africa

**Voetbal: de verwevenheid van sport en politiek in het Midden Oosten en
Noord Afrika**

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Proefschrift

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Acknowledgements

Mexico's national soccer team didn't know what to expect when it toured the Middle East and North Africa for the first time in advance of the 1986 World Cup. It was a journey into the unknown for the team, as it was for me. I was not a soccer fan then and am not today. But I was asked to accompany the team by United Press International and Mario Vázquez Raña, the Mexican press baron and then-vice president of his country's Olympic Committee, who was at the time acquiring the financially troubled global news agency.

The tour was my introduction to the inextricable intertwining of politics and soccer in the Middle East and North Africa and its key role in the development of the region since the late nineteenth century, even if it took me more than two decades to connect the dots between the tour's various vignettes: an Arc de Triomphe-like entrance to the stadium in the Libyan city of Benghazi dominated by a quote from Moammar Qaddafi, "Sports and weapons belong to the people"; police fighting players and fans on the pitch in Cairo; a stadium bereft of spectators in Sharjah; and an arena in Damascus controlled by the military.

The penny dropped with the arrival of an email. "You've got a book," the sender, Steven Solomon, a successful author, journalist and avid soccer player and fan, said. He was referring to an article I had written positioning politics as an impediment to Middle Eastern and North African soccer performance.¹ Steven together with Teresita (Tess) Cruz-Del Rosario, an accomplished sociologist and anthropologist with the practical experience of having played an important role in the 1986 toppling of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, is this thesis's midwife. If Steven was the person who made things jell in my mind, Tess convinced me that if I was going to have one foot in academia alongside my career in journalism, it would be worth my while to obtain the necessary credentials. Steven and Tess's contribution would have come to naught without the support and facilitation of sports professor Paul Verweel. Like Tess, a scholar and an activist, Paul was not only my mentor but also together with constitutional law professor Henk Kummeling, the dean of Utrecht University's Faculty of Law, Economy, Management and Organization key to my acceptance as a candidate although I had no other academic credentials.

Paul, Tess and Steven were always there with solid advice throughout the process. When I wrote the article, I would have declared "nuts" anyone who would have predicted that years later I would be doing a PhD, writing three soccer-related books and still looking at the Middle East and North Africa through the prism of soccer. Yet, all three launched me on a path I had been struggling to find: an original and different way of viewing, analysing and understanding ever more tumultuous and dramatic events in a region I have been covering for more than forty years.

Connecting dots, I first saw travelling with the Mexicans some three decades ago made me realize that no study, analysis or history of modern society is complete without a focus on the nexus of sport, society, culture, politics and development. Soccer figures prominently in the Middle East and North Africa's life.

If this thesis would not have seen the day of light without Steven and Tess, Professor Harald Lange of the Institute of Sport Science of the University of Würzburg, who by inviting me to co-direct with him the Institute of Fan Culture exposed me to a broader world of fandom in ways I may not have had access to without him. Paul and Henk who by fighting for my acceptance as a doctoral candidate added a key dimension to an academic and think tank career that I had discarded almost half a century earlier in favour of journalism.

I am equally indebted to Singapore in more ways than I can recount. An invitation to become a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore followed by an appointment at Nanyang Technological University's renowned S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) offered me a platform and an unrivalled intellectual environment. There are no words for my gratitude to two of Singapore's top diplomats, RSIS Dean and ambassador at large Barry Desker, and Bilahari Kausikan, one of the Foreign Ministry's greatest, beloved guiding lights, whose support was invaluable.

Ever the diplomat in everything but professional designation, RSIS Deputy Executive Chairman Ong Keng Yong and Dean Joseph Chinyong Liow's door, like those of Barry and Bilahari, was always open even when my research and investigative reporting landed me in hot water. There are too many other MEI and RSIS colleagues to mention, amongst them Peter Sluglett, Ali Alawi, Mushahid Ali and Leonard Sebastian. Their friendship, insights and comments in multiple conversations sparked and stimulated my thinking. This is equally true for two great lights of the study of sports,

The names of those across the Middle East and North Africa and beyond who spared time and shared their knowledge and experience, as well as offering me a platform to speak and debate, are far too numerous to list here. Many, for obvious reasons, would prefer to remain anonymous. Nevertheless, their contribution is central to the writing of this thesis.

That is no truer than for the one person, I do want to name: Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein. I have benefitted immensely from Prince Ali's wisdom and knowledge and learnt from his strategic depth and deliberate and considered approach to problem solving. But most importantly, I have been honoured and enriched by his friendship.

The long and short of this all is: thank you. Without all of you, this thesis would have never been written.

Setting the scene

The soccer pitch is often a reflection of society and an indicator of things to come and no more so than in the Middle East and North Africa where the sport has consistently played an important political and social role for more than a century.

Most recently, militant soccer fans played a key role in the build-up to the toppling of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the subsequent years of transition, and the protests against the regime of Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fatah Al Sisi, as well as in the protests in 2013 against then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Unprecedented criticism of ruling families in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan occurred in the arena as do ongoing protests against Algeria's military autocrats.

For years, many in Middle Eastern and North African autocratic regimes viewed the weekly match as their sole release valve, so much so that so that Egypt witnessed a sharp increase in its divorce rate because husbands' spending on stadium tickets was disrupting household budgets. Conversely, women across the region often see the stadium as an important venue to assert their rights in defiance of conservative clergymen and a traditionally-minded society.

Qatar has led other Gulf states in spending massively on becoming a global sports hub as part of its effort to increase its diplomatic and economic influence, punch internationally above its weight, and amass the kind of soft power that embeds it in the international community, and enhances its security, branding and access. In doing so, Qatar has challenged the traditional wisdom that a state's ability to project power is at least partly dictated by its size.

Qatar's embattled 2022 World Cup has laid down multiple gauntlets for Middle Eastern and North African nations. Qatar is fighting to retain its hosting rights as US and Swiss investigations into corruption in the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the body that governs association soccer, which include credible assertions that it won its World Cup bid through a combination of massive vote buying and backroom political and commercial deals. Qatar's woes serve notice to the region's largely corrupt autocratic regimes of the risk of murky, international deal making and abuse of human rights as governments try to project themselves on the international stage. Widespread criticism by human rights and trade union activists as well as FIFA, its corporate sponsors and soccer players and fans of Qatar's labour regime that puts the Gulf state's majority migrant labour population at the mercy of employers has already put the United Arab Emirates in the firing line with Dubai's hosting of the 2020 World Expo and Abu Dhabi's high-profile museum projects and hosting of campuses of top Western universities.

The influence of politics on, and the political influence of, the region's soccer is so pervasive that it has shaped teams formed in Europe and elsewhere by Middle Eastern and North African immigrant communities. Sweden has three immigrant teams playing in the country's highest leagues which are products of the Middle East politics.

All of this, spurred on by Steven Solomon's remark, persuaded me to delve into the politics of soccer in the Middle East and North Africa by reporting regular on a blog that quickly won a large following and evolved into a globally published syndicated column. As I dug deeper not only into often dramatic events as they occurred but also into the larger historic background and context from which they emerged, I developed the research question and themes that are at the core of this thesis.

My key question is: How have sports in general and soccer in particular intersected with politics throughout the history of the past century-and-a half since soccer was first introduced in the Middle East and North Africa by British and French colonialists?

In seeking to answer this question, my enquiry inevitably is heuristic. It breaks new ground given that scholarly research with few exceptions that focused on an individual country or territory have largely not focussed on the role of sports in general and soccer in particular in the Middle East and North Africa as a whole. My enquiry involves looking at the role, processes and mechanics that underline the significance of sports in general and soccer in particular in the development of the modern Middle East. My focus is on nation formation and development, regime formation and survival and as a platform in battles for a host of human, political, social and economic rights, and political radicalization.

My case studies, involving men's soccer as the dominant factor in the relationship between sports and politics in countries like Egypt and Algeria, relate to my focal issues such as the process of nation formation in contemporary Turkey as well as Israel and Palestine. I have included a chapter on the theological and ideological discussions provoked by modernization because of the important role of religion in the relationship between sports and politics in Middle Eastern and North African countries. These debates are as relevant and heated today as they were a century ago.

Soccer serves as an indicator and a barometer of societal trends. It is where developments in society often first manifest themselves. That is nowhere truer than in the Middle East and North Africa as highlighted in this thesis. Militant soccer fans played a key role in protests in the last four years of Hosni, Mubarak's presidency and the four years after his downfall. They also were crucial in 2013 in the mass demonstrations against then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Similarly, stadia have been the focal point of protests against ruling families and autocrats in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Tunisia and Algeria.

In researching and writing this thesis, I realized that my approach had to be inter-disciplinary in the broadest sense of the word. The role of soccer in the development of the modern Middle East and North Africa over a period of more than a century crossed social science border lines. It was part political science and part sociology, anthropology, geography, and military and strategic studies. In terms of methodology, my approach was also interdisciplinary in that it involved both academic research and journalistic reporting or what academics euphemistically call field research, a term I studiously avoid because it evokes notions of the ivory tower in my mind.

In practice, my approach meant that I sought to use the role of soccer in the Middle East and North Africa to pull together relevant social science theories as they related to the role of sports in society, the formation of national identity and states, social movements, anti-colonial and liberation struggles, the impact of spatial characteristics of stadia, protest, violence, and the battles for multiple rights. In doing so, I attempted to further enhance existing theory and apply it to the Middle East and North Africa.

My theoretical endeavour was buffeted by historical knowledge acquired over more than 40 years of journalistic coverage of the region during which I physically witnessed the region's milestone events as well as more mundane developments. For much of those years, I was based in the region, living in nine different countries, some of them more than once, and having also covered the region from bases in Washington, London, Paris and Amsterdam.

During all those years I interacted with key players from the region and from outside it as well as people from all walks of life. The network I built and my continuous almost monthly visits to the region meant keeping close on-the-ground touch with developments as they happened that kept my insights fresh and up-to-date and allowed me to delve deeper into the political and social history of Middle Eastern and North African soccer. This in turn allowed me to gain access to or renew contact with those old enough to remember events and a history they had often been involved in as well as to relevant newspaper and other archives.

This thesis is a first effort to fill a gap in scholarship on the subject at a time of tectonic change in the Middle East and North Africa. It builds on the work of those who have positioned soccer as a pillar of popular culture, and thereby a focal point of politics, a social construct shaped by those involved in the game, and a reflection of how a society models political, philosophical and social issues. Unlike other regions such as Latin America, Africa, Europe and Asia where a significant number of scholars and authors have addressed soccer in all its varieties, the Middle East and North Africa has been the subject of only very limited research by a few academics and journalists focused on a specific country or territory.

This thesis is as much a product of a journalistic career of covering the Middle East and North Africa that spanned four decades as it is of researching the region and its history and politics of sports in general and soccer in particular in an academic setting for the past five years. It is the product of an intellectual journey during which my initial assumptions of the importance of sports and soccer were deepened rather than fundamentally altered. It was a journey of discovery of the degree to which sports and soccer intersected in the Middle East and North Africa that proved to be not simply the result of opportunity but consistent throughout the region's history of the last 135 years and more persuasive than I had initially imagined. The history of the politics of Middle Eastern and North African sports and soccer serves not only to highlight an under-researched and little aspect of the region's development but also as a way of understanding much of the uncharted and often messy era of change that it has recently embarked on.

Soccer: Moulding the Middle East and North Africa

Abstract

Nowhere in the world has sports in general and soccer in particular played such a key role in the development of a region than in the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, the nexus of sports, politics and society is one area that Middle East studies with few exceptions have ignored. Similarly, sports studies have focused on all parts of the world with one exception: the Middle East and North Africa. Nonetheless, sports and particularly soccer has been in various parts of the Middle East key to nation formation, nation building, regime formation, regime survival and the struggles for human, gender and labour rights. This study is a baby step effort to start filling a gap in scholarship on the nexus of sports, politics and society in the Middle East and North Africa. It builds on the work of scholars who positioned soccer as a pillar of popular culture that makes it a focal point of politics, identity formation and protest², a social construct shaped by those involved in the game³, and a reflection of how a society models existential, political and moral issues.⁴ It constitutes a quest to why sports in general and soccer in particular played a more central role in the Middle East and North Africa as compared to other parts of the world that share an experience of having been colonized.

A gap in scholarship

No study, analysis or history of modern society is complete without a focus on the nexus of sport, society, culture, politics and development. And the power of this nexus is nowhere more evident than in soccer – the world’s most global cultural practice. Through their involvement in soccer, governments, NGOs, players, managers and fans define who they are as well as who they think others are. This is particularly true in the Middle East and North Africa where soccer has played a key role in the struggle against colonialism and for independence, national identity formation, assertion of power and resistance to autocracy. Yet, research into the role of soccer in the development of the Middle East and North Africa since the late 19th century, and most recently in this decade’s popular uprisings, is at best nascent.⁵

“The study of sports, and football in particular, arguably the most popular form of cultural performance in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East, has much to add to our current understanding of the social, political and cultural history of the region,” said historian Shaun Lopez in a journal article lamenting the failure of Middle East scholars to include sports in their research.⁶ That gap in scholarship is all the more stunning given “the seminal importance of football and other sports in the region or the central role athletics plays in the formation of national identity in most Middle Eastern and North African countries,” Lopez noted.⁷

Political scientist Victor D. Cha put Lopez’s assertion into a far broader context; the failure of international relations research to recognize the importance of sports in the relations between nation states and the way people interact on the international stage. “The study of international relations purports to explain how nation-states and individuals interact around the globe. Yet one major area of such interaction – international sport – remains exceedingly understudied. This in spite of the fact that countries have gone to war over sport, fought for sovereign recognition through sport, and that citizens around the world have it as a daily part of their lives. Indeed it is astounding that phenomenon that matters so much has been so little studied by a field that purports to explain relations between states and humans around the world... If the operative question is: How does sport

‘fit’ into our understanding of world politics? The bottom line is that the existing literature offers no clear or consistent answers,” Cha wrote in an effort to develop a theory of sports and politics.⁸

There is a long and dramatic history of intersection between sport and politics across the globe — in the boycott by sports people of apartheid South Africa and Nelson Mandela’s engagement with rugby to promote post-apartheid racial harmony, for example. Sport’s role in challenging sexist, patriarchal and racist attitudes is similarly global. Sporting competitions can be global platforms for peaceful and violent protest as well as the struggle for human, labour and gender rights. Coining the phrase “corporate diplomacy”, a shift from traditional inter-state diplomacy to economics-driven diplomacy, sports sociologist Steven J. Jackson argues that sport throughout history has been a vehicle to demonstrate a nation’s ideological, political and military superiority, and more recently to drive tourism. “Today, international sport organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) occupy strategic positions as global arbiters between governments, major media corporations and corporate sponsors,” Jackson says.⁹

The incestuous relationship between sports and politics is evident across the Middle East and North Africa. The Formula 1 races in 2012 and 2013 intended to obscure a brutally suppressed popular revolt turned into a public relations disaster as the media focused on mass anti-government demonstrations. Qatar’s triumph at winning the 2022 World Cup has been dashed by the worst governance scandal in soccer history and pressure to bring its restrictive regime for foreign workers in line with international standards after reports of large numbers of deaths during infrastructure construction projects,

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) used the 2012 London Olympics to force three reluctant Muslim nations — Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei — to field women athletes for the first time at a global sporting event. The 2013 election as president of the troubled Asian Football Confederation of a Bahraini soccer executive who refused to condemn the arrest and torture of national soccer team players for participating in anti-government demonstrations highlighted the intimate relationship between sports and politics and the hypocrisy of international sports management.

In 2009 Iranian players wore green bands in solidarity with brutally suppressed pro-opposition protests. The Palestinian Black September Organization made headlines around the world when they kidnapped and killed eleven members of the Israeli team at the 1972 Munich Olympics. And as far back as 1956, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt boycotted the Melbourne Olympics in protest against the tripartite British-French-Israeli attack on Egypt. The marriage of sport and politics reverberates in derbies in Amman, Tehran, Riyadh and Cairo, home, at least until Mubarak’s downfall, to the world’s most violent soccer rivalry.

As in Franco’s Spain, where soccer’s mass appeal and a lack of cheap alternative entertainment positioned the beautiful game as a lightning rod for dissent, soccer has for much of the past three decades constituted the only major institution alongside Islam able to provide public space for dissent in a swath of land stretching from the Gulf to the Atlantic coast of Africa. Away from the glare of the international media, soccer has provided a venue to release pent-up anger and frustration and struggle for political, gender, economic, social, ethnic and national rights.

By the time the Arab popular uprisings erupted in December 2010, soccer supporters groups had emerged as key non-religious, non-governmental institution players capable of successfully confronting security force-dominated repressive regimes and militant Islamists. “In authoritarian regimes with a repressed or largely absent civil society,

football has remained one of the few if not the only arena open for exposure of social and political identities, and the football arenas are where political messages are first communicated and struggle with authorities initiated,” said social anthropologist Dag Tuastad.¹⁰

In countries where social mobility and economic advancement have depended to a large extent on regime-related nepotism, the soccer pitch has been a rare meritocratic exception in which talent and performance have weighed more heavily. Soccer players, more often than not from lower-class families, become celebrities due to their skill, not because of who their father was. Their careers depend to a large extent on their performance. And despite clashes with militant soccer fans, the stadium is also one venue where security forces have often sought to uphold the rules of the game, not bend them in the ruler’s favour. It is also the sole space where the public are, at least ostensibly, the judges of performance and the experts on the game. The soccer pitch, Adel Iskander has written, is “the ultimate meritocracy that defies the omnipresent *wasta* (connections).”¹¹

Soccer stadiums became arenas of political agitation and social protest in countries like Algeria and Egypt as repression spread there from popular neighbourhoods. Attempts by autocratic leaders to co-opt soccer to improve their tarnished images and deflect attention from unpopular policies have turned the game into a high-stakes political cat-and-mouse contest between fans, autocrats and Islamists for control of the pitch and a counterbalance to jihadi employment of soccer as a bonding and recruitment tool. All participants in the contest bank on the fact that only soccer can capture a similar deep-seated emotion, passion and commitment evoked by Islam among a majority of the population in the Middle East and North Africa.

Soccer fans foreshadow what may be the most fundamental change underlying the popular revolts against autocratic rule in the Middle East and North Africa: a shift in mood from subservience and acceptance to a determination to question and challenge authority and decide for oneself. This can be true across the political and social spectrum: in liberals interrogating and resisting religious precepts, children questioning their parents, and young Islamists challenging their ideological elders. But the process is volatile and often violent. “These things take time and they are done through conflict, trouble and confrontation and then they unfold,” says Egyptian author and political scientist Ezzedine Choukri-Fishere.¹²

The twenty-first century has seen fans play a key role in the destruction of the climate of fear cultivated by neo-patriarchal autocrats to condemn their people to passivity and silence, a barrier internalized and reproduced at virtually every level of society to ensure regimes’ sustainability. Years of confrontation with security forces in stadiums turned soccer fans in Egypt, the only civic group apart from the Bedouin of the remote Sinai desert to have consistently confronted the regime, into a major threat to the regime. That experience in stadiums moulded the fans into an organized, battle-hardened force. Their battles escalated as labour, neighbourhood and professional groups staged incidental protests of their own.

Taken together, the actions of fans, Bedouin resistance and the involvement of various other groups over many years challenges the notion that the popular revolt in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, the city’s historic venue for expression of dissent, owed everything to Tunisia’s successful overthrow of its autocrat, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. There was a hard-fought, home-grown, long-in-the-making battle that no doubt gained momentum from Tunisia’s successful toppling of Ben Ali but was certainly brewing without it.

The brutality of Egypt's security forces played a key part in fomenting revolution. Virtually every sector of Egyptian society had felt its hand when on 25 January 2011 masses gathered on Tahrir for an eighteen-day protest that forced Mubarak out of office. The ultras were the first urban group to demonstrate the protesters' ability to change the balance of power. For four years, they stood their ground, repelling the regime's efforts to control the one public venue where the populace could express dissatisfaction.

By looking at some of the numerous political, ideological, ethnic, religious, sectarian, economic, social and gender fault lines in the Middle East and North Africa through the prism of soccer, this thesis explores the role of the game as a platform for resistance to autocratic regimes and a battlefield on which political issues have been played out, as well as an arena of competition with militant jihadists.

George Orwell described sport as "war minus the shooting."¹³ In the spirit of Orwell, this thesis takes the reader on a journey into the colourful, hair-raising, little-known political world of the Middle East and North Africa's soccer where the game is as much a sport as it is a war.

Occupation and Conquest

Soccer is about occupation and conquest, the occupation of an opponent's territory and the conquest of his goal.¹⁴ The sense of confrontation is heightened with fans often segregated from one another in different sections of the stadium. "The playing field thus becomes a metaphor for the competition between communities, cities and nations: football focuses group identities," said Iranian soccer scholar Houchang E. Chehabi.¹⁵ French Iranian soccer scholar Christian Bromberger noted that every match between rival towns, regions and countries took the form of a ritualized war, complete with anthems, military fanfares and banners wielded by fans who make up the support divisions and who even call themselves "brigades", "commandos", "legions" and "assault troops".¹⁶ Social scientist Janet Lever argued that in sports "nationalism is aroused by individual contestants but peaks over team sports... (It) peaks because many consider collective action a truer test of a country's spirit than individual talent."¹⁷

Little wonder that communities with contested identities and national leaders saw soccer, since its introduction to the Middle East and North Africa by colonial powers, as a key tool to shape their nations and promote modernity in a world in which according to political scientist Benedict Anderson "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time."¹⁸ The sport was initially employed as what sports scholar Mahfoud Amara described as the post-colonial tool par excellence "for party-state regimes in their projects of mobilizing populations around nation-state building and integration into the international bi-polar world system." It has since then helped autocratic leaders maintain power while managing the transition of their economies from state-run to market-oriented. It did so in part by exploiting the fact that nations emerge, in the words of Turkish sociologist Dogu Ergil, out of the tireless global competition that determines dominance, submission and the hierarchy of nations. Success in sports increases the confidence of nations. Failure does the opposite, Ergil argued.¹⁹

Amara and Ergil's insights are relevant in the context of ethnographer Anthony D. Smith's emphasis on "common myths and memories" and "mass, public culture" as crucial elements of national consciousness and the realization that the relationship between nationalism and sports is to a large degree determined in the political context.²⁰ That context in turn is defined by the multifaceted nature of nationalism. "There is a very real difference between the nationalism of a well-established world power and that of a submerged people... Inevitably there will also be a marked variation in the manner in which sport is used in such different contexts to promote the nationalist cause," noted sports scholar Alan Bairner.²¹

At the bottom line, sports and particularly soccer enabled post-colonial societies in the Middle East and North Africa to generate meaning and symbolism that gave imagined substance to an identity that differentiated the conceived nation from others and helped neutralize the threat posed by racial, ethnic, social, religious and regional identities they incorporated. At the same time, it allowed such sub-groups to differentiate themselves even though those sub-identities potentially would compete with the larger national identity.

As a result, sports in general and soccer in particular served historically in the Middle East and North Africa as a platform of opposition and resistance against colonial rulers and their local allies, and as a tool to project on the international stage a nation struggling to achieve independence. Given its strength in producing various forms of distinction,²² sports frequently helped post-colonial Middle Eastern and North African societies mold multiple, often rival identities into one that encompassed the nation as a whole. It was simultaneously designed to help construct national myths and advance post-colonial modernization and foreign policy goals.

Maintaining a fiction

Despite the fact that sport and politics have intersected globally throughout history, politicians and sport officials insist on maintaining the fiction that the two are separate despite the fact that nations employ sport to project themselves while fans display deep-seated passion and play sometimes an independent political role and sometimes a partisan one in association with political factions. Sport expresses national identity as well as that of different groups in society. It reflects how a nation, people or group sees itself and how it wants to be seen. Success in sport validates a group's place in society, a nation's place in the world and in an era of globalization a country's ability to wield soft power.²³ The inextricable, yet ungoverned link between sports and politics lies at the root of corruption scandal that rocked world soccer bodies, first and foremost the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the Asian Football Confederation, in the second decade of the 21st century.²⁴

On the other hand, sport also has the potential of becoming an engine of social and political change. The awarding by FIFA to Qatar of the right to host the 2022 World Cup has already forced improvement of the material living and working conditions of foreign workers who constitute a majority of the population. Two Qatari institutions, the Qatar Foundation and the 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, have adopted standards for the employment of migrant labour that are ultimately likely to be embedded in national legislation.²⁵ The awarding has also prompted all Gulf states to tinker with their labour regimes. Moreover, it has served as a feeder for similar pressure on the United Arab Emirates where workers on a New York University campus as well as museums, including a branch of the Guggenheim and the Louvre, toil under similar conditions.²⁶

Potentially, the Qatar World Cup could transform the political structure of a country whose politics are dictated by the fact that Qatar's citizenry accounts for less than 15 percent of the population. Sport-driven change in the Gulf state would follow in the footsteps of the 1988 Olympics that helped facilitate South Korea's transition from an autocracy to a democracy²⁷ and environmental change in China as a result of the 2008 games.²⁸

By the same token, sport as a venue for protest and a domestic policy tool populates human history. Already in 5th century Rome, support groups identified as the Blues, Greens, Reds and Whites in the absence of alternative channels for public expression acclaimed a candidate slated to be installed as Rome's emperor in games

dominated by chariot racing.²⁹ Much like modern day militant soccer fans or ultras, they frequently shouted political demands in between races in a bid to influence policy. By allowing them to do so, Roman emperors recognized the sports arena as a platform for the public venting of pent-up frustration and anger as well as a listening post that allowed them to take early note of public sentiment and grievances.³⁰

In doing so, they set a trend that has since proven its value. In today's modern world, soccer pitches are frequently viewed as barometers of the public mood and indicators of political and social trends. The US Central Intelligence Agency routinely attends Middle Eastern and North African matches to glean clues as to where a country is headed.³¹

Rome serves further as an early example of the impact of fan power. That was most evident in the 532 AD Nika revolt, the most violent in Constantinople's history, when the then dominant Blues and Greens rioted for a week, destroyed much of the city, sacked the Hagia Sophia and almost succeeded in forcing Byzantine emperor Justinian I to vacate his throne.³²

The identification through patronage and micromanagement of modern day Arab autocrats with soccer emulates the Romans' use of games and sports to solidify their power.³³ Arab autocrats however unlike their Roman predecessors were determined to prevent soccer clubs from becoming arbiters of political power. The Blues and the Greens and their fans in 5th century AD games were the Roman predecessors of today's Middle Eastern and North African soccer fans who expressed similarly deep-seated passions.

However, in contrast to the Romans, giving fans and the public a say in the choice of a leader, would have been unthinkable in contemporary autocratic Arabia. It would have given the public a degree of sovereignty and undermined the position of the ruler as the neo-patriarchal, autocratic father in the mould of Palestinian-American scholar Hisham Sharabi's who characterized autocracies in the Middle East and North Africa as expressions of neo-patriarchy or Martin Herb³⁴ and Martin Hvidt³⁵ who described the region's tribal autocracies as neo-patrimonial.³⁶

A neo-patriarchal autocrat, according to Sharabi, projects himself as a father figure who franchises his authority at different levels of society. The leader is in effect the father of all fathers at the top of the pyramid. Arab society, according to Sharabi, was built around the "dominance of the father (patriarch), the centre around which the national as well as the natural family are organized. Between ruler and ruled, between father and child, there exist only vertical relations: in both settings the paternal will is absolute will, mediated in both the society and the family by a forced consensus based on ritual and coercion."³⁷

In other words, Arab regimes irrespective of whether they were revolutionary republics or conservative monarchies frequently run as family businesses franchised repression so that society, the oppressed, participated in their repression and denial of rights. Lebanon, a conglomerate of delicately balanced ethnic and religious rivalries, was the exception that confirmed the rule. In the words of Egyptian journalist Khaled Diab quoted by journalist Brian Whitaker in a book exploring the nature of Arab society, Egypt's problem prior to 2011 was not simply an aging President Hosni Mubarak with little to show for himself after almost thirty years in power, but the fact that "Egypt has a million Mubaraks" including many soccer players who saw the ruler or the power behind the throne as a father figure.³⁸

Going back more than half a century, Egyptian journalist, writer and activist Salam Moussa recalls that the handlers of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the military officer who in 1952 replaced Egypt's monarchy with a republican Arab nationalist regime, would order students at schools he visited to address the leader as 'baba' or father. "It was an overt and expensive act of defiance for a boy to use the more traditional "Siadat El Rais (Mr. President)" as a greeting, even if (he) was beaming while shaking the (father's) nicotine-stained fingers." Moussa reminisces.³⁹

Sharabi's concept of the neo-patriarchic father figure is rooted in the idea of the mother and father of a nation that harks back to the Arab struggle for independence in the early 20th century. Leaders then as now projected themselves as parents obliged to raise their children.⁴⁰ Saad Zaghloul, the leader of Egypt's nationalist Wafd party, and an early honorary president of crowned Cairo soccer club Al Ahli SC as a bastion of anti-monarchical republicanism was at the time his country's father.⁴¹ His wife Safiyya was Egypt's mother in the years that Saad was exiled by the British. Al Ahli was the launch pad for the 1919 revolution sparked by Saad's exile. It forced Britain three years later to grant Egypt independence. Nasser was one of Zaghloul's successors as honorary head of the club.⁴²

Soccer was for neo-patriarchic autocrats the perfect tool. Their values were values widely projected on to soccer: assertion of male superiority in most aspects of life, control or harnessing of female lust and a belief in a masculine God. The game's popularity, moreover, made it the perfect soft power tool to wield transnational sporting influence in an era of decolonization followed by a Cold War in which sporting powers like the United States and the Soviet Union were focussed on the Olympics rather than the World Cup and subsequent globalization.

Sharabi's assertion that Arab regimes exploited cultural patrimonial values to replicate authoritarianism throughout society and ensure that the oppressed participated in their repression and denial of rights builds on French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault's notion that institutions of power make revolt inconceivable by turning the public into active participants in their own subjugation.⁴³

As a result, neo-patriarchy framed the environment in which militant soccer fans turned the pitch into a battlefield. Arab autocrats like toppled Egyptian and Tunisian presidents Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had no intention of risking a repeat of Justinian I's experience. There was a world in which there could be no uncontrolled public space, no opportunity for the public to express itself, voice grievances and vent pent-up anger and frustration. They could suppress most expressions of dissent like underground music. Musicians were intimidated, imprisoned or barred entry with by and large no public response. Labour activism was brutally repressed. The soccer pitch, however, like the mosque were venues that given their broad following and deep-seated emotions they evoked among a majority of the population could not simply be repressed or shut down. The mosque proved easier to control. The pulpit was subjected to government supervision, clerics were often state employees. Security forces successfully confronted more militant, politicized Islamists.

A threat and an opportunity

Soccer pitches were not that simple. Fans, particularly militants, who described themselves as ultras with a specific power analysis of the sport were cut from a different cloth. They viewed club executives as representatives or corrupt pawns of a repressive regime and players as mercenaries who played for the highest bidder. They understood themselves as their club's only true supporters and as a result believed that they were the real owners of the stadium.⁴⁴ In staking their claim, the fans emerged in countries like Egypt, Tunisia and

Morocco as often the only organized force willing and able to figuratively and literally challenge the regime's effort to control all public space. "The protests were in a very fundamental sense a contestation between protesters and state authorities over the use and meaning of public space," said lecturers Jeroen Gunning and Ilan Zvi Baron in their analysis of the 2011 popular revolt in Egypt.⁴⁵

The fans' claim positioned soccer as both a threat and an opportunity for Middle Eastern and North African autocrats. The threat was an increasingly fearless, well-organized, highly politicized and street battled-hardened force that attracted thousands of young men who were willing and able to stand their ground against the security forces. In doing so, they were publicly challenging the state's authority. Deprived of the option to simply close down the contested public space, autocrats like Mubarak were forced to respond with a combination of co-optation and repression. Alongside heavy-handed use of security forces, they sought to identify themselves with the game, the region's most popular form of popular culture, by basking in the success of national teams and major clubs and exploiting neo-patriarchal attitudes by showering players with expensive gifts and the ruler's attention while at the same time denouncing the ultras as criminals and thugs.

Co-optation potentially created significant opportunity for the autocrat. Identification with one of the country's most popular and emotive past times offered the autocrat the prospect of harnessing it to polish his often tarnished image. For Mubarak, a soccer team's success became an expression of the success of his nationalist leadership which he used to counter the growing popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood, the country's main Islamist opposition. Mubarak would attend key matches⁴⁶ and congratulate players and place medallions around their necks after each of Egypt's triumphs in the African Cup of Nations.⁴⁷ Victorious players elsewhere in the region were showered with expensive gifts: large amounts of cash and expensive real estate and cars.⁴⁸ As a result, they became by and large typical products of Sharabi's concept of neo-patriarchy enamoured by the high status accorded to them. Many players initially viewed the toppling in 2011 of their country's leader as patricide or the death of the father.⁴⁹

Co-optation also provided an autocrat with an additional peg for favourable media attention that could help distract attention away from or overshadow criticism. Egyptian state-controlled media sought, for example, with limited success in February 2006 to sideline public outrage at the poor state of public transport and fuelled allegations of corruption. State-owned media focussed on Egypt's defeat of Congo in a crucial Africa Cup of Nations match to distract attention from the death of more than 1,000 people in the sinking of a poorly maintained ferry that came on the heels of two major train crashes.⁵⁰

Co-optation further enabled autocrats to manipulate public emotions at given moments and rally the nation around them. That is where the Mubarak regime was most successful in exploiting opportunity created by the ultras' challenge on the soccer pitch. The president and his two sons fanned the flames of nationalism in late 2009 after Egypt lost its chance to qualify for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.⁵¹ The nationalist fervour they whipped up brought the world to the brink of a soccer-inspired conflict for the first time since the 1969 football war between Honduras and El Salvador⁵² with violent clashes erupting between Egyptian and Algerian fans on three continents.⁵³ It was a dispute that exploited the two countries' soccer rivalry to distract attention from mounting domestic discontent and enhance Mubarak's prestige as a nationalist leader. It also constituted a battle about which country – Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country and traditional leader, or Algeria wearing a revolutionary badge earned in its brutal war of independence - had the historic and cultural credentials to represent the Arab world on the global pitch.

The crisis was for Mubarak a ray of light that cut two ways. On the one hand, frustrated and humiliated Egyptians forgot for a brief moment Arab and Muslim solidarity and their hatred of US support for Israel and the Mubarak regime when they cheered the American infidels in their 2010 World Cup match against Algeria.⁵⁴ Yet, on the other hand, Egyptians and Algerians despite their longstanding soccer rivalry were ultimately angry about the same issues: they begrudged their lack of freedom and economic prospects and resented the repression and brutal, omnipresent security services that kept their power-hungry, long-serving presidents in office.

Unusual suspects

The key role of soccer fans in in Egypt as well as Algeria in expressing that dissatisfaction and resentment in 2011 serves as evidence of scholars Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta's notion that the "real protagonists of the Arab Spring did not come from the usual suspects within established and formal civil society but from sectors of society that have been largely under-explored."⁵⁵ They note that the post 9/11 trend in academic literature to view the region through the prism of the resilience of autocratic regimes meant that research focussed on "the mechanisms of state domination and co-optation, ignoring informal and unofficial loci of dissent and activism, presenting therefore a picture of a stability that did not exist."⁵⁶ It also meant that new civil society actors such as the ultras⁵⁷ represented new interests and modus operandi that did not necessarily conform to liberal democratic notions of activism. Their emergence reflected political, economic and social changes in the Middle East and North Africa as well as autocratic attempts to adapt to a more globalized, more interdependent world.

Sociologist Asef Bayat anticipated Aarts and Cavatorta's notion that the revolts in the Middle East and North Africa originated in under-researched sectors of society like soccer fans by developing the concept of 'social non-movements'⁵⁸ that "interlock activism with the practice of daily life."⁵⁹ These movements feature significant elements of what constitutes a social movement – an organized and sustained claim directed at the authorities, a repertoire of performances, and public representation of their cause – but operate separately. That was certainly true for rival groups of ultras who largely were as hostile to one another as they were towards security forces as the repressive face of the state. They defied however notions of classical social movements like those formulated by Cyrus Zirakzadeh given that that they lacked a clear idea of the alternative order they were seeking to achieve or the basic means to build it.⁶⁰ Instead in line with David Snow, Sarah Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi's observations they acted "outside of institutional or organizational channels."⁶¹ The fans' protests broke with classical models of protest not only because of their definition of what support for a club entailed but also because they were dictated by the logic and the rhythm of the game.

Nevertheless, taken together, Bayat, Aarts and Cavatorta's insights refined concepts of non-social movements that scholars like Donnatella Porta and Mario Diani as well as Snow, Soule and Kriesi initially described as informal networks with shared beliefs and a sense of solidarity that raise contentious issues through protest;⁶² Alain Touraine's view⁶³ of social movements as paraphrased by Diani "actors of central conflicts in society, embodying fundamental oppositions regarding the direction of the historical process;"⁶⁴ and John McCarthy and Mayer Zald's initial notion that they were "little more than expressions of preferences that movement organizations are supposed to mobilize and turn into real action."⁶⁵

The role of soccer fans cast as new actors with new interests and modus operandi allows for an innovative application of social movement and asymmetric warfare theory to the understanding of the Middle East and North Africa, and its nexus of sports, politics and society and the fans' role in popular revolts. The world of the ultras is one of 'transgressive contention' that challenges an autocrat's narrow, tightly controlled institutional framework as defined by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly in their seminal work, *Dynamics of Contention*.⁶⁶

The ultras' definition of success was akin to conclusions during and after the Vietnam war that asymmetric warfare could not be won by overwhelming forces only. A 1965 six volume, never de-classified study of the Vietnam war by the Rand Corporation entitled *Oregon Trail* argued that the outcome of armed conflicts between a militarily powerful nation and a weak but persistent enemy was determined primarily by psychological rather than by military factors. It also concluded that rebels were likely to lose if the powerful nation focused on political and social grievances driving the rebellion rather than on its military defeat.⁶⁷

New Yorker journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell came to a similar conclusion almost half a century later in his study of the advantages of weakness and disability and his criticism of *Rebellion and Authority* by Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf Jr, a 1970 declassified Rand publication that became a bible for militaries fighting overseas to suppress revolts and insurgencies.⁶⁸ Gladwell argued that perceptions of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the stronger party was the decisive factor that determined the outcome of an asymmetric conflict.⁶⁹

Stronger parties win when they are able to persuade their weaker opponent that they have legitimacy, they lose if their opponent is able to maintain that they lack legitimacy. The more a stronger party seeks to crush its opponent, the more it loses legitimacy and strengthens the weaker party's resolve and determination to resist. In doing so, the stronger side enhances the likelihood that the weaker party will win. By contrast, a stronger party that seeks to redress the grievances of its weaker opponent gains legitimacy, allowing it to undermine the legitimacy of its distractor and improving its chances of victory. "Power has an important limitation. It has to be seen as legitimate, or else its use has the opposite of its intended effect," Gladwell argued.⁷⁰ "When the law is applied in the absence of legitimacy, it does not produce obedience. It produces the opposite. It leads to backlash."⁷¹

These attributes go to the core of Gladwell's criticism of the assertion by Leites and Wolf that "influencing popular behaviour requires neither sympathy nor mysticism."⁷² Interpreted as meaning that the power of the state was limitless, Gladwell read Leites and Wolf as asserting that "if you wanted to impose order, you didn't have to worry about what those whom you are ordering about thought of you. You were above that." They saw obeying the law as a rational, economic calculation of risks and benefits: riots erupt because the cost is not high enough. In Gladwell's view, Leites and Wolf had it backwards. The contrary is true: defeating civic society opponents or insurgents is as dependent on legitimacy as getting children to behave in a classroom. Disobedience in a classroom frequently is the consequence of a teacher failing to properly assert his or her authority. "How you punish is as important as the act of punishing itself," Gladwell argued.⁷³ He went on to say that "the powerful have to worry about how others think of them - ... those who give orders are acutely vulnerable to the opinions of those whom they are ordering about."⁷⁴ Gladwell defines legitimacy as ensuring that the weaker party feels it has a voice, that the law is predictable, and that the authority is perceived as fair.⁷⁵

Gladwell's argument and the conclusions of the Oregon Trail are applicable to determined civic groups resisting brutal security forces. In the case of Egypt, militant, well-organized, street battle-hardened soccer fans emerged victorious from four years of confrontations with security forces representing a regime that failed to meet any of the criteria that create legitimacy by virtue of the fact that their organization survived intact to play a decisive role in the toppling of Mubarak. Survival intact in the face of violent confrontation constituted victory in and of itself. It also displayed the vulnerability and fallibility of a regime that even when it was forced to resort to violence failed to achieve its goal of undisputed control of a key public space, the stadium.

In doing so, the fans with their emphasis on the fight against corruption and nepotism appeared to validate the assertion by anthropologist and geographer David Harvey that the struggle for improved and more egalitarian economic rights is fought as much in the work place as it is urban public spaces like stadia.⁷⁶ The fans embodied attributes Gladwell postulates as prerequisites for the success of weaker parties: to have the strength to resist against the odds weaker parties have to be disagreeable or insensitive to other people's needs or feelings; they must be deceptive and tricky to compensate for their weaknesses; they must be willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause; and they must have discipline and self-control.⁷⁷

A dialectic relationship

The fans' confrontation fit the template scholars Eduardo P. Archetti and Amilcar G. Romero applied to Argentina two decades earlier. The police and security forces' "use of physical force aided by arms of some kind....(was) exclusively destined to harm, wound, injure, or, in some cases, kill other persons, and not as an act intended to stop unlawful behaviour that is taking place or may take place.," they wrote. Official foot-dragging in holding security officers accountable added to that perception, giving "police power...the aura of omnipotence" that "at the same time lost all legitimacy both in moral and social terms," they argued – a development reinforced in post-revolt Arab societies such as Egypt by the failure to reform the security forces. "The police in the stadia, therefore, are perceived not as neutral and shallow actors but as central and active participants. To resist and to attack the police force is thus seen as morally justified," they wrote. For their part, the police defined "the fans as a political. Stadiums were converted into open political arenas."⁷⁸

The Mubarak regime's violent response to the ultras was the logical follow-on to a decade of increasingly violent reaction to ever larger peaceful protests against the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and in support of the Palestinians and by professionals such as students, lawyers and judges. The regime's harsh response and mistreatment they were experiencing at the hands of Mubarak's security forces jelled in the minds of protesters with the violence used by Americans against Iraqis and Israelis against Palestinians. Calls for an end to corruption and the fall of Mubarak informed the ultras as they emerged in the second half of the 21st century's first decade. So did the fact that regime violence had failed to quell the protests. The ultras learnt from and developed techniques that emerged in the years of protest that preceded them while at the same time adapting them to the environment of the stadia and conceiving of new ones. These techniques included circumventing security cordons and blockades by melting away and regrouping elsewhere and surprising security forces with surges emanating from different directions. The tactics of the fans and other youth groups were facilitated by technological advance such as text messaging, email and social media.

The fans displayed a dialectic relationship between the dramaturgical⁷⁹ and the grievance⁸⁰ models of social and resource movement theory. Dramatic support of clubs through carefully choreographed manifestations with fireworks, flares, smoke guns and banners; graffiti; poetry; lyrics; and forms of chanting brought fans into confrontation with security forces that fuelled grievances of abuse and mistreatment. Those grievances resonated with their experience of security force abuse and oppression in their daily lives in the popular neighbourhoods of major cities. Expressing a sentiment widely shared among Egyptians, the ultras taunted the police and security forces during soccer matches and on Tahrir Square with chants asserting that “we will no longer conduct ourselves in line with your whim; spare us your sight”⁸¹ and celebrating their success during the mass protests that toppled Mubarak in giving the security forces and unprecedented thrashing:

"We haven't forgotten Tahrir, you sons of bitches!

The revolution was your catastrophe.

We'll tell anyone... Officers, pimps

You took a beating like you haven't had in years”⁸²

If the police and security forces sparked the ire of the ultras in the years preceding the toppling of Mubarak, they were joined in the eyes of fans by the military as it became evident in the months of military rule immediately after the departure of the president that the military had no intention of fulfilling the anti-Mubarak revolt’s goals. The realization that Egypt’s first and only democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, also would not be the reformer the protesters had hoped for made him and his Muslim Brotherhood a target too.

Anger against the military peaked with a soccer brawl in February 2012 in the Suez Canal city of Port Said at a time in which the military was still in government in which 74 supporters of Al Ahli died. Few doubt that the brawl constituted an attempt by the military and the security forces that got out of hand to teach the ultras a lesson and force them to tone down their anti-government protests. The effort backfired putting the government with the legal proceedings to punish those allegedly responsible for the incident between a rock and a hard place. A verdict acquitting those charged including ultras of Port Said’s Al Masri FC was certain to spark a revolt by the Al Ahli ultras. In the end the court in the initial trial sentenced 21 Port Said ultras to death, provoking an uprising in Port Said that spread to other cities straddling the Suez Canal. The verdict failed to absolve the military from its alleged responsibility in the eyes of the Cairo ultras. Neither did the verdict of the appeals court which reduced the number of death sentences to 11.⁸³

"Military police, you are dogs like the Interior Ministry. Write it on the prison's walls, down, down with military rule," ultras chanted in the stadia. "We want your head, you traitor Tantawi. You could have carved your name in history, but you were arrogant and you believed Egypt and its people could take a step back and forget their revolution," said a group of ultras referring to Field Marshall Mohammed Hassan Tantawi, then top commander of the Egyptian armed forces.⁸⁴ "Today, the Marshal and the remnants of the regime send us a clear message. We either have our freedom or they punish us and execute us for participating in a revolution against tyranny," the group, Ultras Tahrir Square, asserted in a statement that went viral on the Internet.⁸⁵ "The people want the execution of the field marshal," ultras chanted in mass protests immediately after the Port Said incident.

Street art also served the ultras “as a powerful device of collective consciousness and as a pervasive continuous collective remembrance.”⁸⁶ Graffiti on Cairo’s Mohammed Mahmoud Street, the scene of bitter battles between the ultras and security forces in late 2011, depicted the victims of the Port Said incident as winged angels.

A poem near the gallery of portraits of the deceased read:

“I am the martyr

I, whose blood was spilled on every inch here

I, who gave up his life so that you live here

You killed my dream and sold cheaply my blood

And acquitted the killer and did not acquit me

I am the martyr”⁸⁷

The jelling point produced by drama and grievance lies in the fact that the militants survived their regular confrontations with the security forces to live another day. The intensity of the confrontation shaped the nature of their protest. Brutal repression in Egypt and Tunisia sparked non-negotiable demands for the autocratic ruler’s demise. The fans’ ability to weather the repression demonstrated the vulnerability of the security forces and with it the reduced efficiency of the regime’s repression – a prerequisite for successful revolts according to sociologist, political scientist and historian Charles Tilly.⁸⁸ Their achievement enhanced in their view what Tilly and his fellow scholar Jack A. Goldstone termed the “probability that social protest action will lead to success in achieving desired outcome.”⁸⁹ The ultras’ were Tarrow’s “early risers” who engage in actions that test and potentially expose a state’s increased vulnerability to collective challenge.⁹⁰

The regime’s repressive response in Egypt and Tunisia in the early 21st century hardened the dividing lines. Opponents of the regime, including the ultras, demanded regime change. By contrast, the rulers of Jordan and Morocco employed force more selectively and often saw protest in stadiums as release valves. As a result, protesters in Jordan and Morocco demanded reform rather than revolution. They wanted political, social and economic change to be managed by the incumbent ruler. By contrast, brute force in Bahrain and Syria turned initial demands for reform under the incumbent into demands for regime change. “Most revolutions are not caused by revolutionaries in the first place, but by the stupidity and brutality of governments,” commented Sean MacStiofain, former chief of staff of the Irish Republican Army, in his memoirs.⁹¹

Reaffirmation of their identity meant for the ultras standing their ground in the stadia, and retaining their ability to express their choreographed support for their team by successfully resisting attempts by the security forces to stop them. While many ultras professed loftier goals such as fighting for an end to corruption, greater freedoms, and justice for the Palestinians, their lack of ideological and political cohesion beyond the soccer pitch made it more difficult for them to evolve into a political force capable of achieving such targets.

The role of the ultras in breaking down the barrier of fear instilled in Egypt and elsewhere in the region by Sharabi’s neo-patriarchal father figure that prevented them from publicly voicing their grievances and

demanding change during the 18 days of protest in early 2011 that toppled Mubarak calls into question political scientist Erica Chenoweth's theory that protest movements need to have three prerequisites to effect change.⁹² Chenoweth argued that they had to be able to attract widespread and diverse participation, develop a strategy that allows them to manoeuvre around repression and capable of provoking defections, loyalty shifts, or disobedience among regime elites and/or security forces. The ultras fulfilled the first two criteria but not the third.

Bayat's social non-movements⁹³ such as the ultras feature significant elements of what constitutes a social movement – an organized and sustained claim directed at the authorities, a repertoire of performances, and public representation of their cause – but operate separately. That was certainly true for rival groups of militant soccer fans who largely were as hostile to one another as they were towards security forces that they saw as the repressive face of the state. In breaking down the barrier of fear they were what Gunning and Baron termed “experienced ‘facilitators,’ many of which had been honed by years of protests.”⁹⁴

Bayat's concept implicitly acknowledged Aarts and Cavatorta's proposition not to define civil society in normative terms that presupposes liberal democratic values such as human rights and democracy but in neutral terms as “the space between the state and the family, where citizens engage on a voluntary basis with issues of societal relevance” without necessarily establishing a formal organization or defining themselves as political.⁹⁵ Based on research by scholars Sheri Berman⁹⁶ and Amaney A. Amal⁹⁷ that suggested that civil society activity can reinforce autocracy, Aarts and Cavatorta argued that dropping the assumption of liberal democratic values allowed research to include “non-traditional actors not usually thought to be part of civil society”⁹⁸ such as bloggers or, for that matter, soccer fans who traditionally stress that their organization and activities are not political. While ultras created organizations, they insisted that these were not political in a bid to reduce their vulnerability and exposure to political repression and internal divisions.

Bayat, Aarts and Cavatorta further build on the fact that the past decades of Middle Eastern and North African history have various social and political revolts and transformations that involve what Robbert Woltering called ‘unusual suspects.’⁹⁹ These include the 1985 protests by students, workers and unions that forced Sudanese President Ja'afar Numeiri to resign,¹⁰⁰ the first Palestinian intifada from 1987 to 1993 on the West Bank that was sustained by women, volunteers and medics,¹⁰¹ and protests in 2005 in Lebanon that cut across all ethnic and sectarian segments of society and forced the withdrawal of Syrian troops who had effectively occupied the country for 39 years.¹⁰² Similarly, the Kefaya (Enough) movement in Egypt, the precursor to the youth groups that toppled Mubarak which Bayat defined as a “post national and post ideological movement,”¹⁰³ successfully targeted students, teachers, judges, lawyers and journalist irrespective of their ideology, religion, gender or social status rather than the traditional opposition forces.

Bayat, Aarts and Cavatorta's approach fits into political scientist Cilja Harder's ¹⁰⁴ call for a break with traditional analysis of the Middle East that focused on Middle Eastern regimes and alleged Arab exceptionalism, the regime's viability in a world that was moving towards democracy with the transitions in Southeast Asia, the demise of the Soviet Union, the colour revolutions in post-Soviet states, and democratization in Africa. The notion of Arab exceptionalism was put to bed with the 2011 popular revolts.

“Regime-centred approaches have proven inadequate precisely because they focus exclusively on formal institutions and elite actors... By contrast, a ‘state analysis from below’ can help us to capture...how...a widening gap between

dynamic societies and ossified regimes gave rise to a crisis of legitimacy and ultimately revolutionary mobilization. In addition, this perspective sheds light on the local dynamics of mobilization in informal networks, which are crucial for forging coalitions and withstanding violent repression... The uprisings of 2011, as well as the ensuing and ongoing transformations in the region, are rooted in earlier practices of small scale, localized, and formal and informal forms of politics, which often occur 'beyond the centre'... The 'local,' I hold, is a political space, a testing and contested ground for changing state-society relations..., a place where the networks of mobilization and participation materialize...(and) a building ground for new mobilization and political change and a repository for authoritarian practices and attitudes."

The stadium falls into Harder's concept of 'the everyday state,' which she defines as "s a space of power struggles structured by a social contract."¹⁰⁵ The emergence of militant soccer fans as drivers of resistance to the regime in Egypt of Hosni Mubarak as well as their role in student protests against the military-backed government of general-turned president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi amount to an attempt to renegotiate the social contract.

Militant soccer fans fit Bayat's category of urban subjects such as the unemployed, housewives and 'informal people,' whose only option to express discontent is to resort to a public space such as the street or the stadium because they "lack the institutional power of disruption" such as workers' ability to go on strike. "Here conflict originates from the active use of public space by subjects who, in the modern states, are allowed to use it only passively – through, walking driving, watching – or in other ways that the state dictates. Any active or participative use infuriates officials, who see themselves as the sole authority to establish and control public order,"¹⁰⁶ Bayat argued. The ultras' claim to ownership of the stadium directly challenged the state's self-defined prerogative and officials' perception of their authority to which the regime instinctively responded with repression.

Similarly, the ultras conformed to Bayat's notion of youth non-movements that are about reclaiming youthfulness and the assertion of their "individuality, creativity, and lightness and free them from anxiety over the prospect of their future. Curbing and controlling youthfulness is likely to trigger youth dissent... The intensity of youth activism depends, first, on the degree of social control imposed on them by moral and political authorities and, second, on the degree of social cohesion among the young."¹⁰⁷ In the absence of structured networks, soccer constituted an important framework in which youth could spontaneously forge a collective identity. "Theirs was not a politics of protest, but of practice, a politics of redress through direct action," Bayat argued referring to informal networks that were stemmed from recognition of commonalities rather than deliberate solidarity whose preoccupation are narrow claims of youthfulness, not big picture political concepts.¹⁰⁸

Bayat's notion of social non-movements and Aarts and Cavatorta's assertion that civil society is defined by groups seeking to carve out public space that may not be formally organized and do not define themselves as explicitly political is rooted in what Melani Cammett and Ishac Diwan defined as the political economy of this decade's Arab revolts that undermined the social contract that had kept autocrats in power. That political economy links economic factors such as the region's shift towards market rather than planned economies marked by crony capitalism; corruption fuelled by the emergence of regime-bound new elites and low public sector wages; widening inequality and the state's declining ability to cater to the social and welfare needs of a majority of the population; social change involving segments of the population articulating political aspirations and the addressing of grievances; and a political watershed with segments of the middle class - small merchants

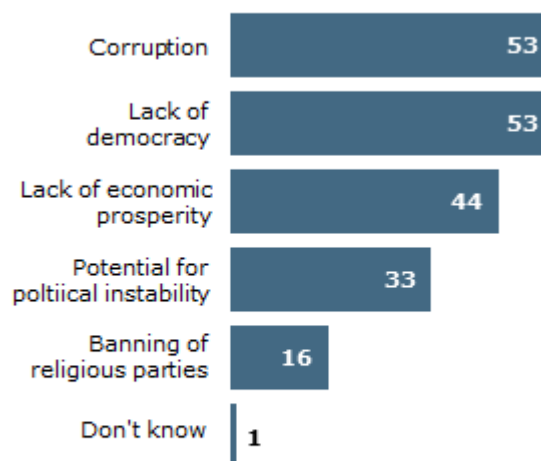
and industrialists that frequently populated the informal sector who benefited from the transition to a market economy and private sector skilled labour – no longer willing to align themselves with the regime.¹⁰⁹

Cammett and Diwan argue that their political economic framework explains why the revolts were sparked by secularist youth, a category to which one significant segment of militant soccer fans belong in Tunisia and Egypt, countries that at the time had relatively high growth rates.¹¹⁰ They note that on a regional basis, government expenditure in the Middle East and North Africa peaked in the 1970s in the wake of increased oil wealth at 50 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), but had dropped to 22 percent by the early 1990s. Private investment failed to compensate for the shortfall while agricultural subsidies dropped significantly. The impact was felt primarily by the rural poor and the lower ranks of public sector workers and civil servants sparking protests in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Jordan against cutbacks in basic food subsidies. “In the mix of co-optation and repression—or carrots and sticks—changes in the former mattered more in explaining authoritarian breakdown than the latter,” Cammett and Diwan wrote.¹¹¹ Moreover, in contrast to Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa where economic crisis sparked government-led political liberalization, Arab regimes responded with increased control. This trend was reinforced by US and European policies that sought to ensure regional stability by maintaining the status quo rather than risky political and social change.

The social contract ruptures

A Pew Research survey published two months after the fall of Mubarak concluded that corruption and lack of democracy topped Egyptians’ concerns ahead of economic prosperity and political stability.¹¹²

Top Concerns in Recent Years



Total adds to more than 100% because respondents could give multiple responses.

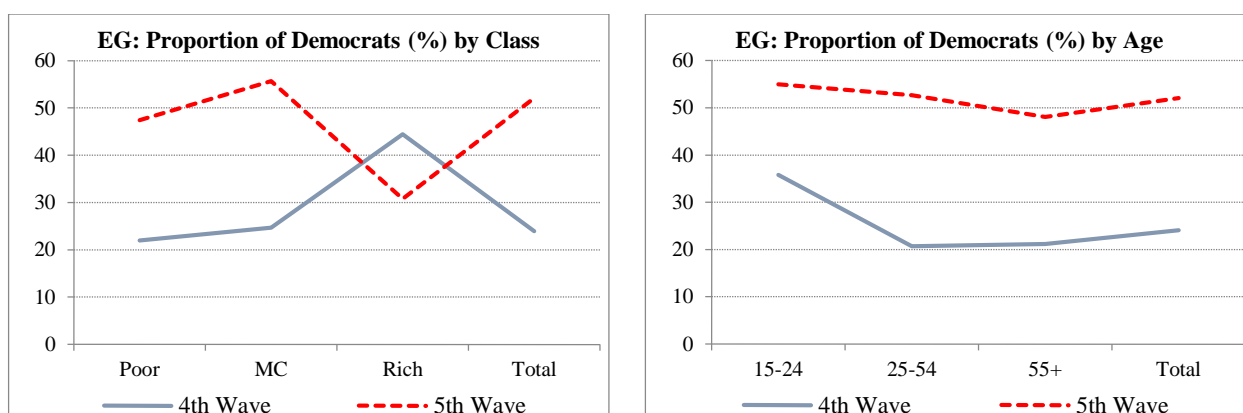
PEW RESEARCH CENTER QEGY1 & QEGY2.

In a separate paper, Diwan argued two years later that analysis of opinion by social class in the years between 2000 and 2008 showed that both the lower and the middle class increasingly clamoured for more democracy as a result of complaints among the poor about increasing inequality and the middle classes’ sense of unfulfilled

aspirations.¹¹³ These dashed expectations were the product of some middle class segments joining the ranks of the poor as well as economic liberalization policies producing small merchants and industrialists who unlike civil servants employees of state-owned companies who accounted for the bulk of the middle class were less dependent on the government and therefore less politically restrained.

This class demography matches that of soccer fans, whose tribal nature means that support for a club is passed from father to son. Diwan noted that the shift in parents becoming more supportive of their children's demand for more democracy was notable in a comparison of the 2000 and 2008 results of the World Value Survey (WVS). This seems to suggest that their opinions may have paved the way for a catch up by their parents. In this story, the closeness of the Arab family plays a positive role. To the extent that the underlying forces driving opinions are connected to skilled youth unemployment, a major phenomenon for the MC (middle class), it seems that Egyptian MC parents became as unhappy as their children about the lack of job opportunities – and this pushes them to favour regime change and democracy,” Diwan wrote.¹¹⁴

Figure 1: Preference for Democracy, by Class and Age



Source: Ishac Diwan¹¹⁵

The ultras' willingness to assert their claim to ownership of the stadium was fuelled by the impact of the rupture in the social contract involving social and welfare cutbacks at the same time that increasingly close ties between the regime and its economic cronies became evident in heightened control of clubs by these elites and widespread corruption in the sport. Fan opposition to the effects of crony capitalism on a key tenant of their lives reflected broader popular concerns that cut across age groups. With other words, while youth, including soccer fans, emerged as the main actor in popular revolts, their concerns were shared by their parents and older members of their extended families.

The ultras' claim to ownership was rooted in a fierce, tribal-like loyalty to the club expressed in an architectural environment that allows for strength in numbers and encourages solidarity and collective action compounded by a game that aims to conquer territory. It enabled the ultras to stand up to authorities' attempts to halt them in their tracks. These attempts often followed a classic pattern as portrayed by Teresa Pires do Rio Caldeira in her study of urban segregation in Sao Paulo¹¹⁶ and Jon Coaffee's depiction of London's territorial approach to reducing the post-9/11 terrorist threat:¹¹⁷ criminalization of the target group, in this case the ultras, as a threat to the existing political, social, urban and moral order in a bid to legitimize use of force to secure, fortify, control and restrict public space and depoliticize them.

In many ways, Middle Eastern and North African stadia served the same purpose as streets in major metropolitan centres in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America where the trek of millions of impoverished and dispossessed migrants from the countryside to the city forced them to effectively live in public spaces. Stadia like streets were venues where people forge or reinforce their identity and establish links and common ground with like-minded or those with whom they share circumstance and similar sentiments. They were what Hannah Arendt described as “a place where people could come together – the agora, the market-place, or the polis, the political space proper.”¹¹⁸ The stadia geographically far away from the symbols of state power allowed the fans to produce Henri Lefebvre’s political spaces characterized by new symbols and practices that challenged existing representations of that space.¹¹⁹

The identity reasserted by mostly male soccer fans in stadia is tribal given that their allegiance to the club was more often than not instilled in them by their fathers. It is reinforced moreover by the large numbers in a confined environment and the nature of the sport, which involves the conquest of territory. It constitutes a modern day validation of the notion of Abd-ar-Rahman Aby Zayd ibn Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, the 14th century father of sociology, of tribal solidarity as a driver of change.¹²⁰

The feeding ground for protest and confrontation with security forces was beyond the ultras’ ideological claim of ownership enhanced by the fact that the state’s options were limited. Soccer was too popular a form of popular culture for it to simply close all stadia or permanently ban the public from attending matches. Its only option was to make repressive law enforcement, involving intrusive security checks and violence, a fact of life. The nature of the stadium and the ultras’ artistic yet aggressive expressions of support for their club shaped the confrontation with the state, which in turn strengthened bonds among the fans. State reprisals instilled a deep-seated aversion to what they termed abuse and mistreatment among ultras and politicized them to varying degrees.

The soccer fans claim to ownership of the stadia enabled them to defy notions that a lack of vibrant, dynamic and interactive urban public spaces prevents collective action put forward by sociologist Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin,¹²¹ anthropologist Setha Low and geographer Neil Smith,¹²² geographer Don Mitchell,¹²³ and philosopher Henri Lefebvre.¹²⁴ These authors argued that loss of public space disconnects people and prompts them to abandon it and surrender their rights. Geographer Mustafa Dikec noted furthermore that authorities develop narratives, strategies and mechanisms to normalize their domination of public spaces that excludes ordinary residents.¹²⁵

Sociologist Dingxin Zhao¹²⁶ employed historian and political scientist William Sewell Jr’s theory of the impact of a built environment on contentious politics¹²⁷ to argue that the ecology of a venue together with organization and network strengthens bonds within a group. He used as his examples student mobilization during the 1989 protests on Beijing’s Tiananmen Square as well as mobilization during the French revolution. That ecology -- defined as the impact of the architecture and layout of a venue on its population as well as on spatial distribution and activities that shape human interactions through passive encounters and active networking -- produced an environment that sustained a high rate of participation. It also facilitated what Sewell described as “the formation of many ecology-dependent strategies” that that shape a group’s dynamics.¹²⁸

Zhao focussed primarily on the ecology of university campuses. He built his argument on scattered references in social movement literature to the impact of infrastructure on mobilization in student movements in the United States, Russia, and China as well as in the riots in the 1960s in the densely populated ghettos of American cities. To Zhao the impact on mobilization of the ecology of infrastructure was more important than the response of government and the use of police and security forces by autocratic regimes to defeat challenges posed by protest movements. Zhao was influenced by the fact that law enforcement refrained from entering the walled campuses of Beijing universities to prevent further alienation of already restless students. Initially, the Chinese approach was part of a soft strategy that also involved public denunciation of the protesters. It was a strategy that backfired. It encouraged rather than dissuaded the student activists. In the end, the Chinese reverted to the way law enforcement in the Middle East and North Africa handled protest: the obstruction and prevention of protest by militant soccer fans by ensuring that police and security forces had an overwhelming presence in and around stadiums.

Control of stadiums was crucial for Middle Eastern and North African rulers. Stadiums offered the ruler an opportunity to unite with the public in the celebration of a team's victory. It was there that the ruler shared with the public the kind of deep-seated passion that was paralleled only by religion. That moment of unification was broadcast on television and magnified in state-run media. It was a tool to polish his image often tarnished by his regime's inability to solve the nation's national, economic and social problems and by its repressive nature. Soccer was important, said state-owned Al Ahram Weekly Online, because it is "one of the threads that comprises the social fabric of Egyptian culture."¹²⁹ Hassan Khater, a Muslim Brother, lamented that Israel would not have dared annex and populate predominantly Palestinian East Jerusalem if Arabs were as passionate about the fate of the Al Aqsa mosque, Islam's third most holy shrine, as they were about the beautiful game.¹³⁰

The value of soccer to an autocratic ruler was exemplified by the mocking in Internet discussion forums of the incompetence of Western-backed militaries in various conflicts including against Israel in Lebanon and Gaza and in Iraq. Participants denounced the militaries as corrupt and that burdened government budgets with their huge arms acquisitions.¹³¹ Some postings compared the militaries to Arab soccer teams, noting that clubs train to win while armies train but never win. Soccer teams attack and defend, Arab militaries do neither; soccer team sometimes win, Arab militaries never do, they argued.¹³² Soccer emerged from the comparison on top even if many comments agreed with one critic who argued that Arab soccer teams and militaries were comparable given "the intensive external interference in their makeup; the likelihood of their defeat; the coach being a foreigner; and the fact that both deserve red cards."¹³³

Stadiums in the Middle East and North Africa like university campuses in Beijing have a layout that simplifies mobilization. Yet, if the Beijing campuses facilitated the transmission of dissident ideas and information about movement activities by sparking the emergence of multiple small dormitory-based student networks, which sustained a high level of student participation and encouraged inter-university competition for activism, stadiums in the Middle East and North Africa offered protesters bound by a virtually all-consuming passion for the game strength in numbers because security forces could not detain thousands and soccer matches were often broadcast live on televisions, risking the regime's repression being put on public display. In contrast to Beijing where competition among universities encouraged cooperation among student groups, rivalry between Middle Eastern and North African soccer groups increased mutual animosity that was only overcome once protests spilled out of the stadiums into streets, neighbourhoods and public squares. Nevertheless, the April 27, 1989 student demonstration

on Tiananmen Square, the first large-scale open defiance to the state since the Communists took power in China foreshadowed the unprecedented and sustained challenge to autocratic rule that initially emerged some 15 years later in Middle Eastern and North African stadiums.

The 2011 popular revolt in Egypt together with the suspension of professional soccer for much of the first four post-2011 revolt years and the return of military-controlled rule with the 2013 coup that overthrew Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first and only democratically elected president, forced militant soccer fans to move their agitation against the various governments that succeeded Mubarak out of the stadia into public squares, popular neighbourhoods and university campuses. It also forced more politicized, primarily Islamist fans to confront the limitations of traditional club-focused, officially apolitical ultras groups, leading in 2012 to the emergence of Ultras Nahdawy. Founded by members of Ultras Ahlawy and their arch rivals, Ultras White Knights, the militant support group of Cairo's second storied club Al Zamalek SC as well as militant soccer fans who were active in Muslim Brotherhood youth groups, Nahdawy initially openly aligned itself with the Brotherhood.¹³⁴

Conclusion

The identification of non-traditional social groups that drive political change reinforces Tilley's suggestion that comparisons of social movements needs to take their specific historical contexts into account¹³⁵ or in other words recognize that straightforward comparisons can be misleading. It also harks back to Olivier Roy's warning against what he termed "comparativism," the taking of "one of the elements of the comparison as the norm for the other, finding that there is either a resemblance or the lack of one, but never questioning the original configuration."¹³⁶ In doing so, the emergence of non-traditional social groups refutes the persistent Orientalist notion rooted in 18th century that views the Middle East and North Africa as different from other regions in the world because it approaches it as monolithic and static. It was that notion that produced the suggestion of Middle Eastern and North African exceptionalism that prevented analysts and scholars from recognizing winds of change in the region.

"Many academics focused on explaining what they saw as the most interesting and anomalous aspect of Arab politics: the persistence of undemocratic rulers... These regimes survived over a period of decades in which democratic waves rolled through East Asia, eastern Europe, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa... For many Middle East specialists, this remarkable record of regime stability in the face of numerous challenges demanded their attention and an explanation... As a result, academics directed their attention toward explaining the mechanisms that Arab states had developed to weather popular dissent... We in the academic community made assumptions that, as valid as they might have been in the past, turned out to be wrong in 2011... Academic specialists on Arab politics, such as myself, have quite a bit of rethinking to do... Explaining the stability of Arab authoritarians was an important analytic task, but it led some of us to underestimate the forces for change that were bubbling below, and at times above, the surface of Arab politics," wrote political scientist and Gulf scholar F. Gregory Gause III.¹³⁷

The emergence of militant soccer fans as a social movement that fits some but not all of the boxes of various strands of social movement theory is one example of the underestimation of forces for change that Gause alludes to. More fundamentally, those forces can only be understood and explained by the kind of innovative multi-disciplinary approach adopted in this chapter that involves historical analysis, social movement theory,

concepts of asymmetric warfare, notions of the impact of architectural environment on contentious politics, political economy, and critical area studies. Such an approach is needed to create a theoretical framework for researching the crucial nexus of sports, politics and society in the Middle East and North Africa. It also offers a basis to explain the role of soccer in shaping the modern Middle East and North Africa since the late 19th century and for positioning militant soccer fans as forces of political and social change as well as of assertion of various forms of identity.

Post-Mubarak Egypt: A Paradigm Shift

Abstract

Against a backdrop of soccer playing an important role in shaping Egyptian national identity and the struggle for independence as well as regional leadership dating back more than a century, militant soccer fans boast a proud tradition of being at the forefront of Egypt's multiple battles. Together with the student movement, fans also played in the last 45 years a key role in the survival of the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the foremost Islamist groupings, in Egypt and beyond. That was true in the 1970s as it is today where students and soccer fans constitute the backbone of non-jihadist opposition to the repressive regime of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and the Brotherhood struggles to survive one of the most brutal government crackdown's in the organization's 87 year-long history. In an environment in which a jihadist insurgency is gaining steam and large segments of Egyptian youth are disillusioned, frustrated and angry at their lack of social and economic opportunity, students and soccer fans are fighting an uphill battle to prevent radicalization.

Breaking with tradition

The 2011 popular revolt in Egypt together with the suspension of professional soccer for much of the first four post-2011 revolt years and the return of military-controlled rule with the 2013 coup that overthrew Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first and only democratically elected president, forced militant soccer fans to move their agitation against the various governments that succeeded President Hosni Mubarak out of the stadia into public squares, popular neighbourhoods and university campuses.

It also prompted more politicized, primarily Islamist fans as well as radicalized supporters frustrated with the 2011 revolt's failure to achieve its goals and improve youths' social and economic prospects to confront the limitations of traditional club-focused, officially apolitical ultras groups. Recognition of the limitations inherent in the structure and positioning of traditional groups of ultras led in 2012 to the emergence of Ultras Nahdawy, Egypt's first fan group that identified itself explicitly as political rather than as supportive of a specific soccer club. It also prompted an influential soccer fan fringe to drift towards jihadist groups like the Islamic State that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq.

Founded by members of Ultras Ahlawy, the fan group of Al Ahli SC, and their arch rivals, Ultras White Knights (UWK), the militant support group of Cairo's second storied club Al Zamalek SC as well as militant soccer fans who were active in Muslim Brotherhood youth groups, Nahdawy with some 65,000 followers on Facebook¹³⁸ initially openly aligned itself with the Brotherhood.¹³⁹

Nahdawy's break with the long-standing template for groups of ultras who defined themselves first and foremost as apolitical fans of their team was fuelled by an initial ideological commitment to the philosophy of the Muslim Brotherhood, a transnational Sunni Islamist organization founded in Egypt by Islamic scholar and schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna in 1928 that despite decades of being outlawed and forced to operate clandestinely emerged as the most organized political grouping in the wake of the 2011 revolt. Notwithstanding continued adherence to the Brotherhood's philosophy, Nahdawy's distanced itself from the group following the 2013 coup,¹⁴⁰ the banning of the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization,¹⁴¹ and the regime's mounting repression.¹⁴² Its focus increasingly became the achievement of the goals of the 2011 revolt, and opposition to the military-controlled regime.¹⁴³

“Many of us are Islamists. I am a member of the Brotherhood, but that is not why we supported the Brotherhood. We don’t want to be inside the Brotherhood or the system. We supported Morsi not because he was a brother but because we wanted a revolutionary force to be in government. The Brotherhood was the only revolutionary force that had a candidate and popular support and was part of the (2011) revolution,” said a leader of the Nahdawy, who asked to be identified only as Ahmed.¹⁴⁴

Nahdawy’s following grew exponentially in the wake of the brutal ending in August 2013 of a Muslim Brotherhood sit-in on Cairo’s Raba’a al-Adawiya Square, one of two protest squares, in which security forces killed more than 600 people. Together with Students against the Coup, a student group formed after the military takeover, Nahdawy saw itself as a force that was trying to provide disaffected youth with a glimmer of hope.

A member of an ultras group that played a key role in the popular revolt on Cairo’s Tahrir Square in 2011 who has since been expelled from university for organizing anti-government protests and sentenced twice in absentia to long-term incarceration, Ahmed, is a fugitive who moves around Cairo in a protective cocoon. He spoke in a low voice to avoid being overheard, and regularly looked furtively over his shoulder.

Like during the revolt on Tahrir, Ahmed and his fellow ultras formed the front-line defence against security forces in anti-Sisi protests on campuses and in neighbourhoods. Their ultras-rooted tactics of chanting, jumping up and down and using flares and fireworks were evident in the protests. It helped protesters bond and overcome their fear of security forces. Some 17 members of Nahdawy that has branches in most Egyptian universities had been killed in clashes with security forces in the first two years after the coup.

Yusuf Salheen, a 22-year old leader of Students against the Coup that built a presence not only in universities but also in vocational institutions, said some 3,000 students had been arrested in the two years since the coup against Morsi, 1,500 of which were still in detention. Salheen, a student of Islam at Cairo’s prestigious Al Azhar University, who positioned himself as an Islamist but not a member of the Brotherhood, said that some 2,000 students had been expelled from university because of their opposition to the government. Salheen successfully defended himself against an effort to expel him from Al Azhar. He said university dormitories like stadia were being shut down to deprive students from using them as protest rallying points.¹⁴⁵

To evade arrests, ultras and students have devised a host of methods. They use basic mobile rather than smart phones, which they believe harder to track. They speak in code on the phone and frequently move sleeping quarters. Rabab El-Mahdi, a political scientist at the American University of Cairo, described the disrupting impact of the crackdown on students, soccer fans and intellectuals in a description of the evolution of a reading group she founded nine months after the toppling of Mubarak in an environment of newly found albeit short-lived academic freedom. The group included men and women, leftists, Islamists and secularists. “Over time things have changed, just as Egypt has. Our weekly meetings are now much smaller and less regular. Awatif and her family had to flee for fear of persecution. Mohamed, Tamer and Asmaa are still here, but have had to stop doing many of the things they love. With the clampdown on freedoms and attacks against activists, many members of my reading group have become disenchanted and at risk. Nahla spends most of her time running from one prison to the next visiting friends who have been imprisoned. Many of Mariam’s family are in jail, imprisoned alongside others attending protests against President Sisi,” El-Mahdi reported.¹⁴⁶

Nahdawy was as much a product of history as it was of the wave of liberalization that swept Egyptian universities in the wake of the fall of Mubarak that built on a degree of greater freedom initiated in 2005 when the deposed president first announced competitive presidential elections.¹⁴⁷ Free elections were held in student organizations in the months after Mubarak's departure and the National Student Union was re-established after having been banned for 32 years. Students associated with the Muslim Brotherhood won the union's first elections in 2012 as Morsi was being sworn in as president.¹⁴⁸

Steeped in the history of the ultras, the student movement and its soccer roots, and the Brotherhood, men like Ahmed and Salheen saw themselves not only as opponents of what they viewed as a dictatorial regime but also of agents of change within the Islamist movement and society at large. Theirs was the century-old history of a student movement populated by soccer fans that sparked the 1919 revolution and paved the way for independence three years later and after the crackdown on the Brotherhood by Gamal Abdel Nasser, the visionary Egyptian leader who toppled the monarchy in 1952 and became a symbol of Arab nationalism, was the Brotherhood's catalyst for revival and adaptation.

Riding the wave of nationalist sentiment

It is a history that is symbolized by Cairo's storied Al Ahli (The National) SC, which traces its roots to what became known as 'The Denshawai Incident'¹⁴⁹ or what George Bernard Shaw called 'The Denshawai Horror',¹⁵⁰ a reference to the 1906 public hanging by British authorities of four villagers and flogging of 11 others for resisting the hunting by British troops of pigeons, the mainstay of the economy of Denshawai, a Nile Delta village. The incident sparked outrage and fuelled nationalist fervour.

Looking for a way to channel that fervour, Omar Lutfi Pasha, a nationalist student leader, and Abdel Khaliq Tharwat Pasha, a founder of the nationalist Wafd Party, came up with the idea of establishing a sports club for Egyptians that would serve as a gathering place for students who spearheaded anti-colonial protest in a land in which sports and social clubs that started to sprout in 1903 were the exclusive domain of foreigners.¹⁵¹ It also offered Egypt's nationalist elite an opportunity to "mobilize and popularize themselves through social and cultural institutions and political parties."¹⁵²

In doing so, Tharwat and Lutfi exploited what journalist Mohamed El-Sayed called Egypt's "love at first sight" with soccer.¹⁵³ To implement their plan, Lutfi and Tharwat gathered in April 1907 a group of like-minded men in the Cairo home of Michel Anas, a British consultant to the finance ministry.¹⁵⁴ Anas was appointed founder and president of the 'people's' club in the belief that a foreigner in contrast to Egyptian nationalists would have less difficulty in acquiring the necessary land. Anas served for a year and is the only foreigner to ever have been a member of Al Ahli's board.¹⁵⁵ The club's founding was in line with nationalist sentiment at the time that resented the emergence of segregated sports cum social clubs that catered primarily to the European elite. In protest, the nationalists developed a network of publications, salons and clubs of their own that targeted the Egyptian upper and middle classes.¹⁵⁶

Celebrations of Al Ahli victories in matches in the Sultan Hussein Cup, Egypt's first local competition launched in 1917, often exploded into anti-British protests. Twelve years after the club's establishment, Al Ahli students led anti-British demonstrations during the 1919 revolution. The revolt was sparked by the arrest of Wafd leader Saad Zaghloul who in 1908 served briefly as chairman of Al Ahli's general assembly.¹⁵⁷ The uprising, fuelled by deep-

seated discontent over British manipulation of the economy, and resentment against a heavily British-staffed bureaucracy and war-time requisitioning of Egyptian assets, led three years later to Egypt's independence. The protesters chanted songs written by Sayed Darwish, and Egyptian singer and composer widely viewed as the father of Egyptian popular music, such as:

"Mr. Hamza, we are the students

We don't care if we go to prison, nor do we care about the governorate

We're used to living on bread, and sleeping with no blankets

Al Ahli against the British Rule."¹⁵⁸

The revolt of the shabab, the young men and students who plotted on the grounds of Al Ahli, like that of their successors who almost a century later toppled Mubarak, highlighted their power, a potency that could serve rulers capable of harnessing it but posed a threat to those who failed to do so.

"The game often diverts the wrath of the masses for a regime or government and directs it at the rival. The satisfaction of competition and occasional triumph keep the masses busy and happy and the game may become an instrument of control by governments that may otherwise become the target of political opposition... When the issue is national competition, the individual melts into the nation and the nation into the state and the state becomes inseparable from its rivals (national enemies). All the rest is either symbolic or insignificant. The powerful support the national team together with the powerless. The rich with the poor, the lower and upper classes and those with cultural differences chant the same slogans, which they normally would not do. They become one. Even in societies that could not yet find internal peace, football is an instrument of union at the national level" whenever the national team plays, said Turkish sociologist Dogu Ergil, laying out the opportunities soccer presented to autocrats.¹⁵⁹

The Egyptian fans' early 20th century street power that earned them the nick name 'Army of the Wafd,' the nationalist anti-British opposition that formed the government after the 1919 revolution, drove home to Egypt's successive rulers from King Farouk who had what is today one of Africa's foremost clubs, Zamalek SC, named after him, to Nasser, who in one of his first moves after toppling Farouk in 1952 appointed himself head of Al Ahli, to presidents Anwar El-Sadat and Mubarak, the potential political power of the sport as well as the threat it posed. Farouk early on set the pattern for political control of soccer by ensuring that his minister of war, Mohamed Haidar Pasha, headed the Egyptian Football Association (EFA) as well as Zamalek during much of his rule.¹⁶⁰

Inspired by European thinking, the notion of cultivating Egyptian youth's physical, intellectual, and moral strength dominated media reporting in the early years of independence and would later shape the thinking of Nasser's revolutionary regime. Under the monarchy however, concern about the youth's loyalty to the regime hampered its willingness to empower the younger generation. Those became even more acute with the ascension in 1936 of 16 year-old Farouk following the death of his father, King Fuad I. His rule became increasingly embattled amid violent student riots against continued British influence in which Nasser participated.¹⁶¹ In response, Farouk, a passionate soccer fan, followed in his father's footsteps by seeking to identify himself with the sport both out of love for the

game and in a play to exploit political opportunity. In doing so, Farouk set a pattern that remains in place until today in much of the Arab world in which Arab leaders lack legitimacy and seek to polish their tarnished images.

Farouk is probably most lauded for the royal decree he issued in 1948 that founded Egypt's National Football League, making it the first such league in both Africa and the Arab World¹⁶² as well as his funding motivated by both politics and passion of numerous Egyptian clubs and the 1946 construction of the Ismailia stadium. Farouk's approach was modelled on that of his father who sought to win the youth by wooing the Egyptian Boy Scouts. The two royals set the tone for their detractors and successors, including General Mohammed Naguib, a leader of the military officers who toppled Farouk in 1952. Naguib kept his eye on the soccer ball but did not ignore the scouts¹⁶³ whose stress on physical sport and training as well as military-like discipline and conformity posed far less of threat but failed to command the kind of national passion that soccer did.

Writing in his diary, Baron Miles Lampson Killearn, Britain's High Commissioner in Egypt from 1935 until 1946, noted that "Farouk began watching football since his prime days."¹⁶⁴ Lord Killearn recalled that the king made a point of attending all derbies between Al Ahli and Zamalek.¹⁶⁵ Like his nationalist and autocratic successors, Farouk sought to polish his tarnished image by associating himself with the glamour and prestige of soccer success not only by attending matches but also by taking a personal interest in the well-being of players.

Talented Al Ahli goalkeeper Mustafa Kamel Mansour recalled that Farouk frequently would inquire whether he and another player, Mokhtar El-Titish, were part of the team's line-up for an upcoming game even though the club was known for its anti-monarchist, nationalist sentiments.¹⁶⁶ When monarchist, pro-British Zamalek then named Al Mukhtalet (The Mixed) because of its ethnically diverse membership defeated Al Ahli 6:0 in their 1942 Farouk Cup derby, the king ordered that the club become his namesake.¹⁶⁷

Earlier, Farouk had considered squashing Al Ahli's nationalist zeal by merging it with Zamalek but dropped the idea when his advisors suggested he may destroy Egyptian soccer's competitive spirit and with it his legacy. Farouk's interest in Zamalek's success against Ahli as the latter confirmed its status as a hothouse of anti-monarchist activism, grew to the extent that he would select players for derbies between the arch rivals and make them vow that "they would do their absolute best to win."¹⁶⁸

Opportunities and threats

In contrast to Farouk, Nasser, the military leader of the coup that toppled the king in 1952, saw soccer as a political utility that could serve his domestic and foreign policy goals with no passion for the game itself. Mohammed Hassanin Heikal, a confidante of Nasser, prominent journalist and editor-in-chief of the powerful, state-owned Al Ahram newspaper, recalled the Egyptian leader recognizing both the opportunity that soccer offered and the potential threat it posed. "Nasser believed football was an important activity for a country involved in political conflicts. He was interested in matches that were played for example in Africa where football served as an Egyptian ambassador," Heikal said.¹⁶⁹

Soccer fit into what Middle East and Islam scholar Raymond W. Baker described as Nasser's "grasp of the necessary linkage between domestic and international politics."¹⁷⁰ Initially, Nasser's identification with the nation's most popular sport constituted one attempt to solidify popular backing for his controversial agrarian land reform, enacted six weeks after Nasser grabbed power and mired in political controversy, which sought to break the back of the rich

landowners who had long successfully resisted change. Nasser saw soccer as an incentive and a vehicle to mobilizing popular support at a time that his efforts to sustain mobilization in support of the regime were faltering. As a result, post-1952 Egyptian sports took on, according to scholar Yoav Di-Capua, characteristics of populism. They were urban, multi-class, exhibitionistic, charismatic and militaristic.¹⁷¹

To further achieve his goal, Nasser, much like he did in many state institutions, relied on trusted military officers to manage soccer. The officers replaced ancien regime officials opposed to revolutionary changes Nasser sought to enact. Given soccer's utility not only in terms of foreign policy but also as a tool of modernization, some of Nasser's intimates countered the notion that he had no interest in the game itself, arguing that he hid his passion for Al Ahli in a bid to prevent soccer fanaticism and maintain a level playing field even though he felt that he had no choice but to accept an invitation to become the club's honorary president in 1955.¹⁷² To cement Egypt's role in Africa, Nasser became the driving force behind the founding in 1956 of Africa's regional soccer governing body, The Confederation of African Football (CAF), and the creation a year later of the Africa Cup of Nations.¹⁷³

To be able to control soccer, Nasser made sure that the military officers or officials who took over management of the sport had security backgrounds. Among them were Mohammed Ahmed, a close aide, and Field Marshal Abdelhakim Amer, a Zamalek fan, who headed for some time the Egyptian Football Association (EFA).¹⁷⁴ Amer's brother, Hassan, was appointed head of Zamalek. Retired army officer Adl Tahrir was named head of the Higher Council for Patronage of the Youth tasked with organizing physical education.¹⁷⁵

The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) in its entirety moreover regularly attended matches to project their country as a modern state. The Council was present in the stadium during Egypt's 1953 World Cup qualifier against Italy in Cairo's Al-Gezira stadium, which President Naguib started by kicking the first ball, and a 1955 derby between Al Ahli and Al Zamalek.¹⁷⁶

Members of the RCC were also dispatched to attend sport events in parts of the country less visited by senior government officials in an attempt at bonding that proved effective given that ordinary citizens seldom had an opportunity to see their leaders in the flesh.¹⁷⁷ It also reinforced the regime's message that the 1952 revolution opened social and economic pathways that would ensure greater equality in opportunity and hold out the prospect of upward social mobility. That message was moreover embedded in the media's focus on successful athletes of humble origins.

In a further break with past tradition in which the state kept a distance from its subjects, military teams and athletes competed on a level playing field against civilian ones in an effort to portray the armed forces as the army of the people in whose name the 1952 revolution had been staged. That allowed Nasser to use sports not only to project Egypt on the international stage but to also position Egypt's new regime domestically. Soccer served to define national unity as the nation rallying around its leaders.

The regime further interpreted sports in the broadest sense of the word to incorporate a broad range of youth movements. Fun was equated with preparedness and defense. The regime's notion of sports as a tool to mould national identity, install discipline, and enable youth physically to perform and defend itself and the country was similar to earlier German-inspired efforts in Ottoman and modern Turkey, Iran and pre-Israel Palestine.¹⁷⁸

"In less than two years, the revolutionary regime managed to gain control over all aspects of public life associated with sports... In a relatively short time, the state apparatus established special committees to organize and institutionalize sports and leisure," Di-Capua concluded.¹⁷⁹ Hundreds of state-owned clubs were established, colonial era clubs were nationalized, competitions and festivals were launched and sports was integrated into the curricula of schools and universities.

State-controlled media and newly established sports publications dubbed the policy 'al nahda al riyadiya,' the revival of sports.¹⁸⁰ Live radio coverage of sports events was introduced as reporting on air expanded enhancing the government's bonding effort. Sports moved from the back of the book to the front pages of daily newspapers, all in a bid to involve athletes and the public in the national effort. Winning teams and athletes received their awards from Nasser and other senior officials.

Naguib welcomed the launch in 1953 of new sports magazine Al Abtal (The Heroes) by urging it to create "a physically strong and healthy generation that is forceful in its faith, approach and spirit that targets creation of a strong, united and organized domestic front." Naguib said the front would have to be able to cope "with all aspects of life in war and in peace."¹⁸¹ In a speech six months later, he noted in an appeal to more conservative and religious segments of society that the Prophet Mohammed had advocated sports such as swimming and archer, projected prayer as a form of exercise and recalled that the revered 8th century Abbasid caliph Harun al Rashid was an accomplished polo player.¹⁸²

Amer's appointment as head of the EFA in 1958 and his brother's takeover of Zamalek two years later signalled Nasser's final push for full control and nationalization of sports. The importance of soccer was enhanced by the fact that the sport had become so profitable that the government was able to use its proceeds to partially fund a 1955 arms deal with Czechoslovakia. As a result, Al Ahli's poor performance in 1965 dominated a meeting of the command council¹⁸³ and prompted Nasser to appoint General Abd El-Mohsen Mortagy, a commander of Egyptian troops in the war in Yemen that had erupted three years earlier, as head of the club to shore up its performance.¹⁸⁴

Prominent soccer players were moreover drafted into the military and Al Ahli midfielder, manager and president Mohammed Saleh Mohammed Salim was given a national award after returning from Austria where he became the first Egyptian to play in a European team. The importance of soccer was further underlined by an Egyptian educator in the early 1960s who noted that promotion of the game had become an obsession.¹⁸⁵ Fuad Zakaria observed that "sport in general and football in particular are gaining the obsessive attention of our students. They are far more interested in that than in the building of the Aswan dam or the progress we make on the road to socialism."¹⁸⁶

Nasser's view of soccer as a projection of his regime and of Egypt was evident when in 1962 he phoned prominent journalist Mustafa Amin, whose newspaper, Akhbar el Youm, the Egyptian leader had nationalized two years earlier, to complain about an invitation Amin and his twin brother Ali had extended to world champion Brazil to play a friendly against Egypt. Three years later, Amin, who had already sparked Nasser's ire in 1961 for giving more prominence in his paper to the death of Hollywood star Marilyn Monroe than to a speech by the president, was sentenced to life in prison on charges of have been an American spy. "After the Brazilian team won the World Cup in 1962, my brother, Ali, and I, decided to invite the team to play three matches in Egypt -- two in Cairo and one in Alexandria. It came as a surprise when President Nasser himself phoned me and argued with me. 'Are you inviting a team to come and defeat us?' he said. His view was that he did not want us to be defeated, not even in a soccer

match. I tried to convince him that it was better for us to play powerful teams and be defeated rather than weak teams and winning," Amin wrote in his memoirs.¹⁸⁷

Soccer's importance was further underscored by the regime's establishment of El Shams (The Sun) SC, a club that was to be the club of the revolution. To emphasize the point, its statutes barred membership of 'collaborators,' 'feudalists,' and capitalists. Nasser's interest in the club was demonstrated by the appointment of his minister of state for presidential affairs, effectively the president's personal secretary, Sami Sharaf, as president of El Shams and by the fact that he had his own, rarely used office, on the club's premises.¹⁸⁸ Sharaf defined Nasser's sport policy as designed to provide recreational and educational opportunity in a revolutionary context that emphasized the role of youth.¹⁸⁹

In asserting control, Nasser was fine tuning Fouad and Farouk's template for a public policy approach toward sports in general and soccer in particular that sought control and subjugation of sports to the regime's political interest. It was a template that was adopted in one way or another by governments across the Middle East and North Africa, with Sudan in the lead, and largely remains valid until today.¹⁹⁰ That is true even if the political interests of Middle Eastern and North African states differed.

The importance of sports to a revolutionary like Nasser went beyond political control: it was a pillar of modernization in the mould of historian Allen Gutman, involving concepts of secularism, equality, women's rights that were alien to more conservative regimes like those in the Gulf, many of which only won independence after Nasser's death. Gutman defined the characteristics of modern sports as secular rather than related to "some realm of the numinous or sacred;" equality in terms of non-discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or race and of ensuring competition on a level playing field; the predominance of national and transnational governance; specialization; continuous updating of rules and training to increase efficiency; the importance of statistics; and an obsession with improvement of records.¹⁹¹

Ultimately, however, absolute control was the policy's cornerstone: control of all public space including stadia and other sports facilities; control of all institutions including clubs; identification of the regime with the success and popularity of sports; and employment of sports to further the government's political, economic and social goals such as the inculcation of 'modern' values of unity, equality, cooperation and discipline; popular mobilization, nationalist fervour, improved public health and increased labour productivity.

Saving the Brotherhood

Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, recognized the imperative of political control of the nexus of youth and sports that his predecessor had made a pillar of his regime. Barely a year after taking office in 1970, Sadat purged the government and security forces of Nasserites to pave the way for his Corrective Revolution that opened the door to liberal economic reforms as well as a rupture in the close ties between Egypt and Russia and the rebuilding of relations with the United States.¹⁹² Leaders of Nasserite youth groups were prominent among those taken into custody.¹⁹³

The real importance of youth and soccer fans under Sadat's 11-year long rule from Nasser's death in 1970 to his assassination by Islamists in 1981 lies in their role in revitalizing The Society of Muslim Brothers better known as the Muslim Brotherhood at a time that it was wavering on the edge of extinction as a result of a government crackdown.

It was a role that was to repeat itself four decades later as the Brotherhood confronted an even more brutal crackdown by the government of President Al Sisi. Founded in 1928, the Brotherhood, which aimed to establish a state based on Islamic law, developed into the Middle East and North Africa's foremost Islamist group whose strategy of political activism and provision of services became a template for militant groups in Africa and Asia.

The Brotherhood, which in the waning years of British rule was accused of responsibility for a series of bombings and assassinations that targeted British troops, senior Egyptian officials and Jews in Cairo, initially supported Nasser's coup but grew disappointed with the new Egyptian leader when it became evident that he would establish neither an Islamic state nor a democracy.¹⁹⁴ A clash between Brotherhood students and government supporters in early 1954 and an attempt assassinate Nasser in October of that year persuaded the Egyptian leader to ban the Brotherhood, whom he accused of plotting a coup. Thousands of Brothers were arrested and tortured while many others fled to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.¹⁹⁵

In contrast to Nasser, Sadat saw the Brotherhood as a potential ally against the Egyptian left. He released Brothers from prison but maintained the ban of the organization at a time that an Islamist student movement emerged. Both the Brotherhood and the students turned against Sadat after his historic visit to Israel in 1977 and his signing of the Arab world's first peace treaty with the Jewish state two years later. An Islamist group, Tanzim al-Jihad, took responsibility in 1981 for Sadat's assassination.

"The Muslim Brotherhood of the early 1970s was a shell of its former self. Many of the surviving activists, numbering barely one hundred members, were not even certain that they wanted to resurrect the organization's mission upon their release from prison. The real story of this era revolves around a vibrant youth movement based in Egypt's colleges and universities. Even as they rebelled against the tenets of Nasserism, the youth of this period were the products of its socioeconomic policies, from increased urbanization to greater access to education. They found in their Islamic identity a response to the post-1967 crisis, even as they adopted the modes of popular contention that had emerged under Nasser. The student movement was notable for the fluidity it displayed on the ideological level and the dynamism it exhibited on the organizational front," said historian Abdullah Al-Arian, author of *Answering the Call, Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat's Egypt*, in an interview with *Jadaliyya*.¹⁹⁶

The scholar went on to say that his book looks "at the parallel developments occurring across the student movement broadly and internally within the re-emerging Muslim Brotherhood. The book weaves together a narrative that examines critical moments where these forces intersected and traces the path taken by the bulk of the student movement's leadership as it ultimately 'graduated' to take on the Muslim Brotherhood's mission and adopt its organizational model. One of the study's key findings is that, even as they attempted to reassert the Muslim Brotherhood's traditional hierarchical structure, "senior figures like Mustafa Mashhur, Kamal al-Sananiri, and Umar al-Tilmisani¹⁹⁷ could not help but adapt their mission to the changing landscape of Islamic activism."¹⁹⁸

Tilmisani who took office as the Brotherhood's Spiritual Guide in 1972 was the leader who merged the group with the student movement, Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya or The Islamic Society. He tirelessly crisscrossed Egypt to meet students and attend their conferences and summer camps.¹⁹⁹ In doing so, he rebuilt the Brotherhood as a formidable political and religious opposition force invigorated by student and soccer fan activism. Tilmisani was also the man who led the Brotherhood to forswear violence and opt for the equivalent of German student leader Rudi

Dutschke's reformulation of Italian Communist leader's Antonio Gramsci's "war of position" as 'the long march through the institutions.'

Gramsci argued that a "war of manoeuvre," his description of political violence, would fail in advanced western democracies. Instead, he argued in favour of a 'war of position' which identifies "switch-points of social power" that the movement would peacefully seek to take control of. Gramsci saw school principals, university professors, government policy makers, education department bureaucrats and journalists as key switch-points.²⁰⁰ Dutschke reasoned that the student movement of the 1960s would have to target a broad range of cultural institutions.²⁰¹

In an interview in Cairo days after the death in Egypt of the Shah of Iran in 1980 a year after he had been forced into exile, Tilmisani said, referring to Nasser: "We don't need an Islamic revolution, our Shah died in 1970."²⁰² By that time, Brotherhood supporters had been gaining ground in elections in professional associations associated with the judiciary and the medical profession as well as in student organizations.²⁰³

Forestalling radicalization

For men like Ahmed of Ultras Nahdawy and Salheen of Students Against the Coup resistance against the regime of President Al Sisi was as much about a struggle against repression as it was about a reorientation and rejuvenation of the Brotherhood and an effort to control, if not forestall, the spread of more radical, jihadist ideologies. It was also an effort to align Islamists and revolutionary forces that run the gamut from liberal to conservative, from left to right and from secular to religious in a united front against autocracy by moving beyond the Brotherhood's insistence of returning to power toppled President Morsi a Muslim Brother, who in 2012 won Egypt's first and only free and fair presidential election.²⁰⁴

"It's not about Morsi, we have bigger fish to fry than Morsi. Most of us no longer believe in the slogan in returning Morsi to office. Thousands are suffering. I don't give a damn about Morsi. Anything is better than this regime. There are two approaches, the reformist and the revolutionary one. We have seen dramatic shifts since 2011. Both Tahrir Square and Sisi's junta were dramatic twists. I and many like me believe that another twist is possible even if that will take time," Salheen said.²⁰⁵

Ironically, Nahdawy's evolution from a Brotherhood support group to one with one leg outside of the organization and one leg inside that aimed to alter the Brothers' strategy and tactics constituted a break with the Brotherhood's covert collaboration with the military in asserting the primacy of traditional over contentious politics in post-autocratic transition. That collaboration was evident in the first year after the 2011 revolt that toppled Mubarak with the military in power in advance of parliamentary and presidential elections.

Backed by Islamist and secular groups, the military pre-empted plans by revolutionary youth and militant soccer fan groups to recapture the momentum of their revolt with a mass gathering on Tahrir on the first anniversary of the revolt by announcing that it together with the Brotherhood would organise its own celebration on the iconic square. The military's co-opting of the celebrations dashed youth and fan groups' intention to exploit the anniversary to launch what they called a second revolution that would force the armed forces to immediately relinquish power. The military's move sent a stark message that established political organisations with well-oiled party machines rather than newly emerging political forces would shape Egypt's future. It effectively advised youth and fan groups

that unless they could match their mobilisation and street skills with the art of electoral politics and backroom horse trading they would be relegated to the side lines of history.²⁰⁶

The Brotherhood's post-2011 strength that enabled it to forge an opportunistic, fragile partnership with the military was rooted in its early expansion strategy dating back to its early days that aimed at garnering popularity by delivering services through the construction of neighbourhood mosques, gender segregated schools, handicraft projects and/or sports programs.²⁰⁷ That strategy that has since been emulated by multiple other Islamist groups including Lebanon's Hezbollah, Palestine's Hamas and Afghanistan's Taliban proved so successful that when the Brotherhood was first banned in 1954 by Nasser, it had built a network of social services, including sports groups, that was so extensive that the government was forced, according to US State Department records, to continue staffing and funding it, for fear that its collapse would spark mass protests.²⁰⁸

True to the Brotherhood's strategy, the emergence of Nahdawy coincided with plans by the Brotherhood to establish its own soccer teams to compete in the country's professional leagues that were ultimately dropped as Morsi in his one year in office struggled to overcome resistance from key institutions of the ancien regime – the military, the security forces and the judiciary.²⁰⁹ Brotherhood Supreme Guide Mohammed Badie announced the group's sporting plans in a speech at a community centre in Tanta, a city north of Cairo. "We are going to launch TV channels soon, as well as sport clubs to compete in the Egyptian League and Cup," Badie said.²¹⁰

Beyond its tradition of providing social services, the Brotherhood recognized the importance of soccer in Egyptians' private and public lives. It also was seeking to capitalize on the close cooperation between Brotherhood youth groups that included militant soccer fans and the ultras during the 2011 revolt. Young Brothers and fans had connected for the first time on Tahrir Square in the heady 18 days of the revolt in January and February 2011 that led to Mubarak's resignation.²¹¹ The Brothers, who initially populated the square in defiance of the group's leadership that was initially stand-offish towards the popular movement for fear that it would be crushed, were together with the fans the two groups with past experience of confrontation with security forces.

The Brotherhood similar to Middle Eastern and North African autocrats saw soccer as a means of garnering public support. It differentiated the group from other Islamists, among whom first and foremost Salafists, who in the wake of the revolt were organizing themselves politically on an unprecedented scale. An ultra-conservative movement within Sunni Islam, Salafism narrowly focuses on Islamic doctrine defined as a fundamentalist approach to Islam that emulates the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers, rejects religious innovation supports a literal implementation of Islamic law. Islam scholar Thomas Hegghammer noted that a variety of Islamist groups with ideologies ranging from advocacy of political abstinence to jihadism adopted the epithet to establish legitimacy and religious authenticity.²¹² That claim to authenticity translated into a host of Salafi clerics denouncing soccer as un-Islamic and a game invented by infidels seeking to distract the faithful from the fulfilment of their religious obligations.²¹³

In the build-up to mass anti-Brotherhood protests that paved the way for the coup, the group conscious of the importance of the ultras in street protests again turned to soccer in an effort to turn the tide. By that time, it had backed away from its plan to establish club of its own in favour of a promise to end corruption of soccer by among other measures replacing Mubarak-era officials.²¹⁴ In a statement two weeks before the coup, the Brotherhood announced that it would field candidates for the board elections of storied Cairo soccer club Al Zamalek SC and

other major football teams.²¹⁵ The Brotherhood never got that far. Mass anti-Brotherhood protests on 30 June 2013 culminated in the military's ousting of Morsi on July 3 followed by a bloody crackdown on the group in which hundreds of protesters were killed and the ultimate outlawing of the group.

Said Moshagheb, a mesmerizingly charismatic, under-educated and unemployed leader of the Ultras White Knights (UWK), the storied support group of Zamalek that played a key role in the 2011 revolt and subsequent anti-government protests symbolizes the threat of radicalization posed by Sisi's repressive policies and inability to offer youth credible social and economic prospects. Moshagheb also represents the successful appeal of the ultras as well as the pitfalls they confront.

Barely three months after the toppling of Mubarak, Moshagheb staged a coup against the founders and original leaders of the UWK.²¹⁶ The impact of the takeover is increasingly evident on the embattled campuses of Egyptian universities and in poorer neighbourhoods of Egyptian cities, the focal points of protest against the military coup that toppled Morsi.

The impact is also obvious in the UWK's most recent history and that of Moshagheb personally, both of which are reflections of a generation that has progressively lost hope and is potentially prone to radicalisation. If anything, the UWK and Moshagheb's histories serve as warning signs that frustration sparked by the success of the military and the security forces in rolling back the achievements of the 2011 popular revolt coupled with Al Sisi's even more repressive policies is fuelling radicalisation rather than returning Egypt to stability and equitable economic growth.

Moshagheb staged the first phase of his takeover during a historic match between Zamalek and Tunisia's Club Africain, the first encounter between two teams whose supporters months earlier had played important roles in the toppling of their countries' leaders.²¹⁷

Emboldened by the fact that he and thousands of militant fans or ultras for the first time in four years of pitched battles against security forces in stadia, found the pitch virtually devoid of police and themselves in control of the stadium, Moshagheb led an invasion of the pitch three minutes into stoppage time after the referee disallowed a Zamalek goal because the scoring player was offside. The violent invasion left five Tunisian players injured and UWK's founding leaders in shock.²¹⁸

To many of the ultras, the ceding of control of the stadium symbolized their victory two months earlier as part Mubarak's overthrow. Moshagheb and his ultras arrived the day of the match at the Cairo International Stadium braced for another battle with security forces who had long tried to prevent the fans from bringing their flares, smoke guns, and often politically-loaded banners into the arena. Police had repeatedly advised the UWK in the 24 hours prior to the match that they would be blocked from entering with their paraphernalia that is a staple of ultras performances worldwide.²¹⁹

Yet, when the ultras got to the stadium the gates were unmanned and police and security forces were absent but for some 30 unarmed officers dressed in light blue training suits deployed to protect a small group of visiting Club Africain supporters. Police and security forces, Egypt's most brutal and despised institution because of its brutal role as the strong arm of the repressive Mubarak regime, had opted not to engage in another clash with what had become one of Egypt's foremost social movements, in a bid to avoid further tarnishing of their image. Moreover, a breakdown of law and order would illustrate the need for a security force that ensures safety and law and order.²²⁰

In effect, Moshagebh and his followers walked into the security forces' trap. Their failure to recognize the strategy of a security force whose training and experience had taught them little more than repressive tactics represented a generational shift among the ultras from a highly politicized leadership to one of disaffected youth whose vision went little beyond deep-seated hatred of the police and distrust of the state.

To the founders of various groups of ultras in Egypt, the battle for the stadia in the Mubarak years constituted a struggle for public space in a country governed by a regime that tolerated no uncontrolled public spaces. Inspired by similar groups in Italy and Serbia, they saw themselves as part of a global trend in which militant soccer fans were part of a push for change. Soccer fans were prominent in youth protests in Greece in late December 2008, a year after the emergence of ultras in Egypt, which were sparked by the killing by police of a teenager.²²¹ It was a trend that proved to have legs with the role of soccer fans in the 2011 Arab revolts, the participation of Hapoel Tel Aviv ultras in Israeli protests against rising costs of living, and in demonstrations against privatization in 2014 in Bosnia Herzegovina.²²²

In Tunisia, opposition groups enlisted the support of ultras with the eruption of the first popular Arab revolt in December 2010 because of their experience in confronting security forces.²²³ In Egypt like in Tunisia, the ultras constituted the only group willing to not only challenge government control of public space but also to putting their lives on the line in staking their claim. They derived their title to the stadium from their analysis of the power structure of the sport that positioned ultras as the only true supporters of the club as opposed to a corrupt management that was a pawn of the regime and players who were mercenaries who played for the highest bidder.

In doing so, the ultras challenged the Achilles Heel of the regime given that stadia alongside mosques were the two public spaces that the government could not simply shut down because nothing evoked the kind of deep-seated passion that soccer and religion did. As a result, the government eager to crush the threat to its authority while wanting to reap the political benefits of association with one of the most important things in the lives of Egyptian men, saw little alternative but to fight for control.

And that was what attracted the likes of Moshagebh who was representative of the thousands of young, under-educated and un-or under-employed men who joined the ranks of the ultras in the waning years of the Mubarak regime because the fans were the only organized group that persistently and physically stood up to corrupt and brutal security forces who made their lives difficult in the stadia as well as in the neighbourhoods where they lived.

Moshagheb's pitch invasion came on the back of empowerment derived from the toppling of Mubarak as well as the ultras-led invasion a month later of multiple lightly guarded offices of the feared and hated State Security Investigations Service (Mabahith Amn ad-Dawla), the regime's prime internal security force.²²⁴ The service was renamed the National Security Service after the invasions in a bid to shore up its demolished image. Similarly, the service concerned about its image refrained from strongly intervening as fans and other protesters rummaged through files and searched for secret prisons in the basements of the service's offices.²²⁵

An action-oriented new generation

Moshagheb's pitch invasion symbolized the side lining of the UWK's founding leadership who had a far more worked out ideological concept of who the ultras were and what their role as a movement was. Moshagebh finalized his

takeover months after the pitch invasion by brutally pushing out the UWK's founders, some of whom were attacked and injured by his knife-wielding followers.

"This is a new generation. It's a generation that can't be controlled. They don't read. They believe in action and experience. They have balls. When the opportunity arises they will do something bigger than we ever did," said one of the group's founders who was wounded in a knife attack by Moshagheb's supporters and has since distanced himself from the UWK. The founder cautioned against repeating the mistake of the Mubarak era when policymakers and analysts underestimated the groundswell of anger and frustration among youth that was bubbling at the surface.²²⁶

Another ultra argued that "standing up to the regime amounts to suicide. The question is how long that perception will last. The closing of the stadia shuts down the only release valve. Things will eventually burst. When and where nobody knows. But the writing is on the wall."²²⁷

Moshagheb's arrest by security forces in February 2014 highlighted the threat of radicalization. It lifted the veil on a process of radicalisation at the fringe of the ultras fuelled by policies of the Al Sisi government. It also put into perspective efforts by Zamalek president Mortada Mansour to persuade Egyptian courts to ban the ultras as terrorist organizations.²²⁸ The arrest further spotlighted mounting pressure by Islamist students and soccer fans on the Brotherhood to surrender its insistence on peaceful resistance and authorize targeted attacks on security forces and other symbols of the regime.²²⁹

Moshagheb's arrest was a personal victory for Mansour, a larger-than-life lawyer and loose-cannon television commentator with close ties to the Mubarak regime. Mansour defeated post-revolt charges that he had orchestrated the notorious Battle of the Camels in which sword-wielding thugs rode into Tahrir Square and attacked protesters on the first days of the revolt against Mubarak. Mansour also boasted that he had ordered the intervention of security forces in February 2014 in which 20 fans were killed as they thought to gain access to a Cairo stadium in which Zamalek was playing that had in a rare instance been declared open to the public.²³⁰

Moshagheb has been kept incommunicado since his detention on suspicion of founding an illegal organization and smuggling arms. Sources close to the ultras said Moshageb had been under surveillance for some time during which he had been smuggling arms into Cairo from Sinai, the setting for an armed insurgency that is being fuelled by neglect of the region by successive governments and a brutal military crackdown. The sources said that AK-47s had been found in the homes of friends of Moshageb some two weeks before his arrest.²³¹

Moshageb was arrested after he and another ultra, Hassan Kazarlan, allegedly set fire to a Cairo convention fire. Sixteen people were injured in the incident. Kazarlan fled to Turkey after the arson attack.²³² He was persuaded to return to Egypt after security forces detained his father as a hostage and immediately detained upon his arrival. Sources close to Kazarlan's family said he had told authorities that he had wanted to travel from Turkey to Syria. They said he provoked security force ire by accusing his interrogators of being infidels.²³³

If he had made it to Syria, Kazarlan would have followed in the footsteps of Rami Iskanderiya, a former leader of Ultras Ahlawi in the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria, who joined the Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq, and married a Syrian woman in the group's Syrian stronghold of Raqqa.

The targeting of the ultras was evident not only in a campaign by Mansour to persuade Egyptian courts to ban the militant soccer fan groups as terrorist organizations,²³⁴ but also in a judicial crackdown on militant soccer fans²³⁵ and in the military where conscripts were being asked after being drafted whether they were members of an ultras group. Those that respond affirmatively were singled out. “They were immediately ordered to do 100 push-ups during which an officer shouted at them: ‘You are the lowest creatures. You sacrifice yourselves for your club, no for your religion or country,’” a source recounted.²³⁶

Sources close to the ultras said Moshagebh had wanted in late January around the fourth anniversary of the revolt that toppled Mubarak to escalate protests in Cairo neighbourhoods like Matareya, a stronghold of the Brotherhood. Some 17 of the 74 Ultras Ahlawy members killed in 2012 in a politically loaded brawl in the stadium of the Suez Canal city of Port Said hailed from Matareya, the scene of multiple anti-government protests that is known for its stock piles of illegal arms, drug dealing and high crime rate.²³⁷

Moshagebh’s alleged failed attempt to escalate the protests in Matareya into an armed conflict coupled with flash protests that have largely moved from campuses to neighbourhoods on Fridays after midday prayers because of security force control of universities constituted a success for those segments of the ultras who had access to a better education to maintain pressure on the government while preventing mounting frustration and anger from sparking nihilistic violence.

“We don’t like violence but we are not weak. Hope keeps us going. We believe that there still are options. We created options on Tahrir Square. This regime is more brutal but there still are options. Success for us is our survival and ability to keep trying. The government wants to provoke us to become violent. Two years later, we are still active. Politics is about making deals; revolution is putting your life on the line. We are the generation that staged the revolution. The new generation no longer cares. Our role is to get the new generation to re-join the revolution. The government markets itself with promises and the power of the state. We can promise only one thing: we will stay on the street. To us football is politics, politics is in everything. That’s why we tackle politics,” said, Ahmed, the Ultras Nahdawy leader.²³⁸

Ahmed and Salheen were the first to admit that they were fighting multiple uphill battles in which the odds are stacked against them. Their space to manoeuvre is increasingly being curtailed while their effort to stem radicalization and keep the momentum of peaceful protest is being stymied by policies by Al Sisi, who seeks to project himself as an effective bulwark against jihadism.

“Unfortunately the idea that Sisi will be an effective ally against Islamic terrorists is misguided. He has, in fact, become one of the jihadists’ most effective recruiting tools. The simple truth is that, since Sisi took power, the frequency of terrorist attacks in Egypt has soared; there have been more than 700 attacks over 22 months, as opposed to fewer than 90 in the previous 22 months. Harder to measure is the number of young people radicalized by Sisi’s repression, but we can assume it is significant and growing... In this environment, is it surprising that reports surface regularly about the trend of radicalization of Egyptian youth, including previously peaceful Islamists? Sisi’s brutal actions speak far louder than his few words about reforming Islam; to believe that he, or the religious institutions of his government, can have a positive impact on young people susceptible to radicalization is beyond wishful thinking. It would be laughable if it were not dangerous self-delusion...” commented scholars Robert Kagan

and Michele Dunne.²³⁹ Political scientist Ellis Goldberg noted that “as Egyptians become inured to a coarser and more violent political life, it seems unlikely they will be able to free themselves from it for at least a generation.”²⁴⁰

Radicalization is both a product of the brutality of an unreformed security force and a military whose brutal tactics have turned a local Bedouin population into allies of militants influenced by the Islamic State and other jihadist groups. “In Cairo, the police are idiots. They have perfected the art of ensuring that people hate them. One is told in the military that we are the good guys and the police are the bad guys. But in the Sinai, the military is under siege, it moves in convoys that are focused on self-protection and not being blown up by improvised explosive devices. Locals no longer wear traditional Bedouin dress and don western clothing to avoid being detained and harassed by the military who sees the Bedouin as the enemy. Locals used to inform on the jihadists, they no longer do, they look the other way. There is no solution. It’s a battle till death,” said a soccer fan who recently returned from northern Sinai.²⁴¹

As a result, uncritical engagement with the Sisi government by the United States and European nations served to perpetuate a situation in which men like Ahmed and Salheen resemble Hans Brinker, the eight-year old fairy tale Dutchmen who stopped a flood by putting his finger in a hole in the dike. Endorsement of Al Sisi as a regional pillar of stability and a bulwark against radicalization amounted to legitimization of the failure of Egypt’s successive post-revolt governments, both those backed and/or populated by the military as well as that of Morsi, that opted to cater to the security forces rather than exploit opportunities to introduce long-overdue reforms that would have been crucial for democratization and restoring political stability.

In the case of Morsi, the attempt to ensure that the security forces would not turn against him backfired. Morsi’s interior ministry, under which the security forces resorted, played a key role in laying the groundwork for his removal from power and the rise of a state more repressive than that of Mubarak.²⁴²

A murky incident in the religiously conservative Upper Egyptian town of Qena that is home to a Coptic minority in which soccer fans, alongside revolutionary youth, Salafists and Muslim Brothers protested against the appointment of a provincial Coptic governor illustrates efforts by elements of what French scholar Jean-Pierre Filiu terms the Egyptian deep state to roll back the achievements of the 2011 revolt.²⁴³ Amid a wave of attacks on Christian churches and homes, protesters demanded the withdrawal of Emad Shehata Michael as governor.

Some objected to the fact that he was a Copt, others accused him of being an exponent of the Mubarak regime who as assistant governor of Giza, Egypt’s third largest city on the edge of Cairo, was responsible for the death of demonstrators during the popular revolt. Al Ahram, Egypt’s foremost state-owned newspaper reported that a document posted on Facebook identified by name the instigators of the anti-Coptic protest as former members of Mubarak’s ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) or state security officials.²⁴⁴

The Qena protest was one of a host of incidents designed to create public fear of the consequences of a weakened state, including increased sectarian and criminal violence. Cairo University political scientist Ahmed Yusef Ahmed reflected those fears in warning as events in Qena unfolded that the Egyptian state was disappearing. “I am afraid that we now have to recognize that the state has begun to disappear,” Ahmed wrote in a newspaper op-ed entitled ‘Farewell to the State that discussed the Qena incidents.’²⁴⁵

The government's failure to push for security sector reform granted the security forces time to regroup and exploit instability, deteriorating security, and increased political violence to ensure their immunity to calls for change. Egypt "presents the most egregious example of the consequences of failing to undertake far-reaching security sector reform," Carnegie Middle East Center scholar Yezid Sayigh noted in a study of the politics of police reform in Tunisia and Egypt, two post-revolt countries.²⁴⁶

"Ministries of interior remain black boxes with opaque decision-making processes, governed by officer networks that have resisted meaningful reform, financial transparency, and political oversight, Until governments reform their security sectors, rather than appease them, the culture of police impunity will deepen and democratic transition will remain impossible in Egypt and at risk in Tunisia" Sayigh said.

The death in February 2015 of the 20 UWK was one example of the consequences of the failure to implement security form. So was the worst incident in Egyptian sporting history when 74 members of Ultras Ahlawy died in 2012 in the Port Said stadium. Eye witnesses reported at the time that scores of unknown men armed with identical batons had been among those that attacked the Ahli supporters.²⁴⁷

The presence of those men fit the pattern of senior security officers and governors hiring thugs called *baltageyya* to cooperate in violation of the law with security forces.²⁴⁸ The practice was expanded in popular neighbourhoods where security forces had advised residents to take the law into their own hands by hiring *baltageyya*. The approach meant that criminal groups often replaced the security forces in neighbourhoods. Overall, stepped up brutality by the security forces and their associates has cost the lives of some 1,400 people since the demise of Morsi.²⁴⁹

The security force strategy backfired not only in its inability to stymie radicalization but also in the fact that militant soccer fans and students who took to the streets in popular neighbourhoods often were joined by locals. "Take Alf Maskan," said an ultra and student activist. "Alf Maskan is a traditionally conservative, Islamist neighbourhood. Youth have nothing to look forward to. They are hopeless and desperate. They join our protests but their conversation often focuses on admiration for the Islamic State. They are teetering on the edge. We are their only hope but it's like grasping for a straw that ultimately is likely to break."²⁵⁰

Conclusion

Soccer has played a role in Egyptian political history from the time it was first introduced to the country more than a century ago. Successive governments saw soccer as a tool and a vehicle for moulding national identity, garnering popular support for regime policies and ideology, and enhancing popular endorsement. Opponents of governments, students, and politicized soccer fans viewed the beautiful game as a platform for successive struggles, including the fight for independence and against colonialism and the battle for a host of basic rights. That was true when storied Cairo club Al Ahli SC became the meeting ground for students and soccer fans who staged Egypt's 1919 revolution that paved the way for the country's nominal independence three years later. It was also true for the 1970s when students and soccer fans revitalized and rejuvenated the banned Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt and the Arab world's foremost opposition group, a process that was repeating itself in the second decade of the 21st century with students and fans driving opposition to one of the most repressive regimes in Egyptian history and forcing the Brothers to adopt. Fans may have been the most organized in Egypt, but soccer's political importance was equally evident in the history of Middle Eastern and North African states across the region.

Constructing National Identity: The Muscular Jew vs the Palestinian Underdog

Abstract

Soccer threads itself as a red line through the 20th century history of the Middle East and North Africa as independence populated the region with nation-states. Soccer was important to the leaders struggling for independence as a means to stake claims, develop national identity and fuel anti-colonial sentiment. For its rulers soccer was a tool they could harness to shape their nations in their own mould; for its citizenry it was both a popular form of entertainment and a platform for opposition and resistance.

The sport offers a unique arena for social and political differentiation and the projection of transnational, national, ethnic, sectarian, local, generational and gender identities sparking a long list of literature that dates back more than a century.²⁵¹ The sport also constitutes a carnivalesque event that lends itself to provocation of and confrontation with authority — local, national or colonial.²⁵²

Constructing National Identity through Sports

Construction of a deeply rooted national identity in the Middle East and North Africa was often hampered by the fact that a significant number of nations in the region lacked the perception of a long-standing common history on which countries like Egypt, Turkey and Iran pride themselves or the wrenching, unifying experience of a vicious struggle for independence as in the case of Algeria. This deficit was reinforced by the emergence of neo-patriarchic autocracies across that region that viewed the population as immature subjects rather than full-fledged citizens. As a result, sports — soccer in particular — underperformed as a tool in moulding nations and promoting feelings of national solidarity in line with historian Eric Hobsbawm's definition of nations as imagined or constructed entities with invented traditions.²⁵³

Nevertheless, Middle Eastern and North African examples of the political employment of sports to create national myths are myriad. Egypt, a regional sports powerhouse, claimed to have fathered soccer long before the British who are largely credited with the emergence of the sport. Ousted President Hosni Mubarak's State Information Service asserted that ancient Egyptians had recorded their knowledge of the game with inscriptions on the walls of temples that were discovered by the 5th century Greek historian Herodotus.²⁵⁴ In his memoir of a visit to Egypt titled "An Account of Egypt,"²⁵⁵ Herodotus made no mention of the inscriptions or of ancient Egyptians playing something akin to soccer. He also failed to refer to assertions that he saw young men kicking around a ball made of goatskin and straw.²⁵⁶

Zionists like the Shah of Iran and the Ottoman Empire's reformist Young Turks saw sports as a way to mould their citizenry in a nationalist image. For the Zionists, the goal was the new, muscular Jew. Reza Shah Pahlavi, who captained his team at his Swiss boarding school and played for the squad of the Iranian military's Officer School, saw soccer as a way "to create a modern Iranian man who understood the values of hygiene, manly competition, and cooperation."²⁵⁷

To the Young Turks, soccer was a means of garnering support as they sought to convert the remnants of the Ottoman Empire into a modern state. Both recognized what the French Iranian soccer scholar Christian Bromberger identified as the westernizing virtues of the sport: "Football values team work, solidarity, division of labor and collective planning — very much in the image of the industrial world that produced it."²⁵⁸ German and Swedish athletics was to the Turks like Cooper's Commonwealth competition was to the Zionists. It furthered what social anthropologist Paul Connerton described as the creation of collective memory and shared identity through

ritualized physical activity.²⁵⁹ Soccer was uniquely designed for that purpose — as historian Eric Hobsbawm noted, “the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people.”²⁶⁰

For the Palestinians, in contrast to other national groupings in the Middle East and North Africa, forming a national identity initially constituted nation formation through differentiation of the Palestinian identity from a Syrian dominated pan-Arab identity, as stated by political scientist Paul James. Later nation building constituted the construction and/or structuring of a national identity within the framework of an own state as seen in post-Ottoman Turkey, Iran and Egypt.²⁶¹ James defined nation formation as occurring “within a social formation constituted in the emerging dominance of relations of disembodied integration” in which there is no face-to-face encounter or agency extension.²⁶² The differentiation of Palestinian identity in the absence of agency extension — the existence of a nation-state — was defined by asserting its distinctiveness from a Syrian Arab identity that was prevalent in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan and Zionist settlements at the time. Moreover, both in nation formation and nation building, imagined national communities need to give substance to their constructs by creating a consciousness of what it meant to be a nation. For Israeli Jews and Palestinians, sports served that purpose.²⁶³

Nonetheless, the effort of multi-ethnic, multi-confessional Middle Eastern and North African societies to employ soccer in the shaping of an overriding national identity was complicated by the communal aspirations of minority communities such as Kurds, Berbers and Israeli Palestinians, as well as conflict that resulted from their assertion. These communities felt discriminated against because the newly established states were preoccupied with creating one imaginary overall national identity that superseded diverse societal fabric rather than one that sought multicultural accommodation of the identities of its various constituent communities.²⁶⁴ Those communities often saw soccer as much as a way of expressing an identity of their own as they viewed it as tool to shape the new state’s national distinctiveness. Bairner and historian John Sugden noted that “wherever there are national or regional conflicts between societies which share a passion for sports, those conflicts will be in and carried on through respecting sport cultures.”²⁶⁵

Israeli sports historian Tamer Sorek argues that Palestinian citizens of Israel as opposed to Palestinians governed by Israeli occupation constituted at least for a significant period of post-independence Israeli history an exception to Sugden and Bairner’s notion. “Under certain conditions, sports may function in the opposite way. The particular case of Palestinian citizens of Israel is evidence that sports in general, and soccer in particular, may be used by the state as a tool to inhibit the nationalist consciousness of a national minority. The Palestinian citizens in turn tend to use soccer to smooth their tense relations with the Jewish majority rather than to emphasize the tension, and therefore they hide their Palestinian identity in the stadium,” Sorek reasoned.²⁶⁶

In effect, Sorek was highlighting the fact that post-1948 citizenship of the State of Israel did not amount to nationality for non-Jewish citizens i.e. the Palestinians. That dichotomy was reinforced by continued Israeli-Palestinian tensions, including military conflict in Gaza, Israeli-Palestinian frustration with lack of progress in peace talks, anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab bigotry on the soccer pitch. Nevertheless, Palestinian players contribute significantly to Israel’s national and top echelon teams despite their deep-seated sense of discrimination.²⁶⁷ This has meant that soccer serves Palestinians in Israel both as an integrative tool and a vehicle to assert their identity within the Jewish state.²⁶⁸

Rifaat ‘Jimmy’ Turk, Israel’s first Palestinian national team player, recalls coach Ze’ev Segal telling him when he joined Hapoel Tel Aviv: “There is one important rule. We live in a racist country. They will curse you, they will curse your mother and your sister. They will spit at you. They will try to undercut you, cut your legs from under you. You have to be smart about it and know how to deal with it. You can’t allow yourself to be provoked. You have to stay focused. If you are smart, you’ll survive. If you’re not smart, you can take everything I told you and throw it out the

window.”²⁶⁹

Moulding Modern Citizens

For pre-Zionist Palestine, Iran and Turkey, sports was key to moulding of the “modern” citizen as well as the forging of relations with a colonial or Western power. This could help them in their endeavor irrespective of the fact that Jews and Palestinians were forming nations while Turkey and Iran were building nations as illustrated in this section. In doing so, they built on the experience of the first modern day international sports encounter — a cricket match in 1860 between the United States, a former British colony, and Canadian colonies that had yet to achieve independence.²⁷⁰ They also relied on the notion, first put forward in 1891 by Reverend J. Astley Cooper, of a British Commonwealth sporting competition that would involve literary and military events as a way of strengthening ties between Britain and its colonies.²⁷¹

Zionism’s view of sports, much like that of the Shah of Iran as well as the Young Turks and their Kemalist successors, was partly anchored in the need to prepare young men for military service and defense of the nation. It was similarly rooted although not acknowledged in 19th century German approaches to athletics articulated by Theodore Herzl, physician and the father of political Zionism, and social critic Max Nordau’s concept of muscular Judaism. It also harked back to the principle in Deuteronomy 4:9 of *shimrat ha-guf*, guard the body.

“I must train the boys to become soldiers.... I shall educate one and all to be free, strong men, ready to serve as volunteers in the case of need,” Herzl wrote in his diaries.²⁷² Speaking to the Second Zionist Congress in Basel, Nordau urged his audience to “let us continue our ancient tradition of being heroes with deep chests, nimble limbs and fearless looks.” Russian physician Max (Emmanuel) Mandelstamm made a similar appeal at the congress, where he concluded by repeating a line from Roman poet Juvenal’s *Satire X*:²⁷³ “*Men sana in corpore sano* (A sound mind in a sound body).”²⁷⁴

Nordau argued that Zionism would revitalise Judaism, liberate it from the distress it encountered in the diaspora, and create the new Jew “morally through the rejuvenation of the ideals of the people and bodily through the physical rearing of one’s offspring, in order to create a lost muscular Jewry... We want to restore to the flabby Jewish body its lost tone. Jews have to show to themselves, and to the world, how much vitality they still possess.”²⁷⁵ Literature scholar Marilyn Reizbaum described Nordau’s image of the new Jew as “derived from the image of manliness and restraint which together make the civilised man. This image is ironically modelled on the Aryan ideal...”²⁷⁶ Political scientist Hagai Harif went a step further in describing the emphasis on the “physical ability of the ‘New Jew’ who symbolized the ideal of national revival in the eyes of the fathers of Zionism” as a core element in “a revolution in the existential reality of the Jewish people in the Diaspora, in defining its collective identity and in its ways of life... Gymnastics and sport were among the offshoots of renewed life in the country and were an expression of the glorification of the physical heroism that was perceived as vital in the battle to conquer the Land” of Israel.²⁷⁷

Zionism’s embrace of the importance of sports was also rooted in moves by significant segments of 19th century Jewish diaspora to accommodate societal change, counter anti-Semitism, and by implication reject Orthodox Jewish repudiation of sports as a form of secularism. From the mid-nineteenth century, many Jews viewed joining the main gymnastic movements and, more importantly, sport and country clubs and the Olympic movement as part of their ‘emancipation’ from the old legal and social exclusions and from a “Jewish pathology”. Jews were described as intellectuals, cosmopolitans, and therefore artificially removed from nature. Responding to the charge of physical inadequacy, participating in gymnastic and sports movements was just another facet of claiming equality and, simultaneously, manifesting patriotism.

Movements such as the Deutsche Turnerschaft, the Sokol, English Muscular Christianity, and of course the Olympic Games were as much a product of the 19th century as was the emancipation of Jews. In many societies, Jews considered the two as part and parcel — if Jews could join this fraternity of athletes, it would prove they were being accepted by the larger society. Zionist preoccupation with the body, exercise, and later the Jewish Olympic idea (Maccabiah Games) was a direct consequence of industrialisation, urbanisation and anti-Semitic pressures, wrote Sports historian George Eisen.²⁷⁸ Eisen was referring to the Maccabiah — a sporting event for Jews from across the globe — first organised in Palestine in the early 1930s and which today is recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Historian David Biale argued that “like other nationalist movements of the nineteenth century, Zionism was preoccupied by the physical and emotional degeneration of the nation and by the threat of demographic decline.”²⁷⁹ As a result, Jewish immigrants imported soccer to Palestine under Ottoman rule. The game was institutionalised through public schools and clubs in 1917 under British colonial rule.

Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, a xenophobic German nationalist, radical egalitarian and father of German gymnastics, inspired Zionist thinking despite his anti-Semitism that eventually prompted clubs associated with his movement to create Aryan sections. Historian Petr Roubal quotes Jahn as saying that “Poles, French, clerics, landlords and Jews are Germany’s misfortune!”²⁸⁰ Jahn’s combination of seemingly contradictory racist and revolutionary views posed a challenge to reactionary rule in Germany. As a result, Jahn was incarcerated in 1819 and his gymnastics movement was banned. Released in 1825, he resurrected his movement in the form of a more militaristic group that favoured unification of the various German states as the 1848 revolutions swept across Europe.

Jahn saw gymnastics and physical education at the time of the Napoleonic conquest of Prussia as a powerful tool to prepare for a liberation struggle. His German Gymnastics Movement (Deutsche Turnerschaft) established in 1811 expressed nationalist goals and emphasised strength, endurance, discipline, and movement in unison.²⁸¹ He also saw his gymnastics, with its egalitarian lack of divisive class or regional characteristics, as a vehicle that would demonstrate what an ideal society would look like. Jahn believed that his gymnasts should be “chaste, pure, capable, fearless, truthful and ready to bear arms.”²⁸²

Jahn’s notion of a utopian society constituted fertile ground for representatives of all political stripes in the Middle East, including various trends within Zionism as well as Jews in Palestine and the Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire, who saw militarisation of society as the way forward. In Zionist Palestine, Jahn’s thinking was to have its greatest impact on Beitar, the right-wing youth movement associated with revisionist Zionist leader Ze’ev Jabotinsky’s idea that evoked the Jews’ last stand against the Romans. Beitar was the Hebrew acronym for Joseph Trumpeldor Union, named after a one-armed Russian army officer who established the Zion Mule Corps that was defeated alongside the British and other Allied forces in 1916 by the Ottomans in the Battle of Gallipoli. Beitar’s emergence was in response to the dashing of Jabotinsky’s hopes that Zionist cooperation with the British against the Ottomans would cement British support for a Jewish state and create the foundation for the future state’s military force. It was mainstream Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann rather than Jabotinsky who got the credit for the 1917 Balfour declaration in which the Britain committed itself to facilitating “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”²⁸³

Beitar’s mission was to create the “New Jew” who would be able to build and defend the Jewish state. Beitar differed from other Zionist factions in its insistence that Jews had to rely on themselves rather than on the British. In contrast to other factions of Zionism, Beitar’s focus was the creation of national institutions rather than the kind of Jewish society the movement would create. Its philosophy was rooted in the Biblical story of God advising Joshua on the eve of the Israelite’s return to the Promised Land, which stated “Every place that you have set foot I have given you”²⁸⁴ and “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”²⁸⁵ Jabotinsky summarised Beitar’s mission in songs he wrote, one of which said:

“From the pit of decay and dust
Through blood and sweat
A generation will arise to us Proud,
generous, and fierce.”²⁸⁶

Russian-born Yosef Yekutieli, an Ottoman conscript who became a physical educator in Palestine and a driving force in realising Herzl and Nordau’s vision, played a key role in the development of soccer and its emergence as a nationalist battle. Yekutieli defined his mission as “the development of Jewish culture — both physical and spiritual, and the presentation of that culture to the Jewish people and to the whole world; the development of Jewish sport in the world and the emphasis of the idea that Jewish sporting athletes were not just part of their home countries but were part of the Jewish diaspora. The emphasising of the fact that Eretz Yisrael is the centre of the Jewish world; and finally, the strengthening of the Maccabi movement.”²⁸⁷ A centrist Zionist youth movement whose concept of sports was influenced by Jahn served Yekutieli’s purpose of tightening bonds between the Zionists in Palestine and the Jewish Diaspora and projecting Jews as a nation and Palestine as their homeland.

Maccabi grew out of the Union of Jewish Gymnastic Clubs founded at the Fourth Zionist Congress in 1903. It was named after the Maccabean revolt in the second century CE that was sparked by the creation of gymnasium in Jerusalem by the High Priest Jason. The gymnasium in which Jews competed nude and participated in pagan rituals provoked the Maccabeans’ anger because it amounted to idol worshipping in their view. Ironically, one of the first things the Maccabeans did after recapturing Jerusalem was to destroy the gymnasium.²⁸⁸ Yekutieli, the founder of the Palestine Football Association and the Palestine Olympic Committee, first dreamt of the Maccabiah as a 15- year old. His inspiration was the 1912 Olympics. It took him 16 years to prepare a plan for the Jewish National Fund and another four to organise the first tournament.²⁸⁹

Following the Zionist Example

Palestinians, notwithstanding their hostility to Herzl, Nordau and Yekutieli effectively adopted their approach. “Obedience is one of the most important qualities a soldier on the battlefield must equip himself with. The war will not be fought without obedience. I urge everyone to obey whoever they are subordinate to, irrespective of whether you are players, spectators or referees, and to heed his every command, decision and restriction,” said the sports column of *Filastin*, a twice-weekly Christian-owned newspaper published in the first 67 years of the 20th century that pioneered Palestinian sports reporting, supported the Young Turks during Ottoman rule, opposed pre-Israel’s traditional Palestinian leadership, and was influential in promoting Palestinian nationalism. In a separate column, Mohammed Tahre Pasha, an Egyptian doctor, who went on to found the Mediterranean Games and head the Egyptian Olympic Committee, argued that sports was crucial for the East and the Arab’s regaining of past glory. “The East neglected sports for a long time. It is a main reason, if not the main reason, for its loss of superiority,” Pasha argued.²⁹⁰

The employment of sports by Zionist leaders also served as a way to mould relations between the Jewish national movement and the British mandate authorities in Palestine who established civilian clubs as well as ones associated with various branches of the government, military and law enforcement. “Here it is, we are given the opportunity now that tens of thousands of British soldiers from various countries and classes happened to come to the country; some of which will play important roles in the British policy and it is up to us to influence them and make them our friends through friendly sport meetings; it is our duty to do so properly and on a full state scale,” Maccabi said in a memo at the beginning of the Second World War.²⁹¹

The strategy of forging ties to British colonial personnel proved to be a double-edged sword. It created situations of

both bonding and friction. At times, encounters between Jewish and British players would end up in brawls with Jews alleging discrimination by British referees. Moreover, tensions would rise at times of unpopular British measures like the publication of the White Book in 1930 that restricted Jewish immigration to and settlement of Palestine. Sir John Robert Chancellor, the High Commissioner at the time of the publication, suspended matches between Zionist and British soccer teams to evade the risk of violent eruptions.²⁹²

The Zionist effort nonetheless constituted the flip side of Astley Cooper's vision of Commonwealth sports. Jewish clubs sought to forge alliances with their British counterparts in a bid to build ties to Brits who one day may be influential in formulating British policy and could help cement Palestine's identity as a Jewish entity. Ties to the mandate authority, the Zionists hoped, would also ensure Jews of British protection in times of violent Palestinian resistance to Jewish settlement of the land. As a result, Zionist exploitation of the sport turned soccer into a barometer of British-Jewish relations against the backdrop of the controversial settlement of Palestine in the 1930s.

Relations between British and Jewish players and fans warmed and cooled depending on political circumstances. In good times, they further served, according to Palestinian historians, as cover for illegal Jewish immigration. The historians charged that such incidences occurred in 1932 and 1935 during the Maccabiah, "This was not merely physical activity for the enjoyment of the individual: it was physical development in the service of the nation," the Jewish Agency for Israel said.²⁹³ Sports historian Eisen argued that the Olympics had provided "a guiding example for the Maccabiah idea and (the) exerting powerful influences upon the inception and format of the Jewish Games."²⁹⁴ Nonetheless, the Palestinian Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) deprived Maccabiah of the ability to project itself as representative of the region's diversity by withdrawing participation from the 1932 tournament.²⁹⁵ It also complicated the PFA's effort to meet FIFA's requirement that it represent both Jewish and Palestinian clubs.

Defence under Cover of Sports

Palestinian historian Issa al-Sifri warned in a book published in 1937 that "since 1924, the Zionists were trying to find new tricks for admitting more Jewish immigrants to the country; they have used smuggling and manipulation. They have pretended to submit to the restrictions of the immigration laws (while) transferring Jews to illegal resident status in Palestine by hiding them in the settlements. The Maccabiah was one of the ways of achieving these tasks," Al-Sifri wrote.²⁹⁶ Hapoel, the sports association with the Zionist labour movement, pioneered naval operations that supported illegal immigration into Palestine as well as the smuggling of arms to Jewish paramilitary groups. The movement also helped establish Jewish settlements. Its members were often also part of the Haganah, the underground Jewish paramilitary force that after independence formed the core of the Israel Defence Force.²⁹⁷

All in all, the involvement of sports movements in what Zionists described as defensive measures traced their roots to the late years of Ottoman rule when sports groups volunteered to protect Jews against Palestinian protesters." From the early 1920s, members of the sports organizations participated in activities aimed at restraining Arab manifestations of violence. They also assisted with the absorption of immigrants and in broadening the settlement enterprise, were involved in protests against British policy which sought to limit the development of the national home, and continued its activities in the fields of education, culture, etc. Many of these activists volunteered to serve in the British army during the Second World War, and some were active in saving and rehabilitating Jewish Holocaust refugees from Europe," Harif noted.²⁹⁸

Palestinian media as well as a Jewish scholar asserted that the Maccabi was using its 1935 tournament to obtain as many tourist visas as possible for Jews from abroad to visit the territory. Filastin said it had received a complaint from residents of the town of Tulkarem denouncing the games as a provocative military exercise.²⁹⁹ The paper

reported the letter in an article headlined “Ten Thousand Jewish Athletes: By What Right are They Permitted to Come?”³⁰⁰ Ha’aretz reported that the Palestinian media had questioned whether British authorities were “taking sufficient precaution to ensure that the tourists entering the country would leave at the end of their stay under the visas granted, or whether it knew that many contemplated remaining permanently as residents.”³⁰¹

In his 1979 dissertation, “The Maccabiah Games: A History of the Jewish Olympics”, Eisen acknowledged the Palestinian concern but asserted that the number of tourists cited by the media was “highly inflated by the hostile Arab news media even though their perception as to the real purpose of the Jewish influx was quite accurate.”³⁰² The notion of using sports not only to project nationalism but also as a cover for developing military skills for the conquest of Palestine and defence of the rights of the Jewish people was particularly prevalent among those elements within Maccabi that traced their routes to Beitar.

Filastin and other Palestinian media demanded that the games be banned and asserted that their opening march was paramilitary in nature.³⁰³ The assertions prompted the British authorities to cancel the march a day before the opening of the Maccabiah.³⁰⁴ Earlier, the British had advised Beitar against wearing its brown-coloured shirts during the opening ceremony as it was reminiscent of fascist dress in Mussolini’s Italy. The ban prompted Beitar to pull out of the tournament and break away from Maccabi.³⁰⁵ Beitar, unlike Maccabi and Hapoel which saw itself first and foremost as sporting organizations with affinity to the Socialist International, defined itself primarily as a movement that also engaged in sports.

The Palestinian media nevertheless complained that the British gave the Zionists preferential treatment by imposing far less restrictions on them than on marches by Palestinian youth and sports groups. The complaint reflected British fears that Palestinian youth were adopting more militant nationalist attitudes. The British mandate authority warned in the public security section of its 1936 annual report that Palestinian youth had closely followed the Egyptian student movement that had “instigated disorders there in November, 1935.” It said Palestinian youth had “gradually achieved a certain degree of influence with the Arab leaders themselves and used this influence to press for the adoption of a more extreme Arab policy. These activities were voiced in the Press through the medium of *‘Al Difa’a’* newspaper, which was suspended for a month under the Press Ordinance for advocating the adoption in Palestine of the methods employed by the Egyptian students.”³⁰⁶

Palestinian media hinted at a growing divide between more militant youth and the Palestinian leadership in articles that criticised the lack of solidarity within Palestinian sports organisations,³⁰⁷ using the term *Assabiyah* — a phrase coined by Ibn Khaldun, the 14th century historiographer and founding father of modern sociology — that refers to the bonds of cohesion built in the formation of communities.³⁰⁸ Divisions among Palestinians were exacerbated by the decision of some Palestinian clubs to join the Zionist-dominated soccer federation during the popular revolt against Jewish settlement and British colonial administration in the late 1930s and the disappearance of a political edge in sports reporting during the Second World War as a result of British censorship.

Al-Sifri was not the first person to suspect Zionist use of sports. Palestine’s Ottoman rulers feared that sports was used as a means to further Jewish nationalism and provide paramilitary training. To counter the Zionists, Ottoman authorities pressured schools to bar sports clubs like Rishon Le Zion in Jaffa and Bar Giora in Jerusalem. Schools often barred sports clubs for fear that authorities would confiscate their equipment or close them down. Ottoman and Palestinian fears were fuelled by the participation of Hashomer — a left-wing Jewish self-defence and settlement organisation — in the Rehovot Games, Zionism’s first major series of sports tournaments. Hashomer grew out of Bar Giora — a self-defence group established during the second wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine and named after Simon Bar Giora who was a leader of the Jewish Revolt against the Romans in 70 CE. Hashomer not only fielded athletes but had been contracted to guard the Rehovot settlement.³⁰⁹

Palestinian nationalists sought to stress the point that youth movements like Maccabi were paramilitary rather than sports groups. “The idea of the Maccabi goes back to first century B.C. when the Roman Empire saw for its own safety that the Jews have to (assimilate) so they could become Romans, but the Jews refused; they decided to maintain their national identity. The idea was in the beginning religiously ethical, so were their ways to achieve their goals. Later the concept was reduced from the realms of religion and ethics to the ground of nationalism and weaponry. The war was ongoing between the parties. The Romans were defeated more than once by the Maccabeans. The Jews remained nationally independent. We have no objection to see the Jews struggling for the sake of their unity and independence. The most we can prove here is that the Maccabi movement was a military struggle, but not an athletic movement as many Jews want to suggest to the world. What has been mentioned was proved by history,” said Filastin.

A Primary Source

Filastin, with its projection of Palestinian nationalism, has become a primary source of 20th century Palestinian history. Since Israel has captured significant Palestinian archives and Palestine’s sports history, historical sources has almost exclusively been written by non-Palestinian scholars and writers, with the exception of the work of Palestinian sports historian Issam Khalidi. Palestinian sports, despite its current political relevance, hardly ever emerges in Zionist or Palestinian collective memory.

The Jewish effort to solidify ties with the British as well as with other nations through soccer was boosted by Palestine’s admission in 1928 to world soccer body — FIFA. Within a decade of its founding, the PFA sought FIFA’s permission to play regional teams that were not members of the world body in a bid to strengthen Zionist ties with its non-Palestinian Arab neighbours as well as with British colonial teams in the Arab Middle East. In Khalidi’s words, “to obstruct Arab Palestinian teams, which it had alienated or excluded from the PFA, from competing with teams from other Arab counties.”³¹⁰ To this end, the PFA in the mid-1930s used its authority as the national association to prevent Palestinian teams from playing neighbouring Arab squads on the grounds that they were not members of the PFA.

Josef Yekutieli, the founder of the PFA and initiator of the Maccabean games, described the PFA’s membership “as a direct result of the Maccabiah Games.”³¹¹ The PFA, despite having been established as an organisation that grouped teams regardless of religion and race, projected itself as one of the driving forces of Jewish sports in British-controlled Palestine. Palestine in its view was Jewish and British; Palestinians did not figure in its nationalist calculations. Its mother organisation, the Palestine Sports Federation, adopted Zionism’s blue and white colours while the PFA dropped Arabic as one of its languages within three years of its founding. The Zionist anthem “Ha-Tikva” was played alongside Britain’s “God Save the King” at the start of official matches. The Palestine Olympic Committee followed a similar pattern with its nine members, seven of which were Jewish. “By 1934, the dominance of Zionist officials meant that Arab clubs had no say in the running of the association, despite Arabs comprising over three-quarters of Palestine’s population,” Khalidi wrote.³¹² The quest for Zionist dominance was rooted in the effort to create under British rule the building blocks of a modern state based on the principle of “authority without sovereignty”.³¹³

The PFA was established in 1924 after the Jewish Maccabi Athletic Organization was refused admission to the International Amateur Athletic Federation because its membership was predominantly Jewish and not representative of Palestine’s British and Arab population.³¹⁴ Its Zionist domination sparked the initial creation of the Arab Palestinian Sports Federation (APSF) in 1931 with Palestinians unwilling to legitimise Zionist colonisation or serve as a fig leaf for a Zionist dominated institution. The APSF was founded at a time when the Palestinian national movement had to grapple with the fact that its traditional leadership was ineffective in the face of a

refusal by the British mandatory administration to accord Palestinians the same degree of self-governance that it had granted other Arabs such as the Egyptians and the Iraqis. This reality was brought into sharp relief in 1930 with the death sentence for three Palestinian youths accused of organising the 1929 uprising against Jewish settlements and the British colonial administration. It persuaded younger nationalist leaders that they had to be more hard-line if Palestinians were to achieve their national ambitions.³¹⁵

Divorce of Palestinians and Zionists was a key element of a more hard-line approach. As a result, the APSF vowed to boycott Zionist teams, athletes and referees. Its opting for segregation paralleled efforts in other regions struggling with competing identities like South Africa and Ireland to assert identity through sports associations based on ethnicity or nationalism rather than the sport itself. The APSF's policy however proved controversial. The Arab Sport Club in Jerusalem battled, for example, for months against a decision by the Orthodox Club in Jaffa to bar Jewish referees.³¹⁶

The PFA's intent was evident when it dubbed the squad it sent to Egypt for a friendly match, the Land of Israel. The team was made up of six Jewish and nine British players. No Palestinians were included.³¹⁷ Neither were Palestinians part of the team which fielded in qualifiers for the 1934 and 1938 World Cup. When Palestinians revolted in 1936 against Jewish immigration, sports served to further bind Jews and Brits. "Efforts to dominate athletics, marginalize the Arabs, and cultivate cooperation with the British at any price were the main traits that characterized Zionist involvement in sports," Khalidi wrote.³¹⁸

A Well-oiled Machine

The Zionist effort to forge close relations with the British stumbled when ties with the colonial power frayed in the wake of the Second World War as Jews geared up for independence and extreme nationalist groups attacked British forces. Beitar, the right-wing nationalist group that encompassed Beitar Jerusalem, a storied club notorious until today for its anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim attitude, played an important role in the push for independence. Beitar, which was the product of the 1935 split between the revisionists and the main Zionist movement, was particularly pronounced in the post- World War Two run up to independence. The various Zionist youth movements intensified their focus on the concept of sports in the service of the nation and as a projection of nationhood. *HaMashkif*, the Beitar newspaper, argued in 1945 "that nations take part in international tournaments not only to display their sporting skills, but also to demonstrate their national traits and their national flag." *HaMashkif* went on to note that sports teams serve "to glorify the name of their people in public."³¹⁹

Beitar adopted obedience as one its core principles so that it would operate as a well-oiled machine. Its members were obliged to become skilled in the use of weapons. Its philosophy was in line with the militaristic principles of legionism, the notion of collective revival based on an inherited defensive tradition; strict discipline; *hadar* or dignity; and mobilisation.³²⁰ The duty of a Beitar member was to be ready to defend the Jewish settlement of Palestine. In Beitar's vision, its members were destined to join a military unit that would emerge from five volunteer battalions known as the Jewish Legion of the British military that fought the Ottomans in the First World War. Almost two decades later, Jabotinsky, to who sports was a utility rather than a passion negotiated through intermediaries the training of 134 Beitar members in Mussolini Italy's Maritime School in Civitavecchia in the province of Rome. The Beitar members were trained by Il Duce's Black Shirts — paramilitary squads established after the First World War — and were visited by Mussolini himself. In a letter to Leone Carpi, one of his intermediaries, Jabotinsky, aware of the rise of fascism under Mussolini, wrote that his movement preferred to have the training in Italy.³²¹

Sociologist Shlomo Reznik noted that "in Jabotinsky's words, Beitar was militaristic in the sense of knowing how and being ready to take up arms in the name of defending our rights. As an educational movement, the goal was to

create a 'normal' or 'healthy' citizen of the Jewish nation instead of the stereotypical 'Diaspora Jew.' The concept that captures the new Beitar type is *Hadar* (a Hebrew word that was used by Jabotinsky to denote outer beauty, pride, good manners, dignity, loyalty, and the like). Like its mother party, Beitar vowed to work for the establishment of a Hebrew state with a Hebrew-speaking Jewish majority, on both sides of the Jordan River, by means of mass settlement funded by national loans."³²²

The Jerusalem branch of Beitar founded the Beitar Jerusalem sports club in 1936, the year of the second Palestinian uprising. The club has been supported throughout its history by right-wing Israeli leaders, including current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It initially drew many of its players and fans from Irgun, an extreme nationalist, para-military Jewish underground. Its players and fans were active in various right-wing Jewish underground groups that waged a violent campaign against the pre-state British mandate authorities. As a result, many of them were exiled to Eritrea in the 1940s. Beitar's initial anthem reflected the club's politics, glorifying a "guerrilla army racist and tough, an army that calls itself the supporters of Beitar." The movement's links to the underground ultimately prompted the British to ban it on the grounds that it was "recruitment source for (a) terrorist group."³²³

Said an Israeli journalist: "This was a team with an ideal. Everybody was a member of (the Jewish underground movement Ha'Etzel) with the Menorah (Jewish candelabrum) emblem, which was something of a sacred symbol. The public was aware of the connection between Beitar and Ha'Etzel."³²⁴

So were the Palestinians. Filastin translated an article by Jabotinsky originally published in Hebrew in *HaMashkif* newspaper under the title "Jabotinsky's Program: Shooting".³²⁵ Jabotinsky argued in the *HaMashkif* article that Beitar could serve as a venue for military training given British opposition to the creation of Jewish military units.³²⁶ The article constituted in Filastin's view evidence that Beitar was a cover for Jewish paramilitary activity.

Despite the willingness of teams of neighbouring Arab countries to play Zionist squads prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, resistance to the Jewish national project spilled onto the soccer pitch, long before Israel's expulsion from the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) in 1974. Filastin reported in 1929 at the time of the Palestinian uprising that Arab fans, provoked by Zionist flags and the singing of Jewish nationalist songs during a match in Damascus played by a Hapoel club, clashed with their Jewish counterparts.³²⁷ Elsewhere, fans fought over alleged bias of referees.³²⁸ The Muslim and Christian Association asked the British mandate authorities in 1925 whether the flying of Zionist flag alongside the British flag during soccer matches violated regulations governing public display of flags. The British governor of Jerusalem and Jaffa ruled that club flags did not violate the ordinance which was designed to curtail "any partisan demonstration."³²⁹ The query followed a visit to Palestine by Hakoah Vienna, a team that was inspired by Nordau and widely viewed at the time as the best Jewish squad ever.

Ironically, Palestinians were not the only ones threatened by Zionist sports endeavours. Orthodox Jewry was vehemently opposed to defining Judaism as a national entity. To them Jewry was solely a religious community and would remain so until the Jews were redeemed from exile. The Orthodox leadership failed however to counter the attraction of youth movements with their emphasis on sports. Religious youth either joined Bnei Akiva, the largest religious Zionist movement, or often became members of Maccabi. The Orthodox Jewry nevertheless fought the fact that sports activities, particularly soccer, took place on Saturdays — the Jewish day of rest. Police repeatedly clashed in the 1930s with Orthodox protesters who sought to prevent games from being played.³³⁰ It was a struggle that continued to be waged throughout the 20th century, with the Orthodox Jewry battling plans for the construction of a stadium in Jerusalem. Much like militant Islamic clerics, ultra-Orthodox rabbis feared that sports would distract students at yeshivas, Jewish religious schools, from their study of traditional texts. Similarly, they also opposed sports because it was performed in clothes that allowed athletes to exhibit parts of their body.³³¹

Fuelling Nationalist Friction

The Zionist employment of sports in their struggle for Jewish statehood nonetheless sparked a Palestinian national response that sought to counter the challenge in the realm of sports. Palestinian national sentiment expressed itself post-World War I through the emergence of charitable societies, women's groups, youth organisations and sports clubs, even though Palestinian media lamented that they lacked the resources, particularly in sports, available to their Zionist counterparts. British mandate officials recognised early on that the development of separate Jewish and Palestinian sports clubs was likely to fuel nationalist friction. At the inauguration of the Jerusalem Sports Club in 1921, Jerusalem Military Governor Ronald Stores called for clubs to be inclusive and admit members irrespective of their religion or beliefs.³³²

Khalidi documented the battle over rival Jewish and Palestinian claims to land and identity waged on the soccer pitch in the decades leading up to the founding of Israel. Muslim, Christian Orthodox and secular Palestinian sports clubs reinforced national identity and constituted a vehicle to strengthen ties among different Palestinian communities. Orthodox Christians, opposed to foreign domination of their parishes, took a lead in promoting sports with the first conference of Orthodox Christian clubs in 1923 that called for the establishment of clubs across Palestine. Its call was heeded with the emergence of Orthodox clubs established in Jaffa, Jerusalem, Lod, and Akko.³³³

The clubs, similar to the role of the Algerian national team as a promoter of the Algerian liberation struggle during the country's war of independence, allowed Palestinians to forge relations with other Middle Eastern and North African nations. Filastin praised in nationalistic terms the performance of the Orthodox Club of Jaffa in its 1931 encounter with a visiting Egyptian team. "The team of the Egyptian University came to Palestine and played with the Jewish teams, no Arab team applied to compete with them, except the Orthodox Club. The result was better than the game with "Maccabi". So it made us proud and made everyone understand that there are Arabic teams in Palestine who are skilful in this game and have the same level as the British and Jewish teams," Filastin wrote.³³⁴

Sports clubs further created an institutional base for political organisation and served to prepare predominantly young men for social and political engagement. In an effort to forge useful relationships through soccer, Palestinians first created their own informal national team in 1910 that played primarily against missionary clubs. Encouraged by local media, the Arab Palestinian Sports Federation and a national team that played its first match against a squad from the American University of Beirut were born 21 years later as Palestinian counterparts of the PSA and the PFA. The team "will refute Jewish claims and Zionist propaganda that Palestinians are ignorant and have nothing to do with sports," Filastin quipped.³³⁵

The Islamic movement, riding a wave of increasing popularity on the back of mounting public disillusion with the inability of Palestinian and Arab leaders to counter Zionist advances, convened a meeting of the Islamic Physical Training Club in 1928. The gathering attended by lawyers, journalists and politicians, including Ragheb Effendi Al-Imam, Hasan Sidqui al-Dajani, Mohammed Izzat Darwazeh and Sheikh Hassan Abu Saud, a close associate of Haj Mohammed Effendi Amin el-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, called for the establishment of Young Men's Muslim Associations (YMMA) across Palestine.³³⁶ A prominent newspaper editor described the activities of the YMMA's Nablus branch as evidence that "native sons now have the knowledge that their public welfare, and consequently their private welfare, requires bonds of unity, virtuous discord, and love to exist."³³⁷

Four years later, sports became a central tenant of the Arab Youth Congress headed by newspaper proprietor and politician Issa Basil Bandak. Convened in 1932, the congress was a reflection of the growing gap between Palestine's traditional leadership and its youth.³³⁸ The divide was evident within clubs. In 1934, members of the long-standing Salesian Club in Haifa that was associated with the charitable Catholic Society of St. Francis de Sales, split off to

form Shabab al-Arab because they felt that it was not nationalist enough. Shabab al-Arab was founded under the auspices of the congress which had its own annual tournament.³³⁹ "Athletic clubs were important in evoking the Palestinian national consciousness, sustaining connections between villages and cities, and developing ties with groups across the Middle East and parts of Africa. As such, this trend was contested by Zionist forces in Palestine in a struggle played out on the international stage after the re-establishment of the defunct APSF in 1944," Khalidi wrote.³⁴⁰ To strengthen links with Arab neighbours, players and spectators held two minutes of silence in 1945 at the beginning of the final of the Palestinians' first territory-wide soccer championship to commemorate the 400 protesters killed in the French bombardment of Damascus.³⁴¹

The nationalist Palestinian uprising that erupted in 1936 nevertheless allowed the PFA to briefly revalidate its claim to represent both Jews and Arabs in Palestine. With the APSF in disarray and no institutional framework, several Palestinian clubs including Jerusalem's Arab Sports Club and Al Rawda Club and Haifa's Shabab al-Arab re-joined the PFA to ensure that they could continue playing.³⁴² It was further strengthened by the creation of a short-lived league in 1942 that included Palestinian, Jewish, British and Greek teams.³⁴³ Shabab al-Arab, the nationalist club, was among the Palestinian clubs that participated.³⁴⁴ The APSF's demise ironically ushered in a period of greater engagement between Zionist and Palestinian teams that in part was encouraged by perceptions in some segments of Palestinian society of sports being apolitical. It was a perception Zionists were eager to encourage. "Perhaps at first a small group of Arab sportsmen would be found, a group that would listen to our voice and claims that sport and politics should not be mixed and that the good and mutual relationship between sportsmen of both nations could bring about the improvement in the friendship in general," wrote journalist Shimon Samet in 1937.³⁴⁵

A refusal seven years later by an Egyptian military soccer team to visit Palestine to play a predominantly Jewish squad prompted the Palestinians to again organise themselves on a regional and national basis. The newly reconstituted APSF insisted in its 1944 regulation that its membership "consists exclusively of Arab, non-Jewish institutions and clubs in Palestine... All clubs must include no Jewish members, not employ Jewish referees and not be funded by Jewish sources."³⁴⁶ "The association is uncharted road in the confrontation with the Jewish Football Association," a prominent Palestinian sports editor said.³⁴⁷

The regulation was more than an effort to challenge the Zionist claim of representation of Palestine, it was an attempt to project Arab Palestine as an organised sports entity in its own right, able to compete internationally and to engage the British in the waning years of their mandate. Opting for segregation in sports was in line with Filastin's advocacy more than a decade earlier of parallel Jewish and Palestinian labour markets to counter British and Zionist policies that forced Palestinians into an increasingly untenable situation of insecure land tenure, heavy debt, and lack of investment.³⁴⁸

Filastin conveniently refrained from reporting that Palestinians and Jews played in an APSF team in violation of the group's 1946 regulations to play against other squads in Palestine.³⁴⁹

The segregation strategy nevertheless persuaded Palestine's Arab neighbours to play in Palestinian rather than Zionist clubs. However, Palestinian efforts to persuade FIFA to recognise the APSF alongside the PFA fell on deaf years. It took the Palestinians half a century to achieve FIFA acceptance when the Palestine Football Association, the APSF's successor, won membership as FIFA's only entity that was not a state.

Ironically, APSF had already warned two years before the establishment of the State of Israel that FIFA's efforts to play peacemaker in the Middle East by having Jews and Palestinians represented by one organisation would fail. "Simply we could say that the members of your federation will not succeed in achieving what the British administration could not do," the APSF said in a memo to FIFA.³⁵⁰ It would take the Palestinians 52 years to defeat Zionist insistence that the Palestinians did not constitute a people or a state. In achieving their goal, the

Palestinians made history by becoming the first territory without a state to have a seat at the soccer world table.

The fact that it took the Palestinians half a century to become a FIFA member raises questions about soccer's effectiveness as a tool to project nationhood. In the case of the Jewish national movement, Harif argued that the "political implications of the sports contacts with foreign countries must not give the impression that these sports meetings resulted in a substantial change in the international standing of the Yishuv," the Jewish settlement of Palestine. Athletes, in the political scientist's view, "first and foremost fulfilled a symbolic role as representatives of a political entity which lacked sovereignty and real power and strove to achieve independence."³⁵¹ While Haggai looked at the role of sports primarily in terms of Zionist Jewish identity, he unwittingly anticipated later concepts of the utility of sports as a soft power tool to project identity to a target audience beyond a nation's immediate confines

Projecting Nationhood

The Palestinian struggle to gain the right to represent themselves in soccer nonetheless gave birth to a strategy Palestinian soccer upholds until today: the projection of Palestinian nationhood through football. Palestinians "cannot avoid devising a way to publicise their ideas...and propagate their principles and views without being afraid of opposition or oppression. They can achieve their goal through sports as did Sweden, Czechoslovakia ... and Hungary," Filastin commented a day before the 1947 United Nations vote in favour of partitioning Palestine.³⁵² APSF had rejected an invitation to Palestinian clubs issued by the PSA a year earlier in a bid to fend off a request by Arab soccer associations to grant the Palestinian group FIFA membership.³⁵³

The Palestinian efforts to join FIFA were thwarted not only by Zionist opposition but also by British concern about identity politics in sports given their experience in Egypt where Cairo's storied Al Ahli club was a driver of the 1919 revolution and represented an anti-colonial bulwark. A 1935 official British report on youth movements in Palestine warned that Palestinian Scouts, sports and youth groups could challenge the region's national leadership.³⁵⁴ A year later, in a forerunner of the role of soccer fans in the 21st century's popular Arab revolts, members of sports clubs and the Scouts were in the forefront of anti-British demonstrations during the revolt in 1936. They patrolled beaches to prevent illegal Jewish immigration and arms smuggling, organised the distribution of food, and helped moving those wounded or killed in the uprising. They saw themselves as filling a void left by a failing Palestinian leadership.

Palestinian media stressed throughout this period the nationalist utility of sports in general and soccer in particular. Filastin, a twice-weekly Christian-owned newspaper published in the first 67 years of the 20th century that pioneered Palestinian sports reporting, supported the Young Turks during Ottoman rule and was influential in promoting Palestinian nationalism, "maintained a consistent critique: challenging the authorities' neglect of Arab sport and its support of Jewish sport activities. About 80 Per cent of the news in Filastin's sport section was about soccer, the most popular game in Palestine," wrote Khalidi.³⁵⁵

At the Jaffa Literary Club in 1922, the newspaper's co-founder, poet and journalist Issa Daoud El-Issa, signalled public distrust of political leadership that came to haunt the Middle East and North Africa almost a century later. Addressing Arab rulers, El-Issa, a pioneer of criticism of 20th century Arab regimes, said: "Oh little kings of the Arabs, by the grace of God, enough feebleness and infighting. Once upon a time, our hopes were on you, but all our hopes were dashed." El-Issa's comments primarily targeted the inability of the Hashemites, Jordan's current rulers who at the time ruled Hejaz — a province of contemporary Saudi Arabia, to unite the Arabs in confronting British, French and Zionist advances in the region.³⁵⁶ They also targeted large landlords who sold Arab land to the Jewish National Fund which was a key element of Zionist colonisation effort; Palestinian merchants opposed to general strikes in protest against pro-Jewish British policies, and against

Palestinian leaders who collaborated with the mandate authorities. The comments were all the more significant given that El-Issa had joined Hashemite Prince Faisal in his 1918 march on Damascus and served as the head of his court during his brief two-year reign in Syria. Similarly, El-Issa parted ways with El-Husseini, the grand mufti, whose supporters called for a boycott of Filastin, accused El-Issa of being a traitor, burnt his house to the ground and forced him into exile in Beirut from where he continued to publish the newspaper.³⁵⁷

Filastin, founded in 1911 in the booming port city of Jaffa, helped in the emergence of a Palestinian civil society and built an audience across all social and economic segments. El-Issa's cousin and co-founder, Yousef El-Issa, defined the newspaper's mission in Filastin's first edition as advocating "every development that serves the constructive rather than the destructive building of a nation."³⁵⁸ Six months later, he stressed the need to create a public opinion that would enable Palestinians to modernise tradition and custom within the framework of Islamic law.³⁵⁹ The notion of a need for public opinion and mobilisation was expanded three years later in the pages of Filastin and other media in a bid to galvanise opposition to Jewish immigration and land purchases. Within three weeks of writing an editorial asserting that "a very important movement is afoot among young men,"³⁶⁰ Filastin was closed down by the Ottomans for a period of six years that included the length of World War One, and Isa El-Issa was exiled to Anatolia. The paper's fate was shared by other Palestinian publications.

Filastin, which unlike most Palestinian publications was not formally associated with a political party, was widely viewed as the most influential Palestinian newspaper in the first half of the 20th century. Once it started publishing again after the six-year closure, Filastin expanded its coverage to include sports. It used its football coverage to deepen national sentiments and helped, according to Khalidi, to "maintain the Palestinian national identity... Sports began to be viewed in the Palestinian community as an important element for raising social consciousness and as an essential component of national culture."³⁶¹ The paper did so in the context of a drive promoted by Isa El-Issa to carve out a Palestinian national identity that was separate from that of Syria, which traditionally was seen to incorporate Palestine. It was based on Isa's notion that Palestinians needed to shape their identity before seeking independence — a proposition that positioned Filastin's brand of Arab nationalism against Islam-based concepts of ummah, the community of the faithful.³⁶² Filastin's coverage tackled Zionist domination of sports and refuted assertions that the Palestinians lacked the cultural, social and athletic attributes needed for sports. The paper's influence increased despite British censorship. Its sports coverage went in tandem with the revival of Palestinian sports federations in the 1940s.

Sports, a term in Arabic derived from a word that denotes domestication of animals, amounted in Filastin's view to a national duty, according to Israeli sports historian Sorek who analysed Filastin's sports reporting in the 1940s. Filastin propagated soccer's emphasis on discipline and obedience. "Soccer teaches us to obey the team's manager, and the referee teaches us to adhere to law and justice... Obedience is one of the most important qualities that the soldier in the battlefield must equip himself with. The war will not be fought without obedience," the newspaper said.³⁶³ To bolster its campaign, Filastin enlisted medical personnel to propagate the individual and national health benefits of sports and provide guidance for taking care of one's body — similar to concepts pushed by its Zionist counterparts.

In an appeal to the Supreme Muslim Council in 1946 to encourage sports, Filastin said it was "calling upon you as a soldier active on the sport field for many years ... I would ask you to direct the attention of the preachers in the mosques, and the speech-givers in the houses of God, so that through their speeches they may point the nation to sport, to urge them to care for their bodies, to ensure its cleanliness and activeness, to strengthen its limbs and to behave according to the rules of health, and its health will advance with us...in the struggle...."³⁶⁴ In a similar appeal to school principals, it said: "Remember that history urges you to raise an army of well-educated and healthy people, which will defend this country against the demon of colonialism."³⁶⁵ The newspaper's campaign reflected the views of nationalist leaders at the time. "The youth is to the nation as the

heart is to the body ... I see sport as the best means of equipping the nation with the youth it longs for," Gaza mayor Rushdi al- Shawa told the paper in 1945.³⁶⁶

Fast forward to 1998 when Palestine became the first non-state entity to become a member of FIFA and soccer re-emerged as a building block in the Palestinians attempt to create a state regardless of peace talks with Israel. Soccer, despite lack of funds and disruptive Israeli travel restrictions, flourished in Israeli-occupied Palestinian areas. Stadiums were built or refurbished across the West Bank and the Palestinian Football Association (PFA) hosted international tournaments. The Palestinian national team in 2014 qualified for the Asian Cup finals for the first time.

"Ours is more than just a game," said PFA secretary general Abdel Majid Hijeh. "It breaks the siege on Palestinian sports and the Palestinian people."³⁶⁷ "When teams come to play on our land, it's a way of recognizing the Palestinian state. That benefits the Palestinian cause, not just Palestinian sports," added player Murad Ismael in an interview with the Associated Press.³⁶⁸ Palestine's soccer effort fits into a Palestine Authority campaign spearheaded by President Mahmoud Abbas to ensure popular support at a time of popular revolt, upheaval and sectarian violence in the Arab world and to reduce Palestinian dependence on failed U.S. efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Leading Palestine's charge on the soccer pitch was PFA President Jibril Rajoub, a 62-year old tough anti-Israeli activist, former security chief and member of the central committee of Abbas' Al Fatah guerrilla group-turned political party. Rajoub, who served 17 years in Israeli jails for throwing a grenade at Israeli soldiers when he was 17 years old, worked hard to get Israeli consent to upgrade a soccer stadium in Al-Ram, a Jerusalem suburb a stone's throw from the barrier that separates the West Bank from Israel, and to get FIFA funding for its refurbishment. He also convinced FIFA to allow Palestine to play its first ever match on home ground in 2008 rather than in a neighbouring Arab capital. The crowds in the Faisal al Hussein Stadium shouted "Football is nobler than war" as Palestine took the lead in its first international match in the stadium, a friendly match against Jordan.³⁶⁹

"We can achieve a lot for our cause through sports. The world is changing and we have to push the legitimacy of our national aspirations through sports. I hope sports will help Israel reach the right conclusion. We are 4.2 million people living under Israeli occupation; I hope that I can convince the Israelis that we should open a new page that recognizes the existence of Palestinian people," Rajoub said.³⁷⁰

Conclusion

Filastin's emphasis on national duty and its concept of sports as a tool for cultivation of traits needed on a battlefield was reflected in its reporting of the 1948 war that led to Israeli independence. Sportsmen who died in Zionist attacks or on the battlefield resisting Zionist advances were termed martyrs. One obituary was entitled, "The Martyrdom of a Youth on the Battle Field."³⁷¹

Nationalist fervour and the impending partition of Palestine in the late 1940s produced a galvanising figure, Hussein Husnu, in many ways the equivalent of early modern Turkey's legendary author and athlete Selim Sirri Tarcan and Zionism's Yosef Yekutieli. An Egyptian physical education teacher who became Filastin's sports editor, Husnu was, in Khalidi's words, a rarity who had a keen understanding of the importance of sports and education for the "health, ethical, national, cognitive, pedagogic and aesthetic benefits of sport at a time when many thought that sport was merely an amusement or recreational activity."³⁷² The emphasis of Filastin and Husnu on sports as a driver of modernity paralleled trends elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, including Zionist parts of Palestine as well as Iran, Ottoman and modern Turkey, and Egypt.³⁷³ Husnu emerged as a nationalist critic of Palestinian and British official neglect of Palestinian sports and physical education, and a major voice in countering conservative

opposition. “The more the Palestinians will sacrifice for the sake of athletic progress, the faster they will reach a level of development and civilization. Every Palestinian must know that for every cent he pays for the growth of sport, he will achieve glory and honour for his country,” Husnu argued in his *Filastin* column.³⁷⁴

In doing so, Husnu and *Filastin* were aligned with more modernised segments of the Palestinian elite as opposed to conservatives like al-Husseini with whom *Filastin* editor Isa el-Issa had parted ways. *Filastin* found common ground with Ahmed Hilmi Pasha, an Ottoman general and finance minister in Faisal’s short-lived government in Damascus, director of Husseini’s religious endowment, and founder of a bank. Hilmi Pasha parted ways with Husseini with the establishment of the secularist *Istiqlal* Party in 1932 to which El-Issa was close. By the mid-1940s, Hilmi Pasha had emerged as a major patron of soccer which he hoped would help garner support for his bid for political office and mobilise a grassroots base. Hilmi Pasha was not alone in recognising the political value of soccer in Palestine at a time of increasing disunity and factionalism. Founders of the People’s Party, a breakaway group of younger members of the Husseini clan’s Palestine Arab Party (PAP), operated secretly through a network of sports clubs in Nablus and other cities.³⁷⁵ The moves by Hilmi Pasha and the PAP dissidents underscored the role soccer had already played in nationalist struggle and nation-formation in the Middle East and North Africa and was destined to play in the years to come.

So did the graduation of Jewish Israelis from nation formation to nation building with the 1947 United Nations partition resolution that established the State of Israel and could have established an Arab/Palestinian state had Arab states not rejected the notion of a territorial compromise. As a result, Palestinians post-1948 remained preoccupied with nation formation in the absence of an identity that was fully delineated from that of the broader Arab world and particularly concepts of Greater Syria.

That delineation took final shape with the takeover of the Palestine Liberation Organization, founded five years earlier by the Arab League, by Palestinian guerrilla groups in 1969. The creation of the Palestine National Authority in 1994 as a product of the Oslo Israeli-Palestinian peace process launched the Palestinians on their ongoing convoluted and messy nation building process. The Ottomans and Turkey as well as Iran were spared the convulsions of nation formation. Nevertheless like in Palestine, sports influenced by the notions of the German *Turnbewegung* played a key role in their nation building efforts. Constructing National Identity: The

The New Turk

Abstract

The history of Turkish soccer in the waning years of the Ottoman empire and the early days of the modern Turkish republic founded in 1923 is a history of the struggle between modernizers and Islamic conservatives. It is a struggle that is still being waged even if the battlefields have shifted from the late 19th and early 20th century when it was exclusively about the sport itself to the 21st century where the stakes are women's rights, political power, and Islamic purity. It is also a history like in pre-state Israel and Palestine a battle for assertion of identity and the creation of a pre-militaristic environment. Ottoman and Turkish soccer history puts the sport's dualistic political character on full display. Soccer is both a tool of mass mobilization that political and economic forces as well as rulers exploit to garner support, improve their image and syphon off financial resources as well as a potential threat as a platform for protest and dissent.

The battle for the sport

Sultan Abdulhamit II's resistance to the introduction of soccer coincided with his fostering of a despotic period in late Ottoman history that started with his suspension of the constitution in 1878. Abdulhamit's opposition to the sport was rooted in his emphasis on national values and pan-Islamism as a response to war with Russia and European encroachment and a result of his paranoia sparked by the murder of his predecessor, Abdulaziz. Abdulhamit hoped that his focus on Ottoman and religious values, including traditional sports like wrestling, would allow him to embrace Western technological and administrative advances while preventing Western values from gaining currency in the empire.³⁷⁶ To Abdulhamit, soccer was a vehicle to promote Western concepts as well as threat because it attracted large crowds at a time that he viewed public gatherings of more than three people as a danger.³⁷⁷

It fell therefore on British nationals and non-Muslim communities in harbour cities like Izmir, Salonika, and Istanbul that linked the empire to Europe to open the door to a sport that ultimately has become a modern Turkish national obsession.³⁷⁸ These port cities, unlike the isolated, inland and more conservative towns of Anatolia, dominated domestic commerce and the empire's exposure through trade and communal links to the non-Ottoman world. Izmir and Salonika moreover emerged as pioneers of soccer because surveillance by the sultan's vast network of informers was less prevalent there.³⁷⁹

It took Turks more than two decades to challenge Abdulhamit's ban on soccer. They did so with their feet. The first club formed by Turkish players and headed by a Naval Academy student, Fuad Hüsnü Bey, the Black Stockings (Siyah Çoraplılar), was founded in 1899. The player opted for an English name in a bid to persuade security forces that theirs was a British club. They hoped that this would spare the club the invasion of pitches and arrest of players by security forces. The emergence of the Black Stockings signalled Abdulhamit's failure to halt what became a soccer wildfire with the founding of various other Istanbul-based clubs, including Kadikoy FRC, the first British club to be founded in Istanbul; Moda FC, Elpis; and Imogene FC, established by staff working on a British embassy yacht, and a number of similar teams in Izmir.

In contrast to Abdulhamit and his conservatives, more progressive elements of the Ottoman elite saw soccer as a vehicle to promote nationalism. The end of Abdulhamit's reign in 1908 and the reinstitution of the constitution gave

them the opening they needed. The Young Turks organized in the Committee of Union and Progress became the empire's proponents of the game. They viewed it as vehicle to mobilize patriotic and nationalist sentiment and neutralize conservative opposition. The Young Turks worked hard to achieve some sort of buy-in from more conservative and religious segments of society who continued to see soccer as a reflection of Western culture.

Conservative and religious opposition foreshadowed contemporary rejection of soccer by segments of the militant Islamist community. It was grounded in a perception of the game as a distraction from the study of the Koran, a promoter of inappropriate dress and the display of naked flesh, and a symbol of blasphemy because hitting a ball resembled the alleged kicking round in 680 CE of the severed head of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson Hussein by his killers. In sum, conservatives rejected the very thing soccer represented: modernity.

The Young Turks' success despite conservative criticism was reflected in the founding of the Istanbul Football Association in 1913 as a result of a merger of the Friday League played by Muslims on their day of rest and the non-Muslim's Sunday League.³⁸⁰ In response to the post-Abdulhamid encouragement of patriotic sentiment, the empire's short-lived first sports and particularly soccer-focussed journal, *Futbol*, called on its readers to suggest Ottoman language substitutes for the English vocabulary of the game.³⁸¹

A novel concept

Alongside *Futbol* which published only seven editions, no one contributed more to the projection of soccer as a pillar of Turkish nationalism that would help cure the sick man of Europe than Selim Sirri Tarcan, a legendary athlete, teacher, author, Ottoman Inspector of Physical Education, and member of the post-Ottoman parliament. Tarcan was a product of the French Lycee de Galatasaray where he excelled in sports, and the military's engineering school.

Tarcan, who in 1897 founded Darulirfan, one of Turkey's first private sports schools, argued in articles and a book³⁸² that Ottomans should emulate Europeans who had recognized that the game embodies concepts of discipline, energy and endurance, and furthered professionalism and entrepreneurialism. Besides recommending that soccer become part of physical education in schools, he argued that the Ottoman military like its European counterparts should adopt the sport as a training and bonding tool.

Niyazi Berkes, one of Turkey's foremost sociologists who focused on its transition from empire to modern state, ranked Tarcan as one of Turkey's foremost mass educators whose rise was unique. These educators were able to counter conservative religious opposition and uproot long-standing traditional values. They "made their influence felt...by demonstrating their views, creating a mass psychology, and converting it into small social movements and a number of fashionable myths. (They) emerged from among previously obscure army officers, doctors, poets, teachers, and civil servants. Each was the populariser of one or two novel ideas. All skyrocketed to fame and were as popular as top politicians. Most of them were colourful figures and a type of popular figure never known before in Turkey. Under normal circumstances, all of them would have been called eccentrics, if not lunatics. But at no other time in Turkish history has the educator been so popular, possessing such magical powers over the crowd... No one has surpassed the theatrical skill with which these men combined radical ideas with plain common sense," Berkes wrote.³⁸³

Tarcan's novel concept was that the nation in its totality should move bodily. "Like the others, he was no mere theoretician... He appeared in his athletic uniform in open squares, at schools, and in the ceremony halls of the

Hamidian³⁸⁴ period that he had converted into gymnasiums. Never before had a sane Turkish adult been seen like this in public. Selim Sirri jumped, walked ropes, swam, fenced – in short, he made acrobatics, which the people had believed to be worthy only of the cheap artists in the Hamidian festivals, sound and look respectable... Talk, move, work, play – these were the first formulae of these empirical pedagogues, their fundamentals for the new education. Playing football or playing on stage – both were unbecoming to adults in the old tradition... In fact, if the Mesrutiyet (constitutional monarchy) resulted in any revolutionary break with the past, it was because these men turned the scale of values upside down in an area of culture which even ambitious Islamists did not imagine could be taken over into the custody of the all-encompassing Seriat (Sharia). The new mass educators opened holes in the rock of tradition, without interference from the Islamists, and placed their dynamite there to explode the religious society which the Islamists were so carefully trying to erect on the rock... The teachers were the first counterparts, hence competitors, of the clericals. What the clergy were to the traditional order, the teachers were to the new,” Berkes recounted.³⁸⁵

Not surprisingly, Tarcan tore walls down. “He brought to education the habit of teaching people to stand up and walk erect. Although few understood the relevance of bodily movement to education or modernization, none ever hissed or attacked its prophet. Selim Sirri not only made his gospel properly acceptable, but also succeeded in introducing it into the school programs. More amazing, he had gymnastics introduced into the curricula of the medreses – those institutions in which sitting was the only remaining vestige of scholastic life. Selim Sirri waged tireless war against physical immobility for more than 40 years and if the Turkish youth today run, swim and jump, they owe freedom to this magician of the Mesrutiyet³⁸⁶,” Berkes wrote.³⁸⁷

Tarcan’s insistence on the importance of sports was strengthened by a public stress on newly introduced concepts of youth as a social category.³⁸⁸ It also built on a realization among Ottoman reformers in the middle of the 19th century that education in traditional sports such as wrestling and horse riding was insufficient. As a result, modern sports initially became an integral part of the curriculum in military educational institutions and subsequently in non-religious schools in major cities. These institutions constituted a minority of the empire’s educational facilities and were inaccessible to the majority of the religiously conservative population who depended on traditional Muslim schools with little time for non-Islamic subjects. This restriction to Tarcan’s efforts was alleviated when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the visionary who carved modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire, integrated parallel religious and educational structures into one national Western-oriented national education system.

Tarcan’s thinking like that of the early Zionists and the shah of Iran was influenced by 19th century national German gymnastics educator, author and military officer Friedrich Ludwig Jahn who in the wake of Russia’s defeat of Prussia and Napoleon’s occupation of parts of Germany propagated restoring his country’s national spirit through the moral power of physical exercise under the motto, Frisch, Fromm, Froehlich, Frei (Fresh, Pious, Happy, Free). Jahn saw his Turn or gymnastics movement as the kernel of a military force that would be able to drive the French back across the Rhine. Many of his athletes joined the Lützow Free Corps, a Prussian volunteer force co-founded by Jahn that was among the German troops that ultimately reversed the French advances.³⁸⁹

“Military exercise even without a gun produces proper behaviour, triggers and enables experience of a sense of order, encourages obedience and paying attention, and teaches the individual to become part of a bigger whole. A well-trained unit of fighters is a spectacle of the highest level of strength and will. Every athlete should become a

soldier,” Jahn wrote in his Bible on German athletics.³⁹⁰ Tarcan echoed Jahn’s concepts, arguing in a book on Germany that a nation of well-trained people constituted a well-equipped army.³⁹¹

However, Tarcan’s exposure to the work of French medic Philippe Auguste Tissie who in Sweden discovered calisthenics and became a proponent of sports led him to nuance his adherence to Jahn despite the German’s balancing of his militaristic attitudes with a degree of egalitarianism that threatened Prussia autocratic rulers and led to his imprisonment. Tarcan’s endorsement of Tissie’s approach, which differed from that of Jahn in its emphasis on sports’ non-competitive aspects as well as the disabled and the weak rather than the fittest, was cemented when he went to study at the Royal Swedish Institute of Physical Education.

Despite his increased affinity with Swedish and Scandinavian culture, Tarcan returned in 1911 to an Istanbul that was infused by German notions of gymnastics as a guild tasked with the emancipation of the homeland. Jahn’s Turnbewegung (Gymnastics Movement) operated often open-air schools that authorities ultimately shut down because of their political role in pushing for the unification of Germany. In his writings³⁹², Tarcan referred positively to Jahn’s co-founding of the Lützow Free Corps as a way to promote nationalism, secularism, authority and obedience.³⁹³

Enter the Prussians

Württembergian officer Heinrich von Hoff who was invited in 1916 by Ottoman war minister Enver Pasha played an important role in cementing Tarcan’s adherence to Jahn’s thinking. Von Hoff had been the organizer of a local branch in Germany of the paramilitary youth organization, the Bund Jungdeutschland (BJD), founded by Prussian Marshal Freiherr Wilhelm Leopold Colmar von der Goltz who became a major influence in the militarization of Ottoman sports. The BJD sought to prepare youngsters from the age of 12 for war. In Istanbul, Von Hoff co-founded with Tarcan the paramilitary Ottoman Youth Association or OGD (Osmanli Gen Dernegi) whose ideology resembled that of the BJD. The influence of German officers that sprung from the close relationship between the German and Ottoman empires forged in the 1880s by Prussian minister president Otto von Bismarck and Sultan Abdulhamid II in reconceiving the concept of sports was felt beyond the Ottoman empire in Palestine and Iran where a German-educated officer, Geranmayeh, taught Jahn’s gymnastics at the military academy.³⁹⁴

The Ottoman preparation of youth took on added significance with the defeat of the Ottomans in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 in which the empire lost almost all of its European possessions and the eruption of World War One a year later that made permanent mobilization an imperative. To facilitate mobilization, Enver Pasha published a declaration calling on the nation’s youth to join the Youth Association. He argued that physical education and training would turn them into an “agile, brave, invincible generation able to endure all hardships.”³⁹⁵ Physical strength was one pillar of Enver Pasha’s concept of national strength that stretched from strong government to laying the foundations for a strong economy to abolishing agreements called capitulations that favoured foreign capital and non-Muslim businessmen to reducing if not eliminating the influence of minorities such as the Armenians in a bid to encourage the emergence of a Muslim bourgeoisie.

Enver Pasha’s focus on physical education and sports was reflected in the pages of *Idman*³⁹⁶, one of the Ottoman empire’s first sports magazines, established in the words of its owner, Cemi Bey, “to support youth who are interested in physical education... the foremost effort to save the country.”³⁹⁷ Prominent writers argued on *Idman*’s pages in favour of teaching children that life is a struggle for survival and employing physical education and

abstention from leisure, alcohol consumption and smoking to turn Ottomans into a strong nation.³⁹⁸ They promoted masculine values of honour, courage and sacrifice for the fatherland – concepts inherent to Jahn’s school of thinking.³⁹⁹ These values underwrote the Idman or Gymnastics Festivals first staged in 1916 by Tarcan and Von Hoff with the support of Enver Pasha intended to have the same effect as similar events in communist Eastern Europe which in the analysis of historian Petr Roubal served to discipline and use athletes’ bodies and convince spectators.⁴⁰⁰

The festivals as well as the OGD reflected a desire to mould social cohesion and national hygienics embodied in the thinking of both Jahn and the Swedish military’s concept of gymnastics. Sociologist and historian Henning Eichberg summarized the disciplinary aspects of this thinking in a study of 19th century Danish gymnastics as:

- Exercises that are structured by a leader and follow a fixed time pattern and drill
- Exercise are designed to emphasize the straight line of the body through a straight spine, symmetry of movement and geometrical position
- Uniformity of bodies
- Exercises are synthetically constructed and follow a pedagogically logical scheme
- Gymnastics are performed under the command of a leader
- The body serves as an instrument to install values such as health and patriotism.⁴⁰¹

In the Ottoman empire, Tarcan was the leader. ‘Be Straight’ or ‘Be Ready’ was his command.⁴⁰² It had an electrifying effect.⁴⁰³ Cora attributes significance to the analogy with electricity first used already at the time of the festivals in for example the liberal Ikdam newspaper⁴⁰⁴ because electricity “provides the energy for a machine to function.”⁴⁰⁵ Educational journal Tedrisat Mecmuasi reported that at Tarcan’s command “gymnasts raised their arms to the level of their chests at the speed of a machine. They began to move in good cohesion...”⁴⁰⁶ They moved in a straight line, emphasizing order and uniformity⁴⁰⁷ in line with Swedish pedagogics.⁴⁰⁸

In co-founding the OGD, Von Hoff was acting on the orders of Von der Goltz, whom the Ottomans called Goltz Pasha, an accomplished military strategist and theorist, author and journalist. A proponent of universal conscription and the submission of society to the military’s needs, Von der Goltz played an important role in modernizing Ottoman military thinking. For Goltz, the crucial test of fitness was war.⁴⁰⁹

Von der Goltz and his German military trainers put their stamp on the Ottoman forces, educating a next generation of Ottoman officers.⁴¹⁰ Von der Goltz’s ideological world was defined by militarism, nationalism and Social Darwinism that translated into a perspective of history as one of continuous struggle between tired established powers and upcoming challengers fought by peoples’ armies populated by well-bodied men who had been shaped by sports and physical education.

The Germans’ influence on the Ottomans was symbolized by the fact that Abdulhamit was reported to always keep a translated copy of Von der Goltz’s military classic, *Das Volk in Waffen* (The People in Arms)⁴¹¹, close to him.⁴¹² The book was used as a textbook in the Ottoman War College where Von der Goltz taught.⁴¹³ In Von der Goltz’s 12 years in the empire from 1883 to 1895 he also served on the Germany advisory committee established by Abdulhamit following Russia’s defeat of the Ottomans in 1878 and as inspector of the modernization of the empire’s military schools.

It was Von der Goltz who introduced to the Ottomans the concept of pre-military education in schools.⁴¹⁴ A disciple of Von der Goltz whom the general met as a young officer involved in youth education while under his command in the BJD, Von Hoff was introduced to the Ottoman military as a well-known military trainer who successfully trained and disciplined German youth. He was given the rank of colonel in the Ottoman army.⁴¹⁵

Von Hoff was a frequent contributor to the OGD's monthly publication, *Osmanli Genc Dernekleri Mecmuası*, where he focused on the need for healthcare⁴¹⁶ and offered practical information on the treating of wounds and the prevention of tuberculosis.⁴¹⁷ Van Hoff also called for a campaign to make the nation aware of the importance of health care that would include public lectures across the country.⁴¹⁸ His focus on healthcare stemmed from the fact that disease was taking its toll on Ottoman soldiers. Retired US lieutenant colonel and military historian Edward J. Erickson estimated that 466,759 Ottoman soldiers died of disease during World War One.⁴¹⁹

Together with Tarcan, Von Hoff further advocated obedience on the magazine's pages. He claimed in a letter to a German health publication that he educated 3,500 Ottoman Youth guides who trained some 200,000 youngsters in "gymnastics, free-style exercise, movement and open-air games, sensitivity exercises, health and first aid who have proven themselves in aiding war efforts based on the German example" – an assertion that is difficult to verify given that the association kept poor records.⁴²⁰ In fact, Van Hoff himself complained about the group's inefficient record keeping in the association's publication.⁴²¹

Tarcan's empathy for German notions of sports chilled with the growing influence in the 1930s of eugenics or racial purity that clashed with the very concepts that had attracted him to the Swedish approach embodied by Tissie.⁴²² His doubts about the German approach foundered however on Ataturk's view of physical education and sports as a key element for preparing the nation for possible war in the years between 1939 and 1945 and a driver of the post-Ottoman social and political paradigm shift towards modernization and Westernization that he envisioned.

A social and political paradigm shift

Ataturk's position was reinforced by his reliance on German experts whose post-Ottoman legacy was furthered by Kemalist officials who had been sent in Ottoman times to study in Germany and Austria and Turkish intellectuals who argued in favour of the need for nationalistic norms. These officials and intellectuals included educator and politician Cevat Dursunoglu and art historian Burcu Dogramaci who positioned sports as one way of filling a void with new norms and values created by the abrupt transition from a sultanate imbued by Islamic law and dogma to a westernized republic.⁴²³

Analysing that period of Turkish sports history, sociologist Demet Lukuslu reasoned that "mobilizing the youth and the masses via physical education became crucial for the republic."⁴²⁴ In Dogramaci's words "the genesis of sports culture in Turkey after 1923 was an expression of a social and political paradigm shift. The establishment of a parliamentary democracy on a Western model was accompanied by a new image of the individual: the republican Turk was young, active and conscious of his body... Sport and the healthy young body were to symbolize the entry into Western civilization and provide one of the 'reformist' pillars of Kemalism. The image of the 'sick man of the Bosphorus,' which was associated with the Ottoman Empire since the nineteenth century, was to be replaced by the young republican individual."⁴²⁵ Sporting events played an important role in this. They proclaimed Turkey's Western-style modernization. "The new Turkey is convinced that there is no fundament for the entire intellectual and moral

constitution as long as the body is weak,” commented the French language Turkish government periodical, *La Turquie Kamaliste*.⁴²⁶

To achieve bodily strength, Turkey, following Iran’s example 11 years earlier, adopted in 1938 a law that made physical education mandatory. The law was drafted at Atatürk’s invitation by Carl Diem, a German sports administrator, co-founder of Berlin’s University of Physical Education, and organizer of the 1936 Olympic Games who in 1932 started visiting Turkey to advise the government on its development of sports.⁴²⁷ By that time, a text co-authored by Diem, *Sportplatz und Kampfplatz* (Sporting Field and Battlefield),⁴²⁸ had been translated into Turkish.

In letters to his wife, Liselott, an acknowledged sports educator in her own right, Diem described his talks with senior Turkish figures, including Republican People’s Party secretary general Recep Peker, National Olympic Committee president Aziz Akyurek and Izmir member of parliament Kazim Pasa.⁴²⁹ Diem was the most prominent German assisting the Turks. Others included Hermann Riedel who advised military and civilian authorities;⁴³⁰ Hermann Altrock, a German sports educator and signatory of a 1933 declaration of academics in support of Adolf Hitler who was appointed visiting professor at the University of Ankara where he founded a sports institute at the College of Agriculture;⁴³¹ architect Werner March who together with Diem converted Berlin’s Deutsche Stadium into an Olympic stadium and advised the Turkish government on the construction of national sports complexes,⁴³² including a stadium in Ankara, which was to be the model for similar facilities elsewhere in the country;⁴³³ and urban town planner Hermann Jansen whose concept of a youth park-cum-stadium based on the principle of recuperation through movement stroked with the Kemalist vision of the New Turk.⁴³⁴

The sports law created a General Directorate of Physical Education (GDPE) headed by a general, Cemil Taner that effectively reported to the prime minister. Not surprisingly, Diem’s proposals and as a result the concepts adopted by post-Ottoman Turkey were initially modelled as much on Germany’s BJD as they were on Adolf Hitler’s Hitlerjugend. As a result, Turkey became the only country alongside the Soviet Union that managed sports through a state committee whose authority superseded that of the cabinet.⁴³⁵ Taner described the directorate’s mission as “conducting games, gymnastics and sports that improve the physical and moral capabilities of the citizens in accordance with the national and reformist principles.”⁴³⁶ Interior Minister Sukru Kaya told parliament during the debate over the new law that “sports is a matter of state. In this sense, we transfer the issue fully with its committees to the state. In any case, the state with its power and endless generosity should organize all of its sources for a field beloved by our nation.”⁴³⁷

The focus on sports by Atatürk and his cohorts stemmed from a belief that the demise of the Ottoman empire as a result of defeats in a series of wars was in part due to the fact that the Ottomans had not been physically prepared. The Turks’ “bodies remained in the East while their thoughts inclined towards the West,” Atatürk lamented.⁴³⁸ Falih Rifkî Atay, a prominent Kemalist journalist and private secretary to one of the leaders of the Young Turks, complained that the average Turk had a crooked posture and was fat and pale in contrast to the Europeans one encountered.⁴³⁹ Kemalist intellectual and member of parliament Burhan Asaf Belge argued that national sports was designed to create “hundreds of thousands of sturdy bodies” rather than win international sporting acclaim.⁴⁴⁰ For his part, one way Tarcan sought to redress Turkish body imperfections was to endeavor to lengthen and flatten the backs of the ill-shaped Turks.⁴⁴¹

Physical education teacher Ethem Nejat, who had worked in the Balkans before getting involved in left-wing politics argued that the Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913 had demonstrated the importance of physical education in schools and the military, a reasoning that had also been adopted by the shah of Iran. Nejat favoured educating schoolchildren in a military fashion and flunking them if they failed to perform in sports.⁴⁴²

The importance attributed by Ataturk and the nationalists to sport strengthened the secularist efforts to create a Western education system that catered to the population as a whole rather than just the elite and weakened religious and Ottoman opposition to soccer and other athletic endeavours. The new republic's stress on secularism and its view of Islam as a backward religion and an obstacle to progress and modernization meant that traditional sports such as certain forms of martial arts were de-emphasized or relegated to notions of folklore as opposed to gymnastics, swimming, rowing and shooting which were seen to be modern and have military value.⁴⁴³

This allowed the nationalists to gain control of sports clubs and associations that until the founding of modern Turkey had been the preserve of the old elites.⁴⁴⁴ These included the Türk Gücü Dernigi (Turkish Strength Society) that initially catered to the Unionist and nationalist elite and operated in only a few secondary schools.⁴⁴⁵ Responsibility for the clubs was transferred to the Union of Turkish Training Associations (TICI). Ataturk took in 1936 the state's grip on sports a step further with the establishment of the Turkish Sports Association (TSK) that obliged all athletes to become members of the government party, the People's Republican Party (CHP), and replaced the heads of sports associations with members of the party.⁴⁴⁶ In addition, the law on physical education turned employees of all sports federations into government officials.

"Physical education and sports became a major factor in constructing the image of the enlightened citizen... The Republic, which wanted to get rid of its Ottoman image as the sick man of Europe, had a high priority to the construction of healthy citizens through physical education," Lukuslu and political scientist Sakir Dinsahin said.⁴⁴⁷ One of Turkey's oldest sports publications, *Ulku*, employed sports to propagate Turkish nationalism rather than Islam as the core of the New Turk's identity.⁴⁴⁸ Turkish military commander and politician Rahmi Apak argued in the paper's columns that the physical weakness of the Ottomans was the fault of religious opposition to sports that produced "clumsy, turbaned, bearded religious men deprived of PE culture" rather than healthy bodies.⁴⁴⁹ Writing in *Beden Terbiyise ve Spor*, an organ of the GDPE, Taner, the directorate's director, argued that the law on physical education was designed to physically and morally prepare the New Turk for his national and revolutionary duties.⁴⁵⁰ The two papers embraced Kemalist mythology that sought to rewrite history to show that Turks and their Asian ancestors were at the core of human history from the beginning. They argued that the modern word sports had been derived from the Ottoman word for cavalry soldier, *sipahi*, and that soccer was a Turkish rather than a British contribution to civilization.⁴⁵¹

An ongoing struggle

Although the battle between the Kemalists and more conservative religious forces was decided in favour of the secularists with the creation of modern Turkey in 1923, the struggle never subsided and was boosted with Tayyip Recep Erdogan's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) ascent to power in the first and second decade of the 21st century. The divide between the religious and secularists, who in the Kemalist tradition restricted notions of pluralism despite Turkey's multi-ethnic roots because it contradicted their identity of Turks as Turks irrespective of

their ethnic, cultural or religious roots, was reflected in media reporting on international soccer matches with the denunciation in the secular press of any display of Islamic symbols by the Turkish national team.

As a result, soccer in many ways played a leading role in the battle over the definition of a Turkish identity and as a barometer of Turkey's standing in Europe. It was one of the early institutional links between Turkey and a Europe that was a pillar of Kemalist Turkish identity. Turkey joined the Council of Europe in 1949 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952. Ten years later, the Turkish Football Federation became part of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), a year before Turkey signed the Agreement Creating an Association between the Republic of Turkey and the European Economic Community or Ankara agreement that constitutes the basis of for its ongoing application for European Union (EU) membership.

"Football is widely considered to be progressive, European and sophisticated. Its vast popularity, indicated by the fact that most of the new satellite television channels broadcast live matches almost daily, owes something to the way it organizes the patterns of identity and belonging in cities which are held to disrupt and fragment this experience. It also owes something to the world of fantasy, glamour and political intrigue which Turkish football conjures up for those who follow it. The sums of money that changes hands almost defy comprehension; footballers and their managers mix with politicians, film and music stars; the scandals of rigged games and transfer swindles fill the back pages of the daily papers. Above all, football involves a point of contact with a global audience for people whose capacity to travel is extremely limited," said social anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes.⁴⁵²

For much of the next 35 years, European perceptions of Turkish soccer as an underdog in a world of giants reflected European question marks about Turkey's potential accession to the EU. Those perceptions started to change in the aftermath of economic liberalization policies in the 1980s implemented by Prime Minister Turgut Ozal, a former World Bank official, and reforms introduced by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a former soccer player, some two decades later. The reforms paved the road for professionalization of Turkish soccer and enabled clubs to hire foreign players and coaches. They also opened the door to the export of Turkish coaches and players boosted by the emergence of world class players of Turkish descent, primarily in Germany. The winning in Copenhagen of the UEFA Cup by Istanbul's Galatasaray SK in 2000 cemented Turkish soccer's arrival in Europe.

In Turkey, it was celebrated as the country's fulfilment of the Copenhagen Criteria, the terms on which a country was judged eligible for EU membership against a backdrop of media reporting that had portrayed matches between Turkish and European teams as replays of historical confrontations that date back to Ottoman times. It also was projected as an event that crowned Ataturk's effort to turn Turkey into a nation of able-bodied people. "Atam Iste Genclik ve Spor: Kutlu Olsun (Ataturk, my father, here is the youth and sport: Congratulations)," bellowed a headline in Milliyet newspaper on Youth and Sports Day, a Turkish national holiday that in 2000 was celebrated two days after the Galatasaray victory.⁴⁵³ The reporting nonetheless reflected a nation conscious of its imperial past that in many ways refused to accept a reduced status and lack of international standing and political clout that it once had. It also enabled Turkish liberals to project soccer as a vehicle that reinforced Turkey's European identity as opposed to more nationalist writers who saw Turkish soccer success in Europe as a reaffirmation of Turkish superiority.

The battle between militant Kemalists and Islamists fought on the back of soccer represented significant shifts in Turkish society and identity reflected in the rise to power of the AKP led by Erdogan, an Islamist politician. Unlike a majority of Turkish prime ministers who represented the closely-knit wealthy secular urban class, Erdogan's

grassroots support were the Anatolian tigers, successful, conservative businessmen in the Turkish hinterland as well as poor, conservative and often marginalized segments of society. Their rise was symbolized by Turkey's national team whose religious players such as Hakan Sukur, Hakan Unsal, Arif Erdem, Nuri Sahin and Arda Turan did not fit the Kemalist image and identity of a secular Turkey in the sense of French laicism and Western secularism. It reflected the Turkey that Erdogan sought to bring in from the cold. Image was for the Kemalists as important as was performance.

"The Turkish press has utilized football events to re-define boundaries of national identity, and informed their readers continuously about who constitutes 'us' and who constitutes 'them' both externally and internally. In the external sphere, Europe/the west emerges as the most significant other of both the secular and Islamic/conservative media. Successes against European teams are exaggerated with nationalistic vocabulary... Internally, however, the media have differed sharply in their definitions of national belonging. The radical secular media continuously campaigned for the exclusion of religious players who were accused of creating division within the national team by praying... The radical secular media took on a surveillance role, pointing out athletes they believed posed a national security threat by displaying their Islamic identity in the public sphere. In many cases, the Turkish State Security Court responded positively to the media coverage, opening investigations... In this manner they attempt to define boundaries of national identity and belonging," said political scientist Hasan Kosebalaban.⁴⁵⁴

Militant Kemalists, who reject any public expression of religious sentiment, took issue with the more conservative media that inserted an element of faith into the celebration of Turkish soccer success such as Yeni Safak, a paper close to the AKP that reported Turkey's successful advances in the 2002 World Cup in South Korea under the banner headline, "We believed and we won."⁴⁵⁵ The headline was a response to attacks on religious players foremost among them Sukur, who went on to become an AKP member of parliament. A state security court judge summoned Sukur for questioning in 2002 after he publicly declared his support for Gulen and praised the preacher's impact on his soccer career.⁴⁵⁶ Sukur resigned from the AKP in 2013 when the alliance ruptured between Erdogan and Fethullah Gulen, a self-exiled preacher who heads one of the world's largest Islamist movements.

The criticism of religious players involved charges by Kemalist columnists like Tuncay Ozkan that the national team's performance in the South Korean World Cup had been undermined by a lack of cohesion caused by Islamist players who organized Friday prayers during training sessions.⁴⁵⁷ A headline in Hurriyet said: "Germans question a drop of water, we bring an imam by airplane."⁴⁵⁸ Spread over two columns, Ozkan reported that "it is clear that there are factions within the team. This faction is led by Hakan Sukur and includes at least eight players... Players who do not belong to this group seem very unhappy. It is said that there is no friendship between team members. We can see the great stress and tension between them during matches. The national team is apparently under the influence and direction of a tarikat," a religious order led by Sukur, Ozkan wrote. Ozkan fumed further that the Turkish team was "suffering from the return of a disease that has plagued Turkish sport in general, the equation of professionalism with piety, prayer given precedence over skill."⁴⁵⁹ He charged that the team lacked a forceful manager who could stop Sukur and his associates from determining who would play and who could ensure that the ball is passed during matches to players irrespective of whether they were religious or not.

The attacks were fuelled by a belief among militant Kemalists that political Islam had infiltrated Turkish sports. "Islam's first target was Turkey's traditionally rural and religious wrestling team," asserted Hincal Uluc, a soccer commentator for Sabah newspaper, in an interview with The Christian Science Monitor. Their next target was

Sukur's club, Galatasaray. "Florya, the team's headquarters, became an Islamic centre. While players insisted they should be allowed to fast during Ramadan, the management argued they couldn't, because it would affect their form," Uluc said.⁴⁶⁰

Sukur symbolized the shifting of soccer's battlefield from a struggle between secularists and Islamists to an internecine fight among Islamists that started in 2011 with the eruption of the worst match fixing scandal in Turkish sports history. The fight pitched Erdogan, whose power base lies in conservative and more nationalist rural Turkey and urban communities that have maintained strong rural roots, against Gulen, an Islamist preacher who appeals to urban, upper mobile segments of Turkish society. Fresh from a resounding victory in municipal elections in 2014 that marked the prime minister's defeat of the preacher's efforts to exercise power through control of key state institutions including the police and the judiciary, Erdogan chose the pitch to make good on his election promise to "enter the lair" of his Islamist rival and ensure that what he called an "alliance of evil" is brought to account for alleged treason and creating a state within a state.⁴⁶¹

In a symbolic gesture, Erdogan called on Sukur to resign as an independent member of parliament after his nameplate was removed from an Istanbul stadium that had been christened after him. Erdogan turned on Sukur two years after he had recruited the player to boost his 2011 election campaign to become prime minister for a third term. Sukur moreover had support the prime minister's effort a year earlier to change Turkey's constitution that had been drafted in the 1980s during a period of military rule.

"Turkey has experienced a tremendous development and I wanted to be a part of this progress and transformation, too. I love my country and I am part of a party that has gained large support," Sukur said at the time.⁴⁶² Three years later, responding to the renaming of the stadium, Sukur quipped on Twitter: "It is better to have your name in people's hearts than having a picture on a wall."⁴⁶³

Erdogan's targeting of Sukur crowned his victory in elections that essentially buried a massive corruption scandal sparked by prosecutors believed to be close to Gulen who had launched an investigation into alleged graft by ministers and prominent businessmen associated with the then prime minister. The investigation led to the detention of the sons of three ministers and the head of a state-owned bank.

Erdogan accused Gulen of leaking a string of audio tapes allegedly implicating senior government officials, including the prime minister himself, in the scandal as well as of a high level security meeting on Syria. The prime minister charged that the graft inquiry was part of a parallel state seeking to topple the government. In response to the leaking of the tapes, Erdogan sought to block Twitter and You Tube but was rebuffed by the courts who lifted the ban on Twitter unconditionally and ordered You Tube to be unblocked once it deleted the Syria-related video because it damaged national security.⁴⁶⁴

The move against Sukur, viewed as the best soccer player of his generation if not in Turkish football history, seemed petty against the prime minister's earlier moves against Gulen, which included shifting scores of judicial personnel and thousands of police officers into new jobs in a bid to control the corruption investigation.⁴⁶⁵

Gulen heads a global education, banking and media empire that allied itself with Erdogan's AKP in a successful bid to submit Turkey's powerful military to civilian control. The mounting power struggle first became apparent in 2011 in

a political and legal battle between Erdogan and Gulen over how to handle the eruption of match fixing scandal. The inquiry into match fixing was initiated by the same prosecutor who launched the graft investigation.⁴⁶⁶

It sparked a proxy battle between Erdogan and Gulen that divided the prime minister's own AKP over legal penalties for match fixing that Erdogan won by pushing through parliament a bill that significantly reduced the penalties and arm twisting the Turkish Football Federation (TFF) to get Fenerbahce SK, the political crown jewel in Turkish soccer, off the hook and prevent clubs guilty of match fixing from being relegated. At stake in the battle over Fenerbahce was control of a club that boasts millions of supporters.⁴⁶⁷

The battle as well as the escalation of the power struggle culminating in the graft investigation raised doubts about whether Gulen, a frail, ailing 73-year old, who lives in self-exile in Pennsylvania, is in full control of his movement. Those doubts rose given that Gulen's movement turned the power struggle into open warfare with the graft investigation without an apparent clear endgame. The movement appeared to have no exit strategy.

Gulen implicitly acknowledged that he may not be in control in two phone calls to Fenerbahce chairman Aziz Yildirim in 2011 prior to soccer boss's conviction on match fixing charges. People familiar with the phone calls quote Gulen as telling Mr. Yildirim: "There is nothing bad in my heart against you. I am not involved in this. There might be people who did wrong against you but I am not aware of this if it was my people." In an inscription in a book Gulen sent to Yildirim in between the two phone calls, the preacher wrote: "To Aziz Bey whom I never had a chance to meet but admire for his activism, righteousness and perseverance. My prayers are with you that your difficult days may pass."⁴⁶⁸

Conclusion

Contemporary political battles fought on pitches brings the history of Turkish soccer as a vehicle to promote modernity and new national identity full circle. From the struggle between conservatives and progressives in the waning days of the Ottoman empire to Islamist efforts in the 21st century to position Turkey as a key Muslim link between East and West, soccer has been a key battlefield. Soccer's role in shaping the identities and positioning of nations in the Middle East is hardly unique. It is evident in the history the region's countries, Arab and non-Arab.

Soccer threads itself through Algerian history

Abstract

The history of soccer clubs at the forefront of nation-, state- and regime formation repeats itself across the Middle East and North Africa. It illustrates how colonial powers saw their strategy of employing sports clubs in a bid to strengthen their rule and advance their civilization mission backfire. Instead, clubs often emerged as catalysts of protest against colonialism and social inequality. Algeria is a classic example.

Islam and soccer

Soccer, the monkey wrench for the introduction in Algeria and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa of modern sport, offered Algerians as early as the 1910s a seemingly non-political way of challenging French colonialism and venting pent-up anger and frustration. It brought Algerians into physical contact with the colons, the French settlers, which often ended in brawls. It also enabled fans to forge an increasingly nationalist collective identity at a time that a national Algerian identity was just emerging.

“Although at the time of its appearance in Algerian cities the nadi (club) was limited to Muslim cultural, intellectual and commercial elites, its combination with proto-associative spaces (the café) and with colonial associative experiences (the sport club, the union, etc.) contributed to mobilise the people fighting for the liberation war,” said World Bank sustainable development expert Andrea Liverani in a seminal study of Algerian civil society.⁴⁶⁹ The nadi “provided the main intellectual hub for the development of Algerian nationalism. The revolutionary ideas of the intelligentsia combined with the mobilisation potential of the less elitist trade unions and sport clubs to produce the intellectual and human capital which eventually brought colonial rule down,” Liverani added.⁴⁷⁰

The first sports club to explicitly identify itself as Muslim was FC Musulman de Mascara established in 1913, two decades after the French introduced soccer to Algeria. Ten years later, 20 percent of all Algerian clubs had adopted an indigenous identity. They wore the green, white and red colours associated with the Algerian flag. One team, Espérance Sportive de Guelma, opted for black in permanent protest against the victims of French colonial rule.⁴⁷¹ The clubs openly challenged France’s laicist version of secularism by wearing their religion on their sleeves. In projecting their identity on the pitch, they were engaging in what Swedish social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz called ‘peripheral corruption,’ the adaptation and corruption of values and ideals put forward by a colonial power to meet the needs and requirements of the colonized.⁴⁷² French hopes that soccer would serve to distract and pacify Algerians were dashed. Instead, clubs and pitches became vehicles for anti-colonial agitation.

Founded in 1921 on the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed as the most prominent Muslim club in French-administered Algeria, Mouloudia Club d’Alger, straddled the nation’s two most important arenas for resistance against the French: Islam and soccer. It kick started the creation of numerous other Muslim football clubs in the 1920s and early 1930s in advance of a North African championship established in 1927. The clubs expressed their nationalist sentiment in their names, symbols and jerseys.

The emergence of anti-colonial soccer clubs mirrored developments elsewhere in the Arab world with the founding of Al Ahli (The National) in Cairo and Forty Team in Atbara, a Sudanese railroad and trade union town where Lord Kitchener's Anglo-Egyptian army defeated the Mahdist forces in 1898. Founded by railway workers, the number 40

expressed a rejection of the European rule that a soccer team should be made up of 11 players. The workers viewed the rule as a British colonial effort to discipline workers in an effort to counter labour activism.⁴⁷³ These clubs constituted counter poles to associations formed by French and British colonialists and their local associates like Al Zamalek in Cairo in 2011; Club des Joyeusetés d'Oran, the first sports club to be founded in Algeria in 1894;⁴⁷⁴ and the Football Club de Tunis in 1904 that was quickly renamed Racing Club de Tunis.

Soccer moreover constituted a release valve for pent-up anger against discrimination by French colonialists. Ahmed Ben Bella, a leader of the anti-French resistance and Algeria's first post-independence president recalled being punished in school for standing up to a French teacher who insisted in class that the Prophet Mohammed was an imposter. "I believe what saved my morale at this time was sport. I threw myself into it with extra keenness, especially into football, which was my passion and in which I had made very rapid progress. Of course, I realize today that at that time football became a kind of compensation. The world of sport was one in which there were no restrictions and where my own ability set the only limitations. When I manoeuvred the ball at high speed against the enemy, nobody asked me whether I was European or Algerian," Ben Bella said.⁴⁷⁵

The celebration in 1930 of France's alleged 100 years of success in bringing civilization to Algeria fuelled the positioning of Algerian Muslim clubs as catalysts of anger and rejection of French triumphalism. Young Algerians dismissed French President Gaston Doumergue's notion articulated in a speech in the east Algerian city of Constantine to celebrate the anniversary of colonial rule that "the celebration of the centenary will show in a decisive fashion the human, peaceful, just and beneficial character of French colonisation methods and of the work of civilisation that France is pursuing."⁴⁷⁶

Clubs further served as vehicles for supporters to stake a claim to public space and an arena where Muslim Algerians could assert themselves physically. They constituted the breeding ground for leaders of the anti-French resistance like Ben Bella,⁴⁷⁷ a mid-fielder who played in the 1940s for French team Olympique de Marseille and for IRB Maghnia. Rather than pursuing a soccer career, Ben Bella eventually joined General Charles de Gaulle's Free French forces against the Axis powers. "Ben Bella, like other African nationalists, believed that football — originally a European colonial game — could be appropriated and made to express African people's desire for equality and freedom," noted African sports scholar Peter Alegi.⁴⁷⁸

Mouludia's name was derived from Mouloud, the Prophet Mohammed's birthday and like similar clubs its colours were the red and green of Islam.⁴⁷⁹ Its century long popularity as Algeria's foremost club is rooted not only in its representation of the two drivers that evoke the country's most deep-seated passions — religion and soccer — but also in its symbolization of the struggle for freedom and its roots in the Casbah, the medieval old part of Algiers that has been a focal point of Algeria's multiple battles ranging from its war of independence in the 1950s memorialized in Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 cinematic classic, *The Battle for Algiers*, to its civil war in the 1990s. "Mouloudia is revolution," Hakim Boukadoum, a former head of the club's fan group told *The New York Times* in 2013.⁴⁸⁰

The founding of Mouloudia and other Muslim clubs that were often linked to clergymen sparked French fears that ethnically or religiously based clubs could fuel resistance to colonial rule and provoke racial or sectarian clashes. To counter the perceived threat, the French administration's Native Affairs Bureau monitored the clubs and reported to prefects in Algiers, Oran and Constantine on their funding, links to political groups and players. French Governor-General Jules-Gaston Henri Carde initially obliged clubs to have at least three European players and later raised the

number to five in a bid to enforce a 1901 French law that mandated that all clubs should be open to all segments of the population irrespective of origin.⁴⁸¹ "Sport should be the link that allows Frenchmen and Muslims to unite in a common desire to perform and (in support of) noble aspirations, the elimination of all rivalry between religions and races," the French commander of the Algerian province of Oran told a local newspaper in 1936.⁴⁸²

The commander's remarks followed efforts by the colonial administration to suppress what it viewed as sectarianism by forcing clubs to include the word 'française (French)' or at least the letter F in their names. The commander's instruction was based on a 1930 directive that set quotas for mandatory European membership in clubs. The administration threatened clubs six years later with closure if they did not include Frenchmen in their management. At times, matches were cancelled if a club did not comply with the directives.⁴⁸³ The impositions as well as Carde's rule were denounced by fans in chants during matches. Some clubs abided by the name rule. At the same time, many clubs sought to circumvent the hiring rule by taking on Muslim players who had obtained French citizenship or asserting that they were not able to recruit Europeans. The French measures were relaxed during World War Two, but authorities simultaneously limited licensing of newly established Muslim clubs.

The circumvention effort laid bare differences among the anti-colonial clergy. Hiring of Algerians who had acquired French nationality amounted in the interpretation of religious edicts by some clergymen such as Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis to employing apostates liable for punishment by death because their naturalization amounted to disavowing Islamic law. Ben Badis, a major religious influence in the first half of the 20th century, decreed in 1937 that "the acquisition of non-Muslim nationality implies abandoning Islamic law. Renunciation of even one precept of the Quran according to doctrine by all clergymen of Islam amounts to apostasy. The naturalized is a renegade."⁴⁸⁴ The clergyman who clad his nationalism and anti-colonialism in religious terms offered however relief to those who opted for a return to adherence to Islamic law.

Nonetheless, Carde's order rather than pre-empting clashes between Algerians and French settlers set the stage for frequent violent confrontations when teams representing the two groups played. The mayor of the eastern Algerian town of Djidjelli warned in a May 15, 1936 letter to the region's prefect that "if a team essentially composed of natives should meet with one made up in large part of Europeans, it is beyond doubt that sporting antagonism, pushed to fever pitch, will add to the racial antagonism and at this moment the repercussions would be especially dangerous."⁴⁸⁵

New heights

Ben Bella took the harnessing of soccer to the national struggle to new heights by forging links to popular clubs and fans and by forming a National Liberation Front's (FLN) soccer team during Algeria's war of independence. "Stadiums and clubhouses became arenas in which intellectuals, business owners and the unemployed challenged colonial power and expressed a shared commitment to racial equality and self-determination. Football constructed a fragile sense of nationhood in political entities arbitrarily created by colonial powers and fuelled Africa's broader quest for political liberation," Alegi noted.⁴⁸⁶

In doing so, he recognized French sociologist Jean Meynaud's definition of athletes as soldiers of sports in a world in which "nationalism determines sports relations between nations... Successes in sports are viewed as signs of excellence and power; they become the standard for judging different socio-economic systems."⁴⁸⁷ A powerful symbol of Algeria, the FLN capitalized on soccer's mass appeal in its bid to rally Algerians to the liberation

movement's cause, forge a distinct national identity, and impress upon world opinion the patriotism, skill, discipline, and tenacity of Algerians in their struggle for independence.

Of the ten Algerian players who clandestinely left their French clubs in April 1958 via Switzerland and Italy, nine made it to Tunis, the seat of Ben Bella's exile Provisional Government of the Republic of Algeria where they formed the FLN squad that post-independence became the Algerian national team. Tunisian President Habib Bourgiba greeted the players with the words: "I wish you much success and Algeria liberty as soon as possible."⁴⁸⁸

The tenth player, Mohamed Maouche, who as part of Stade de Riems was widely viewed at the time as one of France's foremost upcoming stars, was detained on the French-Swiss border. After several months in prison, a return to Stade de Riems and a stint with Red Star Paris, Maouche finally joined the FLN team in 1960. Ultimately, the total number of players that left France to play for the FLN climbed to 30. French teams at the time estimated the value of their loss at US\$ 250,000. Their defections constituted a powerful political statement. By abandoning France, they were demonstrating that Algeria was not French and the failure of French colonial efforts to promote equality and racial integration.

The idea of creating an FLN soccer team, a notion that was unique to Algerians among Third World national liberation movements of the time, first occurred to Mohamed Boumezrag, an FLN operative, grandchild of an imam who was imprisoned by the French for more than thirty years, and an Algerian player in France who retired in 1945. He was inspired by the presence of an Algerian team at the 1957 World Youth Festival in Moscow that marched in front of Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev at the opening of the fiesta and an earlier charity match between France and a North African squad.⁴⁸⁹

The FLN had by that time demonstrated its grasp of soccer as a propaganda tool by using the 1954 World Cup to bring together in Switzerland, the tournament's host, dispersed FLN leaders, including Cairo-based Ben Bella and Mohamed Boudiaf, Mostefa Ben-Boulaid from Algeria, and Paris-based Mourad Didouche. In Switzerland, they announced the launch of the FLN's armed struggle.⁴⁹⁰ "As patriots seeking the liberation of their country above all else, our footballers have given the youth of Algeria an example of courage, rectitude, and selflessness," the FLN said in communique. It asserted that Algerian players had suffered from anti-North African and anti-Muslim sentiment in France that was increasingly making itself felt in French stadia.⁴⁹¹

Two years later, the FLN ordered sports clubs to freeze their activities and instructed members to join the rebels. The FLN's notion of soccer as an important vehicle in the liberation struggle against colonial rule harked back to the establishment in 1926 of a centre for sports and politics in Algeria,⁴⁹² Étoile Nord-Africaine (ENA), a nationalist group widely viewed as the FLN's predecessor.⁴⁹³ ENA leader Messali Hadji frequently staged his rallies in stadia. "The Algerian people were to develop a new public form of political expression in a domain that was considered coarse and commonplace, thus putting an end to the pseudo-neutrality of sport," wrote French-Algerian sports scholar Youcef Fates.⁴⁹⁴ In doing so, they were perfecting a model created by Al Ahli that positioned itself as a nationalist, republican, anti-monarchical club which served as a platform for growing opposition to British colonial rule and meeting ground for students and fans who staged the 1919 Egyptian revolution.

Djamel Eddine Derdour, a professional Algerian player-turned ENA activist who played in France for Red Star Paris FC and AS Cannes while studying dentistry in Paris and Marseille, first confronted the identity challenge posed by French rule when he was stopped at the Swiss border in 1929 on a trip to attend a soccer match. "Sir, this identity

card is not valid, you do not have nationality!" a border guard told him. It was then that Derdour noted that his French id identified him as an "indigenous Muslim not naturalized."⁴⁹⁵ The incident prompted him to meet in Paris to meet with ENA founder Hadji and then join the group. Derdour went on to join the FLN team in 1957 as its technical director.

Empathy for the FLN among Algerian players was evident in their financial support of the group, which according to Time Magazine amounted to 15 percent of their incomes. "No one had imagined that the F.L.N. was powerful enough to make the players throw up good jobs, abandon their homes, and give up such sideline business as bars and bistros. The flight may not have been pure patriotism, but it was far from kidnapping. The exodus, with its complicated movement of wives and children, luggage and refrigerators and washing machines, was elaborately planned over a long period of time to avert suspicion, and not a single player appealed to the police for protection," the magazine said.⁴⁹⁶

The FLN relied on AS Monaco centre back Moustapha Zitouni to set an example by walking away from his dream of playing the 1958 World Cup final as a member of the French national team and an opportunity to play for Real Madrid.⁴⁹⁷ Hours before Zitouni did so, his team played Angers SCO on 13 April 1958. Zitouni tackled Anger's Amer Rouai after the latter scored a goal. "Hey, don't hurt me now! Just keep playing," Rouai shouted. Once the match had ended, the two men said they were going for a drink. They slipped away to meet Boumezrag who accompanied them to from where they flew to Tunis. Their arrival was filmed on the tarmac of the airport.⁴⁹⁸

Zitouni was followed by Rachid Mekhloufi, one of France's most celebrated players, who was known as "the man with eyes in the back of his head." Like Zitouni Mekhloufi was on the brink of international stardom when he decided to join the FLN. Mekhloufi had scored 25 goals in thirty games enabling AS Saint-Étienne a year earlier to win their first Championnat. He had also just been nominated for the French national in Sweden. Months before his departure, Mekhloufi was part of the French national squad that won on Bastille Day the 1957 World Military Cup in Buenos Aires.⁴⁹⁹

Mekhloufi became an instant Algerian national hero and symbol of national liberation. His departure further shattered the image of the successful integration of Europeans with Algerians in French Algeria and of Algerians with Europeans in France that France had sought to cultivate. Unlike other members of the FLN team, Mekhloufi returned to France after Algeria achieved its independence. The irony of Mekhloufi's embodiment of the intrinsic and at times contradictory relationship between sports and politics was driven home when in 1968 De Gaulle congratulated him for his two goals in a French championship final that secured the title for AS Saint-Etienne, the team that the Algerian captained. "La France, c'est vous (You are France), De Gaulle said."⁵⁰⁰ He was recognizing a man who embodied both the Algerian struggle for liberation from French colonial rule and French soccer professionalism.

The liberation movement's team dubbed the Desert Foxes served, according to an FLN statement, to deprive France of some of its best players, raise international awareness about the Algerian struggle, and highlight popular support for the quest for independence.⁵⁰¹ Players declared themselves football revolutionaries. Time reported that "when newsmen tracked down the Algerians in Switzerland and Tunisia, they found them hobnobbing with F.L.N. agents, were handed an F.L.N. communiqué stating that the players refused any longer to help French sport "at the moment when France makes merciless war on their country. They have placed the independence of Algeria above all, giving

Algerian youth proof of their courage and disinterestedness.”⁵⁰² Time quoted Zitouni as saying: “I have many friends in France, but the problem is bigger than us. What do you do if your country is at war and you get called up?”⁵⁰³

The sacrifice made by the players was not insignificant. Sports was one of the few platforms on which Algerians could succeed and be recognized in France. As a result Algerian contributions to French sports went far beyond soccer. Marathon runner Boughera El-Ouafi secured France’s only gold medal in the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam while Alain Minoumi won a marathon gold medal for France in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.

The FLN fulfilled some of its goals even before its team played its first international match with the mere departure of the Algerians from France. French sports newspaper *L’Equipe* reported that “the word France takes a more narrow meaning”⁵⁰⁴ with the departure of the Algerians who included four internationals. The New York Times headlined a report: “French Athletes Defect to Rebels; 5 Star Soccer Players Quit Teams and Go to Tunisia in Algerians' Cause.”⁵⁰⁵ Time quipped that the departure of the Algerians “was as if, overnight, the best Latin American baseball players in the major leagues—men like Chico Carrasquel, Bobby Avila, Minnie Minoso, Ruben Gomez—had fled the U.S. and challenged the Yankees and Braves for the world championship.”⁵⁰⁶

The FLN team won the vast majority of its matches played in Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Iraq, Jordan, the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, China and North Vietnam. It garnered international support for their country’s struggle for independence. Of the 91 games it played, it won 65; lost 13 and drew in 13. It scored 385 goals as opposed to 127 against it.⁵⁰⁷ Ferhat Abbas, president of Algeria’s provisional exile government and a player in his youth who headed Union Sportive Musulman de Setif, declared that the Desert Foxes had “advanced the Algerian revolution by 10 years.”⁵⁰⁸ Abbas saw soccer as an arena in which Algeria could defy the French notion of superiority. The French “rule us because they have guns. Without guns and machines, on a man to man basis, on the field of soccer, we can show tem who is really superior,” Abbas said.⁵⁰⁹

Soldiers of righteousness

The Algerians did not get to match their skills with the French very often. The Algerian and French teams in the city of Tlemecen where Ben Bella went to high school met only once a year. “I must admit that the colons nearly always won. I believe that we were very superior to them in tactics and technically; but they were heavier and more athletic than us. Let’s face it, they were better fed. It was at this period that I made contact with Nationalist groups,” Ben Bella recalled.⁵¹⁰ Sports scholars Pierre Lanfranchi and Alfred Wahl noted that the FLN team with its average of four goals per game and frequent victories “embodied the inescapable momentum towards victory of the liberation movement itself.”⁵¹¹

The team’s song, Qassaman (We Pledge), was written by imprisoned Algerian poet Moufdi Zakaria became Algeria’s national anthem.⁵¹² Its lyrics left no doubt about the politics of the team:

“We soldiers in the name of righteousness have revolted

And for our independence to war we have risen.

Had we not spoken up none would have listened

So we have taken the drum of gunpowder as our rhythm

And the sound of machine guns as our melody,
and we have resolved that Algeria shall live -
So bear witness, bear witness, bear witness!

From our heroes we shall make an army come to being,
and on our dead we build glory,
Our spirits shall ascend to immortality
And on our shoulders we shall raise the standard.
To the nation's Liberation Front we have sworn an oath,
and we have resolved that Algeria shall live -
So bear witness, bear witness, bear witness!

The cry of the Fatherland rises from the battlefields.
Listen to it and heed the call!
Let it be written with the blood of martyrs
And be read to future generations.
Oh, Glory, we have held out our hand to you,
and we have resolved that Algeria shall live -
So bear witness, bear witness, bear witness!"

In response to the FLN's employment of soccer, FIFA in what would become a pattern of support for colonial and post-colonial regimes in the Middle East and North Africa banned at the request of the French national soccer association the team's players and excluded squads that agreed to meet it on the pitch.⁵¹³ The ban constituted a rejection of a bid by the FLN and the players to persuade FIFA to take a stance similar to the one it adopted in 1919 when England sought to persuade the soccer body to expel teams, including Hungary, that represented Germany and its allies in World War one.⁵¹⁴ The FIFA refusal prompted England, Scotland and Wales to leave the group.

The team FLN nonetheless set an example for other nations like Palestine and Kurdistan whose use of soccer to project nationhood and achieve statehood is modelled on Algeria's success. Underlying the model is the premise that "football is the continuation of war by other means" in the words of Le Figaro journalist Thierry Oberle who paraphrased 19th century Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz's maxim that war is the continuation of

politics by other means.⁵¹⁵ While in Tunisia, the FLN team inspired the creation of a Palestinian team that unsuccessfully sought to project Palestinian nationhood.⁵¹⁶

Anti-colonial sentiment in Algeria expressed itself early on in physical confrontations and violence between players of French and other European origins and Arabs and Berbers as well as among spectators in the stands. The violence escalated after FLN leaders announces the group's armed struggle to liberate some nine million Arabs and Berbers from colonial rule by an estimated one million European settlers. Eight years of brutal war that caused the death of up to one million people forced France in 1962 to grant Algeria independence.

Algerian stadia were abused in the course of the war by both parties. The FLN responded to French moves to enhance security at matches by declaring in 1956 a boycott of Algerian leagues by Arab and Berber clubs. The boycott was preceded by a riot in 1955 during a match between Mouloudia and French settler club AS Saint-Eugene. It was announced in response to the authorization granted in 1956 to Henri Calatayut, the captain of French Algerian team Sidi Bel-Abbes, to play in a match against L'Union Sportive Musulmane despite having been suspended, prompted the FLN to order all Algerian Muslim clubs to withdraw from local leagues.

The boycott left French teams as the only competitors. The insurgents pressured Algerian clubs to freeze their activities and join the armed struggle. The boycott paved the way for a bombing campaign that also targeted stadiums. The French, who had viewed stadiums prior to the war as venues to further integration, in response turned them into execution sites and prison camps.

Bombs exploded in February 1957 in the stands of an Algiers stadium during a match between French Algerian Sporting Club Universitaire d'El Biar and Racing Universitaire Algérois. Eight people were killed and scores wounded. Six of El Biar's players had returned to Algeria days earlier from a startling defeat of Stade de Reims in the French Cup.⁵¹⁷ Separately, the FLN detonated a bomb in Algiers' Municipal Stadium.

FLN operatives three months after the Algiers stadium bombings assassinated pro-French Algerian politician and former Algerian Assembly vice-president Ali Chekkal in a Paris' Colombes Stadium during a French Cup final.⁵¹⁸ Chekkal was shot as he left the stadium's VIP box where he sat with French President Rene Coty and headed for his car. The Algerian was in the stadium to watch Said Brahimi and Abdelhamid Bouchouk, two of the 76 Algerian players still playing in France, perform. Brahimi and Bouchouk joined the FLN team a year later. Algerian novelist Rachid Boudjedra memorialized the assassination in his 1981 novel, *Le Vainqueur De Coupe*.⁵¹⁹

The French were no less abusive of stadia. French troops executed 150 rounded up Algerians in August 1955 in the stadium of Phillipeville after the FLN launched a surprise and savage attack on the port city in which some 130 Frenchmen were killed.⁵²⁰ The French, who had viewed stadiums prior to the war as venues to further integration, in response to the FLN actions turned them into execution sites and prison camps. The FLN boycott and violence and the French response effectively dealt a death knell to competitive Algerian soccer.⁵²¹

The FLN's focus, once in government at the end of the war was the employment of soccer to mobilize various social groups, including youth, students and workers, the projection of Algeria on the global stage, and the construction of infrastructure to achieve these goals.⁵²² Soccer served to emphasize the state's recognition of the importance of youth and as a tool to bolster the government's legitimacy.

The FLN squad-turned-national team's performance failed however in the first two decades of independence to match the government's ambitions. That changed when it, coached by former FLN players by Mekloufi and Abdelhamid Zouba, overpowered Germany in 1982 in Algeria's first World Cup appearance and Africa's first defeat of a European team. In a statement, the youth and sports ministry declared that the victory had done more for the nation than the work of any Algerian ambassador.⁵²³ Algeria's memory of victory is however a bittersweet one mired in allegations that it was prevented from advancing to the next stage of the tournament by the alleged fixing of Germany's subsequent match against Austria. Germany beat Austria 1:0, a result that allowed both teams to advance to the next round at Algeria's expense.

An unknown history

Ironically, focus on Algeria's performance and bad luck laid bare an unknown history of German relations with the FLN during the war in which the liberation movement's soccer team created an opportunity for the group to develop a complex, often secret, history of connections with the Federal Republic of Germany, one of France's staunchest allies in the war in North Africa.⁵²⁴ The Bonn government officially shunned the FLN but didn't stop the movement from setting up safe houses, forgeries, bank accounts, training camps, and even a quasi-diplomatic bureau in West Germany that helped sustain the fight against France.⁵²⁵ In 1958, Germany became a base from which "the FLN launched and coordinated the second front of its war in metropolitan France; it served as a hub for the clandestine transfer of militants, army deserters, and funds from the metropole to North Africa; and it became a preferred location where the FLN could secretly procure arms, munitions, radio communications equipment and other vital supplies," wrote scholar Mathilde von Bülow.⁵²⁶

At about the same time, German champion Eintracht Frankfurt e. V invited several members of the FLN squad who were passing through Frankfurt on their return from a visit to China to attend as guests of honour one of the club's matches despite the ban FIFA had imposed on them.⁵²⁷ The gesture coincided with the arrival of thousands of young, unskilled or semi-skilled, destitute Algerian workers who were fleeing from police repression, political violence, and internecine warfare in metropolitan France and North Africa. Most depended on charity and assistance of local organisations, to secure their basic needs. They found life in Germany tough as is evident from reports by the aid committees and Algerian trade union representatives. Some became part of the FLN's clandestine network in Germany

In a letter, written in broken German to Willi Richter, head of the West German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB), 24 Algerians selected to participate in an 18-month training programme, thanked the DGB for its funding and donation of 24 soccer kits, including cleats. To them, the chance to play football represented a welcome and needed respite from the difficulty of adjusting to life in Germany and the burden of war in their home country. The Algerians informed Richter that the kits and cleats "already helped us to one victory in a football match when we played against a team composed of young German colleagues."⁵²⁸ Soccer to them like in the case of the FLN team offered an opportunity to demonstrate their ability and highlight the fact that it was war and colonial oppression that was holding them back.

As a result, of the soccer-aided web of FLN ties to Germany, the Federal republic was invited to play a friendly in Algeria barely two years after the country had become independent and before it was admitted to FIFA. The match was designed to capitalize on the fact that the new country's national team had been born in the struggle for

independence. The transition from an FLN to a national team allowed the squad to help the government rebuild the nation; break with its colonial past; create the image of the new, socialist and nationalist Algerian; counter regionalism; and project the country's socialist model on the international stage. In the process, "sports was occupied by the state under the leadership of the FLN" Fates noted.⁵²⁹

The politics of survival

Yet, it was that politicization that ultimately derailed the government's effort to pacify and demobilize youth and prevent stadia from becoming platforms of protest. The failure became increasingly evident when in the spring of 1980 the notion implicit in the Qassaman of one Algerian nation was shattered as Berbers who account for a quarter of the population rallied behind Jeunesse Sportive de Kabylie (JSK), one of Algeria's foremost soccer clubs widely seen as an expression of Berber nationalism. They rejected the government's Arabization policy that was more directed at reducing the use of French than it was at suppression on Berber languages. The Berbers nonetheless demanded recognition of their language as well as release of political prisoners and political and civil rights. Kabylie in JSK's name refers to the mountainous predominantly Berber provinces of Algeria along the Mediterranean Sea.

In a time in which all political and cultural expressions of Berber identity were banned, JSK and its stadium became the sole venues in which Berberism could assert itself. President Houari Boumediene, visibly uncomfortable sat stony-faced in the stadium as JSK supporters celebrated their team's winning of the 1977 Algerian Cup with the chant, *Pouvoir Assassin!* (The government is an assassin). The chant became the rallying cry for Berber rights.

As a result, JSK's November 1 Stadium was closed to prevent the club's nationalist fan base from gathering. The closure did not prevent thousands of fans of JSK that at the time was named Jeunesse Electronique de Tizi Ouzou because it was owned by state-owned Entreprise Nationale des Industries de l'Electroménager (ENIEM) to show up for a semi-finals league match in Algiers in the Berber red and yellow colours with the words Jeunesse Sportive de Kabylie rather than Jeunesse Electronique Tizi Ouzou emblazoned in Latin rather than Arabic script on their shirts and headbands. Fans demanded the release of hundreds of activists, intellectuals, lawyers, and students, many of whom went on to become founders of Berber parties and organizations like the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) and the Berber Cultural Movement (MCB) once Algeria's one party system was abolished in 1989.

In Algiers' 5 July 1962 Stadium named for the day Algeria declared its independence from France, the fans, waving olive branches, a symbol of Kabylie, chanted *Imzaighen*, the term by which Berbers refer to themselves which means free men.⁵³⁰ In what was to become a repeat performance in 2011, the year that mass anti-government protests swept the Arab world, including, Algeria, fans were subsequently allowed in the 1980s to chant political slogans in stadia as long as they did not take their protests into the streets. "The slogans were traps. They allowed the fans to engage in a tactical dialogue to persuade authorities of their good faith and by the same token enable authorities to manipulate them," Fates wrote.⁵³¹

The government's tolerance of stadia as release valves recognized that they have been arenas of political agitation for a century as repression in popular urban areas increased. "The sport stadia were next to register the heat of social discontent. At every football match, there were riots and youth demonstrations," wrote scholar Said Chikhi in his description of a wave of protests that swept Algeria in the late 1980s.⁵³² "The stadiums have become a rallying-point, where the young can show their explosive strength. They have practically nowhere else to gather for collective manifestations, so thousands of them go to these places to express their protests. This can appear as real

subversive actions: the young develop a biting irony, express their mockery in practical jokes and make fun of absurdities and political personalities in satires. The official symbols are thus cut into pieces and a kind of cynicism mixes with dissidence and mockery, all the more piercing as it compensates for the rage from being unable to act. But as the situation gradually deteriorates and people lack even essentials-consumption goods, water, housing-the young will increasingly become carriers of radicalism: the stadiums will, just as the mosques, open up to the streets and simultaneously to the city,” Chickhi warned as civil war began to tear Algeria apart in the 1990s.⁵³³

Algerian stadia like those in numerous autocratic Arab states were in effect platforms where anti-systemic groups challenged institutions that constituted the backbone of the state. “When institutions are threatened by force, the danger is that they will be overpowered, and the remedy is defence. When they are threatened by opposing ideas, the danger is that their legitimacy will be eroded and that they will collapse for lack of support. Armed force might sustain them...but institutions without popular support are much more precariously positioned than those with it,” noted international relations scholar Barry Buzan.⁵³⁴

Algerian leaders like their Arab counterparts confronted repeatedly with popular demands nevertheless engaged in what another international relations scholar, Joel S. Migdal, termed “the politics of survival” by resorting to violence to control society and pre-empt the reshaping of social relationships.⁵³⁵ The soccer protests like the broader violence in Algeria that exploded into civil war in 1992 was rooted in a significant segment of society’s loss of confidence of confidence in the state and its institutions.⁵³⁶

Algerian stadia reflected that loss of confidence. They summed up in the words of Algeria scholars Martin Evans and John Phillips “the huge chasm of unforgiving contempt between the rulers and the ruled.”⁵³⁷ Writing in *Kalimat*, Karim Sayad noted that “through football, the stadium becomes a new paradigm for political expression.”⁵³⁸ Stadia were the harbingers of the protests that erupted in October 1988, a month that went down in Algerian history as Black October. The writing was on the wall with clashes with security forces in Oran in 1983 and in Constantine and Sétif that either erupted after soccer matches as fans attacked markets to loot food stalls⁵³⁹ or with fans from shantytowns joining protests by high school and university students.⁵⁴⁰ In Ain Beida, a town at the eastern edge of the Setif plains, military troops were brought in to restore order. Across Algeria, matches were interrupted in 1987 by pitch invasions and attacks on players and referees.

In 1998, youth and fans tore through the streets of cities, attacking every symbol of the FLN and the state that they came across, including ministries, municipalities and party offices. The protests that were brutally confronted by security forces laid the groundwork for the demise of the one-party state, democratic reforms and the rise of the Islamists in elections. The ultimate cancellation of the elections paved the way for a decade-long bloody civil war. Estimates of the number of people killed in the riots range from the tens to the hundreds. Thousands were detained.

Slogans shouted in the stadia reflected widespread rejection of the FLN’s long-standing hegemony, growing social and economic inequality and increasing lack of confidence that Algeria could offer a future to its youth. The slogans countered the regime’s efforts over decades to exploit soccer as a tool to project Algeria on the international stage and divert youth’s attention. “We want a boat to Australia” and “My country is Italy,” they chanted. Their lack of commitment to Algeria was further mirrored in slogans like “We don’t want to go to the Army” and their hopelessness in the chant, “Zetla...l’artane...temesta...6-15,” references to cannabis and hallucinatory drugs.⁵⁴¹

Other chants included “Levezvous, la jeunesse” (Rise up, Youth), “Chadli assassin!,” a reference to President Chadli Benjedid.⁵⁴² “We don’t want butter or pepper, but an intelligent and strong leader,” “Chadli, enough vices, tell your son to return the money,” and “Two rooms and a kitchen, better than Chadli and Halima,” a reference to Chadli’s wife, Halima, who was widely viewed to be influencing her husband’s politics. The government’s lack of credibility and legitimacy was reflected in the lyrics of popular songs.

“I saw the rushing sea and the waves crashing,

I saw evil govern, the good will pass judgement,

I saw the people understand and I saw him remain leader

But never have I seen a leader continue to be in command without people,” one song said.⁵⁴³

Another denounced the ruling elite, saying:

“Son of calves, ugly complexion,

Making deafening noise and no good.

“The less deserving of them are fulfilled

And most resourceful is the thief.

An era is gone, another has come,

We worked hard and brought watermelons,

They stabbed us and stole watermelons.

In addition, they demanded silence and submission.

After he beat the cow and her calf,

He drank the milk and left the little man thirsty

And when the milk and the cow dried

He sought to sell it and sacrifice the little man.”⁵⁴⁴

Algerian media reported that three people were killed in violence during the 1987 and 1988 soccer seasons. Some 543 others, including 88 policemen, were injured and 967 arrested. 321 cars were damaged. “Stadia, Algerian’s youth’s preferred venue for political protest, was the school of resistance and soccer / a real introductory spectacle of the revolt,” Fates wrote.⁵⁴⁵

Chikhi added that “the stadiums have become a rallying-point, where the young can show their explosive strength. They have practically nowhere else to gather for collective manifestations, so thousands of them go to these places to express their protests. This can appear as real subversive actions: the young develop a biting irony, express their

mockery in practical jokes and make fun of absurdities and political personalities in satires. The official symbols are thus cut into pieces and a kind of cynicism mixes with dissidence and mockery, all the more piercing as it compensates for the rage from being unable to act. But as the situation gradually deteriorates and people lack even essentials - consumption goods, water, housing - the young will increasingly become carriers of radicalism: the stadiums will, just as the mosques, open up to the streets and simultaneously to the city.”⁵⁴⁶

Filmmaker Abdelkader, who made a documentary on the stadia said they had become places where fans could create an imaginary world reflecting their aspirations.⁵⁴⁷ Algerian sports scholar Mahfoud Amara noted that in the 21st century stadia alongside the Internet “have become the few possible occasions for marginalized youths to gather, feel a momentary sense of belonging, express their frustrations, mock the symbol of state authority, and transgress the boundaries of institutionalized discourse about the state’s political legitimacy, morality, and nationalism.”⁵⁴⁸

For his part, scholar Fates argued that as a result the Algerian presidency took a heightened interest in soccer at a time that Algeria embarked on the post-colonial Arab world’s first transition from an autocracy to a democracy and of dislocation and economic crisis moving from a socialist to a more market-oriented economy at a moment that world oil and gas prices were declining.⁵⁴⁹ The government saw soccer as one key way of redirecting popular discontent. “Algerians need some emotions that have to be procured at a price. Nothing can offer this emotion in the same way as sporting events. The streets in Algeria are empty on three kinds of occasions: the moment the Ramadan fast is broken, the broadcasting of national soccer team matches and the final episodes of specific, popular TV series,” Fates wrote.⁵⁵⁰

Platforms for political agitation

Algeria’s police force in the build-up to the protests and the rise of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the 1980s unlike its Egyptian security forces in the walk-up to the mass demonstrations in 2011 that toppled President Hosni Mubarak recognized that it needed to spruce up its increasingly tarnished image. To do so, the police launched in 1983 a campaign designed to reduce mounting violence in stadia and woo volatile soccer fans that aimed to “engage neighbourhood sports in the fight against delinquency, deterioration of buildings, and laziness.”⁵⁵¹

The campaign part of broader government effort to channel frustration and discontent among youth into sports brought children into the streets to play soccer with makeshift balls and empty cans but failed to redirected energies. Youth and sports minister Cherif Rahmani asserted four years later in an implicit acknowledgement of the campaign’s failure that violence in stadia was fuelled by what he termed idleness, a reference to lack of prospects, and a lack of supervision. He denounced the perpetrators of the violence as “weak ones, cowards and thugs who exploit the density of the crowd to hide and distil their venom.”⁵⁵²

Eduardo P. Archetti and Amilcar G. Romero’s depiction of the fall-out of police violence in Argentina is equally applicable to the Middle East and North Africa. Police and security forces’ “use of physical force aided by arms of some kind....(was) exclusively destined to harm, wound, injure, or, in some cases, kill other persons, and not as an act intended to stop unlawful behaviour that is taking place or may take place,” the scholars wrote.⁵⁵³ Official foot-dragging in holding security officers accountable added to that perception, giving “police power...the aura of omnipotence” that “at the same time lost all legitimacy both in moral and social terms,”⁵⁵⁴ they argued— a development reinforced by the refusal of a majority of Arab states to reform their security forces. “The police in the

stadia, therefore, are perceived not as neutral and shallow actors but as central and active participants. To resist and to attack the police force is thus seen as morally justified,” Archetti and Romero cautioned. For their part, the police defined “the fans as a political. Stadiums were converted into open political arenas.”⁵⁵⁵

Fates and Amara argued that the emergence of multiple political parties elevated Algerian stadia to platforms for political agitation on which the incumbent FLN, the Islamists and Berber groups played prominent roles. “Sport in general and football in particular was transformed into a political and ideological subject of debate. It became a tool for ideological positioning, a way to distinguish one movement or political party from another,” Amara noted.⁵⁵⁶

“Youth are manipulated. The idle and the disgusted are real prey for manipulators who exploit the smallest gathering... The theme of the manipulation repeats itself. The state is too weak in 1989 in the wake of the events of October 1988 to restore order in the stadia which sparks increased violence... The stadia are turned into real arenas of combat,” Fates observed.⁵⁵⁷ The FLN newspaper *El Moudjahid* framed the violence in military terms. “Our youth go to the stadium as if they were going to war, not a party,” *El Moudjahid* reported.⁵⁵⁸

While Berber fans chanted “Imazighen, Imazighen (Free People, Free People), Islamists shouted “We live and die in the name of Allah” and “The Prophet said: no constitution.” The 1988 riots nonetheless produced what has become the anthem of soccer protest since. ‘Bab-El Oued, Ash-Shhouhada,, Bab-El Oued, Assaraka (Bab el Oued martyrs, Bab El Oued thieves),’ in reference to a popular Algiers neighbourhood that was a battleground for the FLN and the pro-French Organisation de l’armee secrete (OAS) during the independence war and a stronghold of the FIS during the civil war.

Fans greeted the resignation in September 1998 of President Liamine Zeroual with snickers and satire. “The telephone rang. The president has resigned. It is just another trick. What can I say If the country was stable for one hour? We would escape on a merchant ship. We would escape from Zeroual’s face. I would call myself Michel and spend the night at the Eiffel Tower,” they chanted.⁵⁵⁹ In another chant, fans warned police in the stadium that Hocine ‘Fliche’, a captured and executed FIS leader “was coming after them.” Their chant built up to a deafening crescendo that included dog-like baying.⁵⁶⁰

Ironically, a 1989 law intended to free sports from government control exacerbated the situation by opening the door to religious influences that served as channels of protest by stipulating that Algeria’s national physical and sports culture should be consistent with Islamic values.⁵⁶¹ The law was promulgated in the wake of the founding a year earlier of the FIS, which swept municipal elections in 1990 and won parliamentary elections in late 1992. The prospect of FIS taking over government prompted the military to step in and spark an eight-year civil war in which an estimated 150,000 people were killed.⁵⁶²

Nonetheless, the Islamist influence was evident. Many national team players grew beards. They stressed their Muslim identity on visits to Europe, prayed at airports and listened publicly to taped speeches of FIS leader Ali Belhadj. Tension on Algerian pitches rose after the FIS banned applause and national tennis team players were assaulted while training in preparation for an Arab championship match against Lebanon. The military’s intervention also reverberated in the stadia with fans chanting “Ya Ali Ya Abbass El Djebha Rahi Labass” (To Ali Belhadj and Abass Madani, in jail, the Islamic Front is fighting fit), a reference to two jailed FIS leaders and the banning of the group. Other slogans included “Fliche, Napoli,” the nicknames of two commanders of the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA).⁵⁶³

The profile of rebellious fans in Algeria was not unlike that in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa and nowhere more so than Egypt. They were almost exclusively often under-educated and un or under-employed young men between the age of 12 and 30.⁵⁶⁴ They hailed from popular neighbourhoods in major cities to which they have a strong sense of belonging. That sense of belonging coupled with loyalty to a soccer club emerged during the civil war that undermined concepts of patriotism and saw Algerians retreat to their harra or neighbourhood and club. The harra and the stadium constituted for many the two venues in which they could express identity. Their sense of alienation, hopelessness and anger at the failure of the country's gerontocracy in control since independence to share power with a younger generation, create jobs and address housing problems was reinforced by media that depicted them as unpatriotic delinquents and drug addicts who were deranged, disruptive, and sinister troublemakers; and brutal security forces whose violence produces a vicious circle.

Algerians refer to these young men as hittistes, those who waste their days leaning against a wall while smoking. Harraga denotes those who attempt to take their life into their own hands by destroying their identity papers to embark on a treacherous sea journey in a bid to get to Europe. Surveys of young men have seen the number wanting to leave Algeria range from a third to almost half.⁵⁶⁵ The hittistes and harraga often belong to subgroups, among which soccer fans are the most prominent.

A 2007 diplomatic cable sent by the US embassy in Algiers and disclosed by Wikileaks linked a soccer protest in the desert city of Boussaada to demonstrations in the western port city of Oran sparked by the publication of a highly contentious list of government housing recipients. The cable warned that "this kind of disturbance has become commonplace, and appears likely to remain so unless the government offers diversions other than soccer and improves the quality of life of its citizens... Disturbances like the latest events in Oran and Boussaada occur frequently in Algeria, and occasionally garner attention from the independent media. The discontent stems from diverse sources ranging from anger over a lack of decent public services to something as seemingly mundane as downgrading a soccer team. The government's ongoing failure to address issues like housing effectively suggests that such localized violence is likely to continue."⁵⁶⁶

The embassy's foresight was evident a year later when the relegation of Mouloudia Club Oran sparked riots that were as much about the club's poor performance as they were about social and economic issues as was evident from the protester's attacks on public buildings and the burning of banks, malls, bus stops and government offices. "Oran was like a ghost town, economic activity and services was practically zero as of 10:00 AM," *L'Quotdien d' Oran* reported.⁵⁶⁷ A survey in early 2009 of 1,340 male Algerians aged 15 to 39 attributed violence in stadia to corruption of soccer and poor facilities as well as "exacerbation with unemployment and lack of opportunity" and the failure of police to engage angry youth.⁵⁶⁸

Continued unrest in the stadia prompted President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who served as sports minister immediately after independence in the 1960s, in an election speech in 2009 to attempt to focus fan attention on Algeria's poor sports performance in international competitions in the wake of the civil war. Noting that sports offered Algeria youth a refuge, Bouteflika lamented the fact that government investment had failed to improve the country's tarnished image. The president charged that Algeria was going from "decline to decline" despite its ability to organize not one, but two World Cups. "The glory of Algerian sport is fading and sport practice is witnessing increasing forms of violence. This issue could have grave repercussions if things remain as they are," Bouteflika warned.⁵⁶⁹

A soccer war

Nationalist fervour erupted when Algeria defeated Egypt to qualify for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. Violence erupted among rival fans unleashing two diametrically opposed dynamics. For the autocratic leaders of Egypt and Algeria, the violence offered an opportunity to distract attention from mounting domestic discontent and seek to reposition themselves as nationalist leaders. As a result, Egypt recalled its ambassador to Algeria while Algeria slapped then Egyptian-owned Orascom Telecom's Algerian operation with a tax bill of more than half a billion dollars. Libyan leader Qaddafi intervened to prevent the dispute from escalating. Algiers was draped in the colours and flag of its national team, traffic turned into a choir of honking cars whose passengers cheered their country and its soccer squad.

Soap operas from Egypt, long the Middle East and North Africa's Bollywood, were boycotted. Egypt Air and signs of Djezzy, the Egyptian-owned telecom operator that sponsored major Algerian soccer clubs, were torn down. Material damage to businesses was estimated at \$64 million. Egyptian international striker Amr Zaki refused to move to English Premier League team Portsmouth, owned at the time by Saudi businessman Ali al-Faraj and UAE real estate investor Sulaiman Al-Fahim, because there was "no way I could play for Portsmouth with an Algerian in their ranks," a reference to Portsmouth defender Nader Belhadj, an Algerian national.⁵⁷⁰ "The violence expressed years of depression of a population that constantly witnesses social, financial and political failure. Soccer is their only ray of light," said Ahmed Al Aqabawi, an Egyptian psychology professor at Al Azhar University, the world's most prestigious institution of Muslim learning, and a Muslim Brother.⁵⁷¹

In contrast to political leaders, the Algerian national team's success offered its supporters for whom the stadium had been a venue to vent their pent-up anger and feelings of alienation a brief opportunity to carve out their own identity and assert their relationship to their homeland on their own terms rather than on those expressed in patriotic songs produced by corporations, the music industry and the media. Militant supporters of Algiers' two arch rivals, Mouloudia and Union Sportive Médina d'Alger (USMA), set their differences aside to compose songs that expressed positive sentiments rather than a hope for a future based on emigration.

Strong, strong, I love my country and long live to Algeria

I want to remain in my country...I do not want to go abroad.

Brothers, we care for each other...and God is strong.

Warmth between Muslims...and Algeria is my dear.

After hardship comes the relief.

Our people are great, we are not in need—

Wherever Algerians go, they are proud and admired for it.

I will be happy and you will be happy and we will forget our grief.

We will forgive each other, and prosperity will return.

We remain in our land, the land of our ancestors.¹⁸

We forget about defection,

I prefer to grow up with my family and my friends,

Respecting my religion and fearing God,” read the lyrics of the fans’ new oeuvre couched in language that was less provocative than their earlier chants.⁵⁷²

The fans’ newly defined place for themselves in Algeria quickly proved illusory. The fans were a year later prominent in the anti-government protests in early 2011 that were sparked by a series of local incidents, including a clash between police and fans after a soccer match in Algiers’ Bab el Oued district⁵⁷³ in which they targeted like in October 1988 government offices, banks and shops. Elsewhere, protesters gathered on the side lines of a crowd that was outnumbered by police. They mocked the government chanting “Ash sha’ab yurid zetla! (The people demand hashish)” using a slang reference to the cannabis in a play on the slogan. The chant was a play on the slogan that dominated popular revolts across the region, Ash-sha’ab yurid isqat an-nizam (The people want the fall of the regime), Inside the stadia however, the fans’ slogans were far more political. Their chants decried their exclusion from sharing the economic pie asserting that they can neither buy nor sell.⁵⁷⁴ The protests prompted the Algerian soccer federation to suspend all matches. At one match a week after the 2014 elections, fans unfurled a banner with the words, “Congratulations to the people who decided to change the President’s throne.” Referring to the fact that Bouteflika was wheelchair bound, the banner played on the Arabic word kursi that denotes both a chair and a throne.

“Our songs focus on current events, on politics and the economy. We sing about politicians, about security, about terrorist attacks. We criticise the current government as well as the extremists of the Islamic Salvation Front [a party that is now outlawed]. We also criticise the high cost of living in Algeria and the privileges enjoyed by the country’s elite, who send their children abroad to study while so many young Algerians are unemployed and live in poverty. Being in a crowd makes us forget our fears. We know that the police can’t do anything, while if we said just half of these things in the street, we would be arrested right away. Stadiums are the only place where we can express our fury... It’s not so much our slogans that worry the authorities, it’s how many of us there are. For example, when riots erupted in the Algiers neighbourhood of Bab el-Oued earlier this year, the Algerian Football Federation temporarily suspended matches. They did this because they were worried that if the police couldn’t control a few dozen youths in the street, they certainly wouldn’t be able to control 60,000 football fans leaving a stadium. I think that the authorities don’t actually have a problem with our chants: if we get our anger out inside the stadium, then that’s it, we don’t cause any trouble outside,” said Amine T., a supporter of popular Algiers club Union Sportive de la Medina d’Alger (USMA).⁵⁷⁵

In one chant, fans in 2011 lambasted Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia because he “begrudged us even our yogurt,” a reference to Ouyahia rejecting criticism with the words “not everyone needs to eat yogurt.”⁵⁷⁶ The song went on to complain that prominent figures including septuagenarian Bouteflika who has been impaired by a stroke, former energy and mines minister Chakib Khalil for whom an international arrest warrant was issued on charges of corruption, and banker Rafik Khalifa who was accused of embezzlement had yet to be held accountable. In a separate incident, fans interrupted a moment of silence in a stadium to commemorate the death of a former leader by chanting “Bouteflika is next.”⁵⁷⁷

Other chants include "You sold the country, we will destroy it!," "Fuck the State!," and "You the cop, with a truncheon in hand, a whore can make better use of it!"⁵⁷⁸ Yet other songs commemorate the martyrs of Bab el Oued, a reference to those who died in the 1988 protests. A week after the election, they unfurled a banner saying "congratulations to the people who decided to change the President's throne," an allusion to Bouteflika's wheelchair.

Mounting violence

Mounting stadium violence has in recent years called into question a government effort in the wake of anti-government protests in 2011 at the height of the wave of popular uprisings that swept the Middle East and North Africa to channel frustration and discontent. A tacit understanding with soccer fans allowed them to chant anti-government slogans in stadia as long as they refrained from taking their protests into the streets. That understanding was evidenced by the fact that fans felt no need to conceal their identity as they chanted in the stadia against the government and posted their songs online and on mobile phones. At times, like in the run-up to 2014 presidential elections fans mocked Bouteflika whose speech is impaired and cast his vote in a wheelchair by chanting in the stadium "Bouyahaya (Bouteflika) got dressed up and elected himself again," in the presence of police at the very moment that police attacked protesters in streets.

The protests in the stadiums paralleled almost daily small scale demonstrations elsewhere in the country denouncing corruption, lack of water, shortages of housing and electricity and low salaries. "Stadiums become one of the few remaining places where the masses can freely and legitimately gather. It is a place that the State itself fears attacking. As a space of verbal and physical opposition to hegemony, the stadium assembles within the same territory both the oppressor and the oppressed, while at the same time representing a place for entertainment, allowing the youth to interact and forget the struggle of their daily lives," noted commentator Sayad.⁵⁷⁹

Continuous protests and mounting soccer-related violence countered the government's attempts to use Algerian soccer success with the national team's qualification for and performance in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil as a way to rally Algerians around the flag rather than their grievances and project an image of the country that went beyond corruption, terrorism and being a source of illegal immigration to Europe. Algeria's top leaders had gone out of their way to associate themselves with the team's success and spin it to their advantage.

"The sporting public and the entire Algerian people are finally overwhelmed with joy and happiness after the well-deserved victory of our national football team. Once again, Algerians, men and women inside and outside the country are celebrating, a national feast in which fans gave free rein to their feelings, delighted after this deserved victory of our national team against our Burkinabe brothers in a competition where the two teams showed fair-play for the qualification for World Cup 2014 in Brazil,"⁵⁸⁰ Bouteflika in a message to the victorious national team after its defeat of Burkina Faso in a key World Cup qualifier.

Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal, on a visit to the team before their departure for Brazil, portrayed the players as an example for Algerian youth. "Know that all the people are behind you, and encourage you no matter what the circumstances. Be yourself, have fun, and be united," Sellal said.⁵⁸¹ A committee made up of representatives the ministries of sport, foreign affairs and health as well as the Algerian Football Federation (AFF), national airline Air Algérie and security organizations offered fans a subsidized \$3,300 all-inclusive package to attend Algeria's first three matches in Brazil.⁵⁸² State-owned telecommunications company Mobilis offered the fans tickets for Algeria's

fourth match against Germany. A fatwa by the religious affairs ministry granted fans the right to perform their Ramadan prayers once the match against Germany had ended.

The team was welcomed home as national heroes by hundreds of thousands of fans despite the fact that Germany stopped Algeria's World Cup match in its tracks. Bouteflika, sitting in a wheelchair, received the players at his palace in a ceremony that was broadcast live. In a violation of FIFA rules barring political interference in the sport, Bouteflika called on the AFF to extend the contract of national team coach Vahid Halilhodžić.

The government's efforts to bask in the team's success quickly wore thin with fans continuing to push the envelope, violence that turned lethal, and an increasing number of fans like in Egypt perceiving the national team as representing the regime rather than the nation. "The players are lucky to play with Algeria, and they only were allowed to do it recently because football has changed! Now you can play with France with the under 21 year old selection and then decide to play with Algeria when you realise that you will never be asked to play on the French World Cup because competition within the team is too big. These players made this choice for their careers, not for the country! And instead of building new stadiums and thinking of a real strategy to develop local football and local players, the authorities go take players trained in France by France with huge cheques instead of doing the job here!" Sayad quoted Bilal, a militant soccer fan, as saying.⁵⁸³

The escalating protests and the violence furthermore threatened the viability of fans' understanding with the government. The killing in August 2014 of Albert Dominique Ebossé Bodjongo Dika, a 25-year old Cameroonian, who played for JSK sent shock waves through African soccer. Ebosse was reportedly hit by a rock believed to have been thrown by a JSK supporter upset that his team had lost a match.

Midfielder Hamza Bencherif told BBC World Service World Football that Algerian players ran risks whenever they entered the pitch. "Every time we lose a game, (there are) some rocks... Death is not far when a risk like that is taken... It's hard to see what (the soccer authorities) can do because they allow so much freedom in the way the stadiums are controlled. If they continue that way there is absolutely nothing they can do," Bencherif said referring to the government's hands-off approach to violence and protest in Algerian stadia.⁵⁸⁴

Players of Mouloudia Olympique had to be rushed to safety when fans rushed the field in March 2014 after a game. USM Alger defender Abdelkader Laifaoui was attacked along with five of his teammates club and stabbed in the back near his kidney in 2012.⁵⁸⁵ Dozens of people, including a player, were injured when supporters of Jeunesse Sportive de la Saoura (JSS) stormed the pitch during a premier league match in 2013 against Algiers-based Union Sportive de la Médina d'El Harrach (USM). The incident followed a massive brawl between players and between fans after a Libya-Algeria Africa Cup of Nations qualifier. Seven fans were killed in the last five years in soccer-related violence and more than 2,700 wounded, according to Algerian statistics.⁵⁸⁶ The incident followed a massive brawl between players and between fans after a Libya-Algeria Africa Cup of Nations qualifier.⁵⁸⁷

Algerian psychologist Mahmoud Boudarene warned that violence in Algeria has become ordinary and banal. "Hogra, the term many Algerians employ to depict government contempt has created an environment in which people can only progress if they have connections or threaten the peace. "It is a system where 'hogra' and social injustice rule. Social violence has become the preferred mode of communication between the citizen and the republic — today in our country everything is obtained through a riot," Boudarene told the Associated Press.⁵⁸⁸

Algerian scholar Amara noted that “In a context of political closure, a lack of serious political debates and projects for society and of a weakened political society, football stadia become one of the few occasions for the youth to gather, to feel a sense of belonging (for 90 minutes at least), to express their frustrations over their socio-economic condition, to mock the symbol of the state’s authority and to transgress the boundary of (imposed) political order and institutionalized language, or the narrative of the state’s political and moral legitimacy.”⁵⁸⁹

Conclusion

Algerian soccer has come full circle. It has traversed the gamut from a platform of struggle against colonialism and for liberation and independence to a premiere venue for the venting of frustration, anger and anti-government sentiment. Algeria’s revolutionary regime that emerged from a bloody war against France has proven as incapable as conservative rulers in the Middle East and North Africa to meet a modicum of popular aspirations and expectations. For almost a century, stadia offered a venue to vent pent-up frustration and anger. Algerian rulers benefit from still fresh memories of the bitter civil war in the 1990s as well as the political violence engulfing Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Protesting soccer fans who populate the stadia remain reluctant to risk political chaos in their own country. The war and the region’s turmoil has also dampened incentives to join militant Islamist and jihadist groups.

Soccer vs. Jihad: A Draw

Abstract

There is much that militant Islamists and jihadists agree on, but when it comes to sports in general and soccer in particular sharp divisions emerge. Men like the late Osama Bin Laden, Hamas Gaza leader Ismail Haniyeh and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah line up on one side of the ideological and theological divide opposite groups like the Taliban, Harakat Al Shabab Al Mujahidun, Boko Haram, and the jihadists who took control of northern Mali in 2012. The Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq, belongs ideologically and theologically to those that view soccer as an infidel invention designed to distract the faithful from their religious obligations but opportunistically employs football in its sophisticated public relations and public diplomacy endeavour. Bin Laden, Haniyeh and Nasrallah base their employment of soccer as a recruitment and bonding tool on those Salafi and mainstream Islamic scholars who argue that the Prophet Mohammed advocated physical exercise to maintain a healthy body as opposed to more militant students of Islam who at best seek to re-write the rules of the game to Islamicize it, if not outright ban the sport. The practicality and usefulness of soccer is evident in the fact that perpetrators of attacks like those by Hamas on civilian targets in Israel in 2003 and the 2004 Madrid train bombings bonded by playing soccer together.

A taste of blood

First there was a bright flash, then the sky turned grey as if it was raining. Lori Ssebulime felt broken glass and plastic all around her. Everything seemed to be swirling. She heard screaming from everywhere, tasted blood in her mouth and felt burning sensations on her body. Her table in the Ugandan capital of Kampala's popular Ethiopian Village restaurant had exploded. Minutes later, another bomb wracked the Kyadondo Rugby Club across town. More than 70 people died in the twin blasts timed to coincide with the 2010 FIFA World Cup final.⁵⁹⁰

Lori and five of her Christian missionary friends had arrived early at the restaurant for a good seat to watch the match between the Netherlands and Spain. A Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, school teacher, she and her friends were in Uganda to complete a wall that would keep intruders out of a church-school compound that their Christian community was funding. Six of Lori's fellow missionaries were among the 70 wounded in the attacks claimed by Harakat Al Shabab Al Mujahidun or Movement of Martyr Youth, the Al Qaeda affiliate known more widely as Al Shabab that was fighting Uganda-led African peacekeepers in Somalia.

In his hiding place in the mountainous border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the late Osama Bin Laden, an Arsenal FC fan, must have had mixed feelings when he heard about his jihad's latest Ugandan fete. The world's most notorious terrorist, Osama shared with Al Shabab as with the Taliban an austere Islamist worldview that proscribes music, gender mixing, women's education, gambling, drinking, homosexuality, and the shaving of beards as well as the belief that rule by Sharia'a (Islamic) law can only be achieved in a holy war against the infidels.

But when it came to soccer, Bin Laden and Al Shabab parted ways. They represented two sides of militant Islam's love-hate relationship with the game. Islamist leaders like Bin Laden and Hamas Gaza leader Ismail Haniyeh occupied a middle ground in the theological debate about soccer that runs the gamut. Former soccer players, their enthusiasm and endorsement of the game put them at odds with more radical jihadists as well as more conservative Salafi clerics who condemn the sport. Men like Bin Laden and Haniyeh were comfortable with more nuanced Salafi

and mainstream scholars who argued that the Prophet Mohammed advocated physical exercise to maintain a healthy body. These scholars, who like all Salafis favour the Muslim world's emulation of life at the time of the Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors, criticize the effects of the commercialization of soccer and the fact that it distracts from the performance of religious duties but acknowledge that there is nothing in Islamic law that would justify banning the sport or imposing restrictive conditions.

The Kampala bombings were not the first time Bin Laden straddled the tension between his passion for soccer and his willingness to target his fellow supporters. In 1998, he authorized a plan by Algerian jihadists to attack the 1998 World Cup. The Algerians pinpointed a match between England and Tunisia scheduled to be played in Marseille as well as US matches against Germany, Iran and Yugoslavia as targets.⁵⁹¹ The England-Tunisia match was expected to attract a worldwide television audience of half a billion people while the US match against Iran was already highly political because of the strained relations between the two countries. "This is a game that will determine the future of our planet and possibly the most important single sporting event that's ever been played in the history of the world," said US player Alexi Lalas referring to his squad's match against Iran.⁵⁹²

The plot that bore hallmarks of the Palestinian assault on the Israeli team at the 1972 Munich Olympics and also included an attack on the Paris hotel of the US team, was foiled when police raided homes in seven European countries and hauled some 100 suspected associates of Algeria's Groupe Islamique Arme (GIA) in for questioning.⁵⁹³ Some scholars and journalists have suggested that the failure of the plot persuaded Al Qaeda to opt instead for the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in the summer of 1998 in which 224 people were killed.⁵⁹⁴ Similarly, purported messages by Malaysian-born, Al Qaeda-affiliated bomb maker Noordin Mohammed Top, claimed that the bombings in 2009 of the Ritz Carlton and Marriott hotels in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta were intended to kill the visiting Manchester United team. Nine people were killed and 53 others wounded in the attacks. The bombs exploded two days before the team was scheduled to check into the Ritz and prompted it to cancel its visit.

Noor said in one of three online statements that one aim of the attacks was "to create an example for the Muslims regarding Wala' (Loyalty) and Baro' (Enmity), especially for the forthcoming visit of Manchester United (MU) Football Club at the hotel. Those (football) players are made up of salibis (Crusaders). Thus it is not right that the Muslim ummah (community) devote their loyalty (wala') and honour to these enemies of Allah."⁵⁹⁵ A variety of other jihadists allegedly targeted soccer stadiums over the years in a number of foiled or aborted plots, including that of Manchester United,⁵⁹⁶ Jerusalem's Bloomfield in 2004,⁵⁹⁷ Jerusalem's Teddy Kollek Stadium in 2011,⁵⁹⁸ Melbourne's MCG in 2005,⁵⁹⁹ and a stadium in the US in 2010.⁶⁰⁰ The Iraqi military said it had arrested a dissident Saudi military officer for being part of an Al Qaeda plot to attack the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.⁶⁰¹

Players = Pilots

Soccer also figured prominently in Bin Laden's imagery. Speaking to supporters about the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, he drew an analogy to soccer. "I saw in a dream, we were playing a soccer game against the Americans. When our team showed up in the field, they were all pilots! So I wondered if that was a soccer game or a pilot game? Our players were pilots," he said according to a video tape released by the US Defence Department.⁶⁰² Al Qaeda spokesman Suleiman Abu Ghaith, recalled in the video that a television program about 9/11 "was showing an Egyptian family sitting in their living room, they exploded with joy. Do you know when there is a soccer game and your team wins, it was the same expression of joy? There was a subtitle that read: 'In revenge for the children of Al

Aqsa', Usama Bin Ladin executes an operation against America."⁶⁰³ Abu Ghaith said referring to Islam's third most holy site, the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

In many ways the debate among jihadists and clerics about soccer mirrors similar concerns among conservative Christian clergymen. Soccer fans outnumber churchgoers in several West European countries. Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos of Nafpatkos warned shortly after the 2010 World Cup in South Africa that soccer had become a religion that promoted superstition. "For many people, soccer is a religion, a worship. Several expressions used are taken from religion. Spectators sit in the stands and their 'gods', the soccer players, contest as another twelve/eleven gods in the field for Victory. Since soccer is considered by many as a new worship, there is certainly their own god, the god of soccer. They pray to this non-existing god... The first prize for superstition goes to the English, who for many years now have been worshipping Beckham as the thirteenth Apostle, and this is why they built him a huge statue in Trafalgar Square, to worship in his shadow and pray. The fans of all teams respect the customs of superstition -- they cross themselves, they murmur hocus-pocus, they tie their fingers, they pray to Allah. But whatever their religion or their soccer god, after all they remain faithful to the doctrine of self-idolatry," Vlachos warned on an Orthodox website.⁶⁰⁴

Similarly, Monsignor Keith Barltrop of Britain's dismantled Catholic Agency to Support Evangelisation praised Brazilian international Ricardo Kaka, a devout Christian, who has the words 'God is faithful' stitched on his boots and tears off his jersey to reveal a T-shirt that boasts 'I love Jesus,' saying "it is good to have positive role models." Barltrop worried that the excitement generated by pop stars and sporting celebrities "leads to a life of hedonism."⁶⁰⁵ For its part, the Vatican, much like the Islamic Movement in Israel and Saudi clerics who developed rules for what they described as an acceptable Muslim form of soccer, created in 2007 The Clericus Cup, an international tournament for priests and seminarians, aimed at bringing the church closer to believers and "reinvigorating a sporting tradition within the Christian community."⁶⁰⁶ And like mosques that sponsor soccer teams, up to a third of Britain's Premier League were founded in association with a church and with the help of the clergy.⁶⁰⁷ By the same token Islamic clerics endorse expressions of religiosity on the pitch and rejection of Western vices by some of Europe's most prominent Muslim players.⁶⁰⁸

Jordanian-born Palestinian Salafi Sheikh Mashhoor Bin Hasan Al Salman,⁶⁰⁹ a cleric who demonstrates knowledge of European soccer, summed up the Islamic clerical divide over soccer in a treatise published in 1998. The treatise is long on articulating militant arguments against soccer citing a slew of clerics, including Saudi scholar and judge Hamoud al-Tuwayjur;⁶¹⁰ the late Saudi grand mufti Abdulaziz bin Abdullah ibn Baz, Egyptian scholar Abdul Razak Afifi, and Saudi scholars Abdul Aziz as Salman,⁶¹¹ Abdullah bin Ghudayan and Abdullah bin Qu'ud;⁶¹² Egyptian scholar, columnist and author Abdul Halim Uways,⁶¹³ Palestinian masters student Shukri Ali al Tawil,⁶¹⁴ and Egyptian Ahmad Shalabi,⁶¹⁵ but short on countering them. While Salman appears to agree with many of their arguments, he made clear that he believes that soccer also contains elements and values that put it in line with Islamic morals and standards.

"Football training is in the realm of the permissible, as we do not know of any proof that prohibits it. The origin of a thing is that it is permissible (a principle in *fiqh* {Islamic jurisprudence}) is that there is nothing that distances it from permissible actions as long as a Muslim does it in order to strengthen the body and use it as a means for strength, exercise and vitality. In fact, the legislation allows it for reasons that will strengthen one's body, for the purpose of striving in the path of Allah. It is verified that the Messenger of Allah (*sallallaahu alayhi wassalam* {Peace be upon

Him)) stated: ‘The strong believer is better and more beloved by Allah than a weak believer even though there is good in both of them,’” Salman concluded.⁶¹⁶

Distancing himself from interpretations of jihad to justify political violence, Salman relied on Al-Tuwayjur’s referral to 14th century Islamic scholar Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah,⁶¹⁷ widely viewed as a co-founder of the Hanbal school of Islamic legal thought and an inspiration for contemporary militant Islamists and jihadists. Al-Tuwayjur quoted Ibn Taymiyyah, as saying that “ball games are good as long as the intention of the one practicing it is for the benefit of training horses and men, so as to help them in attacking and retreating, and in entering, withdrawing and performing similar actions during jihad. The purpose is to secure help during jihad, which Allah and his Commander (Peace be upon Him) commanded. However, such games are forbidden if they have any detrimental effect on horses and men.”⁶¹⁸

Salman interpreted Ibn Taymiyyah’s statement as detrimental to anything that would distract a Muslim from performing his religious obligations. He argued on the basis of opinions of Saudi scholars that soccer is forbidden if it “becomes a common habit that commands too much of a person’s time,” involves clothing that exposes thighs or anything above it or spectators watching players whose bodies are exposed in ways that violate Islamic dress code.⁶¹⁹ In a later treatise, Salman’s thinking however appeared to have evolved to conclude that soccer was distracting believers from their religious obligations. “Football now has become one of the destructive hoaxes which our enemies are using in order to destroy the Islamic Ummah (community),” he said. Salman’s conclusion was prompted by his observation that thousands of Muslims give priority to supporting their team during a match above going to daily prayers if the two coincide in time.⁶²⁰

In his original treatise, Salman quoted extensively the banning of soccer by Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Al Sheikh, a late grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, the country’s highest religious authority, but proceeded to take issue with the ban itself. Al Sheikh, who was in office until his death in 1969, banned the institutionalization of soccer by establishing leagues, associations and governing bodies. Al Sheikh warned that “the nature of the game sparks fanatical partisanship, troubles, and the emergence of hate and malice,” which contradict Islamic notions of “tolerance, brotherhood, rectification and purification of hearts and sows resentment, grudges, and discord that exist among losers and winners of the game.” He cautioned further that soccer can spark violence. “So from this, soccer is prohibited... Soccer does not serve the goal of things that justify allowing sport activities under the divine law of Islam such as exercise of the body, training in fighting or the curing of chronic illness,” Al Sheikh ruled. In addition, he argued, that soccer leads to the postponement of prayers for which there “is no legal excuse” and encourages gambling and betting in violation of Islamic law.⁶²¹

Salman countered Al Sheikh by reasoning that “within the context of Islam and its way of building societies, soccer is among games endorsed by Islam as is the study of it. Soccer involves studying lessons in unity as opposed to splitting, mutual love as opposed to hatred and animosity.” He defined soccer as a game that emphasizes those values and whose “values cannot be realized but through teamwork (in which) the team is greater than the individual.”⁶²²

The debate about soccer is reminiscent of clerical opposition to the introduction of the game in the early 20th century in Turkey and in Iran immediately after the 1979 Islamic revolution that overthrew the Shah. Once popularized, religious forces in Iran recognized the game’s political advantages and were quick to embrace them.

The debate is also reflected in advice rendered to believers on the official fatwa website of Saudi Arabia operated by The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta (Fatwa) that effectively endorsed the game but banned competitions-- an approach that has been ignored by the government with a member of the royal family overseeing the country's leagues.

The presidency in a ruling told a merchant to close his shop and go to the mosque to pray because a television set in his store that was broadcasting soccer matches distracted people from their religious obligations. It justified its advice with a quote from the Quran: "O you who believe! Let not your properties or your children divert you from the remembrance of Allah. And whosoever does that, then they are the losers."⁶²³ Another fatwa, permitting soccer but banning soccer competitions read: "Contests are only permissible when they can be sought for help in fighting Kuffar (disbelievers) like that of camels, horses, arrows, and the like of other fighting machines such as planes, tanks and submarines, whether they are held for prizes or not. Whereas if these games are not sought for help in wars like football, boxing and wrestling, it is impermissible to take part in them if the contests include prizes for winners."⁶²⁴ Yet another fatwa cautioned that "attending football matches and watching them is unlawful for a person who knows that they are played for a reward, for attending such matches involves approving of them."⁶²⁵

The twisted rulings of the more radical Egyptian and Saudi clergy meanwhile provided the theological underpinnings of the attitudes towards soccer of militant groups like the Taliban and Bok Haram, informed Al Shabab's drive to recruit soccer-playing kids in Somalia, and inspired some players to become fighters and suicide bombers in foreign lands. They also fuelled a debate about the participation of three Muslim nations -- Saudi Arabia, Iran and Tunisia -- in the 2006 World Cup. Militant clerics denounced the tournament as a "plot aiming to corrupt Muslim youth and distract them from jihad" and "a cultural invasion worse than military war because it seizes the heart and soul of the Muslim."⁶²⁶ They dubbed the World Cup the "Prostitution Cup" because of the influx of prostitutes into Germany in advance of the games.⁶²⁷

Writing under the name Abu Haytham, one cleric asserted that "while our brothers in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan are being massacred in cold blood by the Crusaders and the Jews, our young people will have their eyes riveted on depraved television sets which emit the opium of soccer to the extent of overdose."⁶²⁸ In a similar vein, Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali, a prominent Kuwaiti Salafist, issued a fatwa on his website that was widely circulated on jihadist forums declaring that "it is illicit to watch these matches on corrupt television channels while our nation is decimated night and day by foreign armies."⁶²⁹ A British pan-Islamist website advocating the creation of an Islamic state in the United Kingdom that was banned in 2006 asserted that soccer promotes nationalism as part of a "colonial crusader scheme" to divide Muslims and cause them to stray from the vision of a unified Islamic identity. "The sad fact of the matter is that many Muslims have fallen for this new religion and they too carry the national flag," it said.⁶³⁰

Militant clerics differed about the fatwas and Salafi campaigns in fierce debates on Islamist websites. More moderate religious leaders and government officials weighed into the discussion about the role of soccer in society. Syrian scholar Abd-al Mun'em Mustafa Halima Abu Basir better known as Abu Basir al-Tartus, who is widely viewed as a spiritual jihadist influence, broke ranks with his militant brethren in 2006 by declaring that there is "no objection to soccer, playing sports as a means of entertainment" but that it was forbidden to watch World Cup matches because they distract believers from the abuses of Arabs in Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere. Al-Tartus asserted that on the day of the opening of 'the Cup in Germany, billions of people clung to television screens while "the Zionist Jews

bombed civilians.”⁶³¹ Radical Islamists also posted a video of their own World Cup on the Internet that showed scenes of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the killing and torture of Palestinians, the Guantánamo Bay detention facility in Cuba, and the abuse of Iraqi inmates by US forces in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison. In its introduction, the video said that "at a time when pro-Zionist Arab media are busy broadcasting the World Cup to divert Muslims away from their religion and from jihad...we offer you the three other cups which those media are trying to hide from our nation.”⁶³² One Islamist, Sa’ad al Wissi, who identified himself as “an extremist” insisted that he could “find no problem in watching the matches. Your calls to boycott the World Cup are doomed to fail,” Al Wissi said.⁶³³

A controversial 2005 ruling circulated on the Internet⁶³⁴ by anonymous militant clerics in Saudi Arabia, the world’s most puritanical Muslim nation, is believed to have motivated three Saudi players to join the jihad in Iraq. Published as the Saudi national team prepared to compete in the 2006 World Cup, the fatwa denounced the game as an infidel invention and redrafted its International Football Association Board (IFAB) approved rules to differentiate it from that of the heretics. It banned words like foul, goal, corner and penalty. It ordered players to wear their ordinary clothes or pyjamas instead of shorts and T-shirt and to spit on anyone who scored a goal. It did away with the role of referees by banning the drawing of lines to demarcate the pitch and ordering that fouls and disputes be adjudicated on the basis of the Sharia rather than by issuing yellow or red cards. “If you ... intend to play soccer, play to strengthen the body in order to better struggle in the way of God on high and to prepare the body for when it is called to jihad. Soccer is not for passing time or the thrill of so-called victory,” the fatwa said. It dictated that the game should be played in anything – “one half or three halves” -- but the internationally accepted two halves of 45 minutes each “which is the official time of the Jews, Christians and all the heretical and atheist countries.”

The ruling was based on an earlier fatwa issued in 2002 by radical Saudi cleric Abdullah al-Najdi,⁶³⁵ a descendant of one of the companions of Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab, the 18th century warrior priest who founded Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia’s austere school of Islamic thought. Echoing Al Najdi, Egyptian-born Sheikh Abu Ishaq Al Huwani said on YouTube: “All fun is bootless except the playing of a man with his wife, his son and his horse... Thus, if someone sits in front of the television to watch football or something like that, he will be committing bootless fun... We have to be a serious nation, not a playing nation. Stop playing,”⁶³⁶

Saudi officials and columnists responded by denying that soccer violated Islamic law. They accused the issuers of anti-soccer fatwas of “misleading Saudi youth and called for a re-examination of the kingdom’s religious discourse and the prosecution of those who had decreed soccer as un-Islamic. Authorities should “prosecute those involved in the publishing of these fatwas in a Sharia court for the crime they have committed,” Saudi mufti Sheikh Abdel Aziz Ibn Abdallah Al-Sheikh was quoted as saying.⁶³⁷ Justice ministry advisor Sheikh Abdel Muhsin Al-Abikan argued that “the rules of the game and the prohibition against using terms such as foul, out, penalty kick, etc. is misguided, since even the Prophet Muhammad used non-Arabic expressions in the hadith (the sayings of the Prophet), and even Allah used some non-Arabic words in His book the Koran.... There is nothing wrong with the lines, the referee, and the soccer rules. All things that come from the West but are not unique to it are permitted. Soccer has become a world sport and does not belong only to the non-believers.”⁶³⁸ To reinforce the message, the municipality of Mecca, Islam’s most holy city, announced the construction of 60 soccer fields that would be managed by a local football club and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), a group that in the past was investigated for alleged links to militant Islamist groups.⁶³⁹

Iranian filmmaker Maziar Bahari documented ambiguous Shiite Muslim clerical attitudes towards soccer while sharing a taxi in Tehran with a clergyman. The cleric gave his assessment of Iran's performance in an Asian Cup tournament. Asked about his fundamental view of soccer, the cleric scowled and said "it's a waste of time." He explained his following of the Asian Cup as relaxation in between his religious studies.⁶⁴⁰ His attitude was rooted in religious opposition to attempts to promote soccer by Iranian ruler Reza Shah starting in 1940. Religious leaders at the time denounced the game as evidence of the moral corruption of the Pahlavi regime.⁶⁴¹ Similarly, the Islamic republic following the 1979 overthrow of Reza Shah's son waged an initial campaign against soccer, which it viewed as a "royalist tool of manipulation,"⁶⁴² a violation of Islamic values and law, a diversion from more pressing political issues and a threat because it involved the gathering of large numbers of people.

The vision of more nuanced scholars like Salman, let alone the views of mainstream scholars and officials, had little impact on Al Shabab, jihadist rebels in northern Mali, the Taliban, Boko Haram or the Islamic State. Al Shabab banned the game in the large chunks of war-ravaged Somalia that it long controlled on the grounds that it distracted the faithful from worshipping Allah, competed with the militants for recruits and lent credence to national borders at the expense of pan-Islamist aspirations for the return of the Caliph who would rule the world's 1.5 billion Muslims as one. It also celebrated peaceful competition and undermined the narrative of an inevitable clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. Pakistani journalist Muhammed Wasim recalled the arrest by the Taliban of a Pakistani soccer team during a visit to Kandahar because they were wearing shorts. As punishment, the players had their heads shaven before being sent home. "They were arrested because they violated the Islamic dress code, which forbids exposing any parts of the body," Wasim quoted Taliban spokesman Maulvi Hameed Akhund as saying.⁶⁴³

A high stakes game of cat-and-mouse

The risks of playing soccer were far greater in Somalia, but so were the opportunities.

Mahad Mohamed was 11 when he joined an Islamist militia. By the time he realized that doing a jihadist warlord's bidding to give meaning to his life in a country savaged for two decades by civic strife and brutal militias wasn't what he expected, he was three years further. After escaping from the Shabab in 2010, he dreamt of being a soccer coach, a pilot and a computer teacher and plays defence on his country's Under-17 national soccer team.

"People were afraid of me when I had an AK-47; now they love and congratulate me. I thank the football federation, they helped me," he said.⁶⁴⁴ "I just drifted into being a soldier; it is hard to say how it happened. Some friends of mine ended up being fighters and they used to tell me that it was a good and exciting life and much better than doing nothing or being on the streets. After I spent some time doing that, I understood that it wasn't like that at all and I was happy to get out."

The opportunity to leave the militia presented itself after three years of fighting government troops, rival jihadists and warlords, and African Union peacekeepers when the warlord he served as a bodyguard was killed. Mahad ran away and returned home to play soccer in an open field. A Somali soccer association scout spotted him and offered him a chance to play on its youth team.

Mahad's shift from boy killer to soccer star stood out in Somalia, a football-crazy country that straddles Africa's strategic Gulf of Aden along which Al Shabab had at the time draconically imposed an austere lifestyle. Supporters of a fiercely austere interpretation of Islam that made puritan Saudi Arabia seem liberal, they banned soccer as satanic

and un-Islamic while Mahad was still a fighter. At the time, the Al Shabab were on the ascendancy. The then US-backed head of Somalia's transitional government, Sheik Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, was hanging on to power by the skin of his teeth. The jihadists had reduced his authority to a few blocks around his embattled presidential palace in the crumbling, battle-scarred capital of Mogadishu. Supported by African Union and Kenyan troops, Somali forces have since regained control of much of the country with the jihadists declaring a tactical retreat.

Like the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Al Shabab was a product of a failed foreign invasion that did little but exacerbate Somalia's political, social and tribal fault lines. US-backed Ethiopian forces crossed the Somali border in 2006 and ousted the hard-line Islamic Courts Union barely six months after the militia had driven the warlords out of Mogadishu on the eve of the 2006 World Cup in a bid to restore law and order. One of the militia's first decrees banned the watching of World Cup matches. Much like the US effort a decade earlier recounted in Ridley Scott's war movie *Black Hawk Down*, the Ethiopian invasion and toppling of the Islamists, sparked the emergence of even more radical forces and a cycle of ever more vicious violence. Tens of thousands of people have been killed since the invasion; another 1.8 million fled their homes to become refugees.

Mahad exemplified the serious challenge soccer posed to the jihadists' dire worldview. The scout who discovered him was on no ordinary recruitment drive. His slogan was 'Put down the gun, pick up the ball.' He was part of a Somali Football Association (SFA) campaign, backed by world soccer body FIFA and local businessmen to throw down a gauntlet for the jihadists by luring child soldiers like Mahad away from them. "However difficult our situation is, we believe football can play a major role in helping peace and stability prevail in our country, and that is what our federation has long been striving to attain. Football is here to stay, not only as game to be played but as a catalyst for peace and harmony in society," said Shafi'i Moyhaddin, one of the driving forces behind the campaign.⁶⁴⁵

The SFA was not the only institution to recognize that soccer could also serve as a de-radicalization tool. Prison authorities in Nigeria have incorporated soccer in their efforts to de-radicalize captured members of Boko Haram, the jihadist group that has banned sports in those controlled chunks of north-eastern Nigeria which it controls. Prison officials describe as progress the captives' willingness to participate in early morning soccer training sessions. "These are people who have a wild concept about life, who look at killing as a very easy something, so we have to work on them to change that ideology [and] for them to have respect for human life. Initially the participation was not encouraging but when they saw their colleagues coming back excited and feeling fulfilled from the sport it brought the others out," said Emmanuel Osagie, a member of Nigeria's de-radicalisation team. "Before, they didn't tolerate others. There is supposed to be a spirit of sportsmanship and it is this spirit that makes them normal and reduces their radical ideology," added Abioye Adeshina, a prison official in charge of sports.⁶⁴⁶

Mahad was one of hundreds the association assisted in swapping jihad for soccer, the only institution that competed with radical Islam in offering young Somalis the prospect of a better life. "If we keep the young generation for football, al-Shabab can't recruit them to fight. This is really why al-Shabab fights with us," said Somali soccer association head Abdulghani Sayeed.⁶⁴⁷ To shield himself from threats by Al Shabab, Somalia's dominant jihadist militia, Sayeed lived in and operated from a heavily guarded Mogadishu hotel. Yet, he refused to move the association's headquarters out of Mogadishu's Al-Shabab-controlled Suuqa Bakaaraha to avoid giving the jihadists a further excuse to attack its members. An open air market in the heart of the city, Suuqa Bakaaraha was famous for its trade in arms and falsified documents and as the crash site of one of two downed US Black Hawk helicopters in the 1993 Battle for Mogadishu. Shoppers fired weapons in the air to test them in one part of the market dubbed Sky

Shooter. A short distance away, they tested anti-aircraft guns and mortars. Somalis ranks as one of the world's most heavily armed populations. Aid agencies estimated that two thirds of Mogadishu's 1.5 million inhabitants own an assault rifle.⁶⁴⁸

Middle Eastern and North African soccer fans insist that their sport is more than a game; it's a matter of life and death. From Mahad and Sayeed's perspective, that was no exaggeration. Nowhere did enthusiasm for the beautiful game involve a greater act of courage and defiance than in their native Somalia under the Shabab where the sport had developed its own unique thrill - a high-stakes game of cat and mouse between enthusiasts and jihadists and a struggle for a trophy grander than the world's largest sports event, the FIFA World Cup: the future of a country and perhaps even a region. It was the world most important football match: Soccer versus Jihad.

Somalia was the pitch, battle-hardened kids like Mahad were the ball. Players and enthusiasts risked execution, arrest and torture. Militants in their trademark green jumpsuits and chequered scarves drove through towns in southern Somalia in Toyota pickup trucks mounted with megaphones. Families were threatened with punishment if their children failed to enlist as fighters. Boys were plucked from makeshift soccer fields. Childless families were ordered to pay al-Shabab \$50 a month, the equivalent of Somalia's monthly per capita income. Local soccer club owners were detained and tortured on charges of misguiding youth. "I don't go anywhere. I just stay at home with my family so that the Shabab don't catch me," said Mahad who ran a double risk as a teenager and a deserter.⁶⁴⁹

Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Aros, a militant cleric, who doubled as head of operations of Hizbul Islam, a jihadist group that in 2010 merged with Al Shabab, condemned soccer as "a waste of money and time" and "an inheritance from the primitive infidels."⁶⁵⁰ His campaign reached a crescendo every four years during the World Cup – a moment when most of the world is glued to the television and much of Somalia risks public flogging and execution to catch a glimpse of the game. Somalia had the sad distinction of being the only country where the world's most popular game was a clandestine, life-threatening activity. To Sheikh Mohammed whose warlords once were soccer's most powerful supporters and providers of security, the World Cup was the equivalent of Karl Marx's opium for the masses. In his mind, soccer diverted the Muslim faithful from jihad; the World Cup offered the youth a stark reminder that watching games and waging battles on the pitch is a lot more fun than the austere life of a fighter who defies death in street battles.

To mark the kick-off of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, Sheikh Mohammed cautioned "all Somali youth not to dare watch these World Cup matches... They will not benefit anything or get any experience by watching semi-nude madmen jumping up and down and chasing an inflated object... we can never accept people to watch it."⁶⁵¹ During the match between Germany and Australia, Sheikh Mohammed's fighters raided a private home in the town of Afgoye, twenty kilometres south of Mogadishu. Of the tens of fans cluttered around one of the country's relatively few satellite TVs one eye on the game with the volume turned off to avoid drawing attention, the other on the door in case of a raid, two were killed and 30 detained among whom were 14 teenagers. In the village of Suqa Holaha north of Mogadishu, another cleric, Sheik Abu Yahya Al Iraqi, warned a crowd that "soccer descended from the old Christian cultures and our Islamic administration will never allow watching what they call the FIFA World Cup. We are sending our last warning to the people," he said hours before a match between Nigeria and Argentina.⁶⁵²

Soccer allowed Mahad to forget the tragedies that dominate life beyond the pitch. He took pride in flying the Somali flag at international matches and showing the world that there is more to his country than wild-eyed fanatics,

suicide bombers and pirates. Yet, his transition from child soldier to national star wasn't easy. "I lost everything when I was a fighter, I had nothing," he said.⁶⁵³ Soccer training for Mahad and his fighter-turned-player team mates involved far more than just gearing up for the next match. Psychologists helped him transit back to a semblance of normal life in a country that is stumbling from bad to worse.⁶⁵⁴

They were aided by the fact that the soccer association constituted an island of relative normalcy. Buoyed by its success in wrenching child fighters from the clutches of the Islamists, the association upped the stakes in its battle with the militias. In the spring of 2010, it revived for the first time in three years the country's football championships at a ceremony on the well-protected grounds of the Somali police academy in Mogadishu. It also launched a tournament for primary and secondary school students.⁶⁵⁵

The jihadists were quick to respond to the association's challenge. "If we kill you, we will get closer to God," they said in an email sent to the association. Several days later, they sent a second mail. "This is the last warning for you to take the path of Islam. If you don't, you have no choice but to die. Do you think the non-believer police can guarantee your security?"⁶⁵⁶

The Shabab have since been driven out of Somali cities. Soccer is one barometer of the success of the drive to defeat them. Their reduced influence was evident in the fact that for the first time in more than two decades, matches have been played in recent years at night, teams travel in relative safety within the country and war-ravaged sports facilities, including Mogadishu's national stadium, once one of East Africa's most impressive filled with 70,000 passionate fans during games that was used by the Al Shabab as an arms depot and training facility, were being refurbished. Scores cheered Somalia's Under-17 national team after it defeated Sudan in September 2012 in an African youth championship, playing without its goalkeeper, Abdulkader Dheer Hussein, who was assassinated in April of that year as part of an Al Shabab assassination campaign that increasingly targeted not only athletes and officials but also sports journalists.⁶⁵⁷

The campaign like more recent attacks on a shopping mall and a university in Kenya illustrated that Al Shabab may be down and out but by far not defeated. Al Shabab has adjusted to a new reality by shifting gears to focus on hit and run guerrilla tactics. Al Shabab's targets have in recent years included senior government officials as well as players like Hussein and Under-20 international Abdi Salaam Mohamed Ali as well as former Somali Olympic Committee vice-president Abdulkader Yahye Sheik Ali killed in July 2012 and SFA president Said Mohamed Nur, who spearheaded the campaign to win back child soldiers and was murdered in April 2012.⁶⁵⁸ Increasingly, its targets now include sports journalists who glorify "satanic" games.⁶⁵⁹

Fourteen sports journalists were killed in the first nine months of 2012 alone, including Abdirahman Mohamed Ali whose decapitated body was dumped next to a restaurant a day after he was kidnapped; Hassan Yusuf Absuge shot that same day by masked gunmen as he returned home from work; and Mahmoud Ali Buneyste killed in August while filming a soccer match in Mogadishu hours after he attended the funeral of a murdered colleague Yusuf Ali Osman. Al Shabab claimed responsibility for their deaths with a leader of the militants telling a Somali radio station that "God is great. We have killed spy journalists. They were the real enemies of Islam." Their demise, he said, constituted "one of the victories that Islam gained, and such operations will continue."⁶⁶⁰ Despite such statements, the facts in lawless Somalia remained murky and it was not impossible that they may have been victims of personal feuds or rogue armed groups. Irrespective of who was responsible for the killing of journalists, Al Shabab's ability to

target senior political and soccer officials demonstrated its continued ability to strike and the importance of soccer in its effort to impose its moral and social code if not by territorial control than by a campaign of fear and terror.

By contrast, Al Shabab mentor and Taliban ally Bin Laden, like various other leaders of militant Islamist political movements, worshiped the game as only second to Allah. So did many of their subordinates. "The day (Egyptian President Anwar) Sadat was killed in (1981) was one of the happiest of my life along with the day when Ahli football club – fielding only youth players and substitutes – beat Zamalek's first team by three to two," recalled Khaled al-Berry, a teenage member of a militant Egyptian Islamist group who went on to study medicine and become a London-based writer in his autobiography.⁶⁶¹ These men recognized soccer's useful bonding and recruitment qualities.⁶⁶² It bought recruits into the fold, encouraged camaraderie and reinforced militancy among those who have already joined.

The perfect game

Soccer fans like jihadists live in a world characterized best by US President George W. Bush's us against them response to 9/11: "You are either with us or against us." The track record of soccer-players-turned suicide bombers proved his point. "I had full confidence in those who were ready to take up the challenge, those who were capable with their honesty, their self-sacrifice, and their faith. They were the ones whom I played soccer with and prayed with, and at whose hands I studied. They were the ones who, when I was in their midst, made me feel safe and protected, the one, who should I fail to show up, would ask about me as though my mere absence was an event of significance," said (former jihadist Khaled) Al-Berry referring to his former jihadi peers.⁶⁶³

Soccer was perfect for the creation and sustenance of strong and cohesive jihadist groups. It facilitated personal contact and the expansion of informal networks which, in their turn, encouraged individual participation and the mobilization of resources. These informal individual connections contributed to jihadist activity in a variety of ways. First, they facilitated the circulation of information and therefore the speed of decision making. In the absence of any formal coordination among jihadi organizations, recruitment, enlistment and cooperation focussed on individuals. Another important function of multiple informal individual relationships was their contribution to the growth of feelings of mutual trust," said Indonesian security consultant Noor Huda Ismail, a consultant on the impact of religion on political violence. "Recruitment into most jihadi groups is not like recruitment into the police or army or college. Indeed, previous formal or informal membership in action-oriented groups such as soccer or cricket teams, and other informal ties, may facilitate the passage from radicalization into jihad and on to joining suicide attack teams," he said.⁶⁶⁴

Nonetheless to Bin Laden as well as more mainstream, non-violent, ultra-conservative Muslims, the beautiful game also posed a challenge. In a swath of land stretching from Central Asia to the Atlantic coast of Africa soccer was the only institution that rivalled Islam with its vast network of mosques in creating public spaces to vent pent-up anger and frustration. During the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, Saudi Arabia's religious guardians, afraid that believers would forget their daily prayers during matches broadcast live on Saudi TV, rolled out mobile mosques on trucks and prayer mats in front of popular cafes where men gathered to watch the games.⁶⁶⁵

Much like with Arab autocrats, soccer posed both an opportunity and a challenge to religious conservatives. The emergence of soccer clubs in Palestinian villages and towns in Israel, for example, challenged traditional social structures.⁶⁶⁶ They competed with the sway of conservative Muslim clergymen who saw the clubs as dangerous

attempts at modernization and innovation. In a bid to co-opt soccer, Israel's Islamic Movement created a league of its own that operated independent of Israel's governing soccer body, the Israel Football Association (IFA).

Underlying the debate about soccer is a more fundamental view among more conservative and militant Islamists of fun that is not exclusively but often associated with sports as a potential threat to political and social control. Witness restrictive sports policies adopted by Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Taliban, Al Shabab, and some Salafis in Egypt. Youth are often the main targets because of their sheer number and disruptive potential that in the words of sociologist Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera means that "youth habitus is characterized by a greater tendency for experimentation, adventurism, idealism, drive for autonomy, mobility, and change."⁶⁶⁷ Bayat noted separately that "whereas the elderly poor can afford simple, traditional, and contained diversions, the globalized and affluent youth tend to embrace more spontaneous, erotically charged, and commodified pleasures. This might help explain why globalizing youngsters more than others cause fear and fury among Islamist (and non-Islamist) anti-fun adversaries, especially when much of what these youths practice is informed by Western technologies of fun and is framed in terms of 'Western cultural import... In other words, at stake is not necessarily the disruption of the moral order, as often claimed, but rather the undermining of the hegemony, the regime of power on which certain strands of moral and political authority rest... The adversaries' fear of fun, I conclude, revolves ultimately around the fear of exit from the paradigm that frames their mastery; it is about anxiety over loss of their 'paradigm power.'"⁶⁶⁸

That principle was at times extended beyond the realm of nations or territories under Islamist rule. Crowned former Egyptian national coach Hassan Shehata maintained an unwritten rule in the first decade of the 21st century that allowed only practicing Muslims to join the Egyptian national soccer team. Players prayed before games for God's intervention and offered up prayers of thanks for goals and victories. To join the team, players had to pass a religious litmus test; "pious behaviour" alongside soccer skills was a primary criterion for making the team. "Without it, we will never select any player regardless of his potential," said Shehata, who dumped a talented player for visiting in London a nightclub rather than a mosque. "I always strive to make sure that those who wear the Egypt jersey are on good terms with God," Shehata said.⁶⁶⁹

A reliable predictor

For Palestinians - locked into Gaza by Israeli and Egyptian travel restrictions in an economic siege that isolated the Strip from the outside world and helped Hamas reinforce its conservative social and political mores— soccer too constituted a rare space for relaxation and a safe outlet for pent-up emotions. That is as long as one steered clear of the Strip's politically controlled clubs. Young Gazans who gathered in a Gaza restaurant to watch the 2010 World Cup qualifying match between Egypt and Algeria discussed the significance of soccer during halftime. "There is sense of despair and there is a mistrust in the leadership whether in the West Bank or in the Gaza Strip," said a young spectator only weeks before soccer played its part in the Arab revolt that would rewrite the region's political map.⁶⁷⁰

Bin Laden and Haniyeh's political interest in soccer stemmed from the fact that jihadists often start their journey as members of groups organized around some sort of action like soccer. They like Nasrallah, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the leader of Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria Jabhat al-Nusra, and self-declared Islamic State Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi despite his targeting of football understood soccer's bonding and recruitment qualities. "A reliable predictor of whether or not someone joins the Jihad is being a member of an action-oriented group of friends. It's surprising how

many soccer buddies join together,” noted University of Michigan professor Scott Atran.⁶⁷¹ Indeed, soccer weaves its way through the history of militant political Islam and jihadism since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In the 1990s, when Bin Laden based Al Qaeda in Sudan, the group had its own soccer league with two competing teams that maintained regularly scheduled practices and played weekly matches after Friday prayers.⁶⁷² Back in Afghanistan during the US-backed Islamist war against the Russians, the Afghan guerrillas and their foreign fellow travellers fought boredom in between battles with their own World Cup; fighters competed in soccer teams representing their countries of origin. Once the Russians withdrew and foreign jihadists returned home, soccer matches were an opportunity to stay in touch.⁶⁷³

Mohamed Abdel Rahman, a former Egyptian fighter in Afghanistan and the son of Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, who is serving a life sentence in the United States for the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, recalled in an interview with CNN that he played soccer in Pakistan with former Egyptian special forces officer Saif al-Adel, a senior Al Qaeda official who has since been killed. “We played football with a group of fellow jihadists, then had lunch before I left,” (Mr.) Abdel Rahman said. “He was a really good football player, sharp and fast.”⁶⁷⁴

The perpetrators of the 2003 Madrid subway bombings played soccer together. Saudi players Tamer al-Thamali, Dayf Allah al-Harithi and Majid Sawat attended twice a week a Quran group alongside their regular soccer practice. Silently they made their way to Iraq as the Al Qaeda-led insurgency gained steam. Tamer and Dayf died as suicide bombers. Majid’s father recognized his son when Iraqi television broadcast his interrogation by authorities.⁶⁷⁵

Similarly, the utility of soccer was not lost on the Islamic State. One thing the biographies of Jihadi John, the Islamic State’s executioner of foreign hostages, and several of his European associates had in common was their passion for soccer and their dashed hopes of becoming professional players. They all belonged to amateur teams or bonded in part by playing soccer together. Like other disaffected youth for whom playing soccer became a stepping stone to joining a militant group or become a suicide bomber, Jihadi John and his mates, traversed football fields on their journey. Their biographies highlight soccer’s potential as a recruitment and bonding tool.

Identified as Mohammed Emwazi, Jihadi John a Kuwaiti-born Brit reviled for videos featuring him as the hooded killer of the Islamic State’s foreign, non-Arab hostages, dreamt as a child of kicking balls rather than chopping off heads. “What I want to be when I grow up is a footballer,” he wrote in his primary school yearbook. He believed that by the age of 30 he would be “in a football team scoring a goal.”⁶⁷⁶ In secondary school Emwazi played soccer matches with five players in two teams whose members went on to become jihadists, The Guardian quoted one of the group’s members as saying in evidence presented to an English high court in 2011.⁶⁷⁷

The court case, which related to a control order imposed on one of three of the former players whose movements were legally restricted, Ibrahim Magag, identifies ten to 12 men, most of East African or South Asian descent, as members of the same group as Mr. Emwazi. Four of the men attended the same secondary school. Several travelled to Somalia for training before returning to the UK as recruiters.⁶⁷⁸

Among the group’s members was Bilal Berjawi, a British-Lebanese national, who was stripped of his British citizenship, and like Mohamed Sakr was killed in separate US drone strikes in 2012. The group also included two Ethiopians who have since been barred from returning to Britain on security grounds, a man who trained in an Al Qaeda camp, and an associate of a group that planned but failed to successfully execute attacks in London in July

2005 barely two weeks after four men killed 52 people in bombings of the London transport system. "They were sporty, not particularly studious young men," The Guardian quoted a person who moved in the same circles as describing Mr. Emwazi's group.⁶⁷⁹

Like Emwazi's group, five East Londoners of Portuguese descent with roots in Portugal's former African colonies,⁶⁸⁰ who are believed to have helped produce Jihadi John's gruesome videos, envisioned themselves as becoming soccer players rather than jihadists viewed as accessories to murder in their home countries. One of them, 28 year-old, Nero Seraiva, tweeted last year on July 11, days before the execution of American journalist James Foley, the first of the Islamic State's Western hostages to be decapitated: "Message to America, the Islamic State is making a new movie. Thank u for the actors." Foley's decapitation was announced in a video entitled A Message to America.⁶⁸¹

Fabio Pocas, at 22 the youngest of the Portuguese group, arrived in London in 2012, hoping to become a professional soccer player. In Lisbon, Pocas, a convert to Islam, attended the youth academy of Sporting Lisbon, the alma mater of superstars such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Luis Figo.⁶⁸² In London, he helped amateur league UK Football Finder FC (UKFFFC) win several divisional competitions. The Sunday Times quoted UKFFFC football director Ewemade Orobator as saying that Pocas "came here to play football seriously. In about May 2013 an agent came down and said, 'Work hard over the summer and I will get you a trial (with a professional club).'" Pocas failed to take up the offer and instead travelled to Syria where he adopted the name Abdurahman Al Andalus. Pocas, according to The Sunday Times, has settled in the Syrian town of Manbij near Aleppo where he has taken a Dutch teenager as his bride. "Holy war is the only solution for humanity," he said in a posting on Facebook.⁶⁸³ A Twitter account associated with supporters of the Islamic State identified Pocas as the cameraman who filmed the incineration of captured Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh in December 2014.⁶⁸⁴

Celso Rodrigues da Costa, whose brother Edgar also was in Syria, was believed to have attended open training sessions for Arsenal, but failed to get selected. Da Costa, born in Portugal to parents from Guinea-Bissau adopted in Syria the name Abu Isa Andaluzi. He appeared in April 2014 in an Islamic State video as a masked fighter. The video exploited the physical likeness of Da Costa to that of French international Lassana Diarra, who played for Arsenal before moving to Lokomotiv Moscow. A caption under the video posting read; "A former soccer player - Arsenal of London - who left everything for jihad." Another text said: "He... played for Arsenal in London and left soccer, money and the European way of life to follow the path of Allah."

On camera, Da Costa said: "My advice to you first of all is that we are in need of all types of help from those who can help in fighting the enemy. Welcome, come and find us and from those who think that they cannot fight they should also come and join us for example because it maybe that they can help us in something else, for example help with medicine, help financially, help with advice, help with any other qualities and any other skills they might have, and give and pass on this knowledge, and we will take whatever is beneficial and that way they will participate in jihad."⁶⁸⁵

The list of soccer players-turned jihadists goes beyond the Portuguese. 22-year old Nidhal Selmi, successful player for Etoile sportive du Sahel and the Tunisian national team, died in October 2014 a foreign fighter for the Islamic State.⁶⁸⁶ His death followed that of other sportsmen such as Tunisian handball goalkeeper Ahmed Yassin and Ahmed El-Darawi, a former policeman and Islamist parliamentary candidate who arranged soccer sponsorships for the

Egyptian affiliate of Dubai telecommunications company Etisalat El-Darawi, a supporter of the 2011 overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, blew himself up in a suicide bombing in Iraq.⁶⁸⁷

Burak Karan, an up and coming German-Turkish soccer star, was killed in October 2013 during a Syrian military raid on anti-Bashar al Assad rebels near the Turkish border. Karan, who adopted the nom du guerre Abu Abdullah at-Turki, appeared to be destined for stardom, before he opted out at age 20 in favour of the Syrian struggle. He had played internationally seven times for Germany alongside soccer giants as Sami Khedira, Kevin-Prince Boateng and Dennis Aogo.

Karan's death by a bomb dropped by the Syrian air forces in the village of Azaz, near the Turkish border became public in a an almost seven-minute You Tube video believed to have been posted by an unidentified Islamist group. Amid ideological justifications of jihad and pictures of him with children whose faces are unidentifiable but are believed to be his sons who together with his 23-year old wife travelled with him to Syria as well a Kalashnikov rifle, Mr. Karan asks his mother in Arabic not to bemoan his death. Speaking to German media, Karan's brother Mustafa cast doubt on the video saying Burak struggled to speak Arabic.

A text in Arabic and German in the video cautioned "not to assume that those who died on Allah's way are dead. No. They are alive with their Lord and being taken care of... Those that listened to Allah and the Messenger (Prophet Mohammed) after they suffered a wound – for those among them who do good and are fearful of God, there will a fabulous reward."⁶⁸⁸

Yann Nsaku, a Congolese born convert to Islam and former Portsmouth FC youth centre back, was one of 11 converts arrested in France in 2012 on suspicion of being violent jihadists and for "suspected Islamic terrorist plotting of anti-Semitic attacks," according to French police. Police said the group aimed to spark a "war across France" with the intention of imposing Islamic law. A 19-year old, 6ft 2ins player, Nsaku was signed in 1998 by Portsmouth from Cannes FC but never made it into the troubled 2008 FA Cup winners' first team. His promising career ended in 2011 when he suffered a knee injury.⁶⁸⁹

The Islamic State's imagery features regularly in the chanting and sloganeering of soccer fans in countries like Morocco and Algeria. An Islamic State video shows Algerian fans chanting the name of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian militant leader of an Al Qaeda affiliate in Iraq who was killed by US forces in 2006.⁶⁹⁰ A clip the official website and Facebook page of storied Moroccan soccer club Raja Club Athletic that has more than 1.7 million followers left doubt about support among the club's fans for the Islamic State. The clip showed fans club that prides itself on its nationalist credentials dating back to opposition to colonial French rule and its reputation as the team of ordinary Moroccans chanting: "Daesh, Daesh," the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State, and "God is Great, let's go on jihad."⁶⁹¹

While Raja Athletic's management failed to respond to the video, the fans subsequently sought to minimize the clip's significance. Writing on their Facebook page with its 118,830 likes, supporters quipped: "We are terrorists... Our goal is to bomb other clubs. We do not want land or oil, we want titles" below a mock picture of Islamic State fighters with the inscription, "Raja's Volunteer Championship." To emphasize their point, the supporters posted two days after the appearance of the video an image of Osama Bin Laden with the words: "Rest in Pieces Motherf*****r."

The Islamic State, despite its use of soccer's popularity in recruitment tactics as well in territory it controls where fighters are depicted kicking a ball with kids in a public square, fundamentally shares the view that the game is an infidel intervention. It brutally penalizes soccer fans as part of the harsh regime it imposes even though many of its fighters are reportedly soccer fans who are glued to television sets during the World Cup, and, according to political violence researcher Thomas Hegghammer, play the game in their downtime.⁶⁹² Fighters raided local coffee shops in Raqqa, Islamic State's effective capital, and dismantled and seized TV screens and receivers the night of the first match in the 2014 World Cup while followed the game on television.⁶⁹³ The group publicly executed 13 boys in early 2015 by firing squad in a sports arena in Raqqa for watching a match between Jordan and Iraq fits the mould. Loudspeakers reportedly announced that their execution was intended as a message to those who violate the strict laws of the Islamic State, which ordered that their bodies be left in the facility for all to see. 'The bodies remained lying in the open and their parents were unable to withdraw them for fear of murder by terrorist organisation,' the activists said.⁶⁹⁴

Much like the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra employs soccer to sprout roots among residents in areas that it controls. But unlike the Islamic State, soccer serves as one tool to emphasize its willingness to adapt to local custom and cooperate with a host of local and other groups rather than impose its authority and austere adherence to Islamic precepts. New York Times Middle East correspondent Ben Hubbard reported in June 2015 that the group fielded in the village of Binnish in Idlib province in north-western Syria a soccer team dressed in fatigues to conform with their Islamic dress code against a squad from another rebel group that wore shorts.⁶⁹⁵

A tough nut to crack

Men like Haniyeh and Bin Laden learnt the significance of soccer early on. They hailed from a part of the world populated by authoritarian, repressive regimes in which soccer offered a rare opportunity for the expression of pent-up anger and frustration. As a kid, Bin Laden organized soccer games in poor parts of Jeddah, his hometown. As if in anticipation of later rulings by radical Muslim clerics that ranged from condemning the game as a satanic invention of the infidels to seeking to provide it with an Islamic gloss, Bin Laden played centre forward wearing his headdress and long pants so as not to expose parts of his body.⁶⁹⁶ He used the matches as a platform to preach during breaks his conservative view of Islam and rewarded co-players who correctly answered trivia questions about the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed.⁶⁹⁷

Soccer often served as the lure militant Islamists employed to draw teenagers like Bin Laden and young men into their circle. A high school mate of Bin Laden's in Jeddah recalled being attracted to an extracurricular Quran class in the school held by a Syrian instructor who promised his students that they would play soccer after learning verses of the Quran. Initially, "we'd sit down, read a few verses of the Koran, translate or discuss how it should be interpreted, and many points of view would be offered. Then he'd send us out to the field. He had the key to the goodies—the lockers where the balls and athletic equipment were kept. But it turned out that the athletic part of it was just disorganized, an add-on. There was no organized soccer. I ended up playing a lot of one-on-one soccer, which is not very much fun," the schoolmate recalled.⁶⁹⁸

The schoolmate left the group a year later feeling trapped and bored while Bin Laden became increasingly committed to it. As the year progressed, the group progressed from memorizing verses of the holy book to reading and discussing hadiths, the sayings of the Prophet, to listening to the instructor's increasingly mesmerizing but

violent stories. The story that prompted Bin Laden's schoolmate to leave the group was "about a boy who found God—exactly like us, our age. He wanted to please God and he found that his father was standing in his way. The father was pulling the rug out from under him when he went to pray," the schoolmate said.⁶⁹⁹ The Syrian "told the story slowly, but he was referring to 'this brave boy' or 'this righteous boy' as he moved toward the story's climax. He explained that the father had a gun. He went through twenty minutes of the boy's preparation, step by step—the bullets, loading the gun, making a plan. Finally, the boy shot the father." The instructor concluded his story with the words: "Lord be praised—Islam was released in that home." The schoolmate said he watched in the years after leaving the group how Bin Laden and others adopted the appearance of an Islamist by growing their beards, shortening the length of their trousers, wearing unironed shirts and advocating the Arab world's return to strict Islamic law.⁷⁰⁰

Similarly, former Tunisian soccer player Nizar Trabelsi was an unlikely candidate for Islamic militancy given his record of petty crime and drug abuse. A one-time player for Germany's Fortuna Düsseldorf and Wuppertaler SV, Dortmund quickly dropped what it thought was a promising player when it emerged that Trabelsi had a cocaine habit and a criminal past. A seemingly integrated immigrant from North Africa, Trabelsi drifted until he was finally persuaded by Djamel Beghal, a French Algerian who was released from prison in 2011 after serving time for planning to attack the US embassy in Paris, to go to Afghanistan to join a European cell. When he returned to Europe he consorted with jihadists in London and Brussels as well as the group that assassinated Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh. Convicted in 2001 of intending to attack NATO headquarters on the edge of Brussels, he said in court that a picture of a baby Palestinian girl killed in the Gaza Strip had convinced him to become a suicide bomber. "I intended to go in with the picture of the little Palestinian girl and press the detonator," he said describing the logistics of his foiled mission.⁷⁰¹

Six Palestinians involved in a wave of Hamas suicide attacks in the early 2000s traced their routes to a mosque-sponsored soccer team in the conservative West Bank town of Hebron⁷⁰² much like members of a soccer team in southern Thailand who two years later joined a militant Islamist group seeking independence of Pattani Province that killed 112 people in a series of attacks on the police. Israeli intelligence believes Hamas saw the team as an ideal recruitment pool – a tight-knit group that shared a passion for soccer, a conservative, religious worldview and deep-seated frustration with Palestinian impotency in shaking off Israeli occupation.⁷⁰³ Considered one of the best teams in the West Bank's most traditional city, they played on Fridays on a pitch made of asphalt just down the street from the Jihad mosque that was located above a local grocer and a car repair shop. Green banners shuttering in the wind on its rooftop indicated the mosque's affiliation with Hamas, a city currently governed by a Hamas mayor.

"A tightly knit group that communicates face-to-face rather than on a mobile phone like this soccer team is a tough nut to crack," said Eran Lerman, a former senior Israeli intelligence official, describing the difficulty counterterrorism forces often have in monitoring football-related jihadist groups. Israeli forces killed Abdullah Qawasmeh, the 43-year old alleged Hamas mastermind behind the soccer team more than half a year after his recruits executed their grizzly assignments.⁷⁰⁴ Israeli officials said Qawasmeh, a member of Hamas' military wing, the Izzedin al-Qassem Brigade, had recruited in total more than a dozen players from different clubs.⁷⁰⁵

At the time of Qawasmeh's assassination, Israel also rounded up the remaining players of the Jihad mosque team founded six years earlier by Muhsin Qawasmeh, another member of Hebron's most powerful clan.⁷⁰⁶ Like legendary Egyptian player and trainer Hassan Shehata, Muhsin, the team's coach who doubled as a player, attributed equal importance to soccer skills and religiosity. He demanded that members of his team pray five times a day and that

they wear the club's blue-and white jerseys inscribed with its slogan: 'Al-Jihad: Be Prepared for Them.' Muhsin was arrested in the spring of 2002 in an Israeli sweep of Hebron aimed at breaking the uprising's backbone. He was sentenced to six months in prison. Many of his fellow inmates were supporters of Hamas. Israeli officials and relatives believe the intifada and his detention radicalized him and convinced him of the virtues of martyrdom. His prison sentence was extended by three months after he allegedly attacked a prison ward.⁷⁰⁷

Resistance to Israeli occupation of the West Bank became an early part of the Jihad soccer team's ethos. Players participated barely two years after the team's creation in the second Intifada against Israel. Two players were killed in demonstrations by Israeli soldiers. Mohammed Yagmur, another player, became in 2002 the team's first member to die in a suicide mission when he attacked a Jewish settlement. A fourth player, Hamzi Qawasmeh, was shot to death several months later after he killed a settler and wounded three others in an attack on Kharsina, an Israeli outpost northeast of Hebron. The losses undermined the team's game but fuelled a longing for revenge among its remaining members. Barely three months after Hamzi's death, Muhsin and another Qawasmeh smuggled themselves into Kiryat Arba just above Hebron where they shot dead a couple sharing a Sabbath dinner and wounded three others before they were killed by Israeli soldiers. Almost simultaneously, two other players were shot dead as they tried to enter the settlement of Negohot. Two months later Fuad Qawasmeh and fellow player Bassem al-Taquri launched separate suicide attacks in Hebron itself and in East Jerusalem.⁷⁰⁸

Several years later, heavily armed members of Hamas' military wing provided security in Gaza for the 2009 Gaza Dialogue and Tolerance Cup, organized less than a year after a 19-day Israeli assault on the strip in which more than 900 people, including three prominent Palestinian soccer players, were killed. Rather than retreating to their dressing rooms at half time, players and spectators crowded the pitch to pray.⁷⁰⁹ The tournament was intended to revive Gaza's soccer league following its demise two years earlier when the Islamists seized control of the strip, the world's most densely populated sliver of land sandwiched between Israel and Egypt, from their arch rival Al Fatah, To underscore the importance he attributed to the game, de facto Hamas prime minister Haniyeh handed the cup's trophy to the captain of the winning club.

Haniyeh, like Bin Laden and Nasrallah, had a soft spot for the game and understood the political benefits it offers, the organizing force it possesses and the threat it poses. As a youngster, Haniyeh played defence for Al Shasta, his neighbourhood team made up of members of Hamas as well Al Fatah and the only soccer team associated with the West Bank group established by Yasser Arafat that survived Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007. As a political leader, Haniyeh harnessed soccer's power. In one of its first moves after its power grab, Hamas and its military wing took control of Gaza's soccer clubs. In doing so, Haniyeh was in good company. Further north, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah engineered funding for Al Ahed, one of Lebanon's most successful clubs, and sponsorship by Al Manar, its popular TV outlet. Hamas' Islamist rival, Islamic Jihad, organized in Gaza's Mediterranean Sea beaches camps for disadvantaged children who were offered a game of soccer or volleyball, swimming and a hefty dose of slanted history that portrayed the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as a religious rather than a national conflict and Israelis as hell-bent on killing Arabs. "The purpose is to counter their anger, fear and sorrow. They play soccer and other games in the morning. In the afternoon, we discuss the need to sacrifice. We tell them how the Jews persecuted the prophets and tortured them and how they kill Arabs and Palestinians. They learn that this conflict is about religion, not land," said one of the camps' organizers.⁷¹⁰

Conclusion

Soccer weaves its way through the history of militant political Islam and jihadism. Its action-oriented, aggressive conquering of an opponent's half of the pitch often serves as an important bonding tool in the process of radicalization and facilitates recruitment into militant and jihadist groups. By the same token, soccer has proven to be a divisive issue in jihadist and Salafist discourse. Understanding of soccer's bonding and recruitment qualities by jihadist leaders lined up on both sides of the divide has not prevented adherents to one or the other side of the argument from contradicting their beliefs with actions that serve an immediate purpose. So Bin Laden, for example, despite being a fervent fan and promoter of soccer did not shy away from targeting big ticket games that would have created a watershed event. By the same token, the Islamic State's Al-Baghdadi, although opposed to soccer as an infidel invention, has had no problem in employing soccer in the group's recruitment videos. As a result, soccer has become not only part of the fibre of jihadist and Salafist debate but also an important utensil in their toolbox.

Conclusion

Sports in general and soccer in particular figures in many if not most of the major twists and turns of the history of the Middle East and North Africa since the late 19th century.

Inevitably, my enquiry is heuristic given that scholarly research with few exceptions that focused on an individual country or territory have largely not looked at the role of sports in general and soccer in particular in the Middle East and North Africa as a whole. My enquiry involves looking at that role as well as the processes and mechanics that underlie the significance of sports in general and soccer in particular in the development of the modern Middle East. My focus is on nation formation and development, regime formation and survival and as a platform in battles for a host of human, political, social and economic rights, and political radicalization.

Based on my different national and thematic case studies, I illustrate the global nexus of sports and politics as it manifests itself throughout recent history in the Middle East and North Africa. The nexus is much like Siamese twins that are inextricable from one another and that drive one another. The nexus is so intricate that at times it is difficult to distinguish between the two. I would argue that the relationship between sports and politics is incestuous and a permanent fixture of the Middle East and North Africa.

A key reason why soccer's political role has been so consistent and persistent in the Middle East and North Africa since its introduction in the late 19th and early 20th century up until today is the fact that politics was written into the DNA of the region's football since day one. A vast number of clubs in North Africa and the Levant were founded with some sort of political association. Some were anti-colonial, others pro-monarchy or pro-colonial. Yet others projected national or ethnic identity or were associated with a political ideology. In the Gulf, soccer clubs were the playgrounds of sheikhs and members of ruling families. Many of the clubs have long moved beyond the politics associated with their birth, yet the perception of their original identity lives on. Rulers of newly formed states or nationalists agitating for statehood borrowed in the early 20th century from a Prussian militaristic sports tradition to mould national identity, ensure pre-military preparedness and attitudes and solidify their rule. As such, sports in general and soccer in particular has played a more permanent and consistent role in the development of the Middle East and North Africa than in any other part of the world.

Soccer's role was perpetuated in the post-independence era in the Middle East of North Africa not only because of its utility in the formation of national identity, international projection of new states, and as an instrument to garner and wield political influence but also because of emerging characteristics of Arab autocracy. Soccer's patriarchal values made it the perfect game for neo-patriarchs in the definition of Palestinian-American scholar Hisham Sharabi's concept of neo-patriarchy or what researchers Martin Herb and Martin Hvidt termed neo-patrimonial. Soccer's masculine values, the aggression inherent in the sport's goal of conquering the opponent's half of the pitch, popularity, and the almost unrivalled deep-seated emotion it evoked among huge segments of the population were factors that served rulers' efforts to mould national identity and modernize society while retaining control and power. They allowed autocrats to position themselves as authoritarian father figures from which others ranging from national administrators to the head of a nuclear family derived their authority. To be able to exploit soccer's attributes, rulers needed to achieve absolute control of stadia. The sport's huge popularity moreover made it a prime platform for political messaging that was only enhanced with technological advancement ranging over a century from the emergence of radio to 24-hour satellite television and the Internet. Yet, it was these very attributes

that were also the factors that made the pitch an obvious battlefield and platform for multiple struggles be they anti-colonial, anti-autocratic or for various rights, including ethnic, political, social and economic ones.

The persistent and continuous significance of soccer catapults the research question and the answers I provide in this thesis to the level of breaking ground in that it fills a gap in academic research in which the nexus of sports, politics and society in the Middle East as well as sports studies have largely ignored. In a nutshell, this thesis seeks to answer the research question by demonstrating that sports and particularly soccer has been in major parts of the Middle East key to nation formation, nation building, national identity, regime formation, regime survival and the struggles for human, gender and labour rights from the time it was introduced to the region primarily by the British but also by the French until today.

The theoretical framework for this assertion takes as its starting point the notion that the interaction of sports and politics in the Middle East and North Africa can only be understood and explained by an innovative multi-disciplinary approach that involves historical analysis, social movement theory, concepts of asymmetric warfare, notions of the impact of architectural environment on contentious politics, political economy, and critical area studies.

It builds on the work of soccer scholars like Houchang E. Chehabi, Christian Bromberger, Alan Bairner and Janet Lever who based on political scientist Benedict Anderson's notion of nation-ness as the most universally legitimate value in political life positioned soccer as a pillar of popular culture that makes it a focal point of politics, identity formation and protest, a social construct shaped by those involved in the game, and a reflection of how a society models existential, political and moral issues. Soccer enabled post-colonial societies in the Middle East and North Africa to generate meaning and symbolism that gave imagined substance to an identity that differentiated the conceived nation from others and helped neutralize the threat posed by racial, ethnic, social, religious and regional identities they incorporated. At the same time, it allowed such sub-groups to differentiate themselves even though those sub-identities potentially would compete with the larger national identity.

The notion of a battlefield or platform positioned soccer fans as a political force interacting with sports in the modern history of the Middle East and North Africa. The fans amounted to the unusual protagonists of protest and resistance defined by scholars Asef Bayat, Paul Aarts, Francesco Cavatorta and Robert Woltering who rather than adopting academia's traditional focus on the resilience of Middle Eastern and North African regimes looked at informal and unofficial venues and situations of dissent. In doing so, soccer fans emerged as new civil society actors whose interests and modus operandi that did not necessarily conform to liberal democratic notions of activism. The fans displayed aspects of what constitutes a social movement but operate as separate rather than united groups. They shied away from developing a clearly defined vision of the alternative order they were seeking to achieve or the basic means to build it. They moreover broke with classical models of protest not only because of their definition of what support for a club entailed but also because they were dictated by the logic and the rhythm of the game.

This analysis allows for an innovative application of social movement and asymmetric warfare theory to the understanding of the Middle East and North Africa, and its nexus of sports, politics and society and the fans' role in anti-colonial struggles, protest and popular revolts. It also puts fans at the cutting edge of a repeated fraying of social contracts in the Middle East and North Africa irrespective of whether the contracts involved colonial or post-colonial autocratic rulers.

In developing this thesis, I have sought to demonstrate that soccer threads itself as a red line through the 20th century political history of the Middle East and North Africa as independence populated the region with nation-states. Soccer was important to the leaders struggling for independence as a means to stake claims, develop national identity and fuel anti-colonial sentiment. For its rulers, soccer was a tool they could harness to shape their nations in their own mould; for its citizenry it was both a popular form of entertainment and a platform for opposition and resistance. The sport offered and offers a unique arena for social and political differentiation and the projection of transnational, national, ethnic, sectarian, local, generational and gender identities sparking a long list of literature that dates back more than a century. The sport also constituted a carnivalesque event that lent itself to provocation of and confrontation with authority — local, national or colonial.

The intersection of sports and politics is highlighted by the key role soccer played in the transition from a colonial empire in which Turks were the dominant force to the modern nation state of Turkey as well in the development of a Jewish (Israeli), Palestinian and Algerian national identity. It is also spotlighted in the depiction of struggles against colonial power in Egypt, Israel, Palestine and Algeria. In all of these cases, it is a history of formation and assertion of national identity and the creation of a pre-militaristic environments in preparation of that identity and the state that would embody it.

Soccer in all of these cases was both a tool of mass mobilization that political and economic forces as well as rulers exploited to garner support, improve their image and syphon off financial resources. It also constituted a potential threat as a platform for protest and dissent though out that history in the struggle against colonialism and for the shaping of nations as in the cases of Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Algeria and Turkey as well as in the formation and survival of post-colonial regimes in Egypt and Algeria, the struggle against autocracy and multiple aspects of human rights, including ethnic rights as in the case of the Berbers, Palestinians and Jews, and the resistance to autocratic and non-inclusionary rule across the Middle East and North Africa in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, and Jordan.

In Egypt, militant soccer fans boast a proud tradition of being at the forefront of Egypt's multiple battles stretching from the 1919 revolution that led to formal independence three years later to playing key roles in the last 45 years a in the survival of the banned Muslim Brotherhood, one of the foremost Islamist groupings, in Egypt and beyond, the 2011 popular revolt that toppled President Hosni Mubarak and subsequent mass anti-government protests. Like in the 1970s, students and soccer fans constitute the backbone of non-jihadist opposition to the repressive regime of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and the Brotherhood struggles to survive one of the most brutal government crackdown's in the organization's 87 year-long history. In an environment in which a jihadist insurgency is gaining steam and large segments of Egyptian youth are disillusioned, frustrated and angry at their lack of social and economic opportunity, students and soccer fans are fighting an uphill battle to prevent youth radicalization.

Militant soccer fans posed a particular challenge to autocrats because they targeted one of the most difficult to control public spaces with their claim of ownership and an institution autocrats saw as crucial to enhancing their legitimacy. The fans' ability to persistently and consistently confront police and security forces and stake their claim constituted success in an asymmetric conflict whose outcome in the view of journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell would be determined by perceptions of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the stronger party.

That was all the truer given the degree of repression, force and brutality employed by regimes and security forces in the vain of scholars Eduardo P. Archetti and Amilcar G. Romero that ensured that stadia and public spaces were political. Against the backdrop of urbanization with millions of impoverished and dispossessed migrants from the countryside trekking to cities, stadia became venues where people forged or reinforced their identity and established links and common ground with like-minded or those with whom they shared circumstance and similar sentiments. In line with sociologist Dingxin Zhao and historian and political scientist William Sewell Jr's theory of the impact of a built environment on contentious politics, those bonds were enabled by the ecology of the stadium.

Interestingly, one as yet unexplored area is whether soccer fans and players who have joined jihadist groups have influenced the debate in jihadist and Salafist circles between proponents of soccer as religiously legitimate and as a bonding and recruitment tool and those that oppose the sport as an infidel invention and tool to undermine fulfilment of religious obligations.

This study further leaves vast scope for further research across a broad spectrum including further verification of the interdisciplinary approach adopted, the histories of a host of key clubs, the role of club and national association management; the role of international sporting associations like FIFA, the AFC and CAF in propping up autocratic regimes; and the impact of powerful Middle Eastern soccer politicians on the regional and global governance of the sport.

These areas of exploration would further serve as potential validation of the thesis of the existence of an incestuous relationship between sports and politics and further illustrate how the two intersect in the Middle East and North Africa.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Sport en met name voetbal heeft een belangrijke rol gespeeld in de geschiedenis van het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika vanaf de late 19e eeuw. De brede onderzoeksvraag luidt derhalve wat de relatie is tussen sport en politiek in deze regio en hoe die zich heeft ontwikkeld gedurende de afgelopen 135 jaar. Ik heb voor een dergelijke brede heuristische benadering gekozen omdat niet op voorhand duidelijk is wat deze verhouding is en een scherpere vraag zou mogelijke processen en mechanismen uitsluiten.

De studie richt zich op casussen die in dezelfde classificatie vallen waarbij ik mij voor sport beperk tot de rol van mannen voetbal als dominant fenomeen in de sportwereld in relatie tot de politieke verhoudingen binnen verschillende landen zoals in de politieke strijd in Egypte en Algerije; het proces van de opbouw van een natie in hedendaags Turkije, Israël en Palestina. Gegeven de belangrijke rol van de religie bij de relatie tussen sport en politiek in deze landen heb ik later besloten een aanvullend hoofdstuk te wijden aan de theologische en ideologische discussies die het proces van modernisatie heeft veroorzaakt. Deze discussies zijn vandaag net zo relevant en verhit als ze pittig waren een eeuw geleden.

Het voetbalveld is vaak een barometer van maatschappelijke trends en is de plek waar maatschappelijke ontwikkelen zich voor het eerst uiten. Dat was en is het geval in vele landen in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika en blijkt uit de voorliggende studie. Militante voetbal fans speelden een belangrijke rol in protesten in de laatste vier jaar van het bewind van de Egyptische President Hosni Mubarak en in de volksopstand in 2011 dat tot zijn omverwerping heeft geleid. Voetbal fans speelden ook een sleutel rol in massale protesten in 2013 tegen de Turkse premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Stadia in Saoedi Arabië, Jordanië, Tunesië en Algerije ontpopten zich als plekken voor ongekennde protesten tegen heersende families en militaire regeerders.

De uitkomst van de verschillende case (landen en thematische) studies in het proefschrift laten zien dat sport en politiek op een globaal niveau, net als Siamese tweelingen, in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika onlosmakelijk met elkaar verbonden zijn. Het zijn fenomenen die diep in elkaar ingrijpen en in elkaar overgaan. Nog sterker gezegd blijkt uit de studie dat ze elkaar 'doordesemen' waardoor de relatie soms juist moeilijk grijpbaar is als we ze als zelfstandig op elkaar inwerken elementen zien. Ik durf de stelling aan dat nergens deze 'incestueuze' relatie zo consistent en voortdurend aanwezig is als in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika.

Politiek is deel van het DNA van voetbal in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika vanaf de dag dat het door Britse en Franse koloniale bestuurders, zakenmensen en zeemannen werd geïntroduceerd. Een groot aantal sport en voetbal clubs in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika werden vanuit een politieke associatie gesticht. Sommige clubs waren voor of tegen het Britse of Franse koloniaal bewind. Bij anderen ging het om een nationale of etnische identiteit of om een specifieke politieke ideologie. Clubs in de Golf waren vaak een speeltuin voor sjeiks en leden van de heersende familie. De leiders van nationale bewegingen en net onafhankelijke staten leunden op de militaristische sport traditie van Pruisen om een nationale identiteit te vormen, pre-militaristische waarden en houdingen te scheppen, en om hun gezag te verstevigen. Vele clubs hebben sindsdien hun politieke associatie achter zich gelaten maar de perceptie van de band leeft voort. Het politieke belang van sport werd, zoals deze studie laat zien, opnieuw bevestigd door de rol van voetbal fans in de populaire opstanden in 2011 en in de conflicten en oorlogen in de regio die sindsdien zijn uitgebroken. Dit alles verwijst naar de constante rol van sport en met name voetbal in de politieke ontwikkeling van het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika.

Dit proefschrift is een eerste poging om aan te geven dat sport en met name voetbal in belangrijke delen van het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika een met politiek verweven maatschappelijke rol speelt. Het proefschrift demonstreert de rol van voetbal in de formatie en opbouw van naties en nationale identiteit in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika, de genesis en overleving van regimes en in de veelvuldige gevechten voor mensen, geslacht en werknemer rechten vanaf de tijd dat het in de regio door de Britten en de Fransen werd geïntroduceerd tot aan vandaag. Deze bevindingen uit mijn onderzoek zijn in academisch opzicht een begin van de invulling van een lacune in onderzoek naar het weefsel tussen sport, politiek en maatschappij in de studie van het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika.

Het theoretische kader voor deze stelling begint met de notie dat de interactie tussen sport en politiek in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika alleen kan worden begrepen en uitgelegd door een innovatieve, multidisciplinaire benadering. Deze benadering omvat onder andere een historische analyse, theorie van sociale bewegingen, opvattingen van asymmetrische oorlogsvoering, inzichten van de invloed van architecturale omgevingen op conflictueuze politiek en door middel van kritisch regionaal onderzoek.

Het kader borduurt voort op het werk van voetbal onderzoekers zoals Houchang E. Chehabi, Christian Bromberger, Alan Bairner en Janet Lever, die weer op basis van het concept van de politicoloog Benedict Anderson voortborduren. Anderson is van mening dat de natie voetbal als een legitieme waarde ziet, die het meest algemeen aanvaard is in de politiek, en daardoor als een pilaar van populaire cultuur. Hierdoor werd voetbal een focus vanuit de politiek voor zowel de vorming van identiteit als een voertuig van protest vanuit oppositionele groepen. Identiteit is dan een sociale constructie die geconstrueerd wordt door degenen die betrokken zijn bij het spel en een weerspiegeling van maatschappelijke existentiële, politieke en morele zaken.

De studie laat zien dat voetbal het mogelijk maakt voor postkoloniale maatschappijen in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika om symbolische betekenissen te construeren die een imaginaire inhoud verlenen aan een identiteit. Deze identiteit droeg bij aan vermindering van risico's, veroorzaakt door raciale, etnische, sociale, godsdienstige en regionale sub-identiteiten die onderdeel uitmaakten van de nationale identiteit.

Een belangrijke reden waarom de rol van voetbal in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika in karakter verschilde van die in andere delen van de wereld, is wat de Amerikaans-Palestijnse wetenschapper Hisham Sharabi beschrijft als de neo-patriarchale aard van autocratie in de regio of wat de onderzoekers Martin Herb en Hvidt neo-patrimoniaal noemen. In hun visie is de heerser een dominant vaderfiguur. De voorliggende studie beschrijft en analyseert de masculiene waarden die voetbal vertegenwoordigde, de agressie die inherent is aan het doel van het spel om de helft van het voetbalveld van de tegenstander te veroveren, en de ongeëvenaarde diepe emoties die voetbal doet ontvlammen onder belangrijke delen van de bevolking. Deze ingrediënten maakten het volgens deze theoretici mogelijk voor de heerser om een nationale identiteit te vormen en de maatschappij te moderniseren en tegelijkertijd macht en controle te behouden. De studie laat in verschillende case studies zien dat deze theoretische benadering verklarende waarde heeft voor het begrijpen van de maatschappelijke dynamiek en de rol van sport daarin.

Het belang van voetbal voor de ontwikkeling van het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika is geworteld in het feit dat voetbal de enige vorm van populaire cultuur is die emoties verwekt die wedijveren met de emoties omtrent religie in de regio. Om de kenmerken van voetbal te kunnen uitbuiten, moest de heerser echter absolute controle over het

stadion hebben. Het probleem is, zoals uit de studie blijkt dat deze kenmerken tegelijkertijd het voetbalveld positioneerden als een platform en slagveld voor veelvuldige soorten van strijd zoals anti- koloniale, anti-autocratische krachten alsmede inzet is voor de strijd voor allerlei etnische, politieke, economische en sociale rechten.

Het idee van het voetbalveld als een platform of een slagveld positioneerde fans als een politieke kracht in de modern geschiedenis van het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika. De fans waren in wezen de ongewone protagonisten van protest en verzet in de definitie van wetenschappers Asef Bayat, Paul Aarts, Francesco Cavatorta en Robert Woltering. Deze wetenschappers hebben gekozen om niet de traditionele focus van academici te volgen die keken naar de duurzaamheid van bewinden in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika maar naar informele en onofficiële locaties en situaties van verschil van mening.

De voetbal fans verschenen in dit kader als nieuwe maatschappelijke spelers wiens belangen en modus operandi niet beantwoorden aan liberale, democratische beelden van activisme. De fans toonden aspecten van een sociale beweging maar opereren in aparte, onafhankelijke groepen in plaats van als een eenheid. Zij onthielden zich van de ontwikkeling van een duidelijke omliggende visie van het alternatieve gezag dat zij wilden bewerkstelligen of de manier waarop dat verwezenlijkt zou worden. Bovendien weken zij af van klassieke vormen van protest niet alleen vanwege wat steun aan een voetbalclub voor hun betekende maar ook omdat hun acties beïnvloed werden door de logica en het ritme van het spel. Als gevolg daarvan blijken fans kernspelers te zijn bij de herhaaldelijke ontrafeling van sociale verhoudingen in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika ongeacht of het gaat om koloniale of post-koloniale heersers.

De interactie tussen sport en politiek is duidelijk in de sleutelrol die voetbal speelde in de transitie van een koloniaal rijk dat door Turken werd overheerst tot de modern nationale staat van Turkije en in de ontwikkeling van een Joodse (Israëlsche), Palestijnse en Algerijns nationale identiteit. Het is ook duidelijk in de beschrijving van de antikoloniale strijd in Egypte, Israël, Palestina en Algerije. Al deze gevallen zijn geschiedenissen van het formeren en projecteren van de identiteit van de nationale eenheid en de schepping van pre-militaristische omstandigheden ter ondersteuning van die identiteit.

Voetbal was blijkens de case studie in deze gevallen een middel tot mobilisatie die maatschappelijke, politieke en economische krachten en heersers gebruikten om steun te verwerven, hun aanzien op te vijzelen en om financiële middelen te verkrijgen. Gedurende deze historische fase was voetbal ook een potentiële bedreiging als een platform voor protest in de strijd tegen kolonialisme en de formatie van naties in bijvoorbeeld Egypte, Israël, Palestina, Algerije en Turkije; de formatie en duurzaamheid van postkoloniale regimes in Egypte en Algerije; de strijd tegen autocratie en verschillende rechten van de mens waaronder etnische rechten voor Berbers, Palestijnen en Joden; en het verzet tegen niet-inclusief en autoritair gezag in landen zoals Egypte, Tunesië, Libië, Algerije en Jordanië.

De militante voetbal fans vertegenwoordigden een bijzondere uitdaging voor autocraten omdat zij een van de meest moeilijk te controleren openbare plekken in hun vizier hadden. Het stadion is een plek die autocraten zagen als cruciaal voor de versterking van hun legitimiteit. Het feit dat de fans de politie en veiligheidskrachten consistent en voortdurend met elkaar worden geconfronteerd, is in het theoretische kader van journalist en schrijver Malcolm Gladwell in feite een asymmetrisch conflict waarvan de uitkomst bepaald wordt door de percepties van legitimiteit of het gebrek eraan van de sterkere partij.

In dit opzicht is de vraag of voetbal fans en spelers die lid zijn van jihad groepen de discussie in jihadistische en Salafistische kringen hebben beïnvloed naar de legitieme deelname aan sport(manifestaties).. De discussie duurt voort tussen voorstanders van het spel als een legitieme bezigheid in theologische termen en als een middel om banden te versterken en nieuwe leden aan te trekken en tegenstanders die voetbal zien als een uitvinding van ongelovigen dat gelovigen afleidt van de vervullingen van hun religieuze plichten. Het belang van dat debat rechtvaardigt volgens mij nader onderzoek gezien de maatschappelijk krachten die hier aan het werk zijn.

Dit proefschrift geeft een kader aan voor verder onderzoek naar een veelvoud van vragen met inbegrip van verdere verificatie van de interdisciplinaire benadering die aan deze thesis ten grondslag ligt; de geschiedenis van een groot aantal clubs die een belangrijke rol speelden; de rol van internationale sport bonden zoals FIFA, CAF en de AFC in het opvijzelen van autocratische regimes; en de invloed van machtige voetbal politici uit het Midden Oosten op het regionale en globale bestuur van voetbal. Dergelijk onderzoek zou de stelling van het bestaan van een incestueuze verhouding tussen sport en politiek verder valideren en illustreren hoe zij met mekaar verweven zijn in het Midden Oosten en Noord Afrika.

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